

3. "*Politesse perdue*": The Patriot Playwright between Court and Public

1

In late October 1772, Edme Billard-Dumonceau wrote to the troupe of the Comédie Française, asking it to consider his comedy "Le Suborneur" for performance. Vainly comparing himself to Plautus and Juvenal, he nevertheless assured the actors that he would gladly modify his play to their specifications. In his letter, he reminded the company that his protector, "M. de St. Andelin," had several times asked them to hear his play. The troupe, however, refused to consider it, responding that one of the actors had already determined it did not merit being read to the assembled troupe. In response, Billard decided to seek another opinion of the merits of his play (and himself). On October 30, just before the curtain was to rise, he climbed on the Comédie's stage and declared, "Silence! *Messieurs*, I am Billard, author of 'Suborneur,' a play ... worthy of Momus, and Heraclitus has barred me from the stage!" Once the resulting ruckus had settled, he continued, "I am Billard, son of a secretary of the King. I was not made to be judged by stage clowns." Highlighting both his classical knowledge and his social standing, he argued that the actors were unqualified to judge a writer of his stature. For vindication, he appealed directly to the "noble and judicious" audience, which he challenged to show its "courage. Now is the moment to grant me justice." But no clamor of support arose, and soldiers quickly hustled him off the stage to Fort l'Évêque prison and then the asylum of Charenton. 1

Although Billard would not be heard from again, his claim to merit the status of a man of letters based on the judgment of the public would become an important component of how playwrights represented themselves in the later decades of the Old Regime. Claiming an audience of "the public," as distinct from the court or urban elites, offered a tantalizing paradox. On the one hand, writers could appeal to the public as a strategy to circumvent monopolistic institutions, such as the royal troupe. On the other, such appeals were largely incompatible with the ideal of the playwright as a man of letters that had emerged in the late seventeenth century, a man who defined himself primarily through his self-restrained, genteel comportment in direct relations with other elites. In principle, the royal theater provided a venue in which a playwright could present his work, and therefore also himself, before a commercial, socially-mixed audience and still be regarded as honorably self-effacing, because this theater's audience of first instance continued to be thought of not as a heterogeneous, anonymous group of ticket purchasers but as the crown, the court, and the Parisian elites. Yet, as we saw in [Chapter 1](#), writers whose plays were performed in the early eighteenth century were generally those known to the actors personally, or who had been sponsored by protectors or introduced by brokers. As we saw in [Chapter 2](#), this situation began to change after 1760, due to alterations in the theater's supervision from court, in its operation in Paris, and in the accessibility and *ethos* of potential protectors for aspiring writers.

In this chapter, we will see how many aspiring writers seeking to become identified as playwrights for the royal theater in the 1760s and 1770s approached the Comédie without any pre-existing personal relations either with members of the troupe, with courtiers and urban elites, or with cultural brokers—generally, more established writers, who could give them entrée into such personal relations. As a result, by the 1770s the troupe became disinclined to deal with or perform plays by new writers who were unknown to the troupe, its protectors, or its audience. As a result, those seeking to become dramatic authors without benefit of previously performed works or a personal relationship with the troupe or influential elites found it difficult to obtain opportunities to read their plays or have them scheduled for performance. Their distance from the troupe, the court, and elite sponsors encouraged them to employ new strategies for legitimating their claims to be men of letters. For some, these new strategies involved addressing themselves to the troupe and its superiors, the First Gentlemen, in a new, more legalistic register. For others, it meant identifying themselves not as honorable in the eyes of the court but as authorized to speak publicly by the abstraction of the public itself.

This chapter describes and analyzes the strategies of playwrights aspiring to gain recognition as men of letters amidst the intense political conflicts that characterized the end of the reign of Louis XV and the accession of Louis XVI; it shows how an alternative identity for some dramatic authors was a result of these new strategies, not the cause.. Rather than fashioning themselves as *honnêtes gens* writing for, of, and to a self-enclosed audience of elites, many of these new entrants in the literary field began to claim social prominence independent of any constituted political or social authority. They represented themselves as writing for and to a more socially heterogeneous audience, one they hoped to unite through their dramaturgy. To advance this agenda, they would have to alter their position, both in relation to the Comédie Française and in French society at large, by emphasizing not face-to-face relations with urban elites or the court but the medium of print: prefaces to plays, treatises, *mémoires judiciaires*, and journalistic criticism. In claiming to speak through print to and for a much broader audience, these writers thereby presented an alternative conception of their role as playwrights—and, by extension, men of letters—as "patriots."

5

The figure of the patriot and the discourse of patriotism have recently become subjects of great interest in eighteenth-century cultural history. Early twentieth-century historiography of the Enlightenment equated patriotism with nationalism, and found both incompatible with Enlightenment universalism. This approach looked for works of literature, especially plays, that represented the French nation and then sought to explain the appeal of these works in terms of either royal propaganda or a latent populism that would emerge fully in the Revolution. 2 More recent

work has explored the nuances of the "new French patriotism" and the "cult of the nation," and argued that it was precisely the search for resonant, broad social categories that led later eighteenth-century writers to have frequent recourse to the public, the nation, and the *patrie*. This newer work defines patriotism as a discourse that called for a reinvigoration of French civic life and denounced tendencies among political and social elites toward self-interest over public service. Patriots, as presented in this newer scholarship, sought to foster a culturally integrated and civically engaged community, and then to create new representative institutions to speak for that community to the crown. Recent historiography has presented this patriotism as a simultaneous variant of early modern humanism, Jansenism, and the Enlightenment, appropriated to the particular social and political developments of eighteenth-century France and Europe. [3](#)

This and subsequent chapters offer nuance to our understanding of what it meant to be a "patriot" and to write for "the nation" in later eighteenth-century French literary life. The figure of the patriot playwright cannot be adequately described as merely a classical republican, a critic of court corruption, or even a theorist of the *patrie* as a polity or a moral community. Nor were writers, *prima facie*, political dissidents or aesthetic radicals. Rather, self-declared patriots situated themselves in a long-standing classical discourse on the utility of literature. Aspiring playwrights deployed the trope of the patriot to imply autonomy from (though not incompatibility with) the established norms and institutions of literary life and, in particular, the Comédie Française.

For these aspiring playwrights, to be a patriot meant to behave and speak publicly in ways that deviated from or even transgressed the *honnêtes* norms of civility that, as was discussed in [Chapter 1](#), defined what it meant to be a "poet" from the 1630s to about 1750. Patriots represented such civility as insincere and self-interested, in contrast to their own magnanimous, brave, and virtuous engagement in literary life. Moreover, patriots represented themselves as willing, even eager, to present their work and themselves in print, implying a broad and anonymous public to receive their works, in contrast to the evident concern of *honnêtes hommes de lettres* to go before a broad public only after establishing personal legitimacy among elites. Inspired by Antoine Léonard Thomas's discourse to the Académie Française in January 1767, calling for men of letters to serve the nation rather than the court, these writers frequently adopted, though rarely cited, all three aspects of Thomas's definition of the "citizen-writer": they offer their works freely to the nation, their works address issues of pressing contemporary importance, and they go to great lengths to explain how their work contributes to the greater good. [4](#)

Thus, the appearance of the patriot playwright in literary life during the

latter half of the eighteenth century, of which Mercier provides the best example, does not necessitate an understanding of later eighteenth-century theater as increasingly politicized, in the sense of providing an intellectual and social basis for opposition to the crown and its institutions. Instead, this chapter shows that writers used the term "patriot" to describe themselves as autonomous and authentic, not despite, but *because* of their engagement with established institutions of literary life such as the Comédie. By the logic of this rhetoric, patriots were those willing to withstand the dominations and humiliations inflicted upon them by established elites, not in order to advance their own cause, but because of their sense of personal virtue and their consequent devotion to a larger cause, that of the nation. Use of this rhetoric, therefore, tended to highlight the wrongs done to the virtuous writer, often to the point of melodrama. But in the cases of Mercier and other self-described patriots, such rhetoric need not be read as a document of lived experience—proof of a group of dissident writers being subordinated, marginalized, or excluded entirely from the theater—nor as a duplicitous, instrumental use of language to misrepresent the situation for their own gain. Instead, the patriot playwrights we encounter in this and subsequent chapters were figures constructed as part of larger, personal strategies of self-representation by those who put forth their public selves as men of honor, played in counterpoint to (and thus often as a complement to) the figure of the *honnête homme*. The figure of the patriot writer will thus be shown to have possessed greater nuance than the anachronistic interpretation given it by many historians of the eighteenth century, who read its invocation as evidence of an objective ideological, political, or social opposition to classicism, the crown, or the aristocracy.

3.1. Playwrights and Printed Editions

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the volume of new dramatic editions rose rapidly. According to one recent estimate, more than half of the over 6,000 known first editions of plays published in France between 1600 and 1789 appeared after 1760. Moreover, these published plays represented a higher percentage of all plays written; an estimated three percent of plays written between 1700–1709 were printed, while this figure increased to fourteen percent in the 1760s, to nineteen percent in the 1770s, and to twenty-eight percent in the 1780s. Moreover, printed plays in the later decades of the century appeared in more editions than before, reaching an average of 14 editions per title. ⁵ Prefaces also became increasingly standard in dramatic editions, appearing in roughly one-third of those printed in the second half of the century. ⁶

Another significant tendency after about 1760 was the increase in plays printed legally but with only partial legitimacy. Of 113 new editions of plays mentioned in the periodical press during the 1762–1763 theater season (26 percent of all new books mentioned), only 47 had been accorded full *privilèges* (11.6 percent of all books). Of all "tacit



[CESAR](#)



[French PIECE](#)

permissions" accorded by Malesherbes between 1750 and 1763, seventeen percent were for printed plays. ⁷ These dramatic editions, as well as those accorded *permissions de police* or *tolérances simples*, were all technically legal, yet lacked the evident markers of legitimacy, such as performance on the official stage and full censorial approval. Printed and sold openly by members of the Community of Printers and Booksellers such as Duchesne and Ruault, editions of plays not performed by a royal theater were not fully legitimate, which differed from the "forbidden" or "under the cloak" literature studied by Darnton, which was printed outside France, smuggled in, and sold clandestinely. ⁸ (The printing and censorship of plays is discussed in greater detail in [Chapter 4](#).)

Even when legal, printing an unperformed play implied a transgression by the playwright against standards of self-restrained comportment. Those who made such a decision to publish were generally younger and less established writers, men with less invested in the norms of civility and respect for hierarchy that prevailed at the royal theater. To explain to themselves and others why they had made such an unconventional move, they often prefaced their editions with discussions of their motives, claiming that they had reluctantly decided to present the work directly to "the public," which they hoped would find it worthy, despite the royal troupe's decision not to stage it. Such a preface, for example, appeared in the second edition of Bardinet's *Les Événements nocturnes* in 1777. Although the work had not been performed by the Comédie Française, the preface specified which actors and actresses the author had chosen for the roles when he had submitted the play to the troupe on September 9, 1775. During the intervening two years, the author explained, he had "solicited, persecuted, written numerous letters, made numerous visits, obtained several meetings with [the actors]," but after a final, unsuccessful request on October 8, 1776, one of the actors "sent me back my manuscript." Expecting no further consideration by the royal troupe, he explained, he had it printed and sold for a price of 24 *sous* by Mecquinon *le jeune*. No longer seeking to gain elite recognition as an honorable man of letters, the forlorn author sought instead a different sort of social prominence: "I have preferred to give my play to the Public, which can judge it without partiality." ⁹

Such prefaces indirectly restored a rhetorical trope from Renaissance dedications, in which writers denied their own personal worth and attributed any virtue in the work to the glory of the patron. In the early and mid-1700s, authorial prefaces had become much more expository, frequently explaining the historical setting, characters, and themes of the play and responding to criticisms of the performance that had been made in the theater or the press. But in the editions of unperformed plays printed in the 1760s and 1770s, writers once again used prefaces to explain their motivations for presenting their work in print. To do so, they drew indirectly on classical and Christian humanist values, in which a public speaker sought to demonstrate that he had no personal interest at stake in his own speech;

thus, aspiring playwrights had to explain why they were so aggressively putting forth their work in terms of social utility rather than their own self-interest. [10](#)

Prefaces and other paratext also provided the author a venue to assert that the tangible, material artifact in the reader's hands represented the authentic form of a work that may otherwise have been deformed either in performance or in a pirated edition. For example, in 1769, a "new edition" of Burette de Belloy's by-then famous *Siège de Calais*, issued by the Parisian bookseller Duchesne, features an "Avis essentiel" warning: "This tragedy has been pirated in nearly all the provinces of the Kingdom and in foreign lands, with copies coming to Paris and being sold even at the theaters. Such pirated editions are easily recognized, as much by the poor printing as by the errors throughout. The Public is thus warned to address itself directly to the bookshop of the Widow Duchesne, rue St. Jacques, to have the correct edition, printed under the eyes of the author." [11](#) Likewise, authors could use the preface to assert that an unperformed play nevertheless merited being read; Andebez de Montgaubet, in the preface to his tragedy *Abimélech*, explained that he had printed his play since it had already languished in the royal theater's repertory for over a year, and with 47 other tragedies ahead of his, it would take fifteen years for it to be staged. [12](#)

Given that a standard press run could produce as few as 500 copies, a printed play would not have reached a broader audience than the over four thousand theater-goers who on average saw each new play at least once. [13](#)

Playwrights who entered into literary life prior to the reorganization of the Comédie Française (discussed in [Chapter 2](#)) preferred to identify and represent themselves in relation to the royal theater, which could serve for them as a princely patron, rather than be judged by an anonymous, unpredictable public. Such older writers tended to print their plays only after the end of their runs on the stage of the royal theater, with full approval of the censorship apparatus and the troupe. Indeed, writers from this generation frequently signaled their identification with, rather than against, the royal troupe by donating to it copies of their printed play, much as Renaissance and seventeenth-century writers often gave the first copy of a printed work to the dedicatee.

The format of the *brochure*, in which many plays were first printed during or immediately after an initial run at the Comédie Française, did not include a preface or dedication. *Brochures* could not exceed four folio sheets (up to 128 pages in duodecimo and only 64 in octavo), lest they require a more rigorous procedure for a censorial *approbation* and a Book Trade *privilège*. Printers frequently produced *brochures* as quickly and cheaply as possible usually selling them for not more than one *livre*, and did so without the



participation of the author. Moreover, *brochures* were easily counterfeited, as one author, Jean-François Ducis explained in a letter to the troupe; he explained that he had arranged for his "Oedipe chez Admète" to be printed prior to its first performance, due to "the impending danger of seeing it quickly printed furtively, contrary to my intentions," once public performances began. ¹⁴ Printed editions of a single play rarely included images of the author; in these editions, frontispieces were rare and usually consisted of an allegorical representation of the theater or playwriting. Andez's *Abimélech* included a particularly striking image: seated at the edge of a stage on which are visible busts of Corneille, Racine, and Crébillon is a cherubic-looking young playwright, who has put down his pen and is crying over his neglected manuscript. ¹⁵



Authors therefore increasingly preferred to prepare compendia of their collected works, frequently in several volumes. Such collections of an individual writer's dramatic and other literary works were rare prior to 1770, but became more common after 1775. ¹⁶ The increased number of such editions might be attributable to a general upturn in output of printed matter, or to the new Book Trade regulations of 1777 that allowed authors to acquire *privilèges* in their own names; certainly, authors perceived such editions as enhancing the literary value attributed to the works in them, and by extension to themselves. Alexis Piron produced one of the first compendia of *Oeuvres complètes* in 1773, which featured a new frontispiece depicting the author as a "poet of genius." He sent a copy to the theater with a cover letter suggesting the troupe initiate a library for all the subsequent editions it would receive from faithful playwrights. ¹⁷ Such editions included not only plays but also extensive paratext, including prefaces and critical discussions of individual plays and, frequently, an autobiographical preface to the entire work. Many also included as frontispieces an engraving of the author, featuring the conventions of an academic portrait, with the author's bust, in profile or quarter turn, in an oval; the base on which the oval rests frequently includes classical icons of the theater such as masks, a torch, and a staff.



Editions of a playwright's work, as several scholars have argued, served to unify a writer's corpus and to assert the authenticity and literary value of the work; moreover, reversing the classical relationship in which front matter highlighted the patron, these editions highlighted the author as playing the central role in literary production. ¹⁸ For writers who had yet to establish any foothold in literary life, editions of collected works offered an opportunity present oneself to the public as a dramatic author without the aid of the royal theater. Whether this strategy evolved out of



necessity (lack of protection or social access) or desire (to avoid a position of subservience), newer playwrights availed themselves readily of its possibilities, but also faced the hazards of self-fashioning through print. In the case studies that follow, we shall see how writers used elements of classical rhetoric (especially representing their motives as writers in publishing their work to be selfless devotion to a larger cause, especially the "public"), often mixed with an Enlightenment reliance on documentary evidence (frequently excerpts from their own correspondence) to produce a relatively unique genre of literature that featured a wide range of variations on the figure of the author, placing themselves between *honnêtes hommes* and autonomous men of honor, or patriots.

3.2. Mercier, the Patriot Playwright

Louis-Sébastien Mercier, the son of a Parisian diamond merchant of Huguenot origins, began regularly attending the Comédie Française while a student at the Collège des Quatre Nations. He completed his studies in February 1763 at the age of 23, briefly taught rhetoric in Bordeaux, then returned to Paris, where he translated poetry and wrote several short, classically-inspired verse *ôdes* and *héroïdes*. Such were traditional first steps towards recognition as a man of letters, as were his efforts in the mid 1760s to become affiliated with the key conduits into literary life, the academies, by entering in competitions such essays as "The Happiness of Men of Letters." ¹⁹ These writings were highly conventional in style, form, and theme, but they did not help him gain election to an academy. Nor did he succeed in establishing relations with potential brokers who could have obtained elite sponsorship for him or in cultivating as patrons such prominent courtiers as the Duke de Richelieu (one of the First Gentlemen), who he met in Bordeaux in 1764, or the Duke de Choiseul, the foreign minister and a protector of many writers, into whose service he sought to enter in 1765.

In 1766, Mercier wrote his first play, "Virginie," a five-act tragedy in verse, set in ancient Rome, which conformed fully to the academic rules for classical tragedy. However, lacking a protector to introduce him to the royal troupe, Mercier did not read it to the actors. Instead, he had it printed, with approbation and permission. Yet he knew himself to be breaking with established practice by printing an unperformed play, as he began his author's preface by asking rhetorically, "If this play is good, why has it not been performed? If it is bad, why is it being printed?" In response, he denied acting out of "vanity," but rather claimed to act from a desire to offer the work directly "to the public," to whom he dedicated the edition and to whom he subordinated himself, professing the gift he offered to be unworthy of its recipient, a claim writers traditionally made in dedicating a work to a patron. ²⁰ Printing *Virginie* rather than seeking to have it performed at the Comédie Française signaled Mercier's first break from the trajectory followed by earlier playwrights such as Corneille, Racine, and

Voltaire.

20

In the ensuing four years, Mercier wrote a series of new plays, each of which addressed, as would a classical tragedy, the moral consequences of an individual's actions. However, unlike classical tragedies, he set these works in the present or in specific historical moments, and made heroes of non-noble characters, whose conflicts were usually domestic rather than epic. More significantly, he wrote these plays in prose rather than verse, believing the former to be closer to everyday speech. The first of these, *Jenneval* (1769), adapted a popular English domestic tragedy, George Lillo's *London Merchant*. Retaining a five-act structure and unity of action, *Jenneval*, like its English model, abandoned other elements of French classical dramaturgy, including verse and an ancient, mythical, or exotic setting. Traditionally, literary critics have considered this and other of Mercier's early plays as exemplary "bourgeois dramas," but more recent criticism argues more subtly that these works depart significantly from Diderot's stylistic agenda, discussing not merely the morality of social types through portrayals of individual characters but portraying social and moral conflict through the invocation of certain themes. Without denying Diderot's influence on Mercier's dramaturgy, it is also important to note that Mercier himself did not refer to his plays as "*dramas*" until after "*Jenneval*" had been submitted to and refused by the royal troupe, and he decided to print it with a preface setting forth his motivations and intentions as a writer. Identifying his work with an innovative agenda helped him explain why he had not followed the standard trajectory of Comédie Française performance prior to edition; at the same time, Mercier's representational strategy identified the *drame* as the genre of choice for outsiders for both his contemporaries and subsequent literary historians. [21](#)

After the rejection of "*Jenneval*," Mercier self-consciously sought to keep his distance from the Comédie Française, opting to submit none of his other works and instead to have each one printed. Several of these plays were then performed in provincial and foreign theaters, which brought him little recognition in Paris. At the same time, Mercier also avoided having his plays performed by (and himself associated with) the Parisian fairground theaters, which he considered too burlesque to contribute to French mores. Nor did the commercial success of his utopian novel *L'An 2440*, which first appeared in late 1771, gain him recognition as a man of letters, due to its anonymous, clandestine publication.

