

6. From Court to Nation: "Liberty of Theaters" and Patriot Playwrights, 1789-1791

"This liberty has shocked all gentlemen" 1

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From its founding in 1680 to the end of the 1780s, the Comédie Française enjoyed unmatched cultural prestige. No literary institution generated as much revenue, held publication rights for so many canonical works, enjoyed such direct access to the court, or drew such attention from the periodical press. Despite the evident obstacles it presented to new playwrights and the many criticisms that had been made of its repertory, seating arrangement, and audience, it retained the central position in Old Regime literary life. Its fundamental importance is evidenced by the loyalty it retained among the aspiring authors who actively sought to reform it but never definitively broke with its actors, its supervisors at court, its police censors, its written regulations concerning literary property, or the unwritten rules of civil, self-restrained conduct expected of Comédie Française playwrights. From the lawsuits brought by Mercier, Palissot, and others in the early 1770s to Beaumarchais's leadership of the SAD in the later 1770s to the strategies of newcomers such as Gouges in the 1780s, those who would be gens de lettres had retained a fundamental belief in the Comédie's importance as a literary institution.



Between early 1789 and mid-1790, however, all these advantages were challenged; for a new group of writers, formerly outsiders to literary life, the royal theater became a symbol of the decadence of court culture, of the profligacy of the royal budget, and of the despotism against which the

Nation had at long last risen. The process of publication was transformed, the theater's name, repertory, regulations, and political supervision changed, and the theater ceased to be a singular institution linking court culture and public life, as it had for over 100 years. As a consequence, the court norms of self-restraint, civility, and *honnêteté* that had remained dominant in the theater's relations with authors gave way to a new ideal of isolated, virtuous writers serving the nation. 2

6.1. The Crisis of 1789 for the Comédie Française

During the months before the Estates-General met in May, the theater faced a progressively worsening financial and political situation. It encountered heightened competition from new theaters, which cut deeply into its dominance over commercial audiences in Paris, over protection and patronage from court elites, and over the aspirations of established as well as aspiring authors. In January 1789, the Minister of the Royal Household, the Baron de Breteuil, authorized two new commercial theaters in Paris: the

Théâtre du Palais-Royal, which would perform new, non-musical French-language works under the aegis (and financing) of the duke d'Orléans, and the Théâtre de Monsieur, named for its chef benefactor, the Count de Provence, to perform musical comedies. Moreover, the Comédie Française actors, and some authors, expected either or both of these new venues to be the "second troupe" that playwrights had demanded for decades, equal in stature to the Comédie Française and able to inspire *émulation*, or competition. Moreover, the Comédie Française faced increased competition for court patrons, Parisian box-seat subscribers, single-ticket buyers, and leading authors from other venues, such as the Italienne (authorized since 1780 by the First Gentlemen to perform French comedies and drames) and from the numerous "boulevard" theaters. [3](#)

This competition exacerbated the theater's revenue shortfall, endemic throughout its history, and increasingly acute in the first half of 1789. By the second week of July, the troupe's debts reached over 100,000 *livres*, and the company had to request a ten-year loan of 115,000 *livres* from the already bankrupted royal treasury. [4](#) The events of July and August worsened the situation, as many box-seat subscribers failed to renew for the upcoming 1789-1790 season, depriving the theater of 25 percent of its annual revenue. When the new season began in September, daily gate receipts were down approximately 150 *livres* per show from previous years. Quickly, the theater's anticipated debt for the season reached 1 million *livres*, and the First Gentlemen and Minister of the Royal Household could no longer arrange loans from the royal treasury. The situation became even bleaker when the National Assembly decreed in mid-September that all royal subsidies to the theater would end on January 1, 1790. Then, in the aftermath of the *journée* of October 5-6, the First Gentlemen cut the troupe off from the court, instructing the actors to "address yourselves for the future to the Mayor of Paris." [5](#)

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That winter, the periodical and pamphlet press transformed what had been the troupe's most valuable asset<its longstanding link to the court<into an even graver problem. Patriot attacks on the royal theater charged the theater with depriving the nation by defending its monopoly over its permanent repertory, including the canon of seventeenth-century writers Molière, Corneille, and Racine and eighteenth-century authors Crébillon, Voltaire, and de Belloy. It also enjoyed a monopoly on new spoken-language tragedies, which the actors had defended aggressively through the spring of 1789; a legal memorandum filed on behalf of the Comédiens Français that season accused a fair theater entrepreneur of acting for personal profit in the name of liberty and refuted his claims of providing *émulation* to the official troupe. [6](#)

In the winter of 1789-90, however, these close ties to the court and this economic monopoly came under attack as being characteristic of Old Regime despotism. [7](#) In response, the troupe began to refashion itself as the "Théâtre de la Nation," a moniker that patriot writers had used for several

years to describe the regenerated theater they hoped for. On July 23, the actor Dazincourt addressed the audience to announce the new name and that, "for the good of the homeland [*patrie*]," the troupe would give benefit performances for the city's Bureau des Subsistances to help alleviate the high grain prices, and for the newly formed militia now policing the city. [8](#) Furthermore, the company entirely revamped its fall schedule, opting to perform new plays by previously unknown writers, either ones long suppressed by the court or new ones that might have revolutionary cachet. Indeed, during the 1789-1790 season, the theater performed only new works, by such new writers as Gouges, André de Murville, Charles-Georges Fenouillot de Falbaire, and others that we will meet shortly: Marie-Joseph Chénier, Charles Philippe Ronsin, and Philippe Fabre d'Églantine. [9](#)

The appearance on the scene of these new personalities, who did not participate in and indeed actively opposed the *honnêtes* norms that had informed playwrights' comportment under the Old Regime, led to a series of internal conflicts in the theater's operation. These contentions resembled the intense author-theater conflicts of the 1770s, but the rapidly expanding press gave them broader coverage and the rapidly changing political context gave them greater importance. For its part, the troupe, as it had long done, continued to resist outside involvement in its management. Consequently, several elected assemblies—the municipality, the district of the Cordeliers (where the theater was situated), and the Constituent Assembly—successively became involved in theatrical life in the year 1790, providing new venues in which aspiring men of letters could present themselves as patriots whose work merited staging in the national theater. To understand these changes in institutional culture, and what they meant for authorial status and identity during the early years of the Revolution, we will look first at an older writer who adopted new strategies in 1789, then to newer writers who emerged from the district of the Cordeliers to take over the theater in mid-1790, and finally to the efforts of longer-standing writers to lobby the Constituent Assembly in late 1790. All sought to take advantage of the opportunity they perceived in the Revolution—a chance, at long last, to achieve the legitimacy and recognition as *hommes de lettres* they felt they deserved.

6.2. Old Writers, New Strategies: Cailhava Returns

Writers who had long been on the margins of Parisian theatrical life—established outsiders who had learned well the rules of the game without yet gaining the legitimacy they sought from it—perceived quickly that the situation offered new opportunities. Jean-François Cailhava de l'Estendoux had disputed with the royal theater over his plays since the 1760s (as we saw in [Chapter 3](#)). Unlike Beaumarchais, Cailhava distanced himself further from the royal troupe in the 70s and 80s, by claiming his continued ownership of his plays after they had passed from the active repertory and by calling for a "second troupe."

Both of these concerns appear in the prefatory material to the



1780 edition of his plays and in subsequent correspondence with the troupe. Yet in taking such a position, Cailhava remained polite, self-restrained, and even ironic. ¹⁰ Unlike such self-fashioned patriot playwrights as Mercier and Gouges, he never transgressed the norms of *honnêteté*, and remained on good terms with the troupe and its better-established playwrights such as Beaumarchais. Though an established outsider, Cailhava in the 1780s retained legitimacy within the official institutions of literary life, serving as a "reader" in the household of the Duke d'Orléans and as president of the literary group known as the Grand Musée de Paris. In May 1787, he went so far as to propose his plays to the directors of the Théâtre du Palais-Royal, but he did not allow his work to be performed until that theater gained royal recognition in January 1789.

At that point, Cailhava immediately withdrew his plays from the Comédie Française repertory so they could be staged at the Palais-Royal. ¹¹ The royal company, in response, threatened to prevent any performances of works it claimed as its own, which provided Cailhava an opportunity to initiate a suit (and to begin to prepare a *factum*) in May. ¹² He penned a highly comic, eighteen-page "Summary of historical documents on those of my plays that the Comédiens Français want to steal [*Abrégé des Mémoires historiques sur celles de mes Pièces que veulent s'approprier les Comédiens français*]," which recounted how each of his six plays had been "stolen" by the "pirates" of the troupe through their "exclusive privilege." He also began revising his pamphlet *Causes de la décadence du théâtre*, first written in 1772 and republished twice (1775 and 1780), which argued for a "second troupe" that would serve the "nation" rather than the court, and which would treat the plays contributed by authors as "public property" rather than as its own possessions. ¹³ Cailhava had been calling for a second official theater to break the Comédie Française monopoly and for authors to retain their literary property in the name of the nation for two decades, and he considered the establishment of a second royal venue in early 1789 as a great opportunity. He would find that subsequent events presented him, and other longtime outsiders like him, a much greater opportunity to represent his plays—and himself—as belonging to "the nation" rather than the court. He could not have anticipated how much change would take place; his calls for a second theater (that would presumably better serve established outsiders such as himself) would be overtaken later in the year by calls for "liberty of theaters," meaning an end to all state-sponsored theaters, to the benefit of total newcomers.

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During the summer and fall of 1789, Cailhava remained a reformer rather than a radical. He greatly expanded both his legal *mémoire* and the new edition of his pamphlet to reflect the outbreak of the Revolution and the opportunities it represented for a second troupe. However, he did not call for the outright end of theatrical *privilèges*, which he considered a necessary bulwark to set a "theater of the nation" apart from the "small theaters" that lacked "taste" and moeurs. Indeed, in early September, at the request of a

Comédie Française troupe member, he met with Mayor Bailly to discuss a possible merger of the royal troupe with the new theater at Palais Royal. He also read to troupe members a draft of his legal *mémoire*, "to know if my thoughts were justified." In his letter to the beleaguered actors, Cailhava sounded almost apologetic, suggesting that he was printing his call for a second theater only to "cure it of its lethargy" and thus serve "the true interests of the public, of the authors, and of the theater of the Nation." ¹⁴

To the memorandum he added an "address to the National Assembly, which has granted mankind its liberty." Quoting from Article 2 of the Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen, that the most fundamental rights are "liberty," "property," and "resistance to oppression," he stated that the time had at last come for "genius" to be free of all restraints and for "privileges" to be "renounced." Under such conditions, he asserted, everyone could aspire to "glory[:] I TOO CAN BECOME A GREAT MAN!" Playing on the patriot idiom, Cailhava likened "these *aristo-comi-tragiques*" to "kings of theater"; he challenged the royal actors to "naturally" renounce their "illusions," and "their cherished habit of ruling through privileges," and recognize "this incredible reality" of the Revolution. ¹⁵ His revised edition of *Causes de la décadence du théâtre*, also published that fall and dedicated to the municipal government, included a newly written preface that updated the call that he had been making over two decades for a second troupe, to perform "modern" plays.. He now proposed that this theater should be under the authority of the Mayor of Paris, instead of the Duke d'Orléans, and be administered by a committee of eight actors and two authors, who would serve not as adversaries but "colleagues [*confrères*]." Whereas the actors' supervision of the royal theater had been characterized by "indolence," "hedonism," "jealousies," "rivalries," and "personal interest," this new system, he assured, would lead the theater to serve "the general interest." To ensure that "a man of letters is respected" and not maltreated by the actors, the theater regulations should cease to be royal orders and should become instead legislation passed by the municipal assembly, then posted publicly in all theaters. ¹⁶

Many of Cailhava's proposed reforms arose from longstanding concerns of Comédie Française playwrights. For instance, he called for authors to share in the proceeds of all performances of their plays, eliminating the *chute*, and for a supplemental *pension* of 100 *pistoles* to authors of particularly successful works. When it performed works by dead authors, the theater should make a payment of 1200 *livres* to a fund from which the Académie Française would award prizes to the most promising "young colleagues" of the dramatic community. This emphasis on pensions and prizes, and his disregard for the commercial mechanism of the *chute*, indicate how much Cailhava, while an outsider, remained deeply influenced by court culture in his view of how writers should be treated. He considered censorship from a similar perspective; though in a "free country," censors would become eventually "useless" and "harmful," the problem of maintaining "order" in theaters "frequented by the multitudes" remained "indispensable," and so theater censors remained "very necessary." Finally, while advocating a second official theater, Cailhava called for a diminution in the number of

"small theaters," to ensure that all citizens would see only "good *dramas*" by "good authors" and "good actors," rather than the "pitiful decadence" of the boulevards. These proposals reflected the position that reform-minded writers had expressed for a generation, rather than what would eventually take place in the next few months: the complete collapse of the court and the violent reorganization of the entire literary field.

In his published writings of 1789, and in his correspondence with the troupe that fall, Cailhava (as he had since the 1760s) consistently called for an end to the royal theater's monopoly. Yet he did so as an *honnête homme* rather than a patriot—that is, in a polite, restrained, and ironic tone rather than in terms of strident opposition between virtue and corruption. An admirer and promoter of Molière's comedy, Cailhava fashioned himself on Alceste rather than Oronte. Until 1789, this tone had helped him retain his status as an established outsider; though the Revolution presented him an opportunity to advance beyond that state to the status of "a great man," Cailhava remained detached and would not engage himself as a patriot. Other writers, who had been further outside the dominant institutions and culture, would be less detached in their adoption of Revolutionary language and imagery in their self-presentation, and would come to the fore in the months and years that followed. Rather than Cailhava's proposal for a second theater of official legitimacy under municipal control, these new writers would call for—and would help create—a much farther-reaching transformation of the institutional culture, which they described, with no sense of irony and in a complete departure from the Old Regime meaning of the term, as "liberty."



[Cailhava, *Essai sur la tradition théâtrale*](#)



[Cailhava, *Réflexions ... en réponse*](#)

6.3. Liberty and Censorship: Chénier vs. Suard

Longtime critics of the royal theater benefited from the loosening of royal censorship in the spring of 1789, generating the most intense discussion of theater policy, in print and at court, since the mid 1770s. Printed reform proposals, criticisms, and even legal factum against the Comédie called for the "liberty of the theater [*liberté du théâtre*]," meaning an end to theater censorship, and for the "liberty of theaters [*liberté des théâtres*]," meaning an end to royal control over official theaters in Paris. ¹⁷ The prevalent language of liberty in these discussions might appear perfectly consistent with the retrospective view of 1789 as the year of "liberty," meaning both the overthrow of Old Regime institutions and an upsurge in popular political activism (including violence). ¹⁸ Yet these calls for liberty from censorship and governmental management of theaters little reflected the views of most Old Regime writers, who viewed censorship as a necessary reinforcement of civility against newcomers in literary life, and who viewed royal protection of official theaters as a necessary bulwark against the burlesque and parodic tendencies of commercial spectacle. So what did these calls for liberty of playwrights and theater mean, what was at stake in 1789, and how did this debate develop after the outbreak of Revolution in Paris that summer? To

answer that question, we can begin by taking a fresh look at the playwright most closely identified by his contemporaries with the view of the Revolution as the triumph of personal liberty, patriotic culture, and the "nation" over "despotism," classicism, and the crown: Marie-Joseph Blaise Chénier. ¹⁹

Chénier first proposed work to the royal theater in mid-1784, as the 20-year old "Chevalier de Chénier." Though unknown to the theater and the court, he submitted several tragedies followed by a series of aggressive letters demanding performances of these works. In one of the earliest missives, dated January 21, 1785, he noted that he had submitted already three works "of genius," of which the troupe had accepted only one, "Azémire," into its repertory.

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After obtaining perfunctory censorial approval, this play premiered on November 14, 1785, but failed miserably. ²⁰

In late 1787, the actors accepted his next play, "Charles IX," a five-act historical tragedy about the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, but as the experience of earlier writers has demonstrated, this acceptance did not necessarily mean the troupe would perform it. Through the brokerage of Palissot, Chénier read the play to potential patrons, the Duke and Duchess of Orléans (a standard tactic which La Harpe and Beaumarchais, *inter alia*, had deployed). He also prepared to print the play, penning in August 1788 a preface that claimed that, by combining classical verse and structure with characters and situation drawn from early modern French history, he had created as a "the first national tragedy." ²¹ Though an exaggeration—Belloy and Sedaine, among others, had written more innovative national tragedies at least 20 years earlier—the troupe considered the topic either too innovative or too controversial and did not schedule a performance. ²²

While "Charles IX" languished on the shelf, Chénier continued to develop a reputation for unconventional comportment towards the troupe and other writers. In late 1788, a better-established writer, Blin de Sainmore, charged him with stealing the story from his own "Isemberg" and engaging in chicanery to place "Azémire" ahead of his in the repertory. ²³ Though the troupe decided in the spring of 1789 that Chénier had not acted inappropriately, he clearly had become identified as an outsider, someone of whom the royal theater should be wary. ²⁴ Unlike Mercier, who learned civil norms only after being nearly expelled from literary life, and unlike Beaumarchais, who worked so assiduously to refashion himself as an *honnête homme*, Chénier did not refashion his patriot identity into that of an *honnête homme*.

He would not need to, since the events of 1789 would present him with an unexpected opportunity to reach the forefront of literary life. That opportunity began with the re-seating of the Estates-General as the National Assembly in mid-June. What many patriots viewed as the rebirth of liberty

for the French nation, Chénier saw as a chance for newcomers to break into literary life with patriotic plays, since historical topics with contemporary resonance had frequently been censored or held in abeyance in the theater repertory. In mid-June, he published a long essay, first in the *Journal de Paris* and then as a pamphlet, *De la liberté du théâtre en France*.

These texts attacked the Police Censor, Suard,  [Chénier, *De la liberté du théâtre en France*](#) and the Comédie as antiquated obstacles to the "liberty of the theater," and by extension, the liberty of the nation. He further developed  [Chénier, *Dénonciation des inquisiteurs de la pensée*](#) this motif in a second pamphlet, *Dénonciation des inquisiteurs de la pensée*, written July 5

(although not printed until August), which claimed his "Charles IX" to be among the "national plays" being demanded by "public opinion" but denied due to the royal troupe's "despotism and aristocracy." ²⁵ To present

ensorship and patronage as repressive and artificial constraints by the state on an otherwise naturally free individual's creative expression of self, Chénier made a tendentious but rhetorically brilliant attack, effectively rewriting the history of Old Regime theater censorship. Whereas most eighteenth-century playwrights considered censorship a necessary defense of civility in public discourse, Chénier transformed it into "aristocratic despotism," a "yoke" that the writers of *belles lettres* (especially "heroes" of the "nation," Corneille, Moliere and Voltaire) had inspired the French people to "shake off" through free expression. Thus, playwrights first and foremost should enjoy the "liberty of all citizens" to think and publish freely.

