

## 2. Playwriting for the Comédie Française in the Eighteenth Century: *Règlements* and the Rules of the Game

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The study of dramaturgy has generally been the purview of literary critics and theater scholars. For those disciplines, it has meant identifying and explaining mutations in successive versions of a given text or analyzing the structural or stylistic elements of an author's plays. <sup>1</sup> In this book, playwriting is approached as a social practice, occurring at the juncture of two broad, historical trajectories: first, the bureaucratizing and modernizing tendency of the absolutist government; and second, the dissolution of a system of elite protection and patronage, which for over a century had structured French literature and established the status and identities of writers. This chapter examines this juncture in the middle decades of the century, during extended reforms to the royal regulations that governed the Comédie Française and concomitant changes in the unwritten "rules of the game" by which individual playwrights entered into and sought personal legitimacy in literary life.

### 2.1. The Regulations of the Comédie Française, 1680–1757

The royal Letters Patent of October 21, 1680, which founded the Comédie Française as the "King's players," granted the troupe a monopoly over non-musical, French-language performances at court and in Paris.

 [\*Anciens Règlements ...\*](#) <sup>2</sup> By another royal *Ordonnance*, the new troupe was placed under the authority of four dukes at court, the First Gentlemen of the King's Bedchamber. <sup>3</sup> In 1685,  [\*Règlements de Nos Seigneurs ...\*](#) the First Gentlemen began issuing "orders" concerning many aspects of the functioning of the theater; in 1697, these orders were codified into the first set of "regulations," which were subsequently renewed in 1719 and again in 1726. The subsequent versions added articles concerning authors' relations with the theater, creating the first direct royal regulation of the literary activity of men of letters. <sup>4</sup>

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, neither the actors nor the First Gentlemen showed much concern with the theater's administration or finances, presuming that a royal theater should be financed primarily by its patron, the King, rather than by commercial revenues. <sup>5</sup> Due in part to

this indifference, the theater ran significant deficits; despite its commercial monopoly and its distinction as the royal troupe, it had accrued almost one-half million *livres* in debt by 1757. <sup>6</sup> At that point, a decision was made at court to reconstitute the theater, fundamentally altering its administration and finances and substantially revising its regulations.  [\*Acte de Société ...\*](#) This reconstitution involved the dissolution of the

old troupe and the re-incorporation of the actors into a "Société des Comédiens du Roi." This "society" of actors became the proprietor of the theater building and of a monetary endowment, from which annual pensions would be paid to active as well as retired troupe members. <sup>7</sup> Although the Intendants of Royal Amusements at court continued to pay lump sums to the company for command performances at Versailles or Fontainebleau, and although individual actors and actresses continued to receive support from patrons, the actors, individually and collectively, were increasingly dependent after 1757 on the commercial success of the plays they performed in Paris. <sup>8</sup>

The 1757 reforms began a process of rationalization in the government's management of the royal theater, characterized by increasingly explicit regulations, standardized enforcement of those regulations, and greater emphasis on generating commercial revenues. Thus, the new regulations distanced playwrights from any direct rapport with courtiers (such as the First Gentlemen) by creating in 1762 a "Committee of Comédiens," supervised by the two most senior male actors, to manage the theater's daily affairs. <sup>9</sup> Moreover, in 1765, the First Gentlemen created a legal committee of seven prominent Parisian lawyers, known as the "Council of the Comédie," charged specifically with enforcing the orders issued by the First Gentlemen and resolving any difficulties that might arise, especially between the troupe and its writers. <sup>10</sup>

The theater regulations, as first composed in the 1690s, presumed that the terms of exchange between authors and the theater would resemble those between writer and patron: hierarchical, but reciprocal and symbiotic. Through the revisions to the regulations in 1757 (and the subsequent creation of the legal council in 1765), the First Gentlemen intended to establish author-theater relations on a more impersonal and procedural basis. In a manuscript draft of the 1757 regulations, they expressed their intention "to reform a great number of abuses which ... for a long time have led to conflicts by anticipating [in the regulations] all which could concern [relations with] the authors." In creating the legal council eight years later, the First Gentlemen noted that "the former regulations [of 1757] concerning new plays are not being executed," and they ordered a printed copy sent to each author before every reading, so that all authors would clearly understand "the nature of the engagements which the troupe contracts with them" if their plays were accepted. Then, in the mid-1770s, the First Gentlemen voiced their desire to "draw up a plan that could save men of letters the embarrassment of perpetual debate with the actors"; this concern led to yet another revision to the regulations in 1780 (discussed in the "Intermission"). <sup>11</sup>

These reforms continued a tendency, evident in seventeenth-century courts across Europe, to standardize informal relationships with intellectual

producers into formal institutions, notably scientific and literary academies. Mario Biagioli has argued that the more relations with patrons became impersonalized (especially in the case of an institutional patron, such as an academy) and standardized, the more the beneficiaries of such sponsorship sought to circumvent those impersonal standards to demonstrate their distinction. Clients were thus encouraged to appear disinterested in gaining what the standardized practices of institutions such as academies were supposed to guarantee to them—remuneration and procedures of evaluation of their writings not dependent on their personal merit or proximity to the prince. The establishment of academies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, he argues, effectively replaced the personal contact of clients with the King or a prominent minister (such as, in France, Richelieu). <sup>12</sup> In lieu of an academy for playwrights in eighteenth-century France, the Comédie Française served this role, but it did so problematically, rendering even more ambiguous the position of dramatic authors between court and public.

For, at the same time that the First Gentlemen regulated with increasing detail the operation of the institution after 1757 (such issues as the acceptance of new plays, preparations for performance, authorial remuneration, and literary property), the relationship between writers and the institution itself became if anything less standardized. Instead of explicit regulations enforced systematically by royal officials and lawyers, the theater's daily operations continued to be handled in those years primarily by the troupe members themselves who, like the writers, had increasingly little direct contact with the court. Consequently, they were free to act of their own volition, which led them, in most cases, not to negotiate legal contracts but to adhere to norms of court culture, specifically ad hoc "private agreements [*conventions particulières*]." Through such direct terms of exchange (analyzed in detail below), writers and the troupe deliberately contravened the First Gentlemen's regulations, and continued to do so, even after the revised regulations formally proscribed such private agreements. <sup>13</sup>

Thus, throughout the latter half of the century, the governance of the Comédie Française was characterized by two, related antinomies: first, writers continually complained about mistreatment by the troupe even as the regulations became, *prima facie*, more favorable to authors; and, second, the court (the First Gentlemen and the Minister of the Royal Household) continually complained about the regulations being disregarded even as they augmented the power of their subordinates, including the Intendants of Royal Amusements and the legal council, to enforce those regulations. Indeed, while the royal court introduced rationalizing reforms, most aspiring playwrights of the age resisted them. Standardization of theater-author relations cut against these aspirants' self-conceptions, which were based not on Enlightenment ideas of market exchange, private property, or state administrative regulation, but on terms of exchange established in the early modern period, between writers and princely patrons. <sup>14</sup> Thus, to understand the consequences of the institutional changes implemented by the court in

the mid-eighteenth century, we must consider not only the explicit provisions of the new regulations but, moreover, the strategic practices deployed by those on whom they had the most direct impact— aspiring playwrights. For those who wished to become *gens de lettres*, the royal regulations represented an obstacle to achieving recognition of their status, because they diminished the opportunities for an aspirant to have social encounters with established elites in which they could display their gentility, leaving only one clear source of legitimacy: a public identification with the institution of the Comédie Française.

The rest of this chapter traces the process of theatrical production, from the writing of the play to its staging and the distribution of revenues and prestige it might generate, to see how, at each stage, writers sought to achieve an ideal based on civil, self-restrained, and *honnêteté* behavior, despite the institution's own regulations which, read at face value, presumed writers would —act in the opposite fashion, as interest-oriented, autonomous, and self-assertive individuals. In so doing, this chapter demonstrates that, in the terms of Stephen Greenblatt, the "social energy" of literature is generated not when a "solitary individual puts words on a page"; instead, the "heart of the mystery" lies in the process by which a text becomes "literature." [15](#)

## 2.2. Playwrights encounter the troupe: The "reading"

A playwright wishing to have a play performed by the Comédie arranged to read the work aloud to the assembled actors, so they could decide whether it would merit performance. This practice had begun informally in the early seventeenth century, as authors who were either members of or personally linked to a specific troupe presented works in progress to friends in the company for response. By the late seventeenth century, it had become standard practice for fixed troupes to gather and hear plays read by outside authors only after one member of the troupe had approved the work for a reading to the entire company. Thus, the First Gentlemen had merely codified existing practice when their 1697 regulations provided that all new plays would be accepted only after a reading by the author and a vote by the troupe. [16](#)

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Under the 1697 regulations, an author seeking an opportunity to read to the troupe technically required the approval of the First Gentlemen; however, many authors appealed directly to one or more troupe members for an audience. [17](#) In 1746, the First Gentlemen began to routinize this process by ordering that all readings of new plays must be arranged by the troupe leaders, or *semainiers*, to whom new works should henceforth be submitted. [18](#) Under these new rules, the troupe leader would ask another troupe member to examine the work, and if this *examineur* considered it worthy of a general reading, the entire company would be assembled for this purpose.

Although this reform has appeared to some historians as meritocratic, the practical consequences were to give the senior troupe members more power to favor writers known personally to them, especially those whose previous works had been staged successfully, and thus to limit opportunities for outsiders. In the 1750s and 60s, established writers were regularly accorded readings promptly, while unknown outsiders normally had to request a reading several times, often to no avail. [19](#)

The most notable example of a favored author, known to troupe members, who benefited from this mid-century reform, was without a doubt Voltaire. His works were regularly read and accepted immediately. In December 1763, the troupe dispensed entirely with the regulations by writing to him at Ferney to request he submit a new tragedy; ten years later, at a meeting to consider his tragedy "Sophonisbe," the troupe "did not have to vote," and accepted the work unanimously. By contrast, an aspiring playwright such as Michel Descazeaux (whom we met in [Chapter 1](#)) wrote repeatedly to the troupe, vaunting himself as being "on par ... with Voltaire" and asking for a reading of his tragedies; when his pleas became too aggressive, the troupe had him arrested and imprisoned in Charenton, then Saint-Lazare, before he was released, having been ordered not to frequent any public places, including the theater. [20](#) Similarly, in October 1772, an anonymous writer, then unknown to the troupe and still unknown to literary historians, pleaded in at least three letters to the actors for a chance to read his "brilliant" tragedy, without obtaining a response. [21](#)

For all playwrights (except Voltaire), the reading was a source of great anguish. Retrospective representations of aspiring playwrights frequently presented them reading their works aloud in aristocratic salons, where they were treated with civility and respect; such a vision is evident, for instance, in the early nineteenth-century paintings of writers in salons, such as Nicolas-André Monsiau's painting of "Molière reading Tartuffe in the salon of Ninon de l'Enclos," from 1802, which Anselin engraved in 1812. Also in 1812, Charles Gabriel Lemonnier painted his oft-cited depiction of Voltaire reading his play "Orephelin de la Chine" to the salon of Madame Geoffrin. [22](#)



Yet writers' correspondence from the eighteenth century frequently represents the *lecture* as an experience of a distinctly different nature—the troupe responding with indifference and scorn, deliberately puncturing aspiring writers' senses of self as *gens de lettres*. So prevalent were authors' complaints of the incompetence, partiality, and caprice of the Comédiens at the *lecture* that the First Gentlemen ordered the actors in 1746 to refrain from any uncivil conduct that "could cool the zeal [the authors] might have to work to please the public and to be useful to the troupe." [23](#) Despite this injunction, writers continued to complain; that same year, one malcontent

playwright wrote to the Count de Maurepas (then responsible for the Royal Household, and thus the royal theaters) of the difficulties and "humiliation" that "men of talent who work for the public" in "the difficult career" of playwriting faced in reading their works to the royal troupe. This anonymous "Memorandum on the theaters" deplored that "the amusement of the court and of Paris ... depends on the caprice and the bad taste" of the troupe members, "who discourage talent." Recalling that, in the seventeenth century, no less than the Académie Française had been called upon to evaluate the merit of Corneille's controversial "Cid," this writer argued in the name of "the public good and the honor of letters" that authors should no longer be exposed to "the hubris and the ignorance" of the troupe in their efforts to contribute to the glory of French theater and of the King. To remedy this situation, he proposed that new plays should be examined not by the troupe but by other writers, "whose delicacy of mind and knowledge of the theater and of the taste of the court" would be more "impartial." Thus, he asked Maurepas to issue a new regulation to that effect, which would not only recognize the status of authors but also advance considerably the civilizing effect of French literature. [24](#)

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In revising the regulations in 1757, the First Gentlemen did address this problem, although they did not transfer authority to choose plays from the troupe to men of letters. Rather, the new regulations specified that the troupe should treat the authors at such readings "as honorably [*honnêtement*] as possible," even if the play were to be rejected. To avoid humiliating the playwrights, the revised regulations physically displaced the troupe's deliberations by ordering that the author "will be asked to withdraw and must not be present at the deliberation." After a discussion among all the troupe members, a vote was to be taken by ballot rather than by acclamation. The use of ballots was specifically intended by the First Gentlemen "to avoid all possible complaints of personal animosity" against authors, so the decision would, to any outside observer, appear to be based on the merits of the work alone. [25](#) The First Gentlemen reiterated this new procedure in two subsequent orders, on January 1, 1762, and again on June 1, 1766, the latter version being printed in a 46-page octavo pamphlet. [26](#) These regulations concerning the troupe's deliberations were explicitly intended by the First Gentlemen "to avoid quarrels and disputes which currently arise too often between the authors and the actors." Then, on April 14, 1774, to further enforce civility at readings, the First Gentlemen disallowed new troupe members from voting on plays during their first five years at the Comédie, during which time they would be required to attend readings and learn proper comportment toward authors. [27](#)

Another change in the 1757 regulations allowed the troupe, in addition to accepting or rejecting a play, to ask the author to make revisions and resubmit the work for further consideration. To exercise this third option, the Comédiens were required to offer written suggestions, in which they were enjoined "not to put in their opinions any words shocking to the author" and

to employ only "honorable language." These responses were then to be recopied by the troupe leader, so the author could not know which actor was responsible for any given comment. <sup>28</sup> Moreover, only the author himself or his designated substitute should be admitted to the reading, and the entire deliberation was to be kept utterly secret. This scripting of the face-to-face encounter between the troupe and the authors was intended both to allow for frank discussion by the actors of the merits of the work and, more importantly, to respect the self-conception of would-be playwrights, who presumed that they should be treated with civility even when their writing was being criticized.

