

1. Public Theater and Dramatic Authorship in Old Regime France, 1600-1757

1

Pierre Corneille today stands, with his near contemporaries Jean Racine and Molière, atop the French literary canon, but during his own lifetime he held a much more ambiguous position. The son of a lawyer at the Parlement of Rouen, Corneille studied at the local Jesuit *collège*, where he demonstrated talent in Latin verse and rhetoric. After entering into the bar briefly, he rapidly withdrew and began writing tragedies, which humanists considered intellectually important but commercial troupes rarely staged, and which carried little cachet in a court retinue or a provincial academy. He sought the aid of the renowned Alexandre Hardy, the best-known commercial troupe author, or *poète à gages*, of the day, who passed through Rouen in 1628. Hardy, however, viewed Corneille as a potential rival, and he refused to help; moreover, Hardy attacked Corneille as pretentious. Though lacking experience in the theater, Hardy charged, the young man nevertheless thought himself superior to commercial playwrights due to his humanistic education. Coming from the "excrement of the bar," Hardy wrote, "writers such as Corneille "imagine that bad lawyers can become good poets in less time than it takes for mushrooms to grow . . . [These] miserable crows profane the honor of the theater." At the same time, the *doctes* of the local academy were wary of Corneille, viewing his efforts as inconsistent with the ideal of disinterest they sought to cultivate. One such academy member, Antoine Gaillard, commented of Corneille, shortly after his first success with "Mélite," which was staged by the minor Troupe de Mondory in Paris in 1629, "Corneille is excellent, but he sells his works." 1

Corneille would achieve great literary, financial, and social success in the 1630s and 1640s, neither due to his formal education nor his commercial popularity, but due to the unique relationship he developed with Cardinal Richelieu, first minister of Louis XIII and the greatest literary patron of the day. Through this difficult relationship, in which the aspiring writer first won the Cardinal's protection, then lost it during the controversy over his play "Le Cid," and then regained through a printed dedication, Corneille established himself—and his identity as a tragedian—as a model for aspiring playwrights. However, he never fully overcame the disdain of those who considered him either too intellectually pretentious or too mercenary, and was never accepted fully by other writers (notably Jean Chapelain), or by their protectors, as a man worthy of elite status. 2

Corneille's trajectory demonstrates both the opportunities and limitations for those who would follow him in claiming the new social identity of playwright in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and offers a standard model of their life experience: common in origin, usually sons of fathers in the legal or administrative world; possessing the intellectual capital of a humanist education; aware of the possibilities for commercial exploitation of their work, but neither financially autonomous nor seeking to be. Thus, while

the social origins of late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century playwrights were bourgeois, this chapter will discuss how the values that informed their self-conceptions (and the way that others viewed them) reproduced those of the court aristocracy in the late seventeenth and well into the eighteenth century. ³ Though in most standard accounts, academic as well popular, of early modern literary history, theater is presented as inherently commercial and popular in orientation and disdained by courtiers and urban elites, Corneille—and the generations of writers who followed him in France—found in writing plays for the public theater an opportunity to fashion their identities at the focal point of French public life, where court and city intersected.

Beginning with Corneille, Racine, and Molière, and continuing on to Voltaire and his contemporaries in the early eighteenth century, this chapter introduces the institutional, cultural, and social framework of the status and identity of playwrights in Old Regime France. This chapter first outlines the two predominant types of playwrights in the early seventeenth century, the troupe author, and the court poet, and then considers the new type of dramatic author that appeared in the middle decades. Next, it describes why, in light of the establishment of a series of royal troupes in Paris and of a broad market for print, the Comédie Française became the locus of efforts by late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century writers seeking to use the theater—as a genre, an institution, and an editorial strategy—to fashion public identities for themselves as honorable men of letters through personal interactions, private correspondence, print, and images. It then examines the potential for and limitations of self-fashioning through playwriting in the early eighteenth century by following three exemplary trajectories: Voltaire's success, Piron's disappointment, and the utter failure of an unknown outsider, Michel Descazeaux. Finally, it sketches a prosopography of eighteenth-century French playwrights, in relation to the larger literary field of the age of the Enlightenment.

1.1. From Court Poet and Troupe Leader to Playwright: Corneille, Racine, and Molière

5

A writer in an early modern court retinue participated in an intensely hierarchical social system, one in which his status and identity were determined primarily by his relationship with one or more protectors; these relationships informed how others read and judged his works, rather than the reverse. Though such relationships often involved a transaction—the writers' dedication exchanged for the protector's financial and social sponsorship—literary patron-client encounters were, as a variety of recent work has shown, represented and performed through exchanges of reciprocal courtesy. A writer, in his comportment towards a protector, had to show himself to be worthy of and appropriate for inclusion in the retinue, and self-presentation therefore became the key determinant of a writer's status at a court. During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, both the material and social practice of this form of literary protection in France became institutionalized in the form of various provincial academies, and were later centralized under Louis XIII and Louis XIV into a series of royally sponsored

academies.

This process of centralization, which would have tremendous consequences for the status and identity of writers in France, began with the establishment of the Académie Française in 1635. This was the first in a series of centralized academies that offered their members both a close link to and a degree of collective autonomy from political patrons; these institutions constituted what Alain Viala has called the "first literary field," which culminated with the establishment of the Comédie Française in 1680. The Académie Française and the Comédie Française, though very different bodies, became the most important literary institutions of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and remain fixtures in French intellectual and cultural life to this day. ⁴



[Académie Française](#)



[Comédie Française](#)

Prior to this process, the act of writing for an audience, other than a princely patron, was seen as incompatible with being a writer. Until about 1630, when the Académie began discussing literature as an artistic endeavor, writers in France—described by such rubrics as *historiqueur*, *rhétoriqueur*, or *orateur*—were identified by their function at a court, rather than by the nature of their literary production or its reception by an audience. ⁵ In this sense, those aspiring to be recognized as literary writers, through admission to the Académie, did not produce stage plays. Such texts were attributed either to actors in a traveling troupe (*gens de théâtre*) or to paid scriptwriters (*poètes à gages*), the very terms suggesting commercial activity and compensation for work performed, as opposed to the receipt of patronage by those who had demonstrated courtly behavior and thereby achieved elite social status. Indeed, to write a stage play would subject an author to the judgment of not merely one or more aristocratic protectors but a broader audience that might have no knowledge of the writers' personal gentility or stature. Thus, although many men wrote plays that were performed during the reigns of Henri IV and Louis XIII, none would have been identified as *écrivains* or *hommes de lettres*.

After 1630, these two ideals of the playwright—court poet and troupe author—became gradually intertwined due to a confluence of political, economic, and intellectual factors: the institutionalization and centralization of patronage into academies, the establishment of commercial theaters in Paris and other major cities, and the re-valorization of the classical genre of tragedy among humanistically educated literary elites. Prior to this date, few commercial troupes had tragedies in their repertoires, as troupe authors either could not or would not write in this style. The demand for such works came first from patrons, but expanded to elite commercial audiences, creating an opportunity for writers outside established academic bodies or commercial troupes. At the same time, by writing a verse tragedy, a man aspiring to recognition as a "poet" could demonstrate his knowledge of classical literary theories to potential patrons of academies (which might then make him a client and member.) Thus, aspects of the identities of the troupe author, the court poet, and the humanist savant were melded into the

"tragedian," a new social identity on which an aspiring young writer could model himself, the first incarnation being Corneille.

This creation of a series of centralized, royally-patronized academies, which greatly heightened the visibility of the kingdom's leading writers at the royal court, did not remove writers from but instead brought them into closer contact with the Parisian public, which was itself being transformed by the royal administrative centralization. High nobles and wealthy financiers, like writers, became concentrated in the capital, where they attended command performances at the Louvre and at such aristocratic residences as Richelieu's Palais-Cardinal. These venues offered playwrights occasions to demonstrate their status and civility, not in a court or academic setting, but in that of an urban theater, albeit one not fully open to the public. At the same time, Richelieu and subsequent royal ministers consolidated the position of Paris (and of the royal household) as the primary source of patronage and social legitimacy for writers, first through the Académie Française and then a series of royal theaters in Paris. Eventually, the coexistence of royal court, royal academy, and royally-sanctioned public theater enabled playwrights to simultaneously gain renown and revenue from commercial performances, endorsement by academic critics of their decorum, and elite patronage and protection. Such a combination had been previously unattainable for court poets or troupe authors, but it came to define the role of the tragedian.

Richelieu, adopting a practice of Renaissance aristocrats, although acting in the name of the King, retained writers in his entourage. Rather than creating positions for these men, he granted them either one-time *gratifications* or *annual pensions*. Richelieu based these awards on his assessment of the writer's personal virtue, which he judged at his own discretion; thus, he considered only writers known personally to him. To gain the necessary direct access, an aspiring writer could generate interest in his work and himself within a provincial circle or academy, from which he might be selected by a broker—an aristocratic courtier, or perhaps another, already pensioned, writer—for presentation to Richelieu. A writer lacking an academic affiliation could come to the minister's attention through the successful staging of a tragedy at a public theater, in Paris if possible. Thus, commercial troupes became conduits through which otherwise unheralded writers might gain direct access to the new royal patronage, if they demonstrated the right combination of commercial appeal (to satisfy the provincial troupe and its audience) and personal comportment and erudition (to satisfy the ministers).

6

10

Richelieu's ideal of a writer emphasized the latter over the former, and this preference informed the creation in 1635 of the Académie Française. He intended this body to rid the French language and literature definitively of all popular and farcical elements, to establish what Richelieu and his most cherished client writer, Jean Chapelain, thought to be pure classicism as a literary ideal. Richelieu sought promote this goal in theater by having the new Académie create a model for French classical tragedy, based on Aristotle's *Poetics*, in the wake of the commercially successful Parisian performances of Corneille's "Le Cid" in



[Corneille, Théâtre Complet](#)

1636. Based stylistically on the decidedly un-Aristotelian Spanish tradition of *comedia nueva*, "Le Cid" set off an intense critical debate, and at Richelieu's direction, the Academy commissioned Chapelain to write what became known as "the rules" of classical French tragedy. ⁷

Richelieu's intervention through the Académie into the domain of literature linked a specific interpretation of classical dramaturgy to the exercise of absolutist power and, moreover, legitimated the new social identity of the tragedian. Whereas Parisian commercial theaters continued to serve as important sources of revenue as well as social legitimacy for writers, they now did so within an aesthetic and institutional framework established by the royal court; performances of plays that adhered to this framework (classicism, as evaluated by the Académie) would be those best received by Richelieu, the King, and other potential protectors in the royal entourage. Authors of such plays would therefore be the most likely to gain a public identity as "men of letters" as well as commercial revenues from performances and, more important, pensions and income from offices made available to them by patrons.

For these and other writers of the mid-seventeenth century, gaining financial and social support from protectors at court depended on self-restrained comportment, but such behavior was neither incompatible with nor entirely distinct from commercial success in the public theater. From the 1630s on, the most important Parisian public theaters—the Palais-Cardinal (later the Palais-Royal), the Hôtel de Bourgogne, and the Théâtre du Marais (and ultimately the Comédie Française)—housed commercial troupes that performed for largely wealthy and aristocratic audiences, people who might become protectors and patrons of writers and, in turn, brokers for those writers to even more important protectors, including Richelieu himself. Thus, successful performances of their plays in these venues enabled Corneille, and later, Racine, to rise from provincial, bourgeois origins to become the most commercially successful and socially prominent writers of the seventeenth century, identified not as troupe authors but as court poets.

