

5. Self-Fashioning, Civility, and the Celebrity of *Gens de lettres* at the End of the Enlightenment: Beaumarchais and Gouges, 1781-1789

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The successful premiere of Beaumarchais's "Mariage de Figaro" on April 27, 1784 has been frequently interpreted as a harbinger of the Revolution, representing the triumph of individual intellect and market demand over Old Regime social hierarchy, patronage, and censorship. ¹ Likewise, Olympe de Gouges's "L'Esclavage des noirs," first staged in late 1789, has been interpreted as an expression of an early feminist's abolitionism, and thus of an advanced variant of the Enlightenment liberalism that came to fruition in the early years of the Revolution. ² These interpretations have been based primarily on the texts of these plays, reading them as documents of eighteenth-century social experience rather than as artifacts of late Old Regime literary and public culture. Thus, Figaro's monologue on "that sweet liberty to print," which includes the epigrammatic "without the liberty to criticize, there is no worthwhile praise," and Coraline the slave girl's statement that liberty will occur only when all people are "neither master nor slave" have both been read as statements that reveal the ideologies of their respective authors, Beaumarchais and Gouges and, moreover, that presage the political events to follow during the French Revolution. ³

This chapter offers a different interpretation of Beaumarchais's and Gouges's roles in the literary life of the 1780s than has generally been presented in literary, historical, and biographical scholarship. Drawing on archival and print sources, and studying these individuals in the context of the predominant institutions and norms of literary life, rather than as autonomous proto-intellectuals, the chapter describes the authors' respective strategies of self-fashioning as two compelling case studies of how established outsiders negotiated late Enlightenment literary life. Taken together, these two case studies of aspiring *gens de lettres* lead us to rethink an established grand narrative of dissident Enlightenment writers triumphing over Old Regime structures of hierarchy and authority—and thus embodying, if not actually invoking, the liberating dynamics of the Revolution.

Moreover, this chapter demonstrates how the methodological concepts deployed throughout this book, such as self-fashioning, linguistic legitimacy, and the double bind, can lead to a more subtle understanding of both writers' social positions and thought. By reading these writers' self-representations in the contexts of their contestations with the theater, the court, other writers, and ultimately in the context of the broader public sphere of politics in the 1780s, we are able to perceive in these two cases a tension between, rather than an opposition of, two concepts closely associated with the Enlightenment-era writer, civility and autonomy. Whereas much scholarship on eighteenth-century writers has sought to divide them into such social categories as "High" and "Low" or ideological categories of "court" and "patriot," this chapter shows that these writers, like

the other playwrights we have encountered earlier, moved back and forth between such positions, often emphasizing courtliness in their personal encounters and correspondence and emphasizing patriotism, virtue, and sincerity in print. By such an analysis of their public personae, their claims for literary property, and their calls for liberty from censorship, this chapter shows how complex and contradictory French public life remained—caught between tradition and modernity, between commerce and monopoly, between court protection and individual autonomy—on the very eve of the Revolution.

The first half is devoted to Beaumarchais, whom we have encountered already, making his entry into literary life in the late 1760s as an intellectually ambitious, well-connected and temperamental aspirant to the status of Comédie Française playwright in [Chapter 3](#), and then in the 1770s as the leader of the SAD, when he became involved in the practice (as opposed to the theory) of [literary property](#) and [censorship](#) under the Old Regime in Chapter 4. He is once again a central figure in this chapter because, more than any of his contemporaries, Beaumarchais demonstrated unmatched intensity and creative subtlety in his manifold strategies of self-presentation, deployed in numerous contexts and media, which in turn generated an unmatched volume and intensity of responses from his contemporaries. This interplay between his self-presentation and his interlocutors' responses has been largely lost in twentieth-century scholarly and popular representations of Beaumarchais as an incarnation of Enlightenment wit and liberty and a prophet (it not an outright cause) of the Revolution.

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The controversy surrounding the censorship of his "Mariage de Figaro" was, for contemporaries, "the most memorable event in the history of censorship." ⁴ Moreover, for historians, the so-called "scandal" of the play's success has been posited as a turning point in a narrative of the Enlightenment's gradual triumph over the Old Regime. Yet we will approach this incident in a different context, that of writers' relations to official entities in the literary field, notably the court and the press; moreover, we will consider the controversy over the play and its author as an incident in the history of late eighteenth-century publicity, which led directly into the politics of the pre-Revolution. As in the "Préface de *Nadir*" controversy of 1780 discussed in the [previous chapter](#)  previous chapter, we will encounter Beaumarchais here as a man actively invoking censorship to defend his embattled legitimacy in literary life, rather than as an almost caricatured Enlightenment foe of absolutist censorship. Beaumarchais emphasized his own civility and self-restraint in encounters with the court, while at the same time both seeking to control the commercial distribution of his work on stage and in print and to emphasize his civic engagement and virtue through the press. To show these different sides of Beaumarchais, the first half of this chapter presents a new version of a well-known episode of French literary life from the 1780s—his successful efforts to overcome royal censorship and arrange a successful Comédie Française performance of "Mariage de Figaro" in April 1784; it then considers the less well-known

aftermath, the ten-month delay in printing an edition of the play, culminating in his arrest and imprisonment in Saint-Lazare prison in March 1785.

The second half of the chapter studies Gouges, a writer best known through her 1791 pamphlet, *Declaration of the Rights of Women and Female Citizen*, and secondarily through her plays, notably the 1792 edition of her play, *L'Esclavage des noirs*.⁵ The chapter, however, presents another, earlier view Gouges as a woman seeking to enter literary life and fashion herself as a writer, first through personal correspondence and then through print, from 1782 to the outbreak of the Revolution. We see here how the text, title, and meaning of the play evolved as part of the process through which Gouges fashioned an identity as a *femme de lettres*. This second half of this chapter therefore pursues Gouges's experiences as a woman writer in late eighteenth-century literary culture, examining how she borrowed directly from Beaumarchais's self-presentation as an aspiring courtier in correspondence while she also defined herself as a patriot in print by contrasting herself to Beaumarchais. As with Beaumarchais, this case study emphasizes her engagement with, rather than her marginality to, Old Regime literary institutions and culture, particularly the Comédie Française. The Gouges we encounter here is neither a founding theorist of modern feminism nor a politically marginal woman activist, but (like Beaumarchais) an established outsider seeking public acclaim as a writer through narrations of her own experiences that deployed available tropes about civility, gender, and personal expression.

The common elements of these two case studies are not merely the concern with how writers constructed their public identities. The two are linked by the particular tension faced by aspiring writers between a commercially constituted public before which they could readily present themselves in print as virtuous, isolated, and sincere actors, and a court culture that considered such self-presentation transgressive and inappropriate. As established outsiders caught in a double bind in their encounters with more established individuals and institutions of literary life, Beaumarchais and Gouges both had to negotiate between showing civility and seeking celebrity, between adhering to established norms of self-restrained behavior and transgressing those norms to defend their pre-existing senses of self as *gens de lettres*, between seeking personal liberty and invoking censorship to defend their legitimacy.

In both case studies, we will see writers in situations they could neither control nor withdraw from, in response to which they creatively altered the personalities that they presented to the world. After repeatedly encountering such situations, including having symbolic or even physical violence inflicted on them, both writers reached a breaking point, or de-civilizing moment, in which the tension became too great and their actions transgressed the established norms of behavior expected of *gens de lettres*. At such moments, Beaumarchais and Gouges had recourse to similar and occasionally desperate tactics in order to salvage their public identities as

writers. These tactics involved not (as we might expect of Enlightenment-era writers) declarations of personal autonomy and challenges to established authority, but the opposite: ever more intense efforts to demonstrate self-restraint and to integrate themselves into the dominant structures, norms, and hierarchies of literary life, even on the verge of the Revolution.

5.1. "Le Mariage de Figaro," Act I: Six Censors in Search of an Author

In the fall of 1781, the Comédie Française began its first season under the new royal regulations that Beaumarchais, as leader of the SAD, had negotiated with the court over the preceding five years. ⁶ Those negotiations had begun with the unexpected success of his "Barbier de Seville" in the spring of 1775; through that experience, Beaumarchais had developed close, if tense, relationships with many courtiers, the royal actors, and other playwrights. He had also during that period drafted the sequel to "Barbier," a work he entitled "La Folle journée" that would become known as "Mariage de Figaro." ⁷ Like the first draft of "Barbier," it is classically structured in five acts. The style is of a court farce, devoid of the elements of *parade* and *genre sérieux* characteristic of his early plays. Continuing the adventures of Figaro in his service to the Count Almaviva and in pursuit of the love of Suzanne, the play is a series of sexual intrigues and double entendres. Beaumarchais introduced a series of new characters of various social, sexual, and cultural identities that scheme with and against one another until a happy reconciliation and resolution is reached in the end. The play turns on several tests of fidelity—that of servants to their masters, of husbands to wives, of children to parents—and of authority—that of masters over servants, husbands over wives, and cultural mores over libertine impulses. Its intricate use of dramatic irony and racy sexual innuendo, not any critique of Old Regime social hierarchy, would eventually draw both large audiences and intense criticism.

 [Beaumarchais, Oeuvres Complètes](#)

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In early September 1781, Beaumarchais read this new play to a select group of authors, including his ally Sedaine, who provided feedback. ⁸ Three weeks later, he read a revised version to the assembled troupe of the Comédie, which unanimously received it into the active repertory. ⁹ Several of his patrons at court, notably the royal First Minister the Count de Maurepas, then circulated news of the play among French elites. Interest quickly spread to other European courts, including those of King Gustavus III of Sweden and Empress Catherine of Russia, both prominent protectors and patrons of French playwrights in previous decades. After Maurepas's death in November, Catherine offered her patronage, through brokers, proposing to receive a dedication to the first edition and to have the play performed at her court. Beaumarchais, however, declined her offer.

Indeed, over the next two years, he would refuse numerous requests to send or read copies of the play, including ones from Catherine, the Duke de

Fronsac, and the commercial troupe of Toulouse. He made clear to each of these would-be "publishers" of his work that he intended to adhere to the established protocol for distributing a new play: he would first seek approval from his protector at court, the Count de Vergennes, then a public performance in Paris, and then an edition. [10](#) Beaumarchais restricted circulation of the work in manuscript and in print over the course of several years, thereby demonstrating the *honnête* comportment through which he would seek to reestablish his personal legitimacy as a man of letters after the embarrassing outcome of the "Préface de *Nadir*" controversy of 1780. This tactic also enabled him to retain an unprecedented level of control over commercial publication, both on stage and page. Throughout the decade, even after the play became a commercial success in 1784, he remained highly selective about circulating the play for performance or an edition. Limiting the circulation of work, as Collé and other prominent writers had done, was novel for a writer in Beaumarchais's position, still seeking to enhance his standing. Beaumarchais's successful use of this tactic not only helped him develop and, for a time, maintain control over his public identity as an *homme de lettres*; it would also provide some of the legal basis for literary property legislation and practice in 1791, as will be seen in the [next chapter](#).

In the spring of 1782, this strategy appeared to have paid off when the royal troupe scheduled the premiere performance for the upcoming season. However, the censor Suard continued to perceive Beaumarchais as an illegitimate outsider, as he had viewed the writer throughout the [SAD and "Préface du *Nadir*" episodes](#). Thus, despite a favorable report from Coqueley de Chaussepierre, a member of the theater's legal council and a royal censor not known for his leniency, Suard refused to grant permission for a public performance of "Mariage de Figaro." As a result, the Lieutenant-General of Police, Le Noir, and his supervisor, the Garde des Sceaux Armand-Thomas Hue de Miromesnil, forbid the author to circulate the play in any form: oral, manuscript, or print. [11](#)

Beaumarchais interpreted Suard's opposition not as the suppression of any social criticism his play contained, but as a challenge to his honor and status, a "personal persecution" due solely to Suard's penchant for "pure intrigue," and thus as a continuation of their conflict of 1780. [12](#) In response, Beaumarchais made entreaties to a variety of protectors and brokers, seeking alternative conduits to the court by which to circumvent Suard. First, he turned to his longstanding ally, Le Noir, who appealed in turn to one of his (and Beaumarchais's) protectors, the Count de Vergennes, the foreign minister. [13](#) When these men proved of little help, he sent the manuscript, in a sealed pouch, to the Baron de Breteuil, newly appointed as Minister of the Royal Household, giving him direct supervisory authority over Parisian public theater. Beaumarchais pleaded with Breteuil to have a different censor read the work and to authorize either a public or a court performance, or both. He also requested that Breteuil not allow the script to circulate, lest it be reproduced in any form without his consent. Moreover, to show his *honnêteté*, he promised Breteuil that he would await, "once again,

patiently," the minister's decision. ¹⁴ In these letters, he presented himself as the perfect courtier: respectful of hierarchy and self-restrained, unwilling to act without authorization.

In fact, Beaumarchais did not wait patiently. Such disengagement would have been impossible for one in his tenuous position, since it would have amounted to an abandonment of his bid for legitimacy as an *homme de lettres*. Instead, he sought to capitalize on the high interest in the play among courtiers through a performance at the private theater of some prominent aristocrat. Almost no one had heard or read the text, but many elites followed the brewing controversy and wanted to be among the first to see the play. In the spring of 1783, no less than the king's brother, the Count d'Artois, with the support of the queen, arranged for a private performance by the royal actors at the Hôtel des Menus Plaisirs in Versailles. Hundreds of carriages arrived with courtiers hoping to see the play; however, a royal order cancelled the performance just hours before it was to begin. ¹⁵ Beaumarchais, despite his disappointment, retained his self-control and again refused to present the work in any venue without receiving formal approval from the court; when the Marquis de Thibouville invited him to give a private reading, Beaumarchais responded that, "I will remain silent, as is right ... I would not want anyone at Versailles to accuse me of having gotten around a prohibition against public performances by giving private readings." ¹⁶

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In the fall, the Count de Vaudreuil, a prominent courtier close to the queen, offered to stage the play at his private theater at Gennevilliers. ¹⁷

Beaumarchais, seizing an opportunity to circumvent Suard, consented to such a performance on the condition that a new censor would read and approve the play. He proposed Gabriel-Henri Gaillard, a member of the Académie known for his classicism. Gaillard approved the work, finding that "permitting a performance would pose no danger to anyone in the *monde*."

¹⁸ Since Vaudreuil's theater was not a public venue, this new censor technically had no legal authority to halt the performance. Yet prominent courtiers, notably Vaudreuil and Fronsac, as well as the Comédiens, recognized Gaillard's authorization as legitimate. The royal actors thus performed "Mariage de Figaro" at Gennevilliers in late September 1783. ¹⁹

However, Suard and the king continued to oppose any public performance of the play. Beaumarchais at this point could have turned to any number of venues in which to publish the play: private theaters in Paris, commercial provincial theaters, or an unauthorized print edition. He could also have waited patiently for royal approval. His primary concern was neither to stand still nor to advance publication of the work at any cost, but to move forward in a way that would enhance his legitimacy. Thus, he asserted himself, but did so civilly, asking Le Noir to refer "Mariage" to a fourth censor. Le Noir suggested the abbot Guidi, a liberal ecclesiastic and author of several theological pamphlets, and Beaumarchais agreed. Guidi at first claimed that he was unqualified to judge the play, though it seems likely that he wanted

to avoid the political hot potato that it had become. Le Noir assured Guidi that his report would be read merely as an advisory; theater censorship, we see here once again, functioned much more idiosyncratically than book censorship. Even then, Guidi sent Le Noir an inconclusive report. [20](#)

By this point, in late 1783, Beaumarchais's frustrations began to show through his veneer of self-restraint. To his long-time ally Le Noir, he complained of the "pitiful role that I am forced to play in this comedy." He also expressed to Le Noir his disappointment that none of the courtiers involved had obtained formal approval from the chief judicial officer of the realm, Miromesnil. In the absence of such approval, Beaumarchais opposed any public performance and requested his manuscript back from Breteuil, implying that his personal sense of *honnêteté* equaled or exceeded that of the courtiers who were hoping to see the play. He again promised self-restrained rather than self-assertive behavior; he would "put it back in my portfolio" and ignore the many requests from Paris and the provinces he had received to print or perform it. [21](#) La Harpe, for one, shared Beaumarchais's frustration, since "the role of censors seems to have become a bit illusory." Clearly, neither the Garde des Sceaux nor others at court considered a censorial approbation, of which Beaumarchais now had three, to be a sufficient green light to allow publication to continue. [22](#)

Beaumarchais's tactics, and La Harpe's comment, demonstrate not merely the highly unsystematic nature of theater censorship in the late Old Regime but also the extent to which the entire field, from authors to actors to courtiers, remained caught in a double bind, able neither to withdraw from nor master the situation. Among the principals—not least Beaumarchais, but also Le Noir, Breteuil, the troupe, Suard, and even the king—none could simply dismiss the play, nor publish it, because none alone could determine the legitimacy (or illegitimacy) of the author and his work. The implicit rules of the game, given the configuration of literary life at the end of 1783, did not allow for a clear resolution. [23](#)

Once again, Beaumarchais forced the issue, taking action that would alter the configuration of power while allowing him to remain within the limits of civility. First, he prevailed upon Le Noir to commission yet another censor's report—the fifth—from the playwright and royal censor François-Georges Desfontaines. Desfontaines advocated minor stylistic changes and compared the work, favorably, to Molière's comedies in their contribution to dramatic art and social morality. Thus, he concluded, noting the "delicacy" of his task as censor, that an author such as Beaumarchais must enjoy the same "liberty [as] Moliere." [24](#)

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Beaumarchais could not have hoped for a better frame in which to present his next approach to the court, which he rushed to make in mid-January 1784. Upon receipt of Desfontaines' report, he wrote to Le Noir and also sent a copy to the royal actors, with a request that proceeds from the first performance be donated "for the poor." He also drew on his relations at

court to defend "Mariage" from what he considered to be imitators who might capitalize on the great but unsated interest in the play. In early February, he complained to Des Entelles that a short comedy entitled "Deux Tuteurs," which he considered to be a parody of "Mariage," had been performed recently at Fontainebleau and at the Comédie Italienne and would soon be printed. [25](#)

At the same time, he tacked in the opposite direction, writing to Breteuil to distance himself from the posters already advertising an imminent performance of "Mariage de Figaro" at the Comédie. The author blamed this "imprudent publicity" on the troupe's assistants, whom he claimed had acted without his knowledge or consent. [26](#) In a separate letter sent to Breteuil the same day, he presented an extended explanation and justification of his conduct throughout the episode as that of an *honnête homme* who wrote only "to amuse and instruct" his audience, and who had never sought to become either a target or "an opponent of theater censorship." [27](#) This letter to Breteuil presents a very different version of Beaumarchais's encounter with the theater, the censor, and the court between 1781 and 1784 than the one we have just followed. Beaumarchais was not being duplicitous to Breteuil about his actions and motivations, but rather was providing an image of himself as a civil *honnête homme* that the Baron could present comfortably to others at court. Throughout the letter, he insisted on his own reluctance to publish his work, or publicize himself, claiming that after having written the play, "it remained for five years in my portfolio" until the Comédiens had asked him for it. He went on to elaborate this trope of a writer reluctantly publishing his work, noting that he asked Le Noir not to distribute the copy he sent for censorial approval. However, much to his surprise, he claimed, six weeks later "my play had been read at all the Versailles dinner parties!"

Presenting himself as a passive actor in the story, Beaumarchais next described himself learning a year later that the Count d'Artois wanted to stage a performance at court; at that point he, the author, insisted a new censor consider the play, to ensure that the performance (and his own comportment) would be beyond reproach. Beaumarchais closed by requesting to meet with Breteuil so he could demonstrate his civility face to face. Through this long letter, Beaumarchais had scripted a scenario in which Breteuil (who he knew to be his protector and ally) could authorize a public performance of his play; indeed, when they did meet in late January 1784, the minister voiced support for a public performance. Beaumarchais quickly informed the troupe that he had received approval to stage "Mariage." However, in enacting this set piece, Beaumarchais either had overestimated Breteuil's influence at court, or, what is more likely, tried to augment it by taking advantage of the unsystematic and highly personal nature of theater censorship. This ruse quickly turned against Beaumarchais when word that the premiere would be staged within a week reached the King and other influential figures at court ahead of any news that Breteuil had approved it. To this audience, Beaumarchais now appeared neither clever and witty nor civil and self-restrained but an outsider, disrespectful of

established norms and hierarchies. Le Noir had no choice but to respond by inflicting symbolic violence, and he ordered the troupe not to perform the play until further notice. The *Mémoires secrets*, which delighted in representing Beaumarchais as an outsider who consistently overstepped his bounds and received his comeuppances, reported, "This sharp and humiliating correction left no recourse to M. Beaumarchais, who responded only with profound reverences." [28](#)

Beaumarchais's attempt to use Breteuil's informal approval—and to exploit the uneven circulation of information in literary life—to establish his own legitimacy had backfired, resulting in an evident experience of domination that called into question (for other courtiers, for the theater public, and for himself) his status as civil and *honnête*. Thus, during the next few weeks, he would be forced to expend more effort and cultural capital to make up lost ground by obtaining another meeting with Breteuil to once again explain his conduct. At this second meeting, Breteuil acknowledged that he had failed in his role as a broker for Beaumarchais to the court, where "Nothing but ill will can explain the rumors that circulate" about you. He allowed that, while Beaumarchais had contributed to his own reputation for self-assertion, "You have done so only innocently." Promising to try again to obtain "definitively, the orders of the king," Breteuil instructed Beaumarchais to submit the manuscript for yet another censorial review. [29](#)

For this sixth report, Le Noir chose Antoine Bret. Like the others who had read "Mariage," Bret was both a royal censor and a member of the Académie Française; unlike any of the others, Bret had personal ties to Beaumarchais, forged during their mutual participation in the SAD during the late 1770s. Unsurprisingly, Bret's report to Le Noir, filed on March 22, 1784, approved the play for public performance. Indeed, Bret's report included a summary written by Beaumarchais himself, which also later appeared in the *Courrier de l'Europe*. This intertextuality demonstrates how closely positioned authors, censors, and critics were around the royal theater. [30](#)

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Even with four favorable readers' reports in hand, Beaumarchais remained uncertain whether his work, and he himself, would be considered legitimate for publication. Thus he appealed directly to the king in a letter that again narrated his attenuated pursuit of censorial approval as a tale of a patient innocent wronged by "my enemies." He signaled his hope for powerful, paternal intervention by the crown to restore the natural state of affairs. Specifically, he sought the king's permission to submit the text to yet another review, by a "tribunal" of writers, including members of the Académie Française. [31](#) These requests implied a comparison of himself to no less than Molière and Corneille; the former's "Tartuffe" had been saved from the author's detractors at court by the intervention of Louis XIV, while the latter's controversial "Cid" had been judged by the Académie Française.