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Ten years after the reform of the regulations had taken full effect (in 1765), playwrights remained vexed at being judged by what the writer Michel Sedaine called mere "mechanics," who were not "cultivated people [*gens d'esprit*]." By 1775, Sedaine had become one of the period's more commercially popular writers, primarily in the less prestigious genre of the *opéra-comique*, though his "Philosophe sans le savoir," performed at the Comédie Française a decade earlier, had been a critical and commercial success. Moreover, Sedaine had achieved significant legitimacy in literary life, as a member and later first secretary of the royal Académie de l'Architecture. <sup>29</sup>

 [Sedaine, Philosophe sans le savoir](#)



Thus, he had sufficient access to the court to have been able to complain directly to the First Gentlemen of his treatment by the troupe; moreover, he had sufficient standing among aspiring writers to articulate with credibility the concerns of "*gens de lettres*." Shortly after the premiere of his play "Paris sauvée" in February 1775, he drafted a long "Memorandum on relations between authors and the Comédie Française," about his personal difficulties with the troupe. <sup>30</sup> He complained that, "an author who comes to give a reading is thrown in the middle of an assembly, where he has no protector [and] no one ... to impose [order] on the atmosphere of denigration, irony, and mockery which is almost inevitable among young persons who are not serious by *état* or education."

Sedaine argued that self-restrained, polite conduct should reign at readings, since the proper aesthetic criteria could only be employed in a context of civility. Moreover, he implied, the actors and authors should encounter one another as had writers and other social and cultural elites since the seventeenth century, in academies and salons where writers often read new works aloud. Sedaine contrasted this ideal of civility with what he represented as the impolite, immoderate, and non-reciprocal conduct in which Comédiens had regularly engaged at readings. The actors, he argued, tended in readings to become emotional and be "electrified ... by tears or affected laughter" and to lose their self-restraint and civility. Such conduct, he implied, disqualified them from being considered *gens d'esprit*, despite

the authority given them under the royal regulations to compose the repertory. As a consequence of this discrepancy between the regulations and the rules of the game, the authors were becoming demoralized, with dire consequences for the state of French literature and culture. The solution, he concluded, must be to restore power to those who did manage to conduct themselves civilly, namely, men of letters. To restore to the royal theater the civility necessary for it to function properly, Sedaine called for a writer, protected by the First Gentlemen, to preside over readings: "the assembly, when there is a reading, [should] be presided over by a man of letters who represents directly the First Gentlemen."

This "president" would mediate directly between authors and the troupe at the reading and, in so doing, would ensure adherence to standards of polite comportment. "He would ensure there is silence and would not give his opinion on the work ... unless asked by the assembly. The author would give his reading ... before a set table with the president across from him." Also at this table would be the two "friends" the author would be entitled to bring to the reading. Sedaine further proposed that if the president "were to see animosity, sourness, or rancor, he would entreat the players to pay attention ... [to be] concerned with the interest of the public and the theater" through respectful treatment of the authors.

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Sedaine clearly intended his proposal to be considered by the First Gentlemen not as an attack on the theater as a court institution but as just the opposite: a call to restore civility in literary life. In proposing a "president," Sedaine made clear that he sought not to protect, but to exclude, newcomers to literary life who would create conflicts through aggressive behavior in their meetings with the troupe. The president, he proposed, would have "all the means to embarrass a man of letters who would make an inappropriate demand and to distance from the purview of the First Gentlemen any discussion that would bring dishonor on literature." Sedaine intended his proposed president to mediate all contact between the authors and the troupe and to ensure that these encounters would be *honnêtes*. To this end, he proposed in his memorandum a scripted statement that the president should make to the author in announcing the troupe's decision: "*Monsieur*, your play is received and you are requested to enter' [the foyer] or simply 'you are requested to enter' if it is not" accepted. An author dissatisfied with his treatment could have recourse to the president, who in turn would take the matter up with the First Gentlemen. This institutionalized means of redress would allow the authors to defend themselves within the existing hierarchies connected to the court, without having to resort to any immoderate self-assertion that might embarrass themselves, the troupe, and the court. Anticipating that rivalries among the authors themselves might compromise the impartiality of the president, Sedaine proposed that there be two potential presidents, between whom a given playwright reading his work could choose when reading his play.

Sedaine proposed thus to link power and civility, so that the readings could take place without degenerating—as authors frequently complained they did—into literary hazing. In this respect, the proposed president would serve the role that Dena Goodman has suggested was fulfilled by hostesses in the salons. <sup>31</sup> There was, however, an important difference between Sedaine's proposed president and Goodman's idealized salon hostess: the president would not be a woman. In fact, for the dramatic authors, the presence of women at the readings, in the form of actresses, far from ensuring the orderliness of the proceedings, undermined it, precisely because these women were *actresses*. Lenard Berlanstein has recently attributed the anxiety generated by the presence of the *Comédiennes* at the readings to a generalized anti-female bias in the theatrical world, especially among playwrights. <sup>32</sup> In the context of the reading, we see a particular instance of this anxiety in Sedaine's complaint that those identified as "dramatic authors," and thus as men of letters, should not be subordinate to actors and actresses alike, so long as these latter did not comport themselves with civility and self-restraint.

### 2.3. The Transfer of the Manuscript: Purchase or Gift?

When a work was accepted after the reading, the author left his manuscript with the troupe. The convention of writers submitting manuscripts had originated with the practice of authors presenting their writings to patrons as a show of fealty and gratitude; such presentations, which were reenacted metaphorically in dedications, had become an art form of their own at Renaissance courts. Yet for early modern commercial theater troupes, the transfer of the manuscript held additional significance, implying a cession of control over the play, either for performance or for a printed edition. Troupes therefore expected that, once an author had handed over his script, he was not to circulate his play in any other form. <sup>33</sup> This practice had been incorporated into the regulations of the *Comédie Française*, giving the actors *de facto* control over the play from the moment they accepted a play into their repertory. <sup>34</sup> Having such control, the troupe tended to accept many more plays than it could perform, thereby preventing them from being performed elsewhere or appearing in print. Indeed, the *Comédie Française* incurred no costs in acquiring new works, and therefore (from the point of view of many authors) had no financial incentive to bring those works to the stage. Yet eighteenth-century authors were very reticent to demand the return of their manuscripts, thereby implying their own intention to have the work printed, which ensured the troupe would not perform it. <sup>35</sup>

Faced with these legal and cultural constraints on their chance to have a play performed or printed, would-be dramatic authors understood themselves to be dependent upon and therefore subordinate to the *Comédie*. Yet even from such a position they did not necessarily consider the cession of their manuscripts in the terms that some historians have described it, as an

archaic Old Regime privilege against which Enlightenment men of letters fought. This narrative is not only oversimplified, but is also demonstrably wrong. However much such agreements appear to twentieth-century observers to contravene the regulations, and to the writer's detriment, many playwrights actively pursued such conventions, because they implied a special relationship between themselves and the royal theater. Conversely, however much the First Gentlemen's reforms appear to have enacted a precocious modernization of literature that greatly advanced the emancipation of writers by creating a legal basis for literary property and consequently greater opportunity for revenue and public acclaim, writers generally resisted them, because they implied that their primary relationship to the royal theater would be commercial. [36](#)

For example, in proposing his tragedy "Vindicatif" to the troupe in November 1773, the Marquis Du Doyer argued that there was no need to observe the regulations too closely, because as a man of letters, he was "far from imagining doing anything which could embarrass" the troupe. Moreover, Charles Palissot de Montenoy expressed his disregard for the new regulations, "which no longer authorize personal agreements," assuring the troupe that self-respecting authors should continue to be allowed "the honor of proposing" such agreements. [37](#) Typically, an author would initiate the negotiation of such an agreement with a letter expressing his "generosity" towards and affection for the actors, and offering to make "a gift" of his play. In response, the company would express its "honor" at being able to perform the play. [38](#)

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The giving of a gift, accompanied by such language of courteous disinterest, had been a characteristic gesture by which early modern courtiers, including writers, entered into patron-client relationships; in such exchanges, as Sharon Kettering and Natalie Davis have shown, both giver and recipient usually denied any expectation of reciprocity or exchange, yet both understood that a reciprocal relationship of protection and dependence was being initiated. Established norms of elite interaction dictated that acceptance of a gift compelled the recipient to reciprocate in the future by exerting influence on behalf of the client. With specific reference to the giving of books by writers to patrons, Davis has suggested that, while such gift-giving was strategic, it was also fully consistent with the Renaissance man of letters' "self-consciousness" as "honorable." [39](#)

Yet these playwrights were not at Renaissance or Baroque courts, but in the metropolis of eighteenth-century Paris, and the Comédie Française troupe was composed not of princes, but of actors lacking civil status. Thus, a model of client-patron gift-giving does not fully explain the playwrights' motivations in donating their plays or in adopting the rhetoric of gift-giving. Indeed, even as playwrights offered their plays as gifts to initiate a personal relationship

with the Comédie Française, they also often solicited an immediate reciprocation, accompanying their "present" with explicit statements of their intention "to reach an agreement [with the troupe] which gives to the author a set number of performances after which the play will belong to the Comédie," even though the regulations specified that such determinations should be made based on paid attendance. [40](#)

Generally, authors tried to specify the conditions of their gift, as did, for example La Harpe, who on June 27, 1773, proposed what amounted to a contract: "I, the undersigned, cede to the Comédiens Français entirely my tragedy 'Varvic,' once six performances will have been given next winter, with an ordinary author's share being paid." When the troupe did not meet these terms, La Harpe wrote again, on September 18, 1775, breaking the "arrangement between myself and the Comédie" unless its terms were fulfilled. On December 25, 1775, still dissatisfied, he proposed that the Comédie revert to the terms set by the regulations in its handling of this play. La Harpe understood well the gestures of *mondaine* courtesy, and he continued to reiterate his disinterest in seeking personal, material gain from the Comédie even as he specified what he wanted the troupe to do for him. [41](#)

The tension evident here between the language of courtly civility, implying patron-client relations, and that of contract, implying mutuality of interests, makes clear the ambiguous position of playwrights in their encounters with the Comédie Française in the mid-eighteenth century. On the one hand, they were seeking a public legitimation of their status as men of letters, which had in the past been granted only by elite patrons, and could now be granted only by the institution itself. On the other hand, they were seeking this legitimation through relations not with dukes, princes, or kings but with actors and actresses, with whom their relations were structured not only by a culture of courtesy but also by royal regulations. Since troupe members were themselves of marginal status both in society at large and within the elite, they were poorly positioned as individuals to serve in the role of protector that authors desired from the royal theater as an institution. And since the royal regulations had been revised to set a standardized basis for such relations in terms of personal interest, they provided an ill-suited framework within which to show self-restraint and civility.

The condition of being simultaneously a patron and a client had been the *locus classicus* of an early modern courtier, and what had made this duality possible were the codes of *honnêteté* and honor, which demanded deference toward those above and generosity toward those below. Yet it was precisely these codes to which troupe members, as individuals and as embodiments of the institution, failed to adhere in their comportment toward authors. The treatment that many playwrights of the 1760s and 1770s experienced as a breakdown in civility was in many cases the product of a

strict adherence by the troupe to the royal regulations; in response, writers could not rely on the codes of *honnêteté* and honor to implicitly compel the Comédiens to reciprocate their gifts of their plays with future protection and advancement.

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Instead, playwrights had to make such reciprocation a condition of the original gift. The highly specific way in which playwrights ceded their "*droits*" to the Comédie Française through "private agreements" indicates a resistance to accepting the implications of the revised regulations—the notion that authors' relationship to the royal theater (and thus to the court and urban elites) could be rendered procedural rather than personal, and should be based on interests, rather than respect for one another's honor. The revisions of the theater's regulations by the First Gentlemen had been intended to be more favorable to playwrights' interests, yet the changes paradoxically reinforced the importance to writers of reaching private agreements with the troupe which contravened those regulations and thereby allowed writers to appear disinterested in personal gain and therefore honorable. As the court diminished its direct contact with the Comédie Française after mid-century, a playwright's ability to circumvent the regulations through personal agreements (even if they involved giving up his monetary remuneration or proprietorship over his play) distinguished him as a man of honor and thereby raised his standing in elite networks and in society at large.