For Corneille, the success of "Le Cid" and then "Cinna" on commercial Parisian stages allowed him to demand fees from commercial troupes two to five times those of even the most successful *poètes à gages*, all while becoming publicly identified with first Richelieu and then other Parisian elites, rather than with the milieu of commercial troupes. ⁸ Corneille's success in gaining both financial support and social status as a tragic playwright would be made evident when, in 1662, Colbert had Chapelain draw up a list of "*gratifiables*" from among university scholars, members of academies, and unaffiliated belletrists, each of whom was offered annual royal pensions. At the top of this list was "Corneille, leading dramatic poet in the world," who was granted 6500 *livres* annually. This sum matched what he had come to demand from commercial troupes for each tragedy, making him by far the best-paid and most respected non-acting dramatic author of his time. ⁹ Even as his literary output diminished toward the end of his life, he continued his efforts to gain acceptance among elites by establishing a residence in Paris and seeking to

marry his daughter into the nobility, and by seeking augmentations of his royal pension. 10

Though Corneille had been the first writer to establish a public identity at this confluence of court and public, he failed to achieve, in his lifetime, either lasting commercial success or, more importantly, permanent acceptance at court. By his final years, in the early 1660s, though drawing a royal pension, Corneille was out of favor and impoverished. A better and more lasting example on which subsequent writers could fashion themselves was Jean Racine. Racine emerged as the ideal model because, in mid-career, after a spectacular rise to prominence, he stopped writing for the commercial theater entirely and obtained the post of Royal Historiographer. In the final years of his life he returned to playwriting, penning two more tragedies commissioned by the royal consort Madame de Maintenon for private performances, though never submitting them to the newly established Comédie Française. Largely by distancing himself from the commercial and public aspects of the theater, Racine emerged as the model of a legitimated man of letters. 11



* * *

Contrary to expectations, the court and the urban public did not become more clearly distinguished after the removal of the court from Paris in the 1660s, when royal command performances were moved to Fontainebleau and Versailles. Parisian troupes were summoned to perform plays at these venues drawn from their urban repertoires or created especially for a festival or other occasion at court. In these years, the one Parisian troupe that performed regularly in the Palais-Royal became the favorite at court. Protected by the King's brother, the Duke d'Orléans, it became known as "the players of *Monsieur*." In 1665, its leading actor and author, Molière, himself became a direct client of King Louis XIV, receiving a pension of 7000 *livres*, and his troupe gained the title "the king's players." In this way, Molière, like the tragedians, combined direct patronage with revenues from commercial performances in Paris; however, his personal social identity was not that of a court poet, like Corneille or Racine. Rather, he was known at court and in the city as an *homme de théâtre*, the leader of the royal troupe.

15

Molière's satires scandalized and amused the aristocracy in Versailles, while entertaining and engaging the more socially heterogeneous commercial audiences in Paris. His ability to negotiate between (more precisely, to enact simultaneously) satirical transgression and courtly adherence, for both the commercial public and princely patrons, on stage and in print—all the while fostering what became a unique relationship with the king as his sole protector (and, in turn, guarantor of a commercial monopoly for his troupe)—gave Molière a unique identity in late-seventeenth-century literary and public life and, indeed, in French literary and cultural history. The polyvalence of Molière's image before the king, elites, urban



public, other troupes, and his printers has been made evident in recent Molière scholarship, which is no longer obsessed with a fruitless debate over whether Molière should be seen as a commercial comedian or a social critic, or with an anachronistic tendency to read his later plays as an inauthentic curtailment of social satire, thus defining the earlier works as more sincere and a better expression of his real self. Recent scholarship on his life and work has highlighted the equivocations of Molière's trajectory through print and page, court and city, showing him not as cravenly pursuing the favor of an absolutist tyrant but instead masterfully self-fashioning a singular persona, a bravura performance that, as we will see, in the eighteenth century only Voltaire would match and only Beaumarchais would dare attempt. [12](#)

In the last years of his life, he gained begrudging acceptance at court as an *honnête homme*, "a polite interloper . . . a newcomer who integrates himself" into elite sociability, or what Elias would call an "established outsider." [13](#) In this respect, Molière in his later years became a figure that would inform how a century's worth of aspiring writers viewed themselves: talented, worldly, and witty, yet careful in their negotiation between printed self-presentation and civil self-restraint, between commercial public and the court. However, in the short term of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Molière could not serve as a model for subsequent aspiring dramatic authors, since his position of troupe leader of the King's players—and his direct link to the crown—would be abolished with the formation in 1680 of a single royal troupe, the Comédie Française.

* * *

A component of this emerging "first literary field" in the seventeenth century, particularly the sub-field of theater, was the market for printed editions. From the Renaissance to roughly the middle of the century, writers (and troupes) resisted printing their plays. Not only did an edition effectively put the play into the public domain for other writers and commercial troupes to perform, modify, parody, or even reprint, but it also diminished a writer's standing by creating an identity not based on his personal comportment. Nevertheless, beginning in the 1640s, printers published dramatic editions regularly, forcing aspiring playwrights to arrange for themselves the printing of their plays as a tactic to retain control over the text and to ensure that the play would be publicly associated with its proper author. [14](#)

Thus, Corneille had *Cinna* printed in 1643, seeking royal Letters Patent to prevent any troupe from performing it without his consent, although the King refused this request. [15](#) In response, the tragedian took advantage of the still-evolving regulation of printing and bookselling by obtaining a *privilège* in his own name for *Cinna* and ceding it to the printer Augustin Courbé. Upon performance of all his subsequent plays,

either Corneille himself or his brother Thomas acquired a *privilège* for the edition, which was then ceded to a preferred printer: Courbé, Thomas Quinet, or Antoine de Sommaville. In this way, he pre-empted other printers from obtaining a *privilège* for editions of his own plays without his consent, and thereby retained greater control over the distribution of the script and over any accompanying paratext. This same concern would prompt Molière to authorize Guillaume de Luyne to print his *Précieuses ridicules* in 1659, after Jean Ribou obtained a *privilège* without consulting the author. [16](#)

In 1644, in response to other printers collecting these editions and selling them as anthologies without his consent, Corneille took another unprecedented step by obtaining a *privilège* for an edition of all his plays performed to that date, which he had printed in quarto format as *Théâtre de Corneille* by Sommaville and Courbé. [17](#) Subsequently, prolific and successful playwrights participated in the editing and printing of anthologies of their previously printed works. Thus, Corneille arranged in 1660 a 3-volume, octavo Théâtre, "revised and corrected by the author," and Molière and Racine each authorized and helped prepare expensive, multi-volume, continuously paginated, and purportedly definitive editions of their plays in 1666 and 1675, respectively. [18](#)

In each case, these well-established authors prefaced their editions with dedications to elite patrons, who had probably paid the printing costs and granted a lump sum to the author. Moreover, in accepting the dedication, protectors informally but quite visibly sanctioned the author to publish his work, preventing him from appearing dangerously self-promotional and thus jeopardizing his honorable standing among elites. [19](#)

These editions, according to the critic Timothy Murray, were intended to demonstrate an "authorial presence," instead of the performance, as the source of the work's literary merit. As Chartier has pointed out, the advent of folio editions of an author's corpus in the 1660s created a new understanding of the works as the product of a "central authorial figure whose art could be appraised only through the reading" of his writing; the author became in this guise a symbol not of the greatness of the patron but of the unity, coherence, and fixity of the work itself. In turn, the size, quality, and dedication of these editions vouched for the morality, acculturation, and civility of the author. Thus, a multi-volume work organized around the principle of a single author, itself something of a novelty in the seventeenth century, was particularly important for playwrights seeking recognition as *homme de lettres* and for printers seeking to find a readership for what had previously been considered a primarily oral genre. The "authorial presence" ameliorated theater's long-standing association with immorality, lewdness, and, above all, a heterogeneous public, as well as the worrisome quantity of printed plays that were counterfeits based on hasty transcriptions of the performance, frequently without proper identification of the author himself. Thus, the editorial imprint, the preface, the dedication, and above all the authorial

 [Corneille, Théâtre Complet](#)

 [Racine, Oeuvres complètes](#)

 [Molière, Oeuvres complètes](#)

 [Molière, Oeuvres complètes](#)



portrait marked the material book as an idealized and authentic text. ²⁰ We will see that each of these elements would become important venues for playwrights' self-presentations in the later seventeenth and throughout the eighteenth century.

To this end, as Steven Rendall has written, the engraved portraits that adorned these editions as frontispieces, "underline[d] the connection between the text and an individual producer"; the iconography of these engraved portraits sought to make clear the author's "presence in the work," notably his good intentions in writing it, his creative originality, and his reliability. ²¹ In editions of theatrical works, notably the plays of Racine and Corneille, engraved portraits represented the author neither in the classical iconography of the writer (pen in hand, or resting on his books) nor as men of theater (with masks, flames, asps, or other symbols), but as men of the cloth and of court. Moreover, the use of an oval *trompe l'oeil* frame and a three-quarters or full profile referred to the portraits of Académie Française members that hung in the Louvre.



A similar tendency, to depict playwrights as *gens d'esprit*, is evident in a posthumous engraving of Molière by Jean-Baptiste Nolin, adapted loosely from a Pierre Mignard portrait. All the portraits of Molière executed during his lifetime depicted him as an actor, but this image shows him seated at ease, dressed stylishly, with pen and book in hand. Molière iconography in the eighteenth century, notably in Charles Coypel's oft-reproduced portrait, presents the subject as model of the romantic writer: hair flowing, shirt open, eyes raised, communing with his muse. ²²

These engraved frontispieces from luxury editions of the collected works of Corneille, Racine, and Molière established iconic conventions that would be adopted by many writers (or their printers) who commissioned engravings for playwrights' collected works throughout the eighteenth century; the contrast between the depictions of Corneille and Racine as courtiers and those of Molière as a romantic artist demonstrates graphically the trajectory that we will trace in the subsequent chapters of this book.



The printed word and image thus provided, from the late seventeenth century onwards, a new venue for self-presentation by authors, particularly dramatic authors, across France in particular and Europe in general. However, print offered a highly problematic venue for authorial self-presentation for several reasons. Provincial or foreign troupes generally felt no commercial, legal, or moral obligation to obtain permission from the author to perform a printed play. ²³ Moreover, in print, an author's self-restrained personal comportment could not be demonstrated, so readers might attribute mercenary, self-aggrandizing intent to a writer who had put forth his work so directly. A great deal of work on the rhetoric of



24

seventeenth-century dedications shows how aspiring writers sought to deflect such criticism by attributing their intent to a sponsor, be it God, the king, a royal institution (such as the Académie Française), an aristocratic courtier, or the glory of French literature itself. But writers without prominent protectors or institutional affiliations to vouch for their legitimacy—most of the aspiring playwrights, as we will see in the subsequent chapters of this book—had to deploy other strategies to demonstrate both their civility and their autonomy as *gens de lettres*. To do so, they modified the classical rhetoric of such prefaces to suit their precarious situation on the margins of elite cultural life.