In these same years, Mercier entered into a correspondence with Thomas, perhaps the foremost literary patriot of the day, secretary to the Duke de Choiseul and a member of the Académie Française. Mercier's letters reveal what he considered a necessity to break with the traditional norms of playwriting and his disdain for the prominent institutions of literary life,

such as salons and academies. Moreover, his letters stand apart from those generally sent by young writers to more established men of letters in that Mercier clearly was not asking Thomas to serve as a broker to protectors or patrons; he refrained from the highly formalized, excessive praise and the language of courteous self-abnegation characteristic of this genre. [22](#)

 [Letter from Mercier to Thomas](#)

In a long letter of July 10, 1770, Mercier declared forthrightly, "I am destined to follow ... the career of the theater." He represented himself as rejecting the entire "regrettable direction" of French classical tragedy since the seventeenth century, which had reduced past and present playwrights from "men of genius" to mere "copyists ... in slavish devotion" to the Academy's tendentious interpretation of Aristotle. Although Mercier could have aligned himself with any number of seventeenth- or eighteenth-century playwrights whose successful plays had been criticized for their deviation from the academic classical model (including Corneille), he presented himself to Thomas as alone in his desire to depict "nature [in] the language of the nation and not in the artificial language ... of an epic poem." [23](#)

Mercier thanked Thomas for having read and commented upon a draft of his play "Le Deserteur," but declined the suggested revisions. He also declined any potential brokerage by this more prominent writer, who might have obtained for Mercier a chance to read his play to the royal actors or entry into Choiseul's extensive network of clients. Although not disdaining the "honors" that a performance of his play on the royal stage might bring him, he declared that he had no intention of presenting his play to the Comédie Française. The royal troupe, he wrote, remained "so indifferent" to aspiring writers that he vowed never to appear before it to read his work. Indeed, Mercier found it "sad for the young people who devote themselves to letters to be dependent on them." Assuring Thomas that he was indeed "touched by [his] praise" for thinking his play worthy of the royal theater, Mercier nevertheless expressed his preference "to receive the applause of the audience directly."

In his letters and other unpublished writings from these years, Mercier represented himself as a "citizen playwright," by which he meant a dramatist of a different order than the classical tragedians *cum* courtiers, such as Corneille, Racine, or Molière. These predecessors he represented as having written overly stylized works primarily for elite audiences in venues linked directly to the court, and as having established their identity and status as men of letters through their relations with aristocratic and royal elites. By contrast, he depicted himself as a man of letters deserving social prominence, but not as part of an elite, distinct from society at large. Whatever his motivation had been in entering academic verse competitions and in writing *Virginie* in the 1760s, Mercier by the early 1770s claimed recognition as a man of letters based on "the acclaim of the public" to whom he sought to speak in the "diversified voices ... of the human race," rather than in the alexandrine couplets of classical tragedy. Rejecting the "dead

eloquence" of the Académie, Mercier declared his preference for the "popular eloquence" of the English prose playwrights, who had transcended (he claimed) classicism and opted instead for a more natural form of expression, oriented away from the court and toward the socially and culturally mixed audience of the commercial theater. For the young Mercier, only other writers and socially mixed audiences, not academic critics or court patrons, could recognize a true man of letters. [24](#)

25

In depicting the court and *le monde* as inappropriate audiences for men of letters, Mercier did not specify which individuals or entities he saw as corrupt. Rather, his criticisms discuss the court as Jacques Revel has described it, as a *topos* with which several figures are associated: "the solitude of power, the pomp and caprice of the monarch, the arbitrariness of [royal] favor, [and] the uncertain and debased status of the courtier." The arbitrariness of royal favor and the debased status of the writer *cum* courtier, in Mercier's representations, stood in implicit contrast to the more socially engaged and more appropriate encounter he proposed between the writer and the public. Revel's analysis suggests why Mercier could not specify what or whom he thought wrong with the court; if he did, he would demonstrate too much comprehension of its characteristic artificiality, intrigue, and deceptiveness. [25](#) By remaining abstract in attacking the influence of the court on literature through such bodies as the Académie, Mercier claimed the position of an outside observer who found court society both inscrutable and abhorrent, yet one who still deserved a place in public life due to his devotion to a broader, more virtuous public.

He expressed these ideas in a long treatise on dramaturgy, published anonymously and clandestinely in 1773 as *Du Théâtre*. [26](#) The central utility of theater, Mercier argued, lies in its singular ability to articulate and promote "*moeurs*"—cultural mores that draw disparate elements of a society together. Common *moeurs*, in turn, would link the French to their government, forming a "nation." Theater should not emanate from or be intended primarily for an elite audience, nor should it derive its inspiration from, or take as its audience, constituted authority alone, as was the case at court theaters. By contrast, commercial (or public) theater, by virtue of its urban, socially varied audience, offered an opportunity to generate *moeurs* and promote social cohesion. If that public theater attracted all social groups, and did not appeal exclusively either to elites or to the base "populace," it could provide a venue for the formation of a nation through a "natural" process of cultural cohesion. In the second half of the treatise, he set out his vision of the role of dramatic authors in contemporary society. Playwrights, he said, should neither exalt the monarch and those close to him as a means of glorifying France, nor should they be content merely "to divert" the populace. More than any other form of cultural expression, an effectively written and staged play could draw out the emotions and sentiments common to all in a public space, where the sympathetic response of all would be visible to all, making manifest the commonality and

"veritable patriotism" of all true citizens of the cultural nation.

For Mercier, a man of letters in the late eighteenth century needed to become a playwright for a public theater in order to best serve his society by expressing and cultivating its *moeurs*. In other times and places, the responsibility for introducing and promoting *moeurs* would be that of a "legislator," but in absolutist France, that function must be performed by the "poet." To perform this role, a poet had to remain immune to the corrupting influence of "luxury," which could result not only through contact with the court but also from any dependence on elite patrons. Only a playwright could serve as a "public orator" and address at once "the oppressed," "the middle class," and "the bourgeoisie." This sense of the playwright as the creator of a unifying national culture underlay what Mercier conceived to be the "serious and patriotic" endeavor of dramatic authorship. As presented in *Du Théâtre*, the playwright must write for both a socially mixed audience and for a more abstract sense of the "good of the public," articulating in an accessible fashion the "moral principles ... of his nation." The nation, in turn, would recognize him as a patriotic playwright, and therefore as an authentic man of letters. Such recognition as "patriotic" from the public, rather than as "honorable" from social elites or constituted political authority, would allow a man of letters to be heard without becoming dependent upon any particular patron or institutional affiliation. Answerable only to the public, the playwright and man of letters could be autonomous without being isolated. Thus, in the penultimate chapter, he instructed an imaginary young poet to work "for the public" as opposed to writing for a "private gathering," such as would be found in a "society" theater or at court. Because the Comédie Française was an appendage of the court, he argued, the self-consciously patriotic playwright must circumvent the royal theater entirely and find alternative ways to present his plays directly to the public.

 Mercier,
Du Théâtre

27

However, as a self-proclaimed patriot playwright, Mercier faced a problem: How could he gain the stature necessary to speak to a broad public without compromising himself through the corrupting influence of elite literary institutions if such an affiliation (or another form of protection) was necessary to get his plays performed by the monopolistic Comédie? In the final chapter of *Du Théâtre*, Mercier attacked the Comédie Française itself as an obstacle to patriotic dramaturgy. The troupe, he asserted, prepared its performances "solely for the convenience of the rich" and was unconcerned with the artisans, merchants, and others that he thought should be the heart of the theater-going nation. Mercier, frequently idiosyncratic in his descriptions of social groups, called this imagined audience "*honnêtes gens*," meaning "gentle folk" rather than the more accepted, contemporary sense of the term as "gentlemen." He upheld this vision of the audience by charging the actors with limiting the number of lower-priced admissions and of contemptuously placing the less expensive seats in the far corners of the hall, where sight and hearing were impaired, rendering impossible the

authentic emotional experience which Mercier had set forth as the very purpose of theater. Rather than contributing to a civic culture, the troupe answered only to the court and disdained patriotic playwrights who wanted to address the "public" directly, and thereby transform it into a "nation." Significantly, Mercier here attacked this troupe in particular, and not the institution of a state theater, implying that if its political supervision could be altered, the Comédie could become a "Theater of the Nation." [28](#)

Several months after anonymously expressing his hostility to the Comédie Française in *Du Théâtre*, Mercier decided nevertheless to try to use this theater to speak to the public and transform it into a nation. To this end, he read a four-act *drame*, "Nathalie," to the troupe on August 8, 1773. Although he remained personally unknown to the actors and without a protector at court or among Parisian elites, his play was accepted. Almost immediately, Mercier began to exercise the prerogatives granted under the theater's regulations to authors of accepted works, including free entrances to all performances and the privilege of reading additional plays to the assembled actors for acceptance into the repertory. [29](#)

30

The troupe, however, did not schedule "Nathalie" for performance. In all likelihood, the actors had no intention of staging it, because Mercier was but one of many new playwrights whose works they had heard and accepted in short order since mid-1772. In the spring of 1774, according to the literary newsletter *Mémoires secrets*, the number of new writers submitting unsolicited works to the troupe "increase[d] daily," such that in the first few months of the 1774 theater season, the Comédiens "have received 40 different plays, of which 20 have already been scheduled," well more than could be performed in several seasons. It is likely that the actors had accepted "Nathalie" as they had many others during that season, without taking notice of the author and in ignorance of his views on playwriting and the royal theater. [30](#)

* * *

How then to understand Mercier's relations to the theater and his identity in literary life at this time? Recent historiography on French political culture in the 1770s would suggest that his self-conception as a patriot playwright should be seen as either sociological or ideological in origin and politically subversive in consequence—indicative of a radicalization of the Republic of Letters by "patriots," "frondeurs," or "hacks." Indeed, Mercier wrote *Du Théâtre* at the height of activity by the self-styled "patriot" party, the most advanced faction of anti-absolutist critics of Chancellor René Maupeou, yet the meaning of "patriot" at this time was not fixed. Focusing on the polemics against Maupeou, Dale Van Kley has recently demonstrated how patriot pamphleteers drew upon a Jansenist moralizing tradition in attacking "ministerial despotism" and corruption at court, arguing instead that

sovereignty lay in the French "nation." Analyzing patriot politics beyond the level of constitutional theory, Shanti Singham has placed Mercier amidst a socially broad-based anti-Maupeou opposition, which encompassed networks of printers, booksellers, and writers. She presents the Comédie Française as a site in which patriot public opinion expressed itself against Maupeou, as audiences actively cheered leaders of the Parliamentary resistance and opposed plays by writers identified with the court and ministry. A third historian, Nina Gelbart, has based her interpretation of Mercier in the 1770s on Darnton's argument for the appearance in these years of a dichotomy between "High Enlightenment Philosophes" and the "low-life" of "Grub Street hacks." She contends that the Maupeou crisis divided playwrights and theater critics between those in favor with the court, who supported the government, and anti-court, "*frondeur*" radicals. Gelbart argues that while Mercier was writing his early plays and *Du Théâtre*, he led a group of anti-classical, anti-absolutist playwrights "frustrated" by the troupe's monopoly and generally critical of the superannuated Old Regime, who saw the Maupeou crisis as an opening to attack the Comédie Française as "one of the regime's most entrenched institutions." Inspired by classical republican ideology and indignant at Maupeou's high-handed absolutism, Mercier "spent the Maupeou years churning out bourgeois and popular *dramas* totally unpalatable to the monarchy." [31](#)

But if Mercier's dissidence were so pronounced, why would the Comédie Française have appealed to him as a venue for speaking to the "nation"? Moreover, why would the troupe have accepted his play? To answer this question, we might consider Mercier's self-conception as a patriot as part of his strategy for identifying and legitimizing himself in a changing literary field, rather than as intellectual radicalism in response to his static social marginality. David Bell, in his recent study of the Parisian Order of Barristers, has shown that the cleavage between lawyers who struck in support of the Parliamentary magistrates and those who argued before the replacement courts reflected not merely an opposition between constitutionalists linked to the Parlements and absolutists allied with the crown. Rather, as Bell demonstrates, the most active lawyers allied themselves with neither the crown nor the magistrates; instead, they broke with traditional norms and hierarchies of the legal milieu and declared themselves autonomous from all but the public. [32](#)

One can perceive in theatrical life a similar breakdown of traditional norms and hierarchies in those same years. As with the bar, the most immediate cause of this change came paradoxically from the court itself. In November 1772, the First Gentlemen ordered that new plays submitted by first-time authors would no longer be vetted by individual troupe members prior to being read to the assembled troupe. [33](#) With this preliminary examination eliminated, fewer works were screened out or simply discarded by individual troupe members, and it became possible for even an unknown playwright to read before the assembled Comédiens. As a result, the traditional authorial

strategies that had been employed to pass through the Comédie's gate-keeping mechanisms—primarily, the cultivation of personal relations at court and within the troupe—quickly became both obsolete and unnecessary for new authors to gain readings and have plays accepted. In this context, many new writers, such as Mercier, now felt justified in claiming to be "writing for" or "attached to the Comédie Française," even though they had not presented their work before any actual public.

Their claims to be "dramatic authors" undermined the position of writers whose plays had already been performed and who had already become identified with the royal theater. Those most active in defending their identities as playwrights for the royal theater in this period against new entrants such as Mercier were not well-established writers such as Voltaire or Marmontel, but rather mid-range authors, whose works had been previously performed but who had not established for themselves stable identities as men of letters. Such authors, generally young and recently entered into literary life, broke with accepted norms of the polite comportment expected of men of letters and acted directly, by letter and in person, to solicit the acceptance of new plays, the advancement in the repertory of their works accepted but not yet staged, or the revival of their previously performed works.

35

These recent as well as brand new entrants approached the troupe directly but also impersonally, not as clients to a patron or courtiers to their prince. They demanded that the troupe adhere to the regulations in dealing with them, which provided for a more standardized, impersonal functioning of the Comédie. For example, Peyraud de Beaussol, who had unsuccessfully submitted in 1765 a classical tragedy entitled "Les Arsacides," approached the troupe in 1772 for a second reading, which was granted, and his play was accepted. At that point, he began to write the troupe regularly, asking it to schedule the play for performance. Peyraud did not seek the intervention of a broker to the First Gentlemen, nor did he present himself in terms of fidelity and courtesy as a potential client of the theater. Instead, he sought to establish relations with the troupe based on the "law" of the regulations, which assured him of "the legitimacy of [his] right [*droit*]" to have his play performed promptly. Arguing that the actors had violated their own regulations by not scheduling a performance, he complained that they "have done me much wrong," for which those less well protected "could be brought before a tribunal." [34](#)

In response, the troupe likewise moved away from the courteous register that it employed towards authors known to it personally. In its response to Peyraud, for example, the company claimed to be bound to observe the regulations, which neither the actors nor their superiors at court could bend to suit any specific instance. Thus, the troupe informed Peyraud that his original reading in 1765 had been granted "by a personal consideration ...

contrary to the regulations," so he could not claim now that the regulations gave him the right to demand a rapid performance. According to the regulations, they explained, his acceptance had to be dated from 1772, which put him at the bottom of the order. ³⁵ Peyraud exemplified how newer, aspiring playwrights were inclined to view the regulations as the First Gentlemen had intended them—promoting a regularized and impersonal relationship between the theater and its authors. However, the actors' response illustrates that, even when claiming to be compelled by the new regulations, they did not feel obligated to establish bureaucratic procedures that would have limited their own autonomy in dealing with authors unknown to them personally. ³⁶

This new tone, at once less courteous and more legalistic, contrasts strikingly with the language of courtesy used by earlier authors to establish personal relations with the troupe. In many cases in the early 1770s, the two voices co-existed, as in a letter from Du Doyer to the troupe of December 6, 1773. Seeking the performance of his play, "Vindictif," this author praised both the "persons and the talents" of the troupe members and noted their legal obligation to follow their own regulations, "because they constitute a known and invariable order" of affairs. The Comédiens responded in kind, suggesting both that they were compelled to observe the regulations in dealing with all authors and that they desired to help him personally.

This new strategy of combining appeals based on clientelistic courtesy with direct assertions of right under the regulations appeared most clearly in correspondence to the theater and the First Gentlemen from three types of playwrights: younger authors seeking to have their first plays accepted and performed, those seeking to have an already performed play revived, and those whose first plays had not been successful and were seeking to have another play performed. We will now follow the experiences of several authors aspiring to recognition as men of letters through writing plays for the Comédie Française between 1772 and 1776, beginning with Beaumarchais and Renou, then, after a brief discussion of the change of regime in 1774—1775, moving on to a consideration of lawsuits brought against the theater by Lonvay, Palissot, and Mercier. Through these cases, we will see how these writers responded to change by deploying different strategies of self-presentation before the troupe, constituted authority, and the public.

3.3. Beaumarchais: Aspiring Man of Letters

In 1772, Pierre Augustin-Caron de Beaumarchais was not a new author, nor was he a new arrival in elite social life. Yet he embodied the



status of an established outsider, on the margins of elite sociability. Over the preceding two decades, he had established an identity among court elites, but one below the status of a man of letters: first as a watchmaker to the Queen, then as music tutor to the King's daughters. These roles, and his proximity to the court, were made evident when Jean-Marc Nattier, who executed portraits of many leading court figures in the 1750s, painted the young Caron holding a music scroll.

40

In the early 1760s, he became a protégé of the elderly financier Pâris-Duverney, for whom he looked after investments in Spain. These experiences brought him to the margins of the court and elite Parisian sociability; to gain acceptance in that world, Beaumarchais produced his first plays, which were far from classical tragedies.

In the 1760s, he authored a series of one-act *parades*, comic works whose characters and language were drawn from the marketplace and fairgrounds, but which were performed in private, aristocratic gatherings. In 1767, he wrote and submitted to the Comédie Française a five-act work, "Eugénie," which was performed 23 times. Seeking to parlay this success into a social identity as a man of letters, he had the play printed with a long prefatory "Essay on the serious genre," in which he framed the work as an example of Diderot's third style, neither comedy nor tragedy. Like Mercier, Beaumarchais made use of this category to frame his work as both erudite and innovative—as a variant, rather than a critique, of classical theories of theater and society, and as a call to broaden rather than abolish such official literary institutions as the Comédie Française.



The death of Pâris-Duverney in 1770 left Beaumarchais in need of a new protector; moreover, the financier's bequest of 15,000 *livres* involved Beaumarchais in a dispute with Count Alexandre de la Blache, an imbroglio that, in turn, led to the celebrated Goezmann affair. Between the fall of 1773 and the spring of 1774, Beaumarchais wrote and had published four highly satirical and widely circulated *mémoires judiciaires* attacking Gabriel Goezmann, a judge on the Maupeou-appointed replacement Parlement of Paris. Sara Maza, in her insightful analysis of the *Mémoires contre Goezmann*, demonstrates how skillfully Beaumarchais challenged Goezmann, not as a representative of unaccountable, arbitrary authority arrayed against a powerless foe, but in an "idiom of ... upper-class mockery of a social inferior." Although addressed to the "public," the *Mémoires* were composed, in the first instance, not for "middling groups," but for the "elites of fortune and taste" who appreciated his pamphlets as "drawing-room entertainment," much as they had enjoyed his comic *parades*. ³⁷ Although frequently invoking the public, Beaumarchais drew upon a tradition of court farce, which employed a mixture of elite and ordinary language, to cast Goezmann as a Georges Dandin-like character,

 [Beaumarchais, Oeuvres Complètes](#)

suddenly elevated to a social station for which he did not possess the appropriate acculturation.