In this respect, the position and self-conception of many playwrights with respect to the Comédie Française in the 1760s and 1770s might be best described as what Elias calls "an established-outsider relationship," in which playwrights "suffered under the humiliation inflicted ... by court nobles" (for which we can substitute the troupe members) even as "it was precisely their recognition [the writer] sought, precisely by them he wanted to be regarded and treated as a man of equal worth."<sup>42</sup> Moreover, we might see in these exchanges an illustration of what Natalie Davis has recently argued about gift-giving in the early modern world—that, *pace* the classic theory of Marcel Mauss, a "gift-exchange economy" should not be considered as anterior and inferior to a market economy, but that the latter should be conceived as but a variant of the former. Whereas Cynthia Brown, in comparing relations between authors and patrons and those between authors and printers in the fifteenth century, sees a clear dichotomy between the "gift-exchange" economy of the former and the "commercial, money-oriented" transactions of the latter, Davis perceives in the sixteenth century elements of both forms of interaction and exchange simultaneously, as individuals shift from one register to another, often in the same encounter, particularly in moments of social or personal instability. Thus, the evident tension between the "gift-exchange" and "marketplace" ideals in playwrights' correspondence with the troupe can be explained as a consequence of the particularly unstable position of writers seeking to simultaneously establish an identity as *hommes de lettres* before both urban elites and the commercial public, in a context of sustained transformation of the norms and institutions of both worlds that converged at the Comédie Française. Thus, their status and identities

could not be formed separately at court and in the city, but necessarily had to remain always at their intersection, in a single, highly complex "market for symbolic goods" that combined elements of protector-client and contractual relations, of *honnête* self-restraint and pursuit of self-interest, and in which status was as much a currency of such interactions as money or favors. [43](#)

#### 2.4. Order of Performance: The Theater Season and Authors' "Rank"

In the eighteenth century (as today), the Comédie Française staged a play in Paris most days of the year—on average, 300 times annually. For this reason, the company always included at least 24 members, to ensure that enough actors would be available for royal command performances at Fontainebleau or Versailles without having to sacrifice a commercial performance that day in Paris. These performances were divided into "winter" and "summer" seasons, of which the former, from All Saint's Day to Easter, drew larger and more prestigious audiences. Thus, playwrights preferred to have plays performed during the winter. Unlike the Opéra, which composed its entire program at the outset of each season, the Comédie Française decided which plays to stage only a few weeks in advance. In its weekly repertoire meetings, presided over by the *sémainiers*, the troupe sought to balance a series of political, literary, and financial concerns, considering not only which plays might appeal to Parisian audiences but also the desires of the court for command performances of specific plays by specific writers. Even after the creation of the legal council in 1765 to oversee the theater's operations in Paris, the First Gentlemen still occasionally commanded performances, such as Belloy's "Siège de Calais" and "Anglais à Bordeaux" in 1765 at the request of the King, and of "Siège" again in 1773, for the Dauphine, Marie Antoinette. [44](#)

Standard practice in Parisian public theaters before 1680 had been that new plays should be alternated with those already in the troupe's standard repertory, and this convention became codified in the Comédie's regulations. [45](#) However, the balance between old and new works remained controversial throughout the century. Authors claimed that Parisian audience interest should dictate the proper balance, and writers repeatedly argued that the Parisian public was most interested in seeing new works. However, to the troupe, new works carried the risk of critical and commercial failure, whereas works already in the repertory—especially the best-known works of the "great masters" of the seventeenth century, Corneille, Racine and Molière—were reliable draws at the box office and did not risk an unfavorable reception. Moreover, repertory plays required less preparation and fewer outlays by the troupe for decorations, costumes, or authorial remuneration. Thus audiences from 1715 to 1750 were fed a diet heavy with "*les grandes pièces anciennes*": 105 works from the seventeenth century, which accounted for nearly 70 percent of all performances and about 60 percent of total revenue in these decades. Between 1757 and 1771, an annual average of 175 performances (out of an annual average total of 300) were of new works, suggesting that active playwrights were being featured more rather

than less prominently in these years, despite much contemporary commentary to the contrary. In the 1770s, however, the number of new works performed annually dropped dramatically; in the first five years of the 1770s, the troupe heard 45 new plays read, of which it accepted 34, but only had performed twelve by the spring of 1776. In each of the seasons between 1774 and 1780, no more than two new plays were performed. [46](#)

According to the original regulations, roughly half the performances should have been tragedies and half comedies. Each play, upon its reception, was to be categorized as of either one or the other genre, and the program of performance was to alternate between the two. In 1683, a third category was added—*petites pièces*—for the one-act comic works, usually with a musical accompaniment, performed prior to the main play on the program. [47](#)

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Over the course of the eighteenth century, as generic distinctions between comedy and tragedy became less clear and as full-length works were written in less than five acts, such categorizations became less important, and the alternation of genres was less strictly observed. Nevertheless, playwrights remained aware of the generic composition of the repertory; those awaiting the performance of their plays understood that their turn would come only when the troupe decided to stage a work of the relevant genre.

Some playwrights submitted works they described as "*dramas*" or "*vaudevilles*," and argued for the creation of new categories. In a letter of November 9, 1778, Michel de Cubières complained that his play had been put in line behind 37 comedies, despite being of another genre, the *vaudeville*. Although Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais described both of the first two plays he submitted to the Comédie, "*Eugénie*" (1767) and "*Deux amis*" (1770), as of the "*bastard genre of the drame*," they were classified by the troupe as tragedies. Perhaps for this reason, when he submitted his third play, "*Barbier de Séville*" in 1772, the troupe also classified this work as a tragedy. These examples notwithstanding, authors of mixed-genre works rarely contested the use of these classical categories; although much excellent work by historians and literary critics has shown the importance of these innovative genres to the evolution of French aesthetics and even social theory, few eighteenth-century authors presented themselves in their encounters with the theater as specialists in the "*drame*." [48](#)



[Cubières-Palmézeaux, \*Oeuvres dramatiques\*](#)

On April 1, 1774, in response to complaints by certain authors about the rotation of genres being used to manipulate the order of performance, the First Gentlemen ordered that three "*charts [tableaux]*" be drawn up, listing the



[Beaumarchais, \*Oeuvres Complètes\*](#)

names of the works that had been accepted into each category in order of acceptance, which would also be the order of performance for the forthcoming 1774—1775 season. A subsequent ruling by the First Gentlemen, on July 27, 1774, required that, as new plays were accepted, they should be inscribed on these same lists in the order of their acceptance and then performed in that order. Finally, in response to repeated complaints by authors, the First Gentlemen ordered on December 18, 1775, that these *tableaux* be posted in the foyer of the theater, where they would be clearly visible to the public, "to avoid quarrels with *Messieurs* the authors" on the order of performance. [49](#)

However, even after this series of rulings, the court periodically intervened and disrupted the order, such as in 1778, when Jean Marie Bernard Clément's "Médée" lost its position due to a royal command for another play. Rather than prepare two new plays simultaneously, the troupe pushed "Médée" farther down on the *tableau*. An author who convinced the troupe that the court desired to see his play could expect advantageous treatment in its scheduling. For example, an author named Candier, whose "Lavæna" had been received but not scheduled for performance, appeared before the assembled troupe on July 27, 1761, and presented what he claimed to be a copy of a letter on his behalf from Voltaire to a "Count de Lauvagrain," asking the latter to speak to the First Gentlemen on Candier's behalf. No other evidence of any such letter exists, nor is there any evidence of such a count, but the ruse illustrates how playwrights continued to see the court (and brokers to courtiers, such as Voltaire) as having a significant influence on the theater's operations, in lieu or even in contravention of the regulations. [50](#)

Playwrights attached tremendous importance to the day of the week on which a play was staged. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Sundays were traditionally "big days," meaning they drew significantly larger audiences, with Sunday by far the most lucrative. Since the play would continue to be performed so long as box-office revenues continued to exceed outlays, it was crucial that a play be staged on a "big day"—and preferably a Sunday—for one of its first performances. Though this provision was not written into the original regulations (because the First Gentlemen presumed that the troupe shared an interest in staging works for the first time under favorable conditions, lest a new play fail before it had returned the theater's original outlay), standard practice at the Comédie Française became for new works to be performed on "big days," and for revivals to be staged on "small days." Playwrights on good terms with the actors or First Gentlemen went to great lengths to lobby for a favorable placement, while those less well connected sought to induce other writers to trade positions on the schedule. [51](#)

\* \* \*

Indeed, the trading of positions on the program was one of the most

important strategies for authors in trying to use the Comédie Française to fashion a public identity. Because of the importance of the play's placement on the seasonal and weekly program, most authors actively sought to establish personal accommodations between themselves, the troupe, and other playwrights with works awaiting performance. Between playwrights, positions on the schedule were regularly exchanged, as authors sought a more favorable placing in terms of season and day of week. Particularly for a writer who lacked an established public persona as a man of letters, being ceded a higher rank enhanced his status in literary life, not only because it brought his work closer to performance but also because others saw that he had gained that higher rank through an act of personal courtesy rather than having to wait his turn, as was dictated under the regulations. In the language authors used to describe such cessions, they drew directly from the culture of courtly civility, in which recipients expressed disinterest in the gift and denied having solicited it, while donors denied any expectation of direct reciprocation. Nevertheless, recipients had to declare their acceptance of such cessions to the troupe, which in turn had to approve them in order for the *tableaux* to be altered. For example, Dorat, the recipient of such a cession on April 21, 1779, attested to the "frankness of my conduct; I will never intrigue to have [my plays] pass before others. Such intrigue is not only vile, it is also tiring; it is good neither for the spirit nor the body." Nevertheless, he informed the troupe, he accepted the cession and intended to preserve his new rank, "whatever the cost." In monitoring such exchanges, the troupe again served a princely function as arbiter between its clients. Like the authors, the actors drew on court culture; for example, they complimented Dorat for his "*honnêtes*" actions and denied any special interest in approving the change to their repertory. [52](#)

Prior to 1780, the regulations did not address such cessions, so the troupe also had to resolve any disputes arising between authors over order of performance. In February 1773, the actors' committee ruled that rank could be ceded only to the writer whose play was next on the *tableau*. [53](#) However, in practice, the troupe allowed authors known personally to its members or those more socially and commercially valuable to the theater to violate this rule. Successive cessions of rank by Charles Pierre Colardeau and Pierre André Peloux de Clairefontaine to Beaumarchais for "Barbier de Séville" were contested in February 1774 by Lonvay de la Saussaye (then unknown to the troupe), on the grounds that he held a rank ahead of Beaumarchais. Appearing before the assembled troupe, Beaumarchais lost his emotional equilibrium and "vigorously argued to defend the rank" ceded him, attacking Lonvay for uncivil behavior. Beaumarchais's outburst did not cost him, because his opponent was of even less stature than he; after deliberating, the troupe decided that "M. de Beaumarchais," from whose work it had already performed two plays, should be granted the higher rank, followed by "the author of 'Alcindonis,'" not mentioned by name. [54](#) This decision demonstrates how the troupe collectively bestowed "rank" upon authors much as courtly patrons bestowed pensions and honorific positions upon their multiple clients, in accordance with the relative intensity of the specific

patron-client relationship. Such circumventions of the regulations allowed the troupe to maintain and augment its control over the functioning of the theater (and in turn its domination over the authors as a group), even as it allowed individual authors to enhance their personal status by seeking more favorable scheduling.

More favorable positioning on the *tableau* did not always mean jumping ahead of others; in many cases, authors deliberately delayed the performance of their own works by ceding their place to another. For an author to cede place was a tactic that, all at once, could advance an individual agenda, could aid an ally, and could appear to the troupe (and other observers) as a show of personal disinterestedness and thus *honnêteté*. Ceding place enabled an author who wanted to delay the performance of his play to remain on the *tableau*, rather than having to withdraw the work outright from the repertory, which would thereby annul its original acceptance. For example, when Colardeau's "Principe à la mode" again came to the top of the order in August 1774, he wrote to the troupe, noting that he was not withdrawing his play but rather "conserving my rights" as the author of an accepted play by ceding his place "to someone who wants to and can be performed" at the present time. <sup>55</sup> By ceding place, an author could strategically avoid having his play premiere during an unfavorable time of year or on an unfavorable day of the week; Rochon de Chabannes, for instance, asked in the spring of 1779 that the premiere of his one-act comedy "L'Amour français" be delayed until the beginning of the fall season, and that it be scheduled for a Wednesday or Sunday. <sup>56</sup> Commonly, authors ceded place to avoid being staged too soon after another successful production. In early 1775, Sedaine wrote the troupe to protest that his play "Paris sauvé," despite having been received four years earlier, was being bypassed due to Clairefontaine's cession to Beaumarchais. In recompense, the actors promised Sedaine that his tragedy would be staged "immediately after 'Barbier de Séville.'" However, when "Barbier" became a smash-hit success later that spring, Sedaine reversed course and delayed "Paris" by ceding rank to "a posterior work, provided that this be the will of the Comédie." <sup>57</sup>

Another strategy involving a cession of rank allowed an author to retain a work of dubious appeal on the *tableau* and thereby prolong his status, both in terms of his public self-representation and under the regulations, as an author "working for the Comédie Française"—a status he would lose if the play were performed, poorly received by the audience, and withdrawn from the repertory. Retaining a work on the *tableau* entitled an author, among other privileges, to give readings of other works upon his request, without having to await a preliminary evaluation by an individual troupe member. For example, La Harpe repeatedly ceded his rank for "Menzicoff," beginning in 1775, thereby preserving the privilege to request immediate readings of other plays, which he did several times in the 1780s. Rochon de Chabannes used the same tactic with his "Valet, maître de la maison"; in 1773, judging

it commercially unpromising, he ceded its place and asked the troupe that it be left indefinitely in the repertory. [58](#)

The best evidence of how cessions served such multiple motives is found in letters sent to the troupe by authors ceding their places to Voltaire. In the 1760s and 70s, Voltaire enjoyed such prestige and commercial appeal that when he submitted a play, the troupe would accept it immediately. Then, due to successive cessions of rank by others, it would move quickly to the top of the *tableau*. Renou, awaiting the turn of his tragedy "Thérée" in April 1772, wrote to the troupe that he would cede rank only to Voltaire's "Loix de Minos": "When a great man like M. de Voltaire appears on the stage, there is no one who will not stand aside to let him pass." [59](#) At the same time, other tragedians recognized the threat in allowing their plays to precede directly a work by Voltaire; in ceding his place to Voltaire's "Irène" in 1778, Barthes acknowledged that, "the justified impatience of the public for a new play of M. de Voltaire can only infinitely harm my own." Moreover, Barthes noted, "it is equally dangerous to appear on the stage before or after M. de Voltaire." However, the troupe did not accept Barthes's cession; needing several weeks to prepare "Irène," the company demanded that he consent to an immediate staging of his "L'Homme personnel," which premiered on February 21, 1778. As Barthes feared, it was poorly received and was staged only eight times before being dropped from the active rotation. [60](#)

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During the successful run of "Irène" later that spring, the Comédie began preparations for the long-delayed premiere of the hapless Clairefontaine's tragedy "Adieux d'Hector." Clairefontaine, fearing the worst, asked that the rehearsals be suspended and ceded his place on the *tableau* for tragedies once again, this time to La Harpe. [61](#) When the troupe then turned to La Harpe, he demurred. While expressing appreciation for the honor Clairefontaine had shown him by ceding place, La Harpe noted that, should he accept, his "'Warwick' would be lost in the wake of 'Irène.'" Noting that, "the Comédie does not lack for authors more hurried than I to whom M. de Clairefontaine could cede his rank," La Harpe politely refused. Pressed by the troupe, he reiterated his "consideration" for Voltaire but noted that the "exception" the troupe had made on behalf of his mentor had disturbed "the natural order of performances." Denying any personal interest, he sought reassurance that the troupe respected him, which he hoped would lead the actors to reschedule his play for a more favorable moment. Finally, pressured by the troupe, La Harpe agreed to its premiere in July of that year. [62](#)

Throughout the 1760s and 70s, whenever the news spread of a forthcoming new play by Voltaire, other authors with works near the top of the *tableau* for tragedies scrambled to cede place and to have their own openings delayed until later in the season or to the next year. Although such a tactical cession of rank further delayed the performance of their plays, playwrights found at times that there was more to gain strategically from such a delay than from having the play staged under unfavorable conditions.