25

So while print offered aspiring dramatic authors the potential to draw additional revenue from their work and to reach a geographically and socially broad audience, those seeking to fashion identities as men of letters through playwriting were hesitant to take advantage of this possibility. For an author, who had not already gained a visible marker of legitimate status, to print his plays, would constitute a transgression against civility; after 1680, the most evident marker of such legitimacy—and thus the most evident venue for civil self-presentation—available to a literary newcomer became the performance of a play at the Comédie Française.

1.2. The Comédie Française and the Status of its Playwrights, 1680-1750

In 1680, Colbert consolidated the remaining French-language commercial troupes of Paris into a single troupe in a move that completed the crown's two-generation-long project of consolidating literary institutions. However, Molière had died seven years earlier, so no actor or author had sufficient stature to be designated to lead this new company.

■ [Anciens Règlements ...](#)

25 Instead, the new, unified royal troupe was placed under budgetary authority of the Royal Household, and its operations in Paris as well as Versailles were to be supervised directly by the court, first by the Dauphine (crown princess) but, after 1683, by the First Gentlemen

■ [Règlements de Nos Seigneurs ...](#)

of the King's Bedchamber. Rather than manage the troupe directly, the First Gentlemen issued a series of "orders" concerning aspects of the theater's operation. In 1697, the First Gentlemen combined all the orders issued to date into a set of "regulations," of which the first extant copy dates from 1719 (and which will be discussed in greater detail in [chapter 2](#)). Under the regulations, the Comédiens themselves became responsible for the composition of their repertory by acquiring works directly from playwrights.

26 By default rather than design, the royal actors came to function as gatekeepers, controlling access to the revenue and prestige generated by the theater through their selection of plays for performance. 27

Playwrights were not mentioned in either the royal letter of October 21, 1680 that established the Comédie, or in the early orders issued by the Dauphine. The first orders concerning plays were issued by the First Gentlemen in 1683,

and established that only works by "external authors," rather than members of the company, could be performed during the better-attended winter months. ²⁸ Thus the royal troupe, which held a monopoly on French-language non-musical performance both at court and in Paris, would compose its repertory by choosing among plays submitted by writers who may or may not have been known personally to the troupe or court. The Comédie thereby became, somewhat inadvertently but definitively, the locus of efforts by aspiring writers seeking to establish themselves as men of letters at court, among elites, and before a growing commercial audience for theater throughout the kingdom. ²⁹

With the decline of court ceremonies in the latter part of the reign of Louis XIV, and especially after his death in 1715, the Comédie Française became one of the crucial sites in which elites publicly displayed their prestige and power—a place where aristocratic courtiers, wealthy robins, and bourgeois financiers alike could interact according to the conventions of polite comportment and thereby perform their elite status to each other. The dependence of the Comédie Française on royal annuities rather than commercial profits in the period from 1680 to 1757 increased the prestige it carried for such elites, while its lack of an entrepreneurial or politically-appointed manager to oversee the composition of its repertory and its relations with authors allowed such elites to conceive of themselves, to varying degrees, as patrons rather than clients of the theater, its actors, actresses, and authors. ³⁰ Plays performed at this theater, the actors who staged them, and the authors who wrote them all readily became topics of conversation in elite society.

Meanwhile, Colbert's successors, especially Louis XV's regent and minister, Fleury, discontinued the direct royal patronage of writers through gratifications. This development furthered the importance of Parisian elites as social and financial sponsors of writers and, moreover, as those with the power to ascribe to others the status and identity of "man of letters." Concomitantly, in the first half of the eighteenth century, commercial theater performances in the capital became equally or even more important than performances at the court for an author seeking to gain recognition as a writer; winning acclaim at the Comédie Française enabled dramatic authors to gain renown in a way that enhanced rather than diminished their aura of status and their identity as courtly elites.

The Française offered writers a unique opportunity, due to a combination of its monopoly, its direct control by and access to the court, and the nature of the works it performed. Just as the Letters Patent issued for the Opéra had provided for the enforcement of its monopoly on performances of music in Paris and at the court, the royal Letter of 1680 instructed the Lieutenant-General of Police to enforce the Comédie Française monopoly on French-language performances. In the last decades of the seventeenth century, this clause was invoked primarily to prevent the other authorized troupe, the Italienne, from performing parodies of works in the repertory of the Française, with which the former enjoyed great success from 1680 until its

expulsion from France in 1697. The Italiens specialized in the *commedia dell'arte*, a genre in which actors portray a series of stock characters and improvise dialogue; since there were no scripts, there were no relations between the company and external authors. However, the troupe eventually incorporated other genres into its repertory, especially parodies of works first performed by the Comédie Française. In this respect, the Comédie Italienne's authors, when they were not troupe members, were "for the most part, *dilettanti* [and] amateurs" of the theater, "rather than men of letters." [31](#)

Unlike the Italienne, the Académie Royale de Musique, or Opéra, did offer a site in which urban elites could demonstrate their prominence to a broad swath of other segments of society; presumably, authors for this venue could win acclaim in a way consistent with elite status. However, a royally-appointed director chose the texts to be set to music for operatic performances. Because the Opéra was more concerned throughout the eighteenth century with music than with lyrics, composers rather than authors gained the lion's share of the prestige and revenue generated by the company. Moreover, since the Opéra only performed two or three times per week, fewer new works were staged each season. Finally, writing an operatic libretto required a technical knowledge of music and verse and an investment of time and energy greater than was necessary even for a classical tragedy. For these reasons, the Opera offered much less of an opportunity for aspiring writers to achieve the status of men of letters. [32](#)

30

After 1715, when the Italiens were re-incorporated, generic divisions between the three official theaters were more readily observable. As a consequence, in the eighteenth century the monopoly of the Comédie Française was invoked primarily against popular "fair" theaters. During the Regency, some of the itinerant troupes that regularly came to Paris for one of the seasonal market fairs began to establish themselves permanently, without authorization, as permanent performing companies. Their performances drew on the improvisational tradition of the *dell'arte*, on elements of marketplace culture, and on a variety of early modern comic-literary traditions. At the same time, needing to circumvent the monopolies held by the three officially recognized theaters—the Française, the Italienne, and the Opéra—these companies developed innovative techniques, such as the use of placards in place of dialogue, mime, and popular dialects, including the market-place slang known as *poissard*, which they could claim did not violate the prohibition against unsanctioned French-language performances. [33](#)

These companies were entrepreneurial ventures operated by owner-managers, who controlled the composition of the repertory. For plays, the managers generally relied on members of their troupes, whom they paid a lump sum for each work. Some boulevard authors became celebrities and lived off the proceeds of their works, but it was not until late in the eighteenth century that playwrights began to negotiate with boulevard theater managers for fixed terms of remuneration and for control over the plays, including the printed edition. Michèle Root-Bernstein, in her history of

boulevard theaters in eighteenth-century Paris, noted the lack of crossover by playwrights from unofficial to official theaters, arguing that boulevard actor-authors did not aspire to the status of Comédie Française playwright. Although there were a few boulevard authors who submitted works to the official theater, most of the author-actors in boulevard troupes enjoyed a comfortable niche within the non-elite social networks around their theaters and thus had no desire to enter into the social networks tied to the Comédie Française. ³⁴ Certainly, these actor-writers were playwrights, but they did not enjoy prestige as "men of letters," and boulevard theaters did not offer an opportunity to fashion an identity for oneself as honorable in the eyes of Parisian elites. Thus, playwrights who sought to use dramatic authorship as a strategy of elite self-fashioning tended to identify themselves primarily with the Comédie Française. Having a work performed by the official, royal theater could grant the prestige previously reserved for court poets, without incurring in *le monde* the disdain associated with writing for non-elite audiences.

Thus, to be considered worthy of the status of men of letters, aspiring playwrights would need direct relations with the royal players; yet such relationships could only be formed under the terms of the theater's regulations as issued by the court. At the same time, these relations were also a function of writers' relations with the theater's audiences, including elites who considered themselves patrons to the actors and writers, and to non-elites, who were increasingly referred to as "the public." Thus, the Comédie Française mediated between playwrights, who were mostly self-conscious "new entrants" into and "aspirants" within the literary field, and the potential sources of the cultural capital they needed to legitimate their presence and enhance their status within the field: the court, Parisian elite protectors, and socially mixed commercial audiences. In this context, those who made the strategic, if not necessarily conscious, decision to submit a play to the Comédie Française necessarily inserted themselves in a field structured by elite norms of *honnêteté*, but subject to a series of other influential forces, including but not limited to court politics and marketplace demand. To gain a better understanding of these forces in the early eighteenth century—and of both successful and unsuccessful strategies pursued by authors in this maelstrom, we turn now to three overlapping case studies, Voltaire, Piron, and Descazeaux.

1.3. Playwriting as a Strategy of Self-Fashioning: Bourgeois to Tragedian to Philosophe

The most prominent early eighteenth-century writer who pursued the path set forth by Corneille and Racine, writing classical tragedy to refashion himself from a well-educated, aspiring bourgeois to a man of letters among urban elites and at the court, was Voltaire. ³⁵ His story begins when François Arouet, a Parisian notary with evident aspirations to social advancement through the judicial milieu, placed his first son in a Jansenist school and his second son and namesake at the prestigious Jesuit Collège Louis-le-Grand. This school, in the final decades of the reign of Louis XIV, was becoming a training ground for the state administration, the highest positions in which

could carry personal ennoblement. There, young François-Marie Arouet entered his early adulthood among the cream of the *bourgeois d'ancien régime*; in this milieu, he became aware that he could achieve prestige, status, and fortune, but that, to make such an ascent, he would need to demonstrate self-restrained *honnêteté* towards higher-status protectors.

Young Arouet's enrollment at a Jesuit *collège* was significant for other reasons as well. The curriculum, inspired by Renaissance humanism and adapted to the purposes of French absolutism and the Catholic Reformation, taught students rhetoric through classical dramaturgy—inspired by Terence, Seneca, Horace, and Aristotle—as interpreted in the academic "rules." A crucial aspect of these rules was the superior status of dialogue in alexandrine verse, which every graduate of the first two years of *collège* would have mastered as part of his instruction in rhetoric. Moreover, his readings in ancient history and philosophy in his later years at the *collège* provided the young Arouet with a knowledge of the characters and themes of Roman and Greek history and mythology, on which classical French drama was supposed to draw to achieve its universality. Furthermore, a common pedagogical technique of *collège* instruction was the staging of plays in Latin, through which students would gain practical experience in oration. This element of the *collège* curriculum gave students not only an appreciation for theater as a literary genre but also practical experience with the technical exigencies of staging plays; moreover, it reinforced the classical idea that the theater should serve as a didactic "school for morals." Thus, the *collège* experience was crucial in the production and reproduction of classical theatrical culture in the eighteenth century, particularly among the sons of upwardly mobile bourgeois families. [36](#)

An equally crucial consequence of his seven years at Louis-le-Grand was his exposure to networks of nobles, magistrates, and financiers. From the age of seventeen, Arouet attended a salon hosted by Madame de Ferriol, the mother of a school friend, through which he gained access to other salons. Had he entered a Jansenist school, like his older brother, it is unlikely that he would have become exposed to the *monde*, and thus that he would have had to justify his presence in this milieu. Since he lacked great wealth or title, the young Arouet drew on the only resource he had—his knowledge of classical rhetoric—and wrote verse, entering "Le Voeu de Louis XIII" into a poetry competition sponsored by the Académie Française in 1712. In subsequent years, he penned a series of verse *odes* and *épîtres* that implicitly solicited protection and also commented on other writers and the contemporary quarrel over the ancients and the moderns. Even though most participants in elite sociability in these years considered themselves as having a stake in this debate, only those identified as *gens de lettres* felt the need and expectation to put their position into writing and to circulate their views, either in manuscript or in print. [37](#)

35

Thus, Arouet's instinctive, strategic response to this elite configuration led him to become a writer to justify his presence within elite networks (despite his lack of title or personal wealth) and to be identified with these networks

publicly. Once so identified, the next step within this logic was to convert his intellectual capital into social capital by writing and presenting an appropriate piece of original verse. Although capable of such a creation, he lacked the standing or sponsorship to be invited to read a manuscript to a salon audience. He did, however, have a sufficient amount of standing to prompt a request for a reading of a work from a less restricted audience, one in need of new works and whose judgment, he thought, could legitimate an author's claim to be an honorable writer: the Comédiens Français.