The tactic succeeded. Within a week, Beaumarchais could write to the troupe that he had at last "the 'bon' of the king, the 'bon' of

the minister, the '*bon*' of the lieutenant of police"; accordingly, he distributed the roles among his preferred actors. ³² Legitimacy as well as legality, it appeared to Beaumarchais, had at last been attained, and he could now present the work publicly without transgressing *honnête* norms. But, as we have just seen, those four years of encounters between Beaumarchais, the troupe, the court, and the censor were much more complicated than the claim he made (with characteristic exaggeration) to the lead actor Prévile, that to see this play on stage at last would be "the fruit of four years of fighting." ³³ In highlighting the ambiguity of this claim, I do not mean to suggest that Beaumarchais acted with duplicity, but instead to underscore the vague contours of censorship and publication in late Old Regime literary life, a terrain full of potential pitfalls through which Beaumarchais sought to maneuver.

He had generated sufficient interest at court and among Parisian literary elites that demand for the play had grown steadily from 1781 to 1784. In one guise, Beaumarchais had acted as an overly self-assertive outsider, a man "who so loves rumor and scandal" and who had employed tactics that an "a more *honnête* author would never have dared even propose." ³⁴ Yet at the same time, he had performed enough indirect displays of self-restraint and civility in his relations with the court to demonstrate "the innocence of my conduct." ³⁵ This combination of tactically brilliant self-promotion and rhetorically classical claims of disinterest and self-restraint had enabled him to maintain a coherent representation of himself as an *homme de lettres* who was at once civil and autonomous in the face of a situation he could not control. In seeking to have this play performed, Beaumarchais had faced a unique double bind, resulting from Suard's resolute opposition on the one hand (which Suard repeated in a speech to the Académie Française in June, attacking the play as an affront to "public decency [*l'honnêteté publique*]" and "good morals [*bonnes mœurs*]") ³⁶ and from the unprecedented commercial interest in the work on the other. To maintain his emotional equilibrium amidst this tension and to maintain a public identity based on self-mastery and civility, he had invested a tremendous amount of creative energy and cultural capital. When "Mariage de Figaro" at last premiered to great acclaim, Beaumarchais hoped that this investment would now pay off on several levels.

5.2. "Le Mariage de Figaro," Act II: Commerce, Publicity, and Cultural Capital

The success of "Mariage of Figaro" did pay dividends for Beaumarchais, most immediately at the box-office. The play was a smash success; over the next ten months, the Comédie Française gave 74 performances, which generated nearly 400,000 livres of revenue. ³⁷ Yet Beaumarchais knew better than to confuse either the legality or commercial success of the performances with his own personal legitimacy as an *homme de lettres*. During the next ten months, as the success of the play brought him an influx of cultural capital, he pursued multiple strategies to convert this capital into personal

legitimacy within the literary world, and, at the same time, into public prestige and monetary remuneration—distinct goals, which he achieved with varying degrees of success. As we follow these efforts leading to the eventual publication of the authorized edition at the end of March 1785, we find Beaumarchais once again simultaneously fashioning multiple identities before different audiences.

As the author of the two most commercially successful plays of his generation, Beaumarchais sought to convert his commercial success to status in the literary field by reprising the role he had played in the 1770s as spokesman for the interests of all playwrights. In the aftermath of his first success, "Barbier de Seville," he had claimed this role in the SAD's negotiations with the royal theater of Paris; he now sought to play a similar role by pursuing *droits d'auteur* for provincial theater performances. Once staged in Paris, plays ordinarily were considered *de facto* in the public domain for provincial theaters, which generally staged them soon after the Paris premiere. Beaumarchais, however, prevented circulation of his new hit for months after its Parisian premiere. This restraint was motivated in part by a need to respond to charges of overly self-assertive comportment; it also had the consequence of preventing provincial theaters from considering the work to have entered the informal public domain. In early June 1784, he took up both issues—his personal standing and authorial remuneration—by seeking to reunite the SAD.

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To begin, he sent a letter to all his former collaborators inviting them to meet and draft terms to propose to provincial theaters regarding their literary property. ³⁸ On June 8, 1784, he met with several other Comédie Française playwrights to discuss terms for a proposal he would make to provincial theaters. His plan, as he explained it to the other authors, was to seek intervention from the court by appealing to the First Gentlemen of the Royal Bedchamber to issue regulations for all public theaters in the kingdom that would require provincial troupes to remunerate authors on the same terms as those already in place at the Comédie Française. ³⁹

 *Convention entre M. de Beaumarchais ...* Those present at this meeting also consented that he would write to André Beaussier, the principal owner and manager of the Marseilles commercial theater, on behalf of "all men of letters." He proposed to Beaussier terms for a provincial production of "Mariage de Figaro," which would then be applied to all future performances of new plays in his theater. Within three weeks, Beaussier agreed to a notarized contract that assured writers one-seventh of the net revenues from all performances of their plays. ⁴⁰ Beaumarchais then made the same proposal to theater directors in Bordeaux, Lyon, Rouen, and Rennes; when these theaters were slow to respond, he appealed to the king for "justice against the usurpation by provincial troupes." ⁴¹

He noted that, while the government had struggled to maintain pensions "to encourage *gens de lettres*," the royal regulations for the Comédie Française had provided playwrights a solid economic base on which to work. (This claim was highly specious; even under the new regulations, few if any authors drew significant income from performances of their plays.) Nevertheless, Beaumarchais requested a law that would apply to all theaters in France and would grant playwrights "the property of their works as the just fruit of their labor." This petition differed markedly from Beaumarchais's earlier petitions on behalf of playwrights (as discussed in [Chapter 4](#)) because, instead of seeking non-commercial markers of status, it addressed explicitly commercial concerns. As before, Beaumarchais here compared literary property to real estate, but not to seigneurial privileges. Instead, he compared a performed play to produce being sold in a market by a "city merchant" who had compensated the cultivator; he even compared theatrical productions to industry, a claim made heretofore only by the troupe. He asserted that the troupe must pay for a play, just as a textile manufacturer must pay for the raw material before producing and selling high-quality fabric. The implication of this comparison, though, would be that, once having purchased the play, the commercial troupe would be free to dispose of it as it saw fit, without further input from the author. Thus the agreement with Beaussier specified that his troupe could perform any play that had been sent by its author, without additional consent, though it would have to compensate the author for one-seventh of all performances. On the other hand, the troupe could not print or otherwise reproduce the play, under any circumstances, reserving that power for the author.

Another consequence of the commercial language in this petition was to expose him to charges of excessively mercenary zeal. During the 1770s, as leader of the SAD, Beaumarchais had repeatedly been criticized as insufficiently disinterested and thus *malhonnête*, and such a critique now re-appeared in mid-1784, adding to the attacks that had followed the premiere of the play. Maza points out that criticism of the play came less from the court than from "patriots," who perceived Beaumarchais to be appealing in his writing to aristocratic decadence; a similar pattern now appeared in criticism of the self-interestedness of his conduct. ⁴² For instance, the *Mémoires secrets* printed in early July what purported to be a response from an offended Rochon de Chabannes, declining his invitation to join a revived SAD. Whereas Beaumarchais and some younger writers, the letter asserted, might share a great interest in "mercantile details" that would enable them "increase their fortune," a true man of letters such as himself "does not work for money" and remained "far from the intrigue of *cabales*," preferring "good behavior" and "*honnêtes* sentiments." ⁴³ If this response indeed came from Rochon, it ought to be read as part of his own strategy of self-fashioning. Nevertheless, its publication by the *Mémoires secrets* reinforces what we have seen above: that the context for Beaumarchais's self-presentation, including his demands for *droits d'auteur*, remained a court culture that valued status over wealth. Moreover, it reminds us that, even in the final years of the Old Regime, Beaumarchais remained (for social and literary elites, including other writers) an established outsider, more concerned with his personal

legitimacy (through declarations of disinterest and *honnêteté*) than with remuneration or commercial property. Finally, it reminds us that, despite these efforts, he remained vulnerable to charges that he acted out of avarice and self-interest.

Perhaps due to such criticism, neither Beaumarchais nor the First Gentlemen pursued any further the idea of royal regulations on *droits d'auteur* for provincial theaters in the 1780s. Indeed, the matter disappeared quickly, along with the briefly resurrected SAD. Both would return, however, in the early years of the Revolution, when the SAD and the document it generated in June 1784 would become the basis for national literary property legislation in 1791. In the meantime, Beaumarchais had other worries, notably defending his personal legitimacy, which would be severely challenged in the coming months.



Despite having authored the most successful French plays since Voltaire, Beaumarchais did not enjoy the same high esteem as his illustrious predecessors. He had never escaped, at court, among the reading public, or among other writers the image as obstreperous, irreverent, and volatile that he had taken in the aftermath of the Goetzmann controversy of the 1770s. In addition, his apparent transformation from a parlementaire patriot in the Maupeou years to an aspiring courtier under Louis XVI had given him a reputation for duplicity and self-assertion in both camps. In the spring of 1784, charges circulated at Versailles and Paris of the uncivil self-promotion in which he had engaged to have the play performed and to achieve his renown. ⁴⁴ Songs and poems questioned whether his integrity, civility, and morality were those of a man of letters. ⁴⁵ After the third performance of "Mariage," on May 8, this mockery took an unusually caustic form, when printed cards were dropped from the upper reaches of the theater, featuring doggerel representing the leading characters of the play as the seven deadly sins. ⁴⁶ By early June, Beaumarchais wrote to Breteuil to complain of "all sorts of excesses, anonymous letters, atrocious verses, lewd attacks, dark menaces ... a thoroughly disgusting horror." He noted that he had restrained himself from any public response to such "calumny." Beaumarchais also responded to the rumor circulating at court that he had refused to grant a box seat to a prominent courtier; he denied this action, explaining that such "ignorance of protocol" would be inconsistent with "my religion of honor." ⁴⁷

His self-restraint, however, reached its breaking point when he received a copy of a counterfeit letter circulating at court that purported to be his insolent response to the Duke de Villequier, denying his request for a *loge*. ⁴⁸ Villequier had accepted the false letter as an authentic response from Beaumarchais, given "what we know of his character and of his very

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immoderate speech," so he wrote to Le Noir to demand a public apology for such "an impertinence." Not trusting Beaumarchais to "avoid very injudicious paths" and fearing another printed polemic, Villequier refused all direct contact and asked the Lieutenant-General to intervene. ⁴⁹ Thus, on June 8, the same day that Beaumarchais met with other playwrights to reconstitute the SAD, he also prepared a public defense of his comportment "against uncivil people [*malhonnêtes gens*]," in a letter to the *Journal de Paris*. But before he allowed the daily to publish this letter (on June 15), he sent a draft to Breteuil for authorization to defend in print "the innocence of my conduct." Only after Breteuil responded favorably did Beaumarchais allow the editor of the newspaper to publish the letter. ⁵⁰ As he had done for the play itself, Beaumarchais received not merely legal sanction but a sign from a prominent broker to the court that he had the legitimacy to publish a justification of his conduct.

This letter would be the first of many efforts, in print and correspondence, he would make over the next ten months to defend his personal legitimacy. In all these self-presentations, he sought to demonstrate civility, often at the expense of a more widely circulated or more aggressive self-defense. At the same time, he figured himself as a writer in service of the people, a patriot whose energetic self-presentation in the public arena should be considered virtuous rather than mercenary. Thus, he began in the summer of 1784 an extended effort to identify himself publicly as a benefactor, magnanimously sacrificing his personal interests to the greater good of society. To this end, he placed a letter in early August in the *Journal de Paris* announcing his intention to donate some 30,000 livres to an "Institut de Bienfaisance" that would support "any woman with children recognized to be poor." ⁵¹

With the fiftieth performance of "Mariage" scheduled for October 2, he proposed to the troupe that all proceeds on that occasion be donated, as a show of good will against the "criticisms of some of the periodical writers," naming Suard and Aubert among those who had "scandalized" the author before "the entire *monde*." ⁵² The performance generated a healthy gate receipt of nearly 6,400 *livres*, which were duly donated at the end of October. Yet Beaumarchais found his efforts ridiculed in print, "as a vehicle to bring back the public to a play that has begun to falter." ⁵³ Moreover, an anonymous pamphlet, *L'Homme aux dix écus, par un enfant trouvé* openly mocked both his attempts to present himself as motivated by patriotism and his implied comparisons of himself to Voltaire. ⁵⁴

Despite the failure of his charitable gesture to generate admiration for his *bienfaisance*, Beaumarchais continued to pursue the idea, donating over 40,000 livres in early 1785—his entire *part d'auteur* from the 68 performances of "Mariage" given to date. ⁵⁵ He then expanded the program, advertising in various periodicals his intention to establish an "Institut de bienfaisance" with the proceeds from provincial performances to which he had agreed, from the edition he had begun to prepare, and from an operatic version he commissioned. ⁵⁶



[Voltaire, L'homme à quarante écus](#)

The onslaught of attacks continued, from both patriots and courtiers. Of the latter, the most stinging was an anonymous letter in the *Journal de Paris*, widely attributed to the abbot Suard, brother of the censor, which pointed out the number of parodies of "Mariage de Figaro" in boulevard theaters and concluded that Beaumarchais had written a play filled with burlesque "*moeurs*, language, and jokes" borrowed from fairground theaters. The letter went on to suggest that poor mothers of any "*honnête* family" would be embarrassed to receive the proceeds of such a play. [57](#)

When the parody "La Repetition de la folle journée," which purported to depict a rehearsal of the "Mariage de Figaro," received a *permission tacite* to be printed, Beaumarchais suspected collusion by the brothers Suard to question his legitimacy in literary life. On the one hand, the abbot Suard had challenged his honor in print; on the other, the censor Suard had denied him authorization to respond in kind by printing the play with a preface. Faced with this double bind, he sought recourse from Le Noir in the form of a censorial intervention on his own behalf; he complained to the Lieutenant-General of being "shamefully ridiculed" and asked for the suppression of these attacks. [58](#)

Le Noir temporized, and the attacks continued. Beaumarchais recognized that he would have to take more aggressive posture and respond directly in print. In a letter to the *Journal de Paris* on March 2, he denounced the abbot Suard as a "man embittered by the success of another, whose anonymous, crude charges" had injured their target, (himself), the reputable journal that had printed them, and the public that had been forced read them. Beaumarchais held this "ruined ecclesiastic" responsible for "everything that is said against me." He then demonstrated both his readiness to respond forcefully to such attacks and his civilized self-restraint in having waited so long, by reminding readers that he awaited authorization to print the preface to the edition of his play. [59](#) In characteristically figurative language, he asked why, "When I had to vanquish lions and tigers" to have the play performed, he now found himself swatting at "an insect of the night." This humorous phrase, which Beaumarchais clearly intended to be read ironically, would be read at court as one insolent step too far.

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In the short term, however, he continued to seek authorization to publish his preface, writing the next day to remind Breteuil that the dramatic authors still awaited the use of royal power to ensure "that their *propriété* be respected in the large provincial cities." This request, a double entendre, both reminded the minister of the authors' petition submitted the previous June for ownership of their works, and of the longstanding concern of *hommes de lettres* that their propriety be respected through the use of royal censorship power. [60](#) He hoped to defend both his property and propriety by printing both the play and a self-justificatory preface in the now widely anticipated edition of *Mariage de Figaro*.

Few plays had ever generated as much commercial success and as intense publicity as did "Mariage" in the spring of 1784; many therefore expected that it would appear quickly in an authorized edition and would then be staged by other commercial theaters across France. Beaumarchais, however, went to great lengths to prevent this publication, which he knew would take the play (and his identity as a writer) out of his control. He thus delayed the publication of an edition and explicitly prevented other commercial theaters from performing it while he sought further markers of legitimacy for an edition and further control over subsequent performances. In May, he refused a request from Madame Montansier to stage "Mariage" at her commercial theater in Versailles, explaining that "I cannot print 'La Folle journée' until the considered opinions at court are reconciled with those of the city." [61](#)

While awaiting censorial approval and a favorable response from a suitably prestigious protector to receive the dedication, he set about drafting a preface that would justify his conduct and respond to his critics. His close ally, Antoine Bret, wrote him in mid-June to encourage his efforts, noting the great interest in the literary world "to see it printed soon," and inquired about rumors that the preface would include passages "sure to pique the public curiosity." However, he also warned Beaumarchais that the preface "will be examined severely at high levels" of the court, and that the "liberty permitted in the performance of a theatrical folly" would not be the same allowed to "a polemic written in cold blood and distributed to all of Paris." As a royal censor, he felt compelled to serve as a broker and ask the author to leave it to others to respond to Suard, thereby remaining within the norms of comportment expected of him as a man of letters. [62](#) Bret implicitly reminded Beaumarchais what he had learned in the *Nadir* controversy: that the preface to the edition would be censored separately and would be held to an entirely different standard, particularly if it called into question the status of established *honnêtes gens*.

Beaumarchais took Bret's warning to mean not that he should modify his text but that he should seek prior authorization before defending himself from attacks, so as not to lose the degree of legitimacy he had developed through months of self-restraint. In September he sought and received his ally Chamfort's opinion about the disposition of the court towards authorizing a self-justificatory preface. [63](#) By late 1784, literary newspapers reported rumors of an aggressive preface in which Beaumarchais would respond to all his critics and, in a deliberate transgression of *honnête* norms, would name names, notably that of Suard. [64](#) Beaumarchais, however, understood the rules far too well to commit such a transgression, at least not deliberately. Instead, he once again prepared to tack between aggression and civility, by drafting two prefaces.

The first preface was typical of the genre, a lengthy defense of "Mariage de Figaro" from critics who had questioned in print the play's morality. [65](#)

Significantly, the preface defends not the play's structure, language, or style (all of which critics had questioned), but the conduct of its characters (and of its author) as "decent" and of "profound morality," in contrast to the "odious and personal satire" of the critics. Before beginning the extended defense of the play to which the bulk of the preface is devoted, he defended his decision to write such a self-justification in the first place, by noting that he hoped therein to "demonstrate to all adversaries his consideration for dignity. I am by no means," he wrote, "the enemy of my enemies."

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The preface then describes the characters' behavior as a series of humorous, but never uncivil, criticisms of social mores. Thus, the Count Almaviva, the dupe of Figaro's relentless scheming, is "always humiliated but never demeaned." The character Figaro, he assured, did not satirize "public morality [*l'honnêteté publique*]" in his mocking claim to be capable "of intrigue," because "I was born to be a courtesan (II.i)," as critics had charged. Rather, the preface explained, Figaro reminded the audience of a subtle difference, between an *homme de la cour* and an *homme de cour*. The former described an *homme de qualité*, who acts always in a disinterested manner; the latter described a professed pursuer of personal gain. Beaumarchais then defended Figaro's mockery of the Count Almaviva as a ridiculing of self-interested courtesanship rather than any particular personality of the court or any social group—much the same defense that Molière had used for his own satires of elites. ⁶⁶ Finally, Beaumarchais concluded by directly addressing his detractors, who had chosen to "attack and pursue the author through verbal, manuscript, and printed attacks to the point of calumny." Their only goal, he charged, was to embarrass and unnerve him, "to make me lose the cool disposition of a citizen." The considerable thought and effort that Beaumarchais put into this preface demonstrates how intently he sought to frame the play, and himself: not as a challenge to Old Regime social hierarchy but as an object lesson in both morality and civility.

Knowing, however, that this preface would be required to undergo another potentially long censorial review, ⁶⁷ he also wrote a second, shorter preface, that tacked carefully between the modes of self-defense and self-restraint. It responded to Suard in a fashion at once more aggressive and more oblique, as is made evident in the double-entendre of the full title: "Dedicatory Epistle to persons mistaken about my play without wanting to see it." This "dedication" consisted of only two short paragraphs, which defended the play but moreover highlighted the author's self-restraint. He opened by noting that "I will not name" the play's critics, and closed by indicating "my resignation equal to my profound respect." In between, he warned "against those persons whose opinion carries great weight," implying Suard, and asked readers to base their judgment on "their own wisdom [*lumières*]." ⁶⁸

 [Beaumarchais, Oeuvres Complètes](#)

 [Beaumarchais, La Folle journée](#)

Bret, when called upon to censor the longer first preface in 1785,



found that it attacks "neither morality nor civility," and thus he saw nothing to prevent its publication. However, he expressed regret that Beaumarchais had spurned his advice to soften the text. Despite Bret's reluctant approval, Suard advised Le Noir not to grant an *approbation* for the preface, thereby delaying the publication of the edition. ⁶⁹ In late January 1785, Beaumarchais

was therefore still awaiting censorial approval when he instructed his own printing company in Kehl to hasten the publication of the luxury edition, since a counterfeit version was already circulating in Paris. ⁷⁰ He also had prepared a new engraving for the frontispiece, based on the portrait that Nicolas Cochin had drawn a decade earlier; it depicted him in the style of an Académie Française member's portrait.

That same week, the printers at Kehl asked the Parisian bookseller Ruault to rush them a cover page with his imprint and the price, to be included in the first edition "to prevent counterfeits." ⁷¹ However, Ruault still had no copies to sell in early February, when the Comédie Française removed "Mariage" from its active repertory, after 74 performances. ⁷² Moreover, Beaumarchais had still not received any response from the Ministry of the Royal Household about his proposed regulations for provincial theaters, which he wanted to get before consenting to additional performances.

Eventually, Beaumarchais authorized Ruault to print an edition himself, which would appear in early March as the first edition; only several weeks later did the Kehl edition go on sale in Paris. ⁷³ Thus, in late February, the only edition available in Paris was a counterfeit; this was the edition on which the abbot Suard based his critical review in the *Journal de Paris*. Suard accused both the author and the play of "wounding public decency" by having brought the "morality, language, and humor" of boulevard theaters to the royal stage; he also highlighted several staged and printed parodies of Figaro and, by implication, Beaumarchais. Beaumarchais thus found himself in an even more constraining double bind, unable to keep his work, and therefore his self-image as an *homme de lettres*, before the public on stage or page, while the oral and printed attacks on him intensified.