## 2.5. The Performance of being a Playwright

Since the sixteenth century, when commercial troupes began acquiring works from playwrights not in the company, authors regularly distributed the roles to the actors. <sup>63</sup> At court theaters, the patron sponsoring the performance generally assigned the roles, and the Comédie Française at first followed this model; the First Gentlemen distributed roles in the early years. The First Gentlemen, though, soon delegated this authority back to the writer of the play being staged, and this practice became formally adopted by the troupe in 1683 by an order of the First Gentlemen, who added that actors could not reject the roles that the author assigned to them. <sup>64</sup> The 1757 regulations further specified that, upon acceptance of the work, the author should submit a list with his selection for each part "to the troupe leader," who should inform the players and prevent complaints by fining recalcitrant actors.

In principle, then, the distribution should have proceeded without direct personal contact between the writer, the troupe members, and the court, avoiding potential embarrassment for both the First Gentlemen and the author if a troupe member were to resist a given role. However, in practice, the actors continued to address "personal complaints" directly to the First Gentlemen. <sup>65</sup> Moreover, a playwright's authority to distribute roles often depended on his particular relationship with the actors and actresses in question. All troupe members willingly performed the roles assigned by Voltaire, and they regularly solicited his instructions for the staging of his plays. <sup>66</sup> In the case of less established playwrights, however, the better-known actors and actresses regularly refused roles or claimed "indisposition" due to illness and withdrew from a role. For example, the great tragic actor Monvel claimed a sudden "malady" in September 1776, which prevented him from accepting the lead role in Gudin's "Cariolan"; Monvel later withdrew from lead roles in Belloy's "Gabrielle de Vergis" and Barthes's "L'Homme personnel" in February, 1778, complaining of "terrible illness," which would necessitate "*un purgation*" and prevent him from rehearsing or performing for the foreseeable future. "*Messieurs* the authors," he wrote his colleagues, "will have to wait." If pleading directly or via a patron could not convince the recalcitrant actor, the playwright could either revise his role distribution or allow his play to be bypassed in favor of the next work on the *tableau*. Thus, despite the regulations, playwrights were often forced into the position of supplicating the actors to perform in their plays, even though they considered themselves, as men of letters, to be of superior status and *esprit* to the troupe members. <sup>67</sup>

Even when the actors remained healthy, playwrights knew that the potential distribution of roles figured in the acceptance or rejection and the scheduling of their plays, and many tried to write roles with specific actors and actresses in mind. The First Gentlemen responded to this situation by revising the

regulations in 1766, decreeing that, prior to the reading, the author should henceforth submit his distribution of roles in a sealed envelope, which should be locked in a closet by the troupe leader until after the reading and the decision to begin preparations for staging had been made. Nevertheless, authors often proposed a distribution of roles with the original submission of the play or as part of terms proposed to the troupe for an ad hoc private agreement. 68

A final aspect of the preparations crucial to the success of a play was the advertisement of upcoming Comédie Française performances through posters. Beginning at mid-century, performances at public theaters were advertised by posters, color-coded to correspond to the specific venue. These posters, hung the day of the show, were not intended to attract potential spectators so much as to inform regular attendees of the title of the work to be performed that day. The posters consisted of a woodcut to frame the text, which generally featured only the most rudimentary information: the title of the play or plays to be performed that day and on subsequent days.

Prior to 1789, authors' names only rarely appeared on these posters, and the actors' names and their roles did not appear at all. 69 Although more significant publicity was generated



by troupe members who went to designated public places to deliver a "harangue" from that day's play, posters served an important purpose for the authors, who would otherwise not know when their plays were being performed and could not monitor if their turn was being bypassed. One hopeful author wrote to the troupe on May 14, 1776: "I was astonished just now to see on the poster that a play other than my own is announced for tomorrow." 70

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Authors who succeeded in having a play accepted into the Comédie Française repertory became entitled to free entrances to the theater. Seventeenth-century commercial theater companies granted free admission to the limited number of playwrights who wrote regularly for that troupe. Because such "external" authors were not troupe members, and were only informally linked to a given company, entrance privileges enabled the writers to create and distribute roles better suited to each actor's abilities. In 1688, the First Gentlemen granted this same courtesy to those few authors "working for" for the Comédie Française, and the 1719 Regulations extended entrance privileges to all authors "who have worked and produced plays ... received by the troupe," specifying that only one author could receive this privilege per play. But by the early eighteenth century, the Comédie no longer had a limited number of designated playwrights, and the troupe worried about granting free entrances to an unspecified number of authors. In response, the First Gentlemen limited entrance privileges to three years from the date of acceptance of an author's play, although reiterating that such perquisites were necessary to encourage playwrights to continue "to work for the

pleasure of the public and to be useful to the troupe." To express the crown's appreciation for the contribution of those who had written more than one accepted play, such authors were extended entrance privileges throughout their lifetimes. Significantly, the First Gentlemen subsequently added grounds for expanding or restricting the privileges of specific authors. For example, entrances would be rescinded if an author, "after having worked for the Comédie," had a play performed at the fairground theaters. [71](#)

Each year, the Royal Household would issue a list of those entitled to free entrance privileges for the coming season. [72](#) To authors, these entrance privileges were worth far more than merely the savings on admissions they would have otherwise paid for a box seat (between 15 and 90 *livres*). Over and above their economic value and their utility in giving playwrights a chance to watch the troupe perform, free entrances were considered by playwrights to be markers of social distinction. Acceptances of plays were not publicly announced, but entrance privileges were accorded immediately upon the reception of a play by the troupe; thus, a playwright's exercise of his free entrances was his first chance to represent himself to others as in some way linked to the theater. Being able to enter the theater freely enabled authors to distinguish themselves from other theater-goers, demonstrating that they were participants in the performance that everyone else was paying to see. Thus, Rochon de Chabannes found it scandalous when, in June 1777, he was prevented from exercising his privileges at the main entrance and instead was forced to cross the courtyard of the Tuileries and enter on the "garden side," where other theater-goers would not see him use his *droit d'entrée*. Noting that he was generally accompanied by his wife to the theater, he remarked, "I was quite surprised last Friday to learn that she could ... pay her money and enter to the show and that me, I had to go around." [73](#)

This concern to be linked visibly and publicly to the theater is comparable to certain practices of clients at court, where entrance privileges had long served as a public representation of social power. The King accorded "*droits d'entrée*" to certain courtiers, enabling them to enter the royal residence by one or another door, according to their status and relative importance. Similarly, playwrights for the Comédie Française were granted different degrees of entrance privileges under the revised regulations of 1757. Henceforth, only authors of two five-act plays would be accorded free entrances for life. Authors of one five-act play would receive three years' worth of entrances; authors of a three-act play would enjoy two years' worth; and authors of a one-act one year's worth. Furthermore, any author "proved to have disturbed the performance" would be stripped of his privileges, ensuring that those authors whose comportment showed them to be unworthy of such a visible association with the royal theater could be excluded, just as a courtier could be banished if he displeased the King. [74](#)

The privilege of free entrance resulted from the peculiar status of the

Comédie as both a royal and public venue. Because it was the royal theater, and thus under the control of the King, those close to His Majesty thought themselves entitled to enter the royal theater free of charge. Moreover, they conceived the privilege of entrance to be reserved for those approved by the King. However, as a commercial public theater, the Comédie operated on the principle that admission to the performance space had to be purchased, so that anyone who could afford the admission price, whether approved by the King or not, could enter. Since the founding of the Comédie Française in 1680, its regulations adhered to the latter principle, and subsequent royal ordinances repeatedly and expressly forbade "all persons, of whatever *qualité* ... even officers of the [Royal] Household ... to enter ... without paying." [75](#)

Free entrances were later accorded to the rival troupe of the Comédiens Italiens and to fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, children, and domestics currently and directly connected to active members of the Comédie Française troupe, and then, in 1732, to members of the Académie Française, making entrance privileges even more desirable for aspiring playwrights. [76](#)

Because they were so narrowly restricted to those directly linked to the troupe or the court, free entrance privileges to the royal theater clearly marked dramatic authors as "attached to the Comédie Française," a distinction which they believed themselves to merit but could not otherwise represent publicly. Moreover, playwrights valued this attachment not for its monetary value, but precisely because it could not be purchased. Since it was awarded only as a form of recognition, such an award suggested that, when they entered the theater, men of letters held a position above all paying spectators, including the wealthy and prominent. For Rochon, this mark of status was the much more valuable part of the "*droits d'auteur*" than "a few coins" in remuneration. He considered uninhibited entrance rights an appropriate sign of recognition of the value of dramatic authors to the theater, above that of any spectator. Thus, he told the troupe that he found it "inconceivable" that "a man who pays you a thousand *écus* for his [yearly subscription] or even one who comes perhaps only once in his life to bring you his six *livres* would have *droits* which an author does not," to enter and sit where he liked in the theater. "No one ... should have more *droits* than we, the authors." [77](#)

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For a writer who had already acquired entrance privileges, whether for three years or for life, even greater standing could be achieved by obtaining entrances for others, just as noble courtiers had sought the right to bring



liveried entourages with them to the theater. Thus, an author of a new work could designate two to four friends to be admitted to the theater as his guests the evenings his play was performed. [78](#) These guests, nearly always other

writers, were expected to accompany the author for the evening, thereby allowing him to appear with an entourage of clients dependent upon him, if only for one night. To authors, free entrance privileges and the ability to invite guests to performances of their works were

crucial to their ability to conceive of themselves as playwrights and honorable men of letters—and, moreover, to represent that status to others. In this sense, they considered such privileges not as remuneration for their intellectual labor nor as compensation for the "gift" of their play, but as a central component of their "*droits d'auteur*." [79](#)

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Once inside the theater, authors had less chance to demonstrate their connection to the Comédie and thus fashion their identities as men of letters. No special seat designated the author of that evening's play, nor did the troupe generally acknowledge the playwright before or during the performance. Nor was there, as proposed jokingly by Mercier, a "padded box ... wherein the author closes himself the day of the first performance so that he will not break his head in despair if his play is met with hoots or harsh whistles"! [80](#)



[Meunier painting](#)

The only visible images of authors in the theater were highly classical busts of past masters, which served only to belittle by comparison contemporaries striving for recognition. The Académie Française had long established a practice of displaying profile portraits or busts of its past members, and it was a common refrain in eighteenth-century literary life that the royal theater should follow suit. For the occasion of the centenary of Molière's death in 1773, Jean d'Alembert donated to the theater a bust of the man generally regarded as the founder of the royal troupe, which the Comédiens displayed in the entrance foyer. Later that same year, the sculptor Jean-Jacques Caffieri donated a bust of Alexis Piron, who had recently died. In 1778, Mademoiselle Denis, Voltaire's niece and heir, gave the troupe Jean-Antoine Houdon's bust of her uncle, which had been executed for the Académie and which the troupe had crowned on stage just months before his death. In the late 1770s, Jean-Baptiste Pigalle proposed to execute a series of busts of the theater's legendary actors and authors, for which the troupe sought donations from contemporary authors (in the form of a session of *droits*). [81](#)



As a result of these donations, the entrance foyer in the early 1780s became a gallery of honor; the collection included playwrights from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries considered to be "grand masters," but none were enshrined during their own lifetimes. Contemporary engravings, especially frontispieces to dramatic editions, demonstrate how authors were often depicted as classical busts, sometimes satirically. We may well imagine an aspiring author, upon entering the Comédie Française, pausing briefly before these busts to solidify his status as an author and his ambition as an *homme de lettres*.

Although the audiences, especially the vocal pit, might know the

identity of the playwright, dramatic authors eager to present themselves as honorable men of letters remained wary of receiving direct acclaim from an anonymous, non-elite audience, and were reticent to respond to its calls to appear on stage. Though the press commonly warned aspiring writers that to acknowledge plaudits from the crowd would clearly violate the norms of disinterestedness expected of honorable men of letters, there are no recorded incidents of playwrights actually taking the stage. Those who did acknowledge the cheers preferred to follow the precedent of Voltaire, who simply waved from his box at the end of the first performance of "Mérope" in 1734. Charles Collé found even such a gesture to the crowd "indecent for a man of letters; he must refuse to present himself in the public theater." [82](#)



An acceptable, but, by the mid-eighteenth century, no longer practical authorial strategy involved organizing a *claque* in the audience to lead the cheers for the play. Article XV of the 1766 regulations limited an author to twenty *parterre* admissions, thereby preventing writers from packing of the pit with supporters, as had been common in the 1730s and 40s. The troupe resisted this change, fearing that, while it prevented *clagues* in favor of a play, it did nothing to block *cabales* against them. In response, the First Gentlemen raised the quota to 60 *parterre* admissions for only the first three shows, after which an author would be limited to twenty. [83](#) Moreover, after about 1770, in light of the larger audiences they faced, and lacking the personal resources or access to those of a patron to sponsor such *clagues*, most later eighteenth-century playwrights were unable to organize them, at least for the first performance. *Clagues* were deployed successfully only to revive audience interest in a play that had been poorly received at the previous performance. [84](#) With so much riding on the outcome of the first performance of a given play, playwrights in the latter half of the century were thus increasingly beholden to the spontaneous judgment of the "public," particularly the socially heterogeneous and increasingly vocal *parterre*. As the size and scope of theater audiences and the theater press increased both in Paris and the provinces, especially in the 1770s and 1780s, playwrights hoping to gain recognition as men of letters were increasingly unable to influence the reception of their work at the Comédie Française.