Drawing on a well-established, classical theme that had been treated by, among others, Racine, he presented to the troupe a play perfectly consistent in form, style, and tone with the academic rules. At the same time, he sought sponsorship and protection from the Marquise de Mimeure, to whom he wrote a series of letters in June 1715, thanking her for the material and moral support she and the Marquis had granted him and reporting on the progress of "Oedipe," implying that he hoped she would intervene and obtain for him a reading before the royal troupe. When the Comédie performed "Oedipe" to acclaim on 32 occasions in 1718, the young writer's view that adherence to the established norms of elite culture (including classical dramaturgy and the solicitation of protection) was the key to becoming recognized as a man of letters was confirmed. Thus, the success of the performances of "Oedipe" emboldened him to dedicate the first printed edition, which appeared the following year, to no less than the Regent himself, the Duke d'Orléans, to whom he signaled his new status by refashioning himself "Voltaire." After delaying several months, the Regent accepted the dedication and awarded him a gold medallion and 675 *livres*. [38](#)

That same year, the leading court painter of the day, Nicolas Largillière, was commissioned to produce a portrait of the young writer. [39](#)

Voltaire now began in earnest to cultivate the social connections that would allow him to make his entrance into the royal entourage, to which he was admitted following his second success at the Comédie Française, with "Hérode et Mariamne" in 1725. After an unsuccessful premiere of an earlier version of the play, entitled "Mariamne," on March 6, 1724, Voltaire revised it substantially. Re-titled and restaged on April 10, 1725, it met with critical and commercial success. After the second, successful premiere, he penned a new preface, appearing in the 1725 edition of *Hérode et Mariamne*, in which Voltaire claimed to be less concerned with academic critics and their classical, stylistic rules (which he had nevertheless closely observed) than with "the public" for which he wrote. [40](#) Yet expressing a desire to please the public as a justification for his literary efforts was fully consistent with his simultaneous efforts to reposition himself more prominently as a client of elite protection. In October 1725, just after the printed edition with the preface appeared, Voltaire showed himself to be primarily concerned with exploiting at Versailles the acclaim the play generated from the Parisian audience, writing to the Marquise de Bernière and Nicolas Claude Tieriot of his availability and suitability for "an establishment" at court. Shortly thereafter, the financier

 [Voltaire, Oeuvres \(Theatre\)](#)

Joseph Pâris-Duverney offered him a pension of 1500 *livres* and a place in the entourage of the Queen. In November, he wrote letters thanking the Marquises de Mimeure and Bernière, as well as Thieriot, alluding in each communication to the success of the revised tragedy as the key to his new legitimacy. [41](#)

Having gained recognition as a tragedian and, moreover, as a court poet, Voltaire now expected to have no further need of the theater and began to work on epic histories, which would become the *Henriade* and *Charles XII*. However, a misstep in comportment slowed his rise; in his celebrated insult to the Chevalier de Rohan, that he had done better to invent a new name than to have disgraced an old one, Voltaire acted in a manner inconsistent with his subordinate position as a writer, and therefore appeared dangerously self-assertive to others of greater status. His violation of the unwritten rules of the game led to a self-imposed exile to London in 1726. Although usually cited as an example of how harshly the Old Regime treated one disrespectful of hierarchy, the Rohan incident may also be seen as evidence that Voltaire was not offering a challenge but rather respect to elite hierarchies and norms by accepting the consequences of his misstep. Place in the court hierarchy was determined not only by juridical status (noble or not) or functional identity (political position, or in this case, "men of letters") but also by the amount of "protection" a courtier enjoyed, which was determined by the position of one's patrons and how important one was as a client to those patrons. Had Voltaire's patrons been better established than were the Queen and Pâris-Duverney in 1726, or had he himself been more important to them, he might not have been subjected to the beating administered by Rohan's lackeys, a brief imprisonment, and a self-imposed exile. On the other hand, by signaling that he recognized his misstep and accepted the consequences, rather than appealing for greater protection than he warranted, the young courtier adhered to etiquette and therefore retained during his exile a certain degree of social standing at court and among Parisian elites, on which he would draw upon his return to Parisian elite society in the 1730s. [42](#)

Although Voltaire's time in England was undoubtedly a formative stage of his intellectual development, it was only upon his return to France in 1728 that he could try again to fashion himself as an honorable man of letters. Once more, he turned to the royal theater, submitting to the Comédie Française in 1729 a play he had written in England, "Brutus," which was performed in December 1730. As he had in his earlier tragedies, Voltaire adapted a well-known story to conform to French classical style. While loosely based on "Julius Caesar," and clearly influenced by Shakespearean dramaturgy, he emphasized in the "Discours sur la tragédie" that prefaced the first edition in 1731 the classical elements he had added, insisting particularly on the importance of alexandrine verse. By returning to classical tragedy and the royal theater, Voltaire re-embarked on the strategy of self-fashioning he had begun years earlier: representing himself as a writer by using the figure of a court poet. [43](#)

Even as he sought to regain an established position at court

and in *le monde*, Voltaire also began cultivating appreciation from a broader public in the late 1720s and early 1730s through non-dramatic works written for a more general readership. In addition to the celebrated essay "On the considerations owed to men of letters" in *Lettres philosophiques*, he also wrote *Temple du Goût*, which exalted writers and denigrated patrons for imposing limitations on men of letters. These works make the case for the centrality of "men of letters" in eighteenth-century society at large, beyond merely elite audiences. Here Voltaire adapts the classical, courtly ideal of erudition, as marked by graceful comportment, to a social reality in which it was possible for writers to claim prominence in their own right, not merely as dependents on patrons. Despite having less wealth and lower status than their traditional patrons among the elite, writers are presented as uniquely qualified to define what is culturally appropriate for the elite and for society at large.

His theater from these years made him, in terms of audience and revenue, the best-known writer of the age and the most successful tragedian in the history of French theater to that time. Indeed, of the eight full-length plays that were seen by more than 20,000 spectators at the Comédie Française between 1715 and 1750, six were Voltaire's tragedies, which drew over 150,000 spectators to over 160 performances. ⁴⁴ While the critical and



commercial success of these works brought him some prominence, they did nothing to rehabilitate his honor as a man of letters and his potential as a client at court. During the later 1730s, while still in a self-imposed exile with Madame du Châtelet in Circey, Voltaire continued both to write tragedies for the royal stage and to cultivate relationships at court, performing a variety of diplomatic errands for the foreign minister, the Marquis d'Argens, as well as for the Count de Maurepas and the Keeper of the Seals, Jean-Jacques Amelot de Chaillou. Moreover, he posed in 1736 for another portrait, this one by Maurice Quentin de la Tour, which depicted him standing, holding a copy of his recently completed *Henriade*. These efforts proved non-remunerative; moreover, in light of the acclaim enjoyed by his plays, they would have been unnecessary had his goal been merely to create a social identity for himself as a playwright. Such activity demonstrates how even the most commercially successful dramatic author of the time cultivated direct relations with the court to become recognized as a man of letters.

These efforts led to his readmission to court in 1745 as Royal Historiographer, followed a year later by his election to the Académie Française. As Royal Historiographer, Voltaire completed and published his great work of cultural history, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, which glorified seventeenth-century French *beaux esprits* on a level comparable with royal military conquests. In this and other texts from the 1740s, as Jack Iverson has shown, Voltaire presented writers in French society as valorous heroes, battling for glory, in terms markedly similar to those he used to represent military and noble family genealogies. Iverson argues that, in placing literature prominently in his historical texts, Voltaire and other writers of the mid-eighteenth century tended to emphasize conflict and triumph, which informed how many writers perceived their own engagement in literary life

during the age of Enlightenment, viewing it more in terms of struggle than in terms of polite, reciprocal sociability. ⁴⁵ The position of Royal

Historiographer did not require Voltaire to reside at court, and in 1749 he accepted the invitation of King Frederick II of Prussia to his new, French-styled court of Sans Souci at Potsdam. For the next three decades, until the end of his life, Voltaire remained out of the maelstrom of Parisian literary life, and this disengagement contributed to his escape from the double bind of a writer seeking both to achieve self-advancement and to demonstrate self-restraint. Not needing to negotiate between civility and autonomy in social encounters with higher-status elites—a narrow passage on the shoals of which many other writers, as we will see, would founder in the eighteenth century—Voltaire could develop and retain a much more consistent public identity, incarnating for contemporaries and historians both Enlightenment reason and courtly civility, a combination achieved by no other writer of his day. ⁴⁶



Indeed, thanks in part to his unique position above, or at least removed from the fray, Voltaire's plays and printed writings brought him a celebrity status in society at large that no writer, and certainly no dramatic author, had previously attained. This success (combined with independent wealth from financial investments) made it possible in subsequent years for him to achieve the highest degree of autonomy of any writer of his age.

In the 1760s and 70s, he could position himself as neither a court poet nor a commercially-oriented dramatic author, but in the new social role of the "Philosophe." By the later, best-known stage of his career, in the 1760s and 70s, he was no longer identified with the theater but as an autonomous writer.

The mature Voltaire had ceased to depend on the court for his identification as a writer and could thus speak to society at large without compromising his public persona as a man of letters. Furthermore, he also no longer depended on the Comédie Française for legitimation, so he could look upon its actors and actresses as contributors to rather than competitors for his own honor. Due to this *sui generis* identity, the mature Voltaire could serve as a model and mentor to younger, aspiring men of letters, and many writers looked to him as a potential broker and protector. Voltaire's dominant position in the 1760s and 1770s afforded him the luxury of representing literary life in idyllic terms as Parnassus and a Temple of Taste, a view that would be shared by few if any of the writers we will encounter henceforth in this book.