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He thus felt the need to respond directly to the abbot Suard, and moreover to the censor Suard, even though he still had not been authorized by the court to do so. His response appeared in the *Journal de Paris* on March 7, 1785, including the passage boasting of having "had to vanquish lions and tigers" in overcoming royal censorship to have his play performed. Beaumarchais apparently thought of it as a characteristically witty riposte that remained within the accepted norms of civility while responding forcefully to the challenge to his honor. However, once again, he misread how his audience at court would respond. Several prominent figures, including the king and one of the First Gentlemen, considered this boast as a reference to themselves, thus constituting an unauthorized transgression of elite norms. Beaumarchais appeared to courtiers reading the letter to

have reached what Elias would describe as a "decivilizing moment," when he violated the norms that defined membership in the community. Though inadvertent, he appeared to have lost his self-control; the consequences for him would be so severe that, by mid-March, Ruault wrote to La Hogue, the director of the Kehl publishing house, that he must send immediately copies, even without the preface, to Beaumarchais's protectors across Europe and 400 copies to Paris, since "Monsieur de Beaumarchais has succumbed under the most horrible blows that calumny has ever struck." ⁷⁴

5.3. "Le Mariage de Figaro," Act III: Celebrity, Shame, and Censorship

In the traditional biographical narrative, Beaumarchais had at the outset of March 1785 achieved widespread acclaim, legal authorization to publish his work, commercial success, and personal legitimacy among cultural elites. He had not only succeeded a year earlier in circumventing the Police Censor and having his "Mariage de Figaro" performed, but the play had gone on to achieve a degree of acclaim and commercial success not seen since Voltaire's glory days of the 1740s. Indeed, Beaumarchais himself implied such a comparison in early 1785 by opening to subscription a second edition of the complete works of Voltaire. As we have just seen, Beaumarchais in the months after that success had retained an unprecedented degree of control over the publication of the work, and the consequent revenues it would generate, by delaying the printing of an edition and reaching a contractual agreement with the largest provincial theaters. In March 1785, he expected shortly both the first copies of the censorially approved, luxury edition of *Mariage de Figaro* from his own printing press at Kehl and a royal edict approving his terms for any provincial commercial performances. Moreover, he had prepared several ripostes to the verbal and printed slights of the past few months, and he believed he would soon be authorized to print these responses, thereby defending his personal stature and, at the same time, demonstrating self-restraint and civility.

He thus ignored the rumors that had circulated, since the previous April, that the king remained furious at him. ⁷⁵ Moreover, he openly mocked in verse the Archbishop of Paris's order, issued in early March, to suppress his new edition of Voltaire. After all, as we have seen, Beaumarchais benefited from numerous prominent protectors at court from different factions—Fronsac and Breteuil on one side and Vergennes, Vaudreuil, and Le Noir on the other—as well as foreign monarchs, notably Catherine of Russia and King Gustavus of Sweden. He also believed himself to have the support of other writers and the theater-going and pamphlet-reading public in his ongoing feud with the brothers Suard. So he had little reason to worry when, in the first days of March, Le Noir summoned him to the Bastille to be interrogated about his doggerel mocking the Archbishop, or when reports of this arrest appeared in print. ⁷⁶ Furthermore, he reacted with what one observer called "civility [*politesse*]" and *sangfroid* when, on the evening of March 7, two police inspectors and a small contingent of soldiers again came to his home and interrupted a dinner party to arrest him. Beaumarchais

calmly told his visitors that he was needed in Versailles and departed; however, his equanimity became disturbed when the police agents did not take him to the Bastille, the usual venue for restraining writers who had run afoul of royal censorship, but to the Maison Saint-Lazare, a home for reprobate boys. According to some reports, Beaumarchais pleaded desperately that such a venue was "unworthy" for a man of his stature. ⁷⁷ For the next six days, while restrained by royal order in Saint-Lazare, he remained out of contact with his protectors and other allies. ⁷⁸

Yet news of the arrest spread quickly through Parisian literary life. Speculation on the reasons for this event focused quickly on the residual hostility at court to the performance of "Mariage," and some accounts interpreted the arrest as a means of delaying the widely anticipated forthcoming edition with its self-justificatory preface. Others considered it punishment for singing pornographic songs about the queen at his dinner party, or as a chastisement for the anti-clerical verse mocking the Archbishop of Paris. The most widely believed theory attributed the arrest to Beaumarchais's hubristic letter in the *Journal de Paris*, in which he boasted of having "vanquished lions and tigers" when "Mariage de Figaro" had been performed over the objections of many at the court. By this account, several court figures perceived the comment to refer to them, including the king, the censor Suard, the Duke de Fronsac, and the Baron de Breteuil. Another theory, not proposed by contemporaries but plausible to historians, attributes the arrest to Beaumarchais's involvement in attempts to inflate prices on the Paris stock market, which Breteuil opposed. Though there is no single reason to which we can retrospectively attribute the arrest, contemporaries debated the news intensely as a significant event at court and in French political life. ⁷⁹

Gossip soon turned from speculation over the cause of the arrest to outright mockery of Beaumarchais. Le Noir noted in his memoirs that "his imprisonment was a great sensation in Paris," including a banner hung outside the Hôtel de Police and *libelles* and songs posted on placards in the garden of the Palais Royal. The literary newsletter *Correspondance littéraire secrete* noted with disapproval that "Couplets, epigrams, and caricatures are appearing in droves, showing how many brave people we have here courageous enough to beat a man already on the ground." ⁸⁰ La Harpe found the "ridicule" and "condemnation" of Beaumarchais in "couplets, engravings and pamphlets" unseemly, and he attributed it to the "many enemies" of Beaumarchais, "always delighted to see a successful man humiliated." ⁸¹ Furthermore, with the authorized edition of *Mariage* still lacking censorial approval, counterfeit editions shot up in price. ⁸²

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One aspect of the narrative that gave it great public interest was the setting at the Maison Saint-Lazare. Not technically a royal prison, it had served as a house of correction for reprobate boys, and popular thinking associated it with austere, even sadistic, priests who flogged their young charges daily in an effort to cure both the body and the soul. The prospect of

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Beaumarchais, then 55 years old, being subjected to such humiliation was too deliciously ironic for his critics to let pass. Among the songs, verses, and engravings satirizing Beaumarchais that circulated in the days after the arrest, the most widely-noted representation—and the one most injurious to Beaumarchais's carefully honed self-conception as an *honnête homme*—was an image of him receiving a bare-bottomed spanking from a priest in the Saint-Lazare courtyard. While the images focused on his physical punishments, accompanying verses and songs emphasized that Beaumarchais had responded to these punishments by confessing social missteps and even mortal sins to the priests and promising to convert from dissolution to piety. 84



The imagined scene was depicted in several hand-colored engravings. In one anonymous work, two *gardes françaises* escort Beaumarchais into Saint-Lazare observed by a mendicant, a reference to Beaumarchais's donations on behalf of the poor. The ambiguous caption to this image, "Voilà où nous réduit l'aristocratie," reflects the tension in Beaumarchais's public self between a courtier and a civic patriot. The caption might be read to mock Beaumarchais's pretensions to elite status, as a symbol of the depths to which the French aristocracy had fallen, or alternatively might depict him as a patriot reduced to prison by a corrupt aristocracy, despite his bienfaisance.

A more humorous image, attributed to Vincenzo Vangelisti, shows Beaumarchais being welcomed to the prison by Basile, a character from his "Mariage de Figaro." Basile is shown repeating one of his lines from the play (I.xi), "Tans va la cruche a l'eau qu'enfin elle s'emplit [The water flows until it overfills the jug]," an expression drawn from numerous French moral fables, implying that what goes around comes around. (In the play, the line is rife with sexual double entendre, delivered to warn Chérubin that he will be punished for his efforts as tutor of the young servant girl Fanchette.)



Vangelisti also produced the most striking engraving, of a Lazardiste flogging Beaumarchais. The author is shown from behind, with his pants pulled down; at his feet lay a pilgrim's hat and staff, symbols of religious conversion. Above the scene is the correct quotation of same line, "Tant va la cruche a l'eau" Observing the scene are two characters, the Countess Almaviva and the adolescent servant Cherubin; in the play, Cherubin, who appears dressed as a girl and whom Beaumarchais intended to be played by a young girl, lusts after the Countess, and their dialogue is rife with sexual double entendre. 85 In a variant of this engraving, another snippet of dialogue (V.viii), "Qu'es-a-co? [Qu'est-ce que c'est? (What is that?)]," appears in the lower left. This line had been associated with Beaumarchais since he had used it in one of celebrated *Mémoires Contre Goezmann* in the 1770s.

A similar scene, less well engraved, shows Beaumarchais holding a copy of the edition of *La folle journée* to protect his backside from the flogging. ⁸⁶ Surrounding him, and



seemingly celebrating his fate, are the entire cast of characters from "Mariage." The heading to this engraving reads "*Castigat Flagrando Mores* [Correct morals by whipping]," a variant on the classical device, "*Castigat Ridendo Mores* [Correct morals by laughter]" much quoted in the eighteenth century. It may have also been a reference to the discussion of self-flagellation by Augustine (Beaumarchais's middle name, often remarked upon by contemporaries). ⁸⁷ The beating sustained by the author also refers to two of Figaro's lines in the play: in the first scene, he implies he will beat Bazile with a cudgel on his backside for his overtures towards Suzanne; then, in his long soliloquy in Act V, Figaro implies he was beaten for having written a play that offended the Islamic princes at the Spanish court. ⁸⁸ This engraving, then, is an early instance in a long tradition of reading Figaro as Beaumarchais, though in this case, it implies that Beaumarchais's life is following his character's rather than the inverse.

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In addition to these engravings, several printed songs mocked Beaumarchais as recognizing only too late how his comportment had merited his imprisonment and flogging, and thereby attributed his public loss of face to his excessive social ambition. One song, based on a *vaudeville* from the play, "Coeurs sensibles, coeurs fidèles [Sensitive hearts, faithful hearts]" (IV.x), focused heavily on the violence to his body, with two stanzas referring to the whipping and to its physical effects:

"Un Lazariste inflexible
Ennemi de tout repos
Prend un instrument
terrible
Et l'exerce sur son dos."

"A Lazarist priest austere
Enemy of all that is lax
With a weapon to be
feared
Goes to work on his back."

 *Coeurs sensibles, coeurs fidèles* Moreover, the poem continues to note that the consequence of his "horrible chastisement" is nothing less than the loss of his personal legitimacy: "Caron is annihilated." ⁸⁹

Another song narrated a story of Beaumarchais, "drunken with success," being forced to "repeat his lesson" at Saint-Lazare, which had the effect of "calming his boiling blood." This song ended with a mock plea to "sensible Breteuil" to "put a quick end to his affliction" and liberate Beaumarchais, since he would continue to suffer from the "rumor" and "laughter" generated

 *Que Caron de Beaumarchais* by the incident. ⁹⁰ Yet another satirical song appeared under the title "Confession générale de M. de

Beaumarchais," in the *Journal des Gens du Monde*. In this song, Beaumarchais confesses to a variety of incivilities committed because he "burned" with ambition for acceptance among elites, despite having an immonde sensibility. He further confessed to having married two widows "to accumulate two inheritances." By the final verses in the song, Beaumarchais finds that, as a result of his misbehavior, his reputation is under attack from all sides. He now regrets his ill-advised letter in the *Journal de Paris*:

"Pourtant ma reputation L'on ataque [sic] par des astuces Moi qui fis trembler un lion Je me vis piquer par des puces... <i>bis</i> Je repondis & j'eus grand tort."	"Despite my reputation They attack with shrewd intellect Me, who made tremble a lion I am bitten by insects ... [<i>repeat</i>] I responded and I was very wrong."
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 *Confession
générale de M. de
Beaumarchais*

Having suffered the terrible consequences of this indiscretion ("These blows made me forget the Latin/ for the awful word of Saint-Lazare"), he offered his mea culpa. The song concluded with Beaumarchais, after having made an "awful penitence," wishing that God had restrained him from his own immoderate and uncivil inclinations: "That you had spared me/ My own independent mind." [91](#)

 *Confession
générale d'un
Homme exécuté ...*

The most biting of the verses mocking Beaumarchais's imprisonment was another lengthy confession, presented as an "Extract from the registers of St. Lazare." In the verse, a "penitent," Beaumarchais, confesses to a variety of crimes, including being "a crook, a traitor, an impure courtesan ... without honor and without law," then adultery and finally murder (of his first two wives, to obtain his property and title). The footnoted commentary bitingly describes him as having "an *honnête* exterior, an upstart's manners, honeyed speech speaking ceaselessly of virtue, and charity [*bienfaisance*], but being only a vile Tartuffe." In the final stanzas, on his imprisonment in Saint-Lazare, the "penitent" describes himself as "despairing" and accepts death on the scaffold, fearing only his reputation, "the name that I leave after myself." [92](#)

The images, songs, and prose representations of his imprisonment all emphasized both the physical and social effects of his imprisonment. By one such account, Beaumarchais fell into a morose stupor, refusing to bathe or shave. Other reports emphasized his indebtedness, noting that his enterprises and investments were close to bankruptcy and that he had sold his horses and other trappings of elite status. [93](#) Collectively, the feeding frenzy of negative representations had refashioned his identity from a witty,

if insolent, social climber to a pathetic and desperate figure—the inverse of the *honnête homme* identity that Beaumarchais had gone to such pains to fashion.

From the interior of Saint-Lazare, Beaumarchais may not have known about the panoply of negative representations circulating about his play, his body, and his status. But he clearly knew that his strenuous efforts to establish his personal legitimacy would be severely, possibly irrevocably, compromised. The tremendous publicity surrounding his arrest had cost him, according to one observer, "a man's liberty, his status, and even his reputation." [94](#)

For those sympathetic to Beaumarchais, the imprisonment and subsequent attack on his public identity seemed not only "a bit strong," but wholly beyond the bounds of civility and *honnêteté*, given how carefully Beaumarchais himself had respected these norms in his relations with the court. La Harpe, explaining the problem clearly, noted that Beaumarchais had "lost his reputation due to suspicions as soon as he entered *le monde*," but that he had been "rehabilitated" both legally and socially after the Goetzmann affair under the protection of the Prince de Conti. Moreover, he had over the course of several years comported himself with great civility and self-restraint. But now, at the moment of his greatest artistic and social triumph, he once again found himself confronted with uncivil treatment as a court outsider; La Harpe found this fate all the more "remarkable" given the service Beaumarchais had rendered the king and the foreign minister Vergennes in the late 1770s, when he had advanced nearly one million livres of his own money to the American revolutionaries. [95](#)

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The *Correspondance secrète* argued in his defense that Beaumarchais had acquired both the legal approval of the censor and a conferral of legitimacy from Breteuil and Le Noir before publishing his letter in the *Journal de Paris*. In addition, he had withheld the edition of *Mariage* containing the potentially uncivil preface. Therefore, "some enemy," most likely Suard, must have given the king a "false interpretation" of Beaumarchais's comportment in publishing "that letter." This analysis implied that Beaumarchais, as an established outsider at court, had not been able to control the image ascribed to him by others who held established positions in that community, such as Suard. The *Correspondance* then speculated that, if Beaumarchais could only enforce his own presentation of self, his detractors would "doubtless be silenced" and cease their "criticisms which seem bent to pick a fight with the *bienfaiteur* of nursing mothers and their children, the editor of Voltaire." [96](#)

Beaumarchais's closest allies sought to mitigate the impact of his arrest. His bookseller, Ruault, who for weeks had urged the printers at Kehl to hasten copies of *Mariage de Figaro* to Paris now decided, given the severity of

Beaumarchais's predicament, to print and sell his edition first, though without the portrait as its frontispiece. While admitting that Beaumarchais was far from the first writer in France to be persecuted, he could think of no writer who had been "oppressed with such violence and injustice." ⁹⁷

Beaumarchais's amanuensis Gudin pleaded with Le Noir to intervene, and influential allies at court, including the Count de Vaudreuil and the Prince de Nassau, lobbied the king for his release. ⁹⁸ After six days, Le Noir obtained royal orders to release Beaumarchais and went to Saint-Lazare himself to inform the prisoner. Le Noir also offered medical care and a substantial sum of money—a letter of credit for 100,000 *écus* (300,000 *livres*)—as partial reimbursement of the money owed him by the royal treasury from his loan to the Americans. At first, Beaumarchais refused to be released until he had received a public apology from the Duke de Fronsac and the queen; when Le Noir urged him not to push his luck, Beaumarchais, realizing that he could turn this incident into an occasion to publicly demonstrate his self-restraint, accepted his release. ⁹⁹



Beaumarchais used his liberation on March 14 to stage a public spectacle in which he would play the part of wronged innocent. As widely reported in the literary newsletters and the French and European press, a train of carriages escorted him from the prison, a show that "appeared to be a triumph [and] made a strong impression on the public." Upon arrival at his home in the Marais, he made another public donation on behalf of poor mothers, and then retired with "a small number of friends, although all of Paris was outside his door."

This elaborate performance concluded with a reunion scene worthy of Greuze. According to printed press reports (which Beaumarchais himself must have authored), his tearful daughter, Eugénie, and his mistress, Mademoiselle de Villers, received him "tenderly," along with the domestics, "touched by the return of such a good master." ¹⁰⁰ Beaumarchais, once again, had used public venues—the streets of Paris and the press—to represent himself in terms of virtue and sincerity, while he continued to fashion himself in his correspondence to the court as an *honnête homme*.

In the days that followed, rumors of his next move once again swirled wildly. Many observers expected him to issue a printed attack on the authors of "these awful parodies" and a self-justificatory *mémoire* to the king. These reports, like most nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship on Beaumarchais, presumed that his response would be that of an outsider, with no ties to the court or constituted authority, such as that of Mercier in 1775. However, the very reason for his imprisonment had been the existence of just such ties; if courtiers from Le Noir to Breteuil to Fronsac had not been intervening on his behalf all along, there would have never been such surprise at his uncivil letter to the *Journal de Paris*. After having presented himself as a sincere and virtuous patriot to the crowds outside his home, his next step was to represent himself as an *honnête homme* through

his civility and self-restraint in correspondence and face-to-face meetings with elites, hoping thereby to restore his lost legitimacy.

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To try to regain control of his image, Beaumarchais first removed himself from the public eye. Over the next few weeks, he declined any chances to present himself before the public, refusing all visitors and remaining within his home. In his first correspondence after his release, he wrote to Le Noir, "the retreat appeared to me a necessary result of my disgrace, and I can very well remain in my room until it pleases the king to agree to justify me. I thus respectfully obey" the royal orders. To the Kehl printer La Hogue, he explained that he would not travel until "the proof of my innocence" had been presented to the king, after which he expected to receive final authorization to print *Mariage*. [101](#) While remaining *incommunicado*, he prepared a self-justificatory memorandum to the king and solicited the intervention of his established brokers at court, Le Noir and Breteuil, to present his case to the king directly. Beaumarchais also wrote to another prominent minister, the Controller-General Charles-Alexandre Calonne, like Beaumarchais a client of the Count de Vergennes. Calonne fought intensely with Breteuil in the royal council, and Beaumarchais once again appears to have been playing both sides of the fence. [102](#)

To Calonne, he explained that no mere financial settlement could resolve his predicament, because his personal legitimacy had been so publicly compromised. To the 300,000 *livres* in credit that Beaumarchais received upon his release, Calonne would add 800,000 *livres* over the next year. This enormous sum represented the repayment of the royal debt to him and possibly an advance on polemics Beaumarchais would write for Calonne defending the Paris Compagnie des Eaux against its detractors. This sum far exceeded the total that Calonne would grant in 1785 to over 300 other writers, including members of the Academy, in "pensions and gratifications to men of letters." Yet Beaumarchais expressed much greater concern with his public stature; he pleaded with Calonne to have the king restore, or even enhance, his legitimacy. [103](#)

As he had in several previous self-justificatory memoranda, Beaumarchais defended himself to the court and crown by emphasizing the *honnêteté* of his conduct. [104](#) He implored the king to consider his letter to the *Journal de Paris*, which had offended the court, as an appropriately civil response to the "horrible meanness" of Suard's attack. Moreover, Beaumarchais argued, he had repeatedly demonstrated his "careful respect" for civility to Breteuil by obtaining all the necessary markers of legitimacy, including censorial approbation, for both the edition of *Mariage* and for his article in the *Journal*. Moreover, he cited the preface as evidence that his remark about "lions" and "tigers" referred not to the crown or the court, but to his anonymous critics, and insisted that the line had referred to a psalm. He emphasized that he had been self-restrained and civil in his comportment for "more than seven years" of encounters with the court, dating back to his negotiations with the Royal Household as SAD

commissioner. He noted that since the royal order imprisoning him on March 7, he had retained a public silence and a "voluntary restraint" on the matter. He therefore concluded by pleading with the king not merely to absolve him of the debts he had incurred but to restore his lost legitimacy.

Calonne, in late March, assured Beaumarchais that his *Mémoire justificatif* would be shown to Louis XVI and that financial restitution would be made. ¹⁰⁵ However, to achieve the rehabilitation he sought, Beaumarchais needed not only financial but also social and cultural capital. He thus sought, first and foremost, authorization to print *Mariage de Figaro*, including the preface, as well as his edition of Voltaire. He obtained these approvals quickly, and both editions appeared before the end of the month. Moreover, he sought a public sign of the king's personal esteem, specifically "a certificate in which the king would recognize the innocence of this unhappy victim of calumny" or an equally important marker of legitimacy, such as Louis's consent to receive the dedication of his next play or, most astonishing to contemporaries, a royal pension and "some place of honor at the court."