The success of the *Mémoires* framed Beaumarchais as a patriot, making him a hero to many anti-Maupeou writers and lawyers as well as the most prominent Prince of the Blood, Conti. This notoriety, however, did not legitimate him as an *honnête homme* among courtly and Parisian elites, who instead feared him as a polemicist. To refashion himself, he turned to literature, specifically the Comédie Française. Late in 1772, having been cleared provisionally of any responsibility for Pâris-Duverney's debt, Beaumarchais requested a reading for a five-act play, "La Précaution inutile." On January 3, 1773, the royal troupe heard it and accepted it unanimously, retitled it the "Barbier de Séville," and Beaumarchais began asking for it to be performed. By January 17, he had supplied the actors with his distribution of roles and offered to cede to them his *droits d'auteur*, as he had done for "Eugénie" six years earlier. [38](#)

"Eugénie" had been classified as a tragedy, since the Comédie had no category for "*drame*." As a consequence, the royal troupe considered Beaumarchais a tragedian, and in seeking to have "Barbier" performed, he would have to compete with other authors of tragedies, including prominent authors such as Voltaire, as well as newer entrants. He sought and quickly obtained from two other tragedians, Colardeau and Du Doyer, cessions of their positions on the *tableau*; however, other authors holding intermediary positions on the order opposed allowing "Barbier" to advance ahead of their works. On February 1, Antoine Renou—who had already written the troupe several times on behalf of his tragedy "Térée et Philomèle"—complained that advancing Beaumarchais would violate both the theater regulations and justice. "If he can [afford to] sacrifice his *droits*," Renou wrote, "that is one more reason to make him wait and not to [delay the performance] of someone who needs it." A week later, Beaumarchais and another author, Lonvay de la Saussaye, both appeared at the troupe's assembly, where Beaumarchais "actively disputed to defend the rank ceded to him" by Colardeau and Du Doyer. When the troupe at first declared that the cessions were improper because the playwrights that had been by-passed had not consented, "Beaumarchais argued against this reasoning"; such aggressive self-promotion violated norms of self-restraint, civility, and disinterest. Nevertheless, the tactic appeared to succeed when the troupe agreed to perform his "Barbier" during the upcoming Carnaval, a season that drew some of the largest audiences of each year. [39](#)

 [Beaumarchais, Théâtre](#)

However, his triumph was quickly reversed when the Duke de Chaulnes had Beaumarchais imprisoned in the Bastille on February 26, 1773, and the troupe dropped "Barbier" from the top of the repertory. After his release, Beaumarchais again proposed to reach a personal agreement with the actors, but to no avail. Twelve months later, he met with the Lieutenant-

General of Police, Sartines, to complain of the "embargo" of his play, despite having obtained the *approbation* of the Police Censor, Marin, in late 1772. In light of "the rumor that he had exposed the magistrature to ridicule" with his *Mémoires*, he explained to Sartines that he had "the greatest interest to exonerate himself" by demonstrating civility, and noted that he enjoyed the "protection" of the Princess Marie Antoinette and the Prince de Conti. At the same time, he warned that if his play were not staged, he might seek legal recourse —implying, of course, more *mémoires judiciaires*.

45

The next day, February 10, 1774, the Comédie posted that "Barbier" would be staged imminently. However, the dominant faction at Louis XV's court—the Duke d'Aigillon, the Countess du Barry, and the Duke de Vrillière—blocked that performance by arranging for the King's Privy Council to order that the troupe should "neither perform nor advertise, until further notice, the play entitled, 'Barbier de Séville.'" ⁴⁰ Beaumarchais would have to wait for the new reign to find his field of honor.

3.4. Renou: Representing Honor in Correspondence and in Print

Beaumarchais's problems created an opportunity for other aspiring writers, such as Antoine Renou. Born in Paris in 1731 and educated (with Mercier) at the Collège des Quatre Nations, Renou won a prize from the royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in 1753. While awaiting an opening for admission to this body, he served from 1755 to 1766 as court painter to Stanislas Leszcynski, then Duke of Lorraine and the former King of Poland. In 1759, Renou wrote and submitted to the Comédie Française a five-act classical tragedy in verse, "Térée et Philomèle." In an accompanying letter to the troupe, he signaled his desire to initiate a client-patron relationship with the royal company and declared that, through such an association, he hoped to become recognized as "a man of letters." In 1766, Renou was named an *agrégé* of the Academy of Painting and returned to Paris. There he met one of the leading actors of the Comédie Française, Le Kain, who encouraged Renou to rewrite the lead role of his tragedy "Térée" for him. Le Kain then arranged for Renou to read it to the entire troupe, which accepted it in 1769. However, neither Le Kain nor the other Comédiens demonstrated any affinity for Renou personally, treating him as one of many young aspirants awaiting performance of their first works. In a letter to the troupe in May 1772, Renou expressed bewilderment that, despite his "liaison" with Le Kain, the actor had not yet learned his role, delaying the premiere. ⁴¹

By the fall of that year, Renou had become frustrated with the troupe's indifference to his attestations of fidelity, and he pursued new tactics. To the actors, he complained of the number of new tragedies recently accepted that had been performed ahead of his. Although he had voluntarily ceded place to Voltaire's "Loix de Minos," he wrote that "I will no longer cede my rank to any tragedy ... I am determined to fight tooth and nail for my right [*droit*],

although I hope not to need to." ⁴² In October, Renou wrote to the actors that, because his "*honnêteté*" had not been returned in kind, he would take the matter to the First Gentlemen. While such a move would not have been unusual for an author with connections at court, Renou did not claim to have such connections. He informed the troupe that, although not "under their orders," he would inform "your superiors [the First Gentlemen] that my turn has come" and ask them to enforce impartially the regulations. Renou declared that he would neither "justify myself nor beg [for their] protection," because this was a matter of "right." He insisted that such a declaration did not violate the norms of honorable comportment: "I have no desire to offend anyone ... I have spoken in the tone of one offended." Late the following month, having had no response from the troupe, Renou wrote to the Duke de Richelieu, explaining that the Comédie had repeatedly passed over "Térée" in favor of other works in its repertory. To impress upon the actors that he had made good on his threat, Renou sent them a copy of his letter to Richelieu, which the players discussed at their next meeting. Without waiting for direct orders from the First Gentlemen, the Comédiens agreed to stage Renou's work as the next tragedy, early the following spring. ⁴³

However, Renou's violation of the norms that defined an honorable man of letters, while in keeping with the desires of the First Gentlemen to de-personalize and bureaucratize relations between playwrights and the theater, had made it impossible to establish a rapport of mutual fidelity with the troupe. Aware of this vulnerability, Renou was alarmed to learn the following February of the troupe's decision that "Barbier de Séville" would be performed ahead of "Térée." Upon receiving word that Beaumarchais had met directly with the actors and convinced them to perform his play, Renou expressed indignation that Beaumarchais's efforts to establish a personal relationship as a client to the troupe by abandoning his *droits d'auteur* had apparently been reciprocated. By contrast, he pointed out, his own *honnêteté* the previous autumn had not been answered in kind, and now his efforts to establish a personal relationship with the troupe were being undercut by "your protégé ... [who] solicits your favors." ⁴⁴

After hearing this last letter read at their assembly, the Comédiens decided not to respond, and instead asked the First Gentlemen to silence Renou, who was clearly becoming a nuisance. When contacted by Richelieu, Renou recognized his strategic error in having abandoned the restrained tone of his first letters and having employed instead a more aggressive voice. Despite having written the previous year "the most honorable letter" to the troupe, he acknowledged to Richelieu that his more recent missives had thrown "powder on the fire," causing a "loss of civility [*politesse perdue*]" between himself and the troupe, which he promised to restore. On February 22, he again wrote to the troupe in a contrite manner, recognizing that "I departed from my naturally gentle and honorable character" by having demanded "my incontestable right," and that this change of tone "had cost me dearly in my heart." Professing to be angry with himself for having allowed civility and

deference to be lost in his relations to the troupe, Renou also suggested the actors should regret the "violence" that their indifference to his original overtures had led him to commit. He closed this letter by once again asking that "Térée" be the next tragedy performed. [45](#)

50

Renou hoped that this explanation for his conduct would allow him to re-establish his relationship with the troupe on terms of reciprocal fidelity, and perhaps to reposition himself ahead of other playwrights—including previously performed authors such as Rochon de Chabannes, Cailhava d'Estendoux, and Belloy, and as-yet unperformed authors such as Peyraud and Lonvay, all of whom also had written the troupe that month on behalf of their plays. However, in its response the troupe refused to reciprocate, stating that it "has not at all forgotten the harsh things you have written." Moreover, the troupe mocked him for having lost his self-restraint and disputed his own claims to civility: "Carried too far by your humor and your vivacity, you allowed yourself indiscretions. Today, when you are calmer, you 'believe yourself *honnête* enough' to seek to repair a wrong that an '*honnête homme*' such as yourself should never have made." In closing, the actors pressed their advantage by demanding "a reparation"—implying a cession of his *droits d'auteur*—before they could begin to rehearse his play. Unwilling to make to this sacrifice, Renou sought to preserve his sense of himself as a legitimate and autonomous man of letters, proposing that the actors "forget my wrong, and I will forget all of yours." [46](#)

In effect, the troupe did just this, informing Renou in April 1773 that rehearsals of "Térée" would begin presently. Finally, in June, the Comédie Française staged the tragedy, but the audience responded coolly. Aware that his opportunity to gain recognition as a playwright and man of letters was now in peril, Renou rapidly revised the play and presented his changes to the troupe four days later. Such a tactic was standard; however, the troupe informed Renou that although his tragedy had not "fallen" from the active rotation under the regulations, it did not merit a second performance. [47](#) In response, Renou again took an aggressive tone, complaining that this decision contravened the regulations and therefore violated his prerogatives as an author. Moreover, he defended himself against the troupe's charge that he had shown himself to be "not honorable" by opposing its decision to withdraw his play from their active repertory. Renou knew that he could not influence the enforcement of the regulations so long as he remained within the established hierarchies of theatrical life, in which the troupe held a dominant position over him, so he sought to change the terms of exchange. In his next letter, he represented himself as speaking for, and with, the moral authority of "the public." Noting that the public's judgment on the play had not yet been rendered, he appealed to the troupe to perform the revised version and accused the Comédiens of blocking his access to that public, thereby denying him recognition as a "man of letters" and displacing the public from its proper role as judge of his revised play and of himself as a writer. [48](#)

Since the actors had refused to perform the revised play, Renou rejected their authority to make such a judgment—"I withdraw from you the power that you hold over me—by withdrawing his play, and invested it instead in "our common judge, the public." Disregarding any pretense of civility, Renou declared frankly his intention to circumvent the existing norms and to appeal brazenly and polemically beyond the troupe, its supervisors at court, or even other Parisian elites, and to set the question before a broad and unrestricted public by publicizing it in print. Renou was not ignorant of the derogation of honorable status such a move implied for a man of letters, so he sought to present this tactic as one being imposed on him: "You have pushed me to this despite myself." Claiming to be an isolated victim of arbitrary authority that had denied him recognition, he declared himself justified in taking his case to the public, which he would ask to judge "my conduct and yours."

Renou presented his case to the public through a preface to a printed edition, which appeared at the end of June 1773. In the first paragraph of the preface, the author explained, "I want to justify myself ... by the way of print." In the preface, he recounted in detail his the narrative of his relations with the troupe, emphasizing his own mistreatment by the actors who had violated his rights and subjected him to repeated humiliations. However, the basic thrust of the preface was neither the troupe's violations of its own regulations nor its disrespect for Renou's "propriety" as a man of letters, which included the right to make corrections to his work. Instead, he repeatedly emphasized the disregard shown by the troupe for "the Public" in "its harassment" of authors. Thus, he represented the troupe's mistreatment of playwrights—both the lack of respect shown them as men of letters and the lack of conformity to the regulations—as dishonoring the public, from which he as an author drew inspiration and from which he anticipated judgment on his works. An author, he argued, could not be compelled to alter his work, except "under the dictate of the public.... Between the public and its authors," he continued, "the actors are only the intermediary agents who must lend themselves to the desires of the former and the efforts of the latter." [49](#)

In this printed preface, Renou represented himself as speaking both to and for the public. He thereby fashioned himself as a man of letters not through *honnête* subordination to an individual or institutional patron, but as an honorable writer whose moral authority and social prominence the broad public should recognize. Presenting himself in these terms both attributed the failure of his play to causes extrinsic to his merits as a writer and demonstrated that personal interest did not motivate his protest. Thus, his preface to *Térée* combined the complaint that, "Authors without protection in this country go nowhere fast," with a denial of any personal desire to advance quickly for his own sake. Rather, he presented the troupe's evident preference for well-known writers—and the consequent

difficulties encountered by younger and less protected writers such as himself—as harmful not just to him personally but to the public for which he and all authentic men of letters spoke.

55

Renou claimed to be aligned completely with the public, and therefore entirely alienated from all other sources of authority such as social elites or the crown, and from more established or better-protected authors. To support this claim of personal sincerity, and to portray himself as the aggrieved party in his dispute, Renou reprinted in his preface the letters between himself and the troupe. In reprinting these letters, Renou actively cast himself in the role of a wronged innocent by systematically deleting all references to his own attempts to involve the First Gentlemen on his behalf. He also removed his requests that the troupe begin rehearsals of "Térée" promptly. ⁵⁰ Renou then highlighted his disinterest in any personal gain and his simple desire to present useful works to the public: "I only wanted to paint the human heart ... with the brilliance of theater." The actors, by contrast, he depicted as having employed intentionally, and in bad faith, "artful thrusts [*bottes secrètes*] ... to kill any author who is not one of their friends." Arguing that he was obliged to protest his treatment not for his own sake but for that of other men of letters and the public, he claimed that "I cannot prevent myself from publishing it." ⁵¹ Renou here drew on a principle of classical forensic rhetoric, whereby only the merits of the case and the virtue of the judges justified an orator to speak in a public forum, and therefore that orator must deny all interest in any personal recognition that might accrue to him for having spoken publicly. While the medium of print allowed Renou to claim to speak directly to the public, it did not provide him with the moral authority to do so. Thus, to prove his personal disinterestedness, he strategically edited the letters before publishing them, so that he would appear in the preface as entirely isolated, and subordinate to the whims of the troupe. He thereby used print to fashion for himself the persona of a patriotic man of letters, one whose virtue and sincerity should not be considered any less—by the troupe, urban elites, or society at large—for having intentionally moved outside the established norms and hierarchies of writing plays for the Comédie Française and addressed himself in print to a broader public.

In the second part of the preface, Renou moved from his particular position vis-à-vis the troupe and the public to consider the general "abuse of allowing the Comédiens to judge the authors. The players have neither the consideration, nor impartiality, nor the enlightenment necessary to judge men of letters." Here he generalized his call for playwrights to be autonomous from the authority of the troupe. If their need for elite patronage prevented writers from speaking with sincerity and authenticity, then their dependence on uncivil actors denied them the "honor" due men of letters. Although, like many aspiring dramatic authors, Renou had sought previously to enter into a clientelistic dependence on the troupe in order to identify himself as a playwright, he now reversed that logic, arguing that

such dependence had forced writers "to be the timid clients of the actors."

In contesting the troupe's capacity to judge new plays, Renou could not continue to call upon the "public" as the arbiter of a play's worth, because the public could respond only to those plays it actually saw performed. There was still a need for a gatekeeper, and Renou proposed that men of letters themselves were uniquely qualified to serve in this capacity. Noting that the First Gentlemen had removed themselves from active involvement in the management of the royal theater, he called for the formation of "a Tribunal of men of letters" to consider new plays for the repertory. He specified that he would not restrict such a tribunal to playwrights, since all writers were "*gens d'esprit*," which could not be said of the Comédiens. With the creation of a tribunal of autonomous men of letters to judge new plays in good faith, Renou asserted in his conclusion, the royal theater could once again serve the public, which was, of course, the very purpose for which he had turned to print in the first place. Renou thus ended by proposing not to undo the hierarchies and norms that governed the literary field but, paradoxically, to restore the "honor of letters" that he knew himself to have violated by publishing his complaints. Renou thus came full circle, and used the medium of print to call for men of letters to once again define themselves as *honnêtes* through their restrained comportment and their participation in official literary institutions such as the Comédie. [52](#)

Renou's preface generated sufficient interest so that the troupe's leading actor Monvel felt compelled to respond with a printed pamphlet attacking Renou's "self-interestedness [*amour-propre*]." Monvel represented Renou as neither a civil man of letters nor an honorable patriot, but a "mediocrity" with a "fever for writing ...libels." Turning Renou's claims of propriety and sincerity against him, Monvel dismissed him as having taken "poetic license [with] morality." Moreover, Renou for Monvel exemplified all the writers who had attacked the theater in print: full of "bitterness ...and remorse ... these men whose conduct is truly embarrassing ... pass the limits of decency and *honnêteté*." His preface, Monvel charged, demonstrated his "anger and jealousy," characteristics ill-becoming to those who claimed to be "men of letters." Highlighting how such attacks transgressed the established norms of literary life, he suggested that Renou, and all others who might be similarly inclined, should comport themselves "gently [*doucement*]" and "lower the tone," since their contentiousness sullied the reputations of men of letters, of the theater for which they wrote, and of the public to which they appealed. The bulk of Monvel's pamphlet is a point-by-point refutation of a series of issues that had been raised that year, from the need for a "Tribunal of Men of Letters" to judge plays to that for a "second troupe." Yet the actor's primary concern was with Renou's tendentiousness towards the theater and other authors, demonstrating again the extent to which the perception of personal comportment, more than any other factor, informed how contemporaries understood what it meant (and did not mean) to be a dramatic author. [53](#)

3.5. Lonvay: A New Tribunal for Men of Letters

As Renou was using different strategies of clientelism in his letters and was invoking "the public" in his printed preface, Lonvay de la Saussaye employed yet a third strategy, turning neither to elite patrons nor to printed polemics but to the judicial courts. In 1762, Lonvay had submitted to the Comédie "Alcidonis," a three-act prose comedy—an unlikely stylistic choice for a first-time author. The setting and theme were nevertheless highly classical, concerning the *moeurs* of Spartan society, especially self-denial, sacrifice, and the scorning of all luxury. ⁵⁴ In accordance with the regulations, Lonvay submitted his play for examination by a troupe member in late 1763. The troupe quickly accepted the work into the repertory, and Lonvay submitted it to the Police Censor for approval to perform and then print it. ⁵⁵ Even then, Lonvay remained unknown to the actors, who put off scheduling his play.

60

In 1768, Lonvay had the play printed. While the edition bore both a censorial *approbation* and the "permission of the Police," and was duly inscribed in the registers of the Syndicate of the Book Trade, the publication still violated the established code of conduct. The actors responded by allowing his play to languish in the Comédie's repertory for several seasons. On August 31, 1772, Lonvay—aware that many new works were being accepted—met in person with the actors to ask that "Alcidonis" be scheduled for performance. They agreed, but set no date to begin rehearsals. The following February 8, Lonvay again appeared in person at the theater to argue against the performance of Beaumarchais's "Barbier de Séville" ahead of his own play. Still lacking personal relationships with the troupe members, "the author of 'Alcidonis'" was informed that he would be scheduled after "M. de Beaumarchais." Later that February, "Barbier" was dropped due to its author's sudden imprisonment, and "Alcidonis" premiered in its place at the Comédie Française on March 13, 1773. Shortly thereafter, a second printed edition appeared. ⁵⁶

After five modestly-attended performances of "Alcidonis," gate revenue fell below the requisite minimum, and the play was withdrawn from the active rotation. Because Lonvay had not reached a personal agreement with the troupe, he then asked for his share of the proceeds. The actors responded that, due to the high "extraordinary" costs for costumes and decorations they had incurred in staging the play, Lonvay was not entitled to any remuneration. Instead, he was asked to reimburse the Comédie 101 *livres*. This response particularly galled Lonvay, because he had requested that the play be staged with minimal decorations and costumes, consistent with its Spartan theme. Yet, without connections at court, with ministers occupied by other conflicts, and with the First Gentlemen removed from direct management of the Comédie, Lonvay, like Renou, had to seek redress outside the existing norms and hierarchies of theatrical life. To do so, Lonvay extended the growing legalism in author-theater relations that had been

evident throughout the 1760s and early 1770s by turning to the civil court. On May 27, the barrister Blacque filed a "summons [*assignation*]" against the Comédiens Français to restore the "property ...of his *droits d'auteur*."

Blacque argued in his brief that, because the theater's Letters Patent and regulations had been registered by the Parlement of Paris, any disputes arising under those regulations fell under jurisdiction of the "ordinary tribunal" of Châtelet. The First Gentlemen had been empowered by the King only to supervise the conduct of the troupe members, and since the playwrights were not linked formally to the Comédie, they were not under the authority of the Royal Household. Thus, Blacque asked for "an accounting of the revenues of the performances [and] the restitution of the play" to Lonvay. ⁵⁷ Legally, this argument challenged the First Gentlemen's jurisdiction (and, by extension, that of the King himself) over writers for the Comédie. Socially, it defined Lonvay as a man of letters not dependent on the troupe or the court, and thus as constrained only by the law and not by norms of *honnêteté*. Once deposited at Châtelet, Blacque's legal brief could be printed without being subject to formal censorship; moreover, Lonvay had no personal relationship with the troupe, and was therefore under no informal prohibition against printing his complaints.