1.4. Limits to Playwriting as a Strategy of Self-Fashioning: Bourgeois to Comic Author

45

In part because of how influential Voltaire's successful trajectory became for other aspiring writers, the ideal of the court poet *cum* tragedian on which he modeled himself in his early years continued to inform expectations of how

men of letters ought to behave, in terms of personal comportment as well as the genre and style of their writings. In the first half of the eighteenth century, most of those seeking to be identified publicly as dramatic authors for the royal theater entered into literary life with neither social status nor independent wealth. Thus, they needed to gain remuneration and prestige from their writing, without appearing to be too mercenary or self-interested, if they were to gain acceptance in *le monde*. For this reason, between 1715 and 1750 most new and aspiring dramatic authors were, despite the widespread acclaim for Voltaire, subordinate in their direct encounters with both troupe members and the urban elites that the actors took to be their primary audience. [47](#)

The experience of Alexis Piron best demonstrates the limitations of playwriting as a strategy of self-fashioning, showing how deviation from classical dramaturgical norms and a failure to win acceptance in the elite could deny a would-be writer acceptance as a "man of letters," even despite great commercial success at the Comédie Française. [48](#) Piron's background closely resembles that of Arouet; he was born in 1689, the second son of a prominent Dijon apothecary, Aimé Piron, himself a member of the corporate-elected city council, a deputy to the regional Estates, and a member of a local literary academy, where he participated in the translation and discussion of classic texts. Intending for his first son to take over his apothecary shop, Aimé Piron sent his second son, Alexis, to the *collège* des Godrans to learn classical rhetoric and then, in 1708, the young Piron began legal study in Besançon. Yet he also began frequenting the dinners organized by the lawyers of the Parlement of Dijon, who the young student entertained with songs and *bons mots*. In this context in 1710, he wrote an "Ode à Priape," a libertine verse work that circulated widely in manuscript, bringing Piron local notoriety. Several years later, Rameau set the "Ode" to music, and the text was then printed anonymously.

Upon completion of his legal studies, Piron became an apprentice at the Dijon bar under the supervision of one of the Parlement's Presidents, Jean Bouhier. At the same time, Piron participated in literary competitions in neighboring Beaune and regularly attended the theater there. Unsatisfied with his potential at the Dijon bar, he set out in 1720 for Paris, where he became a secretary to the Chevalier de Belle-Isle at the rate of two *livres* per day, a post of meager salary but one that brought him in direct personal contact with Parisian elites. Soon he became a reader to the Marquise de Mimeuve, who made him her protégé, introducing him to other aristocrats and men of letters, including the ubiquitous Arouet *le jeune*, with whom he competed for attention. Like Arouet, Piron needed to legitimate his presence in elite society through his writing. Since he lacked a patron to finance his writings, and to whom he could attribute his motivation to write, the royal theater offered his best chance to acquire both remuneration and social legitimacy without appearing mercenary or self-serving. Recognizing that having a classical tragedy performed by the Comédie Française would provide him with what he called a "certificate of immortality," Piron wrote a five-act tragedy in verse, "Artémire." [49](#)

Yet he lacked sufficient social standing or sponsorship to gain a reading before the royal troupe, so he sold the work to the fairground theater entrepreneur Francisque in 1722, whose Opéra Comique staged it without success. Francisque then asked Piron to write, for a lump sum of 100 *écus*, another play closer in style to the more farcical, unclassical repertory of the fair theaters. The resulting work, "Arlequin deucalion," synthesized classical literary allusions with the stock characters of the *dell'arte* tradition in a parody of Aristophanes' *Metamorphosis*. Moreover, Piron included many references to contemporary tragedies then being staged at the Comédie Française (including those of Voltaire) to demonstrate his *esprit*, even while writing self-consciously in a non-classical genre for a third-tier venue. To avoid violating the Comédie Française monopoly, Piron wrote it as a monologue. Staged in early 1722, it enjoyed great commercial success, being performed 30 times consecutively.

In the ensuing years, Piron wrote a series of works for the Opéra Comique and the Comédie Italienne that gained him only a minimal income and even less prestige among Parisian elites. Despite a professed desire to become an honorable man of letters, Piron had become, in his late 30s, a fair-theater author. However, two aspects of his situation were atypical of boulevard authors: first, since he was not being paid as an actor as well, he made explicit his desire for greater remuneration; second, he continued to identify himself not with his fair-ground troupe but with "those writers aspiring to shine on the first theater of France," the Comédie Française. Both these concerns were evident in a legal memorandum he filed in 1725 against Francisque for 400 *livres* due him for his three-act comic opera, "Facheux veuvage." Piron decried the inferior quality of the actors and staging in fair theaters as "a disdained, decried, destitute spectacle . . . [which] even when successful, has a bad influence on the reputation of a man of letters." [50](#)

Finally, in 1728, the Marquise de Mimeuve gained entry for him into the home of the Count de Livry, where he encountered *inter alia* his rival Voltaire and the actress Mademoiselle Quinault. With her help, Piron's five-act verse comedy, "Le Fils ingrat" was accepted and staged by the Comédie Française in 1728. After a poor first performance and subsequent modifications, the play was a success, staged 23 times in Paris and twice at Versailles. At age 39, Piron now believed himself to have established his credentials as a man of letters; he demonstrated his newly acquired status by dedicating the printed edition of his play to the Duchess d'Orléans. However, his position remained precarious; the Count de Livry accorded him a pension, but only secretly, bringing him revenue but no honorific value to enhance his status. To legitimate himself, Piron then wrote for the Comédie Française a classical tragedy he hoped would be his masterpiece: "Callisthène."

With the help of Mademoiselle Quinault, the play reached the royal stage in March 1730, but it flopped and was rapidly withdrawn from the Comédie's repertory. At the time, Piron described himself to his friend, the abbot Legendre, as "sick, melancholy [and] miserable," and blamed his failure again on the actors. To prove his point and to "re-establish my glory," he brought

out a printed edition of the play, which he declared would show any educated reader the value of his work. Nevertheless, Piron recognized that he would still not be accepted as a "poet" and set to work on another tragedy, based on the story of the legendary King of Sweden Gustav Wasa. Early in 1733, his new tragedy was staged with moderate success; although withdrawn from the repertory after only eight performances, it was sufficiently acclaimed for the Count de Livry to accept Piron's dedication of the printed edition and to receive him openly into his retinue. [51](#)

50

Piron, now satisfied that he would be recognized as a "poet," stopped writing for the theater; from 1733 to 1738, he participated in a group of writers known as "Le Caveau," that gathered in a tavern where its members read each other their works and drank wine. In contrast to more established forms of intellectual sociability, such as circles and academies, this group was not under the social and financial sponsorship of a socially prominent noble, financier, or salon hostess. Having failed to follow up on the modest success of "Gustave Wasa," Piron remained poorly known to the commercial public and marginal within *le monde* when, five years later, he next submitted a play to the Comédie Française. "Métromanie," a five-act comedy in verse, premiered in early 1738 and quickly became a major success; its 28 consecutive performances made it the most commercially successful French comedy since Molière. Its central character, Damis, is himself a playwright who seeks acceptance in the "*beau monde*" but is spurned. At the play's close, Damis, having lost the hand of the heroine to a noble rake, denounces the ability of others to judge him and returns to his writing, claiming that he alone is capable of knowing true literary value. For this reason, "Métromanie" is often read as autobiographical and as evidence of "the changing status of the creative writer" in eighteenth-century France -(the play's commercial success then being cited as proof of the widespread acceptance of the ideas believed to be expressed in it). [52](#)

 [Alexis Piron,](#)
[Metromanie](#)

This interpretation is based entirely on the text of the play and the long preface, in which Piron explains, "I had attempted to present on the stage a poet, who, without abandoning his singular character, for once found a way to rid himself of unfavorable prejudice, a poet such as there doubtless existed and could exist again, a poet finally about whom it is possible to say not merely 'one can write bad verse and still be a gentleman [*honnête homme*]' but to think that 'by writing good verse, one can also be a gentleman.'" However, when viewed in the context of Piron's own trajectory, "Métromanie" is anything but autobiographical; indeed, this preface did not appear in the 1738 edition, and was in fact written twenty years later as Piron prepared an anthology of his works. [53](#) In 1738, far from renouncing success based on social reputation in the monde in favor of literary greatness, Piron understood that one was inseparable from the other. To this end, he dedicated the 1738 print edition of *Métromanie* to the Count de Maurepas. Moreover, even after the great success of "Métromanie," Piron again attempted to write a successful classical tragedy, "Fernand Contez." However, in January 1744, it was withdrawn from the Comédie's repertory after just two performances.



By 1750, Piron lived comfortably in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré on revenue from an annuity owned by his mistress, Mademoiselle de Bar. Despite having authored several commercially successful comedies, he had been passed over for election to the Académie Française repeatedly in the 1740s, losing out to, among others, Voltaire. In 1753, when Bougainville was unexpectedly chosen ahead of him to succeed the comic playwright Nivelles de la Chaussée, Piron did not, like Damis, find consolation in his work. Instead, he expressed bitterness against both "the public" and "*gens d'esprit*" in letters to friends. Piron was particularly rankled that while Voltaire bragged of his eighteen academic memberships, "I do not even have one . . . and I am five years older than Voltaire." ⁵⁴ With an eye to his public reputation, he prepared for the anthology new prefaces, including the long introduction to *Métromanie*, and arranged for line-engraved illustrations based on drawings by Charles-Nicolas Cochin. ⁵⁵

In this context, Piron now exalted "the heroism . . . of the true Poet" and railed against more socially-connected but less talented writers. Even after his ultimate failure to gain full acceptance in elite social networks, Piron held to the ideal of the writer as a court poet, whose esprit was evident in his comportment, which in turn should justify his social prominence. ⁵⁶ Although clearly a commercially successful play was a greater determinant of a writer's standing by 1750 than it had been a century earlier, Piron's experience nevertheless demonstrates that a writer not accepted by the Parisian elites—and, by extension, by the Académie Française, whose membership they influenced—could not be considered honorable. It would only be the next generation of playwrights, those who entered literary life in the second half of the century, who would invoke acclaim by the "public" to legitimate their claims to be men of letters.

1.5. The Failed Playwright, or the *Poète Crotté*: Literary Figure and Social Experience

While Voltaire achieved great success, and Piron became embittered, a third trajectory appeared as well, that of aspirants who failed and became instead *poètes crottés*. The *poète crotté* is best illustrated by the contemporary anecdote of the naïvely aspiring writer who arrives at the home of a potential patron to whom he had submitted a manuscript in hopes of obtaining financial and social sponsorship. Rather than being welcomed civilly, however, the poor devil finds his verse in the kitchen being used as wrapping for spinach leaves. In the second quarter of the eighteenth century, an alternative version appeared in which the troupe of the Comédie Française replaced the indifferent patron. After an actor hands back the manuscript and tells the playwright directly that the work had been refused by the entire troupe, the writer opens the rolled paper and demonstrates that it was blank, and thus had been rejected without being read. This motif demonstrates the dependent status of unheralded dramatic authors, and thus the ridiculousness of their pretensions to the status of a man of letters until

vindicated by acceptance into venues of elite sociability.