Chénier described his own motivation to write as a "passion for independence and a revolt against all tyranny," even though to do so meant a struggle. Against "the intrigue of those in power," he offered merely "a good book, the only public action allowed to a citizen who will not descend to humiliating" himself before a patron. Refusing to demonstrate civility, to "debase this genius to the role of serving the court"—and thereby implying that Old Regime writers had succeeded only through cravenness—he presented himself as Revolutionary liberty incarnate.



He asked the "August assembly of representatives of the Nation" to support his efforts to bring liberty to literary life by recognizing the "natural right [*droit naturel*]" of writers to express "what is not expressly forbidden by laws." Such a right, he asserted, must be granted not only for the good of *gens de lettres* but for the entire nation, to enable the "public instruction" that only theater could provide against "the arrogance and weakness of monarchs, the vanity of princes, the baseness of courtesans, the prejudice and ambition of the clergy, the avarice of ministers, [and] the spirit of tyranny." Chénier thus offered as the solution to France's political crisis the virtue of patriotic *gens de lettres*, but only if their own liberty was assured by ending the "despotism" of state-controlled theater.

Thus, Chénier figured himself, already in mid-June 1789, as a patriot

playwright, virtuously fighting alone on behalf of the nation, leading the way to liberty against an otherwise omnipotent despotic regime. Attributing his devotion to literature as the only acceptable form of expression under a repressive government, he implied that writing, especially when done as an outsider, in the face of established institutions and constituted power, offered the only alternative that allowed him to remain true to his personal sense of liberty and autonomy. Though Chénier had at that moment little renown and even less chance of seeing his play performed that season, he nevertheless presented himself and his fellow *gens de lettres* as autonomous, dissident patriots.

On July 19, 1789, the day after the new municipal government in Paris, led by Sylvain Bailly, gained the approval of the Parisian electors to replace the Old Regime municipal authorities who had been thrown out of the Hôtel de Ville on July 14, Chénier presented himself at the Comédie Française. Although not scheduled to meet with the troupe, he interrupted the actors' meeting to declare, "There is no more censorship." With no legal basis, he argued that the First Gentlemen at Versailles no longer held authority over the theater. The troupe, he argued, should instead now answer to the newly installed municipal authority, and through it to the liberated nation, rather than the corrupt and despotic court. ²⁶ This claim was ingenious, not only because it anticipated an interpretation of the past week's events that had not yet become widely fixed (the transfer of sovereignty from the court to the municipality), but because it also implied that the only reason his play had not been performed was the censorial repression he had been decrying in print for several months. This claim effaced the concerns voiced by the troupe, journalistic critics, and other writers about the play's commercial viability and literary merit and about the author's personal comportment.

This claim emerged in more developed form in his second pamphlet, *Denonciation des Inquisiteurs de la Pensée*, written in mid-July and published in early August. It opened a thoroughly original line of attack on the royal theater as an institution by equating the troupe and the court supervisors with the royal censor. ²⁷ Since 1776, Suard had served as the Police Censor, operating entirely independently of the company and the Royal Household, reporting to the Lieutenant-General of Police and the Chancellor on the civility and *honnêteté* of potential dramatic authors. Insofar as these values defined proper comportment for writers in the Old Regime, Suard had been seen by many writers as a mediator between writers and the institution of the Comédie Française. Chénier redefined this view of Suard by presenting him, rather than the troupe, as the obstacle to liberty. Furthermore, Chénier represented Suard's role as censor as a matter not of reproducing elite cultural norms through an official institution created to confer legitimacy on a community of writers, but of limiting his own autonomy as an aspiring writer. Indeed, Chénier presented the theater censor as much more oppressive than even the Book Trade officials, whose censorship had been much more systematic under the Old Regime. Because Suard answered directly to Versailles, he claimed, playwrights had been subject to greater "court intrigue" and "persecutions."

The only solution, Chénier concluded, was for the National Assembly to recognize the particular value that theater could have in helping people "learn to think," and to defend and promote the "genius" of the French nation by granting the "*droit*" of "liberty" to patriotic playwrights such as himself. By discussing the official theater repertory—always difficult to crack, especially for a new and aspiring writer such as himself—in terms of liberty and censorship, Chénier proposed, in a preface added to the pamphlet in early August, a new role for *gens de lettres* as leaders of the Revolution. Having "prepared the Revolution that is now beginning," they now led the fight for liberty against its "detractors in the government."

Chénier identified this resistance to liberty with one man, Suard: "The nation marches with great steps towards liberty; Monsieur Suard seems to march as quickly in the opposite direction." Whereas earlier censors such as Marin (who he would have never known) had been unable to repress writers and was a figure of "ridicule," Suard had suppressed with inexplicable "zeal" any work "that makes the public think," be it by dramaturgical innovation or, as with his "national tragedy," by its historical allusion and implicit political content. Chénier had turned Suard's institutional power and thorough acculturation in Old Regime civility against him, making him a symbol of what the Revolution had arisen to combat.

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Suard responded in a letter, printed anonymously in the *Journal de Paris* on August 27, which defended continuing royal control over the theaters as necessary for "public order" and challenged Chénier's equation of liberty with the end of theater censorship. ²⁸ Suard argued that liberty consists not in "independence" from all control but in consistent application of "just rules" of civility. Suard warned that if all writers, including newcomers like Chénier, were given total license, the result would be "atrocious scenes [that] ridicule religion, morality and law ... [and] encourage sedition and ... vengeance against innocent citizens." This defense, of course, is much closer to the notions of liberty and censorship to which most playwrights subscribed than it is to Chénier's equation of liberty with individual autonomy from constituted authority. Suard also offered a distinction that would be upheld by many liberals throughout the nineteenth century, between the liberty of the press and the theater, noting that the social nature of theater made it more dangerous not only to the government but to norms of morality and decency. ²⁹ Therefore, he held, even for a free people, theater required continued censorship to ensure peace and liberty. Suard held that, particularly in this moment of political change, when the people would make the law and the law would be sovereign, theater must serve as a "school of good taste and good morals" by guarding against "satire ... scandal ... weakness ... mediocrity ... pusillanimity ... and tyranny." Far from defending the despotism that Chénier had accused him of embodying, Suard explained that, as a censor, he and other authors who were "wise lovers of art and liberty" must work together against any return to "capricious" and "arbitrary government." Suard clearly saw himself as an Enlightened defender of what he considered civility against a threat of stylistic degeneration and a

resurgence of popular activism than an advocate or defender of absolutist tyranny.

Chénier's public debate with Suard on the issue of liberty and censorship, and his eventual triumph in 1789-1790 (on which more shortly), might suggest the first blow of a new political culture (based on a universal idea of individual rights) against the dying Old Regime (based on restraint and respect for hierarchy and order). ³⁰ Yet Suard's response, which we would undoubtedly consider conservative today, more closely resembles the liberal position on censorship not only of the late Enlightenment and the Revolution but even that of the nineteenth century. ³¹ Chénier's more radical, seemingly libertarian, position did not represent the view of most writers, either before or after 1789. Indeed, such a position was irreconcilable with the Old Regime ideal of a man of letters, as the experience of Beaumarchais and Voltaire has shown us already. In early November, Beaumarchais himself re-articulated this principle in a letter to the troupe, advocating that it not perform "Charles IX," because "many well behaved and moderate men" disdained the "ardent mind" of its author, however well intentioned. ³² The identity of an homme de lettres, his opposition implied, thoroughly depended on the acquisition and maintenance of personal legitimacy that was not to be challenged by outsiders speaking freely.

6.4. Liberty of Theaters before the Municipal Assembly

In the winter of 1789-1790, many such outsiders made their bids for prominence on the national stage, forcing the transfer control over Parisian public theaters from the court to the municipal government. The Commune took up this responsibility reluctantly, amidst calls in the periodical and pamphlet press for an end to royal censorship, revocation of the *privilège* of the Comédie Française, an end to royal policing of theater audiences, and greater involvement of self-fashioned patriots in the financing and operation selection plays for the public stage. This issue played out as well through conflicts within the troupe, among authors, in the audience, and in the periodical and pamphlet press. It involved municipal officials, the company, and established authors such as Beaumarchais. Also intervening would be the many new writers who successfully sought to have plays performed at the Comédie Française that spring, as well as the three elected bodies that claimed authority over the public theater: the Cordeliers district assembly, the municipal assembly, and the Constituent Assembly.


In early August 1789, Bailly, as mayor of the new municipal government, had charged the new Département de Police with authority over "exterior policing of theaters." In October, when the First Gentlemen ceded authority over the internal functioning of the royal theaters, Bailly invested this power in the Bureau des Établissements Publics. Through the fall, the division of responsibility between these two committees remained unclear; further complicating the picture, Bailly continued to rely on the royal Police Censor, Suard, for opinions on plays. ³³ The need for a systematic policy to govern

the Parisian public theaters became acute when, on January 1, 1790, the Comédie Française ceased to receive any royal funds for operating expenses or *pensions* to actors and writers. Bailly turned to Jean Louis Brousse-Desfaucherets, author of three plays performed at the Comédie Française in the 1780's, who had been elected chair of the Commission de Police for the Commune and was now Director of the new municipal Department of Public Establishments. On January 3, Bailly asked Desfaucherets to formulate new theater regulations to replace those issued by the First Gentlemen, effectively ending more than a century of court control over Parisian public theater. [34](#)

While Desfaucherets formed a committee and began drafting a report in late January and February, several writers petitioned the Commune on behalf of *gens de lettres* for "liberty of the theater." By this term, Chénier meant an end to censorship and royal control over public theater, while better-established authors such as Sedaine called for *gens de lettres* to be granted an active role in municipal supervision of a limited number of theaters. Sedaine's petition, heard by the Commune's General Assembly on February 23, also pleaded for the "literary property" of all *gens de lettres*, arguing that playwrights in particular had already shown their devotion to the nation, whereas the Comédie Française troupe sought only to retain their privileges. [35](#) This equation of writers with liberty and of mediating institutions, such as the theater or book printers, with aristocratic privilege, we will see shortly, would become predominant in Revolutionary debates over literary property.

30


The actors, whose recently successful campaign for civil status had been supported by many established as well as aspiring playwrights, petitioned the Commune as well. Like the writers, the company sought to represent itself as an incarnation of liberty, pleading that the royal theater regulations had been reformed as recently as 1780, so that the theater had already, years before the Revolution, oriented itself toward the regeneration of public morality and service to the public. [36](#) The actors' petition, submitted in early February and then enlarged and printed in March, adopted an argument the troupe had made for decades: Louis XIV had founded the theater to promote the performance of French dramatic literature for the people, not to provide patronage to "malcontent authors of ill will." It also asserted the company's longstanding claim that "the progress of the art" required a single theater. In response to playwrights' "pretext" to incarnate the Revolution and liberty, the actors charged that the authors served only "personal interest," and in so doing threatened the "public good [*bien public*]." Rather than a *privilège*, the actors asserted, they defended the "good administration" of a national "establishment" and the "unity" of French theater against "usurpations" that would destroy it. This petition to the Commune differed from earlier appeals of the actors to the First Gentlemen by suggesting that this troupe had and would continue to serve "the nation," rather than the court. The actors then asked the Commune to recognize their existing repertory of "immortal masterpieces"

 [Délibération ...
27 septembre 1790](#)

as a literary *patrimoine national*, as public property, which only the "Theater of the Nation" could preserve. In defining literature as an entity of the "nation," the troupe's petition borrowed from the claims that some authors had made in demanding retroactive literary property. They also introduced an argument that would be adopted repeatedly by theaters, printers, academies, and other corporate commercial entities: the symbolic goods they had accumulated under the Old Regime represented not privilege to be eliminated, but instead constituted sacred and inviolable property to be protected as a natural right. [37](#)

Seeking an empirical basis for its debate, the Commune turned to Beaumarchais, himself a member of the assembly and the best-known playwright both at court and among the public. Brousse's committee asked Beaumarchais to explain the existing Comédie Française regulations that Beaumarchais, as leader of the SAD, had negotiated between 1776 and 1780 with the troupe's lawyers, the First Gentlemen, and the Minister of the Royal Household. In the years since those regulations had taken effect for the 1781-1782 season, other writers had consulted him regularly about their own relations with the royal theater, so Beaumarchais had greater knowledge of the finances and administration of the royal theater than anyone not in the company or the Ministry of the Royal Household. [38](#) To the municipal government, Beaumarchais now supplied a detailed discussion of the financial impact of the 1780 regulations on both the Française and the Italienne, concluding that between 1782 and 1790, new plays had accounted for three-quarters of annual revenues for each theater (roughly 1300 *livres* profit per show). [39](#)

He then highlighted what would become the crucial issue in all Revolutionary debates over literary property: who would control works in the existing repertory, the heirs of the author, the troupe or publisher to which the work had been sold, or the public? Beaumarchais noted that the Française, which acquired full control over a play once it passed into the permanent repertory, had only staged new plays half the time in the 1780s—considerably more often than in previous decades, but much less than the Italienne. Under the royal regulations, the Italienne had continued to pay authors a share of proceeds from all performances; accordingly, this troupe had no incentive to draw on its permanent repertory at the expense of new plays. Beaumarchais thus implied that, while the 1780 regulations had been effective in keeping production costs in line, the municipality ought to provide for authors to be paid for all performances of their works, not merely during their original runs. In this manner, commercial theaters (which he recognized that all public theaters would become) would have no incentive to perform canonical works by dead authors over new ones by living writers. This issue of literary property rights over works in the repertory, especially works by dead authors had been at the heart of writer-theater relations throughout the late eighteenth century, and this question—that of public domain—would emerge as the most contentious (and the most theoretically difficult) in the legislative debates of the Commune and the National Assembly.

In February, the commission of municipal deputies made its report to Brousse-Desfaucherets, proposing that the theaters should be considered "not a personal but a public property." The report proposed that the Municipality should remain the proprietor of the four public theaters: the Opéra, the Française, the Italienne, and (in response to authors' calls for a second troupe) the Théâtre du Palais-Royal. It further called for the municipality to license the operation of these theaters, which would generate revenue for the municipality and leave it with ultimate control over repertoires, policing, and censorship. Brousse- [Brousse-Desfaucherets, Réponse du département ...](#) Desfaucherets then modified the proposal, eliminating the private licensees as intermediaries and placing all theaters in Paris under his authority as head of Bureau des Établissements Publics. [40](#) On February 23, the Commune's general Assembly voted to approve this plan, adding a supervisory committee of municipal deputies that would include at least two writers. [41](#) The Commune tried this arrangement for a brief time, as evidenced in the Assembly's consideration on March 18 of a decision by Brousse's committee not to allow performance of the play "Le Baron de Wolza." [42](#)

The troupe, however, resisted, and the actors continued selecting plays at their own discretion. Circumventing the issue of literary property entirely, the actors resorted to the sort of private agreements with authors that the First Gentlemen had proscribed twenty years earlier. In response, Bailly, who had already intervened on behalf of several writers in January and February, began to exercise more direct authority over the troupe in early March, to distance it further from the practices and institutions of the court. On March 6, he commanded the actors no longer to accept roles in commercial provincial theaters, a common practice in the past allowing actors to enhance their income, because he wanted them to be available for benefit performances in Paris. [43](#) Five days later, he introduced another change in the theater's institutional culture, informing Brousse that he had abolished free entrance privileges, traditionally awarded by the First Gentlemen to courtiers and prominent authors. [44](#)

35

Despite Bailly's efforts to win political support for the new policy, it quickly came under attack from liberals who sought farther-reaching reforms. Nicolas Framéry, a composer, wrote the most comprehensive treatise, which discussed each genre and theater. He called for an end to privileges, for a "second troupe ...absolutely equal" to compete with the Comédie Française, and for municipally subsidized, mixed-use theaters for those unable to gain acceptance by the official theaters. He also suggested that these additional theaters would contribute to the "progress of the arts" by providing venues for the "young authors who have not yet made their reputation." To promote the work of men of letters generally, Framéry argued that authors should enjoy "perpetual propriety of their works," recognized as "inalienable and imprescriptible," meaning it could neither be given nor taken away, and would pass to their heirs after their deaths. Finally, Framéry contested the

troupe's claim of its repertory as private property, by noting that no individual troupe member owned the theater. ⁴⁵ Framéry's treatise, much of it written before the Revolution broke out, reflects primarily the views of late Old Regime theater reformers such as Cailhava rather than those of Revolutionary patriots.

Such self-described patriots, though, published pamphlets in 1790 claiming that the municipal authorities had simply replaced royal censorship with their own, equally arbitrary, oversight. ⁴⁶ Others attacked the actors as irremediably imbued with Old Regime values, concerned only with their own "particular interests," and hostile to the "public good." ⁴⁷ More aggressive critics attacked the Comédiens as "instruments of a counter-revolution" and called on the municipal assembly to demand "proof of their civic-mindedness." ⁴⁸ Potential entrepreneurs, such as Augustin de Fréville, called for the Constituent Assembly to step in and pass a more liberal policy regarding Parisian public theater. ⁴⁹ Even Chénier, who had only months earlier called on the municipality to take over the Parisian public theaters, now challenged the Commune's supervision as contrary to "the true principles of liberty" in speeches to the municipal assembly and the Cordeliers assembly and in a printed pamphlet. He too called on the Constituent Assembly to pass a law stating that all Parisian public theaters, including the notoriously expensive and highly prestigious Opéra, should not belong to the municipality but instead become the "property" of private "entrepreneurs." ⁵⁰

Liberals in the assembly attacked the new system as well. Millin de Grandmaison opposed it as both insufficiently liberal and insufficiently patriotic; he advocated a more thorough liberalization of theater as well as a more aggressive use of theater to promote revolutionary values. "The theater," he argued, "must be a means of government to give the people the proper impression." Grandmaison proposed that entrepreneurs be at liberty to construct new theaters, and that the Commune direct them to locations placed strategically in outlying neighborhoods, to encourage both economic development and greater access to theater for the Parisian population. Authors could negotiate among these different venues for the most favorable terms for the performance of their works, which were subject to approval by the Commune, thus assuring patriotic content in the public theaters. ⁵¹ Quatremère de Quincy made an even more liberal case, arguing against municipal "appropriation" of royal theaters, which would only sustain "decadence." He advocated suppression of censorship and an end to all royal or municipal subsidies and a law that would enable entrepreneurs to establish and manage an unregulated number of venues. This policy, he insisted, would ensure that the greatest number of Parisians could attend theater, and the plays they would see would most accurately reflect audience tastes and promote patriotism. ⁵²



A. L. Millin
de Grandmaison,
*Sur la liberté
du théâtre*

Under the weight of such attacks, the Commune's theater policy effectively collapsed in the summer of 1790. ⁵³ While the Constituent Assembly deferred action, Parisian public theater existed in a state of limbo, with no clear controlling legal authority. The actors, royal officials, the municipality, leading authors, and outspoken patriotic voices in the press and the audience, manifest in frequent *cabales* within the theater, all claimed (and to some degree exercised) power over the theater. In the spring and summer of 1790, while the municipal assembly continued to debate and the Constituent Assembly considered whether to address the issue, the Cordeliers district assembly (which contained several aspiring writers) moved in to fill the vacuum.