The Comédie's council of lawyers acted swiftly to prevent the publication of Blacque's brief. On June 13, they met in the apartments of Coqueley de Chaussepierre, who as royal censor had approved the printing of *Alcidonis* in 1764, and drafted a motion to have the affair transferred from Châtelet to the royal Council of State. The lawyers then inveighed upon the First Gentlemen "to be willing, in this circumstance, to honor the Comédie with their special protection by supporting the request for an *évocation*" to the higher court. ⁵⁸ If Lonvay could invoke as an alternative source of power the law, then the troupe could invoke its traditional source of power—the court and the First Gentlemen—to defend its own position. Accordingly, on July 24, the First Gentlemen made a report to the King "of the petty quarrel that Lonvay was preparing to make against the Comédie." Acting "on his own accord," His Majesty transferred the dispute to his Council and forbade the judges of Châtelet "and of all the courts" from hearing this case. ⁵⁹ Lonvay's strategy had clearly failed; nevertheless, as we will see below, he continued to represent himself as a man of letters despite his lack of standing in the eyes of the troupe and its supervisors at court. To do so, he would have to turn to print to fashion himself as a dramatic author.

3.6. The Cultural Politics of Playwriting at the Accession of Louis XVI

The death of Louis XV of smallpox in May 1774 brought an end to the controversial Maupeou ministry, and to a period of intense activity in literary life. During the final years of his reign, political divisions had presented opportunities for new writers, and also restructured, but did not diminish, the close links between literary and public life. In this context, the figure of

the patriot generally and the patriot playwright in particular had flourished. But the accession of a new monarch whose political, moral, and intellectual affinities remained unknown raised hopes and fears among both patriots, who hoped for an opportunity to enact their programs of moral reform through self-expression, and *honnêtes hommes*, who sought to restore what they considered appropriate norms of civility to public life.

65

In June 1775, the as-yet uncrowned Louis XVI named the Count de Maurepas his first minister; this move signaled that the new monarch would seek a reconciliation with the Parlements and an end to the divisions at court and across the body politic. One component of the new first minister's attempt to reassert royal power was an effort to restore the *status quo ante* in official literary institutions, notably the Comédie, through the Lieutenant-General of Police, Jean Charles Pierre Le Noir. During the 1774–1775 theater season, and in subsequent years, Le Noir and his Police Censors intervened with greater frequency in relations between writers and the royal theater. However, these interventions amounted neither to a backlash against pro-Maurepas playwrights nor a suppression of plays with either royalist or "patriot" themes. Rather, they were attempts to restore the barriers to entry and to exclude those marginal playwrights who had entered into theatrical life in the early 1770s without necessarily becoming integrated into established networks of elite protection or established norms of civility, but who instead acted and represented themselves as autonomous, patriot playwrights.

From the fall of 1774 through the spring of 1775, then, two developments converged. The first development was at court, where Maurepas actively sought to establish support for his government by balancing the opposition between two factions: absolutist, reforming liberals, led by Turgot, and judicial-monarchy *Choiseulistes* allied with the Queen and loyal to the exiled Duke. Maurepas also found his government's credibility questioned in print by "patriot" polemicists, no longer under the control of patrons among the Parliamentary magistrates or Princes of the Blood. This crisis quickly came to head during the "flour war" of April–May 1775. In the face of this crisis, Maurepas sought to assert the power of his appointed officials, such as the Minister of the Royal Household and the Lieutenant-General of Police, over that of non-appointed aristocrats at court, such as the First Gentlemen. Thus, control over the Comédie Française, including its repertory and therefore the treatment of its authors, became one of several sites for high-level political contestation. At the same time, Maurepas's most prominent ministers in the late 1770s—Turgot, who was succeeded by Necker, and Malesherbes, who would be replaced by Amelot—were court outsiders who functioned more as bureaucrats than aristocrats and were thus not active patrons of writers, as Choiseul had been. This change in ministerial *ethos* made it that much more difficult for would-be writers, especially aspiring playwrights, to obtain protectors who would intervene on their behalf.

Meanwhile, the second development was removed from affairs of state but lay within networks of Parisian elite sociability, whose prominent individuals also sought to re-establish hierarchies and barriers to entry that had broken down during the period of conflict from 1772—1774. Among dramatic authors, this reassertion of order meant a loss of legitimacy for those playwrights who had had plays read, accepted, and perhaps even performed without themselves having become integrated into the established social networks linking authors, actors, patrons, and First Gentlemen. Playwrights such as Collé, Du Doyer, Dorat, and La Harpe had all been known to the troupe previously and were all moderately to very well protected by prominent ministers or court aristocrats; each became more prominent by having new plays premiered or older plays revived in the 1774—1775 and 1775—1776 seasons. Indeed, all the new plays staged during the first two theater seasons of Louis XVI's reign were by previously performed authors, and for the rest of the decade the troupe sharply increased its performances of works by writers no longer active that it revived from the repertory. The court's intent clearly was to reassert control over who could claim publicly to be a playwright for the Comédie Française and to ensure that those so identified would adhere to norms of *honnête* conduct and would respect established norms and social hierarchies.

It is significant—and ironic—that in this context Beaumarchais's time came at last. In February 1775, the royal theater finally brought his "Barbier de Séville" to its stage, with support from the new Queen, the new prime minister, Maurepas, and the new Lieutenant-General of Police, Le Noir. Moreover, Beaumarchais benefited from a series of cessions of rank on his behalf by other authors and from his own, repeated assurances to the troupe that he would comport himself disinterestedly, made evident in his promise to cede back any eventual revenues the play might generate. These revenues would be significant, and the author's share would become the subject of an extended dispute between Beaumarchais and the theater. Although that dispute would lead many at court and in literary life to question explicitly Beaumarchais's civility, is important to note here that the staging of "Barbier" came about only because Beaumarchais made explicit overtures to demonstrate his commitment to the new regime and what it hoped to stand for: a restoration of self-restraint, hierarchy, and courtly civility in public life. For many of the aspiring writers of the preceding years, who we have identified as patriots, this overture—and the evident success it brought Beaumarchais with the performance of "Barbier de Séville"—suggested that he had crossed over to cast his lot with the court, abandoning the patriot cause with which many readers of the *Mémoires contre Goetzmann* had associated him. Although of course Beaumarchais had been only tangentially associated with and had shown no ideological affinity for the patriot political movement of the early 1770s, and although he remained only marginally established at court in the later 1770s and early 1780s, an impression took hold at this moment in early 1775, especially among aspiring writers, that Beaumarchais had switched sides for personal advancement. As we will see, this impression would inform and haunt Beaumarchais's public identity for the rest of his life.

* * *

For the many younger, less-established writers who had works accepted from 1772 to 1774, and who thought of themselves as men of letters, the two years immediately after the death of Louis XV proved deeply disillusioning, as they found themselves unable to attain legitimacy in literary life. Among these newer and unprotected entrants were Mercier, Renou, and Lonvay, who had, in different ways, called upon the public for legitimation as men of letters. In so doing, each had diverged from the norms and institutions that had been dominant prior to 1772. In 1774—1775, as those exercising gate-keeping power in literary life sought to restore the *status quo ante*, these newer playwrights found themselves once again on the margins of what they had only two years earlier perceived as a reformed, more transparent, and more impersonally-run Comédie Française. These writers had turned towards the royal theater in the early 1770s as an opportunity to put forth their new ideas about theater, state, and society, and to fashion themselves as playwrights and men of letters before a more broadly conceived public and nation. Now, by the spring of 1775, they could see that the rules of the game had once again changed and that their opportunity to speak to the public through the royal theater was being closed off. To achieve the social standing from which they could advance their intellectual goals, they would have to find new tactics to circumvent the court and Parisian elite sociability that would allow them to reach the public without sacrificing their sense of their own personal autonomy, social prominence, and moral authority as writers.

70

The rest of this chapter studies their efforts to do so, exploring how, why, and to what effect a series of younger writers, near or total outsiders to the institutions of literary life, used the medium of print to identify themselves publicly as patriots. We will also see how these writers became less strident and more reticent than they had been in the early 1770s, thereby arguing against the tendency to perceive ever-mounting radicalism across literary life in the final decade before the Revolution. These writers, rather than breaking entirely with Old Regime institutions, sought to transform them by turning to courts of law and the press, where they challenged the norms of both the royal theater's regulations and the unwritten rules of the game of literary life in the name of the public and the nation. The remainder of this chapter describes this new strategy by looking first at the *mémoires judiciaires* printed against the Comédie Française in 1775 by three playwrights: Mercier, Lonvay, and a much better-known and aesthetically more classical writer, Charles Palissot de Montenoy.

The legal yet transgressive *mémoires* printed on behalf of these three in turn occasioned a flurry of printed attacks against the Comédie Française—against the actors' treatment of playwrights, against the theater's emphasis on the box seats and their occupants, and against its monopoly over new dramatic works. One playwright who penned such attacks, Cailhava

d'Estendoux, exemplifies how those seeking to fashion themselves as "patriotic" men of letters through their playwriting for a broad public called for a reorientation of the royal stage away from the court and urban elites towards a non-elite nation. However, self-representation through print by those without established status or a protector carried a risk; such comportment might identify them not as the men of letters they claimed to be but as writers of lesser status, mere journalists or pamphleteers. This risk was particularly acute in the mid 1770s, when self-identified "patriotic" writers such as Mercier and Cailhava, who had difficulty distinguishing themselves from the many writers who similarly invoked the public in print but who did not demonstrate the same sense of themselves as patriotic men of letters morally obligated to serve the nation.

3.7. Mercier and the "Tribunal of the Nation"

Mercier, as we have seen, had become the most notable of the aspiring playwrights who were seeking entry into literary life between 1771 and 1774. By March 1775, "Nathalie" had still never been performed and more than fourteen months had passed since his last contact with the Comédie. Nevertheless, Mercier wrote the troupe asking to read to the actors a new play on a topical theme, "Le Juge." ⁶⁰ Upon receipt of his letter, the actors expressed astonishment at his temerity, in light of his *Du Théâtre*, "in which he most indecently attacked" them, and decided that "the Comédie neither can nor should hear any work" by him. ⁶¹ In response, Mercier adopted a more aggressive strategy; he filed a civil suit against the actors on March 20, 1775, and then did Lonvay one better by having his brief against the troupe printed as a *mémoire judiciaire*. ⁶² Mercier's *mémoire* openly challenged the authority of the troupe "to judge the authors and their works" and charged that the Comédiens deliberately constrained playwrights from expressing their "patriotism." Instead of serving as a transparent, disinterested medium between men of letters and the nation, he asserted, the actors arrogantly and consistently humiliated aspiring playwrights. Furthermore, the troupe members exercised their authority arbitrarily and despotically, composing the repertory to serve their own vanity rather than the public and utterly disregarding the dignity of men of letters. By excluding honorable writers from its stage, Mercier argued, the royal troupe not only violated the "infinitely respectable rights" of the public but also hindered the development of French "*moeurs*." On behalf of not only himself but of any writer equally "*honnête*" and of "the public generally," he asked that the theater's regulations be rewritten so that "the judgment of these plays be referred to Men of Letters." Moreover, Mercier asked the civil court—and, implicitly, readers of the printed *mémoire*—to grant him autonomy under its "protection," by recognizing his "*droits*" "as a citizen... [and] a man of letters."

Mercier's complaints were echoed in the following months, when Lonvay renewed his two-year-old civil action and then Palissot brought a legal complaint against the Comédie Française; both

printed *mémoires judiciaires* written by François de Neufchâteau. The troupe responded immediately by turning to a more traditional authority—the First Gentlemen—to whom the troupe leaders wrote a memorandum on April 27 complaining of "several libelous printed works being sold publicly," which the actors refused to dignify with a response. They further stated that they had no intention of arguing their case in the civil court and asked the First Gentlemen "to see to the annihilation of these odious writings and to the legal punishment of their authors." The troupe based its demands not on any legal principle that Mercier or the others were accused of violating, but rather on "the prince's justice [and] the declared protection which [the First Gentlemen] have always accorded" to the Comédie. [63](#)

Prompted by the First Gentlemen to act, the Lieutenant-General of Police, Le Noir, attributed all the offending *mémoires* to Mercier. Le Noir likely based this inaccurate conception on Mercier's own behavior, since that writer pursued his suits more resolutely than others and was quicker to resort to the publication of his complaints in print. On May 28, 1775, Mercier had a second *mémoire* printed that again challenged the troupe's moral authority to judge dramatic authors. [64](#) In this pamphlet, he reproduced verbatim some of the most scandalous passages of *Du Théâtre*, including the comparison of the troupe's actresses to prostitutes and the description of the players as "avid, unjust, and dishonorable [*malhonnêtes*]." [65](#) Mercier denied that he had brought his complaints to the courts—and, implicitly, to the public—out of any personal interest or as part of any organized campaign against the troupe. Instead, as he had in *Du Théâtre* and as Renou had in his preface two years earlier, Mercier here claimed to speak as a sincere, isolated voice on behalf of the larger causes of "the honor of letters [and] the rights of the public." Having no ambition other than "that of being useful to literature," he attacked "the ignorance, arrogance ... and caprice" of the troupe toward its writers. He depicted the troupe's refusal to show suitable respect for playwrights as an affront not to the personal interests of men of letters but to "the Nation," which alone should have the authority to judge and rule over those who serve it as writers. Finally, he represented the actors as corrupted clients of the court and blamed them for the "decadence" in the "*moeurs*" of French society. So long as the court continued to pamper the actors with patronage and protection, Mercier warned, they would continue to obstruct the direct connection he sought to establish between patriotic playwrights and the nation for which they claimed to write.

75

Most instrumental in compromising the writer's dignity and independence and alienating the public from the playwright, Mercier's *mémoire* charged, were the box seats. These enclosed, expensive seats provided "a luxury ... for a certain *monde* [composed of] a small number of privileged people" at the expense of the "rights of the public" to attend the theater collectively and, in so doing, to acquire common *moeurs*. Similarly, Mercier defended playwrights' property rights and remuneration from the theater not as

matters of individual "private interests" but as an extension of authors' role as representatives of the public interest. Thus, he interpreted the article of the regulations that granted an author "his *droits* on his play" until two consecutive performances generated sub-standard gate receipts to mean that the playwright's fate, including his remuneration, should be a function of his service to the "citizens" who attend the theater, and whose very attendance proved the value of the service provided by the author. Efforts by the troupe to shorten the run of a new play thus victimized authors and public alike. The *mémoire* closed by blaming on the troupe the "decadence" in French *moeurs*. It charged that the "histrions" of the troupe would have no incentive to serve the public good so long as "the government" continued to flatter the actors with "wealth and honors." This depiction of the Comédiens as pampered clients of the court emphasized the complete identification Mercier sought between patriotic playwrights such as himself and the nation for which they wrote.

In response, the troupe sought to humble this self-declared patriot who so blatantly violated the polite etiquette it expected of its playwrights. The very evening that the second *mémoire* appeared in print, when Mercier arrived at the Comédie Française, the porters informed him that the troupe had withdrawn his free entrance privileges, which were accorded only to the theater's active playwrights, and "a soldier forcibly closed the door" on him. Uncowed by this physical domination, Mercier immediately filed yet another legal complaint, asserting that "this refusal is a formal breach of the specified rights and privileges of [all] authors," and asked for police commissioners to accompany him to the theater and ensure his admittance. At the theater door, the actor d'Allainval explained that since his play, *Nathalie*, had been published by the Parisian printer Ruault before the theater had performed it, the actors had, in accordance with the theater regulations, removed it from the repertory. Thus, Mercier no longer enjoyed free entrance privileges as a Comédie Française playwright. [66](#)

Mercier would later represent his physical expulsion from the theater that evening as a deliberate exercise by the troupe of its arbitrary power over all authors, directed against him personally, and made all the more galling by its public and physical nature. "Making my way tranquilly to take my seat in the *parquet* of the Comédie," he would write in his *Tableau de Paris*, "a place I had properly acquired," the guards blocked him, "crossing two muskets across my chest." [67](#) Yet at that moment, Mercier  [Mercier, Tableau de Paris](#) understood that, in concrete terms, this tactic sought to dissuade him from continuing his suit and to pressure him to reach an accommodation with the theater. Ordinarily, a protector would have enforced such discipline on his protégé, but of course, Mercier had no protector at court or in Parisian elite networks. Thus, the new Lieutenant of Police, Albert, summoned him the next day to ask him directly to withdraw his suit. When Mercier demurred, Albert noted that his actions displeased the "government" and threatened that "something regrettable could happen

to you" if he did not desist. Shortly thereafter, one of the First Gentlemen, the Duke de Duras, obtained a *lettre de cachet* for Mercier's arrest, from which the writer sought and was granted refuge on June 2 by the Paris Parlement, whose magistrates further obliged him by summoning the Comédiens Français. ⁶⁸ Even as he represented himself in print as a lone defender of the public interest, and although he claimed that his battles must be settled by the nation, Mercier turned to a traditional power in the Parlement and in its magistrates. Clearly, protection of writers by constituted political authorities remained an essential component of literary life, despite the rhetoric in which men of letters declared their autonomy from patronage and invoked the moral authority of the public. ⁶⁹

With their reputations at stake, the troupe and its lawyers wished to prevent Mercier from making his case into a public scandal through further *mémoires*. As he had in response to Lonvay's suit in 1773, Coqueley de Chaussepierre convened the theater's legal council to ask the First Gentlemen to intercede by obtaining the *évocation* of Mercier's suit from the Parlement to the royal Grand Council, where it would languish while the printed *mémoires* could be suppressed. The lawyer Jabineau de la Voute drafted a memorandum to the First Gentlemen, laying out the legal justification for such an *évocation*. After alluding to the precedent of Lonvay's suit, he suggested that Mercier's suit represented a personal affront to the honor of the First Gentlemen, whose authority Mercier disobeyed by challenging their regulations. Noting that Mercier enjoyed the protection of the magistrates of the Parlement of Paris, Jabineau appealed to the First Gentlemen to protect their own position as supervisors of the royal theater, which he claimed the magistrates were seeking to usurp. If this encroachment were tolerated, he warned, "it would be permitted to all authors to criticize [and] to attack all which emanates from the authority" of the crown and its court. Because Mercier clearly did not feel bound by the code of restrained comportment expected of those who identified themselves as men of letters, Jabineau charged, he must not be allowed to escape discipline. He and writers like him—not tied to the court through networks of patronage and protection—might even go so far as to "form among themselves a 'league' against the Comédie." With no protector to control their conduct, they would be free to make printed, libelous attacks on the royal theater. Such attacks would be injurious to the royal troupe, "all of whose members are concerned in their conduct only to show themselves ever more worthy of the protection that the government deigns to accord" them. At stake were control not only of the Comédie but control over who would have access to literary life, who could claim the status of "man of letters," and thus the legitimacy to speak publicly. ⁷⁰

On June 22, the royal Council ruled that the King had the



authority to judge directly any legal matter involving the Royal Household, of which the Comédie was a part. The Council thus forbade the Parlement of Paris and all other judges in the kingdom from hearing Mercier's suit or any others brought against the Comédiens Français.

Furthermore, his *mémoires* were suppressed, and all printers, booksellers, and *colporteurs* were forbidden to circulate them. ⁷¹ Mercier's public identity, not yet well established, suffered considerably, as is evident in a satirical engraving, "Âne comme il y en a peu," depicting him as a "rare jackass," pushing a vinegar-maker's wheelbarrow and carrying artisan's tools, trampling on religion (represented by Raphael's "Transfiguration") and the classic texts of ancient and modern French dramaturgy, including Horace, Virgil, and Corneille.

* * *

80

In the summer of 1775, news that the renowned liberal Malesherbes had become the Minister of the Royal Household encouraged Mercier, who hoped that Malesherbes might counter the influence of the First Gentlemen. Mercier's hopes were further raised when he learned that Malesherbes would be the respondent for his suit pending before the Royal Council. ⁷² Thus, on September 8, 1775, the barrister Henrion filed in Mercier's name another suit before the Parlement, naming the First Gentlemen themselves and questioning the basis of their authority over "the legislation and regulation of the theaters," particularly as it concerned dramatic authors. The bulk of this third *mémoire* defended Mercier's personal honor as a man of letters, which he claimed had been wounded by the First Gentlemen's personal vendetta against him. Recounting the highly impolite terms in which the decree of June 24 attacked him, Mercier professed shock and disbelief that men of elevated stature would use such strong language. He thus boldly asked that this royal decree, rather than his *mémoire*, be suppressed as an unauthorized libel; he also attacked the First Gentlemen, questioning their suitability to oversee men of letters whose "natural judges [should be] the Tribunal of the Nation." Explicitly, this "tribunal" was meant to indicate the Parlement of Paris, but in light of Mercier's prefaces, treatises, and *mémoires*, it implied the French nation. ⁷³

During the next twelve months, as others took up a journalistic campaign in print against the Comédie, Mercier became involved in other projects. Most notably, he collaborated on the first complete translation of Shakespeare into French, edited by Pierre Le Tourneur. This twenty-volume series began to appear in mid-1776, accompanied by a long preface, and occasioned a brief but intense debate over Shakespearean drama versus the classic, academic French dramaturgy identified with Racine. ⁷⁴ Moreover, the ministry remained unstable, divided among those supportive of Turgot and those loyal to Maurepas, and no action was taken on either Mercier or the

regulations of the Comédie Française.