55

While much recent scholarship on eighteenth-century literary life has looked at representations of the "poor devil" or the mercenary "hack" writer in literary sources, we can look at the actual lived experience of such a through the example of Michel Descazeaux, a contemporary of Voltaire and Piron who failed in his attempts to have the Comédie Française perform his plays and even more dramatically in his attempts to fashion himself as a "brave and *honnête homme*." In a letter dated April 28, 1740, Descazeaux wrote the actors a nearly indecipherable, three-page letter asserting his desire to "protect my honor" and complained "of the base cabal which has frustrated me odiously" by not performing his plays, "despite my prodigious politeness." ⁵⁷ Ten days later, Descazeaux wrote again, in a distinctly more menacing tone, claiming that although "my tragedies are reputed and praised all across Paris," he had waited three years for the royal theater to perform even one. The wait, he complained, had driven him nearly to distraction, and he now threatened to effect "a revolution in the theater . . . I am capable of anything if you force me." He suggested it would be "more gallant" for the theater to recognize his "erudition" than "to oblige me to be caressed by praise from dukes, princes, and others in power at court" in order to gain the actors' attention. Deploying tropes that we will see recurring in many writers' self-presentations to the troupe in the 1760s through the 1780s, Descazeaux presented himself as a man of stature at court, "of equal stature with the leading citizens in terms of *honneur*," and of "probity, indefatigable courage, and vigilance." Moreover, he implied that he would use this standing and energy to obtain intervention by the court on his behalf: "I will make good use of my reputation, which is as great in this country as that of Voltaire." The evidently exaggerated nature of this claim must have appeared ridiculous to the troupe member who read it; that ridicule might have turned to worry when the reader saw that it had been sent from just next door to the theater, "to the right, between the baker and the meat shop, above the Comédie." ⁵⁸

The actors worried that its author, despite his assurances of civility, was a potentially dangerous, delusional would-be playwright who lurked just outside the door. As a consequence, the troupe asked the Count de Maurepas (then Minister of the Royal Household) to have Descazeaux imprisoned; by royal order, he was taken to the asylum of Charenton for several weeks, before being released to his neighbors and family on the condition that he not enter any café or other public place, including the Comédie Française. ⁵⁹

Descazeaux thus represents more than simply a "poor devil" of literature; he demonstrates the far reach, to the margins of Old Regime society, of the desire to become a playwright for the royal theater, and of the extent to which personal stature, comportment, and sponsorship were necessary for that hope to be considered realistic. His claims of personal probity and stature would have been an appropriate frame for his self-presentation to the theater, had he had been able to offer any visible marker of his civility such as a protector or broker to confer legitimacy. Instead, Descazeaux found his self-presentation contradicted forcefully by the troupe's actions—first

indifference and then domination. Accordingly, when he failed to show properly *honnête* and restrained comportment, he found himself physically prevented from entering the public arena, a writer in no one's consideration but his own.

1.6. A Brief Prosopography of Eighteenth-Century Playwrights

These social identities, from Voltaire as courtly tragedian to Descazeaux as marginalized outsider, will be elaborated through many case studies in subsequent chapters. But before considering the texture of an individual's multi-layered strategies of self-fashioning, we might attempt briefly an overall prosopography of eighteenth-century Comédie Française ⁶⁰ playwrights. A sample of 30 writers can be drawn from the beginning of the reign of Louis XVI—in effect, all those playwrights living, as of the 1776-1777 theater season, who had authored full-length plays performed by the Comédie Française. Such a prosopography demonstrates that playwrights for the royal, public theater were of slightly inferior standing, in several respects, than the universe of late Old Regime writers as a whole, based on Darnton's analysis of over 2000 authors. Darnton shows that roughly eleven percent of later eighteenth-century authors were from noble families, and sixteen percent were non-nobles from the legal and judicial milieu. Among playwrights, only three were born noble (ten percent), although five others were from landowning families; tellingly, nine more playwrights included partitive articles in their names, demonstrating pretensions to elite status. The most common background was from non-noble legal, financial, or administrative families, from which at least thirteen issued (43 percent). At least six dramatic authors were of artisanal parentage (twenty percent), whereas only one percent in Darnton's sample had risen from such low origins. ⁶¹

Aspiring dramatic authors appear unimpressive in social status when compared with the profile of members of eighteenth-century academies, as studied by Roche (for the provinces) and Martin Edwards (for the Académie Française in Paris), and with Frank Kafker's prosopography of the 140 contributors to the *Encyclopédie*. ⁶² Roche has demonstrated that, of 6,000 members of eighteenth-century provincial academies, 57 percent were from the privileged orders, while Edwards finds that well over half the eighteenth-century members of the Académie Française benefited from direct patronage, a sinecure, or a beneficed position in the Church. Likewise, Kafker finds that one third of the *encyclopédistes* were noble, and almost another third were of the "upper bourgeoisie." Kafker estimates further that nearly one-third belonged to literary or scientific academies, and fewer than twenty percent sought to support themselves by writing. By contrast, the first and second estates constituted only a small minority (at most twenty percent) of Comédie Française playwrights. Moreover, while initiates to the Académie Française had generally benefited from direct court patronage prior to their induction, most aspiring dramatic authors, when they first submitted work to the royal theater, generally did not possess honorific positions, sinecures, or academic memberships as sources of income or prestige. This comparison

suggests that, for those hoping to acquire such prominence and thereby legitimate their claims to be "men of letters," the Comédie Française offered a possibility to gain access to the social and economic capital that members of academies had acquired through birth, patronage, or sinecures.

In terms of age, the playwrights were widely scattered, ranging from 28 years old to 78 (the oldest being, of course, Voltaire). Discounting two septuagenarian playwrights who skew the sample, the average age of active playwrights in 1777 was 48; by comparison, Edwards found that the members of the Académie Française were, on average, 44 at election, a statistic that remained steady throughout the century. Yet of the 25 playwrights not already in the Académie in 1777, all but two were at or past this age. After having devoted their best years to their literary efforts and not having much to show for it, they may have seen the Comédie as their only remaining avenue for achieving legitimacy. Moreover, only two of the authors had their first play performed at the Comédie Française before they reached 30, and twenty had their premiere there between the ages of 30 and 40, suggesting that playwrights made their entry into the Parisian literary milieu relatively late in life, beyond the midpoint of their adulthood. The *Encyclopédie* authors were a bit older (54 of the 98 whose age can be determined were above 40 when they contributed), though half of the total were in their 30s. Significantly, over half of the contributors had already published at least one significant work, suggesting that the members of the "*Société des gens de lettres*" were by and large not newcomers to literary life. The playwrights, by contrast, generally were; indeed, given the amount of social capital necessary to attain a sinecure or election to the Académie, the Comédie Française may have appeared as a way for those less well connected to make up ground quickly. Unlike the *Encyclopédie* contributors or provincial academics, and certainly unlike Académie Française members, most Comédie Française playwrights—and certainly those aspiring to that status—were very much seeking to legitimate themselves as men of letters. [63](#)

60

The most commonly shared characteristic of Comédie Française playwrights of 1777 was their sex: all were male. The precise number of female playwrights is difficult to establish, and depends on the criterion used for determining who is a playwright and which plays were actually written by women. The highest published estimate (for the entire century) is 93 writers for all theaters, having produced 328 plays, constituting just over five percent of the 1710 identifiable playwrights and just over two percent of the 11,600 dramatic works estimated to have been written in France in the eighteenth century. With respect to the Comédie Française, the highest estimate is 27 female authors, though only as few as three can be credited with full-length works, and two writers (Anne-Marie du Boccage and Françoise de Graffigny) account for more than half of the estimated twenty plays by women writers staged by this theater prior to 1789. Between 1750 and 1789, the Comédie Française staged only nine new plays by female writers; of these nine, none were in the more prestigious genre of tragedy, most were shorter than the standard five acts, and all were quickly withdrawn from the active repertory. Considering published first editions of plays in the

eighteenth century, Jeffrey Ravel identifies 175 by women (2.5 percent of the estimated 7,000 total). Qualitatively, the portion of published plays by women appears even less significant, since 83 percent appeared in anthologies, a majority of which were "children's theater, *proverbs* [dramatic renderings of well-known stories], translations of foreign works and plays . . . destined for the *théâtre de société* [private, aristocratic theaters], the provinces and abroad." Precisely, then, in the years when the number of new authors, of new works submitted and staged by all theaters (including the Comédie Française), and of new dramatic editions all increased markedly, the public identity of "dramatic author," both as a cultural construct and a social reality, became overwhelmingly masculine. [64](#)

In its exclusion of women from the public identity of writer, the Comédie Française was not atypical of eighteenth-century literary life. According to Carla Hesse's analysis, only two percent of all published writers prior to 1789 were women. Yet theater does seem to have differed in its tendency towards greater exclusion of women writers in the latter decades of the century. Hesse's statistic and the qualitative analysis of feminist historians and critics have demonstrated growing female authorship in general in the later decades of the eighteenth century. (We will consider a case study of a female playwright, Olympe de Gouges, in [chapter 5](#) [65](#)).

1.7. Conclusion: Playwriting and the Enlightenment

After about 1750, the representation of the writer, specifically the playwright, became central to the Philosophic campaign to redefine the relation of knowledge to society. Enlightened arguments for the social utility of *belles lettres* emphasized literature's moralizing potential if it could reach a broad audience; since public theater, more than any other venue, brought together multiple segments of society, Enlightenment writers considered it the best forum for such a project, a claim they made all the more enthusiastically because opponents of the theater generally based their arguments on traditional Christian morality.

While the Comédie Française as an institution retained its centrality to elite cultural life, and thus partook of the prestige and values inherent to an appendage of the court, it was nevertheless seen by self-declared reformers as the most likely venue through which to re-unify French society, linking court and *mondaines* elites to the "*menu peuple*" of the "public."

Those who made this argument generally represented playwrights neither as court poets nor as "*poètes crottés*," but as intellectually if not spiritually inspired creators expressing their inimitable "genius" to society at large. Denis Diderot expressed such views in "Entretiens sur 'le Fils naturel'" (1756), depicting a playwright overcome by the sensations that brought him artistic inspiration—a figure distinct from both the classical writer, who reproduced highly stylized rhetorical forms, and the "shoddy poet," who lacked the inspiration and self-respect to produce work of any social value. In the "Entretiens," Diderot linked his view of the dramatic author as "genius" to his calls for a "serious genre," better suited to both

 [Diderot, Oeuvres Complètes Vol. VII](#)

natural expression by playwrights and to comprehension by socially mixed audiences. He thus placed playwriting at the center of the general project of the Enlightenment, which he saw himself advancing in the 1750s through both the "serious genre" and the *Encyclopédie*. 66

Diderot's emphasis on the genius of the playwright as expressing and thereby influencing social mores distinguished this view of dramatic authorship not only from the formalism that underlay classicism but also from the burlesque, parodic, and decidedly non-didactic plays written for entrepreneurial fair theaters, which he thought hindered cultural integration. Significantly, Diderot and those inspired by him did not associate themselves with fair theaters or with the commercially successful, highly sentimental works known as *comédies larmoyantes*, but rather claimed to be updating classical dramaturgical theory by transcending comedy and tragedy via a new genre that would accomplish in modern society the Aristotelian goal of unifying an audience by eliciting a common emotional response. While emphasizing that a playwright must express sentiment and genius, and not merely formal knowledge, Diderot nevertheless continued to imagine the ideal dramatic author as socially prominent but not commercially mercenary, noble in calling rather than in title or in comportment.

As we will see in the next chapter, the articulation of innovative dramaturgical theory in the late 1750s coincided with an administrative reorganization of the Comédie Française between 1757 and 1766. Yet Diderot argued abstractly, rather than proposing specific changes in the functioning of the royal theater. Moreover, as we have seen, those proposing plays to the Comédie Française prior to 1750 sought to represent themselves publicly as honorable men of letters through engagement in the genre of classical tragedy, rather than through more emotive, less stylized works. Thus, within Parisian elite networks, which included many of the Comédie Française supervisors and troupe members, there was a disparity between the self-conceptions of playwrights as honorable men of letters, who expected respectful treatment by patrons and the Comédie Française troupe, and the status ascribed to aspiring authors, which depended largely on their adherence to specific classical norms in their writing and personal comportment. Only those firmly outside the elite networks called for more socially useful, publicly oriented, and autonomous men of genius.