6.5. The New Patriots: The Cordeliers District and the Revolution in Literary Life

The opportunities that the Revolution offered outsiders to refashion themselves as patriots are evident in the trajectories of those writers associated with the Cordeliers district in 1790, beginning with Chénier and including Charles Philippe Ronsin, Fabre d'Églantine, and Collot d'Herbois. As the assembly supervising the national guard in the district where the Comédie Française resided, the Cordeliers were responsible for maintaining order in and around the theater; thus, its leading members, including these writers, held a much more powerful position over the troupe than any playwright had under the Old Regime. All of these men had sought, with limited success, to launch literary careers under the Old Regime, and all would go on to prominent political roles in the Republic. But their first entry onto the Revolutionary stage came during the 1789-1790 Comédie Française season. Between September 1789 and June 1790, each would fashion himself as a patriot playwright, through strategies and with consequences that differed markedly from the experiences of earlier authors, even those who like Mercier had fashioned themselves as patriots under the Old Regime.

40


Leading this charge was Chénier. In August 1789, Chénier opened a new front in his campaign to identify his play, and himself, as embodiments of revolutionary liberty. Combining the traditional Old Regime strategy of an organized *cabale* ⁵⁴ and the new Revolutionary politics of collective action in the name of liberty, he arranged for fellow patriots from the Cordeliers district assembly to distribute printed placards in the theater on August 19, 1789. ⁵⁵ At the end of intermission, two "anonymous *Bons Patriotes* orators," later identified as Mirabeau and Danton, shouted from a box seat and from the pit, respectively.

Immediately, a crowd (including, among others, Fabre d'Églantine and Collot d'Herbois) rushed the stage, and placards rained down from the upper balconies, calling on "the French people" to demand end their "servitude" and "slavery" to the "burlesque authority of the censors [who] have bastardized the genius of dramatic poetry" by preventing the performance of "Charles IX." The crowd, and the placards, called on the "nation" to take control of the theater from the court: "in these first days of liberty, Frenchmen, it is no longer to the Gentlemen of the Royal Bedchamber that

it belongs ... it is yours!" [56](#) Four days later, Chénier delivered this message directly to the newly seated Commune in a petition, subsequently printed, in which he announced that "no power" could any longer govern over the theater, other than "the public" of Paris, and any "resistance" to this popular will would be "a useless form of censorship." [57](#) The municipal assembly, clearly seeking to cool tensions and not yet sure whether it would be able to (or even wanted to) govern the Comédie, ordered Chénier to turn over his manuscript of the play, ostensibly to prevent furtive performances or an illegitimate edition, and to desist from reading it publicly until further notice. [58](#)

Nevertheless, the placards from the theater and his speech circulated in print and were reprinted in newspapers over the next few days. On August 27, Chénier printed in the *Journal de Paris* a response to Suard's rebuttal that upheld not only the idea of "liberty" as personal autonomy from all constraint, but moreover defended the performance of "Charles IX" as the will of the public. In response to Suard's distinction between the relative degree of liberty that could be tolerated in theater as opposed to print, Chénier responded that not only was "liberty of theater" more necessary for the many who did not read but also that the author of a play could be held much more readily responsible, since a play could never be performed anonymously. Like Suard, Chénier defined "liberty" as a dependence on "only the laws," but unlike Suard, he no longer considered Old Regime theater regulations to be law, since no "citizens" had approved them. [59](#)

By the end of September, Chénier had effectively transformed his own, rather typical, struggle to have his play performed on the official stage into an instance of the popular struggle for liberty and against despotic censorship that had already become the dominant trope in how contemporaries understood the Revolution. Moreover, he had placed the issue of liberty of theater, meaning an end to all royal control over the official stage, firmly on the agenda of the new municipal assembly. According to pamphlet published anonymously by a self-described "member of the Commune," a speech delivered to the municipal assembly on August 22 had proposed a series of reforms to the Comédie Française, including a "bureau," headed by a municipal official and composed of "a committee of *gens de lettres*," to take over the composition of the repertory, approval of plays for public performance, and the remuneration of authors. [60](#) Yet it was by no means clear in August and September that Chénier and this anonymous deputy were correct that the city government would take control over the theater from the court.

Their cause benefited greatly from the popular demonstrations of October 5-6, which transferred the court to Paris. That very day, Chénier wrote a petition to all 60 district assemblies calling for the municipality to take over the royal theater, arguing that the "liberty of the nation" demanded such a change. [61](#) He also wrote the troupe directly, making no pretense of *honnêteté* but instead boldly informing the  [Adresse de M.J. de Chénier ...](#)

royal company that he had seen the mayor, "who will be henceforth in charge of the policing of theaters," and that he, the author, would inform the troupe when the performance of the play had been authorized, effectively usurping Suard's role as Police Censor. ⁶² This tactic paid off when, on October 12, the First Gentlemen ceded control over the Comédie Française to the Commune; the next day, the Commune's Comité de Police heard his arguments for the performance of "Charles IX."

Due to objections by representatives from the District des Carmes, the Commune provisionally suspended the performance. ⁶³ Suard, perhaps sensing that he had regained the upper hand, published another short text in the *Journal de Paris*, on October 18, defending theater censorship as necessary for "public order, good *moeurs*, sociability, and true liberty." However, this turn of events played directly into Chénier's strategy of self-fashioning as a patriotic voice of liberation. He immediately published another letter in the *Journal de Paris* calling for liberty of theater—meaning the performance of his play—as a necessary bulwark against "tyranny, fanaticism, murder, [and] civil war." Moreover, he held, the performance of "Charles IX" would be the surest way to lead the "French nation to love virtue, laws, liberty, and tolerance." ⁶⁴

45

At this point, Chénier also deployed two innovative and ultimately successful strategies to win over support for his definition of liberty. First, he undermined Suard's argument by agreeing that it may have been true prior to the Revolution but no longer applied to a free French nation. He did this by publishing another short pamphlet in Suard's name. ⁶⁵ Here the putative censor claimed that he, like all Parisians, impatiently awaited the performance of "Charles IX," but that he had been forced to delay it by "arbitrary, ancient laws." These laws, he claimed in Suard's name, had been written to defend against "monstrous plays," precisely the sort of work that would no longer be written, performed, or applauded on the stage of a free society. By equating the Censor with the Old Regime, a time when plays were produced for "slaves born for servitude," he asserted that his Revolutionary play, and his newly fashioned identity as a Revolutionary playwright, would please and instruct "that part of the nation which truly loves liberty." With the support of the District des Cordeliers assembly, Chénier lobbied the Commune's Comité de Police, which two weeks later reversed its decision and approved the performance. The premiere took place finally on November 4. As had Beaumarchais in 1784, Chénier had outmaneuvered Suard, circumventing the Censor by gaining support in a new body that ultimately decided the issue, the municipal government, and among the theater-going and pamphlet-reading public.

When "Charles IX" premiered finally on November 4, 1789, the theater audience, doubtless prompted by the author and his allies from the Cordeliers district assembly, received it "with vivacity." The *Journal de Paris* interpreted the performance as the "latest blow against aristocracy," delivered by an author "inspired by patriotism and liberty." ⁶⁶ To others,

such as the author of one anonymous pamphlet, Chénier's spectacular rise to prominence through unabashed self-assertion in the theater and the press demonstrated a breakdown of civil norms: "This liberty has shocked all *honnêtes gens*." ⁶⁷ Chénier, when he read both these comments, must have been flattered. Throughout 1790, he worked relentlessly to maintain this identity as a patriot who had overcome both the legal and cultural restraints imposed on liberty by Old Regime theater culture. With the help of the Cordeliers assembly, including the actor Talma and fellow authors Ronsin, Fabre, and Collot, he generated continued shows of popular support for his play. At the same time, Chénier set about distancing himself from his own aggressive assertions, in response to demands by royalists and others that municipal authorities shut the play down to end such exuberance in the pit. In the weeks after the premiere, he and his friend Palissot published letters in the *Chronique de Paris* and the *Journal de Paris* that attributed the "effervescence" of the audiences to the intensity of patriotic sentiments the play inspired, and pointed out that the very point of the story was the danger of "fanaticism." ⁶⁸

In early January 1790, citing demands by "the public" for additional performances, he announced in the *Chronique de Paris* that he would donate the proceeds of the 25th performance of "Charles IX" to poor patriots from his Cordeliers district. ⁶⁹ As had Beaumarchais in 1785, Chénier made this public gesture of *bienfaisance* to reinforce his self-presentation as patriotically devoted to the nation. Moreover, Chénier ensured that it would coincide with the appearance of his play in print by selling rights to the printer Bossange for an unprecedented 10,000 livres. Like Beaumarchais, Chénier had delayed printing the play while the controversy surrounding it drove up interest in Paris and across the nation. In the meantime, though, unauthorized editions had been printed, as well as two new editions of François Baculard d'Arnaud's 1740 play *Coligni, ou la St. Barthelemi*. One edition included a new preface suggesting that Chénier had stolen the story, and a "Discours général" decrying such "calumny" and lack of *honnêteté* among writers. ⁷⁰ While some continued to attack him for aggressive self-assertion, Chénier, by publishing an authorized, censor-approved edition, which included a "Dedication to the Nation" and his essay "Sur la liberté du théâtre" opposing royal censorship, had reinforced his public identity as *the* playwright of Revolutionary liberty. ⁷¹

Chénier withdrew the play from the Comédie Française repertory in February 1790, but his continued interventions kept it at the forefront of cultural politics while the municipal government and, eventually, the National Assembly debated how to create "liberty of theaters" that year. His most important effort in this regard was through generating calls for "Charles IX" in Paris from the patriot press and National Guard regiments for the Festival of the Federation. This performance led to a reprise at the Comédie Française on July 23, during which violence erupted between members of the Cordeliers and royalists. In response, some members of the troupe sought to have the

 Chénier,
Charles IX


play suppressed as an incitement to violence, but the municipality again asserted its authority. Bailly obtained first a decree from the Constituent Assembly that placed all Parisian public theaters under his authority, and then ordered "Charles IX" staged for the opening of the Comédie Française season in mid-September. [72](#)

On August 23, in response to a petition from several authors, including Chénier, both the Commune and the Constituent Assembly again decreed that the municipal government had authority over the administration of the theaters. Chénier even wrote the speech that the actor Talma delivered before that season-opening performance, which disparaged Old Regime playwrights (excepting Molière and Voltaire) for having failed to use their genius to represent liberty and "universal reason" on stage, and which called upon "the public ...to encourage dramatic poets" such as Chénier, "who, inspired by the Revolution, have come to occupy this stage," where they might produce "a purified theater" for a "nation" worthy of liberty and an "enemy of tyranny." [73](#) Finally, on October 1, Chénier withdrew the play (for the second time) from the Comédie Française, declaring that he would await the establishment of true liberty of theaters, meaning the end the national theater's commercial monopoly in Paris. [74](#)

50

By this time, Chénier had fashioned himself not merely as a patriot playwright, but as the writer most closely associated with the end of court control over the official Parisian theaters. Moreover, he had fashioned his work as an expression of the liberty of the nation, and thus one of the first fruits of the Revolution itself. His patriot identity, fashioned through his public association with the theater in 1789-1790, would surpass in the next few years that of an *homme de lettres*; in the following months, he became associated with the Jacobins, into which he and his Cordelier allies entered in the fall of 1790. Over the next three years, Chénier rose at a spectacular rate to take a prominent role among the Montagnards of the Convention.

Less well known, but more important for understanding the fluidity of "liberty" as used by writers who fashioned themselves as patriots in the early years of the Revolution, is the way in which Chénier sought to defend this identity from what he considered "impure calumny" by illegitimate outsiders. On February 18, 1792, the Théâtre de Vaudeville, one of the many Parisian theaters that enjoyed new prominence and freedom from censorship as part of the "liberty of theaters" that Chénier himself had helped make law, performed François Léger's "L'Auteur d'un moment." This one-act comedy satirized Chénier as Damis, a recurrent character in early modern French comedy, an author who lacked literary talent and who manipulated others to advance himself. [75](#) For Chénier, who had claimed repeatedly that the nation had demanded his work, this parody risked compromising his public identity as the leading Revolutionary playwright. So he reversed his earlier demands for absolute liberty and called, in a short verse "Discours contre la calumnie" that he circulated in manuscript, for laws against those "insensitive" writers and printers who defamed French

 *Discours en vers, contre la Calomnie ...* literature by abusing their liberty with impunity. ⁷⁶ His refutation of his earlier libertarian stance on censorship need not call into question Chénier's sincerity or belief in the Revolution or personal liberty, if we consider it evidence of the fluidity of the language through which writers described themselves and—such as "liberty"—and of the institutional culture within which they used that language—such as the still-official theater—in the years immediately following 1789. To fashion an identity as a Revolutionary, a patriot, and an *homme de lettres* required playing a game the rules of which, never clear in the past, now became even more open to adaptation and invention.

Only in retrospect can Chénier's experience be seen as that of a solitary patriot embodying liberty, or as that of an opportunist using the Revolution to advance his long-stifled career. ⁷⁷ Just as, only in retrospect, is Chénier the romantic genius of open shirt and flowing hair, as numerous nineteenth-century frontispieces would depict him. Indeed, we cannot read any of these representations as transparent documents of his experience in the early years of the Revolution. Chénier, more than any of his contemporaries, perceived the opportunity that the Revolution would represent to deploy the trope of the patriot using the tactics of collective action and the press, in new ways that had never succeeded in the past, but would now prove more effective than the more established language of *honnêteté* and the more established tactics of civil comportment in face-to-face encounters and correspondence.


In the wake of Chénier's success, and given the political vacuum around the national theater, the Cordeliers kept up their assault in the spring of 1790, most notably in the person of Charles-Philippe Ronsin. Ronsin would become an adjunct minister of war under the Jacobin Republic, a general of the Revolutionary army who exacted violent retributions in the Vendée, and finally the lead defendant among those executed with Hébert. Yet he had begun his public life, in the 1770s by seeking legitimacy as an *homme de lettres*. While still in his 20s, he moved from Soissons to Paris and began to write, penning first a verse epic, and then submitting his first play to the Comédie Française in late 1781. On December 26, the troupe considered this work, "La Duchesse de Bourbon," and asked him to revise and resubmit. When the revised version did not impress the actors, Ronsin offered yet a third version, now retitled "Isabelle de France," in October 1783. ⁷⁸ The company voted by eight to five to refuse this version outright but made a unique agreement with Ronsin to provide him some recognition as an *homme de lettres*. The work was entered in the theater's register as having been accepted, but the author agreed, in writing, never to demand a performance or any of the perquisites of a Comédie Française playwright such as free entrance privileges, and not to propose any additional plays to the theater for at least a year. ⁷⁹ He did submit a second

work, "Hecube et Polixene," in July 1785, but the troupe refused it too, prompting Ronsin to publish a year later these still unperformed plays, along with a third, never submitted to the troupe. ⁸⁰ In late 1787, he finally succeeded in having the royal troupe accept a play, "Jeanne d'Arc," into its repertory, but no performance was scheduled. Ronsin, like many earlier aspirants to literary honor, remained on the margins of legitimacy as one who held the status of a man of letters only through repeated, unsuccessful appeals to the royal theater.

As had many before him in a similar position, Ronsin moved from polite entreaties to transgression of the norms of *honnêteté* expected of aspiring playwrights. In early 1788, he again proposed a novel arrangement with the troupe: a cash advance, citing "personal reasons," including the illness of his mother-in-law. Even more brazenly, he suggested that he had been forced to make such a request because the troupe had never scheduled "Jeanne d'Arc" for performance. ⁸¹ In another move commonly made by aspiring Old Regime authors, Ronsin sought to advance his work in the repertory by asking other writers to cede their places to him. To this end, he repeatedly appealed to Chénier, who was also struggling to get his first play performed, asking that he cede his place in the order of performance. Chénier readily agreed, pleased to have an opportunity to represent himself to the troupe and other authors as disinterested and honorable. Moreover, in his note informing the actors of this cession, Chénier complained of Ronsin's repeated letters and visits, implicitly fashioning himself as a more reserved, self-restrained, and magnanimous man of letters. ⁸² So in May 1789, Ronsin's turn for a performance of "Duchesse" approached, but the troupe had become so exasperated by his antics (and so worried about the prospect of having to perform his unpromising play) that, despite the theater's financial difficulties, the actors offered him 600 livres to withdraw the work! ⁸³

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Ronsin's prospects turned considerably brighter with the outbreak of the Revolution. By late November, he had become a member of the Parisian National Guard, marking him publicly as a patriot. And Chénier had achieved what Ronsin noted to be a "striking success" with a "national" and "patriotic" play, "Charles IX." Moreover, Ronsin knew that the troupe, no longer getting support from the court and facing a political and financial crisis, badly needed "a way to give to the capital new proof of your patriotism." He also knew that the troupe faced a chorus of public criticism from authors such as Cailhava, Gouges, and Chénier. Perceiving in these developments an opportunity, Ronsin proposed to the actors a new, "patriotic ... national" play, "Louis XII, Père du peuple." ⁸⁴

 Ronsin,
Louis XII,
père du peuple

In addition, he suggested the play be placed at the top of the repertory, based on the entirely specious claim that it should take the place of his "Isabelle de France," and the only slightly more legitimate argument that the play had contemporary resonance as a *pièce de circonstance*. ⁸⁴ Ronsin

claimed that this new work should take the position of "Isabelle," which should have been entered in the repertory back in 1783. In fact, the troupe in 1783 had sent "Isabelle" back to the author for corrections by a vote of seven to two; Ronsin now claimed, with no legal or historical justification, that the rules provided for a work that received an equal number of votes for acceptance and rejection should be placed in the repertory. Moreover, authors had never been allowed to substitute one play for another, as he now proposed.

Ronsin next borrowed a page directly from Chénier's script when, on December 2, he organized a *cabale* during a performance of "Charles IX," demanding the performance of "Isabelle de France." In response, the troupe leader De la Porte gave a prepared speech promising "to satisfy the demands of ... the nation" if the other authors agreed to let "Louis XII" pass to the top of the repertory. The next day, the troupe sent out a circular letter to all the other authors with tragedies scheduled for performance, asking that they accede to the demands of "the citizens" and allow Ronsin to pass to the top of the list. [85](#)

The prospect of another outsider patriot moving to the top of the list angered long-standing playwrights with works already in the repertory, such as Maisonneuve and Blin de Sainmore, and at least one newcomer still awaiting his premiere, La Faucherie. Each declined to cede his place. Their plaintive responses express the frustration of men heavily invested in the identity of *honnêtes gens de lettres*, as understood prior to 1789. They now faced a new environment that favored self-styled patriots, assertive outsiders who had engaged in what had previously been regarded as unacceptably dangerous behavior for a writer—fomenting collective action in the theater and making opportunistic use of the press.