## 2.6. Fame or Fortune?: "Droits d'auteur"

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Prior to the formation of the Comédie Française, there were no standard procedures for the remuneration of playwrights by Parisian commercial troupes. Troupe members who wrote plays were generally granted a double share of the troupe's proceeds from performances of that play; after a series of initial performances, the work became part of the troupe's general repertory. The relatively rare instances of revivals or printed editions posed no problem, because the playwright, as a troupe member, would continue to share in the proceeds generated. By contrast, "*poètes à gages*," non-troupe members from whom the troupe purchased a work, were paid a lump sum in

return for exclusive rights to the work on stage or in print.

By the late seventeenth century, it had become standard for playwrights who were not troupe members to receive one-ninth of the net revenues from performances of their works. Paying authors one-ninth of the revenues enabled commercial troupes to deal with the new phenomenon of playwrights not known personally to the company members. In this respect, the procedure of paying a one-ninth "*part*" was precocious as an impersonal procedure not dependent upon a specific patron's appreciation for a given writer. However, this procedure distanced dramatic authors from direct access to what they continued to rely on as their primary sources of social legitimacy as men of letters: elite patrons. The calculation of the ninth referred the calculation of a writer's payment (a crucial measure of his social worth as a writer) to an indirect source, the theater-going public. While this public was itself composed of many of those same elites who in earlier times would have served as patrons, their relations with playwrights became mediated by the institution of the theater. The Comédie Française regulations codified this practice of paying one-ninth. <sup>85</sup> At the same time, the troupe discontinued another long-standing theater tradition, that of gathering with the author at a *cabaret* or other public venue after his play's run had been completed, to settle accounts and "congratulate each other together." <sup>86</sup> Consequently, the author (or a designated representative) had to go to the theater after the end of the play's run and ask for the *part d'auteur*, and sign a receipt agreeing to the calculation. <sup>87</sup>

Making explicit solicitations and calculating costs was at odds with playwrights' self-conceptions as honorable men of letters, indifferent to personal gain. So those who did request payment from the theater usually did so obliquely, as in a 1778 letter to the troupe, where the aged and heavily indebted Dorat wrote: "As for the *part d'auteur*, I renounce it ... and beg you to understand [this] ... as testimony of my friendship for you," while asking the troupe to take "reciprocal steps" towards him out of "*honnêteté*." The troupe, in turn, responded with a similarly oblique offer of payment. That same year, after Antoine de Le Mierre had denied any interest in being paid for his "*Veuve du Malabar*," the actors wrote him, saying, "We entreat you to receive your *part d'auteur*, as a tribute that it pleases the Comédie Française to offer." <sup>88</sup> The troupe, in turn, represented its payment of the author's share as a form of largesse, such as a court patron would offer his client, not as compensation for work performed or property purchased; such conceptions were at odds with the economy of honor that informed the self-conceptions of Comédie Française authors and actors alike.

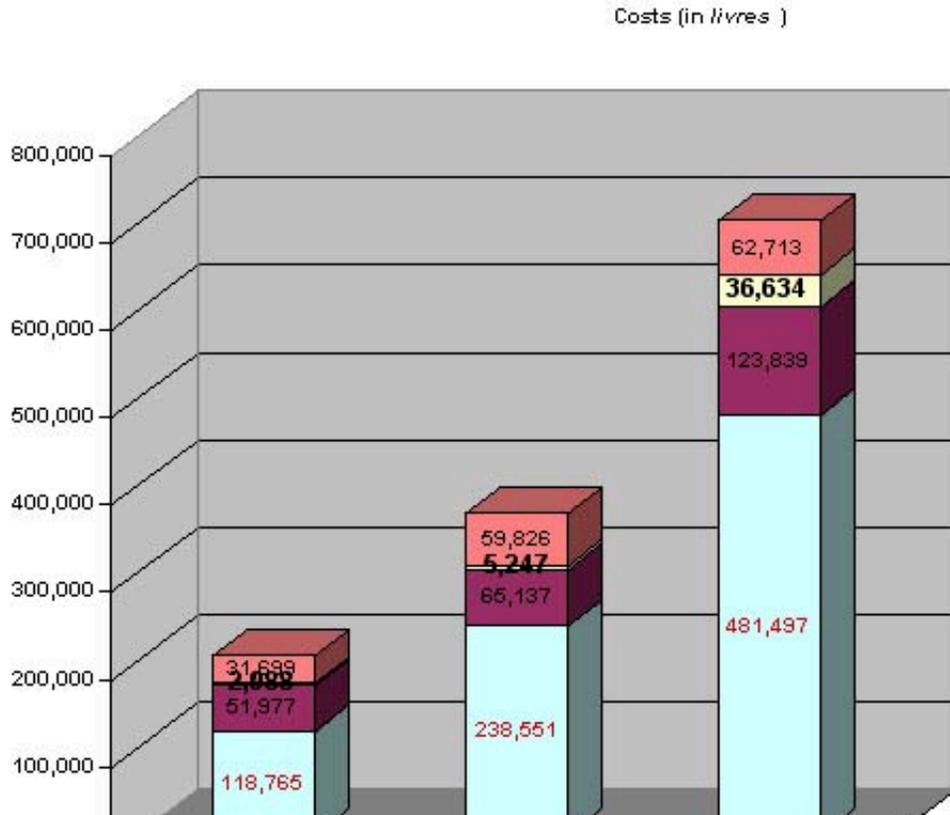
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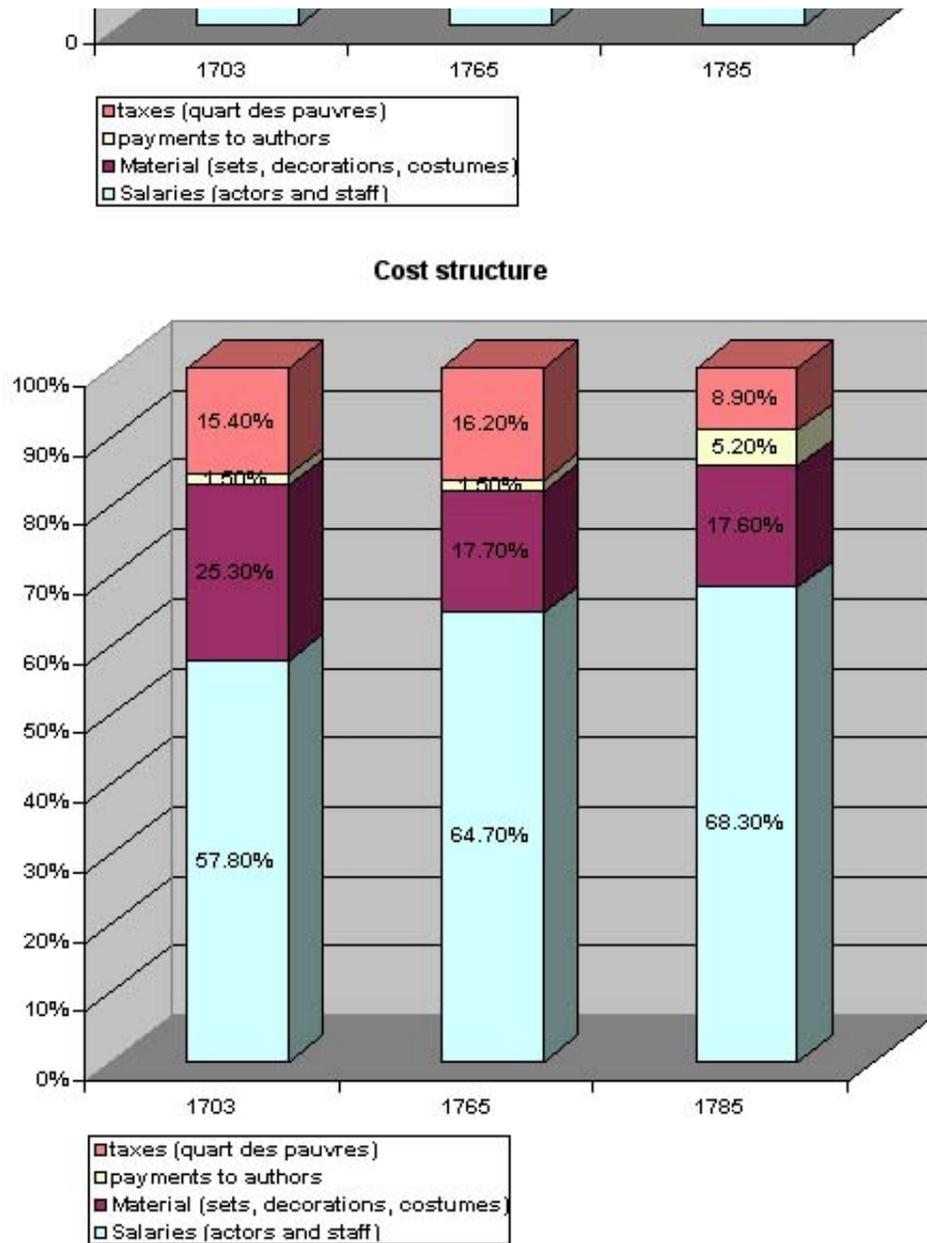
For those who did demand it, calculation of the *part d'auteur* depended on

the theater's revenues and operating costs. The original regulation concerning the *part d'auteur*, drafted in 1683, established a relatively simple formula: one-ninth of the difference between total revenue from admissions sold at the door ("*recette à la porte*") to any given performance and total production costs, including the tax paid to the Hôpital Général known as the *droit des pauvres*. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, the theater's finances, revenue structure, costs (including taxes), and relations with its authors had altered substantially, rendering much more complicated and controversial the calculation of authors' payments.

First, there was the theater's need for greater revenue to cover rising operating costs and pay off its debt to the royal treasury, which by 1757 totaled 486,930 *livres*. In that year, as part of the Royal Household's reform of the Comédie Française, the royal treasury forgave 276,000 *livres* in debt and loaned 197,000 *livres* to the troupe's common fund. Henceforth, the royal treasury would no longer pay any subvention to the theater; the First Gentlemen now expected the theater to finance itself by generating sufficient revenue to meet its operating costs, including actors' pensions. Yet the theater's other operating costs rose even more markedly after 1757, with average per-show costs rising from 292 *livres* to 535 *livres* by 1780. <sup>89</sup> In the same period, the amount paid to authors grew steadily, but still remained by far the smallest budget item, accounting for an average of just over 26 *livres* per show. <sup>90</sup>

**Table 1: Comédie Française cost structure, 1760 - 1789**





Alasseur, *La Comédie Française*, 108; BCF, "Registres des recettes et dépenses annuelles;" and AN O1 844, # 245 - 251 and O1 845, # 16. After 1760, "pensions" to active and retired actors are paid by the theater rather than the royal treasury. "Other costs" are primarily production costs, for decorations, heating, and police.

Authors indirectly bore some of these costs, as the troupe leaders deducted greater amounts from the gross revenue before calculating the author's share. In 1765, the First Gentlemen ordered the theater's legal council to ensure that henceforth only 300 *livres* for "daily costs" should be deducted from the gross revenue before calculating the author's part for each production. No limit, however, was specified for how much in "extraordinary

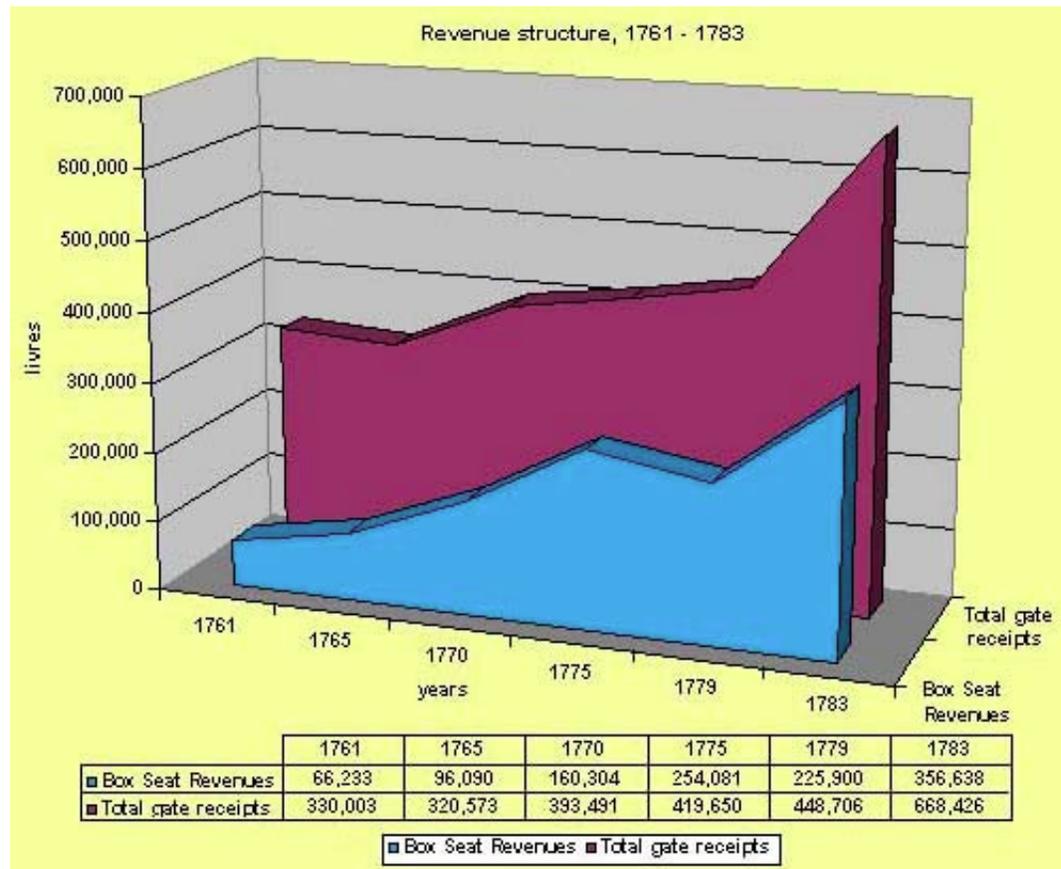
[fixed] costs" could be deducted per show, enabling the troupe to circumvent this new order by budgeting daily operating costs as "extraordinary costs" and then deducting them from the gross revenue before calculating the author's due. [91](#)