Though it was far from unprecedented for an author to seek such an honor openly—Racine and Voltaire had both done so—Beaumarchais's request struck many observers as evidence that he remained incorrigibly self-aggrandizing. This request drew humorous, though biting, mockery in print, such as a verse that suggested that Beaumarchais had asked vainly for induction into the Académie Française as compensation. ¹⁰⁶ And he suffered another indignity in June, when the Cramer brothers, Voltaire's printers in Geneva, had his edition of Voltaire suppressed as an infringement on their *privilège*. ¹⁰⁷

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Printed reports speculated that he would be exiled from Paris before the end of the year. Others expected him to leave France of his own accord, as other writers had done after experiencing public humiliations, such as Voltaire and Belloy. ¹⁰⁸ To help prepare Beaumarchais's way for a self-imposed exile, the abbot Sabatier de Cabres sent copies of the still unapproved edition of *Mariage de Figaro* to King Gustavus III of Sweden, King Stanislas II of Poland, and the Princess of Nassau, who might provide their protection. ¹⁰⁹ Beaumarchais, perhaps fearful of such an exile and certainly in need of any elite protection he could obtain, wrote to King Gustavus on April 12, sending him a deluxe copy of *Mariage*, printed at Kehl with the "Épître dédicatoire." ¹¹⁰ Later that spring, Gustavus received the Comédiens Français to perform "Mariage," and his royal printer produced a luxury edition. Beaumarchais hoped that a display of his legitimacy in a foreign royal court (rather than, say, London, where he had spent several months on espionage missions for the king in 1776) would help him retain his precarious standing on the margins of elite Parisian sociability.

Even as he sought rehabilitation and recognition of his *honnêteté* at court,

Beaumarchais began a campaign to shore up his public identity as a man of letters (through the publication of *Mariage*) and, moreover, as a man of honor and a patriot. To this end, he had the *Courrier de l'Europe* reprint, on April 5, a letter that had first appeared in the *Journal de Lyon* the previous January, proposing to establish an Institut de Bienfaisance in Lyon endowed with share of proceeds from the Lyon performances of "Mariage." He also sought to suppress the most egregious images of his humiliation—Vangelisti's engravings. Beaumarchais understood, from his own experience, that legal permission to publish was less important than social legitimacy, and that royal censorship existed less to suppress transgressive speech than to uphold the legitimacy of those whose personal conduct merited recognition as civil. As someone of standing, his public persona, according to the rules of the game, should not have been open to mockery by those without such standing; as we have seen, legitimate men of letters expected royal censorship, especially in the theater, to enforce that principle. Thus, four years after Suard failed to censor Du Buisson's attack against him (and within a year of his triumph over Suard in having "Mariage" performed), Beaumarchais once again invoked royal censorship to defend his legitimacy. He prevailed upon Le Noir to order the engravings suppressed and the dealer arrested. Vangelisti, questioned by Le Noir, took responsibility for the "joke," turned over his remaining copies, and pleaded for the exculpation of Madame La Gardette, who had tended his stand and sold the copies. [111](#)

Somewhat surprisingly, Beaumarchais avoided one significant venue in his effort to rehabilitate his identity amidst this personal crisis of 1785: the Comédie Française. Not only did he not appear in the theater for the rest of the year, he also opposed the troupe's revival of "Mariage" in Paris. Although he authorized performances at provincial theaters and in other European capitals in the summer and fall of 1785, he asked the royal troupe not to perform it in April 1785, just after his release, and performances were suspended in July of that year. On November 4, 1785, he asked the troupe to withdraw the play from its active repertory. Over the next four years, the Comédie Française gave another 25 Parisian performances of the play, though Beaumarchais twice requested the troupe not stage it, "out of respectful circumspection for public decency." With interest in his public self so great and his identity so mutable, the urban theater no longer offered him a favorable venue in which to establish personal legitimacy; it offered only the risk of further slights. He had thus resigned himself, he told the troupe, to "no longer allow to be performed this play which has given rise to such difficulties." [112](#)

Though he would maintain close ties with the Comédiens Français across the 1780s (and would influence the troupe against other aspiring writers), he would never again achieve huge commercial and critical success as he had with "Barbier" and "Mariage." Though his "Tarare" was performed at the Opéra in 1790, Beaumarchais's greatest moments in literary life were behind him by mid-1785. He would become active in negotiating playwrights' *droits d'auteur* and literary property, but he would no longer enhance his social or financial capital through the theater. Despite remaining

close to numerous writers, notably La Harpe and Sedaine, literary life after 1785 would no longer provide Beaumarchais an avenue toward the legitimacy among elites and at court that he had sought for so long, and had come so close to achieving. After his brief imprisonment, Beaumarchais became a different sort of figure than the legitimate man of letters he had sought to be; his identity had generated so much interest that his public self had escaped from his own control. He had become a celebrity.

5.4. Beaumarchais, Modern Man?

A celebrity is defined, legally and in lay terms, as one whose life is so much in the public eye as to be considered fair game for all. This characteristic of celebrity may be distinguished from the type of renown for which authors in early modern France had striven, that of glory. From the Renaissance through the mid-eighteenth century, an "ethic of glory" informed writers' self-conceptions; Jack Iverson shows how earnestly Voltaire and other writers conceived of themselves in the terms of the heroic epics and histories they wrote during that decade. ¹¹³ By contrast, Beaumarchais's celebrity in the 1780s appears closer to the notoriety associated with, in his own day, Marie Antoinette, or in the nineteenth century with "star" actresses. ¹¹⁴

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Becoming a celebrity, as Beaumarchais had, represented the opposite of establishing personal legitimacy at court, and this trajectory explains the active role he took as a polemicist in several controversies of the later 1780s, notably the financial controversy surrounding the Compagnie des Eaux in 1785-1786 the Kornmann affair of 1787, and a series of attacks in 1789 and thereafter. The tremendous interest that Beaumarchais evidently held for Parisians in the later 1780s might be understood, as standard biographers of Beaumarchais would have it, as an outpouring of support and concern for a popular hero paying the price for his dissidence at the hands of a corrupt regime. However, as I have tried to suggest above, this interest emerged in large part from disdain for a man who seemed to many to have earned a comeuppance for his insincere artifice and unseemly self-aggrandizement. Though many contemporaries, and even more historians, consider his recourse to printed polemics in the Compagnie des Eaux and Kornmann affairs to have been a natural instinct for Beaumarchais, we have seen to what great lengths he went (without success) in the late 70s and early 80s to change that perception.

Paul Metzner describes various "virtuosi" of late eighteenth-century France as individuals who projected deliberately "immodest" representations of themselves to large audiences through displays of technical brilliance. In contrast to the figures studied by Metzner who projected public selves that exalted their personal talent and genius, Beaumarchais became known as a virtuoso *malgré lui*, a virtuoso of scandal and publicity, despite his own best efforts to project an image of *honnête* self-restraint. ¹⁵¹

Much like the *libelles* of the queen or press coverage of actresses, the

negative representations of Beaumarchais that appeared in print in 1785 and thereafter focused intensely on intimate details of his life: his personal relations with other writers, actors and courtiers; his state of mind in prison; his body and the sexual overtones of the violence to which he may have been subjected; and his relationships to his wives. Maza, in her brilliant analysis of the "culture of publicity" in the late eighteenth century, notes that the theater, including "Mariage de Figaro," contributed directly to this public fascination with the domestic, which, following Habermas, we might perceive as an essential pathology of the public life of modern society, evident already at the supposed birth of that public life in the later eighteenth century. In this sense, the case of Beaumarchais in the later 1780s appears recognizably, even alarmingly, contemporary at the dawn of the twentieth-first century. [116](#)

To call Beaumarchais a celebrity is to challenge a romanticized narrative of him as invoking the public in an ideological struggle for liberty by positing the opposite: that through his arrest and the subsequent spectacle, he lost a great deal of autonomy, since he could no longer control his own self-image once he had been established in the public eye. The publicity, in the sense of "rendering public," accorded to Beaumarchais and "Mariage" in 1784-1785, produced less a triumph of Enlightenment values or an Enlightenment man of letters than a new social identity, the celebrity writer. This celebrity, as was evident in the numerous satirical representations, in print, song and engraved image, of his mind and body, transformed Beaumarchais the man—an individual at once ordinary and inimitable—into what Maza described as "the protean figure of Beaumarchais." Beaumarchais in these years became represented in terms very similar to those he used in his own literary and polemical writings, which had made these writings (and their author) so interesting to his contemporaries, and to subsequent biographers, critics, and historians. Through multiple forms of publicity, including word of mouth and correspondence at court and engraved images and print in Paris, Beaumarchais became a character in a narrative well beyond his own control, entirely divorced from the self he had sought to project. [117](#) The power of this publicity prevented Beaumarchais, after March 1785, from any longer acting effectively to protect or enhance his legitimacy, no matter how resolute or original his strategies of self-fashioning, even when abetted by royal financial subventions and the censorship of his critics. Indeed, after this date, he could benefit from neither elite patrons nor the royal state in fashioning the image of a self-restrained, civil *honnête homme*. He had simply become too "public" for such a narrative to make sense.

He would be subject, in the late 1780s and during the Revolution, to an onslaught of negative representations, despite his continued efforts to embody the ideals of both civility and patriotism. Later in 1785, he would again seek to cast himself publicly in the role of *bienfaiteur* as the public face of the Paris Compagnie des Eaux, backed by Calonne. This involvement, however, would only further link his public identity to negative images of the court as a symbol of immorality and to the attacks on "speculation [*agiotage*]" by the Count de Mirabeau and his group of self-

described patriot publicists, including notably Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville. To these writers, Beaumarchais would serve as a useful symbol through which to link speculative capitalism and court politics as related forms of self-interested corruption. Beginning with Mireabeaus's and Brissot's pamphlets denouncing the Compagnie des Eaux in 1785 and continuing through the lawyer Nicolas Bergasse's printed *mémoires judiciaires* attacking Beaumarchais in the context of the "Kornmann affair" of 1786-1787, these texts cast Beaumarchais as the very incarnation of courtly corruption. Furthermore, in later 1787, printed reports of a court performance of "Mariage" with the queen herself playing the role of the Countess placed Beaumarchais directly in the line of fire of attack on Marie Antoinette's sexual behavior and on general lasciviousness at court. At the outbreak of the Revolution, even though he would be elected to two district assemblies and the municipal general assembly, the municipal assembly denounced him for having stolen papers from the Bastille. In the early years of the Revolution, he would play an active role in cultural politics, drafting a version of new theater legislation for the Commune in 1790 and then new literary property legislation for the National Assembly in 1791. He also sought to frame himself as a patriot by proposing to lead the procession of Voltaire's remains to the Pantheon and to donate his edition of Voltaire's works to the national library. Despite these efforts, Beaumarchais during the Revolution became reviled by much of the French nation— revulsion that culminated in charges of treason in the so-called affair of the rifles—as a figure of superannuated court decadence that had, at last, succumbed to patriotism and liberty). [118](#)

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Beaumarchais sought to negotiate between ideals of civility and autonomy throughout his entire public life. He came to prominence through a combination of clientelism at court (as a music tutor in the 1750s, then a protégé of a series of prominent courtiers) and self-positioning through print as an outsider (most notably in the *Mémoires contre Goetzmann*). He then sought to use public theater to bring together these two forms of publicity and establish legitimacy before both court and public. Instinctively yet intentionally, characteristically yet originally, he sought to become both a great courtier and a modern patriot, a synthesis Voltaire appeared to have achieved. However, Voltaire's self-fashioning was atypical for the eighteenth century. His combination of personal autonomy and personal prominence, characteristic of the modern intellectual, remained unsustainable for most aspiring *gens de lettres* in the age of the Enlightenment, even for one as creative and energetic as Beaumarchais. Though often considered precociously modern in introducing social content to his literature, Beaumarchais might be best understood as a figure who most acutely experienced—and whose identity most evidently represented—the paradoxes of eighteenth-century public life.

Maza quite rightly notes that most scholarly as well as popular biographies end the Beaumarchais narrative in April 1784, with the so-called "scandal" of

"Mariage," taking this as the moment when the Old Regime began to crumble before the onslaught of Enlightened criticism and popular dissent. Moreover, as she notes, the play "was greeted with deep hostility" by many critics for its supposedly immoral allusions to aristocratic libertinage and dialogue rife with sexual double entendres. However, this chapter demonstrates a need to temper the political implication of her reading of Beaumarchais as a "consummate social climber," which she substitutes for the classic narrative. She emphasizes that this criticism came from "the left of the political spectrum," meaning the patriot writers, such as "Mercier himself," and moreover from the "Grub street radicals" of the "Kornmann group." This analysis in effect is anachronistic, since self-described "patriots" are on "the left" only from the retrospective view of the Revolution, and the coterie of writers who would viciously attack Beaumarchais during the controversy surrounding the Compagnie des Eaux and Kornmann affairs emerged as such only in the years following the commercial success of "Mariage." The criticism of Beaumarchais that emerged in the spring of 1784, and became so intense over the next ten months, culminating in the disgrace of his arrest, did come from self-described patriots such as Mercier, but what so perplexed Beaumarchais was that it also came from those who saw themselves as defenders of *honnêteté*, such as Suard.

Indeed, the double bind that Beaumarchais faced was even more intense than Maza has described. His emphasis on court language that incurred the anger of patriots such as Mercier did not, paradoxically, win him support at court; the play reached the public stage only with the support of *gens en place*, yet Beaumarchais did not win widespread support among such elites, as evidenced by the success with which Suard rallied opposition to him at court. Beaumarchais's efforts to play one side off against the other, to be both patriot and *honnête homme*, led him to seek affiliations with both of the major court factions of the mid-1780s, and this instinct to play one off against another, more than any other factor, contributed both to his success and downfall. On the one hand, Beaumarchais cultivated the protection of the Baron de Breteuil, who in the mid-1780s emerged as the leader of the former Choiseul or "Queen's" faction that included the Duke de Vaudreuil, the Duke d'Orléans, the Paris parlementaires, the Count de Mirabeau, and such writers as Brissot and, on its margins, Gouges. On the other, he retained his longstanding ties to the Maurepas or "King's" faction now headed by the Count de Vergennes, which included Le Noir and the finance minister Calonne.

One of the issues dividing these two groups, at court and in pamphlets, was the royal joint-stock Compagnie des Eaux de Paris, which had been founded in 1777 to bring running water to the capital. By 1785 there was still no running water, but the Compagnie had become one of the most hotly traded stocks on the over-heated Paris Bourse; in 1784 and 1785, Calonne issued 12 million *livres* worth of new shares, hoping to shore up the shaky royal finances. To boost the value of these shares, Calonne pumped an estimated 20 million *livres* from the royal treasury into the stock market. Opposing this maneuver within the council of state was Breteuil; beyond it, opposition came from a group of Genevan investors, headed by Etienne Clavière, whose

most prominent publicist was the Count de Mirabeau. Beaumarchais, in the spring of 1785, appears to have found himself between these two very powerful rivals. In the months after his release he clearly sided with Calonne, from whom he received shares in the Compagnie. In the fall of 1785 into early 1786, Beaumarchais actively promoted the value of the Compagnie and called for an expansion of its role to include fire insurance and professional fire-fighting services. Mirabeau, in response, attacked "speculation," the Compagnie, the idea of professional fire-fighting, and Beaumarchais as immoral. Beaumarchais thus found himself defending both the government's fiscal policy and the active stock market against patriot charges that the Compagnie consisted of nothing but parasitical stock-jobbers and corrupt ministers. While there is no evidence to suggest that Beaumarchais's imprisonment might have resulted directly from the Breteuil-Calonne rivalry, its consequence was clearly to force him to choose a side, and the side he chose, Calonne's, would soon collapse. Indeed, the collapse came quickly and spectacularly between March 1785 and mid-1787, due to an onslaught of attacks on government finances, Vergenne's death, and the failure of the Assembly of Notables, all culminating in Calonne's flight from France. At that point, the Kornmann affair became a proxy fight, and Beaumarchais became a lightning rod for patriot criticism of the Old Regime.

In his work on these controversies, Darnton—and those such as Crow and Maza who have drawn on his work—has argued convincingly for the importance of reading the politics of "Beaumarchais's style" as more important for understanding late Old Regime political culture than anachronistic readings of the "liberal pieties" of the play "Mariage de Figaro." This chapter has added another dimension to that reconsideration of Beaumarchais and of cultural politics on the eve of the Revolution. ¹¹⁹ First, we have seen that his "style"—in correspondence, appeals to court, the periodical press and the prefaces, as well as in the play itself—was itself a combination of styles, combining elements of both *honnêteté* and patriotism, though with a much greater emphasis on the former. Second, we have seen that the style of Beaumarchais was not unique to him, since so many of the same words, strategies, and outcomes appear in the case of Gouges, a writer who allied herself with the opposite faction and who put much greater emphasis on the "*patriote*" aspect of her public identity.

5.5. Olympe de Gouges, Woman of Letters

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Beaumarchais's defense of his endangered status in literary life in the spring of 1785 included fending off unfavorable representations of himself and his work, including Vangelisti's engravings, several parodies of *Mariage de Figaro*, and several plays that appropriated its characters and situations. For instance, in late 1785, he prevailed upon the Comédiens Italiens not to perform a work entitled "Mariage de Cherubin," by a certain Madame de Gouges, entirely unknown to Beaumarchais and most of the literary world. Gouges, as we will see, spent most of the 1780s seeking to fashion an identity as a playwright and *femme de lettres* by soliciting intervention from a variety of protectors and brokers. Because she considered herself both a

patriot and an outsider to the court, she looked to potential brokers, including Beaumarchais, along with Mercier, Palissot, and the Chevalier de Cubières. Gouges evidently read literally Beaumarchais's claims to speak for all playwrights in his representations of the SAD, which he tried briefly to revive in June 1784. So, in late 1785, though she had had no plays performed by the royal theater, she wrote her own circular letter to a series of Comédie Française playwrights, evidently seeking to solicit the SAD to come to her aid. Beaumarchais showed no interest, a response that disappointed, even angered, the volatile Gouges, and she responded with a printed preface attacking him. [120](#)

In the mid-1780s, Gouges turned to print to fashion an identity as a patriot writer, one who embodied virtue in a corrupt culture. Though the figure of the patriot appears *prima facie* the antithesis of the *honnête homme*, we will see that, in many ways she, like Beaumarchais, moved back and forth between these ideals in her self-representations. Like Beaumarchais, she would insist upon the civility of her conduct in face-to-face encounters and in correspondence, then insist upon her virtue, sincerity, and civic commitment in print. Like Beaumarchais, she would rely heavily on the intervention of brokers to and patrons in the court, before finally turning to print in violation of court norms. Like Beaumarchais, she would find herself in a series of double binds and would eventually reach a point at which she lost her self-mastery, and civility yielded to aggression. However, unlike Beaumarchais, she would try to compensate for her outbursts by refashioning herself in print as an isolated, virtuous figure challenging hierarchy and corruption from outside established institutions. This tactic confounded her sponsors at court and within the troupe, inadvertently leading to her isolation in literary life, a fulfillment of her own rhetoric. Most importantly, like Beaumarchais, she did not foresee this disappointing outcome because she sensed no contradiction between these strategies of self-representation, due in large part to her creative and relentless capacity for restructuring her presentation of self to escape ever more confining double binds.

Of course, Gouges differed from Beaumarchais and other aspiring playwrights in a crucial respect: she was a woman, and she presented herself in public life as a *femme de lettres*. Thus, her story, as discussed in this chapter (and continued in the next), offers both a point of comparison with Beaumarchais and a rare opportunity to view a woman seeking entry into late Old Regime literary and public life. [121](#) Prior to Gouges, the best-known female eighteenth-century playwright for the Comédie Française had been Françoise de Graffigny, author of two short works staged to mixed response in the 1750s. Between Graffigny and Gouges, the only female writers to pursue a public identity as Comédie Française playwrights (through correspondence with the Comédie Française troupe) were the Delhorme sisters, for their one-act comedy "Rupture." After one performance, in November 1776, the troupe withdrew the work from its active repertory and refused to perform it again. The Delhormes, as had many other aspiring writers in the 1760s and early 1770s, including

Beaumarchais and Mercier, protested that their play had been passed over in favor of works by better-known and better-connected authors. ¹²² As had Beaumarchais after the initial failure of his "Barbier de Séville" in February 1775, the sisters then substantially revised their text and wrote repeatedly to the troupe, demanding that the new version be performed. Yet "Rupture" never returned to the public stage, and the Delhormes never achieved the acclaim of "the journals ... all *gens de lettres*, ...the *parterre* [and] the public" that they claimed to seek. In their correspondence with the troupe, they never refer directly to their sex, appealing for the "droits naturels ... of all authors," to be judged by the "public," and noting that their "modest silence" has brought them the "pain of seeing ourselves the innocent target of sarcasm." Such self-effacement conformed to eighteenth-century expectations of how *gens de lettres* should comport themselves, yet it brought the Delhormes no recognition from the troupe, which waited six months before finally rejecting the revised version. At that point, the sisters broke with the theater and printed an edition of the play. ¹²³

Ten years later, Gouges's experience, and her responses, would turn out to be very similar. Her story begins in the spring of 1784, the season of Beaumarchais's great triumph. By this date, she had already refashioned herself from Marie Gouze, uneducated provincial and teenage single mother, into Olympe de Gouges, proprietor of a lifetime annuity and a protégée in the entourage of the Duke Louis-Philippe Joseph de Chartres, who would become Duke d'Orléans and later Philippe-Égalité. Orléans sustained a network of writers, many of them self-styled patriots who supported the Paris Parlement, yet also maintained close links to the king's faction at court; it was in this milieu that Gouges began writing. In the 1780s, as much recent scholarship has shown, Gouges produced a series of essays and plays, the first of which was a five-act comedy, "Zamore et Mirza, ou l'Heureux naufrage." In most respects, this play was unexceptional. The story, set in a romanticized version of the French colony of Isle de France (in the Indian Ocean), deploys standard early modern plot devices of geographic displacement, familial separation, and eventual reconciliation. The title characters, Zamore and Mirza, South Asian slaves, reconcile the French Saint-Frémont family after it is shipwrecked. ¹²⁴ The royal theater censor, Suard, submitted the play anonymously on her behalf to the Comédie Française on April 17, 1784—just 10 days before the premiere of "Mariage de Figaro," against which Suard had fought for years. ¹²⁵ This intervention of a well-connected broker to the royal theater (on behalf of an utterly conventional play) all illustrate clearly that, while a newcomer, Gouges entered literary life from neither a position of social marginality nor intellectual dissidence.

 de Gouges,
Zamor et Mirza

The royal actors accepted the work unanimously, without comment, but evidently did not add it to the *tableau* of new plays in the theater lobby. ¹²⁶ Gouges thereby took a position we have encountered several times already, that of an aspiring writer who had very little standing in literary life, yet could publicly demonstrate an association with the Comédie Française

through, for example, free entrance privileges to the theater. Royal theater regulations, which awarded such privileges to authors, also mandated that the troupe perform plays in the order received, and the theater maintained a surplus of works on its repertory. Like other aspiring authors whose work had been accepted, Gouges could not expect her play to reach the stage for over a year. Furthermore, the revised regulations that had gone into effect in the fall of 1781 prevented playwrights from printing a play until it had been performed (or until three years had elapsed since its acceptance). Yet Gouges had a strong emotional investment in her self-conception as a writer already worthy of acclaim, a self-conception incompatible with patient, self-restrained comportment. Thus, like other aspiring writers whose plays had been accepted but not yet performed, she found herself on the threshold of recognition at court and before a commercial public, due in at least in part to having adhered to established norms. To advance beyond that threshold, she had to continue to adhere to those norms in order to obtain intervention on her behalf by brokers, including the largely autonomous troupe. Yet with so many new writers in the 1770s and 1780s in the same position, she needed to promote herself forcefully to bring her work to the attention of elites and the broader urban public. Gouges responded to this double bind with a minor transgression of both the royal regulations and established norms, while still remaining well within the contours of *honnêteté*.