Maisonneuve questioned whether the crowd's demand represented "the will of the public" or was simply a "ruse" pulled off by a man of as little "talent ... as modesty." [86](#)

Sainmore noted that his own play, "Isemberge," also drew on French history, and that it had been accepted into the repertory four years earlier. Since then, at least ten other tragedies, he claimed, had been staged, yet he had exercised self-restraint and made no protest. Now, it seemed, the troupe would perform works that had never been accepted into the repertory, such as Falbaire's "Honnête criminel," and brand new works such as Ronsin's "Louis XII," in violation not only of the long-standing regulations but also of the culture that rewarded civility and punished self-assertion.

It was, he claimed, under these rules that he had submitted his play to the Comédie and patiently waited his turn; now it seemed that these rules, and those who had adhered to them, were being abandoned in favor of political opportunism by undeserving newcomers. He closed by noting that, while the troupe and these authors claimed the new plays had to be performed due to "circumstances," long-standing writers such as himself also deserved to benefit from the new possibilities presented by the Revolution. [87](#) La

Faucherie complained, "The nation which has just destroyed the oppressive privileges must respect the new rights, especially written into law," which the troupe now refused to recognize. ⁸⁸ The troupe, unmoved, announced this opposition to the audience, forcing Maisonneuve, Sainmore, and others to write perfunctory letters agreeing to cede place to Ronsin and expressing their respect for the public. (La Faucherie refused to write such a letter, and the troupe removed his play from the repertory.) ⁸⁹

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Ronsin, emboldened, moved quickly to consolidate his new position of strength, securing the support of Bailly. The day after the municipal government's authority over Parisian public theaters became complete on January 1, 1790, Ronsin informed the troupe that the mayor wanted "Louis XII" to be performed. ⁹⁰ Two weeks later, Ronsin deployed an even more aggressive tactic, threatening violence by the Cordeliers unit of the National Guard against the troupe. He wrote the actors that "many citizen-soldiers have expressed to me their displeasure with the delays in the performance of this tragedy ... I believe that it is in my interest and that of the actors that the play be advertised for next Wednesday. That would be the best way to calm the soldiers, of whom there are a great number." ⁹¹ Three weeks after this threat, the troupe performed "Louis XII" on February 12, 1790, ⁹² the first time that the Comédie Française performed a play under duress from an author himself and a municipal body, rather than the writer's protector and royal officials at the court.

That very day, however, Ronsin fell victim to the success of his own tactics. At the end of the first act, a crowd interrupted the performance to demand Flins des Oliviers's "Reveil d'Epimenide," a comic one-act adaptation of a classical motif, traditionally performed on New Year's Day, now revised to celebrate the dawn of liberty. The troupe, without guidance from the court or the municipal government, acceded to the crowd's demands. The next day, despite Ronsin's offer to revise "Louis XII," the troupe withdrew it from the active repertory. ⁹³ The author then published the play. Though Ronsin would write several more patriotic works, including "Fête de la liberté," for the Festival of Federation on July 14, 1790, he never again sought identity as an *homme de lettres*, instead expressing his patriotism through political action in the Cordeliers club and the revolutionary army.

Ronsin's outright threat of violence—and the response of a violent *cabale* that forced the troupe to change the play in mid-performance—demonstrates the extent to which the first months of the Revolution transformed the culture of literary and public life. Writers ceased to fashion themselves as civil and *honnête*, opting instead for a patriotic language in which *gens de lettres* claimed to speak for the nation and challenged the authority of such long-standing institutions as the Comédie, rather than proposing to reform them. Moreover, the court and Parisian elites were no longer involved in governing the theater troupe or mediating its relations with writers. Control over the theater, and cultural power more broadly, had passed quite literally to the public, meaning the theater audience, and thus

became available to those like Ronsin who found ways of supporting their claims to speak for it. That Ronsin went on to use (and be subjected to) greater violence under the Republic is an entirely different story. Nevertheless, his rapid rise and fall as an *homme de lettres* in late 1789 and early 1790 illustrates how, within months of the taking of the Bastille, newcomers gained control over and inverted the long-standing institutions and culture of literary life.

A third writer to emerge from the assembly of the District of Cordeliers in 1790 as a self-fashioned patriot was Fabre d'Églantine. Born in 1750 in Carcassonne, Philippe Fabre's background typified that of an aspiring *homme de lettres* of the later eighteenth century: son of a provincial artisan merchant, taught in a *collège*, began his career writing verse (for which he claimed, speciously, to have been awarded the Églantine d'or at the Jeux Floraux of Toulouse), painted miniature portraits, and eventually joined an itinerant theater troupe. In his late thirties, lacking any legitimacy in literary life and any means of supporting his wife and son, he moved to Paris and turned to playwriting. ⁹⁴ In September 1787, the Comédie Italienne staged his first play, "Les Gens de lettres," which Darnton has described as an aspiring writer's fantasy of being swept from anonymity and poverty to fame and glory by a benign patron who recognizes the writers' genius. ⁹⁵ Later that year, in another move typical of an aspiring Old Regime playwright, Fabre sought to convert his limited success into great prestige by submitting a tragedy to the Française; his "Augusta" enjoyed a passable success. In early 1789, the Française staged his "Présomptueux, ou l'Heureux imaginaire," a full-length comedy inspired by Cailhava and, in turn, Molière. Fabre seemed to be on the rise, in terms of renown and legitimacy. But like so many aspirants of the later eighteenth century, he became mired in a conflict with another author, Collin d'Harleville, who charged that "Présomptueux" had been plagiarized from his own work, "L'Optimiste." Collin organized a *cabale* that halted the first performance of "Présomptueux," and the Française actors dropped it from the active repertory, so Fabre turned to the newly opened Théâtre de Monsieur, which performed his fourth play, "Le Collateral," in May.

 [Lettre de M. Fabre d'Eglantine à Monsieur de *** ...](#)

 [Collin d'Harleville, L'optimiste](#)

While far from a legitimate *homme de lettres*, Fabre had by mid-1789 become an established outsider in literary life. In the fall, as the Comédie Française revised its repertory, it adopted his fifth play, "Le Philinte de Molière." In this sequel to "The Misanthrope," Alceste returns as a sentimental hero, virtuously sacrificing his own fortune to save his friend, Philinte, whose reliance on norms of reciprocal civility leads him to be duped. Noting Fabre's explicit use in the play's prologue of Rousseau's critique of Molière's "Misanthrope," Darnton has interpreted this work as expressing a tendency at the heart of the Revolution to replace the hypocrisy of

Molièresque courtliness with Rousseauian natural emotion and purity of self-expression. Indeed, Darnton argues that we should view this play as a sequel to Fabre's earlier "Gens de lettres" as expressing a collective fantasy of aspiring writers of the late 1780s to overturn the established institutions and norms of literary culture—a fantasy that the Revolution would grant Fabre and others previously marginal to literary life a chance to fulfill.

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Yet the prologue to "Philinte" was added only for the first printed edition so, ne "Philinte" may also be interpreted in the context in which it was written, the late Old Regime, rather than the Revolution. In this sense, Fabre's work also expressed the desire of several self-described "modern" writers, including notably La Harpe and Cailhava, as well as Gouges and Mercier, to update Molière for the Française repertory. This re-appropriation of Molière is evident in the resurgence of plays by and about him in the late 1780s. An engraving of Molière reissued at the outbreak of the Revolution offers an even more striking updating of his image; executed in 1773 by the royal engraver Jacques-Firmin Beauvarlet and based on a seventeenth-century portrait painted by Sébastien Bourdon, the first edition retained an inscribed dedication to the First Gentlemen of the Royal Bedchamber from the printer Mailly and a royal privilege. The new version retained the same image but replaced the dedication with a short verse by Chénier, praising Molière as the

Vrai poète du peuple, ami de la nature, Fleau des charlatans, il brava leurs clameurs; Ses crayons vertueux fletrent l'imposture, Et par le ridicule il reforma les moeurs.	True poet of the people, friend of nature, Scourge of charlatans, he endured their brays; His virtuous pens withered imposture, And by ridicule, he reformed mores.
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Fabre's attempt to rewrite a seventeenth-century comedy for the contemporary moment thus indicates a larger trend, begun in the 1770s and taken up by Cordeliers patriot playwrights, to refashion Molière from courtier to national poet, a tendency that would continue through the nineteenth century. [96](#)

At the same time, Fabre distinguished himself from other aspiring writers, including other Molière admirers, due to his prominence in the Cordeliers district assembly, which supervised policing of the theater district. Consequently, in his relations with the Comédie Française, he received singular treatment from the company. Repeatedly he complained to the troupe that his play had not yet been staged and that he could not afford to wait much longer. [97](#) For decades, the troupe had regularly received, and regularly disregarded, such complaints from aspiring authors; this time,

however, the author in question had the backing of the Cordeliers district assembly. On December 21, 1789, the financially troubled troupe agreed to pay him an advance of 600 livres for his play and promised that it would be performed shortly. ⁹⁸ Within two months, the troupe staged in full his "Présomptueux," followed two days later by the premiere of "Philinte de Molière." Again Collin organized a *cabale* to interrupt the performance.

In response, Fabre turned to a tactic often taken by frustrated writers; he printed the play with a preface. In this preface, Fabre fashioned the voice that would become better known in *Révolutions de Paris*, which he took over later in 1790: an outsider fighting against the corruption of Old Regime institutions and for national regeneration through Revolutionary change. Here he contrasted himself, as a patriot dramatist whose "civic duty" inspired him to write plays that would promote a "fraternal interest," with Collin, the "aristocrat," "intriguer," and "traitor." Fabre represented Collin as exemplary of Old Regime "poets, following the court," who exhibited gentilhomanie in their writing and personal comportment, to "caress the nobles by flattering their pretensions." ⁹⁹

In this text, Fabre deploys a rhetoric that would come to characterize how Revolutionary patriots would represent Old Regime literary life—cravenly corrupt writers dominated by self-aggrandizing patrons and producing immoral works that reproduced in the audience a moral laxity and civic apathy characteristic of a people in bondage. Only with the Revolution, this discourse held, had France rediscovered its liberty, so it now needed new writers and new theaters to replace the corrupted, established institutions and thereby to rediscover its uncorrupted, true morality. This image, in the years that followed, would become so pervasive as to efface, both for the Revolutionaries and subsequent historians, the very different understanding of *honnêteté* held and acted upon, in ways we have seen, by all aspirants to literary legitimacy under the Old Regime, even self-fashioned patriots such as Fabre. Printing an edition with such a self-justificatory preface attacking a rival author had been, we have seen, for instance, in the case of Du Buisson, a common tactic for marginal writers throughout the later eighteenth century, especially those caught up in literary disputes. The troupe thought such a preface "does not honor its author whose arrogance dishonors the accumulated glory" of the official French stage, "to which he believes himself quite superior." ¹⁰⁰ Yet Fabre's preface went much further, not merely transgressing but explicitly attacking the *honnête* norms that had until recently defined what it meant to be a playwright. Moreover, Fabre's self-fashioning as a literary outsider did not imply a marginal position in literary life; due to the changes that had occurred in the past year, Fabre now occupied a position of relative power in the literary world, because he could mobilize a public, in print and through collective action, and not merely claim such support on paper.

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Even as he prepared to print this aggressive preface, Fabre retained in his correspondence with the troupe a civil, even *honnête* tone, characteristic of writers' mode of address to the troupe and the court prior to 1789. In a

letter from the spring of 1790, Fabre politely asked "that the Comédie Française settle its accounts with me." Fabre did not adopt the adversarial and embittered tone of his printed preface, instead declaring himself to be of "honorable intentions," far from "any litigious fantasy." Their differences, he assured the actors, "are not so great to be worth a quarrel, let alone a lawsuit." Using this polite tone to make what seems a reasonable request, Fabre actually broke new ground in author-theater relations in June 1790 by demanding that the company buy his three plays for 5,000 livres, even though they had generated little revenue from performance. [101](#)

Under the royal theater regulations, still in effect while the Commune debated new ones, the troupe compensated writers with one-ninth of the proceeds from profitable performances only. Moreover, it deducted production expenses from the author's share, so that by the troupe's calculation, Fabre owed the theater 600 *livres*. In the past, the royal company had not hesitated to assess these charges on failed writers, such as Lonvay de la Saussaye in 1775. However, in this case, the actors offered him a series of four small cash payments, of 96 *livres* each. Though neither theater regulations nor cultural expectations any longer inhibited a self-declared patriot writer such as Fabre from appearing overly aggressive or self-interested, he had no need to proclaim his own virtue to the nation, or even to take his complaint to the municipal government, the press, or the courts, like Cailhava, Chénier, and Gouges. Instead, he sent the actors business-like letters asking for additional payments; in return, he received three more installments of about 100 *livres*. [102](#)

Finally, in mid-June 1790, he met directly with the troupe, which presented financial records indicating that Fabre owed the theater nearly 1,000 *livres*. Not needing to demonstrate any self-restraint in his response, Fabre asked the leading actor Dazincourt to join him in a separate room, where he proposed that the theater pay him "a sum of 3,000 *livres* in silver ... and an [Délibération du comité ...](#) annual payment" for the rights to perform his three plays. Dazincourt explained that such an agreement would be "impossible" without approval "by the superiors of the theater," which would have in the past clearly alluded to the First Gentlemen. Fabre, knowing the court could no longer control the theater nor exert influence on its writers, "stood by his demands." Dazincourt, unable to refuse the man who controlled the district's militia, proposed a compromise of 1,200 *livres*; again Fabre refused and ominously left the building. [103](#) The next day he returned, and Dazincourt signed a detailed agreement to settle the troupe's accounts with Fabre.

Whether these payments amounted to extortion or a just recognition of literary property rights on the free market, Fabre's correspondence with the theater from the spring of 1790 is remarkable for its lack of the patriot language used in these same months by Chénier and Gouges towards the troupe and by Fabre himself in the Cordeliers assembly. The agreement, negotiated through persistence but with neither rancor nor rhetorical self-fashioning, indicates how thoroughly the Revolution had altered the balance

of power between the troupe and aspiring authors. It demonstrates, moreover, how drastically the Revolution had transformed the culture of literary institutions, so that the elaborate self-fashionings as *honnêtes hommes* deployed by writers to deny any pursuit of personal interest were simply no longer necessary. Fabre's language of "honorable intentions," expressed in his correspondence with the established institution of the Comédie Française, which had predominated in writers' self-fashionings in the Old Regime, was fast losing ground to much more unrestrained public self, presented in print, of a Revolutionary Cordelier who called for the outright destruction of such institutions.

Another of the marginal writers *cum* patriots who returned to the national stage in 1789 was André de Murville. Though not a member of the Cordeliers assembly, André refashioned himself with great alacrity, embracing the Revolution despite having invested during the 1780s a great deal of energy in demonstrating his allegiance to, even self-abnegation before, the royal troupe. As late as May 1789, he distanced himself from the lawsuit brought in his own name against the royal theater, implying outsiders had forced the aggressive action on him. He asked the actors to "forget the past [and] restore to me your friendship, which I have missed." He promised that, at the first sign of favor, "I will fly right away to your meeting, kiss the hands of the women, and throw my arms around the men." ¹⁰⁴ Such enthusiastic, if perhaps sardonic, shows of courtesy were ill timed. Within months, the troupe would be in no position to reciprocate, and courtly deference would no longer prove an effective strategy for authors to fashion themselves as *honnêtes hommes*.

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By early 1790, assertions of patriotic virtue against the court had become the norm, and the troupe's ties to the court had been definitively cut. André quickly adapted to this new reality, dropping the affected partitive from his name and the affected courtesy from his letters to the company when he proposed another short comedy, "Le Souper magique." The troupe staged the play on February 11, 1790, but André was once again displeased with the placement; in the following days, he fired off a series of letters demanding a better placement for the second performance. ¹⁰⁵ Though direct, these letters do not fashion the author as a patriot outsider, recently arrived as a consequence of Revolutionary liberty. Rather, André here presents himself as one who, "working for your theater for ten years," deserved better treatment than any "new confrère in the career," specifying Flins d'Oliviers and implying Chénier, Ronsin, and Fabre. He presented himself as exemplary of "all dramatic authors, who protest unanimously against the supposed regulations, which are one of the great abuses of despotism. ... Their eyes are on me and they want to see how I will conduct myself with you." Eighteen months earlier, he had based his civil suit against the theater on these regulations, but he now recognized that "Your regulations are null," soon to be replaced by municipal legislation. ¹⁰⁶

Like the Cordeliers writers, André turned his attention quickly to the municipality, to which he appealed on February 24. Presenting himself again as a long-standing Comédie Française playwright who had been treated disrespectfully by a troupe that the court had coddled, he pleaded with the municipal assembly to replace "the supposed regulations, issued under despotism," and moreover to liberate "*gens de lettres* from the restraints" of the actors, who refused "to respond to dramatic authors who write them" and "to perform their plays, when demanded by the public." Borrowing directly from Chénier's earlier appeals to the municipal assembly, André's petition pleaded on behalf of *gens de lettres*—an identity that André himself could scarcely have claimed a year earlier—who had earned for France "the greatest honneur among foreigners" but at home remained "discouraged" by the "despotism" of the royal troupe. [107](#)

His major demand, though, was particular: that he should not lose control over performance rights to "Souper magique" due to substandard gate receipts, since it had only been staged on "lesser days." On this count, the municipality's Bureau des Établissements Publics, headed by the former author Brousse-Desfaucherets, decided in his favor. [108](#) Over the next month, the troupe refused to perform the play on the more lucrative "big days," until André finally demanded the return of "my manuscript, the property of my play as restitution of something that belongs to me." The question of literary property, he claimed, should no longer be determined by superannuated regulations, but by "the *droits* of *gens de lettres* and consequently, my own rights." [109](#) Thus he generalized from his own very particular and long-standing claims that his plays had failed to achieve success due to arbitrary scheduling. He added his voice to the demands of better-established writers such as Sedaine that royal theater regulations must be revised to recognize "literary property," and to the claims of newcomers, such as Chénier and the Cordeliers, for liberty of theater from the "despotism" of a single troupe, beholden to the court. [110](#)

6.6. Gouges in the Revolution: Of Patriots, Selves, and Slaves

Olympe de Gouges was another aspiring writer of the 1780s who perceived quickly that the advent of the Revolution offered not only an occasion to have new plays performed, but also a new context for the public presentation of self. Gouges, whom we encountered in [Chapter 5](#) fashioning herself a *femme de lettres*, now offers us a view of a writer outside the Cordeliers inner circle who deployed the patriotic trope of solitary virtue to identify her literary efforts with the Revolution itself. By picking up her story here, we will see how Gouges, like Chénier, rapidly adapted her self-presentation in 1789 to the new cultural politics. In the previous [chapter](#), we saw how, throughout the 1780s, she made personal overtures of *honnêteté* through correspondence, even as she used print to fashion herself as a virtuous, isolated outsider. As of July 1789, however, she had not succeeded in having her play performed or herself recognized as a legitimate writer. We will now see how she brought to the fore this latter image to conform herself to the contours of Revolutionary public rhetoric

and inserted herself into public life as a *patriote*.