Then, in May 1776, the departures of Turgot and Malesherbes from the government signaled the consolidation of power by Maurepas, who soon installed his own men in the positions of Minister of the Royal Household (Amelot), Lieutenant-General Police (Le Noir) and Director of the Book Trade (Le Camus de Néville). Moreover, he installed Jean-Baptiste Antoine Suard as Police Censor, who had the authority to approve all plays before they could be performed on the royal stage or legally printed. Although drawn from the more aristocratic, constitutionalist "Queen's faction" at court and from the Philosophic faction in literary life, these new functionaries sought above all to restore the weakened hierarchies and institutions of the literary world. To do so, they had to deal with men such as Mercier and Lonvay, who had come to prominence during the crisis years of 1772—1775, and thus had remained outside client-patron networks, invoking instead the "public" and "nation" as their inspiration and audience. As the new government sought to restore order, such polemical voices as Mercier's were dangerous, not so much for their ideological content, but because those who raised them could not be re-integrated into the networks of patronage and thus be linked to the court. They therefore had to be eliminated from public life lest they destabilize it further.

The denouement of Mercier's story comes only years later. In 1778, Mercier's entrance privileges at the Comédie Française were restored, not due to a clamor from the public, but through the unlikely intervention of Beaumarchais at Versailles as part of his negotiations with the Royal Household on behalf of the Société des auteurs dramatiques (on which see the "Intermission."). To win this concession, Mercier agreed to draft an explanation of his conduct toward the theater, in which he renounced his "just complaints" and agreed to follow a "path of conciliation." Even then, the troupe continued to refuse Mercier's requests that it perform his plays, due to his earlier impolite conduct. ⁷⁵ With this act of contrition, Mercier began a thorough refashioning of his public image. During several years of informal banishment from Paris, he went to work for the publisher Charles-Joseph Panckoucke, who published the later volumes of his *Tableau de Paris*; in this edition, a very different image of Mercier appears—an engraved portrait of the author in academic style. Another engraving, based on a drawing from the mid-1780s, shows him as he has been understood by literary historians: writing alone at his desk, drawing inspiration from the city outside his open window, and independent of all institutions.



Yet by this time, Mercier had returned to the capital and



reconciled himself to the dominant norms and institutions of literary life. He became affiliated with the salon of Fanny de Beauharnais and the Masonic Lodge of the Nine Sisters, and he entered into the client network of the young Duke d'Orléans, where he would become a mentor to, *inter alia*, Olympe de Gouges. By 1785, he had sufficiently moderated his views and had accrued a sufficient degree of legitimacy to be included, along with members of the Académie Française and other leading writers, on the Controller-General of Finance's list of "Men of Letters requesting pensions" from the royal treasury. ⁷⁶ Only then did he achieve the full status of a Comédie Française playwright, when in October 1787 it staged his comedy, "La Maison de Molière," a paean to the theater itself. By the late 1780s, he spoke of the "patriot" identity he had created in 1775, when his "literary existence" was nearly "entirely annihilated," as ironic; although the troupe had nearly had him imprisoned in the Bastille at the time, the actors "laugh about it now, as I laughed then." ⁷⁷ By this late date, his legitimacy had become more established, and Mercier had achieved the distance necessary to reconcile his patriot identity to a literary world still pervaded by *honnêteté*.

3.8. Palissot, the unlikely Patriot; or, The Perils of Satire

85

In mid-1775, Mercier's patriotic ideal and, moreover, the strategies he employed to represent it provided the model for a playwright who, several years earlier, would have seemed highly unlikely to appeal to the nation and claim autonomy from the court, Charles Palissot de Montenois. Palissot is best known to eighteenth-century French theater and cultural history for his "Philosophes," and the Comédie Française performance in 1760 of this satire of the *mondaines* affiliations of leading *Encyclopédistes* has generally been interpreted as the response of a devout Catholic to the gathering cultural power of the High Enlightenment. ⁷⁸ Yet, in the third quarter of the eighteenth century, Palissot passed through a much more complicated series of positions in literary life, cutting across categories such as "Enlightenment" vs. "anti-Enlightenment," or "classical" dramaturgy vs. "*drame*." Subsequent to the "Philosophes" controversy, he experienced a marked decline in his literary status that lasted through the 1760s and 70s. From this diminished position, in 1775 he wrote a new play, "Les Courtisanes," which he submitted to the royal troupe, then had printed, before seeing it suppressed. Trying to regain his lost legitimacy as a man of letters, Palissot represented himself and this work in terms of morality and literary property; moreover, in the highly visible medium of print, he made highly contentious rhetorical appeals to the "nation," while continuing to represent himself in face-to-face relations and correspondence as sociable, self-restrained, and therefore worthy of elite protection.

Born in 1730 to a father of the Lorraine robe nobility and a mother of Austrian bourgeois origins, Palissot was educated at a local Jesuit *collège* and

was sent at age fourteen by his parents to Paris to continue his education and enter the clergy or the bar. Once in the capital, he began attending the Comédie Française and elite social gatherings. In a series of letters between 1750 and 1754, he described to his Lorraine friend Claude-Pierre Patu his encounters with such writers as Jean-François Marmontel, aristocrats such as the Duchess of Luxembourg and the Count of Stainville, and Comédie Française actresses such as Mesdemoiselles Clairon and Quinault. In these letters, the young Palissot represented himself as an aspiring writer on the margins of the court, where he hoped to attract notice and financial patronage that could save a "man of letters" from becoming "the born slave of whomever buys his works." Moreover, he was at pains to distance himself from any suspicion of seeking patronage out of mercenary intent: "It is a consolation, my dear friend, amidst this literary harassment, to have worthy protectors ... whom one loves only for themselves, independent of all interest." ⁷⁹

Palissot's early attempts at classical verse and tragedy brought him to the attention of the Duke of Lorraine in Nancy, where he was admitted to the city's Royal Society of Sciences and Letters. This affiliation in turn brought Palissot into contact with a Lorraine aristocrat, the Count of Stainville, the future Duke de Choiseul. ⁸⁰ Through the intervention of Stainville and the Countess de la Marck, the Comédie Française performed two of Palissot's works: in 1751 a classical tragedy, "Zarès," then in 1754 a verse comedy, "Les Tuteurs." With the first edition of *Tuteurs*, Palissot included a "Preliminary discourse" to the Countess de la Marck, explaining the social utility of classical comedy as the ridicule it could heap on vice. ⁸¹ In 1755, he voyaged to Geneva to pay homage to Voltaire, with whom he became a frequent correspondent. Thus, in the mid-1750s, Palissot appeared well-launched on a trajectory that he hoped would identify him eventually as a Comédie Française playwright and an honorable man of letters, with legitimate standing among Parisian elites and at court.

In 1756, to commemorate the installation of a statue of Louis XV in Nancy, a local troupe performed Palissot's "Le Cercle," a comedy of manners including a scene satirizing Rousseau. The play appealed to local Jesuits and *dévôts*, who encouraged him to write the verses that became *Petites lettres sur les grands philosophes*, satirizing Diderot, among others. Palissot also took it upon himself at this time to defend classical dramaturgy against what he then saw as a potential corruption of it in Diderot's proposed "serious genre," in an anonymous 1758 pamphlet, *Scène dernière du 'Fils naturel,' avec une lettre à Dorval*. ⁸² These works angered the pro-Philosophe Duke of Lorraine, but the Duke de Choiseul brought Palissot under his full protection, settled his debts, and employed him to translate articles from the English press for publication in the *Gazette étranger*. If Palissot's rise had been imperiled by his financial difficulties and his transgression, Choiseul's protection provided a necessary margin for error.

However, in 1760, when Palissot rewrote "Le Cercle" into "Les Philosophes" for the Comédie Française, the ensuing scandal cost him this margin for error. By 1762, Palissot had lost the protection of Choiseul, whose own position at court was weakening due to the calamitous Seven-Years' War. Palissot's relationship with the Comédiens also deteriorated. Moreover, he was openly ridiculed in salons and in print and forced to withdraw from Parisian elite social networks and literary life. In a long letter to Choiseul, Palissot justified his comportment as consistent with "the *qualité* of a man of letters," arguing that writing a satire such as "Les Philosophes" was consistent with the classical ideals for a writer set forth by Boileau. Nevertheless, he complained, his plays had been withdrawn from the Comédie's repertory; he had himself been forced to withdraw from Paris; and "my reputation is attacked with ... furor and with impunity" in pamphlets and the *Encyclopédie* article "Parade." Expressing his excuses to Choiseul, Palissot knew that he could not ask for "a declared protection ... but I would like only to be certain that, without displeasing you, I can ... make use of the natural right to defend myself" by responding to "my enemies" in print. [83](#)

 [Palissot, Le Cercle](#)

 [Palissot, Les Philosophes](#)

 [Voltaire, Lettres à Palissot](#)

90

In 1764, after notifying Choiseul, Palissot responded publicly with his biting satirical—and highly classical—*Dunciade*; he also sought to regain the status of a man of letters by writing articles for Fréron's *Année littéraire* and J.-B. Rousseau's *Journal Encyclopédique*. Palissot refrained, however, from engaging in unauthorized, direct polemics; instead, he accepted his banishment and then pointed to his self-effacing conduct to represent himself as *honnête*, as in a 1764 letter to a friend in Paris where he expressed hope that "my exile be regarded there generally as a title of commendation." [84](#) Palissot's silence was soon rewarded with letters of endorsement from several petty Lorraine nobles who, serving as Palissot's brokers, attested to the devotion still felt for him by the Duke of Lorraine and the Count de Tressan. These letters praised his honorable conduct and warned him implicitly to refrain from any further public response to the attacks on him. [85](#) Yet in 1769, still awaiting recall to Paris, he wrote to the *Journal Encyclopédique* to deny having "misrepresented anyone" in the "Philosophes," and alluded to his "two benefactors," who he refrained from naming, noting that one was a "man of the court" and that both continued to accord him "the most honorable confidence." [86](#)

Throughout the 1760s, although Palissot had lost his status as a man of letters due to his very public involvement in intellectual and literary polemics, he nevertheless continued to demonstrate both his classical erudition and his propriety and civility. Most of all, he understood the unwritten rule of the literary game: that one could assert oneself in polemics only after establishing one's legitimacy before elite protectors, and only to a degree corresponding to the intensity of the patrons' investment in the client.

87

At the same time, he continued to seek to re-establish his presence in Parisian literary life by writing to the Comédie Française. In May 1763, in a gesture characteristic of a client, he offered the troupe the gift of a first edition of his printed works. 88 Then, in 1770, he submitted to the royal theater another verse comedy, "L'Homme dangereux," which he described as a satire of *mondainité*. In satirizing the very social networks to which he hoped to regain admission, Palissot was not attacking the excesses of polite etiquette so much as demonstrating his comprehension of it, and thus his worthiness for inclusion in the social networks that defined their members by adherence to it. In a letter of early 1769 to the abbot de la Porte, while writing "L'Homme dangereux," Palissot situated the work not in a moralizing framework but in a tradition of wit specific to French court culture. Appreciation for "French pleasantries," he complained, clearly had been lost since "the amiable time of the Regency," when Voltaire had entered public life on the strength of his *bons mots*. Palissot also contrasted his own wit to the "decadence" evident in the work of such base newcomers as Diderot, whose polymathy lacked "*bel esprit*" and decorum. 89

Palissot thus hoped that his new play, far from setting back his return to legitimacy, would facilitate it. To further advance this strategy, he sought new protectors to replace Choiseul, now exiled from court. He gained the support of the First Gentleman the Duke de Richelieu as well as of the abbot de Voisenon, both members of the Académie Française, to vouch for his civility and self-restraint. 90 To these elites, he represented himself as a court satirist, writing about elite mores and social types to entertain—and moralize on—the very elites being satirized. Indeed, in his request for approval to have "L'Homme dangereux" staged, Palissot compared himself explicitly to Molière, noting that similar concerns about morality had been raised about "Tartuffe." As an astute observer of court culture, Palissot expected that his protectors would not only act on his behalf but that merely having protectors would signal to those doubting his civility and legitimacy that he understood and respected the elite hierarchy and accepted his subordinate place in it as a man of letters. Thus, he hoped, the elites he satirized would not be offended when they recognized themselves in the characters portrayed in the play. 91

Yet, contrary to its author's expressed expectations, "L'Homme dangereux" was neither accepted by the royal troupe nor approved by the Police Censor. Instead, Palissot had it printed. 92 This move signaled his fullest break yet with the norms of elite interaction, which had to that point informed his behavior. Thus, by the early 1770s, Palissot had experienced a rather sharp decline in status within literary life since his promising beginnings in the 1750s. He no longer benefited from elite protection, and his associates were

no longer literary elites but instead those seeking to gain entry into literary life, such as the young Lorraine François de Neufchâteau, an aspiring writer to whom, in 1772, Palissot described his disappointment that his latest play had been rejected. ⁹³ Nor did Palissot any longer enjoy a personal relationship with the Comédiens. So, in early 1775, he submitted a new play, "Les Courtisanes." He did so not as an established playwright but to "make my enemies see that I still exist"; like the many new entrants who had appeared in the early 1770s, Palissot hoped to refashion himself into a legitimate man of letters through a public identification with the Comédie Française.

In light of his previous tendencies to push the limits of elite comportment from within, it was not surprising that this play would once again satirize elite social comportment. Yet, in 1775, Palissot wrote no longer from a position within established elite networks. He had become, like Mercier, an outsider seeking to reposition himself more prominently in literary life. On one level, "Les Courtisanes" mocked the prominent place of women in elite Parisian social life, a variation on the classical comic theme of inverted proper hierarchy, which he had broached previously in "Le Cercle" and "L'Homme dangereux." Indeed, the theme appeared sufficiently mundane to seven troupe members that, when Palissot read it to them on March 11, 1775, they voted to accept it for performance, while three others voted to reconsider it after revisions. However, eight actors voiced concern about its "indecenty" and refused to either accept or reject it. ⁹⁴ Palissot, in a characteristic response, tried to defend the refinement of his play and himself by demonstrating his acceptability to elite patrons. Before even reading the play, he had reminded the troupe of the gift he had made of his book in 1762, and of "the letter that you made me the honor of writing me, as a flattering testimony." ⁹⁵ After the reading, he met with the Lieutenant-General of Police, Le Noir, and with the new Police Censor, Crébillon *fils*, from whom on March 18 he obtained legal authorization for performance of the play.

95

Armed with this official approval, Palissot met in person with the troupe on March 20, hoping to convince it of his own "decency" and that of his play. Once again, he cited "Tartuffe" as exemplary of the tradition of moral satire in which he had written "Les Courtisanes." Furthermore, he denied what must have been evident, that title character referred implicitly to Madame Geoffrin; "Far from wanting to attack Philosophy in my play," he expressed a desire to contribute "decency and dignity" to the "*moeurs* of the nation" by satirizing the immorality of courtesans. ⁹⁶ However, the troupe remained unconvinced and again voted not to perform the play; this second rebuff galled him all the more, because the actors delivered it was given to his face. Palissot, unable to rely on a protector, turned to an alternative source of authority and status, the nation. To reach it, he employed the strategy of Mercier, who had sought to convert his intellectual capital into social status as a man of letters without becoming dependent on elites, through a lawsuit

and a printed *mémoire judiciaire*.

* * *

On April 8, 1775, François de Neufchâteau brought a suit on Palissot's behalf before the Parlement of Paris; a printed *mémoire judiciaire* followed, including François's legal arguments and a third-person narrative justifying Palissot's actions. ⁹⁷ Legal arguments figure much less prominently in both parts of this *mémoire* than in those already published on behalf of Mercier, suggesting that Palissot's *mémoire* was intended primarily for a broad readership rather than the "Magistrates" to whom it was addressed. Moreover, this pamphlet made bolder claims than Mercier's, challenging the authority of the First Gentlemen and the troupe over dramatic authors and identifying playwrights not with the court or urban elites, but with the nation for which they wrote. Most significantly, François defined Palissot's *propriété* not in material but in moral terms, namely his control over his play and his right to have it performed. Moreover, François defined Palissot's "*droits*" not in terms of personal interest but as belonging rightly to the "nation, for which the playwright served as trustee and guardian.

The *mémoire* for Palissot began by challenging what had been the organizing principle of playwright-theater relations at the Comédie Française since its founding: that dramatic authors and actors shared mutual interests. Instead, it asserted the opposite, that authors' rapport with the royal troupe was no longer "honorable" for playwrights. It attributed this change to the actors' "usurpation" of the authors' *droits*, leaving the latter without the "dignity" appropriate to men of letters. Moreover, the *mémoire* made no effort to distinguish Palissot from writers of lesser status, as he had repeatedly done himself in the 1750s and 1760s. Rather, it embraced "the demands of the *Sieur* Mercier" and presented Palissot's complaints not as personal but as general grievances voiced by "a universal cry ... against the audacious conduct of the Comédiens." Narrating the story of Palissot's reading of "Les Courtisanes" to the troupe, the actors' rejection of it on grounds of "indecenty," the granting of censorial approbation, and finally, the troupe's second refusal to accept the play into its repertory, the *mémoire* represented the troupe's actions as "humiliating despotism" to which otherwise honorable men of letters were forced to submit. Thus, the first part of the pamphlet concluded that Palissot's complaint was being brought not for himself but "for the honor of literature and [in] the interest of *moeurs*."

Yet, throughout the 1770s, Palissot remained wary of being identified as an obstreperous outsider, a patriot. At the same



time as the *mémoire* appeared, Palissot wrote to the former actor and director of the royal theater of Brussels Jean Nicolas d'Hannetaire (known as Servandoni) that, while he agreed with the complaints of "the *honnête* and estimable M. Mercier" against the troupe, he found the latter's style immoderate and with "a bit too much bitterness and passion in his defense" of himself.

Palissot went so far as to publish this letter in 1777 edition of his *Oeuvres*, which also featured an engraved frontispiece. The portrait for this engraving had been painted by Charles Monnet, who held an honorary title as "Peintre du Roi"; the engraver, Chessard, held a similarly honorific position at the Spanish court. The printer for the edition was the state publisher of Liège. 98

In his "consultation," François focused on "the property of works of genius." Pushing his argument farther than Henrion, he dismissed the theater's regulations as invalid due to the troupe's capricious, despotic, and abusive applications of them. Noting that dramatic authors had not been consulted in the drafting of the regulations, nor had the regulations been issued in the name of an authority to which men of letters were answerable, François asked "the Magistrates to work for the conservation of [authors'] *droits*," for which neither the First Gentlemen nor the Comédiens had shown any concern. François distinguished plays from all other "products of *esprit*," because plays for the public theater could influence "*moeurs* and public opinion" and were therefore not only a source of "national glory," but also "a public property [and] a national good." Dramaturgy for the public theater, François asserted, should glorify neither the King nor his court but should rather serve the "public"; if such precious cultural capital were mishandled, "the public [would] lose the advantages which could have resulted for its *moeurs*." The threat of such mistreatment of and of such malfeasance towards the public came from the royal troupe, which selfishly sought to deprive sincere, patriotic authors of the chance to present their work to the nation. The troupe thereby stripped a man of letters of not only the "fruit of his labor" but, more importantly, it deprived the audience of the benefit that the work was intended to convey. Thus, François found it ironic and audacious that the morally irresponsible royal troupe, "abusing the word 'decency,'" would so uncivilly deny Palissot the opportunity, through performance of his "Courtisanes," to contribute to French morality.