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In July 1784, having waited only three months, she wrote the troupe leaders asking when "Zamore et Mirza" would be performed. Over the next twelve months, she sent several letters soliciting a rapid performance of her play, before the troupe leader Florence finally wrote back, indicating the nineteen plays received onto the repertory before hers and reiterating the royal regulation that plays be performed in the order received. Florence followed with a second letter, explaining that the troupe considered requests by authors for special treatment, such as she had made, to be malhonnête, "indecent" and "little worthy" of one claiming the status of a Comédie Française playwright. [127](#) This led Gouges in turn to veer away from self-assertion and to demonstrate her adherence to established norms. She sent another series of letters seeking the favor of the troupe leaders Florence and Delaporte and the actor Molé, who she had selected for the lead role of Zamore. She also had Michel de Cubières—another playwright and protégée of Orléans, who was known personally to the actors—serve as her broker by accompanying her in person. [128](#)

When the troupe remained indifferent at this meeting, Gouges lost her self-control, staging what she herself would later call an "explosion ... of bitter complaints." The incivility of her outburst (much like that of Beaumarchais in 1773) astonished the actors, all the more because it occurred in person and came from a woman. [129](#) They responded to Gouges's incivility by ending her affiliation with the royal theater; the troupe leader Florence wrote that "your play ... has been crossed off the register ... and [the troupe] has ordered your name effaced from the list of those with entrance privileges to the theater." [130](#) Moreover, the troupe appealed to the Minister of the Royal Household, who held supervisory power over the royal theater

(and by extension its authors), to issue a *lettre de cachet* for her arrest.

However, she did have recourse to refashion herself anew. As had Beaumarchais, she sought to do so by emphasizing her *honnêteté*, beginning with an appeal in late 1785 to the Duke de Richelieu, one of the First Gentlemen. ¹³¹ Richelieu responded with the protection she had sought, ordering the new Lieutenant-General of Police for Paris, Louis Thiroux de Crosne, to suppress the arrest order and restore her entrance privileges at the theater and her play to its repertory. Reassured that her standing as *honnête* had not been compromised, she wrote again to the troupe in a conciliatory, polite tone. Assuring the actors that "all was forgotten," she praised their *honnêteté*, expressed the "sentiments of unity that are in my heart," and proposed "to work together [for] a reconciliation." ¹³² The troupe leader Florence readily followed her lead in his response, expressing satisfaction that the troupe had been able "to convince you of the *honnêteté* and the rightness of its actions." To prove the actors' good faith, he invited her to meet with him and discuss her other plays. ¹³³ This exchange demonstrates that Gouges had adopted the rhetoric of late Old Regime literary culture, as she tempered aggressive overtures with compensatory, polite gestures of self-effacement. Gouges used correspondence to demonstrate civility with great acuity and thus retained a diminished, but still viable, status in literary life. So she could expect, when she next wrote the troupe on February 1, 1787, that "Zamore et Mirza" would soon be performed.

The company defied her expectations, however, and further delayed the performance. She responded with a long letter reminding the actors that their contretemps of two years earlier had been resolved; the troupe, she reiterated, had expressed "its *honnêteté* and its sincerity for me," and she had reciprocated such "loyalty ... with my own." Representing herself as polite, sociable, and of "good faith," she attributed this latest difficulty not to her earlier, aggressive action but to the troupe's hostility. She charged that the actors had taken advantage of her politeness and civility, "rare virtues [which] have been more grievous to me than vices... [A]lthough I have never harmed anyone, how many times have I been betrayed or had atrocities committed against me?" ¹³⁴ Thus, Gouges's correspondence with the troupe from 1784 to 1787 reveals not a marginal woman whose latent feminism would appear during the Revolution but a typical late Old Regime established outsider alternating between civil and self-effacing statements of fidelity to potential protectors and acts of symbolic violence on her own behalf, which transgressed established norms of literary life.

5.6. Fashioning the Female Writer

What differed in Gouges's self-fashionings from those of other aspiring playwrights were her explicit invocations of gender to explain her comportment. She used gender both as an explanation for transgressive aspects of her behavior and as a reason that she ought

still be considered *honnête*. For example, in a 1787 letter to the troupe, she emphasized that the difficulties of literary life, "too much for a strong man to endure, become deadly for a weak woman." Unable to bear the burden of waiting patiently, she had become too forceful: "In my first overtures, I over-estimated myself as a very important person, but I am a woman and I merit some indulgence for that early enthusiasm." From the theater's response, she claimed, "I learned to moderate myself and become modest." As evidence of this moderation, she noted that, since her original outburst, she had taken no further aggressive action and "said nothing, except the twenty letters ... to M. Florence which were as submissive as they were *honnêtes*." Yet, she complained, the troupe still continued to hold "against me an unjust and displaced animosity," which she attributed to her sex. ¹³⁵ In her next letter to the troupe, sent several days later, she further gendered her presentation of self by emphasizing that she had tempered her emotional nature and become sufficiently self-mastered to face "the dangers that my sex runs in pursuing a dramatic career." Insisting upon the sincerity of her correspondence by claiming that "I have no art for writing; I can speak only in a natural language," she deployed a commonplace of eighteenth-century women's self-referential writings: a woman writer possessed of personal genius and creativity so intense that she could not control her own expression. ¹³⁶

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As several feminist critics have argued, such self-presentation gendered an even broader commonplace of the writer as an embodiment of natural genius and authenticity, and thus a moralizing force in an otherwise corrupt world.



¹³⁷ By highlighting her femininity, Gouges framed herself to the troupe as both courteously self-effacing and also naturally virtuous. Such a presentation of herself as a woman writer implied that her expression in public would contribute to both civility and morality, creating social harmony rather than disorder or social change. Gouges's cultural creativity ought to be understood, not anachronistically, as the founding of twentieth-century militant feminism (as per Scott, Harth, and others) but as an appropriation and modification of elements of several different seventeenth- and eighteenth-century figures of women who expressed themselves in public. These figures, including the "honest courtesan," the *précieuse*, the Amazon, and the *salonnière*, were all used by women prior to Gouges to frame their literary pursuits as contributing to social order and morality. ¹³⁸

Like other aspiring writers in the 1780s identifying themselves as "dramatic authors" and *gens de lettres*, Gouges had fashioned one self in correspondence and another in print, and these multiple self-presentations should not be reduced to a distinction between a private, authentic self, and a contrived, public persona. I am not suggesting here that Gouges acted with duplicity through an instrumental use of court language; rather, my intent is precisely the opposite, to decouple how we interpret her self-representations from any attempt to capture her "true," autobiographical self. To see this more clearly, we can contrast her self-presentations in correspondence with her entry into the medium of print,

the publication of *Zamore et Mirza* in 1788. As we will see, this change in medium both resulted from and changed the context of her self-presentation, and thus altered the strategies available to her.

From her earliest encounters with the royal theater, Gouges had expressed an interest in printing her play, and in 1787 she overtly threatened to issue an authorized edition, complete with an explanatory preface. By printing the play with a preface, she implied, the troupe's conduct would be made known, and "the public . . . would complain of seeing the Comédie treat me with such rigor." Yet to show her good faith and loyalty to the actors, she proposed to delay the publication of her play for another six months. Thus, she used her correspondence to emphasize to the troupe her self-restraint by noting that she had resisted the temptation to "cry murder, theft, and assassination" in print. [139](#)

Finally, in August 1788, Gouges took the aggressive (but still legal and conventional) tactic available to frustrated playwrights: she published *Zamore et Mirza* as an unbound *brochure*. [140](#)

Although granted royal approbation and privilège, and not in violation of theater regulations, the edition still transgressed *honnête* norms because it appeared before the play had been performed by the royal theater. Gouges justified herself by reminding the actors that her play had been in their repertory for over three years, the period that royal theater regulations allowed the troupe to retain a work before the author could print it. She also complained that "Zamore" had been by-passed repeatedly in favor of other plays, and threatened to "have recourse to the law" and to "violent means," meaning not physical but symbolic violence in the form of a suit and published legal brief against the theater and the First Gentlemen. [141](#) Such a threat alluded implicitly to Mercier and Palissot, who had both brought such suits in 1775; these writers, with Cubières, had taken Gouges on as a *protégée*.



[de Gouges,
*Le Bonheur primitif
de l'homme*](#)

This alliance illustrates how well-integrated Gouges was in literary life and how flexible were the contours of patriotism and civility in the 1780s, since all of these writers maintained ties to the court and official institutions of literary life even as they fashioned themselves in print as outsiders and patriots. In this same letter, she explained that her decision to offer the play to a broader audience, without the theater's approval, demonstrated not inadequacies in her own personality but the importance of the work itself. Here, for the first time, she described it as a *pièce de circonstance*, meaning a work of contemporary resonance, which by theater convention should be staged before all others on the repertory.

Then in September, she printed it again, in the third volume of her complete works. To this second printing, she added a preface that

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purported to narrate, "with the most rigorous exactitude ... the greatest injustices" of the troupe's mistreatment of the play and its author. 143

Previous scholarship has read this preface as a document of Gouges's social marginality and exclusion, and thus the explanation for her still-latent militancy and radicalism. Yet when read in light of her correspondence with the troupe, it might be best understood as an exercise in self-fashioning, through which she sought to reconcile her self-assertive act of printing the play with her continued claims of self-effacement and *honnêteté*. Here again, Gouges again showed herself both typical and innovative. Her preface reprinted selections from her correspondence between herself and the troupe, which she framed with commentary as a story of her original "loyalty" and "simplicity" toward the actors, who treacherously ensnared her in a "clever trap ... terrifying for me" and "indecent for my sex." 144 In her commentary on the published letters, she describes how the unaccountable and self-interested troupe deliberately violated, with impunity, not only the royal theater regulations but, moreover, the norms of *honnêteté* by arbitrarily refusing to perform works by new authors. Anxious to advance from her position on the periphery of literary life towards the center by being associated publicly with the royal theater, she had asserted herself forcefully, first in letters and now in print. In response, the actors had taken offense and, as they had with Beaumarchais, Mercier, and Palissot on earlier occasions, broken off relations with her. 145

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As Beaumarchais had when faced with a similar double bind, she responded by defending, in print, her comportment as civil and accusing the actors of abuse. At the same time, she innovated in her use of this medium and rhetoric, by claiming that polite reciprocity came naturally to her as a woman, in contrast to men such as the troupe leader Florence: "I could not have suspected a cultured man [*homme d'esprit*] capable of seeking to prevail over a woman.... Instead, "I addressed myself to Mademoiselle Contat and to Madame Bellecourt, the two most just and essential women," hoping that "a cultivated woman [*femme d'esprit*]" would be naturally inclined towards "fairness." She implied that these women would be more understanding than Florence of her earlier "missteps." Her editing and framing of this correspondence in the printed preface is explicitly intended to demonstrate the "honnêteté and the goodness" of her "supplications" and the actresses' "calming and palliative ... equitable, decent and moderated response." Gouges represented herself here again as an embodiment of genteel sociability, interacting in the sort of reciprocal, civil, and self-moderated manner expected of *gens de lettres*, and which she now claimed to be her natural comportment as a woman. 146

By publishing and commenting upon the letters in the preface, Gouges did not merely recount her experience but actively fashioned a public identity through which she interpreted the recent past and from which she would now necessarily approach and be approached in subsequent social interactions. This act of public self-presentation in turn altered the context for her self-presentation to the troupe in correspondence. Just after the

preface appeared, she sent to Mademoiselle Contat a letter explaining that the good will she had felt for the troupe in "my heart, my mind, and my spirit" had been met by "all sort of bad steps" from the troupe, which "abuses ... my *honnêteté*" and had forced her to print the preface and to initiate a lawsuit. ¹⁴⁷ Having printed her play, the second time with accompanying paratext, she recognized that she had broken decisively with established norms and would have to articulate a new basis for her public persona as a writer.

5.7. Self-Fashioning, Abolitionism, and Patriotism: A Writer's Identity and Liberty

Gouges's entry into literary life may thus be seen as characteristic of the experience of new and aspiring authors, insofar as she used correspondence to represent herself as having the social attributes and acculturation expected of *gens de lettres*, and then turned to print to explain how she had been forced by the royal troupe to abandon civility and take aggressive public action. This context leads us to reconsider now the afterword to the second 1788 printing of *Zamore et Mirza*, "Réflexions sur les hommes nègres." ¹⁴⁸ Gouges here offered a new explanation, in print, for why she had written and published the play: she had decided, five years earlier, to tell "the deplorable history of these unfortunate people," black slaves. "The destiny of these unfortunate people must be of greater interest to me than anyone," she wrote, "because this is the now fifth year [sic] since I conceived [this] subject for a drama." ¹⁴⁹

Despite her ignorance of "politics," she had felt, "more than anyone," a natural "curiosity" about the "deplorable" and "cruel" treatment of black slaves, and she had felt compelled to contribute to their "liberty." Gouges thus presents the slaves as the reason she had become a writer, claiming as her motivation neither self-interest nor the glory of a patron, but the advancement of civility and morality through literature. Indeed, the "Réflexions" reaches its rhetorical height not with a call for abolition but a demand to the actors to "perform my play ... all Nations demand with me that performance." The afterword then concludes by using abolitionism to explain her comportment. Her inherent virtue and sociability had inspired her to become a writer, and moreover had compelled her, she implied, to act aggressively by printing her work, in defiance of both the theater regulations and norms of literary life: "This sensibility which seems like self-interest [*l'amour-propre*] . . . is only the natural effect produced on my heart by all the public clamor in favor of *hommes Nègres*." ¹⁵⁰

The "public clamor" refers to the activities of a group which, led by Jacques-Pierre Brissot, met during the autumn of 1788 at the Café de Valois to discuss and agitate for abolition of the slave trade. Gouges did not participate in these discussions, nor did she become a member of the Société des Amis des Noirs that the Marquis de Condorcet established in early 1789. In 1789, the Société adopted and printed rules allowing men

and women members and waiving dues for indigent members, but Gouges did not subscribe or attend any meetings. Condorcet invited her to his salon at the Hôtel de la monnaie, in late 1789, after the publication of her play, but she still did not formally join the Société. [151](#) Yet beginning with her "Réflexions," and continuing in writings printed over the next eighteenth months, she repeatedly equated her efforts to have the play performed with the efforts of the Société to abolish the slave trade, presenting both as necessary steps towards "liberty" for the French people. In late 1788, sensing that the outpouring of printed debate on pressing political issues, including slavery, had brought about an opportunity for the play and herself, she retitled "Zamore et Mirza" as "L'Esclavage des nègres," a work she described as "the dreadful history of *nègres*." [152](#)

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 [Letter from Olympe de Gouges ...](#)

To wit, she wrote, in a letter of November 27, 1788, before the revised version had been made public (and perhaps even before revising it): "It has become a *pièce de circonstance*, because various published newspapers have mentioned 'L'Esclavage des Nègres.'" Gouges thereby effectively elided the Amis des Noirs public campaign for abolition and emancipation with her then little-known dramatic work, which she now claimed to be "entirely their [the slaves'] history." [153](#)

Through this representation, she could comprehend herself not as a frustrated, unfairly maligned, or dangerously aggressive woman, but as a self-effacing writer, motivated by devotion only to the black slaves and the public.

Scholarly criticism of Gouges's play has been based almost entirely on the published 1792 version, but there are at least three different versions of the play. [154](#) The first version, written in 1784 and first published in August 1788, was a melodrama about a French family shipwrecked on an island in the "East Indies." As an eighteenth-century literary artifact, its most salient features are characteristics of imaginary travel literature in the period—geographical displacement of Enlightened French characters to an exotic Asian location where the society resembles that at home but where the customs and mores are markedly different. In this first version, slavery and race are barely mentioned. The characters of Zamore and Mirza are South Asian domestic slaves who supervise black field slaves on the estate of the colonial Intendant, who in turn expresses his sexual and perhaps marital designs on Mirza (all common occurrences on plantations in Isle de France and other Indian Ocean colonies). [155](#) When Mirza forcefully resists his advances and kills the Intendant, she and Zamore flee into the wilderness. Thereafter, they remain minor characters, appearing occasionally to discover the members of the French Saint-Frémont family, who had been shipwrecked separately on the island. At the conclusion, Saint-Frémont, the

"humane and generous" *gouverneur*, having recognized and been reunited with his long-lost daughter Sophie, is moved to absolve Zamore and Mirza and marry them (III.xv). [156](#)

A second version is the manuscript *copie de souffleur* prepared for the Comédiens to use in their performance, of which eventually there were three, in late December 1789 and early January 1790. This version is slightly revised from the first printed edition. Retitled "L'Esclavage des nègres," it is set in India [l'Inde], not the Indies. The main characters, Zamore and Mirza, are now slaves of indeterminate race, whose civility, language, and kindness impress the Europeans Sophie and Valère sufficiently for them to consider them apart from both the "society of Indian slaves" (I.vii) who serve as domestics, intendants, and soldiers to Saint-Frémont, and from the "*nègres*," the majority of slaves in the colony. [157](#)

This version introduces a new character, Betsi, a chambermaid to Madame de Saint-Frémont, whose race is not identified and who is sympathetic to the plight of Zamore and Mirza. Though this version remains structurally very similar to the 1788 printed version, there is a crucial difference. When Zamore and Mirza flee the city after having killed the malicious Intendant and the colonial judge announces their death sentence at the end of Act I, the black slaves openly revolt, and the Indians mobilize to suppress violently the revolt. Saint-Frémont then must judge between the protestations of Zamore's and Mirza's innocence made by Betsi, Sophie, Valère, and his wife, and the demands of the "the Indians" for their death (II.iii). He expresses this predicament as a choice between an Enlightenment impulse towards benevolence ("All citizens are free under a good master") and the burden of colonialism ("in a slave land, one must be barbarous despite oneself"); he seeks inspiration from the somewhat unlikely figure of Louis XVI as "good father." In the end, Saint-Frémont opts for liberty. He absolves Zamore and Mirza and offers them their freedom, and they in return refuse manumission and plead to serve loyally Sophie and Valère. Saint-Frémont then calls on all the inhabitants of the colony to observe the law and act for the "public good" (III.xv). The manuscript also includes a final scene, clearly written in late 1789, but which has been entirely crossed out (suggesting it was not performed), in which Saint-Frémont receives an honor from the king for his service and closes the play by declaring his wish that the National Assembly "not only for the regeneration of France but also for the happiness of our colonies, act to make the destiny of the *nègres* less unhappy."

The third version, printed in 1792, is a shorter and more structurally balanced work, eliminating several minor characters and scenes. It is now set in "les Indes," (presumably the American West Indies), and the action is focused on the slave couple, now refashioned as *nègres*. In the new version, the plot centers on the flight of the title characters from colonial justice rather than the family romance of the Saint-Frémonts. In this version, Zamore kills the Intendant who had sought to rape Mirza, and the black slaves help them hide until they are recaptured by colonial soldiers. At the end, they are, as before, saved and married by the enlightened Saint-Frémont, and they now

 [de Gouges,](#)
[L'esclavage des noirs](#)

accept their manumission. Gouges added two explicit discussions of slavery and liberty: the shipwrecked Sophie and Valère describe slavery as "unnatural" and "evil," in contrast to the "liberty" recently achieved by the French (I.vii); and the slave girl Coraline explains that to achieve liberty, "one must be neither master nor slave" (II.ii).