In the fall of 1789, Gouges published her second, unperformed play, *Le Philosophe corrigé*, with a plaintive preface decrying her exclusion from literary life, thereby reinserting herself forcefully into the public (and the troupe's) agenda. She also wrote, in September 1789, a letter to the National Assembly that she would then publish, proposing that the proceeds of any Comédie Française performances of her work should go to the *caisse nationale* —beginning with the proceeds from performances of her first play, which was not even in the troupe's active repertory. Like Beaumarchais's efforts at *bienfaisance* with the proceeds of "Mariage de Figaro," this tactic implied at once the magnanimous largesse of an elite patron and the civic self-sacrifice of a citizen. [111](#) In Gouges's case, it was a particularly audacious move, because she had no works in the theater's active repertory, "Esclavage des noirs" having been suppressed in response to her earlier, aggressive letters to the troupe. Yet Gouges' plays now suited the troupe, which had begun that fall refashioning the Comédie Française into a national, rather than royal, theater by adding works of such patriotic outsiders as Gouges to its repertory. So, having been reminded of her public identity (and of her play) by this tactic, the actors on September 21, 1789 restored her play to the repertory and her entrance privileges as an author. [112](#)

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Gouges seized upon this opportunity, immediately assigning to the actors roles for the play and asking that they begin rehearsals. [113](#) In December, when she had obtained the approval of both the Police Censor and the Mayor for the theater to stage the play, [114](#) she wrote the company offering to intervene on their behalf in two public controversies: their ongoing conflict with Chénier over his "Charles IX" and their bid for active citizenship rights under the new constitution. Casting herself as compelled by "principles" to speak for the cause of liberty (even that of her former oppressors), she offered to the actors her patriotic voice. [115](#)

She also seized an opportunity presented by political changes that had occurred between October and early December 1789, as the issue of black slavery in the French colonies came to the forefront of public debate.

In October, petitions on behalf of active citizenship for *gens de couleur* (free, landowning men of mixed race) and against slavery had brought colonial politics into the Parisian press, which intensified its coverage when news of slave uprisings, first in Saint-Domingue and then in Martinique, reached Paris in late November and December. Prompted by these developments, representatives of colonial planter interests organized the Club Massiac to forestall any action on slavery by the National Assembly. [116](#) For Gouges, the public debate between the Massiac and the Société des Amis des Noirs presented an opportunity for her play and herself. As we saw in [Chapter 5](#), she printed "Zamore et Mirza" twice in 1788, framing it with a

 [de Gouges,](#)
[Zamor et Mirza](#)

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

afterword that identified herself with the abolitionist cause, then revised the text, retitling it "Esclavage des nègres."

Late in 1789, she further linked her play and herself to this debate by attacking the Club Massiac in the Parisian press for blocking the performance of her play. Responding to what she charged to be "a bloody libel against ... those who considered themselves honored to be counted among the Friends of Blacks," in which she included herself, she drafted a "Letter to the American Colonists," which appeared on December 20 in Condorcet's newspaper *Chronique de Paris*. ¹¹⁷ In this letter, Gouges [Lettre de Madame de Gouges ...](#) narrated once again her experience as a writer in terms of her efforts to civilize society. Despite "the faintness of my talents," she claimed, she had struggled for "nine years" (actually, fewer than five) against "the power of my enemies ... at court"; now, even in "the current era of the re-establishment of liberty," she found herself compelled to struggle against what she called "American despotism." Her rhetorical self-identification with the anti-slavery cause proved self-fulfilling. On Christmas Day, the Baron Jean-Baptiste Monseron de l'Aunay, a deputy from the port city of Nantes and a leading voice in the National Assembly for colonial land-owning and mercantile slave-trading interests, published a four-page pamphlet attacking the Amis des Noirs. Though it never mentioned the play, the tract was addressed to Gouges, who was not a member of the Société. Through her deft public self-presentation, Gouges had fashioned herself into an anti-slavery advocate by generating a public attack on her as such. ¹¹⁸

Gouges' claims of struggling against both the court and foreign despotism were tropes of patriot discourse that more prominent Revolutionaries would adopt repeatedly in the years to come; in the winter of 1789 she appears, in retrospect, precocious (if overly enthusiastic) in her use of them. To emphasize her personal virtue, she insisted that she had waged and would continue to wage this struggle for the performance of her work not out of self-interest but for the general good, which she hoped was made evident in her promise to donate the proceeds of all performances and the edition to the *caisse patriotique* of the national treasury. More original was her insistence that should "my sex at last obtain a public," she would contribute directly to the transformation of the French citizenry into patriots. Because her work had never been performed by the Comédie Française under the Old Regime, she had no affiliation with the court to disavow. She could instead claim that the performance of her play would represent a triumph of liberty brought on by—and by implication, helping to further—the Revolution itself.

In late December 1789, the Comédie Française prepared to premiere the work now entitled "Esclavage des nègres." In the preceding months, Gouges had refashioned the play into an anti-slavery tract and herself into a revolutionary advocate of abolition, using print to set both in the context of

a broader series of conflicts. On the morning of the scheduled premiere, December 28, she furthered this strategy by stating in the *Journal de Paris* that a *cabale* in the audience would seek to undermine the performance. Blaming a cabal for an event that had yet to take place, she attributed what she anticipated to be a negative audience response to the heckling of a small group that would try to outshout the true public. To fend off this "powerful party ... opposing my play," she called on "honest citizens" to come and judge the play for themselves. [119](#) The same day that Gouges's letter appeared, the *Journal de Paris* also published a special supplement, dated December 24, in which De l'Aunay reported the outbreak of a slave rebellion in Saint-Domingue and blamed it on Condorcet and the Amis des Noirs. The spokesman for the Club Massiac charged that abolition and manumission would irrevocably harm the national interest by confiscating the property of French colonists and destroying the livelihood of six million men. France would be overtaken by "our eternal rival," Britain. [120](#)

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That evening, the troupe performed the play to a sizable audience, which generated a more than respectable 2,517 *livres* of gate receipt. [121](#) However, the audience "whistled mercilessly" and interrupted the play repeatedly. Even when a man rose from the pit to defend Gouges and admonish the spectators to be "more indulgent ... the author being a woman," he was shouted down. [122](#) The feared cabal had taken its toll, and its negative response reverberated through the press. Three days later, the second performance generated only 586 *livres* at the gate, prompting Gouges to revise the play, then to use the press to address the spectators, who she again begged to attend. [123](#) Yet a third performance, on January 2, 1790, again generated a desultory gate receipt, of 590 *livres*. The poor revenue figures were embarrassing for Gouges; moreover, under the royal regulations that still governed the Comédie Française, her play had become the property of the Comédiens, who quickly withdrew it from the active repertory.

Gouges responded to her play's failure as had many frustrated eighteenth-century playwrights; she blamed the flop on poor acting by the Comédiens. She singled out Molé, cast as Zamore, for an indifferent performance which, given the "stormy circumstances, appears to me extraordinary." Moreover, she charged that the entire troupe remained a vestige of "despotism," with a "*privilège* ... so unjust and odious." She threatened to do "everything in my power" to bring liberty to the royal theater. Daring the actors to "see how dangerous I can be," she taunted the troupe: "in a century of Enlightenment and reason, we now turn our attention to reforming the abuses that insinuate themselves everywhere," and rendering all things "useful to the public good," including the theater regulations. [124](#) Indeed, she asserted in a later missive, the royal regulations had been "naturally destroyed" with the transfer of authority over public theater from the court to the municipality (effective with the new year). [125](#) The Commune, Gouges expected, would afford her patriotic play another performance, and herself another chance to achieve recognition as a patriotic *femme de lettres*. The troupe evidently

made the same calculation; on January 25, the actors voted nine to eight to accede to her request for a fourth performance. [126](#)

6.7. Gouges and the Cultural Narrative of the "True Patriot"

Gouges, then, in early 1790 had already achieved her goal of having her play staged and could look forward to additional performances. She could attribute this great advance from her position of a year earlier to the Revolution itself, which seemed to have vindicated her claims of personal virtue by vanquishing those she had represented as her corrupt enemies, namely the troupe and the colonists. However, her fortune quickly reversed itself again when, at the end of January 1790, she and her adult son both lost their positions in the entourage of the Duke d'Orléans; shortly thereafter, the troupe broke off all contact with her. [127](#) She thus found herself cut off from both the stage of the national theater and from her prominent protector, and thus from her source of income and her potential for a legitimate, public identity as a patriotic writer, from which she had hoped make additional interventions in literary and public life. To explain this failure, she would point again to the corruption of the troupe and the power of the colonists, and add a new obstacle to her personal and France's national liberty—betrayal by those who had been viewed as patriot allies. She did so in a series of pamphlets printed in the spring of 1790, in which she used her isolation to great rhetorical advantage, representing herself as a "true patriot." This self-fashioning produced a coherent narrative of her experiences, allowing her to escape the psychological double bind and to represent herself as an incarnation of revolutionary virtue and liberty. Due to both the broad dissemination of these pamphlets and their seeming relevance to late twentieth-century concerns, particularly the notion of engaged intellectuals as politically marginal, this image has become the dominant representation of Gouges, to the exclusion of the polite, sociable, *honnête femme de lettres* that, until this moment, she represented in manuscript correspondence.

To understand how she represented her unexpected failure in early 1790, we must consider not only the evolution of her relations with the troupe, the court, and the municipality, but also the language she used to represent this evolution. Beginning with the preface to the second printing of *Zamore et Mirza* in 1788, and continuing through the legal brief in her March 1789 suit against the theater and on through the failed performances of January 1790, Gouges had been writing a narrative apology of her relations with the troupe, which she would now revise for publication. [128](#) While the events she narrates and the correspondence from which she quotes in this text have been discussed above, we need to consider now the frame she placed around them. The story she told here about herself, like her plays,  [de Gouges, Les Comédiens démasqués](#), drew upon available tropes and story lines, notably the patriot figure in which she cast herself and the melodramatic mode in which she told her story. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, through this telling, she cast the colonists and the royal actors as powerful villains who subverted natural, human

goodness by keeping and trading slaves and by opposing her efforts to express virtue. She in turn equated her efforts at self-expression with those of other *gens de lettres* and also with those of abolitionists as a unified, virtuous quest for liberty that would require the intervention of the Revolution. [129](#)

From the outset, the *Mémoire* casts the troupe as incarnations of Old Regime "injustice," "tyranny," and "despotism," whose "oppression" had drawn complaints from "sublime authors" from Corneille through a list of eighteenth-century "literary Hercules." "This greedy monster," she claimed, had for too long subjected authors to "slavery" and "humiliations." In contrast to this "ridiculous" oppression, she defended playwrights as the "courageous architects of the regeneration of France," whose "patriotic genius [had] enlightened the French ... about your rights" and had introduced, through theater, the idea of "civil liberty." Drawing a direct line between what she represented as the "humiliations" of *gens de lettres* under the Old Regime and the outbreak of the Revolution as a "restoration of liberty," she noted that "the edifice of that Gothic Bastille, where thought and talent had been persecuted and enchained," had been the first target of the Revolution. Thus making a claim that had been heard already in the National Assembly, Gouges identified her own struggle to express her virtue with the coming of the Revolution itself. [130](#)

Carol Blum argues that precisely this language of personal virtue awaiting liberation, extracted from Rousseau into a "radically simplified folk saga" by Revolutionary orators, became first the dominant and later the only legitimate "language of politics" in the French Revolution. Under the Republic, she argues, Robespierre deployed a series of oppositions ("virtue," "people," and "pure" with "vice," "enemies," and "corrupt") to represent himself as personally struggling to preserve virtue amidst corruption and thus embodying the Revolution and, moreover, defending it from backsliding. Gouges, whose distance from both Rousseau and Robespierre is evident, nevertheless clearly deployed a similar language of virtue versus corruption, suggesting that the idiom may have been much more flexible than Blum or more recent work on "virtue" linking Rousseau directly to Robespierre might suggest. [131](#)

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Gouges went on to offer another example of natural liberty denied under the Old Regime, "the cruelty exercised by ferocious masters on unhappy Africans," which she claimed had "touched my sensibility" and thereby compelled her to write a work that would "awaken benevolence on behalf of these deplorable victims of cupidity; thus I conceived the idea of my play entitled 'The Slavery of Blacks.'" Gouges thereby elided the evolution of her play from "Zamore et Mirza" into the one she now discussed by presenting it as the spontaneous expression of her virtue. However, she claimed, her efforts quickly ran up against the vicious and egotistic troupe, which responded to her play not with sympathy or encouragement but did "all that

could humiliate it." Portraying her encounter with the Comédiens as a story of virtue undermined and innocence betrayed, she claimed that she had restrained herself and "swallowed in silence these cruel outrages." [132](#)

To illustrate this narrative, Gouges reprinted excerpts of her correspondence with the troupe. She presented these documents as evidence of a melodramatic narrative in which the powerful, corrupted actors consistently and derisively rebuffed, without reason, the young heroine Gouges's successive offerings of new plays. Throughout this narrative, she insisted that she had "employed only the most *honnêtes*, the most noble, and the most generous means," so that "my rights are incontestable." However, "all my efforts have been in vain," due to the troupe's consistently "horrid conduct towards me." Using these documents selectively, she narrates her story in a tone so sentimental and melodramatic that at one point she likens her virtuous figure before the corrupt troupe to a scene painted by Greuze. [133](#)


Finally, the narrative arrives at what should be the resolution of its melodramatic conflict: the outbreak of the Revolution. Representing herself as confident in mid-1789 that "the sacred property of the Comédie Française" would be abolished along with other "*droits* of tyrants," the heroine ceased to lobby the theater to perform her play so she could devote herself to "patriotism alone at every instant." As proof of her sincerity, she reminds the reader, she had offered as a patriotic contribution her proceeds from performances of "Esclavage des Nègres." Suggesting that she had expected her play would have been performed to acclaim and that she would have been invited to "reveal to the National Assembly the turpitude of the [actors'] ruses," she wrote the Revolution into her narrative as a potential salvation for the young heroine Gouges, providing herself at last with the benign intervention necessary for virtue to overcome powerful corruption. [134](#)

Yet, as she revised this narrative in early 1790, her virtue had not yet been rewarded. So she had to explain why she remained powerless and alone, despite the triumph of patriots in 1789. [135](#) To do so, she reverted again to a melodramatic story of corrupt power thwarting her sincerity and virtue. First, she wrote, "a terrible *cabale* formed against my play," acting against her precisely because of the enlightened, humane subject of the work, the goodness of black slaves and their desire for liberty and personal happiness. Then, she charged, the troupe ignored her generous offer to revise the work and instead rapidly staged two performances, knowing they would be poorly attended. Next, defying the Revolution itself, the troupe followed its old, royal regulations and removed the play from its active repertory.

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Finally, in desperation, she turned to the municipality, demanding that the new regime "punish the aristocracy of the rich" and "destroy ... despotism" by ignoring the "caprice of [the] colonists" who had objected to her play, and that they should serve instead the "general will" by mandating another performance. Despite the heroine's appeal for divine intervention to save

her, the denouement becomes tragic due to the corruption of the municipal government by the self-interested colonists, who triumph over the public good and who, not only by owning slaves but by suppressing her play, perpetuate "the barbarity of the feudal regime." ¹³⁶ Having equated the monopolistic privilege of the theater with feudalism, Gouges then ended her narrative by equating the royal actors' treatment of her and other playwrights with the inhumane treatment of black slaves by colonial plantation owners. To advance the still-incomplete Revolution on all these fronts (feudalism, slavery, theater), she called for forceful, civic-minded, and honorable intervention by all patriotic *gens de lettres*. ¹³⁷

Gouges then linked all three instances of liberty—her personal self-expression as a writer, the cause of abolitionism, and the Revolution—by returning to her polemic against Monseron de l'Aunay. On January 18, while revising the *Mémoire*, she drafted another pamphlet, aligning her efforts to become a *femme de lettres* with the Revolution and the emancipation of black slaves in the colonies. On February 1, this pamphlet appeared under the title *Réponse au champion américain*, 300 copies of which she sent to the municipal assembly of the Commune. ¹³⁸ At  [*de Gouges, Réponse au champion américain ...*](#) the outset of this text, she establishes herself as a "true patriot" compelled to intervene publicly once again, because the Revolution is not yet complete. Monseron's attack on her demonstrates that France has not yet seen the fall of despotism, to which she has committed herself. Thus motivated, she fashions herself as a "simple student of nature ... without knowledge of American history" and with no personal knowledge of the "odious treatment of the *nègres*," attributing her choice of subject only to her moral sincerity and desire for social reconciliation. ¹³⁹ Denying Monseron's charge that she had been prompted to write her play by the Société des Amis des Noirs, she emphasizes the immediacy and thus the authenticity of her writing, suggesting that the Société had been motivated by her play rather than the reverse. Consistent with the figure of the patriot, she depicts herself as possessed of an inner sensibility compelling her to act alone in making public pronouncements on morality, all the more sincere for not being based on any personal familiarity with or interest in the issue at hand. Finally, responding to his charges that her play had led to the outbreak of slave violence in Saint-Domingue and moreover had injured French commercial interests while benefiting those of Britain, she insists upon the moralizing influence her work will necessarily have on not only its audience but on all of society. If only the play were to be performed in Saint-Domingue, the colony's inhabitants, master and slave, would overcome the immorality introduced by slavery and would recover their natural goodness and engage in peaceful commerce. Thus, the violence would cease—and the virtue of the patriot playwright would be recognized.

In arguing for emancipation and abolition, Gouges speaks here in terms of personal virtue and morality (her own) overcoming societal corruption through forceful public action (playwriting), and thus leading to unity and harmony (that of slaves and masters), rather than offering an explicitly

economic or political analysis. In this way, she draws on a language deeply grounded in early modern culture and adapts it into specific tropes that would become central to several nineteenth-century radical social discourses, including republicanism, feminism, and especially abolitionism. Gouges's self-fashionings in manuscript and print have drawn surprisingly little scholarly attention, even in light of recent arguments that, in Old Regime literary sociability, a female presence suggested *honnêteté* and thus a proper functioning of social hierarchy. [140](#)

We have seen how Gouges herself deployed this trope in her preface to the 1788 edition of *Zamore et Mirza*, representing her encounters with two actresses in the troupe, Mademoiselle Contat and Madame Bellecour, as polite, sociable, "equitable, decent, and moderated," in contrast with the duplicitous and aggressive treatment of the leading male actors, Florence and Molé. Yet in her published writings from mid-1790, when she clearly no longer directed her appeals to the court, Gouges drew on a different set of gendered oppositions, claiming that, because she was a woman, she enjoyed less access to the theater and had been treated less civilly than other writers. This shift in rhetorical strategy has gone unnoticed in Gouges scholarship, which generally reads her later writings as evidence of feminist consciousness, and does not consider them as part of her efforts to control the fate of her own publications and her public self, or as a reflection of changing norms in Revolutionary language. [141](#)

In February 1790, when she presented her revised *Mémoire* to Bailly, she expected the Revolutionary mayor to intervene as her savior; instead, he acted according to a different script and merely referred her to his secretary, Boucher, who shelved the matter. After waiting three weeks, Gouges contacted Brousse-Desfaucherets, who had recently been appointed director of the Bureau des Établissements Publics and given authority over the public theaters. In her narrative, Desfaucherets met with her on February 21 and outlined not only the troupe's objections to her play but also the complaints brought by colonists, especially "the Americans who have boxes at the Comédie Française [and who] have threatened to relinquish them if we perform again that incendiary play." [142](#) Whether or not box-seat subscribers had made such complaints and whether or not Desfaucherets spoke to her about them cannot be verified by other sources, although Gouges's account is highly plausible, given that, after March 8, the Club Massiac controlled the Assembly's committee on colonial affairs and shut off further debate about enfranchisement of *gens de couleur*, manumission, or abolition of the slave trade, referring these matters to the Colonial Assembly in Saint-Marc, controlled by colonial plantation owners.