100

Finally, François objected that the troupe could not judge morality and decency, since the actors relied on no higher principle than the protection of the court. Nor could decency be determined properly by the First Gentlemen or the Lieutenant-General of Police (whose own Censor had nevertheless approved "Les Courtisanes"); such authority must derive directly from the "august tribunal of public opinion ... conservator of *moeurs*." Interpreting the pronouncements of this tribunal, of course, would be the prerogative of those who submitted themselves to its authority, namely patriotic men of letters. François thereby rejected entirely the logic of the court and *le monde*, in which "decency" and "*honnêteté*" meant appropriate respect for

status hierarchies. Instead, he argued, the troupe's blatant disrespect for its writers—through its violation of their *droits* and "propriety," such as its refusal to stage Palissot's play—amounted to an indecent and dishonorable act, because it refused to recognize the authority of the nation, whose *moeurs* a public theater must express and cultivate.

3.9. Lonvay: Law and Print in the Service of "Letters"

Having authored the *mémoire* on behalf of Palissot, François next took on the case of Lonvay de la Saussaye, which had been transferred from Châtelet to the royal Council in July 1773. Now, in the spring of 1775, by appealing this *évocation*, Lonvay and his new legal adviser, François, gained an opportunity to publish another *mémoire judiciaire* challenging the royal troupe on behalf of "men of letters" and "the nation." ⁹⁹ As had Renou and Mercier, Lonvay used print to fashion himself as a disinterested man of letters, devoid of personal ambition, who wrote plays for the Comédie to foster national morals. Despite "my politeness, my patience, [and] my accommodation" toward the troupe, he claimed to have been, over the last ten years, "continually bounced around by the Comédiens." Lonvay's correspondence with the troupe, his strategic turn to the civil courts in 1773, and his turn to print in 1775 all demonstrated an acute awareness of how the game of playwriting had classically been played— (and of his own weak hand in that game). However, in his *mémoire*, Lonvay emphasized his lack of a protector to imply his isolation in literary life and thus to represent himself as a virtuous, sincere, and modest man of letters whose quest to advance the "glory [of] the Nation" through playwriting for the royal theater had cost him his honor.

Lonvay began by recounting his relations with the royal troupe, beginning with his submission of "Alcidonis" in 1762. Because he had not solicited the favor of an introduction to the troupe from any "protectors," he had not gained an opportunity to read his work to the assembled actors. Noting that the theater regulations at that time required works by new authors to be examined first by a single troupe member, Lonvay complained that the actor to whom he had submitted his play had allowed the manuscript to languish for four years in "the noble depository [of] the canopy of his bed" (a commonplace among theater writers since at least the seventeenth century). ¹⁰⁰ Finally, "the patience and *honnêteté* which are so natural to me were exhausted, [and] with good grace, I renounced hope of the honors of a performance." He opted instead in 1768 to "appeal to the tribunal of public opinion" by having the play printed.

At this point, Lonvay continued, the troupe finally consented to hear the play read and, after demanding modifications, accepted it into the repertory. However, Lonvay portrayed the troupe's acceptance of "Alcidonis" as an act of "self-interest [*amour propre*]," complaining of the "most bizarre inversion" by which "the players ... reign over the authors." Despite their clear

inferiority in "*esprit*," the actors force well-intentioned men of letters "to adjust [their] genius" to the troupe's "ignorance." Moreover, he represented his frustration as being shared by many dramatic authors: "it is not only mediocre or beginning authors [such as himself] over which the troupe exerts this sort of despotism." Yet, he claimed, those without protectors, such as himself, would never be granted the personal prerogatives available to writers who became clients of the troupe. Writers who sought to retain their autonomy, he claimed, saw their plays delayed the longest and themselves treated with the least respect by the actors. Not only was his play delayed three times for no reason, but, when finally staged, his directions "that one see neither gold nor silver in all that belongs to the Spartans," in accordance with historical verity, had been deliberately ignored. Most galling, the performed play varied significantly from his text, and he blamed the play's failure on the troupe's changes.

Having suffered "so much harassment and bad faith" in presenting his work before the public, Lonvay then found himself humiliated by the troupe, which deliberately prevented him from imparting *moeurs* to the audience. Under such conditions, he asked, would such "demi-gods of literature" as Corneille, Racine, Crébillon, or Voltaire have made the effort to become playwrights? Moreover, how could new playwrights be expected to develop under such conditions? By emphasizing the generality of the troupe's excesses, Lonvay implied that he sought no personal gain in bringing his suit or by stating his case in a printed *mémoire*. Instead, he offered to sacrifice himself as "the first who has tried to avenge the cause of Letters," openly stating what "was in the mind of many writers but which none dared risk declare." Since, he claimed, he never again would want to have a play performed on the royal stage, "I was able to render a great service to the dramatic arts and to the writers who work at it by forcing justice to be served, for once, on the actors."

105

Even so, he emphasized the lengths to which he had gone to reach an accommodation with the troupe in 1772 and 1773. After the five performances of "Alcidonis," he had asked for a face-to-face meeting with the troupe for an explanation of the calculation of his share of the proceeds. Specifically, he had asked for an explanation of how the revenues from the loge subscriptions had been calculated into the gate receipt and how the production costs, both ordinary and extraordinary, had been calculated. Yet the troupe had rebuffed these overtures, refusing to meet its "obligations ... to the public and to the authors." Moreover, he continued, the troupe had benefited from its undue power to subjugate men of letters and prevent them from reaching their public by having the First Gentlemen intercede. Attributing his mistreatment to his lack of any patronage, Lonvay concluded by representing himself alongside other men of letters who had suffered similar indignities, explicitly mentioning Renou, Mercier, Palissot, and Belloy. Implying a commonality of cause, Lonvay's *mémoire*, more than any of the pamphlets printed against the troupe in 1775, presented itself as speaking for an organized group of the most sincere and well-intentioned, but also

most victimized and oppressed, aspiring dramatic authors.

* * *

While each subsequent *mémoire* referred back to the previous ones, there is no evidence of any direct collaboration among Mercier, Palissot, and Lonvay in the spring and summer of 1775. The most evident link would appear to be François de Neufchâteau, who authored the "consultations" and filed the legal briefs for Palissot and Lonvay. If François indeed authored the narrative components of the *mémoires* for Palissot and Lonvay, then he reversed the dynamic outlined by Maza, who suggests that innovative dramaturgical ideas anticipating the melodrama influenced the "socially figurative language" used by lawyers in the 1770s. In these instances, François imported representational strategies from the legal profession into the cultural of politics of playwriting. In the same style as his mentor, Simon Henri Nicolas Linguet, François presented Lonvay and Palissot as seeking, above all, autonomy from the court and the royal theater, by identifying with the public and the nation. While Mercier and Renou had already deployed this trope of autonomy, neither Lonvay nor Palissot had conceived or represented themselves as autonomous in their previous relations with the troupe or the court. That is not to suggest that Lonvay or Palissot did not believe the arguments made in their *mémoires*; rather, it is to argue that the attempts, in print, to use the rhetoric of the public and nation to fashion new identities as autonomous, patriotic men of letters was as much a cause as it was a consequence of their self-conceptions as writers.

While their efforts were not coordinated, the turn to print by Mercier, Palissot, and Lonvay influenced how others understood what it meant to be a dramatic author. Their printed *mémoires* represented the aspiring playwrights' claims not as arguments for themselves as individuals, but in terms of the court's illegitimate domination, through the royal troupe, over *all* dramatic authors— and, in turn, over the public and nation. These *mémoires* could not create, objectively, greater autonomy for playwrights or give greater power to the public as a concrete social entity; they did, however, influence how the contemporary press (and thus subsequent historians) represented dramatic authors and men of letters. The *mémoires* represented playwrights not as *honnête* clients of the court and the royal troupe, but as patriots seeking and deserving autonomy from constituted political and social authority, so that they could become disinterested spokesmen of, by, and for a socially abstract, morally authoritative, yet politically disenfranchised, public.

3.10. Du Coudray and Cailhava: Journalist and Dramaturgical Theorist

Despite the great effort expended by writers such as Mercier to fashion their identities as patriot playwrights, contemporaries and subsequent historians have often considered them part of a larger "opposition" tendency among

later eighteenth-century writers on theater. That tendency has resulted from confusion caused by the appearance in these same years by a large number of tracts and treatises on theater, and by the advent of a new identity for writers, that of the journalistic critic. To speak of a "journalistic critic" as opposed to a "dramatic author" is to consider a different self-conception as a writer, as is evident in the authorial voice critics used to comment on the Comédie Française without seeking to define themselves in relation to it. [101](#)

The journalistic critic who did the most to publicize the lawsuits and *mémoires judiciaires* brought by these three authors, and who came to represent them as part of a more general discontent on the part of men of letters, was Alexandre du Coudray. Although he was the author of at least twelve dramatic works in the 1770s and 80s, du Coudray never made any effort to have his works staged by the royal theater; moreover, he had no personal ties to the troupe and no commitment to the idea of a sanctioned royal or national theater. By contrast, he regularly portrayed himself in his writings as an opponent and external critic of the Comédie Française—its actors, its repertory, its political supervisors, and most of all its monopoly over new French plays.

In the spring of 1775, du Coudray entered the fray not as an aspiring dramatic author but as a journalist, authoring a pamphlet which restated the arguments of Palissot's *mémoire*, denouncing in much the same terms the arbitrary authority exercised by the royal troupe over sincere, talented, patriotic men of letters. Claiming to be motivated only by "a noble passion for the theater," he complained that the troupe regularly rejected plays of which they were unable to judge the merits, accepting only works by those who offered the actors "vile servility [and] base flattery." Authors whose plays were performed, he implied, wrote not for the public, but for the players, "most of them having no studies, no knowledge, without *esprit*" to determine which works should be staged. Du Coudray offered the refusal of Palissot's "Courtisanes" as evidence that the Comédie Française, far from a school for morals in French society, contributed only to the "decadence" of French "taste." [102](#)

110

While du Coudray's arguments were not new, his pamphlet was significant because he represented himself to be commenting on theatrical life from without, as a disinterested observer of a conflict between the monopolistic troupe and the subordinated authors. Furthermore, he claimed his pamphlet had been inspired by a general clamor rising from the public for the works of such patriotic authors as Mercier and Palissot, a desire frustrated by the troupe's preference for its own favorites. Du Coudray thereby represented theatrical life in the simplified terms of a melodrama, the very antithesis of what was a multi-layered, highly fluid series of relations through which aspiring writers contested with each other and in which many writers sought out rather than renounced client-patron associations with the troupe or court elites, even as they invoked the "public." As an informed and astute observer, du Coudray must have been aware of such networks of elite sociability, but he had no desire to describe their nuances, because such subtlety did not fit his rhetorical needs as a journalistic pamphleteer.

To solve the problem he had highlighted, du Coudray also proposed the establishment of "a tribunal composed of Men of Letters" to select plays for the royal theater's repertory. Unlike the actors, who were creatures of the court and dependent on protectors and supervisors in the ministry, men of letters would judge proposed plays in accordance with the "will of the Nation," which they were uniquely positioned to comprehend. Moreover, to present his views as being representative of a general complaint arising spontaneously from the public, du Coudray alluded to other pamphlets that had recently called for an end to the actors' despotism, such as *Les Causes de la décadence du goût sur le théâtre et les moyens de le faire reflourir*. This pamphlet had been excerpted from the final chapter of a four-volume treatise, *De l'art de la Comédie*, by Jean-François Cailhava d'Estendoux, the author of two moderately successful comedies for the royal theater. [103](#)



Cailhava's dramaturgical writings belonged to a body of tracts in the late 1760s and early 1770s that depicted the Comédie Française as decadent, due to its close association with the court and Parisian elites. At the same time, such commentators looked askance on commercial, fairground theaters, which they considered too burlesque to provide a proper alternative. The first of these texts, Louis Charpentier's *Causes de la décadence du goût sur le théâtre*, proposed to "renew" French theater by jettisoning the tradition leading from Aristotle through the Académie to Racine and Voltaire; to replace it, Charpentier proposed a dramaturgy based on classical theories but updated to address the morals of contemporary French society. [104](#) Throughout the 1760s, this and other treatises proposed to resurrect a lost tradition of classical comedy, and Cailhava continued this argument by tracing the history of comic theater from Plautus and Terence to Molière. He then presented this comic tradition as an alternative to both the Académie's rules for writing tragedy and to what he depicted as such inferior, modern genres as the *comédie larmoyante*, the *drame*, and *Marivaudage*. He devoted the second half of the treatise to Molière, who he analyzed as a model for both morally useful and commercially viable comedy that could bridge what he presented as a widening gap between the Comédie Française and the majority of theatergoers in contemporary France. Such a culturally disaggregated society was not a "nation," and was therefore "decadent"; to resurrect French culture from this state, Cailhava proposed in the final chapter a new, national theater, which could break the monopoly of the Comédie Française by creating a "second troupe." The idea for a second troupe had been raised in the late 1750s by some of the Comédiens Français themselves, such as Le Kain, Bellecourt, and Prévile, to alleviate their responsibility to perform regularly at court and in Paris. However, the First Gentlemen had rejected the idea, because such a project would require financing from one of the Princes of the Blood, such as the Count d'Artois, the Prince de Condé, or the Duke d'Orléans, each of whom might become an opponent of the king.

In raising this question, Cailhava called for a "Theater of the Nation" that would enjoy legitimacy equal to the Comédie Française and thus could liberate French public theater from control by the vain actors and corrupt court. Cailhava argued in *Causes* that a second royal theater in Paris would provide competition for the monopolistic royal troupe, which out of "emulation" would not only perform better but would also become more solicitous of its authors. Such a reform would enable playwrights to once again inculcate proper *moeurs* across French society through public theater. Cailhava began with the commonplace that the glory of France lay in its theater, and he used this assertion to question the contribution being made by the contemporary Comédie Française, where the works performed lacked "those virile, authentic, vigorous traits which enlarge the soul" and which demonstrate not "the least knowledge of the human heart." For this reason, he considered the Comédie Française—and French theater generally—to have fallen into decadence. To arrest this decline, Cailhava proposed, honor must be restored to the status of writers, who as "men of genius" must receive, as they did in ancient Rome, the attention and respect of both the government and the citizenry they served. Formerly, that attention and respect had come in the form of elite and royal "protection," which assured men of letters in previous centuries the security and moral authority necessary to contribute to the national glory. In the present, however, Cailhava called for writers—and particularly playwrights for the public theater—to be encouraged not by elite protection but by public acclaim and by government policy. Specifically, he entreated the "Prince" to remove the cause of decadence: the monopolistic troupe that prevented patriotic playwrights from speaking to the "French nation," and thus prevented the nation from discovering its true sentiments in the playhouse.

Having established a direct link between the royal troupe's mistreatment of playwrights and its failure in service to the public, Cailhava went on to decry the actors' disregard for the status of their own authors. Attacking the troupe's highly irregular procedures in hearing readings only of works by certain authors and its penchant for humiliating authors at such readings, Cailhava questioned the actors' suitability to judge such men of "art" and "genius" and, moreover, to choose plays for a public whose interests and sentiments they clearly did not share. He asserted that they chose works for performance only from among those written by their clients. For Cailhava, such "privileged authors" were subservient to the company and therefore necessarily insincere and unable to express the sentiments of the nation. Thus, he argued, personal agreements between the troupe and writers must be proscribed, and all playwrights must be granted and must retain full *droits d'auteur*, in terms of remuneration, control over the staging, and all the marks of honor, such as free entrance privileges. Only then could they truly achieve the personal autonomy necessary to serve the public, rather than being subordinated to elite protectors or self-interested entrepreneurs.

A central argument on behalf of a second theater was that it would better serve less wealthy spectators by offering more of the inexpensive admissions that were being replaced at the Comédie Française by higher-priced box seats. In making this argument, Cailhava, du Coudray, and others asserted that high prices and an overly traditional repertory at the Comédie excluded a large audience. They further argued that those excluded from the theater-going public were also being excluded from the nation that a properly functioning public theater formed. At the same time, advocates of a second troupe criticized the fairground theaters and the more farcical, non-classical plays performed in such entrepreneurial venues as inappropriate to the cultivation of *moeurs*. They criticized the entrepreneurial management of fairground theaters for serving only their own interests, and exploiting their authors, rather than serving public morality. Thus, they argued for greater public access to the stage as spectators, while rejecting broader access by undistinguished, commercially-oriented cultural producers to the public.

For patriot playwrights and the critics who adopted their arguments, cultural renewal and the fight against decadence meant maximizing the possibility for all members of society to manifest their common sentiments in a public forum. Yet only those possessing both specific knowledge and evident sincerity should be allowed to articulate those sentiments in that same forum. Such educated but authentic voices of national sentiment therefore should enjoy a prominent position in society, as men of letters. This logic explains why Mercier, Cailhava, and later Rochon continued to seek performance on the stage of, and public identification with, the Comédie Française, even as they denounced its corrupt and decadent state and called for a second troupe that would be more favorable to the public and its playwrights. Denouncing the central theater as inaccessible to the nation while criticizing more accessible venues as culturally inappropriate to the nation was easier for journalistic theater critics than playwrights, since the former sought no personal identification with the theater as an institution. Critics, such as du Coudray and Jean-Pierre Le Fuel de Méricourt (editor of the *Journal des théâtres* and an obstreperous critic of the royal theater), were more likely to represent a central theater as inevitably leading to high admission prices and a self-serving repertory. They therefore called for a series of commercial public theaters that would be both attractive and affordable for socially heterogeneous audiences.

Cailhava sought to distance himself from mere "journalists"; in the preface to *Causes*, he denied that his own printed polemics compromised his legitimacy as a man of letters. He emphasized the distinction between his pamphlet—published in his own name, with the "*honnête* and noble dignity suitable to Men of Letters"—and that of "a timid, anonymous [critic]" who lacked any sense of dignity and honor. Moreover, Cailhava represented himself as having a strong personal investment in the Comédie Française, for which "I have too much desire to see it glorified, to consecrate it to infamy" by attacking it irresponsibly in print. Furthermore, denying that he had any personal interest in his proposals to enhance the status of the

theater's playwrights, he attributed his motivation in writing and publishing *De l'art* and *Causes* to a desire "to renew" French dramatic art and thereby to contribute to the "taste" and "glory" of the French nation. Such a goal necessitated that patriotic writers accept their obligation to write for the public theater, so that it could be reoriented toward the needs of the nation. Were writers to abandon the public theater to make their careers elsewhere, in the fair and boulevard theaters or as journalists, they would not contribute to the moral renewal of French society. [105](#)

Nevertheless, Cailhava's pamphlet proposed changes that, if implemented, would transform theatrical life by dislodging the Comédie Française as the sole gatekeeper to literary life and by restoring a space for a more socially and culturally heterogeneous public. For this reason, his pamphlet had evident appeal to journalists such as du Coudray, whose own writings about theater indicated a conviction that the current situation—a monopolistic troupe answerable only to a corrupt court—was not merely a symptom but the cause of the same decadence against which the *mémoires* of Mercier, Lonvay and Palissot had argued. [106](#) Thus, journalists such as du Coudray and Le Fuel de Méricourt represented themselves as of equal status and allied with playwrights such as Mercier, Palissot, and Cailhava, while those playwrights sought to distinguish themselves from the journalists.

* * *

The First Gentlemen perceived all such public and impolite complaints—whether in *mémoires judiciaires*, in Cailhava's pamphlet, or in the press by journalistic critics such as du Coudray—as a common complaint shared by authors generally. To resolve what they perceived as a single conflict, they considered further modifications to the internal regulations of the Comédie. On July 5, 1775, Duras and Richelieu ordered the committee of actors "to seek a means to conciliate the Comédie Française and the authors" regarding the handling of new plays, for which new orders had been issued only the previous autumn. Since initiating reforms of the royal theaters in 1757, the court had sought consistently to minimize its own involvement in the Comédie's functioning and its conflicts. Yet now, the First Gentlemen needed to end the printed attacks on the royal theater (and on themselves). To this end, they advocated not repression through the Lieutenant-General of the Police but rather a further formalization of relations between the troupe and its authors; to achieve this goal, the malcontent authors themselves might be consulted "by the committee [of Comédiens], but only secretly." Only once an accommodation had been reached should the troupe notify the Intendant of the Royal Amusements of the terms of its agreement. By advocating secret consultations, the First Gentlemen sought to hear playwrights' complaints while publicly keeping their distance from less legitimate and presumably more dangerous writers, such as Mercier.