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Her revisions of the play (and her multiple explanations for those revisions, to be discussed in [Chapter 6](#)) suggest to us not duplicity but efforts to preserve the self she had fashioned as a sociable, self-restrained woman of letters with no personal interest to advance and whose virtue merited public recognition. At the moment when she revised the play in the late 1780s, Gouges still lacked public recognition as a *femme de lettres*, despite having held for several years a position in the Orléans entourage and having a work in the Comédie Française repertory. And during those years, she had with increasing frequency represented (and thus, come to conceive of) herself as a socially excluded outsider, a patriot, who did not receive the favorable treatment and protection at court enjoyed by other writers. On the eve of the Revolution, she further developed this persona by intervening in the political debates surrounding the calling of the Estates-General, publishing several explicitly patriotic pamphlets calling for a constitutional monarchy. [158](#) In one such tract, *Le Bonheur primitif de l'homme* of early 1789, Gouges included a passage calling for a "second theater," adopting the argument advanced repeatedly since the 1770s by such self-identified patriot playwrights as Mercier. [159](#) Gouges modified this long-standing demand to her own situation, arguing that the second theater should include works by "all the women who have written in this century" and "plays of all distinguished authors which would promote moral goals," specifying Mercier's *dramas*. For this new theater, she proposed two distinct committees for the repertory: one would be composed of men, to judge men's plays, and the other would be composed entirely of women, to judge works by women. She represented this proposal as an expression of her own "useful and humane vengeance" against not only the Comédie Française troupe but also "the journalists" and "certain authors" who had refused to publicize her work, condemning her to be "forgotten by the entire world." [160](#) Through these pamphlets, Gouges inserted not only herself but also the concerns of patriot playwrights in the political arena. At the same time, she continued to seek entry into literary life by demanding that the royal theater stage her play. [161](#)

Though the pamphlets seem to have had little effect on the Estates-General, the passage calling for a second troupe caught the attention of the Comédie's troupe leader Target, who considered her to have "insulted the actors in offensive writings." Accordingly, the troupe revoked her entrance privileges for the second time. [162](#) In response, Gouges reinforced her self-

presentation, to both the troupe and the pamphlet-reading public, as a patriot playwright, by bringing in March 1789 a lawsuit against the Comédie Française and preparing a legal brief for print. ¹⁶³ In the brief, she not only argued her claims for propriety over her play on the basis of Old Regime civil law, she also justified her aggressive conduct on behalf of her play by describing her encounters with the royal theater as a conflict between a virtuous innocent individual and a powerful, corrupt institution of the court. In narrating the actors' mistreatment of her, she synthesized what had become commonplaces in the rhetoric of legal claims made by late Old Regime playwrights against the theater with claims made by women in domestic disputes, casting the troupe as both abusive husband and corrupted royal power. ¹⁶⁴

However, she withheld from publishing the legal *mémoire* that spring. Instead, she wrote a new play, her sixth, entitled "Philosophe corrigé," with the intention of printing it rather than having it performed. A satire in the tradition of Molière, Piron, and Palissot, this work mocks a courtly writer by depicting him as a naïve dupe of the elite social circle with which he identifies himself. Moreover, in the "Préface sans caractère" printed with the play, she represented herself as the antithesis of such a dupe, as a writer of "natural genius" who refused to be concerned with forms imposed on her and who sought only to express her pure self through her writing: "I am my work and when I write, there is only ink, paper, and pen on the table." This asceticism, she continued, enabled her to retain "ignorance" and "originality" by avoiding the "frozen style" of a "savant." Thus representing her total unfamiliarity with classical style as a form of artistic integrity, she claimed that the publication process itself corrupted this integrity and led to the failure of her works. For this corruption, and for the failure of her works to have an impact on social morality (and to obtain recognition for their author), she blamed copyists, editors, actors, journalists, and other authors. ¹⁶⁵ This ideal of the pure writer, relying only on her natural virtue to fend off the twin threats of intellectual and spiritual corruption from the unnatural knowledge of savants and of material corruption from the publication process, represented a sociological impossibility in the late Old Regime, yet would become a dominant image of the writer in the romantic tradition of the nineteenth century. ¹⁶⁶

To render this image plausible in the 1780s, Gouges drew upon a dominant motif of herself as an isolated, virtuous figure imperiled by a series of powerful, corrupt forces, one of which she singled out one by name: Beaumarchais. As we saw in the first half of this chapter, Beaumarchais in the mid 1780s sought to protect his own legitimacy from parodies of himself and his work, including Vangelisti's engravings and Gouges' *Mariage de Cherubin*. Gouges thus represented him in the "Préface sans caractère" as a double traitor, to the patriot cause and to her personally. She addressed a long passage to "C[aron] de B[eaumarchais] ... false protector [and] ... false friend of women," who had become a "redoubtable enemy," one of the "evil rogues" and "flatterers" whose self-interested and dangerously powerful cabale had prevented the virtue and innocence with which she aligned

herself from being recognized and rewarded. Repeating the charges of deceptive action and of self-interestedness that became so frequent in critical representations of Beaumarchais during the mid- and late-1780s, Gouges claimed that Beaumarchais had told others she had not written her plays and that he had forced the Comédie Italienne to suppress her parody to ensure the commercial success of his own "Mariage de Figaro." ¹⁶⁷ In contrast to Beaumarchais's self-promotion, she represented herself as wanting to withdraw from the duplicity of literary life and "find myself alone," concerned only with other virtuous people.

For this reason, she claimed, she had decided to write about black slaves. ¹⁶⁸ Thus she suppressed in her preface any reference to either her alliances with the Orléans entourage, the salon of Fanny de Beauharnais, or the Masonic Loge des Neuf Soeurs, or to her earlier version of the play in which the characters were South Asians. These omissions demonstrate her investment in figuring herself as a patriot playwright, taking virtuous, selfless, solitary, and courageous steps both to achieve personal autonomy and to influence social morality, on the strength of her writings alone.

5.8. Gouges v. Beaumarchais: Paradoxical Symbols of Modernity

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So often presented in literary historiography as an outsider and the very symbol of Enlightenment liberalism, Beaumarchais appeared in Gouges's preface as an incarnation of inauthentic courtliness and parasitism, the counterpoint to her own patriotism. Her use of patriot rhetoric to fashion herself as virtuous and her rivals as corrupt not only has informed how historians, critics, and biographers have interpreted her life and writings from between 1784 and 1789, it has also influenced our interpretation of court culture in pre-revolutionary France more broadly. In standard accounts of the Enlightenment, it would be inconceivable for a writer such as Beaumarchais to have been authentic in his appeals to the court, so his appeals must be read as duplicitous. Similarly, for many feminist critics, Gouges's use of a variety of similar tropes in her self-representations indicates a willful duplicity that she was forced to adopt. Yet, as we have seen, Beaumarchais, Gouges, and many other writers went to great lengths to demonstrate their *honnêteté* throughout the eighteenth century, deep into the 1780s. We need not dismiss this rhetoric as mere sophistry or duplicity even though, as we will see in the next chapter, many of these same writers, notably Gouges, after July 1789 quickly abandoned claims to courtly civility as corrupt and insincere and highlighted instead the figure of the patriot playwright—a sincere, virtuous and autonomous writer for the nation.

To conclude this discussion of the cases of Beaumarchais and Gouges, we can revisit several points developed in earlier chapters of this book and now link them to the larger history of the late Enlightenment and the outbreak of the Revolution. Most fundamentally, the subtlety with which each author altered what Elias calls their "structure of personality," or self, in response to unexpected outcomes of social encounters, reminds us of both the constant

concern of aspiring gens de letters to attain, retain, and demonstrate social status, and of the many stratagems to which such would-be writers had recourse, presenting multiple personae in different media simultaneously. Thus Beaumarchais and Gouges, generally treated as symbols of different aspects of Enlightenment writers' social and intellectual autonomy, show us how much closer aspiring writers positioned themselves to official institutions and accepted norms than their own printed self-presentations would suggest. They engaged with the official institutions of literary life not merely out of duplicity or for tactical advantage (to subvert from within, as it were); such behavior was necessary for anyone who would consider him or herself, or be considered by others, a writer in the age of the Enlightenment.

Historians, literary critics, and biographers of the eighteenth-century literary world have almost unanimously underscored the modernity of the period, and Beaumarchais and Gouges have often served as material witnesses for that argument. Beaumarchais, more frequently represented in the popular than in the scholarly imagination, is consistently figured as a modern free spirit, struggling to reconcile himself to the last vestiges of traditional mores, hierarchical social encounters with condescending protectors, and tyrannical Old Regime repression. His supposed triumph has become a recurrent symbol of the inevitable progress of personal autonomy, liberty, and merit—in short, of modernity. [169](#) Likewise, Gouges has become a recurrent symbol of the extension of that triumph to women, among the first women to establish her public identity as a writer. [170](#)

This chapter does not dispute that claim, but adds nuance to it. The modernity of Beaumarchais and Gouges resulted less from their autonomy—or detachment, as Elias would call it—than from their creative adherence to norms of sociability or engagement, even when caught in double binds that pushed them toward (and occasionally over) the boundary of their emotional equilibrium, leading them to commit intentional acts that were interpreted as transgressive. Their respective violations of norms should be seen as inadvertent and regrettable missteps in a constant tacking back-and-forth between civility and autonomy rather than as radical responses driven by feelings of social marginality. Moreso than earlier self-fashioned outsiders, or patriots, such as Mercier, who represented his own virtue in terms of his distance from a corrupt court, Beaumarchais and Gouges insisted that their personal virtue was reflected in their civility among established elites; any deviation from civility, both insisted, had to be understood as a defensive response to inappropriate slights they had received from others.

In this sense, Beaumarchais and Gouges—and the entire generation of writers that came to prominence in the 1770s and 1780s—might be seen as moderns, but also as the last *honnêtes gens* of literature. Without question inspired by the great prestige and autonomy of Voltaire the Philosophe, they were no less impressed by the universal acceptance Voltaire the courtier had gained across Europe. Though tempted and occasionally drawn to speak in print as outsiders to a broad public, Beaumarchais and Gouges were far from socially marginal or intellectually radical. They were, quite simply, people of

their time. Though both would participate actively in and make a significant impact on French literary and intellectual life during the Revolution, each would also find that the rules of the game changed too quickly. Although both Beaumarchais and Gouges had found ways to negotiate between *honnêteté* and autonomy, civility and liberty in the late Old Regime, they would be ill-prepared for the changes that came rapidly to literary life in 1789.

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In her provocative and original book on eighteenth-century publicity, Maza questioned the "tenacious" legend of Beaumarchais's radicalism and proposed a reconsideration of Beaumarchais's persona as a "consummate social climber" notable not for his dissidence but instead his thorough identification with norms of elite sociability. Moreover, she called for a reconsideration of the "prophetic subversiveness" of "Mariage," noting that the evidence of this traditional reading comes from the play itself, taken out of its context. Much the same could be said of Gouges, as Hesse has suggested, and this chapter has developed this point by demonstrating the extent to which both writers, though consistently represented as intellectual dissidents and political radicals, were deeply imbued with the norms, practices and language of the court and elite Parisian sociability. At the same time, the present discussion of Beaumarchais and Gouges has sought to avoid the unsubtly sharp distinction Maza suggested between "the language of the salon," which Beaumarchais "refused to let go," and the language of the "social contract," which she claims became predominant in the 1780s. Moreover, it has sought to avoid an even more frequently overdrawn contrast made in the historiography of eighteenth century writers, between "hacks" and "Philosophes." ¹⁷¹ As we have seen here, Beaumarchais and Gouges experienced both institutional acceptance and rejection in the 1780s, and each described themselves in terms of both civility and patriotism. We will see in the next chapter how these two writers took very different paths after 1789: Beaumarchais resisting the sharp turn away from *honnêteté*, while Gouges fashioned herself as a patriot more virtuous than the Revolution itself. However, as we have seen here, such a tendency did not appear prior to the Revolution.

In pursuing these two case studies, this chapter has engaged more than previous chapters with the texts of plays; on the other hand, it has digressed further from the world of theater to consider the place of these writers in the broader context of contemporary politics. As a result, we have seen how closely tied their literary production and their strategies of self-presentation to the public theater were to the factions of court politics and to contemporary polemics in the press. We see in the cases of Beaumarchais and Gouges, whose trajectories will be pursued further in the next chapter, illustrations of Jouhaud's argument for the seventeenth century; the history of writers and their relations to institutions cannot be separated from intellectual or political history, but in effect are political and intellectual history in early modern France—"two histories in one." As seen through

these revisionist narratives of Beaumarchais and Gouges, these two histories must be integrated into our understanding of the Enlightenment and its relationship to the Old Regime and the Revolution.

Notes:

Note 1: The first such instance of this claim may have been in the *Mémoires de Fleury de la Comédie Française, 1757 à 1820* [2nd ed.] (Paris: Adolf Delahays, 1847), I: 320; for contemporary versions of this account of Beaumarchais as incarnation of modernity, see Claude Petitfrère, *Le Scandale du Mariage de Figaro* (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 1989); and Maurice Lever, *Pierre Augustin-Caron de Beaumarchais* (Paris: Fayard, 1999). [Back.](#)

Note 2: The 1990s generated extensive study of Gouges's published writings, through which we have come to know her as "radical" and "revolutionary," as the "first French feminist," and as a "militant abolitionist." These depictions, however, are based almost entirely on Gouges's published works of the early Revolutionary years and on the presumption that these works reflect a coherent feminist world view. Consequently, the tendency has been "to emphasize woman's natural rights in Gouges's view of the world" in all discussions of her life or works. (Quotes from Maryann DeJulio, "On Translating Olympe de Gouges," in *Translating Slavery: Gender and Race in French Women's Writing, 1783-1823*, eds. Doris Y. Kadish and Françoise Massardier-Kenney (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1996), 132.

A particularly interesting and thorough analysis of Gouges's "practice of representing herself in political pamphlets" as well as other published writings of the Revolution is found in two articles by Janie Vanpée, "Performing Justice: The Trials of Olympe de Gouges," *Theatre Journal* 51 (1999): 47-65, and "Taking the Podium: Olympe de Gouges's Revolutionary Discourse," in *Women Writers in Pre-Revolutionary France: Strategies of Emancipation*, eds. Colette H. Winn and Donna Kuizenga (New York: Garland, 1997), 299-312.

In this sense, Gouges scholarship exemplifies the tendency that Carla Hesse has noted, of feminist criticism and historiography to romanticize eighteenth-century women writers as socially marginal heroines struggling at the outskirts of an essentially masculine political culture. She calls instead for more "basic, empirical investigations" into actual "female participation in the cultural and political life of late Enlightenment and Revolutionary France." Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment*, and "French Women in Print, 1750-1800: An Essay in Historical Bibliography," in *The Darnton Debate*, ed. Mason, 65-82. [Back.](#)

Note 3: *Mariage de Figaro* in *Oeuvres de Beaumarchais*, ed. Pierre Larthomas (Paris: Gallimard, 1988): V.iv: "cette douce liberté ...[d']imprimer ... sans liberté de blâmer, point d'éloge flatteur;" ; *L'Esclavage des Noirs, ou l'Heureux naufrage* (Paris: Duchesne, 1792) (II.ii): "ni maître, ni esclave." [Back.](#)

Note 4: Manuel, *Police de Paris devoile*, 182. [Back.](#)

Note 5: This rediscovery of Gouges as the progenitor of modern French feminism is attributable first and foremost to Joan Scott's essay, "French Feminists and the Rights of Man: Olympe de Gouges's Declarations," *History Workshop* 28 (1989): 1-21, which has subsequently appeared in revised form as "A Woman Who Has Only Paradoxes to Offer: Olympe de Gouges Claims Rights for Women," in *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution*, eds. Sara E. Melzer and Leslie Rabine (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 102-120, and then, further revised, in her *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 19-56.

Her plays have been studied generally as an extension of her feminism. See Giselle Thiele-Knobloch, "Introduction" to *Théâtre politique* (Paris: Côté-femmes, 1991); Roland Bonnel, "Olympe de Gouges et la carrière dramatique: 'une passion qui porte jusqu'au délire'," in *Femmes et pouvoir: Réflexions autour d'Olympe de Gouges*, eds. Shannon Hartigan, Rea McKay, and Marie-Thérèse Seguin (Moncton, Canada: Editions d'Acadie, 1995), 65-95; Gabrielle Verdier, "From Reform to Revolution: The Social Theater of Olympe de Gouges," in *Literate Women and the French Revolution of 1789*, ed. Catherine R. Montfort (Birmingham, AL: SUMMA Publications, 1994), 189-215; and Michele Ratsaby, "Olympe de Gouges et le théâtre de la Révolution Française," (Ph.D., City Univ. of New York, 1998). [Back.](#)

Note 6: They had been issued May 18, 1781 (AN O1 844, dossier #8). On the previous of the regulations prior to 1780, see Chapter 2; on the 1780 revisions, see Chapter 4. [Back.](#)

Note 7: On the three different manuscripts extant, see Pierre Larthomas, "Note sur le texte," in the Pléiade edition of *Oeuvres de Beaumarchais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 1371-1372. [Back.](#)

Note 8: Sedaine to Beaumarchais, September 9, 1781. (Proschwitz, #290, BAF). [Back.](#)

Note 9: BCF, "Beaumarchais: Correspondance," [September 1781], VII-viii. The actor Fleury recalled that unlike many of the plays it accepted in those years, and despite the intensity of the troupe's disputes with Beaumarchais in previous years, "We ardently wanted to perform it." (*Memoires de Fleury*, II: 323). [Back.](#)

Note 10: In early November 1781, Daubcourt, a member of the Comédie Française wrote from Saint Petersburg to report of the high appreciation at the Russian court for "Barbier" and to ask if he would like to premiere his new play in this venue (Daubcourt to Beaumarchais, Proschwitz #293, BAF). On May 27, 1782, Beaumarchais wrote to Friedrich Melchior von Grimm, who was acting as a broker for the Russian Empress Catherine, that he would gladly send the work after it had gained approval at court and from the censor. He did in the meantime agree to read the work aloud to Prince Paul Petrovitch, the Russian crown prince, then traveling in France with his wife under the pseudonyms of the Comte and Comtesse du Nord (Proschwitz, #312, BAF). One month later, he wrote to the Lieutenant-General of Police, Le Noir, that the Russian ambassador

had asked for a copy to send to Catherine, but "I cannot send it until it has been censored and performed." For this reason, he asked Le Noir to hasten the censorial approval (Beaumarchais to Le Noir [June 1782], Proschwitz #315 (BAF)).

That same year, he also refused requests from the Duc de Fronsac and the Duchesse de Lamballe to give readings at their homes (*Théâtre et lettres relatives a son théâtre*, ed. Maurice Allem (Paris: Gallimard, 1934) ,letter XXII, 560-561), and he also declined to consent to a commercial performance in Toulouse (Beaumarchais to Mole, 7 July 1782; Proschwitz #323, BAF).

Vergennes, as foreign minister, had taken up from his predecessor Choiseul an active network of writers as his clients since the mid-1770s; moreover, in late 1781, he effectively replaced Maurepas as First Minister. On Vergennes' political career (though without reference to his role as a literary protector), see Munro Price, *Preserving the Monarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

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Note 11: Coqueley's and Suard's reports are in the BAF (VIII, XVI, 15-16). Manuel, 184. [Back.](#)

Note 12: Beaumarchais complained to Le Noir (in a letter of June 1782) of persecution, noting that although he had made the changes requested by the first censor, Suard had still denied an *approbation*. Moreover, he noted, he had not been able to obtain an audience with Miromesnil to plead his case (Proschwitz, #315 (BAF)). In explaining to the troupe why the play had still not been approved, over a year later, he spoke of court intrigue (Proschwitz, #339bis, reprinted from BNF-MSS NAF 14898, f. 19).

For a sophisticated discussion of the censorship of "Mariage de Figaro" which nevertheless presents it as a triumph of civil liberty over an absolutist state, see Elizabeth J. MacArthur, "Embodying the Public Sphere: Censorship and the Reading Subject in Beaumarchais's *Mariage de Figaro*," *Representations* 81 (1998): 57-71. [Back.](#)

Note 13: Beaumarchais to Le Noir, June 1782; BAF, Proschwitz #315; Le Noir to Vergennes, April 11, 1783 (Proschwitz, #339, MAE, dossier: "Beaumarchais," f. 354.) As foreign minister, Vergennes, like his predecessor Choiseul, played an active role as a prominent patron in literary life; moreover, in the 1770s, he had supported Beaumarchais's efforts to aid the American Revolutionaries. [Back.](#)

Note 14: Beaumarchais to Breteuil, undated [December 1782/ January 1783] (BAF), reprinted in Loménie II: 307-8. [Back.](#)

Note 15: BCF, "Beaumarchais: Mariage de Figaro," "Interdiction de representation (Theatre des menus plaisirs)," June 13, 1783. La Harpe reported "six or seven hundred" carriages had arrived with expectant spectators who went away disappointed; see *Correspondance littéraire* (Paris: Migneret, 1801-1807), 6 vol.; letter CXC (IV: 130). [Back.](#)

Note 16: Beaumarchais au Marquis de Thibouville, June 19, 1783, Proschwitz

#340, BAF. [Back.](#)

Note 17: As Vaudreuil explained to Beaumarchais, "it would be a considerable step towards its performance at Fontainebleau and Paris" ([September 15, 1783], Proschwitz #348, BAF). Vaudreuil proposed a private performance in his theater to Fronsac in early September (Proschwitz #346, BAF). Fronsac then meticulously coordinated the staging for maximum effect, inviting the Comte d'Artois, the king's brother, "and the entire court" (in a letter reproduced from the BAF in Loménie, II: 308-9), and instructing the royal intendant Papillon de La Ferte to make arrangements for the performance (Proschwitz, #345, BAF) before finally obtaining the indirect approval of the king and queen through the royal actors (BCF, "Dazincourt," October 24, 1783). Such care was necessary, because Beaumarchais (and his protectors) risked appearing to be excessively self-assertive, as evident in Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun's interpretation, that "Beaumarchais cruelly harassed M. de Vaudreuil to have his theater perform the play" (*Souvenirs de Madame Louise-Elisabeth Vigée-LeBrun* [Paris: Fournier, 1835], I: 147). [Back.](#)

Note 18: "Copie de la censure du Mariage de Figaro remise a M. Le Noir," (BAF VIII, XVI, 18), reprinted in Loménie, II: 313: "aucun danger à en permettre la représentation ... pour aucun homme du monde." Gaillard commented primarily upon the characters, who he found "gay characters [who] are not dangerous" and noted that only "fools and miscreants" had anything to fear from this play. He also suggested the work might provide the Comédie with much needed attendance that would generate "much revenue." [Back.](#)

Note 19: Vaudreuil wrote to Fronsac and Beaumarchais in September 1783 that the troupe had informed him of its desire to perform the play: "hors de Mariage de Figaro, point de salut" Proschwitz #346, #348; BAF); Fronsac in turn wrote to the Intendant of Royal Menus-Plaisirs, Papillon de la Ferté, in early September 1783, that the king and queen had approved and "to make all arrangements," including obtaining Beaumarchais's approval for a staging (Proschwitz, #345; BAF). In a letter of early January 1784, Beaumarchais explained to Le Noir that he had agreed to the performance after he had received both "juridical" approval, from Coqueley, and "extrajudiciary" approval from Gaillard (Proschwitz, #355, BAF). [Back.](#)

Note 20: Beaumarchais to Le Noir, September 27, 1783 (Proschwitz, #351, BAF); Beaumarchais to Louis XVI, January 1784 (Proschwitz #370, BAF). Guidi's report as "extrajudiciary" is quoted from Beaumarchais's letter to Le Noir of January 17, 1784 (Proschwitz #355, BAF); the report itself is in the BAF (VIII, XVI, 19) and is reproduced in Loménie, II: 313. [Back.](#)

Note 21: Beaumarchais to Le Noir, November 27, 1783 (Proschwitz, #351, BAF). [Back.](#)

Note 22: La Harpe, *Correspondance littéraire*, 4: 165. [Back.](#)

Note 23: Such a configuration is the essence of Elias's concept of a social double bind, in which all actors, even those who ostensibly hold positions of power, are able neither to resolve nor disengage from a potentially unstable

encounter; see Elias, *Involvement and Detachment*, 48-49. [Back.](#)