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In her narrative, Gouges represented Bailly's refusal to help and Desfaucherets's outright rebuke as proof of both her own sincerity, good will, virtue, and patriotism, and of the powerful forces acting to silence her.

These evil forces had not been eliminated by the Revolution (as she now claimed to have believed too naïvely); rather, they had become even more powerful, able to turn Bailly against her. "[U]ntil this moment, I had believed that if merit, modesty, and integrity" were the most important values in conducting oneself in public, then Bailly, a patriot of such qualities, would recognize and reward her virtue. She claimed to have only then realized, abruptly and too late, that the Revolution had not brought such virtue to power. "Under the reign of ministerial despotism," she claimed, she had felt compelled to "speak the truth to people in power," but with the coming of the Revolution she had expected the triumph of all patriots. But now she had discarded her early illusions and wondered of "the ministry and the government, have they changed only in appearance and only to redouble the intrigue, to serve imposture, to overwhelm defenseless citizens and must we now regret having drawn swords in the first place?" [143](#)

Gouges thereby took a "patriotic" stance against the first man who had come to power under the Revolution, Bailly. To retain her self-image as a virtuous patriot, even though her appeal to the Revolutionary municipal government had failed, Gouges needed to represent the Commune's leadership itself as unpatriotic, even though it had replaced absolute royal authority. She did so by claiming that it had been subverted by the particular interest and undue influence of the slave-owning colonists. Thus she turned away from the theater and the municipality to the social force she had identified in previous pamphlets as the "sole restorers" of French liberty and morality, *gens de lettres*. In late February, she published a short pamphlet, *Lettre aux littérateurs français*, which recounted her disappointment with Bailly and appealed for aid from other patriot writers.

Although some historians and critics have considered this text primarily as an anti-slavery tract, it is a rhetorically ingenious appeal to the very group with which Gouges had long sought to identify herself, *gens de lettres*. She here juxtaposed her own narrative of unrewarded virtue with the charges of venality and corruption that other leading playwrights had been making that spring against the royal troupe. The audience for which she clearly intended this pamphlet was Beaumarchais, who had been reported to be preparing a petition in February 1790 in the name of the Société des Auteurs Dramatiques. Throughout this short pamphlet, she drew upon the figure Beaumarchais had used in the 1770s and 80s of playwrights as "providing fathers [*pères nourrissants*]," the paternal protectors of literature, who would look out for destitute yet worthy women such as Marie Corneille (as discussed in the Intermission).

Gouges inverted this figure, offering herself as a "weak and timid being," and pleaded for these better-known, more established male writers to aid "a woman sacrificed to this new tyranny, who seeks no reparation for herself; she asks only to be the last victim and that her fate may open the eyes of the magistrates who have immolated the rightness of the cause to serve the

unjust interest of the actors." [144](#) Gouges also drew on her own disappointment with Bailly and Desfaucherets to suggest an affinity with the more prominent writers of the SAD. Having turned to Bailly in hopes of finding him a "man of integrity," she refashioned him into a corrupted courtier, "a despotic minister" rather than a revolutionary leader. "[I]nduced into error," he "can condemn the innocent and favor imposture and injustice." To explain this corruption of the Revolution, Gouges pointed to the troupe members and the colonists, claiming that both groups had acted out of self-interest and in secret; against such "injustice, calumny, and darkness," Gouges claimed to have suffered indignities with innocence and self-restraint, "forcing me to hide my indignation at the core of my soul ... I succumbed to this boundless persecution." [145](#)

Wondering what she had done to "encourage my enemies ... these vile calumniators" who "spare nothing to win over hearts and minds" with snide "insinuations" against her in public, Gouges claimed to see only "humanity, sensibility, and justice" in her play and only "the most authentic proof" of her "reason and probity" in her comportment. The answer then had to lie in the unnatural corruption of the Revolution, and of Bailly, by the privileged actors and the self-interested colonists. A melodramatic story such as this requires a denouement of salvation by a benign, powerful, paternal force; Gouges cast in this role the elected deputies of the municipal assembly, "three hundred citizens, less susceptible to be induced in error" than Bailly. These deputies, she claimed, would remain "attentive to work, so that the oppressed cease to be persecuted and the innocent at last justified." [146](#)

Finally, she appealed once again to *gens de lettres*, above even the Commune, as "natural ... incorruptible judges" for the nation. Speaking for "the oppressed" and "the innocent" imperiled by further corruption of the Revolution, she warned that, by inaction, "you accustom yourselves unknowingly to become the creatures of these tyrants," the colonists and the troupe. Warning of the ever-present threat that "the despotism gives birth ...[and] it grows," as it had before 1789, she suggested that all who read her plea—the Société des Auteurs Dramatiques, the Commune, the nation at large—must publicly denounce her mistreatment, because she herself was "too innocent and weak" to defend herself. If such a virtuous but powerless voice could be silenced, she warned, the Revolution itself would descend into despotism. [147](#)


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In early March 1790, Gouges continued her revolutionary self-fashioning by reprinting parts of both the *Réponse* and the *Lettre* in a short letter to the *Fouet National*. Once again, she represented herself in print as sincere and patriotic, noting that she had performed her civic duty by revealing the machinations of the colonists and the misconduct of Bailly and had remained undaunted by the risks of doing so. [148](#) The same day, the *Courrier de Paris* printed a letter in which Gouges, "having learned ... that the public yesterday demanded 'Esclavage des Noirs,' " reminded the public that she had not abandoned it, having herself "denounced the injustice of the actors" for over two months to obtain another performance of

the play. Moreover, she added, only the "private authority" of the troupe had prevented the public's desire from being met. She thus highlighted her own essential goodness, manifest in her willingness to suffer indignities patiently in silence, until the public had now come to redeem her. [149](#)


Through the fall of 1790, Gouges awaited such redemption. When it became apparent that the National Assembly, rather than the Commune, would take charge over the public theaters in Paris, Gouges tried once more to obtain a performance of her play by distributing the printed version of her *Mémoire* to the National Assembly. She wrote to the troupe members that since their *privilège* would end shortly, she hoped they "will look with more justice after the interests of the authors." [150](#) On October 17, Bailly wrote to the troupe that Gouges's *Mémoire* had been printed and sent to the National Assembly and asked if they would consider performing the play again. In response, the lead actors sent him an accounting of the three performances, demonstrating the insufficient receipts it had generated. [151](#)

She identified new villains in the troupe, this time the actresses Mademoiselle Contat and Madame Bellecour, to whom she had appealed directly and from whom she had received encouragement in 1788-1789. Convinced as she was of her own virtue and innocence and the necessary corruption of all who failed to aid her, she attacked "two tyrannical women who direct your cruelty," suggesting that they personally were responsible for the troupe being "two inches from being out the door." [152](#)

On January 13, 1791, by decree of the National Assembly, the Comédie Française ceased to hold a monopoly on Parisian public theater, and at this  [Loi Relative aux Spectacles](#) point Gouges turned elsewhere to express her patriotism. On April 15, the Comédiens Italiens (which had recently agreed to a new contract with the SAD covering all performances) performed her play "Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées," which she quickly had printed with a preface explaining that she had written the play to express her "patriotic spirit" to the nation. [153](#)

Over the next twelve months, Gouges modified her claims of absolute isolation and unsurpassed virtue, allying herself publicly with Brissot, the Girondins, and the royal family, even arranging with the Comédie Française troupe to lead a procession of women for the Queen at the Festival of the Triumph of the Law in May 1792. [154](#) And she wrote the text for which she has become best known, the *Declaration of Rights of Women and Female Citizens*, dedicated to Marie Antoinette. In March 1792, she also published a second edition of *Esclavage des noirs*, based on the revised 1789 text, with a new preface. Continuing to frame the work as "philanthropic," appealing to all "just men" and opposed only by those of "greed and ambition," she defended her work and herself from the accusation of having fomented the violent slave revolt in Saint-Domingue the previous autumn. She did this by insisting once again on her own good intentions; as a "friend of the truth," she denied any "other interest than to recall to mankind the beneficial principles of Nature." Figuring herself once again as a patriot possessed of an

irrepressible urge to express her virtue, she emphasized "the purity of [her] maxims" and her love for "laws and social conventions," and claimed that she wrote only to express virtue and achieve social reconciliation. Thus, she continued, "If these writings do not produce the good they promise," the flaw must be not in her work but in society, corrupted by "unhappy colonists" interested only "in conserving their property and their interest"—as her play itself, she claimed, made clear. Since the colonists had acted in such bad faith, she now addressed her play to those whose virtuous nature could not have been corrupted by self-interest, those who had no interest whatsoever, the slaves themselves: "It is to you now, slaves and men of color, that I am going to speak; I am perhaps incontestably qualified...." Here for the first time, she claimed that the inspiration for the play had come from Brissot's 1786 anti-slavery pamphlet *Examen critique des voyages dans l'Amerique septentrionale de M. le marquis de Chastellus*. She claimed Brissot had also inspired her own 1789 tract, *Le Bonheur primitif de l'homme* (although *Bonheur* does not mention slavery or the colonies at all!). Thus she presented this edition of *Esclavage des noirs* as the culmination of her literary career, on which she asked the public and posterity to judge her. And, indeed,, it is on this edition—but out of the context of her broader narrative of a "patriot" playwright and too much in light of the *Declaration*—that readers of today have judged her. [155](#)


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

6.8. Honnêtes hommes among the Patriots: Droits d'auteur and the Rights of Man

Though the 1789-1790 season provided many new writers, such as Chénier and Gouges, an occasion to come to the forefront of public life, more established playwrights found themselves less able to adjust to the rapid changes in political context and institutional culture surrounding the Comédie Française. Surprisingly slow to respond, given his acuity in cultural politics prior to 1789, was Sedaine, a popular comic author for the Comédie and other Parisian theaters since 1765. Of artisanal origins, but having ascended to a position in the Académie Française, Sedaine wrote plays that were generically innovative, which contributed to their great popularity, but also limited his legitimacy an *homme de lettres*. [156](#)

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From his first success, in 1765, with "Philosophe sans le savoir," through to the Revolution, he had sought in vain the ultimate marker of legitimacy for a playwright, to have his five-act tragedy, "Paris sauvé," performed by the Comédie Française (see [Chapter 4](#)). The commercial theater of Madame de Montansier had staged it in 1780, but despite Sedaine's persistent lobbying, "Paris sauvé" had not reached the official stage by April 1788, when the author had it printed under the title *Maillard*. In the preface to the new edition, Sedaine blamed the work's failure to reach the stage not on repressive censorship but on the aesthetic conservatism of Académie Française members who refused to recognize the legitimacy of a prose

 [Sedaine,](#)
[Philosophe sans](#)
[le savoir](#)

tragedy. This claim is unlikely, given the commonality of prose in late eighteenth-century plays, but it demonstrates how much even the dramaturgically innovative Sedaine continued, to the end of the Old Regime, to be influenced by the established norms of literary life, expending great energy throughout the 1770s and 1780s to conform his public persona to the prevailing image of the *honnête homme de lettres*. [157](#)



Thus in 1789, Sedaine, due to his position as an established outsider (a member of the Académie Française, yet also viewed warily at court by the First Gentlemen and Minister of the Royal Household) and his play (with its theme of national salvation) seemed better positioned to benefit from the Revolution than Chénier. But while Chénier and other writers circumvented the troupe and the court during the winter of 1789-1790 by appealing to the municipality and the nation for support of their plays, Sedaine continued to lobby Suard, who still held the post of Police Censor through 1790. Hoping to take one final stand for the Old Regime ideal of *honnêteté* that he had never fully mastered, Sedaine in late 1789 resubmitted the work for Suard's approval though he knew well that authority over Parisian theaters had passed to the municipal government. In January 1790, Sedaine obtained Bailly's permission for the play to be performed, and he wrote the theater that he hoped to see it staged "before dying." This plea from a 71-year old man retained Sedaine's characteristic Old Regime ironic *honnêteté*, flattering the actors by acknowledging his talents to be "much inferior to yours."

He must have been encouraged when, only days later, the company asked him to meet face to face; at the meeting, on January 26, 1790, the troupe promised to perform the play soon and, as per the royal regulations (still in effect pending municipal legislation), asked the author to assign roles to the actors. [158](#) Sedaine did so and also offered to discuss "private arrangements" once the rehearsals began, implying a personal agreement over remuneration and literary property of the kind that authors had offered regularly to the actors prior to 1780, until proscribed by the new regulations (which Sedaine himself had helped draft). In contrast with the aggressive patriots of the Cordeliers assembly, Sedaine avoided any serious conflict with the troupe. He even joked incongruously that it had been easier for him to obtain justice under the Old Regime than to have his play performed in the Revolution. [159](#) In early 1790, Sedaine appeared a man out of time, moving away from his long-standing (and now potentially beneficial) reputation as an outsider and opting instead to demonstrate disinterest and *honnêteté*. Perhaps because of his continued fashioning of himself as an Old Regime *honnête homme*, the troupe resisted performing Sedaine's patriotic play all summer. Sedaine finally withdrew the play in the fall of 1790; "Paris sauvé" would never be performed. [160](#)

Nevertheless, Sedaine closely followed and became actively involved in the Revolutionary debates over literary property, emerging as a spokesman for

established playwrights. In February, he petitioned the Commune to grant *gens de lettres* literary property rights and a more prominent role in the administration of Parisian public theaters. Then, in the months that followed, he worked with La Harpe, Beaumarchais, and other writers who had achieved prominence during the Old Regime—now aided and influenced by Chénier—to influence the outcome of the legislative debates over theater in the National Assembly. [161](#) In the spring and summer, La Harpe elaborated on Sedaine's February petition. The two recruited other writers with long-standing relations to the theater to argue the need for greater municipal control over the theater (by which they meant the troupe), including giving writers greater say in its repertory. Their position differed markedly from patriot calls for liberty of the theaters; these writers sought instead a position of influence within a central institution, from which they would be able to control not only the repertory and the cultural and financial capital generated by their own individual works but, moreover, function as gatekeepers to the institution and the capital it generated. [162](#)

La Harpe and Sedaine accelerated their activities in the fall of 1790, as the locus of debate over liberty of the theaters moved to the Constituent Assembly. In August, at Bailly's behest, the Constituent Assembly issued a decree reiterating the municipality's control over Parisian public theaters. However, this decree only encouraged interested parties to address their claims to the national as well as municipal legislature. For those authors who since the spring had been preparing a petition calling for national literary property legislation, the Constituent Assembly's decree provided just the opportunity they needed to move the issue beyond the Commune. The Constituent Assembly discussed the governance of theaters on August 23, and that evening La Harpe and a delegation of fellow writers proclaiming themselves to be the SAD deposited their petition.

 [Adresse ... par M. de La Harpe](#)

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Describing *gens de lettres* as not only the incarnation but the "sole" makers of the Revolution, the petition demanded "competition [*la concurrence*]" of different theaters as the necessary "abolition" of the "exclusive privilege" that the royal actors, acting as a "corporation tied by their shared interest," continued to enjoy. [163](#) The authors, La Harpe proposed, sought only "their legitimate *droits*" and "the independence that all citizens must enjoy," which would be assured by granting writers full control over the publication of their works. The consequence of such a change, he concluded, would be to liberate the theater from being "corrupted by despotism," for the benefit of the *patrie*. The nation as a whole, not just its authors, would benefit from plays that were "more patriotic," which would contribute to "the regeneration of French theater ... and that of all France, under the auspices of liberty."

The petition attacked the *privilège* enjoyed by the "corporation" of actors at the Comédie Française, specifically the theater "regulations," the most recent version of which had been issued by the First Gentlemen in 1780,

with input from many of these same authors. La Harpe argued that, since 1680, the actors' authority over their own theater had allowed them to alter the calculation of authorial remuneration, transforming what had been "the intimate union of two different types of artists" into "a continual rivalry of self-interest and self-esteem [*amour propre*]." Assuring the Assembly that the authors sought neither "vengeance" nor their own material interest, La Harpe asked that the Revolution now remove the obstacles to what he called "the inevitable independence" of men of letters. ¹⁶⁴ Thus, La Harpe translated the authors' claims (which dated back at least twenty years) into the language of patriotism that newly arrived writers, such as Chénier and Fabre, had introduced into French public and literary life.


La Harpe and Sedaine understood the importance of Chénier's style of cultural politics, meaning both patriotic self-presentation and involvement in political clubs. Thus, four months later, as the National Assembly's Constitution committee debated among several proposed laws on theater, La Harpe appeared before the Jacobins club to seek its support of his conception of "liberty of the theater." ¹⁶⁵ Noting the contribution of several patriotic playwrights to the Festival of Federation the previous July (though curiously omitting Chénier), La Harpe presented not merely *gens de lettres* in general but *auteurs dramatiques* in particular as paragons of national virtue, whose works had contributed to the rediscovery by the people of their "human rights [*droits de l'homme*]" which the National Assembly now "applied for the public good" through legislation that promoted both "utility" and "public order." He contrasted such "civic" sentiments with "the hardened and sustained resistance that the troupe, as a *corps*, had opposed" to Bailly over the past eighteen months and "the forced and hypocritical renunciation that the actors appear to have made of their *privilège*," while still claiming their repertory as "private property."