65

The cultural politics of writing plays for the Comédie Française in the last decades of the Old Regime thus occurred at the intersection of Renaissance conceptions of the self, Baroque courtly social encounters based on protection and deference, Enlightenment reform of official institutions, and an aesthetic debate over the relative merits of ancient and modern conceptions of literature. In this context, as the remaining chapters of this book demonstrate, the status and identity of playwrights became an evident point of contention in the second half of the eighteenth century, wherein individual writers' traditional self-conceptions and strategic modes of address confronted alternative representations of the role of men of letters in society and an evolving conception of the state.

Notes:

Note 1: Alexandre Hardy, *Théâtre* (1628), V, 78: "Avis au lecteur." Gaillard quoted in Georges Mongrédien, ed., *Recueil des textes et des documents du XVIIe siècle relatifs à Corneille* (Paris: CNRS, 1972), 54. [Back.](#)

Note 2: On this relationship in the late 1630s and early 1640s, see Jouhaud, "Power and Literature: The Terms of Exchange," and *Pouvoirs de la littérature*, 292–307. [Back.](#)

Note 3: Jean Dubu, "La condition sociale de l'écrivain de théâtre," *XVIIe siècle* 39 (1958): 149–183, is an empirical study of the social origins of selected seventeenth-century playwrights; on seventeenth-century writers more broadly, see Viala 183–238. On seventeenth-century writers' self-conceptions, as formed through interactions with elite protectors such as Richelieu, see the works of Jouhaud and Merlin, further discussed below. [Back.](#)

Note 4: On the founding of the Académie, see Merlin, *Excentricité académique*, 27–47; on the establishment of the "first literary field" in France between 1630 and 1680, see Viala, 1–167. [Back.](#)

Note 5: On the "names" of writers in the later seventeenth century, see Viala, 270–290; on the introduction of this new conception of theater as literature in the 1630s, see Deborah Blocker, "Usages de la Comédie: utilités et plaisirs de la représentation théâtrale dans la France du premier XVIIe siècle (1630-1660)," (Ph.D. diss., Université de Paris III, 2001). [Back.](#)

Note 6: Viala, *Naissance*, 75–84. [Back.](#)

Note 7: Jouhaud, *Pouvoirs*; Merlin, *Public et littérature*, 178–187, 233–236. Key texts from the "querelle" are reprinted in Armand Gasté, ed., *La Querelle du Cid* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1970). The technical and structural elements of the "rules" of seventeenth-century classical tragedy are explained in Jacques Scherer, *La Dramaturgie classique en France* (Paris: Nizet, 1954). [Back.](#)

Note 8: Hardy's notarial contracts, from the height of his renown in the 1620s, show him to have been paid 50 to 100 *livres* per play (reproduced in Deierkauf-Holsboer, 211–216). Corneille, by contrast, sought 100 *livres* for his early works, and after his successes of "Le Cid" and, later, "Cinna," would not write for less than 500 (Mongrédien, ed., 50–60). [Back.](#)

Note 9: The list is reproduced in Mélése, *Le théâtre et le public*, 109. Unlike others listed merely as "poet" on the list, Corneille is specified as a "poète dramatique," implying a distinction from the troupe author, referred to usually as "écrivain de théâtre." By this time, Corneille had also acquired other wealth, in the form of land and offices, from his marriage and from his father, worth another 5000–6000 *livres* annually. [Back.](#)

Note 10: Georges Couton, *La Vieillesse de Corneille* (Paris: Maloine, 1944). [Back.](#)

Note 11: See Raymond Picard, *La carrière de Jean Racine*, revised edition (Paris: Gallimard, 1961); Viala, *Racine: La stratégie du caméléon* (Paris: Éditions Seghers, 1990); and Vicomte de Grouchy, ed. *Documents inédits relatifs à Jean Racine et à sa famille* (Paris: Techener, 1892). On the post of royal historiographer in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see Orest Ranum, *Artisans of Glory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 58–78. [Back.](#)

Note 12: What Larry F. Norman calls Molière's "public self-portraiture" through the characters of his plays and Roger Chartier calls the "social discourse of representation" of his theater is evident as well to critics such as Abbey Zanger in his prefaces and C.E.J. Caldicott in his correspondence with patrons and editors. See Norman, *The Public Mirror: Molière and the Social Commerce of Depiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Roger Chartier discusses Molière's editions in *Publishing Drama in Early Modern Europe*, (London: British Library, 1999). 30–46, and the performance of his works in "From Court Festivity to City Spectators," *Forms and Meanings: Texts, Performances, Publics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 43–83; Abbey Zanger, "Paralyzing Performance: Sacrificing Theater on the Altar of Publication," *Stanford French Review* 12 (1988) 169–185; C.E.J. Caldicott, *La Carrière de Molière: Entre protecteurs et éditeurs* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 63–150. [Back.](#)

Note 13: Norman, 69; Elias, *The Established and the Outsiders*, 148–165; and Mozart, 35. Indicative of the reconsideration of Molière in the last generation, Caldicott argues forcefully that his court years should not be seen as an abandonment of social satire, either out of self-serving duplicity or coercion by the king, but instead as Molière's most creative period. [Back.](#)

Note 14: Chartier, *Publishing Drama in Early Modern Europe*, 51–78; Wallace Kirsop, "Nouveautés: Théâtre et Roman," in Chartier and Martin, eds., II: 218–229. On press coverage, see André Tissier, "La critique dramatique dans ses rapports avec le public," in *Die Theater und sein Publikum* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1977), 101–109. [Back.](#)

Note 15: The request is reprinted in *Oeuvres de Pierre Corneille*, ed. Charles Marty-Laveaux (Paris: Hachette, 1862–1868), I: lxxiv–lxxvi, including the response: "Privilège refused." Note that Corneille was denied a "privilège" rather than the Letters Patent that he had requested; the crown thereby likened his request not to the monopoly granted certain troupes to perform in Paris but to the monopolies over editions granted to printers. [Back.](#)

Note 16: Zanger, "Paralyzing Performance," and Madeleine Jurgens, *Cents ans de recherches sur Molière* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1963), 339–340. [Back.](#)

Note 17: BN Réserve p. Yf 64. "Recueils factices," or artificial collections, were composed of separate editions of individual works bound together. Because plays were generally printed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in

cheap, octavo editions, such *recueils factices* were frequently compiled by readers or by booksellers, grouping works by a single author or on a single theme. To differentiate authorized compendia from artificial collections, the former were generally printed in larger (quarto) formats and were continuously paginated. [Back.](#)

Note 18: *Le Théâtre de P. Corneille* (Rouen et Paris: Courbé et Luyne, 1660), 3 volumes; *Les Oeuvres de Monsieur Molière* (Paris: Jolly, 1666), 2 volumes; and *Oeuvres de Racine* (Paris: Ribou, 1675), 2 volumes. The practice of printing multi-volume compendia had begun earlier in England, where Ben Jonson had collaborated with printers to produce standardized versions of all his plays in the 1616 folio edition of his *Works*. [Back.](#)

Note 19: Wolfgang Leiner's *Der Widmungsbrief in der französischen Literatur, 1580—1715* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1965) remains the classic study of the rhetoric of seventeenth-century authorial prefaces, which discusses Corneille's dedications on 273—276. On dedications in early modern books more generally, see Chartier, "Princely Patronage and the Economy of Dedication," *Forms and Meanings*, 25—52. [Back.](#)

Note 20: Timothy Murray, *Theatrical Legitimation: Allegories of Genius in Seventeenth-Century England and France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 81; Chartier, *Publishing drama in early modern Europe*, 51—73; quote at 55. [Back.](#)

Note 21: Steven Rendall, "The Portrait of the Author," *French Forum* 13:2 (1988): 143—151. [Back.](#)

Note 22: On seventeenth-century Molière portraits, during and after his life, see Rene-Thomas Coèle, "Madeleine Bejart et Molière, Modèles des peintres Nicolas Mignard et Pierre Mignard, Avignon, 1657," *Révue d'histoire du théâtre* 9:2 (1957): 276—290; and Elizabeth Maxfield-Miller, "Molière and the Court Painters" in *Molière and the Commonwealth of Letters: Patrimony and Posterity*, eds. Roger Johnson et al. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1975), 5—30. [Back.](#)

Note 23: Julie Stone Peters, *The Theatre of the Book, 1490—1800* (New York: Oxford, 2000), 66—92; 129—145; 276—293. [Back.](#)

Note 24: The classical rhetorical forms in this genre are most evident in the writings of Guez de Balzac, on whom see Jouhaud 321—366; and Peter Shoemaker, "Guez de Balzac and the Eloquence of Patronage" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1997). [Back.](#)

Note 25: A Lettre de cachet of October 21, 1680 (BCF, Registre IV A) established the new troupe as the "King's French players [*Comédiens Français du Roi*]," to distinguish them from the Italian troupe, which continued to perform. Because they would perform commercially in Paris rather than exclusively at the court, they were also referred to as the "ordinary players [*comédiens ordinaires*]." See Bonnassières, *Histoire administrative*, 1—103; Mélése, 29—59; and, on the Comédie Italienne at this

time, Virginia Scott, *The Commedia dell'arte in Paris, 1644–1697* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1990), 276–279. [Back.](#)

Note 26: Different "Ordres" issued by the First Gentlemen to the troupe during the first four decades of its existence are found in the BCF dossiers " Feuilles de l'Assemblée des Comédiens Français" and " Règlements et ordonnances" (IV A), of which document #2 is the 1719 transcription of the 1697 regulations, still in effect. Several of these early orders and regulations are reprinted in *Extrait de l'établissement des Comédiens du Roy* (Paris: [1728]) [NYPL-PA (RB): MWEH Paris 97-132 (1).] [Back.](#)

Note 27: On this sense of " gatekeeper," see Lewis A. Coser, Charles Kaduskin and Walter W. Powell, *Books: The Culture and Commerce of Publishing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 4–5 and 362–374. [Back.](#)

Note 28: BCF, " Feuilles d'assemblée," dated March 22, 1683, and July 19, 1683. [Back.](#)

Note 29: Maximilien Fuchs, *La Vie théâtrale en province au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: CNRS, 1986), shows the predominance of the Parisian public theater in eighteenth-century France by taking a sample of 835 Comédie Française productions, and demonstrating that 125 were staged in provincial theaters within 20 months of their Parisian premiere. Fuchs also shows that in adapting the play for a provincial stage, the primary concerns were gaining the approval of municipal authorities and attracting an audience, not remaining faithful to the original author's text. As the century progressed, Fuchs finds less concern with staging *nouveautés* direct from Paris and stricter adherence to works that might be considered canonical—proven crowd pleasers by well-known (and no longer living authors), notably comedies by Molière and Marivaux. [Back.](#)

Note 30: Bonnassières, xiii, and Hemmings, *Theatre and State*, 5-6, both state that only after the reorganization of 1757 should the Comédie Française be seen as a commercially-oriented theater. Even then, Rougemont points out (246–259), the Comédie Française differed from all other Parisian theaters in that it had no commercial or artistic director. [Back.](#)

Note 31: François Moreau, *Dufresny, auteur dramatique: 1657–1724* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1979), 53. [Back.](#)