Note 24: Observations sur le Mariage de Figaro" (BAF VIII, XVI, 20). The report is signed "Desfontaines, censeur royal" and dated January 15, 1784. [Back.](#)

Note 25: Beaumarchais to Des Entelles, February 13, 1784 (BN-MSS NAF 25261 f 33-34). Beaumarchais attributed the play to Nicolas Fallet, though the printed version carries the name of Auguste Poisson de la Chabeaussière; *Le Deux tuteurs* (Toulouse: 1785). [Back.](#)

Note 26: Beaumarchais to Le Noir, January 17, 1784, Proschwitz #355 (BAF); Beaumarchais to Breteuil, January 17, 1784, Proschwitz #356 (BAF). [Back.](#)

Note 27: Beaumarchais to Breteuil, January 17, 1784, Proschwitz #357 (BAF). [Back.](#)

Note 28: *Mémoires secrets*, 25: 137. [Back.](#)

Note 29: Breteuil to Beaumarchais, February 26, 1784, Proschwitz #362 (BAF). [Back.](#)

Note 30: Bret to Lenoir, Proschwitz, #369, March 22, 1784 (BAF VIII, XVI, 21). This same summary appeared in the printed "programme" that Beaumarchais himself wrote for publication in the *Courrier de l'Europe* to respond to criticisms of the work. (The manuscript [Proschwitz, #368, BAF] is in Beaumarchais's own hand; the printed version appeared in the *Courrier* of July 9, 1784 (16: 18-19) (Proschwitz, #393). [Back.](#)

Note 31: Beaumarchais au Roi, [March 1784], Proschwitz, #370 (BAF). [Back.](#)

Note 32: BCF, "Beaumarchais: Mariage de Figaro," "Distribution faite par M. de Beaumarchais a l'assemblee du lundi 23 fevrier 1784." [Back.](#)

Note 33: Beaumarchais to Preville, March 31, 1784, Proschwitz #372 (BAF). [Back.](#)

Note 34: *Mémoires secrets*, 25: 266. [Back.](#)

Note 35: Beaumarchais to Breteuil, June 10, 1784, Proschwitz #387 (BAF). [Back.](#)

Note 36: On June 15, in the presence of King Gustavus III of Sweden, Suard delivered an address that criticized "Mariage de Figaro" for its *décadence* and considered it an attack on *l'honnêteté publique* and *bonnes mœurs*. (La Harpe, *Correspondance littéraire*, 4: 251-252; [Louis-François Mettra et al.], *Correspondance littéraire secreta* 84:25 (June 16, 1784), 6. (Note that here and below, citations to the *Correspondance littéraire secreta* (CLS) refer to the numeration in Birgitta Berglund-Nilsson and Barbro Ohlin, eds., *Inventaire et index de la Correspondance littéraire secreta, dite de Mettra* (Ferney: Centre International d'étude du XVIIIe siècle, 1999).) [Back.](#)

Note 37: BCF, "Beaumarchais," "Mariage de Figaro: Comptes," f. 2. On Beaumarchais's financial returns from his theater, see Kim Sae-Hwan, "Analyse d'un succes: *Le Mariage de Figaro* de Beaumarchais, 1778-1793," (*Thèse du 3eme cycle*, Université François Rabelais, 1996). [Back.](#)

Note 38: Bret, a close collaborator in the SAD negotiations of 1780 and a crucial ally in obtaining censorial approval for "Mariage de Figaro," wrote in response to a "billet d'invitation" that he could not attend (Proschwitz, #391, BAF). The *Mémoires secrets* (26: 35) reported on June 8 that, "Le Sieur Beaumarchais sent a circular letter to all dramatic authors in which he invited them to meet at his house to discuss matters concerning their mutual interests." [Back.](#)

Note 39: *Mémoires secrets*, 26: 40, (June 11, 1784). [Back.](#)

Note 40: The agreement with Beaussier was notarized by the Comédie Française notary Momet, at Châtelet on June 25, 1784, and most of the document is reprinted in Beaumarchais's *Petition à l'Assemblée nationale* of December 23, 1791, for dramatic literary property; it thereby became a model contract for provincial theaters to use in performing new plays. It is reproduced as well in Beaumarchais, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Gudin. (Paris: 1806), 229. [Back.](#)

Note 41: Au Roi, [June-July] 1784 (BAF VIII, XVI, 22). [Back.](#)

Note 42: Maza, *Private Lives, Public Affairs*, 289-311. [Back.](#)

Note 43: *Mémoires secrets*, 26: 89. There is no manuscript of this letter in the Beaumarchais archives, raising the question of the veracity of the *Mémoires secrets'* attribution; nevertheless, it demonstrates clearly Beaumarchais's continuing vulnerability to the charge of excessively mercenary, and thus uncivil, behavior. [Back.](#)

Note 44: BCF, "Beaumarchais: Mariage de Figaro," contains an unsigned letter to the troupe, dated October 17, 1784, in which a man claiming to be an unheralded, aspiring playwright, "absoluttment nul dans le monde" and "qu'une très petite existence dans la littérature" complains that his work had been by-passed due to Beaumarchais's manipulations. [Back.](#)

Note 45: One such song is printed in the *Mémoires secrets*, 26: 21 (June 11, 1784). [Back.](#)

Note 46: This incident is reported in *Mémoires secrets* (25: 279), and the *Courrier de l'Europe* (15: 324, May 21, 1784). The verse is reprinted in the Pléiade edition of Beaumarchais, *Oeuvres Pierre Larthomas*, ed. (Paris: Gallimard Pléiade, 1988), 1165. Furthermore, La Harpe, *Correspondance littéraire* CCVI (4: 227-233), reported in May: "Plus le Mariage de Figaro a de succes et plus on en dit de mal." Similarly, the *Mémoires secrets* (26: 21, 43, 48) reported numerous printed poems and songs satirizing Beaumarchais and "Mariage de Figaro" during the month of June 1784. [Back.](#)

Note 47: Beaumarchais to Breteuil, June 4, 1784, Proschwitz #385 (BAF). Beaumarchais explained to Breteuil that he had happily accorded du Paty his author's *loge*, but the duke responded by asking for an enclosed box, suggesting he would be embarrassed to be seen publicly at the play. [Back.](#)

Note 48: BN-MSS NAF 18247: "Réponse de M. de Beaumarchais à Mr. le Duc de Villequier qui lui avait demandé sa loge pour des dames." [Back.](#)

Note 49: Manuel, 188. [Back.](#)

Note 50: "Beaumarchais aux auteurs du Journal de Paris"; the manuscript is dated June 8 (Proschwitz, #386; BAF), and the printed version printed is dated June 13; it appeared in the June 15 *Journal de Paris* (167) 721. Beaumarchais au Baron de Breuil, June 10, 1784, Proschwitz #387 (BAF). [Back.](#)

Note 51: The letter, dated August 12, appeared in the August 15 *Journal de Paris* (228), 971-973. In mid-September, he printed another letter, expanding on the idea of a "patriotic institution" to provide support for "poor, nursing mothers [*pauvres mères nourrices*]"; *Courrier de l'Europe* (16: 179), September 17, 1784 (Proschwitz, #400).

The creation of both public and private institutions to relieve poverty animated a great deal of discussion throughout the eighteenth century, since Church efforts appeared increasingly inadequate and ineffective. Charitably inclined urban elites markedly reduced their donations to traditional hôpitaux généraux in favor of newer institutions they considered more Enlightened, especially in the 1780s. See Isser Woloch, *The New Regime: Transformations of the French Civic Order, 1789-1820s* (New York: Norton, 1994), 237-242. [Back.](#)

Note 52: Beaumarchais to Comédiens Français, September 20, 1784 (BCF, 137b, f. 110; Proschwitz #401) is a reprint of a first draft of this letter from the BAF, in which Suard is not named. The troupe agreed immediately to make this contribution (BCF 137b, f. 111; 21 September 1784). [Back.](#)

Note 53: *Mémoires secrets*, 26: 288. BCF, "Beaumarchais: Correspondance," X.i-ii (September 20-21, 1784). The gate receipt was 6,387 *livres*, 2 sous, which were duly donated (BCF, "Registre des recettes" (122-25), October 2, 1784). [Back.](#)

Note 54: "À Seville, chez Bride-Oisin, au Patriotisme, 1784" [Paris: 1784; BNF 8-TC31-167] Voltaire's essay, "l'Homme á quarante écus" proposed this amount as the daily amount an independent man, including an *homme de lettres*, deserved. Beaumarchais, by contrast, is represented as a man who defines autonomy as one-fourth of that amount, -the 30 *livres* daily he would accord poor mothers under his plan. [Back.](#)

Note 55: BCF, "Beaumarchais: Mariage de Figaro," "Compte des 68 premieres representations du Mariage de Figaro," January 10, 1785. By the end of the play's run, after 100 performances, in July 1787, his total *part d'auteur* would be 59,510 *livres*, 14 sols, 10 deniers (BCF, "Beaumarchais: Correspondance,"

XI.ii). [Back.](#)

Note 56: *Journal de Lyon* (January 17, 1785), 39-41; *Courrier de l'Europe*, 17: 51 (January 25, 1785); *Journal de Paris* 44 (February 13, 1785), 184. [Back.](#)

Note 57: *Journal de Paris* 52 (February 21, 1785), 215-217. The letter is signed "P. L. P. F. C. L." and widely attributed to the abbot Suard. [Back.](#)

Note 58: BAF, Beaumarchais a Le Noir, February 26, 1785. (DCS #20). [Back.](#)

Note 59: *Journal de Paris* 66 (March 7, 1785), 272-3; the manuscript is dated March 2 (BAF, "Aux auteurs du Journal de Paris"). "The abbot ... does not wait have long to wait for the response to his diatribe. It has been printed as the *Preface du Mariage* that will be rendered public soon" (272). The reference to having vanquished "lions," Beaumarchais later claimed, was an oblique reference to Psalm XV, verse 13. [Back.](#)

Note 60: Beaumarchais a Robinet, March 3, 1785 (*Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Gudin (Paris: 1806) VII: 55 (DCS #22). [Back.](#)

Note 61: Beaumarchais to Madame Monstansier, May 19, 1784, Proschwitz #381 (BAF). [Back.](#)

Note 62: Bret to Beaumarchais, June 19, 1784, Proschwitz #391 (BAF). [Back.](#)

Note 63: Chamfort to Beaumarchais, September 12, 1784 (BN-MSS NAF 22899, f. 31). [Back.](#)

Note 64: Grimm et al., *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique*, ed. Maurice Tourneux (Paris: Garnier, 1877-1882), 14: 91-93, reported on February 2, 1785: "The preface is awaited with great impatience ... Many people are attacked in it. [On attend avec grande impatience la préface ... Beaucoup de gens y sont attaqués.]" The previous December, the CLS (84: 50 [6], December 8, 1784) reported that Beaumarchais had given several public readings of the preface. [Back.](#)

Note 65: "Préface," *La Folle journée* (Paris: Ruault, 1785), i-I [ARS Rf. 16590]. [Back.](#)

Note 66: On Molière's defense of his use of court figures in his plays, see Larry F. Norman, *The Public Mirror: Molière and the Social Commerce of Depiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Beaumarchais here implied Figaro's much-commented upon monologue in V.iii in which he asked rhetorically of the count: "Noblesse, fortune, un rang, des places, tout cela rend si fier! Qu'avez-vous fait pour tant de biens? Vous vous êtes donné la peine de naître, et rien de plus." [Back.](#)

Note 67: The *Courrier de l'Europe* of April 19, 1785 (17: 246) [Proschwitz, #430], explained, several weeks later that, indeed, the delay in publication of the edition was due to "de[s] règlements de la librairie qui exige de prendre une permission nouvelle pour toute préface qui excède une certaine longueur." [Back.](#)

Note 68: "Epître dédicatoire, aux personnes trompées sur ma pièce et qui n'ont pas voulu la voir": that is, those who had a mistaken notion because they had not seen it, and those—namely Suard—who had made a mistake by preventing it from being seen. This text first appeared in the edition printed by Ruault for King Gustavus III of Sweden (Paris: Ruault, 1785), and was included in a special edition printed by the royal press of Sweden later in 1785; see Gunnar von Proschwitz, "Gustave III, Beaumarchais et le 'Mariage de Figaro,'" in *Influences: Relations culturelles entre la France et la Suede*, ed. Proschwitz (Göteborg: Societatis Scientiarum et Litterarum, 1988), 173-198. [Back.](#)

Note 69: [Bret] "Censure de la Preface du Mariage de Figaro," (BAF VIII, XVI, 23), Proschwitz, #413. Suard, "Lettre à M. Le Noir sur la préface du Mariage de Figaro," dated February 2, 1785, is reprinted in Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire* 14: 116-119 [Back.](#)

Note 70: On January 29, 1785, Ruault sent the corrected proofs to the director of the Société typographique de Kehl, Jacques Gilbert de la Hogue, and urged him to rush the edition back to Paris (Proschwitz, #414, BHVP). [Back.](#)

Note 71: BN-MSS NAF 25261, ff. 72-73, January 22, 1785. This letter also proposed that the bookseller Regnault market the edition in Lyon. [Back.](#)

Note 72: Beaumarchais had requested that the actors "de fermer notre boutique" in early January when gate revenues for the 68th performance fell below 3000 *livres* ("Beaumarchais a MM les semainiers, 4 janvier 1785," reprinted in Regnier 466-7, from BCF). However, the troupe performed the play another six times before withdrawing it, ostensibly due to the illness of the lead actor d'Azincourt (La Harpe, *Correspondance littéraire* I. CCXVIII (4: 309-316). When the troupe made a trip to London in February, it had intended to perform "Mariage de Figaro" but did not, reportedly due to Beaumarchais's dissatisfaction with the translation. (*Courrier de l'Europe* 17: 109 (15 February 1785)). [Back.](#)

Note 73: *La Folle journée, ou le Mariage de Figaro* (Paris: Ruault, 1785) [ARS Rf. 16590; BNF Res. P. Yf. 59]; *La Folle journée, ou le Mariage de Figaro* (Kehl: Société typographique de Kehl, 1785) [ARS Rf. 16.693]. Both contain the "Préface" (i-l) and "Approbation" signed by Coqueley de Chaussepierre, Bret, and Le Noir (lv, 237) and an annotation, "Achevé d'imprimer pour la première fois, le 28 fevrier 1785," though neither edition became available in Paris until well into March. [Back.](#)

Note 74: Ruault a La Hogue, March 14, 1785 (Proschwitz #421, BVHP). The first edition is imprinted "28 Fevrier 1785," but La Hogue had evidently still been awaiting the censorial approbation for the preface. [Back.](#)

Note 75: *Mémoires secrets* (28:: 182, 197) reported during the first week of March on both the Archbishop's "proscription of the new edition of Voltaire" and that once again, rumors were circulating of an impending arrest: "Since the play 'Mariage de Figaro' appeared on the stage, the rumor has been repeated several

times that the Sieur de Beaumarchais is imprisoned, and each time, this has proven false." [Back.](#)

Note 76: *Mémoires secrets*, 28:182 (March 6, 1785). The *Mémoires*, as always critical of Beaumarchais, maintained that he had indeed been "the author of that bad joke, among others." This doggerel, along with several other couplets attributed to Beaumarchais and a report that he had been interrogated in the Bastille, appeared in the CLS 85:10 [1-2] (March 3, 1785). [Back.](#)

Note 77: *Mémoires secrets*, 28: 208 (March 11, 1785). [Back.](#)

Note 78: There is no extant correspondence from or to Beaumarchais during these six days, nor do any documents exist in the judicial or Bastille archives on the affair. (According to some reports, his estate was sealed upon his arrest, which would have prevented him from sending or receiving any mail.) The most extensive discussions of the arrest and subsequent speculation are found in the CLS, 85:12 [1] (March 16): "The next day, the event was the topic of conversation across Paris, and [his] enemies ... were very pleased by the choice of prison." The *Mémoires secrets* (28: 197) reported the arrest on March 9, but noted, "as for the cause and the circumstances, accounts vary so much that we should withhold judgment ... one speaks of nothing else in public places and private gatherings." Le Noir discussed the event in his unpublished memoirs, noting "on a fait beaucoup de versions" and describing "the veritable" reason for the imprisonment as the offense taken at court, especially by the First Gentleman the Duke de Fronsac, at Beaumarchais's letter of March 7 in the *Journal de Paris*.)Le Noir papers, BMO, ms. 1423 (III: f. 187).) [Back.](#)

Note 79: All these theories except the last were put forth by both the *Mémoires secrets*, 28: 210 (March 12); and the CLS, 85:11 [6] (March 10, 1785), 85:12 [1] (March 16, 1785). Le Noir, in his memoirs, recorded that "Soon after, we learned what had led to the imprisonment of Beaumarchais [:] his response to Suard in a newspaper. The Duke de Fronsac, himself insulted by a Beaumarchais epigram, induced the severity of Louis XVI." (BMO 1423 (III: f. 187). Both Le Noir's memoirs and the *Mémoires secrets* (28: 208) reported that Breteuil had prevailed upon the king to send Beaumarchais not to the Bastille but to Saint-Lazare. [Back.](#)

Note 80: CLS, 85:12 [1] (March 16, 1785). [Back.](#)

Note 81: La Harpe, *Correspondance littéraire* I. CCXVIII (4: 309-310). [Back.](#)

Note 82: *Mémoires secrets*, 28: 215 (March 15, 1785). [Back.](#)

Note 83: Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie* (Paris: Plon, 1961), 107. [Back.](#)

Note 84: *Mémoires secrets*, 28: 217 (March 16, 1785). [Back.](#)

Note 85: In the commentary on the costumes and roles that Beaumarchais included in the printed edition, he specified that Cherubin should be played by "une jeune et très jolie femme" and that he should be played as an adolescent animated by "un désir inquiet" (48-49). [Back.](#)

Note 86: Augustin Cabanès "Beaumarchais à Saint-Lazare," *Les Indiscretions de l'histoire* (Paris: Albin Michel, [1903]), 206-222; Georges Monval, "Beaumarchais fouetté," *La Revue d'art ancien et moderne* (1898), 360-363. For an iconography of Beaumarchais, see René d'Hermès, ed. *Théâtre complet de Beaumarchais* (Paris: Magnard, 1952), 20-30. [Back.](#)

Note 87: Often credited to seventeenth-century comic writer Jean de Santeul, the line "Castigat redendo morales" appeared on the curtain of the Comédie Italienne. Augustin's description of self-flagellation appears in *Confessions* (Book III, Chapter 8): "quae autem contra mores hominum sunt flagitia." [Back.](#)

Note 88: It also refers to a passage in the preface to Barbier de Séville, in which Beaumarchais brags of his successful revision to the play after the poor reception of its initial performance, with a clever reference to Chapter 6 of *Candide*, when *Candide* is spanked during an auto-da-fé: "Figaro, flogged in counter-time to the singing of the *cabale* and almost buried on Friday ... found his courage, and my hero picked himself on Sunday with vigor..." ("Lettre modérée sur la chute et la critique du Barbier de Séville," *Le Barbier de Séville* (Paris: Ruault, 1775), 1-46 [BN-IMP: Rés. p. Yf 317].) [Back.](#)

Note 89: *Mémoires secrets*, 28: 225 (March 19, 1785). [Back.](#)

Note 90: CLS, 85:14 [4](March 31, 1785.) [Back.](#)

Note 91: "Confession générale de M. de Beaumarchais," *Journal des Gens du Monde* 4: 76 (1785), 229-234. [Back.](#)

Note 92: *Confession Générale de Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais. Exécuté au Caveau du Palais-Royal* [sInd] (NYPL-RBR: *KVR 5287). An identical version, which does not identify Beaumarchais by name, appeared under the title *Confession générale d'un homme exécuté au caveau du Palais-Royal* [sInd] NYPL-RBR: *KVR 5386 [BN Ye 18936]. Though not dated, it includes references to the Kornmann affair, suggesting that it appeared in 1787 or 1788. The imprisonment in Saint-Lazare also figured centrally in another pamphlet mocking Beaumarchais, [Antoine Rivarol,] *Récit du portier du Sieur ... de Beaumarchais* (Paris: 1789) BNF Res. Ye4646. [Back.](#)

Note 93: *Mémoires secrets*, 28: 228 (March 20, 1785). [Back.](#)

Note 94: CLS, 85:12 [1] (March 16, 1785); 85:13 [1] (March 24, 1785). [Back.](#)

Note 95: La Harpe, *Correspondance littéraire* I. CCXXIII (5: 8-9). [Back.](#)

Note 96: CLS, 85:13 [1] (March 24, 1785). [Back.](#)

Note 97: Ruault to La Hogue, March 14, 1785 (BHVP; DCS #421). [Back.](#)

Note 98: *Mémoires secrets*, 28: 217 (March 15, 1785); 28: 228 (March 20, 1785). [Back.](#)

Note 99: Manuel, 190, reprints a letter from Beaumarchais, dated March 15, 1785, to the "Vice-roi de toutes les Maisons de Force," meaning Le Noir. [Back.](#)

Note 100: *Mémoires secrets*, 28: 236. In his letter of March 15, Beaumarchais described the "two hours of my family weeping and kneeling at the foot of my bed [deux heures aux larmes de ma famille à genoux auprès de mon lit]" (Manuel, 190). [Back.](#)

Note 101: The note to La Hogue was a post-script appended to Ruault's letter to La Hogue of March 14 (BHVP; DCS #41). Similarly, he wrote to Madame de Ximenès, March 20, 1785 (CLS, 85:14 [2-4] [March 31, 1785]): "struck by the anathema of the crown that I did nothing to deserve, I have imposed on myself the voluntary and rigorous rule of remaining in my room until His Majesty decides to hear me or to dictate my justification." [Back.](#)

Note 102: This opening to Calonne demonstrates both Beaumarchais's continuing political flexibility, or to many of his contemporaries his insincerity, since Calonne feuded bitterly with Breteuil in the mid-1780s; see Price, *Preserving the Monarchy*, 155-170. [Back.](#)

Note 103: Beaumarchais to Calonne, March 19, 1785 (Proschwitz #422, BAF). Later in 1785, Calonne and Le Noir (as Director of the Royal Library) would begin to standardize subsidies to writers, which totaled a mere 325,000 *livres* (AN F17 1212). This program is discussed by Darnton as a source of frustration for outsiders who did not receive support; Darnton, "High Enlightenment and the low-life of literature," 7-11.