Against "this anti-civic character, this despotism," La Harpe asserted the claims of authors for "liberty." This liberty he represented as the transfer of all plays owned by the national theater into the public domain, the freedom of citizens to establish other theaters, and most importantly the freedom of authors to contract freely with all theaters for performance of their works according to their own terms. He also proposed that all works by authors dead at least five years enter the public domain. Thus, any play from the classical repertory, which remained the most valuable asset of the Comédie Française, would become the property of the nation, available to any commercial theater for free. He asked the Jacobins to lead the National Assembly in approving his legislation rapidly, since the current situation posed grave danger for established men of letters. The Française continued to seek out plays by new writers from the boulevard theaters (who had signed a competing petition) and to perform works by long-dead authors from its permanent repertory. ¹⁶⁶

Further making the case for La Harpe's proposed law, Billardon de Sauvigny, who had briefly served as a theater censor in 1775 and had participated in the SAD in the later 1770s, now spoke to the National Assembly and printed

a pamphlet. Men of letters, he claimed, and more particularly playwrights, had yet to enjoy the fruits of liberty. Despite the great changes of the past year, he claimed the theater had fallen "into disorder and confusion ... the most inconceivable despotism has been replaced by a destructive anarchy." ¹⁶⁷ Sauvigny blamed this situation first and foremost on the efforts of the royal troupe to define its repertory as a "property" that should be inviolable. Sauvigny attacked the Old Regime regulations under which the Comédie Française had acquired these plays as "despotic" and "feudal," and called upon the National Assembly to grant "liberty to men of letters." ¹⁶⁸

He argued, at the same time, against the Commune's proposal to liberalize theater entirely and allow entrepreneurs to establish and administer their own venues. For entrepreneurs, Sauvigny argued, liberty meant only license to serve their own interests; by contrast, the writers would conceive of this liberty differently. *Gens de lettres*, he argued, would use their freedom for the "honor [*honneur*] and glory [*gloire*] of the homeland [*patrie*]." So the greater the role playwrights would have in the administration of a national theater, the more they would be able to continue the work they had begun long prior to the Revolution—imbuing French culture with collective morality. Sauvigny sought to promote such a role for writers across France, yet called for Paris to remain "the capital of arts" and the home of a single, national theater, administered by its writers.

 [Billardon de Sauvigny, Du théâtre ...](#)

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That writers such as La Harpe and Sedaine (both members of the Académie) and Billardon, all deeply invested in their personae as *honnêtes hommes*, had adopted this new idiom so rapidly testifies to the influence of new men such as Chénier (often credited, incorrectly, with penning this petition). ¹⁶⁹

It shows, furthermore, the changes in the institutions and norms of theatrical life in 1789-1790. Most of all, it reminds us of what we have seen demonstrated in every chapter of this book: eighteenth-century writers' great flexibility of self-presentation. This instinct, acquired under the Old Regime, would prove perhaps the essential characteristic of the Revolutionary new man, the ability of formerly *honnêtes* men of letters to refashion themselves as patriots.

La Harpe proposed to the National Assembly a five-point law for all theaters in France. Any citizens should enjoy the liberty to establish a commercial theater, which should be operated under laws established by municipal governments. Plays of the past would become "public property," that is, enter the public domain, and would cease to belong to a particular theater's repertory. Plays by authors now living and plays to be written could be performed by a commercial theater only with the consent of the author; to consent, authors would be empowered throughout their lifetimes (and their heirs for a period of five years) to contract with any and all theaters as they saw fit for all performances of all plays. Five years after the author's death, a work would enter the public domain. At no point would the play belong to

the theater, as had plays previously that entered into the Comédie Française permanent repertory.

The petition bore the signatures of nineteen playwrights, all of whom had written plays performed at the Comédie Française. The signatories ranged from those well established under the Old Regime, such as La Harpe and Sedaine, to newcomers such as Chénier, Fabre, Murville, and Falbaire. Accordingly, La Harpe's text incorporated both the liberty called for earlier in the year by the patriots of the Cordeliers and the more traditional concerns of established authors that the use rights over a play to be considered personal property. It thus represented a significant change from how playwrights had discussed literary property under the Old Regime.

 [Adresse ... par M. de La Harpe](#)

A second statement, in the name of lesser authors, followed in a separate petition. Penned by the popular boulevard-theater author Parisau and signed by 23 other boulevard-theater writers, this second petition sets in relief the significant issues of literary property and public domain raised by La Harpe's appeal. ¹⁷⁰ Boulevard-theater writers differed greatly from the authors for the royal stage; rather than established outsiders striving to fashion identities as *homme de lettres* among cultural elites, these men were generally content in their professional, social, and artistic niche. ¹⁷¹ They therefore had little reason to view the Revolution as an opportunity to break into elite literary life. Instead, it offered them a chance to address their own long-standing concerns about the world of highly commercial boulevard theaters run by entrepreneurial managers, who exercised great control over both actors and authors. Avoiding the aggressive, patriotic tenor of La Harpe's petition, Parisau represented his group of lesser writers to the National Assembly as "peaceful, honorable" men who had not been embittered by being held "in a humiliating dependence" in their relations with theaters.

Like La Harpe, Parisau framed his concerns in terms of literary property, referring explicitly to the Declaration of Rights. Parisau began by emphasizing his agreement with La Harpe that all writers should, throughout their lifetimes, retain the power to consent to any performances of their works on the public stage. Like La Harpe, Parisau described this non-material right of an author to control his work as one of literary property that had been insufficiently recognized in the past for living authors. But in contrast to La Harpe, Parisau credited the Comédie Française troupe with having been among the first to recognize this principle. Far from crass flattery, Parisau here highlighted an important contrast with entrepreneurial fair theater owners, who typically paid lump sums rather than royalties to their authors in exchange for full control over performance and publication of the plays.

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The essential difference arose however over whether this concept of literary property as the power to publish the play could be applied to anyone other than the author. Whereas La Harpe and others thought not, Parisau asserted

that, "the property of the actors is no less sacred," defining this property as the work of "all the former authors who have composed works for its repertory, notably the masterpieces of Molière, Corneille, Racine, Crébillon, Voltaire, etc." In making this claim, Parisau did not merely provide a stalking horse for the royal troupe. The Comédiens Français of course sought to retain the canonical repertory for its own reasons, but Parisau and his fair-theater authors had a great interest in this position as well: they did not want the canonical plays to become available to the commercial theaters for which they wrote. Indeed, Parisau asserted, a "multiplicity of theaters" performing the classic works in the public domain would not "advance the art," since this would block the performance of new plays by the signatories of this petition. ¹⁷² For fair theater authors, who were generally paid a lump sum [*forfait*] for their works rather than a share in the proceeds, legally mandated payments to authors for each performance of their work, throughout their lifetime, would be a distinct improvement.

By proposing control for authors over their plays for life, these authors opposed a free market for literary texts, advocating a permanent, inalienable moral right for writers above and beyond any contractual cession of the rights to revenue from the publication of their work, recognizing that a free market would benefit theater operators, rather than authors. By proposing that the national theater control those same plays after the authors' death, the signatories of this second position opposed an unfettered public domain, which they recognized would benefit entrepreneurial theater directors rather than the public. These fair-theater writers, with long experience in a free market for cultural goods, recognized that calls for liberty of theaters needed to be tempered with an understanding of whose interest that market would serve and that literary property rights needed to be understood as not simply a different form of landownership.

6.9. Bringing Down the Curtain on Old Regime Literary Life

In early January 1791, the Constitution Committee, chaired by Le Chapelier, reported to the Assembly that La Harpe had been correct to claim that the Comédie Française repertory constituted an "exclusive *privilège*" and thus a vestige of "despotism" incompatible with a "free constitution." Defying the actors' claim of their permanent repertory as private property to be respected as sacred and inviolable, Le Chapelier adopted the authors' representation of those plays as "public property," the use of which should benefit the entire nation. Recognizing that the "glorious work" of writers had made the theater into a "school of patriotism," Le Chapelier proposed that men of letters should be able to enjoy "freely the fruit of their labors."

 [Loi Relative aux Spectacles ...](#) The law he proposed, approved by the National Assembly on January 21, adopted all five articles of La Harpe's proposed legislation: it revoked the Comédie Française monopoly, ended royal censorship, assured authors' literary property, and created a public domain for all works by authors dead for more than five years. ¹⁷³ Claiming to address both the long-standing desires of established playwrights for property and new writers' insistence upon liberty, this

legislation created a *de jure* public domain for plays and an entirely commercial field for theater. It resolved the tension between centralized institution and commercial venue that had characterized the Comédie Française, and the identities of its writers, since at least 1680.

Shortly after the passage of this law, the composer Framéry established a notarized "Central Authors' Bureau" and through the press invited "all dramatic authors," whether their works had been performed or not, to register their plays with him and authorize him to represent their interests to entrepreneurial theater directors, both in Paris and the provinces. On February 15, Beaumarchais became the first to register. ¹⁷⁴ Framéry and Beaumarchais then drafted and had printed an agreement, based on the latter's arrangements with provincial theater managers for "Mariage de Figaro" in 1784, which would cover all performances of plays by writers registered with the Bureau, which they proposed to the official theaters of Paris—the Comédie Française, the Comédie Italienne and the Opéra—and to entrepreneurial theater managers in the capital and the provinces. When the Comédie Française and entrepreneurial managers of provincial theaters resisted an agreement, Beaumarchais and Sedaine led the reincarnated SAD in lobbying the National Assembly to mandate enforcement of the law. ¹⁷⁵

Among his strategies in this effort, Beaumarchais again sought to appropriate the legacy of Voltaire to the cause of playwrights, writing a pamphlet proposing an SAD delegation to head the procession carrying Voltaire's remains to the Pantheon in May 1791. His efforts bore fruit with a second law on July 19, 1791 that compelled theaters to reach agreements with authors prior to any public performance, even of previously published plays. However, a flurry of pamphlets ensued, published in the name of provincial theater owners and actors, attacking the playwrights' "corporation" for seeking to serve its own interests at the expense of the nation's desire to see both classical and new plays. Then, on August 30, 1792, in the waning days of the Legislative Assembly, the laws of January and July 1791 were reversed, leaving the Convention in chaos. ¹⁷⁶ Under the Republic, Chénier, who had broken with Beaumarchais, La Harpe, and Sedaine as well as the Comédie Française in the fall of 1790 and had become both more publicly prominent and closer to the Jacobins, to become the best-known patriotic playwright, pushed through the Convention the law of July 17, 1793. This law declared the "rights of genius" by assuring literary property to all living authors and established a public domain into which works entered ten years after the death of their author, effective retroactively. ¹⁷⁷ For our story, though, the more significant law was the decree of September 1, 1793, which eliminated the juridical category of dramatic author by specifying that the law of July 17 should apply indiscriminately to performances of plays and to printed editions. Then, on September 3, 1793, the Committee on Public Safety closed the Comédie Française.

Though French theater, and literary life generally, would not remain free from censorship, government involvement, or economic crises for long, the French Revolution had ended the long period of indeterminacy, which has been the subject of this book, between Viala's "first literary field," based on state institutions created in the mid-seventeenth century, and Bourdieu's "modern literary field," autonomous from the state and oriented primarily toward the commercial marketplace. It had created a newly configured field based on the presumption, though not necessarily the experience, of a link between, on the one hand, individual liberty of writers, guaranteed by political *droits* of literary property and rights of free expression, and on the other, the nation as a literary marketplace, which would demand works that suited its cultural needs and provide a natural source of legitimacy for writers whose work met those needs. In the small space of four years and two months, an institution that had anchored the French literary field for over a century, the Comédie Française ceased to be, as did the official regulations and informal strategic rules it imposed on writers seeking an association with it.

The Revolutionaries who passed the legislation of 1791-1793 believed they were eliminating the traditional institutions and practices that mediated between writers, audiences, and the state, and thereby were putting in place the conditions of modern liberty. The personal ambitions of writers would serve the cultural needs of nation, and thereby reinforce the legitimacy of a reformed, representative political state. What could not have been evident to those legislators, and the writers who lobbied them, and what has been largely opaque to us, the modern heirs of this belief, was that the cultural norms created by those institutions—the need for writers to accrue, demonstrate, and retain markers of personal legitimacy—could not be dispensed with. The rules governing the game of playwriting evolved greatly in the first few years of the Revolution, but the need for personal markers of legitimacy did not simply dissipate in the face of liberty. The importance of these symbols, we have seen throughout this book, led writers to invest great importance in their *droits d'auteur* which, prior to 1789, had gone well beyond merely the economic right to remuneration. Consequently, Revolutionary legislation creating literary property and the public domain did not suffice as a new means of legitimating writers before the public.

Nor did this legislation establish a fixed status for playwrights in French society. Under Napoleon, new laws in 1806 and 1812 restricted the number of public theaters in Paris and their repertoires, again limiting dramatic authorship as a point of entry into literary life. Those already established as playwrights in 1806—that is, those 106 writers affiliated with the Agency established by Framéry (rather than the SAD)—named the notary Sauvin their "agent," and this agency evolved in 1823 into the Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques, the modern-day association of playwrights and composers. [178](#)

Throughout the nineteenth century, those identified as writers for (and

remunerated primarily from) the theater continued to struggle to establish a personal identity in literary life, because of the limited number of outlets to which they could turn and the dominant presence in the repertory of French classical theater with which they competed. Moreover, the romantic ideal of writers as having a solely aesthetic vocation, which emerged in the nineteenth century to address a series of intellectual, political, and social exigencies of a changing literary field, devalued playwriting as, variously, crass, burlesque, and politically dangerous. [179](#) Only in the Third Republic would the juridical, economic, and cultural restrictions on playwriting ease sufficiently so that dramatic authors could again legitimately claim to be men of letters writing for (and thereby creating) a socially heterogeneous public; only at that point were dramaturgical debates once again considered intellectually substantive by contemporaries and subsequent literary historians. [180](#)

By this time, however, the role of spokesmen to and for the public had long been taken over by others. Moreover, the leading writers identified as dramatic authors in the later eighteenth century were being refashioned retrospectively by Third Republic literary historians as "Enlightenment men of letters," and had were being given, once again, a new identity and status in French public life. [181](#)

Notes:

Note 1: "Cette liberté à choqué tous les honnêtes gens." Quoted from anonymous pamphlet, "Rémarques sur la Tragédie de Charles IX," written in the late fall of 1789, printed in *Les Miniatures* (Paris: 1790), 34-36 [BN: Yf 12802]. [Back.](#)

Note 2: The scholarly literature on theater during the early years of the Revolution is dense, but largely unsatisfactory, especially on the Comédie Française. A general interest book, notable for its inclusion of documents from the theater archives, is Noëlle Guibert and Jacqueline Razgonnikoff, *Le Journal de la Comédie Française, 1787-1799* (Antony: SIDES, 1989). For an empirical, though unsympathetic, account of Revolutionary efforts to use theater to promote cultural change in the first years of the Revolution, see René Tarin, *Le Théâtre de la Constituante* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1998). Marvin Carlson, *Theatre in the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), though weak in its analysis, remains the broadest treatment of the Revolution broadly. On the Revolutionary repertory, see Emmet Kennedy, et al., *Theatre, Opera, and Audiences in Revolutionary Paris: Analysis and Repertory* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996). [Back.](#)

Note 3: *Les spectacles de Paris, calendrier des theatres* (1790); on the Palais Royal generally, see Darrin McMahon, "The Birthplace of the Revolution: Public Space and Political Community in the Palais-Royal of Louis-Philippe d'Orléans,

1781-1789," *French History* 10:1 (1996): 1-29. On the boulevard theaters, see Isherwood, *Farce and Fantasy: Popular Entertainment in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New York: Oxford 1984); and Root-Bernstein, *Boulevard Theatre and Revolution*. [Back.](#)

Note 4: BCF, "Délibérations du conseil de la Comédie," f. 88; July 8, 1789. [Back.](#)

Note 5: BCF, ""Délibérations du conseil de la Comédie," Duc de Richelieu aux Comédiens Français, October 12, 1789, reproduced in Guibert and Razgonnikoff, 64. [Back.](#)

Note 6: *Mémoire pour les Comédiens français, contre les Entrepreneurs du spectacle du Fauxbourg Saint Antoine* (Paris: Prault, 1789) [NYPL: MWEH (Paris) [RBS] 97-132.] This factum, written by the royal Advocate General de Seze in December 1787, and printed in the spring of 1789, defended the theater's *privilège* over plays in its repertory. [Back.](#)

Note 7: One witty example of this charge came in a parodic pamphlet of early January 1790, *Demande de la Reine d'Hongrie a Monsieur le Directeur de la Comédie Française* [Paris: 1790; BN: Lb 39 8267], which purported to be a letter from the "Queen of Hungary," Marie Antoinette, instructing the theater "director," in suitably phonetically misspelled French, to perform plays that would reflect well on the monarchy, such as Collé's "Henri IV." [Back.](#)

Note 8: *Journal de Paris* 204 (July 23, 1789), 917. [Back.](#)

Note 9: BCF, registre 124b. [Back.](#)

Note 10: *Theatre de M. Cailhava*, 2 vols. (Paris: Duchesne, 1781) [ARS Rf 8328]; "Préface Générale" and ""Mémoires historiques sur mes pièces," (I: 1-98) recount in detail (and excerpting from over a dozen years of correspondence with the troupe), the "very comic story of the flattering but deceptive illusions of a young man ... carried away by the desire to merit a great name in the career of Letters.... [He is] soon forced to conclude that the most beautiful and most noble career, that which brings the greatest honor to the Nation, the career of theater, is henceforth closed [to him] by the shenanigans of the troupe." The actors' failure to recognize the "*honnêteté*," "*génie*," and "*ardeur*" of aspiring authors consequently prevents them from producing for "the Nation the Spectacles of which it is worthy." (I: 7-9). [Back.](#)

Note 11: Indicative of Cailhava's moderation, he did not formally remove his plays from the Comédie Française tableau, instead ceding his place in the repertory to other authors, such as the Chevalier de Cubières (BCF, "Cailhava," letter of May 2, 1789.) [Back.](#)

Note 12: BCF, "Cailhava," includes a fragment of the letter dated May 4, 1789 and reproduced in *Mémoire pour Jean-François Cailhava, en réponse à des défenses faites par les Comédiens français aux Directeurs du Théâtre du Palais-Royal de jouer ses pièces* (Paris: Boulard, 1789).[BN: Ln27 3354] 12. [Back.](#)

Note 13: BN Yf 8484. [Back.](#)

Note 14: BCF "Cailhava," letter to the troupe, September 12, 1789: "I promise ... to serve the Comédie, because I have always loved that ungrateful mistress." [Back.](#)

Note 15: *Mémoire pour Jean-Francois Cailhava*, 1-2, capitalized in original. [Back.](#)

Note 16: *Les Causes de la Décadence du Théâtre et les Moyens de le Faire Refleurir*. Nouvelle édition. Ouvrage présenté à la Municipalité de Paris. (Paris: Royer, 1789) [BN: Yf 8484; ARS Rt 165]. The section added for the "Edition de 1789" appears on 12-45. [Back.](#)

Note 17: Tarin, 43-86. On the theoretical distinction between *liberté du théâtre* and *liberté des théâtres*, see Albert Cahuet, *La liberté du théâtre* (Paris: Maresq, 1902). [Back.](#)

Note 18: Isser Woloch, "The Ambiguities of Revolution in the Nineteenth Century" in *Revolution and the Meanings of Freedom in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Woloch (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 1-30. [Back.](#)

Note 19: Until a recent renewal of scholarly interest in Revolutionary theatrical culture, Chénier had been generally used as a symbol of liberty and Revolution, an incarnation of liberty against despotism, and of class conflict; see Charles Labitte, "Marie-Joseph de Chénier," *Études Littéraires* 2 (Paris: 1846), 1-119; Adolphe Lieby, *Étude sur le théâtre de Marie-Joseph Chénier* (Paris: Lecene, 1902), 13-130; Alfred Jepson Bingham, *Marie-Joseph Chénier, Early Political Life and Ideas, 1789-1794* (New York: Privately printed, 1938), 1-80; Daniel Hamiche, *Le théâtre de la Revolution* (Paris: UGE, 1973), 9-26. More recent scholarship on Chénier is cited below. [Back.](#)