A second problem arose from the theater's payment of poor taxes, known as the *quart (or droit) de pauvres*, even after 1736 when the payment ceased to be one-fourth of total revenue. As part of the mid-century reorganization, the theater's assessment to the Hôpital became a fixed annual sum of 60,000 *livres*, or roughly 15% of total costs. However, in the calculation of authors' shares, the troupe continued to deduct one-fourth of total revenue per show, prompting repeated complaints from authors. In response, the theater's council of lawyers in 1765 ruled that, although the theater paid a lump sum for the so-called "*droit des pauvres*," fully one-fourth of net revenue could still be deducted before the calculation of the writer's share. The council ruled that this payment represented a "personal tax on each individual" author, taking the place of their own head tax, or *capitation*, which therefore should be unaffected by the "private treaty" between the troupe and the Hôpital Général. [92](#)

The third and perhaps most important development in the calculation of the author's payment after 1757 was a significant change in the Comédie's revenue structure, due to the introduction of box seats ("*loges*") that were leased annually. The total theater-going audience, relatively stable in the first half of the century, appears to have grown substantially after the 1740s, though much of the additional attendance might be at lesser venues and thus considered marginal cultural consumption. [93](#) The First Gentlemen and the performers knew that the wealthiest and most assiduous members of the Parisian theater-going public came to the Comédie Française not only to watch but also to participate in the spectacle, by displaying themselves to each other, so they sought seats that would be highly visible venues in which to perform their social prominence. In order to increase revenue for the Comédie Française, the First Gentlemen in 1757 authorized the troupe to sell 50 "lifetime subscriptions" for 3000 *livres* each to generate the revenue necessary to pay off the remainder of its debt to the royal treasury. [94](#) At the same time, they authorized the troupe to divide up the balconies into high-priced boxes, to be offered for rent, at elevated cost, to a designated group of elites, primarily dukes and counts with established presences at court. [95](#) Admission to the balconies previously had been sold, as for the entire theater, to individuals on a per-performance basis; they would now be rented in blocks, and the subscriber could invite whoever he wanted to occupy the seats in his box. Beginning with the 1761–1762 season, these subscriptions provided an additional 60,000 *livres* in gross revenue, without a significant decline in average revenue from daily admissions sold at the door.

## Table 2: Comédie Française revenues, 1760 - 1789

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LaGrave, 171; Alasseur 76 - 77.

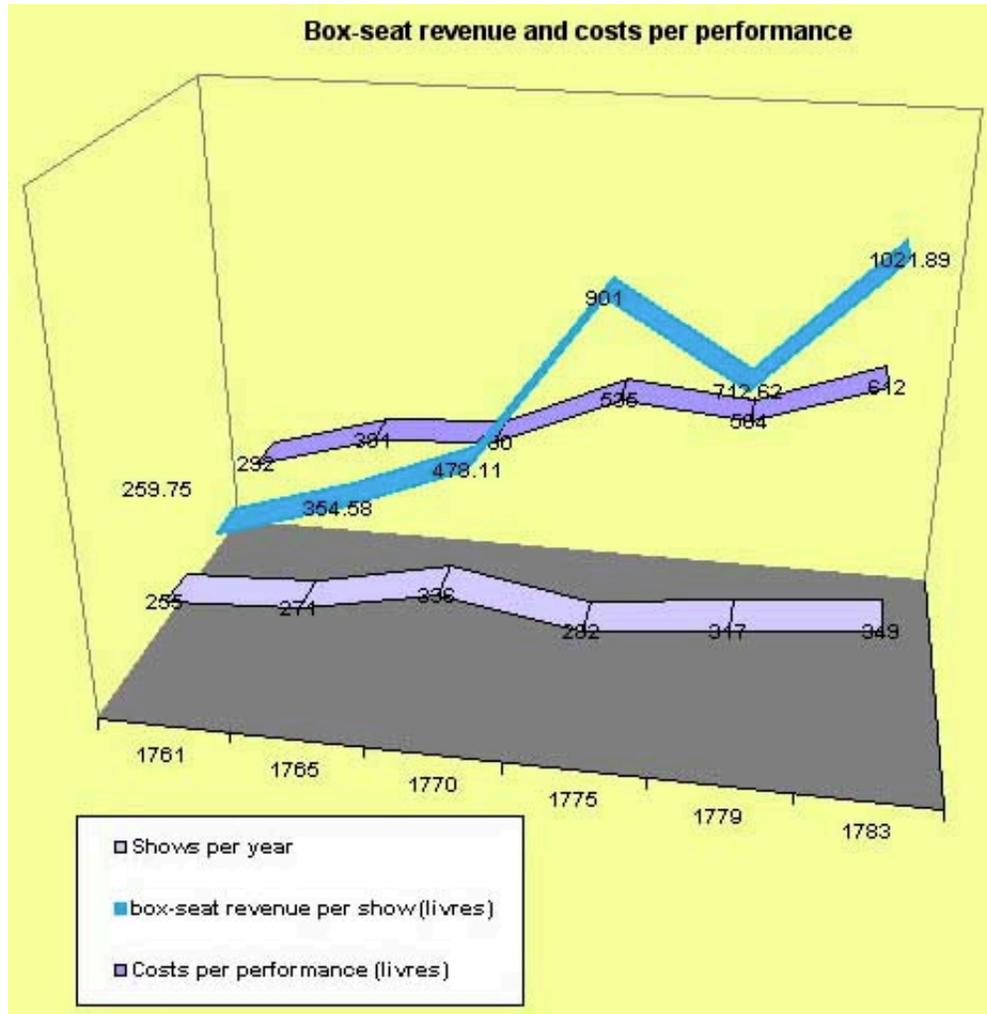
In the years after 1761, this new form of admission provided a reliable revenue stream to the Comédie, since it was paid quarterly rather than daily. However, this change in the Comédie's revenue structure was not accounted for in the 1757 reforms, and the new revenue from box-seat subscriptions did not figure in the calculation of the author's ninth. In response to complaints by authors, the Comédie's legal council created in 1766 a new formula for calculating authors' payments that would take subscriptions into account. Deciding somewhat arbitrarily that the revenue from the box seats set aside for the playwright could be fixed at 300 *livres* per show, the Council ruled that the authors' share of subscription revenue and of "ordinary costs" would cancel each other out. While this ruling simplified the theater's bookkeeping considerably, it did not assuage the playwrights' concerns, and therefore did little to settle the issue between authors and the troupe.



As the number and price of subscriptions for boxes continued to increase, the revenue they generated also increased as a fraction of the Comédie's total annual income, rising from less than one-sixth to more than one-third. In 1770, the troupe moved to a new performance hall at the Tuileries palace, in which roughly one-fifth of the 2200 seats were in boxes, and the revenue generated by box-seat subscriptions rose to 36.5 percent of overall income. For any given performance in the 1776–1777 season, one-third to

one-half of the company's daily revenue came from the boxes, depending on the number of tickets sold at the door. In this way, box-seat subscriptions reduced to nearly zero the troupe's annual financial risk, because these revenues exceeded total production costs by about 100,000 *livres*.

**Table 3: Comédie Française structure, 1761 - 1783**



This table is composed from BCF "Registre des recettes annuelles, 1761 - 1793;" "État general des recettes de la Comédie Française" (AN O1 845, # 16) calculated in 1780; and Alasseur, 42 and 72.

In 1783, the Comédie began performing in the new theater at Odéon, and this season was its first to generate over a million livres of revenue. Although the proportion of total revenue generated by the boxes in 1783 was higher than in subsequent years, the new hall was clearly constructed to maximize revenue from subscriptions for box seats. Of the 2000 seats in the new theater, over 600 were sold by subscription.

Authors complained of this situation, charging that, with so much fixed revenue from box-seat subscriptions, the troupe no longer had incentive to attract new spectators with new works. Instead of fulfilling their mission of presenting new works, many authors claimed, the troupe could rely on its permanent repertory, including the entire body of work by the "grand masters" of the seventeenth-century, Corneille, Racine, and Molière. Even more common were complaints by aspiring authors that the troupe deliberately precipitated the "fall" of revenues from new works below the point of profitability (set in the 1757 regulations at 1800 *livres* of gate receipt in winter and 1200 in summer). At that point, the work was considered to have "fallen"—that is, to have passed from the active to the permanent repertory, and the theater no longer required the author's consent to perform it, nor owed any share of the proceeds from subsequent performances. Consequently, Comédie Française playwrights, and those who wished to be, spoke frequently of their "*droits d'auteur*" and their "literary property," yet meant something quite different from the "*privilège*" available to printers, booksellers and, after 1777, authors themselves. (The mechanism of the "fall" and the problem of literary property are discussed in greater detail in [Chapter 4](#).)

## 2.7. Conclusion: The fear of a theater without authors

Thus, despite the specificity of the 1757 regulations concerning the calculation of the total revenue from performances of their works, and the part of it due them, few authors requested such calculations in the 1760s and 1770s. Many, however, did comment on another, broader problem: the increasing irrelevance of playwrights to the theater's operation. They knew that, as a commercial troupe, its incentive to perform as often as possible (and thus to stage more new works in the course of a season) resulted from its need to attract paying spectators. Furthermore, aware of the Comédie's financial difficulties, these playwrights believed that a need for enhanced revenue should translate into a need for even more new works, in order to maximize attendance at each performance. Thus the rules of the game of playwriting, as they had developed since the seventeenth century, suggested that the Comédie should perform as often as possible, and moreover should perform as many new (as opposed to repertory) productions as possible each season. Box seats, however, fundamentally changed these "rules," since subscriptions to the boxes generated the same amount of revenue regardless of the number of works—new or old—staged in a given year. Thus, to playwrights hoping to become more prominent in theatrical and literary life, this change in revenue structure appeared to have the perverse effect of rendering new plays and playwrights superfluous to the success of the royal theater, which had been created, they would argue, to showcase the glory of French dramaturgy.

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Under the assumption of a direct personal relationship and of mutual interests between authors and the troupe, based on which the regulations had first been written in the seventeenth century, playwrights might have looked favorably upon such changes as more elaborate stagings and the

construction of new boxes as setting their own works in the best possible light. Moreover, they might have seen the troupe's attempts to draw greater attendance and greater revenue, and to pay less in taxes, as potentially augmenting their own *parts d'auteur*. However, after the reorganization of 1757–1766, those playwrights who did ask for their payment to be calculated were those who had been unable or unwilling to arrange "private agreements" with the actors; they were therefore unlikely to have had direct, personal contact with the actors, and were more likely to distrust the motives of the Comédiens toward their plays and themselves. Thus, the troupe's efforts to cut its tax payments, increase its attendance through more elaborate staging, and augment its revenue through the leasing of boxes—in conjunction with the court's efforts to revise the regulations to distance playwrights personally from the actors in their composition of the repertory and preparation of works for the stage—all led to an increasing sense by new playwrights in the 1760s and 1770s that the Comédie Française was not treating them with the consideration due men of letters.

This chapter has shown how, beginning in the 1680s, the Comédie Française regulations defined as "authors" individuals who submitted new plays to the troupe, distributed roles to actors, and gained such perquisites as free entrance privileges and a portion of the proceeds. At the same time, it has shown how, between 1757 and 1766, the First Gentlemen revised the regulations, seeking to distance the troupe's handling of these matters both from direct supervision by the court and from personal interference by playwrights. However, troupe members and playwrights resisted this standardization (each for their own purposes), and continually circumvented the regulations, either through private agreements between authors and actors or by manipulation of less prominent authors by the troupe. Thus, in the 1760s and 1770s, in the wake of these revisions, playwrights' status in relation to the court, the Comédie, and its multiple publics—whence a dramatic author derived his identification as a man of letters—became increasingly unfixed and further beyond the control of any individual.

Another new factor in determining a playwrights' status was the market, insofar as the Comédie increasingly depended upon its admission-paying public. However, because the Comédie continued to be the sole point of entry for would-be dramatic authors into the field of playwriting, writers themselves were not necessarily able to expose themselves directly to the market. Moreover, because their strategies for representing themselves as men of letters linked to the royal theater were generally so heavily informed by ideals of *honnêteté*, most sought to avoid being remunerated through direct commercial exchange or being evaluated by a broad, undefined, heterogeneous audience. Indeed, as this chapter has shown, most playwrights whose works actually were performed by and who identified socially with the Comédie Française in the 1760s and 1770s viewed the royal stage primarily as affiliated with the court rather than with a commercial Parisian public. Therefore, they sought to establish their social prominence through modified practices of clientelism, and they expressed any concern for

personal prerogatives ("*droits*") not in terms of personal "interest," but rather in terms of their personal "honor" as men of letters.

However, many of the playwrights who first submitted works to the troupe after the revisions to the regulations that were completed in 1766 did so from a fundamentally different position than had those of previous generations, such as Voltaire and Marmontel, who had already established their social standing in literary life through direct personal relations with elite protectors. Newcomers, those outside all literary institutions, sought to establish their legitimacy by fashioning themselves in relation to the royal theater itself. Those who had a direct personal relationship with troupe members (or the ability or desire to establish one) sought to relate to the troupe as clients to a patron, through the use of language and gestures of fidelity and denials of personal interest. Those without such relations (or the ability or desire to establish them) had no specific signs, such as private agreements, of the theater's concern for them personally. While this was precisely the sort of impersonal relationship the regulations had been revised to create, it meant that such would-be men of letters would have to pursue their own interests if they were to be recognized (and thereby gain status) in theatrical and literary life. When some playwrights in the 1770s began to see the troupe not as a potential patron and source of recognition but as an obstacle between themselves and what they considered to be their "public," they would seek to address that public directly. To do so, they would represent themselves in ways utterly at odds with the ideal of the playwright as a polite courtier. It is to the efforts of such writers to fashion themselves as "patriotic" playwrights that we turn in Chapter 3.