The *Mémoires secrets* reported in late March that should he even try to make a social appearance (28: 240), "the maîtres d'hôtel will want none of him and will know to send him away." On February 12, 1786, a royal order granted Beaumarchais another 800,000 *livres* (AN F17 86, f.707). [Back.](#)

Note 104: "Memoire justificatif de P. A. C. de Beaumarchais au Roi," reprinted in Proschwitz, "Gustave III, Beaumarchais, et 'Le Mariage de Figaro'," 189-195, from a copy in the Royal Library of Stockholm. Beaumarchais's original is in the BAF. [Back.](#)

Note 105: Calonne a Beaumarchais, March 31, 1785 (Proschwitz, #426, BAF); CLS, 85:14 [2-4] (March 31, 1785). On April 2, Beaumarchais wrote to Achille Joseph Gojard, First Commissioner of Finances, to set a meeting on his financial compensation (Proschwitz, #427; AN G1 56). [Back.](#)

Note 106: These requests were made through such intermediaries as Breteuil, Vaudreuil, Calonne (DCS #26/BAF), and eventually (in June) the first minister Vergennes (DCS, #27/MAE t. 443, ff. 55-56). Indicative of the continuing interest among the Parisian and European publics, these requests were all reported in the *Mémoires secrets*, 28: 236, 292, 307; and the CLS,85:14 [2-4] (March 31, 1785); 85:15 [1] (April 7, 1785). [Back.](#)

Note 107: An "Arrêt du conseil d'état du Roi" of June 3, 1785, signed by Breteuil ordered the suppression of the first 30 volumes of this edition (BN MSS

FF 22102, #33). Even more embarrassing for Beaumarchais, the royal arrêt was printed by the royal printer, the Cramer frères and the Parisian printer Simon [BNF Beuchot Collection, Z 1907; BNF F-21732 (29); BNF 4-F-4373 (100)]. [Back.](#)

Note 108: *CLS*, 85:13 [1](March 24, 1785). [Back.](#)

Note 109: Proschwitz, "Gustave III, Beaumarchais et 'Le Mariage de Figaro'" reproduces Sabier's cover letter. [Back.](#)

Note 110: Beaumarchais to Gustavus III, April 12, 1785 (Proschwitz, #429). [Back.](#)

Note 111: Vangelisti's letters to Le Noir, dated March 20 and 23, 1785, are reproduced from the Bibliothèque de l'Institut in Ludovic Lalanne, "Deux Caricatures sur Beaumarchais," *Courrier de l'art* II: 42 (1882), 493-4; and in Georges Cabanès, *Les Indiscretions de l'histoire* (Paris: Albin Michel, [nd]), 214-216. [Back.](#)

Note 112: *Correspondence litteraire secrete*, 85:29 [5] (July 14, 1785); 85: 33 [7](August 11, 1785); *Mémoires secrets*, 29 191 (August 7, 1785). The letter of November 4, 1785 is reproduced from a Druout auction catalog in Félix Gaiffe, 121. Beaumarchais wrote the Comédiens Français on December 15, 1787 to deny requests for his consent to reprises (BCF, "Beaumarchais: Correspondance," XI.iii); the quote is from a letter of May 10, 1788, from Beaumarchais to the troupe, reprinted in *Oeuvres Complètes* (1865), 4: 462). Not until September 1789 did "Mariage" enter into the permanent repertory and become property of the theater-after 107 performances, which had generated a total revenue of nearly 500,000 *livres* and total *part d'auteur* of over 60,000. [Back.](#)

Note 113: Iverson, "Voltaire's Heroes"; Frank Donoghue, *The Fame Machine: Book Reviewing and Eighteenth-Century Literary Careers* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) argues that eighteenth-century English writers achieved "fame" through the advent of book reviews in the periodical press, but the concept remains undefined; moreover, the writer striving for "glory" had never been as important a trope in English literary culture. On how historical "glory" informed writers' self-conceptions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see Ranum, *Artisans of Glory* especially the discussion of Racine (92-148). [Back.](#)

Note 114: On Marie Antoinette, see Chantal Thomas, *The Wicked Queen* (New York: Zone Books, 1999); Hunt, *Family Romance*, 89-124; and Jacques Revel, "Marie-Antoinette and Her Fictions: The Staging of Hatred," in *Fictions of the French Revolution*, ed. Bernadette Fort (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 111-129.

On the celebrity of a nineteenth-century actress, see Berlanstein, *Daughters of Eve*, 209-237; for an interesting sociological study of "stardom," which traces the trajectory of one-hundred contemporary American celebrities (with interesting parallels to the work of Viala on seventeenth-century writers), see Jib Fowles, *Starstruck: Celebrity Performers and the American Public* (Washington:

Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992). [Back.](#)

Note 115: Metzner, *Crescendo of the Virtuosi: Spectacle, Skill and Self-Promotion in Paris during the Age of Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); on the concept of the "virtuoso," see 9-12; advent of immodesty as a crucial change brought about during the age of the French Revolution, see 265-270. Even Maza, whose discussion of Beaumarchais is the most sophisticated, reverts to this tendency when writing that Beaumarchais "naturally fought back" when attacked, "by publishing a ...*mémoire*..." (307). [Back.](#)

Note 116: The phrase "culture of publicity" occurs in Maza's essay in *The Mémoires secrets and the Culture of Publicity in Pre-Revolutionary France*, ed. Jeremy Popkin (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1999). Metzner in *Crescendo* refers to "the publicization of social life... the process of the private becoming public ... of the public becoming private" (214). A contemporary example might be Stephen King, whose bodily injuries in an automobile accident became the subject of media coverage; however, unlike Beaumarchais, King assimilated this celebrity into his own, already well-developed public self, by writing about it. See his, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (New York: Scribner, 2000). [Back.](#)

Note 117: Maza, *Private Lives, Public Affairs*, 14; 63-104; 154-196. [Back.](#)

Note 118: On the Kornmann affair generally, see Rory Brown, "The Diamond Necklace Affair Revisited," *Renaissance and Modern Studies* 33 (1989), 21-40. On Beaumarchais's role in it, see Maza, *Private Lives, Public Affairs*, 289-295; Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 247-250. On the speculation surrounding the Compagnie des Eaux, and "court capitalism" of the late 1780s, see Georges Taylor, "The Paris Bourse on the Eve of the Revolution," *American Historical Review* 67:4 (1962): 951-977; on the rhetorical links made in patriot polemics denouncing "speculation" which used Beaumarchais as a symbol of court culture, financial speculation and personal self-interest, see Darnton, *Gens de lettres, gens du livre* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1992), 92-93. The municipal assembly of the Paris Commune on July 22, 1789, denounced "M. Caron de Beaumarchais for having at his home a great quantity of papers taken from the Bastille." A delegation was sent to his home, where it discovered the papers in question to be "of a very small quantity, and they appear to be of no importance." Beaumarchais returned the papers. (*Proces-Verbal des Séances et Deliberations de l'Assemblée generale des Electeurs de Paris* ed. [Jean-Sylvain] Bailly and Duveyrier (Paris: Badouin, 1790), 2: 297.) A copy of Beaumarchais's letter of July 5, 1791, proposing to donate an edition of Voltaire, on the occasion of his reburial in the Panthéon, is in the BN-Estampes, N2, vol. 125. [Back.](#)

Note 119: Maza and Crow both note that they draw heavily on Darnton's discussion of the Kornmann affair in his unpublished doctoral thesis. [Back.](#)

Note 120: *Mémoires secrets*, 31: 44 (January 19, 1786). [Back.](#)

Note 121: On the problem of defining women writers in the age of the French Revolution as a sociological group as well as a cultural

construction, see Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment*, 3-55. I discuss this problem with respect to women playwrights in general, and Gouges in particular, in "The Self-Fashionings of Olympe de Gouges," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34:3 (2001): 383-401. [Back.](#)

Note 122: The works staged ahead of "Rupture" were Claude Joseph Dorat's "Malheureux imaginaire [Imaginary Invalid]," adapted from Molière, and Charles Favart's "L'Anglais à Bordeaux [The Englishman at Bordeaux]," promoted by the Dauphine. [Back.](#)

Note 123: BCF 137a, f. 37-44; *Rupture* (Paris: Veuve Duchesne, 1777) ARS GD 8 17429; BCF 137a, f. 49 (26 June 1777): "Lecture de la *Rupture* . . . refusée."

Typical of the resilience—a combination of self-confidence and desperation—shown by aspiring eighteenth-century writers to the royal theater, the Dames Delhorme responded with another letter, four days later (BCF 137a, f. 51, 30 June 1777) arguing that the play had already been accepted and deserved a second staging before, under the regulations, the troupe could withdraw it. Despite its basis in the royal regulations, the women's appeal was ignored. [Back.](#)

Note 124: The plot bears a strong resemblance to, among other later eighteenth-century works, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788), and the motif of slaves in the French South Asian colonies is most closely associated of course with Raynal's *Histoire des Deux Indes* (1775). Mirza, as a character name, is drawn from one of Usbek's wives in the *Persian Letters* (Letter 10) and recurs in Bernard-Joseph Saurin's novel, *Mirza et Fatmé, conte indien* (La Haye: 1754). Zamor was the name of the much-discussed Bengali slave of Madame DuBarry, given to her by the King, and it occurred commonly in Indian characters in eighteenth century fiction, the earliest instance being Madeleine de Puxieux, *Zamor et Almanzine, ou l'Inutilité de l'esprit et de bon sens* (Paris: 1755). [Back.](#)

Note 125: In *Les Comédiens Démasqués* (Paris: 1790), Gouges's narrative of her relations the troupe (on which more shortly), she claims that Suard arranged and conducted the reading on April 17, 1784 (7). [Back.](#)

Note 126: The *Mémoires secrets*, (31: 44) reported in January 1786, "the title of the play that Madame de Gouge had received by the royal actors is unknown." [Back.](#)

Note 127: BCF, "Gouges," #1 and BCF register 137-2, f. 126; BCF, "Gouges," #2, #3; 8 July 1785; BCF, "Gouges," #4a, August 31, 1785. [Back.](#)

Note 128: One such letter is BCF, "Gouges," #4 [August 1785]. The troupe alludes to several similar missives in its response: BCF, "Gouges," #6 (September 1, 1785). [Back.](#)

Note 129: BCF, Gouges, #6; September 1, 1785. Gouges, *Comédiens Démasqués*, 7: "l'explosion de mes plaintes amères." According to her account,

Florence responded, "Si vous n'êtes pas femme, vous ne me parleriez ainsi. [If you were not a woman, you would not speak to me that way.]" [Back.](#)

Note 130: BCF, "Gouges," #5; BCF, Notes of Assembly of 7 September [1785]. [Back.](#)

Note 131: Archives Nationales (AN) O1 845; dossier # 6; f. 47-48, September 5, 1785; BCF, 137-2, f. 129. [Back.](#)

Note 132: BCF Gouges, #7; BCF 137-2, f. 129, November 11, 1785. [Back.](#)

Note 133: BCF, Gouges, #8; BCF 137-2, f. 130, November 14, 1785. [Back.](#)

Note 134: BCF, "Gouges," #9; undated but between February 2 and 5, 1788. [Back.](#)

Note 135: Ibid. [Back.](#)

Note 136: BCF, Gouges, #10, February 5, 1787. [Back.](#)

Note 137: Nussbaum, 147-151, and LeHir, 167. [Back.](#)

Note 138: See discussions of these respective figures in Margaret F. Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan: Veronica Franco, Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth-Century Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 58-115; Carolyn Lougee, *Le Paradis des Femmes: Salons and Social Stratification in 17th Century France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 11-110; Harth, Cartesian Women, 15-26; Joan DeJean, "Amazons and Literary Women: Female Culture during the Reign of the Sun King," in *Sun King: The Ascendancy of French Culture during the Reign of Louis XIV*, ed. David Lee Rubin (Washington: Folger Books, 1992), 115-128; Lieselotte Steinbrügger, *The Moral Sex: Women's Nature in the French Enlightenment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 21-30; and Goodman, *The Republic of Letters*, 90-135. [Back.](#)

Note 139: BCF, "Gouges," #9. [Back.](#)

Note 140: *Zamore et Mirza, ou l'Heureux Naufrage, Drame Indien, en Trois Actes, et en Prose, Par Madame DE GOUGES.* (Paris: Chez l'Auteur, rue & Place du Français, Cailleau, Imprimeur-Libraire, rue Gallande, no 64. 1788, Avec Approbation et Privilège du Roi). [Back.](#)

Note 141: BCF, Gouges, #12 and #13 (June 28 and August 4, 1788). In response, the troupe sent her a list of eight plays still ahead of hers on the *tableau* (BCF, #13b). [Back.](#)

Note 142: In August and September 1788, Gouges published her complete works, dedicating to the Duke d'Orléans the first two volumes and to the Prince de Condé the third, which includes her four plays, with additional paratext (*Oeuvres de Madame de Gouges* [Paris: Cailleau, 1788]). [Back.](#)

Note 143: "Préface de Zamor et Mirza," 1-21 in *Zamore et Mirza* (1788) in *Oeuvres* v.3. [Back.](#)

Note 144: "Préface," 3: "my loyalty to the Comédie Française; such was my simplicity," contrasted with the Comédie," which "seemed to offer me ... only a clever trap fearful for me ... and indecent for my sex." [Back.](#)

Note 145: BCF, "Gouges," #17 (December 18, 1788). The troupe leader described her as "a woman whose self-esteem has been aggravated." [Back.](#)

Note 146: "Préface," 8-14: "I can only suspect an homme d'esprit capable of such action towards a woman ... I address myself to Mademoiselle Contat and to Madame Bellecourt, the two women who I was told were the most just and the most essential." [Back.](#)

Note 147: BCF, Gouges, #40. She brought the suit formally in early 1789, and a year later, she printed her judicial memorandum, *Mémoire pour Madame de Gouges, Contre la Comédie Française*, which appeared with the prefatory "Adresse aux représentants de la nation" in a 53-page, version, *Les Comédiens Démasqués, ou Madame De Gouges ruinée par la Comédie Française pour se faire jouer* (Paris: 1790). Here she reprinted passages from the 1788 preface to *Zamore*, including the same edited correspondence and commentary. This narrative has been used extensively by Gouges scholars as a document of her experience, without considering the rhetorical self-fashioning she performs in it. [Back.](#)

Note 148: "Réflexions sur les Hommes Nègres," in *Oeuvres* 3: 94-99. [Back.](#)

Note 149: "Réflexions," 97. [Back.](#)

Note 150: "Réflexions," 98. Gouges's use of slavery as a metaphor for unaccountable authority generally closely parallels the use of "anti-slavery" rhetoric in "anti-despotism" legal discourse of the 1760s and 1770s; see Sue Peabody, *There are No Slaves in France: The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Regime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 88-105. [Back.](#)

Note 151: *Règlements et tableau des membres de la Société des amis des noirs* (Paris: 1789), 15, 19-20. Blanc, 68, 99; Marcel Dorigny, "Mirabeau et la Société des amis des noirs," in *Les Abolitions de l'esclavage*, ed. Dorigny (Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 1995), 153-164. [Back.](#)

Note 152: In a letter of August 1788 (BCF, Gouges, #14: August 24, 1788), written before she had begun any revisions, she framed it already as a work about "the fearful history of nègres." [Back.](#)

Note 153: Cornell University, Kroch Library, French Revolution Collection: FR #4606. Olympe de Gouges, November 27, 1788. This four-page letter describes the troupe's "harassment" and offers the recipient, "Monsieur," (most likely another writer, Cubières, Palissot, or Mercier), a copy of the third

volume of her *Oeuvres* (which included the revised play, as well as the new preface and afterword) and appeals for his help, a traditional gesture of a client to a broker or patron. [Back.](#)

Note 154: A first version, entitled *Zamore et Mirza*, was printed twice in 1788 (citations above) and a second version was printed in 1792 (*L'Esclavage des Noirs, ou l'Heureux naufrage* (Paris: Duchesne, 1792); this latter has been reprinted under the same title by Côté-femmes in 1989 and translated in Kadish and Massardier-Kenney, eds., 84 -124, with the preface and afterword from the second 1788 edition. A very brief comparison of these two versions of the play is in Marie Josephine Diamond, "The Revolutionary Rhetoric of Olympe de Gouges," *Feminist Issues* (Spring 1994): 3-23, at 10-12. A third version, the manuscript *copie de souffleur*, which most closely reflects the text that would have been performed at the Comédie Française in December 1789, has never been published (or even cited); it is in the BCF, mss 371. [Back.](#)

Note 155: *Zamore* is described in the *dramatis personae* as an "educated Indian [*Indien instruit*]," and the French Saint-Frémont as "Gouverneur of a French Colony in India" (*Zamore et Mirza*, 2). On the recurrence of India in fantastic travel literature, see Jean-Michel Racault, "L'effet exotique dans *l'Histoire des deux Indes* et la mise en scène du monde colonial de l'ocean Indien," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 333 (1995): 119-132. On the treatment of East Indian slaves in the French Indian colonies, including the commonality of French slave owners taking East Indian women slaves as lovers and wives as well as of the high rates of *marronage* among male East Indian slaves, see Deryck Scarr, *Slaving and Slavery in the Indian Ocean* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), 18-59; 159-160. The prominence of these characteristics in the first version of the play belie Harth's claim (227) that Gouges simply confounded East and West Indies and intended to write, in this version, about American Indians. [Back.](#)

Note 156: Valère, upon learning of the arrival on the island of Saint-Frémont—who, as *gouverneur*, had superior authority to the Intendant—suggests the slaves appeal to him, since "If he is French, he must be humane and generous [*S'il est français, il doit être humain & généreux*]" (I.xi). [Back.](#)

Note 157: Further complicating the racial mix, the characters may have been changed to "savages" at one point. In the Comédie Française manuscript, the slaves had been "*sauvages*," a term often used to describe aboriginal Americans, though this word is crossed out and replaced with "*nègres*" (II.i). In an account printed in 1789, shortly before the staging of "L'Esclavage des nègres" (but after the revisions had been made and the new title publicized), Gouges charged that "La Comédie n'a pas voulu hasarder cette couleur sur la scène [The theater had not wanted to risk putting that color on its stage]," so she had been constrained to make the characters of *Zamore* and *Mirza* "*sauvages*," rather than blacks as she wanted them to be ("Préface sans Caractère," *Le Philosophe corrigé, ou le Cocu supposé* [Paris: 1789] (ARS: 8 GD 465) xx.) [Back.](#)

Note 158: [Olympe de Gouges], *Lettre au Peuple, ou Projet d'une Caisse Patriotique; Par une Citoyenne* (Vienne: 1788); *Rémarques patriotiques, par la Citoyenne, auteur de la Lettre au Peuple* (Paris:1788); and *Les Songes*

Patriotiques (Paris: May 1789). This last pamphlet, dedicated to the Duke d'Orléans, included a fictional narrative of the opening of the assembly, at which the king acceded to all "patriot" demands, appointing the duke as Regent to implement the reforms. In the fictional speech "to the nation" by Orléans which follows, he praises *gens de lettres* for having generated the current French love of liberty and suggested that only patriotic writers could contribute to the necessary restoration that France and Europe so badly needed at the moment. On the use of *patriote* in pamphlets of late 1788 and early 1789 calling for a new constitution, see Hampson, "*La Patrie*," 127-129. On patriotism in eighteenth-century France more generally, see Dziembowski, *Le nouveau patriotism français*. [Back.](#)

Note 159: *Le Bonheur Primitif de l'Homme, ou les Reveries Patriotiques*. (Amsterdam: 1789) ARS Rf 18225 (1): "Projet d'un second Théâtre Français, ou le Théâtre national," 72-80. [Back.](#)

Note 160: *Bonheur*, 79-83. [Back.](#)

Note 161: BCF, "Gouges," #18 and #19; March 9 and 15, 1789. [Back.](#)

Note 162: BCF, "Gouges," #17; December 18, 1788: "Madame de Gouge has so insulted the actors ... I believe it sufficient to read the passages of her writings." [Back.](#)

Note 163: She brought the suit on March 27, 1789 (BCF, "Gouges," #20). [Back.](#)

Note 164: On the melodramatic rhetoric of *mémoires judiciaires*, see Maza, *Private Lives*, passim; and Nadine Berenguier, "Victorious Victims: Women and Publicity in *Mémoires judiciaires*," in *Going Public: Women and Publishing in Early Modern France*, eds. Elizabeth C. Goldsmith and Dena Goodman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 62-78. The document itself, "Mémoire pour Madame de Gouges, contre la Comédie Française," can be dated from context to early 1789; she would revise and have it printed in 1790 with a prefatory "Adresse aux representants de la nation," (BN 4 FM 8954), then reprinted as a pamphlet entitled *Les Comédiens Demasques, ou Madame De Gouges ruiné par la Comédie Française pour se faire jouer* (Paris: 1790), discussed in Chapter 6. [Back.](#)

Note 165: *Le Philosophe corrigé, ou le Cocu supposé ... Par Madame DE GOUGE* (Paris: 1789) (ARS: 8 GD 465); "Préface sans Caractère," iii-xxi. [Back.](#)

Note 166: For two very different explanations of the rise of this romantic ideal of the writer in the nineteenth century, see Paul Bénichou, *The Consecration of the Writer* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 51-58, 189-242; and Bourdieu, *Rules of Art*, 103-113, 285-312. [Back.](#)

Note 167: The passage of the "Préface" concerning Beaumarchais is on 7-19. [Back.](#)

Note 168: "Préface," 20. [Back.](#)

Note 169: Revisionist treatments, such as Crow (220-226) and Maza (130-140, 289-311), have had little impact on Beaumarchais scholarship or popular representations of Beaumarchais, as evidenced for instance in the recent biography by Lever, or the film "Beaumarchais, the Scoundrel." [Back.](#)

Note 170: Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment*, xi-xv; 154-156. [Back.](#)

Note 171: Maza, 289. In questioning the distinction between "hacks" and "Philosophes," I am challenging less their original proposition by Darnton, in "High Enlightenment and Low-life," than the unrigorous appropriation of these categories, which Darnton himself has described as "excessively vertical" and insufficiently sociological; see Darnton, "Two paths through the social history of ideas," 253-255. [Back.](#)

Note 172: Jouhaud, *Pouvoirs*, 373. [Back.](#)

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