At the same time, the First Gentlemen considered creating the sought-after second official troupe but keeping it under the court's control by making a Prince of the Blood its patron, protector, and supervisor. Later in July, Duras sought authorization from the King for the Duke d'Orléans to establish a "Theater of *Monsieur*" in the space formerly occupied by the Comédie Française in Saint-Germain. Such a second theater, the First Gentlemen argued, could both assuage complaints by playwrights and provide a new mechanism to give more of them a stake in the royal theatrical regime and thereby bring them under its control. While the King approved of the plan, the troupe asked that its implementation be delayed and "kept secret for two years," so that the Comédie Française and its supervisors would not appear to have capitulated to the demands of Cailhava. The troupe members shared the First Gentlemen's concern to end the printing and distribution in Paris and the provinces of pamphlets attacking their theater as decadent; however, the actors proposed a more traditional strategy, asking Duras to continue "to protect" the royal theater by repressing "the secret machinations of Sr. Cailhava and of his adherents." ¹⁰⁸ To the troupe, the complaints concerning its own monopoly and its sale of box-seat subscriptions were without merit; moreover, they argued that men such as Mercier and Cailhava who made such criticisms had demonstrated such a lack of politeness and protection that they had no honor—nor any status or power in literary life—which need be respected.

3.11. Rutledge: Playwright and Anti-Man of Letters

The subtle difference between playwrights and journalistic critics becomes more evident by considering some of the numerous editions of plays from the mid and later 1770s that served entirely polemical purposes. In such cases, the play itself was merely an extension of the preface. Both were written only to be printed, generally anonymously and clandestinely. In such cases, the authors had no intention of seeing their play staged; instead, they wrote as journalists. Although printed plays were used in some cases as pamphlets against the royal troupe, the Comédie Française functioned for such writers neither as a gatekeeper nor as a protector, because they were not seeking to identify themselves publicly as men of letters.

The best example of such a journalistic pamphleteer who used printed plays to polemical effect was Jean-Jacques Rutledge. In the mid-1770s, Rutledge became involved in polemics about the theater, particularly the debate concerning Shakespearean dramaturgy occasioned by the publication of the Le Tourneur translation. In response to Voltaire's open letter to the Académie Française in 1776 that was highly critical of Shakespearean dramaturgy, Rutledge wrote his *Observations à l'Académie Française au sujet d'une lettre de M. de Voltaire*. ¹⁰⁹ In the months immediately after this polemic appeared—and thus after several years of printed attacks on the Comédie by self-declared patriot playwrights—Rutledge wrote and had printed two plays, accompanied by prefaces, that were not intended to be

performed. Rather, these works appeared as pamphlets in which he claimed to take a position of opposition to the leading institutions of literary life: the Académie, the Royal Household, the Comédie, and elite social gatherings, such as elite salons. Yet by writing plays as satirical pamphlets rather than dramaturgical exemplars, Rutledge showed that he remained uninterested in penetrating into such institutions or in seeking to be accepted within these networks. In this last respect, Rutledge's plays were written from a position distinct from that of Mercier, Cailhava, and others discussed above. Nevertheless, Rutledge's pamphlets purported to extend the patriotic journalistic campaign begun by these earlier writers in that he similarly claimed to speak of, by, and for the public against the illegitimate power of the court, *le monde*, and the royal theater.

In 1776, he wrote and had printed *Le Bureau d'esprit*, a parody of the salon of Madame Geoffrin, which he depicted as "the divisive authorities" of literary life. He did not intend for the play to be performed, as the unstructured dialogue would make it nearly impossible to stage. Moreover, Rutledge parodied the conventions of printed plays written by those seeking to establish themselves as men of letters through playwriting for the royal theater. Remaining anonymous, he dedicated the work not to a patron, but "to all disinterested Men of Letters who are of no party and to all sensible men." As we have seen, authorial denials of any search for personal gain or social distinction were standard in this genre, yet Rutledge's dedication could not be read as a means of fashioning an identity as a client to a greater individual or body, since he did not dedicate it to an elite patron or the royal theater but to other, unnamed writers. This anonymity (of both writer and dedicatee) sought to suggest that the author's denial of self-interest was not a stylistic convention, but a naïve and sincere declaration. This appearance of sincerity was reinforced by the dedication's open hostility to any potential patron and to all clients of such patrons, referred to as "privileged authors." Not only denying any pursuit of self-interest, but also openly attacking any potential source of legitimacy, and remaining anonymous to ensure that any social value attributed to the work would not be transferred to its author, Rutledge presented himself here as an anti-man of letters. Claiming to seek no "indulgence" or praise and making no claim to contribute to the greater glory of French literature or of France itself, he framed the printed play as a "criminal comedy," reinforcing its transgression of the conventions of the genre. Finally, he made clear the targets of his parody, concluding the dedication by consenting that the work was indeed "an assassination attempt of *lèze-Philosophie*." [110](#)

Rutledge thus fashioned himself as a complete outsider rather than as one on the margins of literary or theatrical life and struggling to get in. Later in 1776, he then had printed another short play parodying an established institution of cultural life, *Les Comédiens, ou le Foyer*. [111](#) Once again anonymous, this brochure was also not a printed script for a stage play but a pamphlet subverting and parodying the conventions of a dramatic edition

that could be attributed to a man of letters. In the prefatory "Dedicatory epistle to the public," he employed rhetoric similar to that of Mercier, situating the "respectable public" where a protector might usually appear, attributing to it the merit of the work and, by extension, of its author. He then proceeded to blame the troupe for preventing him, the author, from gaining the proper recognition from his public. The preface then became farcical, pretending that the edition has been printed in the year 2440, the year in which Mercier's utopian novel had been set. The manuscript had been found supposedly with many other worthy plays long lost in a trunk which had belonged to the actor Prévile, who had died "following a violent fainting spell and an apoplectic fit caused by the noise of whistles" from the audience. The "old farceur" had marked the work "insolent and to be burned, and the author would merit being hung," indicating how indifferent he and the other late eighteenth-century royal actors had been towards "good manuscripts ... towards authors," and especially "toward the public," which had been denied "the heritage of Corneille and Racine." Thus, announced the unnamed editor of the play being published, he would henceforth render all additional plays found to the public, because "they belong to you."

125

The second page of the edition lists the actors designated for each role, as would have an edition of a play performed by the Comédie Française. Yet, once again, this convention is parodied. The characters' names would have been recognizable to an eighteenth-century reader as representing different dramaturgical genres: "Alceste" ("Misanthrope") for classical comedy; "Hyppolite" ("Phèdre") for classical tragedy; and "Crispin," a *dell'arte* stock character. Finally, the lead character, "Gengiskahn," was drawn from Voltaire's allegorical 1755 play about playwriting, "Orphelin de la Chine," in which this character, an exotic despot, had represented "modern tragedy."

The action of the play consists of a troupe meeting to hear a new play read by an aspiring dramatic author. After keeping "the poor devil" waiting three hours in the ante-chamber, the troupe members ask who has recommended him to them. When the candidate invokes no less a cultural broker than Voltaire, the troupe members cringe: "How we adore Arouet and, above all, how we fear him." When the would-be playwright begins to read his work, he is interrupted by troupe members anxious to know what roles they will be assigned. Frustrated with the actors' indifference to his play, the sincere author invokes the public as the ultimate judge of the success of the work. In response, of course, the troupe members show contempt and outrage at such an idea. Finally, amidst this chaotic reading, the ghost of Molière enters. Considered the founding father of the Comédie Française, and both an actor and a playwright, Molière incarnated the debate over whether dramatic art resides in the play or in its performance. Not surprisingly, Rutledge's "ghost of Molière" admonishes the troupe members for their indifference to those authors working for "the good of the King and the people." The ghost accuses the troupe of showing only "bad taste" in their choice of plays and "mediocrity" in their acting. The soldier accompanying the ghost then seeks to arrest the actor Monvel (notorious for rejecting roles

which did not please him by claiming illness) for indifference to the public, but the ghost of Molière generously intervenes and offers him a reprieve. Finally, the troupe members are warned that if they do not reform themselves, a second royal theater "will finally go up," forcing the Comédiens Français to compete. However, to retain the farcical tone, Rutledge undermines his polemical intent by giving the villainous actors the last word: "Rest assured, M. Molière. We will still hold the privilege."

The issues raised in *Les Comédiens* were the same as those on which Mercier and Cailhava had written, yet Rutledge's tone differed from their earnestness and the seriousness displayed toward their efforts at self-fashioning. Rutledge's irony, by contrast, suggested a distance from the authorial identity he had created. Moreover, Rutledge presented no alternatives or solutions to the perceived problems; instead, his writings only mock literary institutions, rather than critique their legitimacy. Further thumbing his nose at the royal troupe, Rutledge submitted the play to the Comédiens in the spring of 1777 but made no effort to lobby for a chance to read it for serious consideration. For his efforts, Rutledge was arrested and briefly imprisoned in the Bastille on April 10, 1777, and then released on the understanding that he leave Paris. After his release, he traveled to Yverdon, Switzerland, where he produced first a two-volume anthology of *Oeuvres diverses*, including a self-justificatory preface and then the *Babillard*, modeled on the English *Tatler*.

He also wrote a five-act prose play, *Le Train de Paris*, which he proposed in a letter to the Comédie Française without submitting the manuscript or asking for a reading. Instead, he wrote the troupe, "The author does not solicit; he proposes," and warned that if refused, he would turn directly to the "tribunal of the public." When the troupe responded that they must have the play before they could agree to a reading, he refused to be "judged by ... you," claiming that he recognized only two true judges: "the Public" and God. Rutledge then left the troupe "free to go seek out the plays of passive writers," while "the Chevalier Rutledge [remains free] to take his" where it would be appreciated. [112](#)

Rutledge might then appear to exemplify what Darnton described as a "Grub Street hack" frustrated by his exclusion from the legitimizing institutions of elite literary life and thus turning against the superannuated Old Regime and especially its Enlightened liberals, from Voltaire to Necker. Gelbart, modifying Darnton's categories, characterized Rutledge as a "*frondeur*," not only for his opposition to royal power but, just as importantly, for having collaborated in a "journalistic support system" led by Mercier. Both of these interpretations can be improved upon in light of the foregoing discussion of Mercier's identity as a patriot playwright. Rutledge, I would argue, was certainly marginal to Old Regime theatrical and literary life; however, unlike Lonvay, Mercier, and Cailhava, he and Le Fuel were uninterested in

establishing themselves legitimately in literary life or gaining the authority to speak publicly in their own names. Although Rutledge wrote plays that were printed, he did so only to parody those "men of letters" who considered themselves socially prominent due to their literary practice. Thus, his use of print should be distinguished from Mercier's self-fashioning as a patriotic playwright through play prefaces and *mémoires judiciaires*. Mercier had invested heavily in, and could not disengage from, his identity as a man of letters; Rutledge, by contrast, had no engagement with such an identity other than parody.

130

Such a distinction would be easy to miss, especially because Rutledge himself deliberately sought to efface it. *Les Comédiens*, in its attacks on the troupe, presented itself as a continuation of Mercier's printed attacks on the troupe members and their supervisors at court, of François de Neufchâteau's legal *mémoires*, and of Cailhava's pamphlets for a second troupe. In addition to appropriating Mercier's language, Rutledge went so far as to attribute his play to Mercier by creating a title page for *Comédiens* which facetiously reports it had been performed "January 5, 2440." As a consequence, Rutledge's plays have often been misattributed to Mercier. Moreover, the play explicitly mentioned even more prestigious playwrights who had been outsiders at times, Voltaire and Molière. Such allusions could be read as a contention that Rutledge was but the latest in a long line of authors repressed by constituted authority, including the royal troupe. Indeed, Pierre Peyronnet's well-researched article on Rutledge falls into this trap, comparing him to Piron, Voltaire, and Mercier, as playwrights who had all complained of mistreatment by the Comédie. ¹¹³ However, given Rutledge's actual lack of personal involvement with the troupe and his lack of investment in the official institutions of literary life, his pamphlet-plays are better read as parodies. His targets were those seeking to fashion themselves as men of letters by writing plays for the royal theater, such as Mercier; for his part, Mercier found his efforts at self-fashioning rendered more difficult, rather than aided, by such pamphleteers as Rutledge.

3.12. Conclusion: Playwrights and their Publics

We have seen that, although "patriot" dramaturgy and criticism purported to emanate from a common marginal position, in no case can their patriot approach to playwriting or criticism be attributed to their sociological exclusion. The intellectual opposition expressed by Mercier, Lonvay, Palissot, and Cailhava to the court, *le monde*, and the Comédie was by no means incompatible with a specific form of classicism, as demonstrated by Cailhava's exaltation of Molière and classical comedy and Mercier's championing of the "serious genre." In opposing classicist academic dramaturgy, both Mercier and Cailhava took positions that were nevertheless well within a classical dramaturgical tradition and thereby distinguished themselves from burlesque fairground theater that could not provide the basis for a national cultural renewal. Moreover, patriot playwrights also sought to distinguish themselves from such journalists and "anti-men of letters" as Rutledge, du Coudray, and Le Fuel, each of whom employed

similar language, but from different status positions and with different goals. Thus, while this chapter has addressed the appearance of an alternative representation of dramatic author—as patriots, autonomous from all but an uninstitutionalized public—it has argued that it cannot be assumed that those who expressed such ideas occupied a shared social position. Despite the commonality of claims on behalf of such playwrights and their public in the 1770s, there were actually several degrees of marginality, each subsequently farther outside of theatrical, literary, and public life.

Not all uses of print, of accessible genres, of highly figurative rhetoric, and of appeals to the public were of the same order. They depended on the position from which one made such strategic use of a given medium, genre, and orientation, and on where one sought to position oneself through that strategy. Voltaire's plays—printed with prefaces—and his non-theatrical writings allowed him, even as he pursued and achieved status at court, to occupy the more autonomous position of *Philosophe*. Likewise, Diderot's use of printed prefaces to argue for a "serious genre" clearly deviated from the classical trajectory of a seventeenth-century writer who identified himself in relation to elite protectors and disdained any identification ascribed by a non-elite audience. However, in these instances, the appeal to the public came from a position of relative legitimacy in literary and theatrical life, with no serious risk of losing standing, as with Voltaire, or no self-definition as a man of letters at stake, as with Diderot.

For would-be dramatic authors such as Renou, Lonvay, Mercier, Cailhava, or the Palissot of the 1770s, only by suppressing any clientelistic attachments to a patron or the royal troupe could printed appeals for recognition as a man of letters from the public serve their strategic purposes. Thus, whatever the cause—loss of protection, inability to acquire it, or ideological antipathy to court culture—these writers claimed to circumvent the power such protectors could exercise for or against them with respect to the *Comédie*. Instead, they employed alternative representational strategies to claim prominence as writers. To define themselves not as playwrights dependent upon the *Comédie Française* and its supervisors at court but as autonomous men of letters, Mercier and Cailhava appealed to the public through the civil judiciary, through *mémoires*, and through other printed polemics. Yet they continued also to endeavor to establish themselves as dramatic authors for the royally-sanctioned public theater, and they continued to write plays in hopes of attaining prominence and centrality in literary life. When threatened with being cut off definitively from the possibility of occupying such a position, as were Mercier and Palissot for different reasons in the mid and later 1770s, these patriot writers reoriented themselves away from further conflict and sought to make their peace with the established institutions, hierarchies, and norms of literary life. While they challenged the theater regulations and, moreover, resisted playing by the rules of the game of playwriting, their correspondence and other writings demonstrate that they still fully understood these rules and

regulations, and the hierarchies these codes supported. Even as they represented themselves as dramatic authors and men of letters in a fashion at odds with the model established by Voltaire, they continued to strive to advance their intellectual, dramaturgical, and moral-social agendas. Thus, they did not call for the abolition of the Comédie Française, only for a reform of how it operated or a diminution of the inordinate influence held over it by courtiers and troupe members. Through the establishment of a second troupe, they argued, official public theater would become more responsive to the needs of the nation, as articulated by patriotic men of letters.

At the same time, the particularly precarious position of a "patriot" man of letters, marginal to yet identifying with the dominant institutions and norms of literary life, has been made evident through comparison with journalists such as du Coudray or the "anti-man of letters" represented by Rutledge. For du Coudray or Rutledge, the writing and printing of plays, prefaces, and journalistic criticism was not a strategy for fashioning themselves as men of letters. Even though they voiced complaints on the same issues as did Lonvay, Mercier, Cailhava, and Palissot, and although they presented themselves similarly in their printed writings as frustrated playwrights appealing to a broad public, they had no interest in accruing legitimacy or becoming established in literary and theatrical life. For them, cultural politics, at least by the late 1770s, had ceased to be a game they wanted to or were able to play, even from the margins. Since these critics had no interest in exerting any influence, and since they had no real intellectual or moral-social agenda to advance, their exclusion from cultural power was something they not only welcomed but highlighted in their published writings. Thus, their printed appeals to the public for vindication were of a different order than those of Mercier or Cailhava.

135

By contrast, Lonvay, Renou, Mercier, and Cailhava continued to conceive of themselves as men of letters—potential literary and moral leaders in society who therefore attributed their position as established outsiders to an inappropriate exercise of power not only against them but against the public and nation that they depicted as their natural audience. Each of these writers had, upon entering into literary life in the 1760s, demonstrated a commitment to the dominant values and institutions of Old Regime cultural life. In the early 1770s, however, each of these writers had broken with, become excluded from, or at least come to oppose these norms and hierarchies, leading them to fashion alternative models for themselves as men of letters. Despite having coexisted, known, and (apparently) collaborated with journalistic critics in the immediate aftermath of the change of regime in the fall of 1774, and despite the similarities in rhetoric and medium between *frondeur* criticism and their patriot campaign, there was by 1777 a near total divorce between these two self-conceptions as writers with respect to society.

Without paying such careful attention to the position a given writer or group

of writers held in relation to the institutions of Old Regime literary life, the distinction between Voltaire's, Mercier's, and Rutledge's appeals to the public would be effaced, and all would appear similarly outsiders, seeking to circumvent institutions of constituted authority in the name of society at large. That Voltaire was at the center, Mercier on the margins looking in, and Rutledge outside and looking out of theatrical life as centered on the Comédie Française gives different meaning and importance to their otherwise rhetorically-similar self-fashioning. That patriot playwrights continued to identify with institutions of theatrical and literary life as constituted, and that they continued to position themselves within rather than against it would mean that, given the opportunity, they would collaborate with those dramatic authors who continued to fashion themselves on the classical model of an *honnête homme*. Even though patriot playwrights such as Mercier and Cailhava fundamentally disagreed with this model, they retained some engagement with the norms of legitimacy and civility.

Patriot playwrights, in this respect, did not reject social hierarchy as an element of literary life. Indeed, they went to great lengths to distinguish themselves from declared writers of even lower status, such as journalistic critics. Although this chapter has presented the patriot playwright as a figure antithetical to the *honnête homme* on which late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century tragedians fashioned themselves, we will see in the second half of this book how writers deployed patriot rhetoric in a complicated dialectic with, rather than as a total rejection of, established norms of civility in literary life. The figure who, in the 1770s and 1780s, made the most use of this dialectical tension between civility and autonomy, *honnêteté* and honor, would be Beaumarchais. His efforts to fashion himself as at once an *honnête homme* **and** a *patriote*—and the influence these efforts had on other writers and on literary culture more broadly—are at the heart of the second half of this book.

Notes:

Note 1: BCF 52-24, f. 23–24. [Back](#).