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### Notes:

**Note 1:** An example of the first approach taken on an eighteenth-century French playwright is E.J. Arould, *Le Génèse du 'Barbier de Séville'* (Paris: Minard, 1965), which studies the revisions of successive versions based on Beaumarchais's manuscripts. The second approach is evident in the work of Jacques Scherer, whose *La Dramaturgie classique en France au XVIIe siècle* and *La Dramaturgie de Beaumarchais* (Paris: Nizet, 1956) address the structure of various plays, attempting to deduce general models for classical tragedies and for Beaumarchais's comedies, respectively. [Back.](#)

**Note 2:** Lettre de cachet pour l'établissement des Comédiens du Roi," parchment copy in the BCF, register IV A ("Anciennes Ordonnances et Règlements"), document # 1. [Back.](#)

**Note 3:** Ordonnance sur la surveillance des Comédiens," June 18, 1684 (BN-MSS FF 24330, f. 93). [Back.](#)

**Note 4:** Many of these early orders are collected in the Bibliothèque de la Comédie Française (BCF), register IV A ("Anciennes Ordonnances et Règlements"); the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra (Res. 958); and, New York Public Library Department of Performing Arts (NYPL-PA) in *Decreets, règlements, et mémoires sur le Théâtre Français* [(MWEH (Paris) RBS 97-132]; the 1719 and 1726 "règlements" in the BCF IV A, #2 (1726) and #2 bis (1719). [Back.](#)

**Note 5:** Bonnassières, *La Comédie Française, 1680—1757* and La Grave, *Le Public et le théâtre* both emphasize the lack of procedural order in the management of the theater in this period. [Back.](#)

**Note 6:** These deficits began in 1687, with the heavy outlays for a new, specially-constructed playhouse in the rue des Fossés St-Germain on the Left Bank. On the finances of the theater in the eighteenth century, see Claude Alasseur, *La Comédie Française au 18e siècle: Étude économique* (Paris: Mouton, 1967). [Back.](#)

**Note 7:** A 40-article "Arrêt" reorganizing the theater's administration and financing was issued by the Conseil d'État du Roi on June 18, 1757. These articles also empowered the First Gentlemen to establish regulations concerning the internal operation of the troupe, which were formulated as the "Règlement pour les Comédiens français ordinaires du Roi"; an additional 40 articles, including XLI to LXVI, concerned "new plays and authors." A notarized copy of these regulations was then issued to the troupe on June 9, 1758 (AN (MC) XLIV, 1011, # 52), and the entire 80 articles were reported back to the royal Council of State, which approved them in an "Arrêt" on June 12, 1759. New Letters Patent were issued on August 22, 1761, and registered by the Parlement on September 7, 1761, and then printed by the royal printer, Ballard. A manuscript on parchment of the entire document is in the BCF, dossier: "Décrets et Règlements concernant les acteurs et les employés du théâtre," and all 80 articles were printed as *Arrests du Conseil d'État du Roi, Lettres Patentes, Acte de Société Et Règlements de Messieurs les Premiers Gentilshommes de la Chambre du Roi, concernant les Comédiens Français* (Paris: Ballard, 1761), Bibliothèque de l'Opéra, Réserve 960. Nicolas Des Essarts, *Les Trois théâtres de Paris* (Paris: Lacombe, 1777), 80—82, gives an account of the making of the new regulations. [Back.](#)

**Note 8:** BCF, Register 124a, ff. 70—72. Previously, the royal treasury had paid pensions directly. [Back.](#)

**Note 9:** AN O1 844, dossiers 82, 87. [Back.](#)

**Note 10:** The reasons for establishing this council are described in BCF 124a, "Délibérations du Conseil de la Comédie Française," f. 7; January 31, 1765, and its powers are enumerated in AN O1 844, # 107 -108. The first members were four *avocats du Parlement*: Pierre-Jean-Baptiste Gerbier, Pierre Jabineau de la Voute, Claude-Geneviève Coqueley de Chaussepierre and Fauchave de Grandmesnil; an *avocat au Conseil du Roi*, Brunot; a *procureur au Châtelet*, Yvon; and a notary, Crulot.

The proceedings of the council's deliberations, from its beginning in 1765 until

its dissolution in 1791, are recorded in BCF 124a—124e. These proceedings, along with those of the troupe's "Assemblées," document how the regulations issued from court were received and implemented by the theater. The troupe's meetings are recorded in the BCF carton of "Feuilles de l'assemblée" (for the period 1680—1746) and BCF 52-24 and 137a-b (for the period 1772—1786). A general guide to the BCF registers has been compiled by Roselyne La Place, "Inventaire des registres de la Comédie Française," *Révue d'histoire du théâtre* 42:4 (1990): 389—399. [Back.](#)

**Note 11:** AN O1 844, #2; BCF 124a ff. 5—7; BN-MSS FF 9228, f. 43; BN-MSS FF 9232, f. 2589. [Back.](#)

**Note 12:** Biagioli, "Le Prince et les savants: La civilité scientifique au 17e siècle," *AHSS* 50:6 (1995): 1417—1453; see also his *Galileo*, 84—90; on the role of Richelieu and subsequent ministers in the establishment of academies in France, see Merlin-Kajman, *L'Excentricité académique, passim*; Viala, *Naissance*, 13—49; Hahn, *The anatomy of a scientific institution: the Paris Academy of Sciences, 1666-1803* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971) [Back.](#)

**Note 13:** BCF IV A, #2, p. 7; BCF, dossier: "Falbaire," # 10. [Back.](#)

**Note 14:** On the ambiguities of such patron-client relations, and the consequences for the status and identities of *gens de lettres* in the seventeenth century, see Jouhaud, *Pouvoirs*, esp. 128—150; 367—373. Jouhaud argues against the tendency, prevalent in scholarship on the seventeenth century, and even more so in work on the Enlightenment, to perceive royal regulation as a limitation on writers' personal autonomy. [Back.](#)

**Note 15:** Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 5: "There may be a moment in which a solitary individual puts words on a page, but it is by no means clear that this moment is the heart of the mystery." This passage apparently refers to Hamlet's discussion (III.ii) of his effect as a performer on his audience as "the heart of my mystery." [Back.](#)

**Note 16:** Prior to the founding of the Comédie, this practice was an "observed custom," according to Samuel Chappuzeau, *Le Théâtre Français* (Paris: 1876; Lyon: 1674), 64. Article I of the 1697 regulations formalized the requirement that, when a new play was to be considered, the entire company should be called for a reading, after which it would vote by casting either black or white ballots. The revised regulations of 1757 mandated that the troupe should continue to assemble "to compose its repertory ... in the accustomed manner" (BCF, 124a, f. 16). [Back.](#)

**Note 17:** BCF IV A, # 2bis, p. 3. [Back.](#)

**Note 18:** BCF, "Feuille de l'assemblée des Comédiens," April 18, 1746. This reform would be incorporated into articles X—XIII of the 1757 regulations. [Back.](#)

**Note 19:** Hemmings, "Playwrights and Play-Actors: The

Controversy over the *comités de lecture* in France, 1757-1910," *French Studies* 43:4 (1989): 405—422. [Back.](#)

**Note 20:** AB 11459, ff. 45—48. Other examples of proposals from outsiders that the troupe either ignored or refused to consider are evident in the troupe's registers of correspondence with authors from the 1760s and 1770s (BCF 52-24 f. 15; f. 86; BCF 137a, f. 88; BCF 124a, f.4). [Back.](#)

**Note 21:** BCF 52-24, f. 86; 137a, f. 88; BCF 124a, f.4; BCF 52-24, f. 15. [Back.](#)

**Note 22:** Monsiau's painting belongs to the BCF; Anselin's engraving and the key are in the BN Département des Estampes (AA5, volume 3). [Back.](#)

**Note 23:** BCF, IV A, 2 *bis*, p. 3. [Back.](#)

**Note 24:** ARS MSS 10295, f. 93—94; April 10, 1746: "Mémoire sur les spectacles." Calls to institutionalize a role for men of letters in literary life would become a constant refrain in the second half of the eighteenth century; see, for instance, Dina Ribard, "D'Alembert et la 'Société des Gens de Lettres'," *Littératures classiques* 37 (1999): 229—245; Roche, *Républicains des Lettres*, 157—171; and Mercier's references to the need for such a role in *Tableau de Paris* (Paris: Mercure, 1994), *passim*. Yet the most concrete (and most successful) instances of this refrain would concern playwrights for the Comédie Française. [Back.](#)

**Note 25:** BCF, 52-24, f. 72 ff. [Back.](#)

**Note 26:** AN O1 844, #2 and BN-MSS FF 9232, ff. 2580-2590; ARS 8 J 4292. [Back.](#)

**Note 27:** BCF 124a, f. 48; January 14, 1774; BCF, 124a, f. 49-50; O1 844, #116. [Back.](#)

**Note 28:** Regulation of 1766, article V, paragraph 5 (BN-MSS FF 9232, f. 40). [Back.](#)

**Note 29:** On Sedaine's career, see David Charleton and Mark Ledbury, eds., *Michel-Jean Sedaine, 1719-1797* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000). [Back.](#)

**Note 30:** BCF, "Sedaine": "Mémoire sur les rapports des auteurs avec les auteurs à la Comédie Française." [Back.](#)

**Note 31:** Goodman, *Republic of Letters*, 90—135. [Back.](#)

**Note 32:** Berlanstein, "Women and Power in Eighteenth-Century France: Actresses at the Comédie Française," *Feminist Studies* 20:3 (1994): 465—503; and *Daughters of Eve*, 69—76. [Back.](#)

**Note 33:** For example, in 1625, when selling twelve plays to a commercial troupe for performance, Hardy agreed not to allow his printer, Jacques Quesnel,

to publish these works. See the notarized contracts reproduced in Deierkauf-Holsboer, 210—212. [Back.](#)

**Note 34:** Bonnassières, *Auteurs dramatiques*, 5 ff. [Back.](#)

**Note 35:** Examples of such requests include those by Rosoy (1773); Gudin (1776); (BCF 137a, f. 57 and 137b f. 43, respectively); and La Harpe in 1775 (BCF, "La Harpe," # 7, July 1, [1775]). By contrast, a *privilège* for a book was useful to a printer only once he brought a printed edition to the market; moreover, once having expended time and money to obtain a manuscript from an author and a *privilège* for an edition, a printer had an incentive to publish. On the differences between literary property for playwrights and for authors of printed books, see Chapter 4. [Back.](#)

**Note 36:** This claim, with respect to playwrights, appears in such otherwise excellent works as Didier Masseau, *La Naissance de l'intellectuel en Europe du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1994), esp. 101—110 and 150—163; Roger Chartier, "Trajectoires et tensions culturelles de l'Ancien Régime," in *Histoire de la France* volume IV, *Les Formes de la culture*, eds. André Burguière and Jacques Revel, (Paris: Seuil, 1993), 373; and Maurice Pellisson, *Hommes de lettres au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: 1911; Geneva: Slatkine, 1970), who argues that because playwrights were "few [and] isolated ... they suffered the loss of their property" to the troupe (134). Less subtle in making this claim that such cessions represented a "usurpation" of the author's "droits," which precocious moderns, such as Beaumarchais, overcame in 1780 (and ultimately in the Revolution in 1791) to achieve creative and financial "liberty," is Jacques Boncompain, *Auteurs et comédiens au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Perrin, 1976). I have discussed some of the reasons for this historiographical tendency in "Beaumarchais and the Society of Dramatic Authors in Cultural History and Historiography," *Beaumarchais: Homme de lettres, homme de société*, ed. Philip Robinson (NY: Peter Lang, 2000), 29—38. I offer an alternative presentation of the SAD's negotiation of new regulations in 1780, and its role in passing new Revolutionary legislation concerning theaters in 1791, in my *Literary Sociability in the Old Regime*, Chapters 4 and 5. [Back.](#)

**Note 37:** BCF Register 52-24, f. 103; BCF, dossier "Palissot," document 8. [Back.](#)

**Note 38:** BCF 137a, f. 63; see also Chappuzeau, 71-72 [Back.](#)

**Note 39:** Natalie Zemon Davis, "Beyond the Market: Books as Gifts in Early Modern France," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th ser., 33 (1983): 69—88, quote at 73; Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Sharon Kettering, "Gift-giving and patronage in early modern France," *French History* 2 (1988): 131—151, presents "ritualized gift-giving" as the central dynamic of patron-client relations. See also her *Patrons, Brokers and Clients*, 40—67. Biagioli describes gift giving as "the medium of patronage" through which identities were constructed; see *Galileo*, 36—59. On gift-giving at early modern English courts, see Linda Levy Peck, "Benefits, Brokers and Beneficiaries: The Culture of Exchange in Seventeenth-Century England," in *Court, Country and Culture*, eds. B. Y. Kunze and D. D. Brautigan, (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1992), 109—

127; and David Wootton, "Francis Bacon: Your Flexible Friend," in *World of the Favorite*, eds. J. H. Eliot and Lawrence Brockliss (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 186-187. [Back.](#)

**Note 40:** BCF, dossier: "Belloy," September 30, 1778. [Back.](#)

**Note 41:** BCF, dossier "La Harpe," 6 *bis*; # 8; # 9. Other authors having reached "conventions" who wrote to remind the troupe of the provisions of their "arrangement" include Dudoyer (1773) and Le Blanc (1775) (BCF 52-24, f. 102). [Back.](#)

**Note 42:** Elias, *Mozart*, 35. On the "established outsider relationship" and the "double bind" in which it places newcomers to a community, see Brown, "Social Encounters and Self-Image." [Back.](#)

**Note 43:** Cynthia Brown, *Poets, Patrons and Printers: A Crisis of Authority in late Medieval France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 100—107; Davis, *The Gift*, 43—47, 71, 124—132. Greenblatt makes a similar point, arguing that particularly at moments of crisis, such as the later sixteenth century, individuals tend to deploy a greater range of self-presentation in their encounters with others, in *Self-Fashioning* (6-7). Bourdieu, in his discussion of the "market for symbolic goods," adheres to Mauss's developmental theory that gift exchange precedes market economics; see *Field of Cultural Production*, 112—141; and his "Marginalia: Some Additional Notes on the Gift," in *The Logic of the Gift*, ed. Alan D. Schrift (London: Routledge, 1997), 231—241. [Back.](#)