Note 32: On opera-going as a social responsibility for eighteenth-century elites, see James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 9–34. On the history of the administration of the Opéra in the eighteenth century, see William Weber, " Une Institution et son public," *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 48:6 (1993): 1519-1539. On the writing of operatic lyrics, see Catherine Kintzler, *Poétique de l'opéra français de Corneille à Rousseau* (Paris: Minerve, 1991). [Back.](#)

Note 33: Robert Isherwood, *Farce and Fantasy: Popular Entertainment in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 22–250. See also Rougemont, 261–268. [Back.](#)

Note 34: Michèle Root-Bernstein, *Boulevard Theater and Revolution* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984), 167—196. [Back.](#)

Note 35: The following is based on Theodore Besterman, ed. "Correspondence and related documents, definitive edition," which comprises volumes 85—135 of *Complete Works of Voltaire* (Geneva and Oxford: Voltaire Institute, 1968—). This edition has provided the basis for René Pomeau et al., *Voltaire et son temps*, 5 volumes (Oxford: The Alden Press, 1985—1994), a work notable for its combination of empirical depth (drawing on the complete Voltaire correspondence and writings) and interpretive superficiality (not a single work in the history of the book or the sociology of literature is cited in the bibliography). [Back.](#)

Note 36: Willem Frijhoff and Dominique Julia, *École et société dans la France de l'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Colin, 1975). On classical theater in the curriculum of early modern collèges, especially Jesuit institutions, see L.W.B. Brockliss, *French Higher Education in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 163—177; Chartier, Dominique Julia, and Marie-Madeleine Compère, *L'Éducation en France du XVIe au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: SEDES, 1976), 151—206; and François de Dainville, *L'Éducation des jésuites, XVIe au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1978), 167—208, 473—503. On verse and on universality of character and theme in classical dramaturgy, see Jacques Scherer. [Back.](#)

Note 37: *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire* (Kehl, 1778), vol. XIV: "Poésies mêlées." On the quarrel over the ancients and the moderns in early eighteenth-century France, see Saisselin, *Taste*, 15—25; and Joseph Levine, *The Battle of the Books* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) 121—147. [Back.](#)

Note 38: Besterman, ed., D25—D28. Voltaire's dramaturgical agenda in his early tragic works is treated in Jack Vrooman, *Voltaire's Theatre: The Cycle from Oedipe to Mérope* (Geneva: Voltaire Institute, 1970). [Back.](#)

Note 39: "Voltaire à 24 ans," Musée Carnavalet (P 208). This painting may be a studio copy of a similar portrait in the Musée nationale de Versailles from the same year, which has been attributed to a different court painter, Catherine Luscurier. [Back.](#)

Note 40: *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire* (Kehl, 1778), I: 175. On Voltaire's modifications from the first version to the second and on differing public responses to each, see Ravel, " 'La Reine Boit!': Print, Performance and Theater Publics in France, 1724-1735," *ECS* 29:4 (1996): 391—412. [Back.](#)

Note 41: Besterman, ed., D 252; D 253; D 255. [Back.](#)

Note 42: The Rohan incident is described in Pomeau et al., I: 195—196. On protection in early modern French elite hierarchies and on the need of subordinates to demonstrate a comprehension of the balance of power and thereby retain their protection, even while losing place temporarily, see Neuschel, *Word of Honor*, 186—208. [Back.](#)

Note 43: *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire* (Kehl, 1778), I: 309–323. [Back.](#)

Note 44: " Oedipe" (30 performances, 25,000 spectators); " Hérode et Mariamne" (28, 24,000); " Zaire" (31, 27,000); " Alzire" (20, 20,000); " Mérope" (29, 30,000); and " Sémiramis" (21, 18,000). Source: Lough, *Paris Theatre Audiences in the Seventeenth & Eighteenth Centuries* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 178–179. Yearly attendance in this decade averaged just over 100,000 spectators at 300 performances. [Back.](#)

Note 45: Iverson, " Voltaire's Heroes," 253–334. Jouhaud makes a similar argument about seventeenth-century historians, claiming that the rhetoric they deployed of " rendering service to the *patrie* to valorize the noble families that patronized them informed their own senses of themselves, as fighting vigorously and valorously, leading to a greater intensity of conflict in literary life (*Pouvoirs*, 267–269). [Back.](#)

Note 46: This point is developed by studying Voltaire's participation in scientific institutions by J. B. Shank, in " Before Voltaire: Newtonianism and the Origins of the Enlightenment in France, 1687-1734" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 2000), esp. 45–46. [Back.](#)

Note 47: Lough, *Writer and Public in France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 208–210; Saisselin, *The Literary Enterprise in Eighteenth-Century France* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), 56–57. [Back.](#)

Note 48: The classic biography of Piron is Paul Chaponnière, *Alexis Piron: Sa vie et ses oeuvres* (Geneva: Jullien, 1910), of which an abridged version was published as *La vie joyeuse de Piron* (Paris: Mercure, 1935). A recent treatment, Pascale Verèb, *Alexis Piron, poète (1689–2773), ou la difficile condition d'auteur sous Louis XV* (Oxford: Voltaire Institute, 1997), is more thorough, though breaks little new ground. These accounts are supplemented in the following passage with Piron's own accounts in his " Vie de l'auteur," and the " Préface" to *Métromanie*, both written in the mid-1750s, and cited from the second edition of his *Oeuvres complètes* [sic], 7 volumes (Paris: Lambert, 1776), and Piron's correspondence in Gunnar von Proschwitz, ed., *Alexis Piron, épistolier* (Göteborg, Sweden: Rundqvists Boktryckeri, 1982). [Back.](#)

Note 49: Piron, " Vie," 6. [Back.](#)

Note 50: Chaponnière, *Alexis Piron*, 58. [Back.](#)

Note 51: Proschwitz, *Alexis Piron*, documents # 5, #7, and #10. [Back.](#)

Note 52: Chaponnière, *Alexis Piron*, 120–132; La Grave, 562. [Back.](#)

Note 53: The preface first appeared in *Oeuvres complètes*, 3 volumes (Paris: Duchesne, 1758), which was reissued in a seven-volume octavo format in 1776 (quoted from 1776 edition at III, 46). [Back.](#)

Note 54: May 31, 1754, to the Baron de Fontette (Proschwitz, #38). [Back.](#)

Note 55: On Piron's involvement in the preparation of this edition, see Vereb, 280—299. This first edition of the *Oeuvres* (Paris: Duchesne, 1758), however, did not include an engraved author's portrait, which would be added for the later compendium of Piron's *Oeuvres choisies* (Paris: Duchesne, 1773). [Back.](#)

Note 56: December 12, 1753, and September 17, 1754, to his friend and sometime patron Jean-François Le Vayer (printed in E. Lavaquery, ed., *Lettres de Piron* (Angers: Gaultier et Thébert, 1920), 73, 86. [Back.](#)

Note 57: Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal (ARS), Archives de la Bastille (AB) 11459, ff. 49—51. [Back.](#)

Note 58: AB 11459, ff. 45—48; 7 May 1740. [Back.](#)

Note 59: AB 11459, f. 54; f. 68. [Back.](#)

Note 60: The prosopographical profile is based on information from their dossiers in the BCF; from the police dossiers kept on certain of the authors by the Inspecteur d'Hémery (BN-MSS, NAF 10781—3); and from the following sources: *L'Espion Anglais* 7 (1783) 193—4; J. S. Ersch, *La France littéraire* (Hambourg: Hoffman, 1797), 3 vols; J.-M. Quérard, *La France littéraire* (Paris: Maisonneuve, n.d.), 12 vols; A. Joannidès, *La Comédie Française de 1680 à 1900* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1970); and J.-P. Beaumarchais et al., eds., *Dictionnaire des littérateurs de la langue française* (Paris: Bordas, 1987), 4 vols. [Back.](#)

Note 61: Darnton, "Facts," 270 — 280. [Back.](#)

Note 62: Daniel Roche, *Le Siècle des Lumières en Province*, (Paris: Mouton, 1978), I: 194—197; Martin Edwards, "The Judgment of Distinction: The Académie Française and Interpretive Communities in Eighteenth-Century France," (3rd cycle dissertation, European University Institute (Florence, Italy), 1995), ch. 2., 10—34; Frank A. Kafker, *The Encyclopedists as a Group* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1996), 10—15. [Back.](#)

Note 63: A fuller discussion of this prosopography, including sample trajectories, can be found in Brown, "Dramatic Authorship and the Honor of Men of Letters in Eighteenth-Century France," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 27 (1998): 257—271. [Back.](#)

Note 64: On the increase in total numbers of plays and editions, see Jeffrey Ravel, "Theatre Beyond Privilege: Changes in French Play Publication, 1700-1789," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 12 (2001): 319-67, which draws on his database of [French Plays in the Eighteenth Century](#), based on Clarence D. Brenner, *A bibliographical list of plays in the French language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1947). Ravel identifies nine women whose plays premiered at the Comédie Française in this period. The aggregate figures of women authors and plays are from David Trott's interrogations of Ravel's database; see Trott, "[Bases numérisées et bilans: pour un survol du rôle des femmes dans le théâtre français entre 1700 et 1789,](#)" oral communication to the XXVth Congress of the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies,

Montreal, 15 October 1999 <http://www.chss.utoronto.ca/~trott/femme.htm>.

Other scholars who have produced estimates based on other sources have found significantly fewer women writers and plays. Cecilia Beach, *French Women Playwrights before the Twentieth Century* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 22–50, identifies only five women in the eighteenth century, while Sylvie Chevalley, "Les Femmes auteurs dramatiques de la Comédie Française," *Europe* (1964): 41–47, discussing the entire century, finds 27 plays by women accepted into the Comédie Française repertory. Considering the total number of authors for the entire century and all types of drama for all venues, Nadeiger Bonnifet identifies 80 woman playwrights in France in the eighteenth century ("Repertoire des femmes auteurs de langue française du XVIIe, XVIIIe, XVIIIe siècle," [D.E.A., Université de Paris III, 1988], 15–17).

On the general problem of women and theater in eighteenth-century culture, see Lenard Berlanstein, *Daughters of Eve: A Cultural History of French Theater Women from the Old Regime to the Fin-de-Siècle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 33–83. [Back.](#)

Note 65: See the statistics in Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment*, 37. Aurora Wolfgang, in an unpublished manuscript, "Publish and Perish: Women in Print Culture in Eighteen-Century France," finds more women writers in the Old Regime and fewer in the Revolution than does Hesse, and Wolfgang therefore disputes Hesse's conclusion that the Revolution provided broader opportunities for women writers. (I thank Professor Wolfgang for sharing the findings of this paper, which will be published in her forthcoming book, *Furiously Female: The Novel and Feminine-Voice Narratives in France: 1730–1782.*) [Back.](#)

Note 66: Diderot, "Entretiens" and "Discourse sur la poésie dramatique," *Oeuvres complètes t.X Le drame bourgeois* (Paris: Hermann, 1980), 83–162 and 323–427. These and other contemporary writings on the "drame" are interpreted, most recently, in Alain Ménil, *Diderot et le drame: Théâtre et politique* (Paris: PUF, 1995); Julie C. Hayes, *Identity and Ideology* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1991); and Pierre Frantz, *L'Esthétique du tableau dans le théâtre du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: PUF, 1998); and Frantz, "Théorie et pratique du drame bourgeois" (*Thèse d'état*, Université de Paris III, 1994). [Back.](#)

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