Note 2: Much of this early cultural historiography on eighteenth-century patriotism focused on the theater and specifically Belloy's "patriotic" play "Le Siège de Calais" (on which see Chapter 4). This work includes Clarence Brenner, *L'Histoire nationale dans la tragédie française au XVIIIe siècle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1929); Margaret Moffet, "Le Siège de Calais et l'opinion public en 1765," *Revue d'histoire littéraire de France* 39 (1932): 339–354; Jean Rivoire, *Patriotisme dans le théâtre sérieux de la Révolution* (Paris: Gilbert, 1950); Lenart Breitholtz, *Le Théâtre historique en France jusqu'à la Révolution* (Uppsala: Lundequistka Bokhandeln, 1952);

and, much more recently, though on the same question Anne Boës, *La Lanterne magique de l'histoire: essai sur le théâtre historique en France de 1750 à 1789* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1982). [Back.](#)

Note 3: Edmond Dziembowski, *Un nouveau patriotisme français, 1750—1770* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1998); David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France, 1680—1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 68 — 78; Catherine Maire, *De la cause de Dieu à la cause de la Nation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998). [Back.](#)

Note 4: Dziembowski, 391—398; on appropriations by seventeenth and eighteenth-century French writers of the classical commonplace of the utility of literature, see the special issue of *Littératures classiques* (1999). [Back.](#)

Note 5: Ravel, "Theater Beyond Privilege: Changes in French Play Publication, 1700—1789," *SVEC* 12 (2001): 319 -367; Kirsop, "Nouveautés: Théâtre et roman," in Chartier and Martin, eds., II: 218—219. [Back.](#)

Note 6: This estimate is based on 500 randomly selected editions catalogued in the BN series Yth and Yf, the Collections Rondel and Douai of the Arsenal, and [Paul Lacroix] *Bibliothèque dramatique de M. de Soleinne* (Paris: 1834—1835). [Back.](#)

Note 7: Jean-Louis Flandrin and Maria Flandrin, "La circulation du livre dans la société du XVIIIe siècle," in *Livre et société dans la France du XVIIIe siècle*, François Furet et al., (Paris: Mouton, 1970), II: 39—72. [Back.](#)

Note 8: Darnton, *Forbidden Best-Sellers*, 3—21. [Back.](#)

Note 9: [Bardinet], *Les événements nocturnes* (La Haye: Mécquinon, 1777). [ARS Rf. 7819] [Back.](#)

Note 10: On the rhetoric of dedications and prefaces in the sixteenth-century Europe, see Kevin Dunn, *Pretexts of Authority: The Rhetoric of Authorship in the Renaissance Preface* (Stanford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Chartier, "Princely patronage and the economy of dedication"; Brown, *Poets, Patrons and Printers*; on seventeenth-century France, see Leiner, *Widmungsbrief*, and Peter Shoemaker, "Guez de Balzac and the Rhetoric of Patronage," (Ph.D. diss., Princeton U, 1997). [Back.](#)

Note 11: ARS Rf 8004. Other than this "Avis," however, this "new" edition is identical to the first Duchesne edition of 1765 (ARS Rf 7981 (2)). [Back.](#)

Note 12: BN Yth 77. Andez is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. [Back.](#)

Note 13: On the size of press runs, see Kirsop, 220; on average audience size, see La Grave, 185—189. [Back.](#)

Note 14: BCF 137b, f. 108. [Back.](#)

Note 15: BN Yth 77. [Back.](#)

Note 16: Jean Sgard, "Des collections aux oeuvres complètes, 1756—1798," in *La Notion d'oeuvres complètes*, eds. Sgard and Catherine Volpilhac-Auger (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1999), 1—27. [Back.](#)

Note 17: BCF 124a, f. 1; other, older writers who sent copies of newly printed works include La Harpe (Todd, #8, #16; 1778), Le Fevre (BCF 124a, f. 49; 1778), and Buirette for *Pierre le Cruel* (BCF 124a, f. 57; 1778). [Back.](#)

Note 18: Murray, *Theatrical Legitimation*; Charter, *Printing Drama in Early Modern Europe*; Sgard, "Des collections," 8—10; Julie Stone Peters, *Theatre of the Book, 1480—1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Rendall, "The Portrait of the Author." [Back.](#)

Note 19: *Le Bonheur des Gens de Lettres* (Bordeaux: 1763); *Discours sur la lecture* (Paris: 1764); *Que notre âme peut se suffire à elle-même* (Londres: 1768). These and other similar writings by Mercier from this period were later republished by the Dutch Huguenot printer E. van Harrevelt as *Éloges et discours philosophiques qui ont concouru pour le prix de l'Académie Française & de plusieurs autres académies* (Amsterdam: 1776). [Back.](#)

Note 20: *Virginie*, 86 and iv. [Back.](#)

Note 21: The standard critical view of Mercier's early plays as exemplary *dramas* is stated by Léon Béclard, in his *Sébastien Mercier* (Paris: Champion, 1903), 152—170; Gilles Girard, "Louis-Sébastien Mercier, dramaturge" (*Thèse du 3ème cycle*, Université d'Aix-Marseille, 1970), 125—174; Fawzia Boubia, *Theater der Politik, Politik des Theaters* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1978), 104—120; and Martine de Rougemont, "Le Dramaturge," in *Louis-Sébastien Mercier, un hérétique en littérature*, ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris: Mercure, 1995), 121—125. The newer argument is presented by Enrico Rufi, *Le rêve laïque de Louis-Sébastien Mercier, entre littérature et politique* (Oxford: Voltaire Institute, 1995), 33—68. [Back.](#)

Note 22: The paradigmatic form of such a letter was the verse *épître*, praising the recipient and declaring the sender's sense of obligation to the recipient for serving as his literary inspiration. Such *épîtres* implied a desire by the sender to become a client to a cultural broker, such as those sent by Mercier's contemporary Nicolas-Louis François de Neufchâteau in 1767 (Archives Nationales (AN) 27 AP 9, II and AN 27 AP 10, #2). [Back.](#)

Note 23: Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal (ARS) MSS 15078 (II 1) B, f. 4. [Back.](#)

Note 24: ARS MSS 15081 (I 1), f. 475; 15078 (II, 1) B, f. 11. [Back.](#)

Note 25: Jacques Revel, "La Cour," in *Lieux de mémoire*, ed. Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), vol. 3, pt. 2, 129—193, quotes at 134 and 161. [Back.](#)

Note 26: *Du Théâtre, ou Nouvel essai sur l'art dramatique* (Amsterdam: E. van Harrevelt, 1773). The text was written for the most part in the latter months of

1772, and the dedicatory epistle "To my brother" (iii) is dated January 18, 1773. A request for a "tacit permission" was denied by the royal censor on March 17, 1774 (BN-MSS FF 21982, f. 58). For a critical discussion of this important text, see Ruffi, esp. 17–116. [Back.](#)

Note 27: *Du Théâtre*, 218–243 and 337–339. [Back.](#)

Note 28: *Du Théâtre*, 347–372. [Back.](#)

Note 29: BCF 137a, f. 1; BCF 52-24, f. 84, f. 172. On December 22, 1773, he requested a reading for another play, "La Brouette du Vinaigrier." [Back.](#)

Note 30: *Mémoires secrets*, VII, 187. [Back.](#)

Note 31: Van Kley, *Religious Origins of the French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) 249–302; Singham, "A Conspiracy of Twenty-Million Frenchmen" (Ph.D. diss, Princeton University, 1991), 275–6; Gelbart, "Frondeur Journalism in the 1770s: Theater Criticism and Radical Politics in the Prerevolutionary French Press," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 17:4 (1984): 493–514; and Brown, "Le Fuel de Méricourt and the *Journal des théâtres*," *French History* 9:1 (1995): 1–28. [Back.](#)

Note 32: David A. Bell, *Lawyers and Citizens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 145–155. [Back.](#)

Note 33: BCF 52-24, f. 22, November 23, 1772. [Back.](#)

Note 34: BCF 52-34, f. 47; March 7, 1773. [Back.](#)

Note 35: BCF 52-34, f. 59; April 1773. [Back.](#)

Note 36: BCF 52-24, f. 102–103. [Back.](#)

Note 37: Sara Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 130–140. Maza reports that these were among the most widely circulated *factum* of the 1770s, reaching up to 10,000 copies, which were read across France and Europe. [Back.](#)

Note 38: The reception is recorded in BCF 52-24, f. 28, and the offer of a "personal agreement" concerning his *droits* is on f. 33. [Back.](#)

Note 39: BCF 52-24, f. 35–37. [Back.](#)

Note 40: *Mémoires secrets* (VII, 126–127) reported on Beaumarchais's meeting with Sartine and his protectors and opponents at the court. BCF 52-24, f. 107 includes two orders from the King's Privy Council, the first dated February 8, authorizing the troupe to perform the play, and the second proscribing it two days later. [Back.](#)

Note 41: BCF, Renou, #1, January 21, 1760; BCF, "Renou," # 2; May 26, 1772. [Back.](#)

Note 42: BCF, "Renou," 3; September 28, 1772. [Back.](#)

Note 43: BCF, "Renou," #4; October 5, 1772. The letter of October 5 and the letter to Richelieu, dated November 25, were transcribed with the "deliberation" of the troupe's assembly of December 7, 1772, (BCF "Renou," #6.) [Back.](#)

Note 44: BCF, "Renou," #7, February 15, 1773. [Back.](#)

Note 45: BCF 52-24, f. 41; BCF, "Renou," #8, February 22, 1773. [Back.](#)

Note 46: BCF, 52-24, ff. 29—31; BCF 52-24, f. 43; February 22, 1773. [Back.](#)

Note 47: BCF, "Renou," # 9; April 19, 1773; BCF, "Renou," #12; BCF 52-24, f. 72; June 7, 1773. [Back.](#)

Note 48: BCF 52-24, f. 73; June 13, 1773. [Back.](#)

Note 49: *Térée et Philomèle* (Amsterdam: 1773). The preface appears on i—xxiii; the quote is from xii. [Back.](#)

Note 50: References to his letters to Richelieu and requests for a prompt staging of "Térée" appear in the letters to the troupe of February 13 and 22 and June 13, 1773 (BCF 52-24, f. 41, f. 42 and f. 73, respectively), but do not appear in the copies of these letters on pages vi, xiii and xiv of the preface. [Back.](#)

Note 51: *Térée*, preface, xvii. [Back.](#)

Note 52: *Ibid.*, xxi-xxiii. Indeed, after publishing his play, Renou gave up his attempts to become a playwright; the following October 14, he accepted the 207 *livres* due him by the troupe (BCF, "Renou," #13). He returned to painting, and was elected to the royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in 1781. [Back.](#)

Note 53: [Monvel], *Observation sur la Préface de Térée et Philomèle* [Paris: 1775] BN 8-Yf Pièce 329. Quotes at 5—7. [Back.](#)

Note 54: *Alcidonis, ou la Journée Lacédaémonienne* (Paris: Lacombe, 1768) ARS-Rondel Rf 11619. [Back.](#)

Note 55: Approval for the performance was issued in 1763, according to Alexandre Du Coudray, *Correspondence dramatique* (I: 56—68), written in the fall of 1776. Approval for an edition was granted by Coqueley de Chaussepierre on February 14, 1764, according to the 1768 edition. [Back.](#)

Note 56: BCF 137a, f. 1; BCF 52-24, f. 10; BCF 52-24, f. 38; February 8, 1773; ARS Rf 11620. [Back.](#)

Note 57: Quoted from Lonvay's summary of Blacque's argument in *Mémoire à consulter et consultation pour le Sieur Lonvay de la Saussaye contre la troupe des Comédiens Français ordinaires du Roi* (Paris: Gueffier, 1775). [Back.](#)

Note 58: BCF 124c, f. 4 v; June 18, 1773. [Back.](#)

Note 59: AN O1 845, f. 14. The BCF dossier "Lonvay de la Saussaye" contains only one document—a parchment transcription of the deliberations of the Grand Council of State, dated August 2, 1773. On the power of *évocation*, see Michel Antoine, *Le Conseil du Roi sous le règne de Louis XV* (Geneva: Droz, 1970), 292–296. [Back.](#)

Note 60: BCF, "Mercier," #1. Dated February 4, 1775, the manuscript is marked "received March 1, 1775." [Back.](#)

Note 61: BCF, "Mercier," #2, March 6, 1775. [Back.](#)

Note 62: [Henrion de Pansey], *Mémoire à consulter et consultation pour le Sieur Mercier; Contre la troupe des Comédiens Français ordinaires du Roi* (Paris: Clousier, 1775) BN 4 FM 21453. [Back.](#)

Note 63: BCF 52-24, f. 180. [Back.](#)

Note 64: A manuscript copy of the legal brief is in ARS MSS 15078 (I) ff. 171–175, which was printed as *Premier Mémoire pour le Sieur Mercier Contre la Troupe des Comédiens Français* (BN 4 FM 21452). [Back.](#)

Note 65: *Ibid.*, 29–38. [Back.](#)

Note 66: From Commissioner de Laubepie's report of Mercier's complaint (AN Y 15076, May 25, 1775). [Back.](#)

Note 67: *Tableau*, I: 1406. [Back.](#)

Note 68: The "summons [*assignation*]," dated June 2, 1775, was transcribed in BCF 124b, f. 36 and 137b, f. 36. The interview with Albert and the Parlement's physical and political protection of Mercier was reported in François Métra, *Correspondence littéraire secrète*, nos. 24–25 (June 10–17), in I: 421–422. [Back.](#)

Note 69: BCF 124b, f. 36 and 137b, f. 36; June 2 [1775]. [Back.](#)

Note 70: BCF 124b, f. 36-37. [Back.](#)

Note 71: BCF, dossier "Mercier": transcription from "Registres du Conseil du Roi," dated June 22, 1775. [Back.](#)

Note 72: *Mémoires secrets* (VIII, 103), August 1775. [Back.](#)

Note 73: ARS MSS 15078 ff. 116-27, then printed as *Requête au Roi, pour le Sr. Mercier* (BN 4 FM 21454). [Back.](#)

Note 74: See Jacques Gury, "Introduction" to Pierre Le Tourneur, *Préface du Shakespeare*, ed., Gury (Geneva: Droz, 1990). [Back.](#)

Note 75: BCF, "Mercier," letter of August 13, 1776; AN O1 845, # 13—14 (April 12, 1778); BCF, "Mercier," "Letter to M. Mercier," January 22, 1781. [Back.](#)

Note 76: AN F17 1212, dossier, #2. [Back.](#)

Note 77: ARS MSS 15081 (I, 1), f. 248 (a fragment from late 1780s). [Back.](#)

Note 78: Scholarship on Palissot concentrates on the polemics surrounding "Philosophes." See for example, Hervé Guenot, "Palissot de Montenoy, un ennemi de Diderot et les Philosophes," *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie* (1986): 59—63; Paul Benhamou, "La guerre de Palissot contre Diderot," in *Les Ennemis de Diderot*, ed. Anne Chouillet (Geneva: Klincksieck, 1993), 17—29; Colin Duckworth, "Voltaire's *L'écossaise* and Palissot's *Les Philosophes*: A Strategic Battle in a Major War," *SVEC* 87 (1972): 333—351; and Hilda Freud, "Palissot's *Philosophes* and the Philosophers," (Ph.D. diss., Columbia U., 1965). Daniel Delafarge, *La Vie et l'oeuvre de Palissot, 1730—1814* (Paris: Hachette, 1912), is dated but takes a longer-term view. [Back.](#)

Note 79: These letters are reprinted in *Oeuvres de M. Palissot* (Liege: Clement, 1777), VI: 3—40; quotes from 26 and 40. [Back.](#)

Note 80: For a provocative essay on Choiseul's role in mid-eighteenth-century French politics, see Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *Choiseul, 1719—1785: Naissance de la gauche* (Paris: Bussière, 1998). [Back.](#)

Note 81: Palissot, *Oeuvres*, I: 71—89. [Back.](#)

Note 82: ARS, Collection Rondel Rf.9137. [Back.](#)

Note 83: Palissot, *Oeuvres*, VI: 41—45. [Back.](#)

Note 84: *Ibid.*, 136—7. [Back.](#)

Note 85: At the time, Palissot may have circulated these letters in manuscript on his own behalf; several years later, he printed them in his *Oeuvres* VI: 60—69. [Back.](#)

Note 86: *Ibid.*, 47. [Back.](#)

Note 87: Because of rather than despite his exile, Palissot continued a cordial correspondence throughout the 1760s with Voltaire, who had himself authored "L'Écossaise" as a pro-Philosophe rejoinder to "les Philosophes." At several points, Voltaire even sought to engineer a reconciliation for Palissot with Diderot and the other Encyclopédistes. See Palissot, *Oeuvres*, VI: 289—396. [Back.](#)

Note 88: BCF, "Palissot," #2. [Back.](#)

Note 89: Palissot, *Oeuvres*, VI: 146—148. [Back.](#)

Note 90: In a series of letters to Voisenon and Richelieu during the spring and summer of 1770 (*Oeuvres*, VI: 78—80), Palissot sought to ensure their support for "our comic plot" and make clear that he expected them to obtain the assent of the theater censor Marin to the play's performance by the royal theater. [Back.](#)

Note 91: Palissot, *Oeuvres* VI: 88—98. On Molière not as satirizing polite models of social interaction and of hypocrisy at court but as actually celebrating court society and mocking those who did not comprehend its inherent sociability, see Pierre Force, *Molière, ou le Prix des choses* (Paris: Nathan, 1994), 7—12 and 249—252. [Back.](#)

Note 92: *L'Homme dangereux* (Amsterdam: 1770) BN 8 Yth 8605. [Back.](#)

Note 93: Palissot, *Oeuvres*, VI: 98—100. [Back.](#)

Note 94: *Mémoires secrets* (VIII: 1). [Back.](#)

Note 95: BCF, dossier: "Palissot," #4 (February 20, 1775). [Back.](#)

Note 96: "Mémoire read by M. Palissot, to the assembly of Comédiens," (March 20, 1775); BCF, 52-24, f. 174. [Back.](#)

Note 97: *Mémoire à consulter et consultation pour le Sieur Palissot de Montenois, Contre la Troupe des Comédiens Français* (Paris: Clousier, 1775) BN 4 FM 23659 (10).

The suit was brought before the Parlement probably because Mercier's first suit before Châtelet had already been subject to *évocation* by the royal Council of State. It appears that François de Neufchâteau rather than Palissot initiated this suit, although the principal must have agreed to the filing of a suit and the printing of a brief in his name. Moreover, Palissot does not appear to have authored the memorandum that preceded the legal consultation in his *mémoire* (as Mercier had in his own). [Back.](#)

Note 98: The letter to Servandoni is republished in Palissot, *Oeuvres*, VI: 168; the engraved portrait is the frontispiece to volume I of this edition. [Back.](#)

Note 99: [François de Neufchâteau], *Mémoire à consulter pour le Sieur Lonvay Delassaussaye*. [Back.](#)

Note 100: *Ibid.*, 3. [Back.](#)

Note 101: Jack R. Censer, *The French Press in the Age of Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 1994), esp. 121—137; Gelbart, *Feminine and Opposition Journalism*. [Back.](#)

Note 102: *Lettre à M. Palissot, sur le refus de ses 'Courtisanes'* (London and Paris: Duchesne and Ruault, n.d.) BN Yf 9003. [Back.](#)

Note 103: [Cailhava de l'Estendoux], *Les Causes de la décadence du théâtre et les moyens de le faire refleurir* (Paris: 1775) BN: Yf 1709; *De l'art de la comédie* (Paris: Didot, 1772), 4 vols. BN Y-534. (Engraving reproduced from the Bibliothèque Nationale, Département des Estampes, N2, vol. 248.) [Back.](#)

Note 104: Louis Charpentier, *Causes de la décadence du goût sur le théâtre, où l'on traite des droits, des talents et des fautes des auteurs, des devoirs des comédiens, de ce que la société leur doit et de leurs usurpations funestes à l'art dramatique* (Paris: Dufour, 1758) BN Y 606. [Back.](#)

Note 105: *Ibid*, iii—iv. [Back.](#)

Note 106: Du Coudray also called for a second troupe in his "Lettre à Madame la Comtesse de T[urpin] sur un second Théâtre Français" in his *Lettres critiques* (1775), II: 1—21, as well as in the summaries and extracts of the *Mémoires* for Lonvay and Palissot in *Correspondance dramatique* in the fall of 1776. In 1779, he would again argue at length and with great sarcasm against the Comédiens' monopoly in another anonymous pamphlet, *Il est temps de parler et il est temps de se taire* (Paris: Ruault, 1779) BN Yf 9091. [Back.](#)

Note 107: BCF 124e, July 5, 1775. [Back.](#)

Note 108: BCF 124e, July 26, 1775. [Back.](#)

Note 109: BN YK 4695. [Back.](#)

Note 110: Rutledge, *Le Bureau d'esprit* (Liège: Boubers, 1776), v—vi; BN Yf 7059. A second edition, "revised, corrected and augmented," attributed to "M. L. C. R. G. A." [Monsieur le Chevalier Rutledge, Gentilhomme Anglais] and imprinted "Londres" was published a year later, just after Madame de Geoffrin's death in October 1777 (BN Yth 2393). This edition features a longer preface, in which the author continued his response concerning Shakespeare. Both prefaces—and the text of the play—are reprinted in Erna Wolf, "Rutledge's *Bureau d'Esprit*" *Giessener Beiträge zur Romanischen Philologie* 16 (1925): 75—84; Wolf also discusses the critical reception and debates over its authorship. [Back.](#)

Note 111: *Les Comédiens, ou le Foyer* (Paris: 1777) BN Yth 17451. [Back.](#)

Note 112: ARS 8 NF 8451; BCF 137a, f. 60—61, March 30, 1778. The plays appear in *Oeuvres diverses* (Yverdon: 1777), 2 vols. [Back.](#)

Note 113: Pierre Peyronnet, "Jean-Jacques Rutledge," *Révue d'histoire du théâtre* 44:4 (1992): 330—359. This misattribution is made as well in the otherwise stellar Berlanstein, *Daughters of Eve*, 72. [Back.](#)

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