**Note 44:** BCF 124a, f. 46 and f. 65. The troupe members complained of the arbitrariness of such requests from the court, such as in a letter to the First Gentlemen of June 11, 1774 (124a, f. 49). [Back.](#)

**Note 45:** BCF, "Feuille de l'assemblée des Comédiens Français" (March 22, 1683) established that "new plays and old ones will be alternated." [Back.](#)

**Note 46:** La Grave, 318—323. The calculations for 1757 to 1771 and 1771 to 1780 are my own, based on A. Joannidès, *La Comédie-Française de 1680 à 1900* (Paris: 1901; Geneva: Slatkine, 1970); BCF register 52-24; and Henry C. Lancaster, "La Comédie Française, 1701—1774: Plays Actors, Spectators, Finances," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* n.s. 41:4 (1951). [Back.](#)

**Note 47:** Article VII of 1719 Regulations: BCF IV A, # 2 *bis*, p. 4; BCF, "Feuille de l'assemblée," June 16, 1683. [Back.](#)

**Note 48:** BCF 137a, ff. 82—83; BCF 137a, f. 105. On the *drame* as an aesthetic and social form, see especially Julie C. Hayes, *Identity and Ideology* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1991); and Pierre Frantz, *L'Esthétique du tableau* (Paris: PUF, 1999). Sara Maza describes the "*drame bourgeois*" as "a substitute for middle-class consciousness" in "Luxury, Morality and Social Change." [Back.](#)

**Note 49:** BCF 124a, f. 49, f. 50, f. 55. [Back.](#)

**Note 50:** BCF 137a, f. 85; BCF 124a, f. 18. [Back.](#)

**Note 51:** By the middle of the eighteenth-century, the Comédie Française was taking in three-quarters of its gross revenue on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Sundays (La Grave, 301). On November 27, 1763, the First Gentleman the Duke the Richelieu ordered that a new play be performed in Paris one additional day of the week, effectively creating a fourth "grand jour" (AN O1 844, # 88), which, after some resistance, was accepted by the troupe on January 1, 1766 (BCF 124a, f. 85). [Back.](#)

**Note 52:** The Dorat letter and the troupe's response are in BCF, 137a, f. 97-8. Similar exchanges took place between the troupe and Dudoyer on November 29, 1773 (BCF 52-24, f. 100-102) and Gudin on September 30, 1776, (BCF, "Gudin," # 3-4). [Back.](#)

**Note 53:** BCF 52-24, f. 37. [Back.](#)

**Note 54:** BCF 52-24, f. 106. As it turned out, this order was not followed, and it would require another cession, by Jean Bernard Le Blanc in January 1775, for "Barbier" to be brought to the Comédie's stage. [Back.](#)

**Note 55:** BCF 52-24, f. 139 and 141; August 1 and August 25, [1774]. On September 7, 1774, the Comédie's legal council codified this distinction between cession and outright withdrawal in a "regulation on the rank of new plays" (BCF 124a, f. 50), although in practice, this distinction was already long established. [Back.](#)

**Note 56:** BCF, "Rochon de Chabannes," #20 (February 23) and #21 (May 24, 1779). [Back.](#)

**Note 57:** BCF, "Sedaine," letters of January 16, February 6 and March 1775. [Back.](#)

**Note 58:** On La Harpe's cessions, see Christopher Todd, *Voltaire's Disciple* (London: MHRA, 1972), 23, n. 121. See also the correspondence between La Harpe and the troupe, reprinted from the BCF and other locations, in Todd, ed. "La Harpe Quarrels with the Actors," *SVEC* LIII (1967): 223-337. La Harpe cedes place for "Menzicoff" in Todd, #24, #64, and #65. Rochon's cessions are made in BCF 52-24, f. 34. [Back.](#)

**Note 59:** BCF, dossier, "Renou," #3, September 28, 1772. [Back.](#)

**Note 60:** BCF 137a, f. 60. A similar development followed the acceptance of Voltaire's "Loix des Minos" in 1773, as Lonvay requested that his "Alcidonis," at the top of the *tableau*, be staged either immediately or well after the production of Voltaire's new tragedy. The troupe opted to stage "Alcidonis" before "Loix," and as we will see below, the former's run came to a rapid and unsatisfactory end (BCF 137a, f. 2 and 52-24, f. 27). [Back.](#)

**Note 61:** BCF 137a, f. 64, May 12 1778. Clairefontaine's letter again expressed his intention to preserve his position so that his play could be prepared for

performance at a later time. [Back.](#)

**Note 62:** BCF 137a, ff. 60—64 and Todd #10— #13; correspondence of May 24—29, 1778. [Back.](#)

**Note 63:** Chappuzeau, 71—72: The result of this consultation, troupes and authors alike expected, would be that "each [actor] performs the role for which he is capable and which suits him best." [Back.](#)

**Note 64:** BCF, dossier: "Feuille de l'assemblée des Comédiens Français," October 11, 1683. [Back.](#)

**Note 65:** BCF 124a, f. 73. [Back.](#)

**Note 66:** For example in 1773 for the production of "Sophonisbe" (BCF, 52-24, f. 86). [Back.](#)

**Note 67:** BCF 124a, f. 34; BCF dossier, "Monvel." Authors who complained of actors' "indisposition" included Le Febvre for "Zuma" in April 1777, and Cailhava for "Marriage interrompue" in June 1778 (BCF 137a, f. 45 and f. 68, respectively). [Back.](#)

**Note 68:** BN-MSS FF 9232, ff. 258-9. [Back.](#)

**Note 69:** Written in 1781, Mercier's article "Affiches des spectacles," in the *Tableau de Paris* (II: 1321), notes that the presence of authors' names is a relatively new development. A brief discussion of the locations where theater posters were hung in Paris and their utility for cultural history, see François de Dainville, "Les lieux d'affichage des Comédies à Paris en 1753" and "Pour un inventaire des affiches des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles," in *Révue d'histoire du théâtre* 3:3 (1951): 248—260. [Back.](#)

**Note 70:** BCF, dossier "Fenouillot de Falbaire" 1. [Back.](#)

**Note 71:** Bonnassières, *Auteurs dramatiques*, 20 ff quotes the 1719 regulations from BCF IV A, 2 *bis*, articles XVIII—XIX. The original order concerning entrance privileges is in AN O1 845, # 53, from which it was added into Article XVIII of the 1719 regulations. [Back.](#)

**Note 72:** For example, the list for 1766 (AN O1 845, ff. 101—103) specifies authors enjoying lifetime entrances, authors enjoying such privileges for the year, authors whose privileges had expired since the previous year, and authors eligible to gain privileges during the course of the upcoming season upon acceptance of a new work. [Back.](#)

**Note 73:** BCF, dossier, "Rochon," #18, June 18, 1777. [Back.](#)

**Note 74:** AN O1 845, # 101. [Back.](#)

**Note 75:** This statement was included in several royal ordinances concerning the Comédie in the late seventeenth century (BCF IV A, "Anciennes

Ordonnances et Règlements") and then was publicly announced in the printed *Ordonnance du Roi, Concernant les Spectacles ... du 7 decembre 1728*, reissued as an "Ordonnance de Sa Majesté du 18 janvier 1745," and again printed as an *Ordonnance du Roi, Concernant les Spectacles. Du 29 Novembre 1757* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale. 1762; BN F 21159 (25)). [Back.](#)

**Note 76:** BCF, IV A, #1, p. 15. On free admissions prior to 1750, see La Grave, 175—185. [Back.](#)

**Note 77:** BCF, "Rochon," #18, June 18, 1777. [Back.](#)

**Note 78:** Both the original regulations (article XIV) and the revised 1757 regulations (article LVII) allowed authors between four and six guests, depending on the length of the work. [Back.](#)

**Note 79:** Rochon describes entrance privileges as "*droits d'auteur*" in the above-cited letter and again in a subsequent one on July 1, 1777 (BCF, "Rochon," #19). Later, he would refer to his right to distribute free tickets to performances of his play as a component of his "*propriété littéraire*" (f. 37. January 22, 1781). [Back.](#)

**Note 80:** *Tableau*, II: 818. [Back.](#)

**Note 81:** Caffieri donated the bust of Alexis Piron and received a grant of extraordinary entrance privileges to the theater (BCF 52-24, f. 82). One such solicitation for a donation, in 1778, is in BCF 137a, f. 73. Pigalle's proposal, and the commission to execute the busts, are in the BCF. In 1775, the troupe did note in its deliberations that Augustin Pajou had executed *a terre cuite* bust of Michel Sedaine, an author then very much alive (BCF, "Sedaine."). [Back.](#)

**Note 82:** *Journal et mémoires de Charles Collé* (1772; Paris: Firmin Didot, 1868), II: 208—210. [Back.](#)

**Note 83:** BCF, 124a, f. 48—51 and AN O1 844, # 117. [Back.](#)

**Note 84:** Lough, 190—195. Mercier, *Tableau*, II: 152—4, reports that in the latter eighteenth century, the *claque* gave way to a loosely organized group of individually hired *battoirs*, stationed strategically in the *parterre*. [Back.](#)

**Note 85:** Article XI established that, after deduction for production costs, the proceeds of a play would be divided in nine parts, of which one would be granted the author—hence the term "*part d'auteur*" to mean the payment due the author by the troupe. The remaining net revenue would be subdivided among all 24 troupe members equally. Article XII decreed that one-eighteenth part would be paid the author of a one-act "*petite pièce*," so that a total of three-eighths of the revenue was designated for the author if both a new "*petite pièce*" and a new full-length play were performed together. The 1757 regulations, article LV, reiterated these provisions and further specified that authors of a three-act work would receive one-twelfth of the net revenue; these exact provisions were repeated by article 14 of the 1766 regulations and remained in effect until the 1780 regulations would grant authors one-seventh

and would alter the formula for calculating the author's payment.

The tragedian Philippe Quinault is consistently cited as the first non-performer author to be compensated with a share of the receipt, for his "les Rivaies," staged at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1653. According to an anecdote often repeated in French theater historiography, Quinault was unknown to the troupe at the time. To have his work received by this, the leading company of Paris, he submitted it in the name of his mentor, the well-known Tristan l'Hermite. When the troupe members learned of this ruse, they agreed to stage the play but offered Quinault a lump sum of only 50 *livres*, less than half what was standard for first-time playwrights. As a compromise, Tristan himself proposed that Quinault should be compensated as if he were a member of the troupe—with a double share of revenues after expenses. Since there were sixteen troupe members, the resulting fraction was two-eighteenths or one-ninth. The earliest printed rendering of this episode appears to be 1746, when it appeared in Parfaict, *Histoire du théâtre français* (VII: 428—430). William Brooks, *Bibliographie critique du théâtre de Quinault* (Paris: Biblio 17, 1988), 50, considers the anecdote true but unlikely to have been the first example of an author being paid a *part*. Liberal, Third-Republic era historians, such as Bonnassières and Pallisson, nevertheless presented Quinault's ninth as a liberation for men of letters from subservience to patrons or having to sell their works outright to troupes. [Back.](#)

**Note 86:** Bonnassières, *Auteurs dramatiques*, 11. [Back.](#)

**Note 87:** BCF 124b, f. 1: "Partes des Auteurs."

Such *décomptes* and signed *billets* are in many of the BCF dossiers for authors whose first plays were performed between 1765 and 1777, such as Gudin de la Brenellerie, Renou and Cailhava. Those such as Marmontel, whose first works had been performed prior to the 1760s, generally reached private agreements, and their dossiers rarely include *décomptes* calculating their share. Also deducted from the author's payment would be the cost of any admissions he had requested in excess of his quota of 20. [Back.](#)

**Note 88:** BCF 137a, f. 84; November 16, 1778; BCF 137a, f. 110; July 17, 1780. [Back.](#)

**Note 89:** Claude Alasseur, *La Comédie Française au 18e siècle: Étude économique* (Paris: Mouton, 1967), supplemented by the BCF register of "Recettes et dépenses annuelles" for 1761—1775; AN O1 843 A and AN O1 845 # 68—83 and BN FF 9228, ff. 12—14; and DesEssarts, 84—110. [Back.](#)

**Note 90:** AN O1 844, # 245—251 and O1 845, # 16. [Back.](#)

**Note 91:** BCF 124b, f. 3. From the available documentation, it is impossible to determine how much of the additional spending after 1757 went towards staging. The regulations never established how much of the operating budget should be used for production expenses, dictating only that revenues should exceed costs for each production. [Back.](#)

**Note 92:** Alasseur, 84—100; La Grave, 36—47; BCF, 52-24 f. 181; AN O1 845,

# 16; BCF 124b, f. 3. Complaints of deductions of one-fourth of gross revenue are evident in documents in BCF authors' dossiers, such as "Cailhava," (October 1, 1763; November 10, 1766); "Gudin," (#7 [undated]); "Rochon," (#3 [undated]). [Back.](#)

**Note 93:** La Grave, 171—206, estimates the size of the potential theater audience in Paris as between 1715 and 1750 at a relatively fixed level of 120,000 admissions annually, distributed among 15,000 theater-goers, of whom 1000 accounted for 50,000 admissions annually. These 1000 "assiduous" theater-goers could choose between the Française and the Italienne on most evenings, and had the additional option of the Opéra thrice weekly, so the total number of admissions that could be sold by all three public theaters combined in a given week was thought to be limited. Furthermore, because this limited public was primarily composed of elites, its demand for theater admissions, while limited in quantity, was thought to be highly price inelastic. For this reason, the First Gentlemen authorized the Comédiens Français to double or even triple its admission prices on occasion prior to 1757, enabling them to capitalize on a popular play without hindering the other public theaters (BCF, "Feuille de l'assemblée," March 22, 1683). [Back.](#)

**Note 94:** AN O1 843 A, # 9. [Back.](#)

**Note 95:** AN O1 844, #13—14. [Back.](#)

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