Note 20: BCF, "Chénier," #1. [Back.](#)

Note 21: This "Discours préliminaire" was printed in the first edition of the play: *Charles IX, ou l'école des rois: tragédie* (Paris: Didot, 1790), 11-38 [BNF: Yf8610; ARS YF 17.332]. [Back.](#)

Note 22: Lieby, 32. On plays with national themes in the 1770s and the difficulties these works encountered in gaining a performance, see Boës, *Lanterne magique*; and Dziembowski, *Nouveau patriotisme*. [Back.](#)

Note 23: BCF, "Chénier," #6, #7. [Back.](#)

Note 24: BCF, "Chénier," #8, #9, #10; March 23-April 11, 1789. [Back.](#)

Note 25: Chénier. *De la Liberté du Théâtre en France*, (Paris: June 15, 1789). On the more recent work on Chénier and the politics of this play, see Maslan, "Resisting Representation"; and G. Charles Walton, "*Charles IX* and the French

Revolution," *European Review of History* 4:2 (1997): 127-146. [Back.](#)

Note 26: BCF, "Chénier," #12. Bailly, *Mémoires* (Paris: Baudouin, 1821), II: 283. [Back.](#)

Note 27: Chénier, *Denonciation des Inquisiteurs de la Pensée* (Paris: 1789), BN: Yth 22625. [Back.](#)

Note 28: *Journal de Paris* 239 (August 27, 1789), 1076-77. Reprinted as Suard, *Encore quelques mots sur la censure des théâtres* (Paris: 1789) and in Suard, *Melanges de littérature*, ed. Nisard, tome V, 309-319. [Back.](#)

Note 29: Robert Justin Goldstein, "France," in *The War for the Public Mind: Political Censorship in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Goldstein, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), 125-174; Krakovitch, *Hugo censuré*. [Back.](#)

Note 30: Maslan describes it as "The Revolution's greatest debate over freedom of expression" (30). [Back.](#)

Note 31: Framéry noted that, in late 1789 through early 1790, this debate interested "all literary life [*toute la littérature*]" and concluded that, "The greatest number appear to be for censorship" of performances as a "reasonable precaution" and that even the "most zealous partisans of liberty" accept that "men of letters could resort to print" if their play did not gain approval for performance. (239). [Back.](#)

Note 32: Beaumarchais to Comédiens Français, letter of November 9 1789 (BAF), reprinted in Loménie, II: 435-7: "En ce moment de licence effrenée ... ces barbares excès ... me semblent dangereux." [Back.](#)

Note 33: Sigismond Lacroix, ed. *Actes de la Commune de Paris Pendant la Révolution* (Paris: Cerf, 1894-1899 [NY: AMS Press, 1974]), I: 170; II: 129; III: 130-131, 153, 207-208. [Back.](#)

Note 34: On January 7, Brousse summoned the actors to inform them of this impending change (BCF, 124b, "Brousse-Desfaucherets to Comédiens Français," January 6, 1790, reprinted in Guibert and Razgonnikoff, 79.) [Back.](#)

Note 35: *Actes* III: 661-665. On February 1, 1790, Gouges and Chénier, along with a delegation of troupe members, addressed the Assembly. (Chénier's interventions before the municipal government had by this date become common: see *Actes* I: 284-295; II: 286-287.) [Back.](#)

Note 36: BCF Register IV a, #8: "Adresse Présentée a l'Assemblée Generale de la Municipalité de Paris par les Comédiens Français, ordinaires du Roi. Fevrier 1790"; *Observations Pour les Comédiens François ... sur Le Rapport fait à la Commune de Paris ... le 27 mars 1790, relativement aux spectacles*. (Paris: 1790) [Back.](#)

Note 37: "Adresse," 7-9. [Back.](#)

Note 38: BAF XIbis, XVII, 26-27 [1790], "Éclaircissements et notes à demander à M. de Beaumarchais." This document consists of five questions about the formula for calculating droits d'auteur as a portion of net revenues, sent to him by Fenouillot de Falbaire, and Beaumarchais's short responses. [Back.](#)

Note 39: "Observations comparatives sur l'état passé des Comédiens Français et de leurs auteurs, depuis le commencement de 1782 jusqu'à la fin de 1789," reprinted in *Révue retrospective* 2nd ser., t. VIII (1836), 7-19. In February J. L. Francoeur prepared a similar, though less detailed, report on the Opéra: "Produit des Ouvrages qui ont été donnés au théâtre de l'Opéra, depuis les années 1780 à 1781, jusqu'à celles de 1789 à 1790" (Bibliothèque de l'Opéra: "Archives" CO 287); J. J. Leroux prepared an even more detailed report on the Opéra, *Adresse Présentée à la Municipalité de Paris, Par les Membres du Comité de Régie de l'Opéra*. (Paris: Prault, 1790) [AN ADVIII 44 (#16)], and the 100-page final report, J.J. Leroux, *Rapport sur l'Opéra* (Paris: August 1791) [AN ADVIII 44 (#17)]. [Back.](#)

Note 40: *Rapport de MM. les Commissaires nommés par la Commune, Relativement aux Spectacles* (Paris: Lottin, 1790) [BN Lb 40-81]; Brousse's brief response, "Réponse du Département des Établissements Publics, au Mémoire présenté par le Département de la Police, à la Commune et aux Soixante Districts, au sujet des Spectacles," is reproduced on 34. [Back.](#)

Note 41: Actes IV: 185. The new law was printed and promulgated on March 27 (Actes IV: 512), but seems to have been put into effect in early March. [Back.](#)

Note 42: *Rapport des Commissaires, lu a l'Assemblée generale des Representans de la Commune, par M. Vigee, le jeudi 18 mars 1790*. (Paris: Lottin, 1790) [BN: Lb 40 88]. [Back.](#)

Note 43: AN 01 501, fol. 90; March 6, 1790. [Back.](#)

Note 44: AN 01 501, fol. 98; March 11, 1790. [Back.](#)

Note 45: *De l'Organisation des Spectacles de Paris* (Paris: Buisson, 1790), 78-112; quotes at 76, 91, 99. On Framéry's musical career and active involvement in theater politics during the Revolution, see Marc Darlow, "'Le progrès des arts'; Nicolas-Etienne Framery's contribution to late eighteenth-century musical and theatrical life in France" (Ph. D. diss, University of Canterbury at Kent, 2000). Darlow discusses *De l'organisation* at length, 262-279. [Back.](#)

Note 46: *Figaro aux Parisiens, amateurs du bon goût, des arts, des spectacles et de la Liberté* (Paris: 1790). Manuel, in his *Police de Paris* (II: 19-22) made the same criticism of Bailly that earlier commentators had made of Suard, that he abused his free entrances to the theater by giving them to his wife and friends. [Back.](#)

Note 47: Aubin-Louis Millin, *Petition Relative aux Comédiens Français, adressée au conseil de ville, au nom d'un très grand nombre de citoyens* (Paris:

[1790]) [BN: 8 FM 3323]; another version of this pamphlet—anonymous, shorter, and more aggressive—ended with a call to the Commune "to act as promptly as possible on the petition from the dramatic authors and to establish definitively a law on the liberty of the theater" [AN AD VIII 44 (#3)]. [Back.](#)

Note 48: The record of the municipal assembly session for September 27, 1790, recorded these charges and called for the troupe to demonstrate its "submission" and "obedience" to the Commune and called on all citizens to show proper respect to the Theater of the Nation ("Extrait du Registre du Conseil de Ville," [BCF IV A DL, #9]). [Back.](#)

Note 49: AN D IV 49, dossier 1427, #1 is a letter to Bailly on May 16; #2 and #3, "Lettre & Projet relatives à l'établissement d'un spectacle sous la direction du Sr. Fresville," are dated June 24 and addressed to the President of the Constituent Assembly. [Back.](#)

Note 50: *Actes IV: 701; Extrait du Registre des Délibérations du District des Cordeliers, le 29 avril 1790* (Paris: 1790) [Opéra C 1654]; reprinted in *Oeuvres* (1826), IV: 450-456. In September, he repeated this argument to the municipality, that it had failed to "grant liberty to the theaters" by preserving its *privilège* (*Actes VII: 307*). [Back.](#)

Note 51: Millin de Grandmaison, *Sur la liberté du théâtre* (Paris: La Grange, 1790). [Back.](#)

Note 52: Quatremère de Quincy, *Discours prononcé à l'Assemblée des représentants de la Commune, sur la liberté des théâtres*, (April 2, 1790). [Back.](#)

Note 53: The "commission sur les pouvoirs de la municipalité" of the Constitution Committee demanded from Brousse explanations of his theater policy, to which he responded on July 10 (*Actes IV: 638; VI: 332; VI: 456*). [Back.](#)

Note 54: Ravel, 56-60; Henri Welschinger, *Le Theatre de la Revolution, 1789-1799* (Paris: Charavay, 1880). [Back.](#)

Note 55: Maslan, "Resisting Representation." [Back.](#)

Note 56: BCF, "Chénier," #2, "Appel aux Spectateurs, Distribué dans le Théâtre, 19 aout 1789." See the commentary on this event in Labitte, *Etudes Littéraires II: 27-28*. [Back.](#)

Note 57: *Discours de M. de Chénier, auteur de la Tragédie de Charles IX, à l'Assemblée Générale des Représentans de la Commune de Paris, le 23 Aout 1789*. [Back.](#)

Note 58: *Actes de la Commune I: 321; I: 335*. [Back.](#)

Note 59: *Journal de Paris* (August 27, 1789), reprinted in *Denonciation des Inquisiteurs*, 54-64, quote from 63-64. [Back.](#)

Note 60: *Discours et Motions sur les Spectacles* (Paris, Denne, 1789) [BN: Yf 9030]. [Back.](#)

Note 61: *Adresse de M.J. Chénier, auteur de la Tragédie de Charles IX, au Soixante Districts de Paris.* [Back.](#)

Note 62: BCF, "Chénier," 4, reprinted in *Revue retrospective* (3rd ser.) III (1838), 268. This letter is dated October 4, though apparently backdated to appear not to be capitalizing on the popular violence of October 5-6, which is precisely what Chénier had done. [Back.](#)

Note 63: BCF, register 124b, "Duc de Richelieu aux Comédiens Français," October 12, 1789. Reprinted in Guibert and Razgonnikoff, 64. The deliberations of October 13 are printed in *Actes de la Commune* II: 286. [Back.](#)

Note 64: Reprinted in the pamphlet *Encore Quelques Mots sur la Censure des Théâtres* [BN-Imp 8 Yf 225 (#20)]; quoted passage at 10. [Back.](#)

Note 65: "A Messieurs les Parisiens, sur la Tragédie de Charles IX," in *Encore quelques mots*, 10-16. [Back.](#)

Note 66: *Journal de Paris* (November 6, 1789). [Back.](#)

Note 67: "Rémarques sur la Tragédie de Charles IX," written in the late fall of 1789, printed in *Les Miniatures* (Paris: 1790), 34-36 [BN: Yf 12802]. [Back.](#)

Note 68: Palissot's letter appeared in the *Journal de Paris*, November 16, 1789, and Chénier's in the *Chronique de Paris*, November 29, 1789; both were reprinted in the first edition of the play in February 1790: *Charles IX* (Paris: Bossange, 1790), 235-243. [Back.](#)

Note 69: "Lettre de Chénier aux Auteurs de la *Chronique de Paris*. Ce lundi, 18 janvier 1790," in *Charles IX* (244-247). BCF, "Chénier," #8 and #9, January 19, 1790, are an exchange of letters between the author and the troupe agreeing to this benefit performance; through an exchange of letters with the District of the Cordeliers on January 29 (*Charles IX*, 250-251), he paid 800 *livres* for "the poor." Not to be outdone, the Comédiens Français followed suit, donating one-third of its available funds, nearly 2000 *livres*, to the poor of the Cordeliers district on January 30 (*Actes* IV: 658). [Back.](#)

Note 70: *Coligny, ou la St. Barthelemi: Tragédie* (London: 1789) [ARS Rf 7675], "Avertissement," i-ii; "Discours général," 3-12. The play had first been printed in 1740 and reprinted in 1744, 1767, and 1780. The second 1789 edition ([Avignon]: Bosquet, 1789) appeared with a false Lausanne imprint [BNF Yf 11351]. [Back.](#)

Note 71: Bossange testified that he had paid Chénier 10,000 *livres* in a suit he brought in February against other printers for distributing counterfeits (AN Y15021). In March 1793, Chénier effectively created his own statement of copyright when he published *Fénélon*. The verso of the title page included a warning, in the name of the author and the printer Nicolas-Léger Moutard, "that

this work is our common property.... We place it under the protection of laws and ... will bring before a tribunal any theater entrepreneur who, in violation of my property rights under existing laws, has performed this tragedy without formal and written consent" (Paris: 1793) [BN 8 Yth 6874]. [Back.](#)

Note 72: The Commune then ordered the actors to perform the play at its season premiere on September 17 and three more times that week. (BCF, Register IV a, #9: "Conseil de Ville. Extrait du Registre du Conseil de Ville," September 27, 1790.) Chénier then used this success not only to have the play restored to the Comédie Française active repertory but also another play, "Henri VIII." (BCF, "Chénier, #25, #25; September 21, 1790). [Back.](#)

Note 73: *Discours pour la rentrée du théâtre de la Nation, en 1790* [BN: Yf 8615]. [Back.](#)

Note 74: *Relation de ce qui s'est passé à la Comédie Française, dans la nuit du vendredi 23 au samedi 24 juillet* ([Paris]: 1790); BN: 8 Lb39 3806. "Extrait du registre du conseil de ville, du 24 septembre 1790," reproduced in Etienne and Martainville, *Histoire du Théâtre Français* (Paris: Barba, 1802), I: 164. [Back.](#)

Note 75: [Léger], *L'Auteur d'un moment* (Paris: 1792). Piron's Damis from "Métromanie" (Chapter 1) would have been best known to eighteenth-century audiences. In this version, Damis's plays are written by his lacky, Lourdet, another common early modern trope. [Back.](#)

Note 76: BNF-MSS NAF 6852, #2, "Discours contre la calumnie." [Back.](#)

Note 77: Maslan, "Resisting Representation." [Back.](#)

Note 78: BCF, "Ronsin," #1, December 26, 1781; #2 (undated); #3 (undated). These letters and others from the Ronsin dossier cited below are reprinted in *Révue retrospective 3rd ser VIII* (1835), 299-323. He published the poem, *La Chute de Ruffin* (Paris: 1780) under the pseudonym Claudiene. [Back.](#)

Note 79: BCF, "Ronsin," #5, October 11, 1783. [Back.](#)

Note 80: BCF, "Ronsin," #7. *Théâtre de M. Ronsin* (Paris: Cailleau, 1786). [Back.](#)

Note 81: BCF, "Ronsin," #8: "A MM les Comédiens Français, Ce 14 janvier 1788." [Back.](#)

Note 82: BCF, "Ronsin," #9, July 6, 1788; #9 bis, undated. [Back.](#)

Note 83: BCF, "Ronsin," #10, May 15, 1789. [Back.](#)

Note 84: BCF, "Ronsin," #11, November 26, 1789; #12, December 21, 1789. [Back.](#)

Note 85: BCF, "Ronsin," #13, undated; #14, undated; De la Porte to Ronsin. [Back.](#)

Note 86: BCF, "Ronsin," #15, December 30, 1789. [Back.](#)

Note 87: BCF, "Ronsin," #16, December 30, 1789. [Back.](#)

Note 88: BCF, "Ronsin," #18, La Faucherie, undated. [Back.](#)

Note 89: BCF, "Ronsin," #17, January 3, 1790. [Back.](#)

Note 90: BCF, "Ronsin," #19, Ronsin to Dazincourt, January 2, 1790. [Back.](#)

Note 91: BCF, "Ronsin," #20, Ronsin to Dazincourt, January 18, 1790. On the evening of December 31, one such soldat citoyen of the National Guard, Le Roy, made such a request to the Assembly of the Commune of Paris, which referred the matter to the Department of Police (*Actes de la Commune* III: 328). [Back.](#)

Note 92: BCF, #23. The troupe backdated the date of reception to December 9, 1789, and scheduled it near but not at the top of the repertory. [Back.](#)

Note 93: BCF, #21, #22. [Back.](#)

Note 94: ARS-MSS Rondel MSS 361: "Fabre d'Églantine," piece #1, is a letter from Fabre to his wife, "Comedienne dans la troupe du Sr. de St. Gerand, à Macon," dated "Genève, 20 janvier 1783," concerning how much he misses her. [Back.](#)

Note 95: Darnton, "Facts of Literary Life," 279-288. The work apparently generated no interest or commentary at the time and was not published until well after Fabre's death, as part of his *Oeuvres mêlées* (Paris: 1832). [Back.](#)

Note 96: Cailhava initiated the campaign to resurrect his works with the publication of the first edition of *De l'art de la comédie* in 1772, and would continue this campaign throughout his life, culminating in *Étude sur Molière* (Paris: Debray, 1802). For the opening of the troupe's new theater at Odéon in 1782, La Harpe was commissioned to write "Molière a la nouvelle salle"; Mercier's first (and only) play performed at the Française was "Maison de Molière" in early 1789; Gouges and the Chevalier de Cubières also both wrote and published plays featuring Molière in the later 1780s. On appropriations of Molière in the Restoration, see Sheryl Kroen, *Politics and Theater: The Crisis of Legitimacy in Restoration France, 1815-1830* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), esp. 229-284; on the later nineteenth century, see Caldicott, *La carrière de Molière*, 11-24; and Ralph Albanese, *Molière à l'école républicaine* (Saratoga, CA: Libri, 1992). [Back.](#)

Note 97: BCF, "Fabre d'Églantine," #2, January 19, 1790. [Back.](#)

Note 98: BCF, "Fabre d'Églantine," [1] "Délibération," December 21, 1789; [1a] Letter of December 22, 1789, signed by Fabre, acknowledging receipt of 600 livres. [Back.](#)

Note 99: *Le Philinte de Molière* (Paris: Ruault, 1791), i-xxxvii (quote at v-vi).

This edition has been reprinted, with scholarly annotations, commentary, and bibliography by Judith K. Proud (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1995). [Back.](#)

Note 100: BCF Registre 124f, f. 59v; June 19, 1790. [Back.](#)

Note 101: BCF, "Fabre," #14. [Back.](#)

Note 102: BCF, "Fabre d'Églantine," #6-9. [Back.](#)

Note 103: BCF, 124f, f. 60, June 19, 1790. [Back.](#)

Note 104: BCF, "Murville," #21, May 18, 1789. "Today, I am no longer with those persons who separated me from the Comédie. [Aujourd'hui que je ne suis plus lié avec les personnes qui m'eloignaient de la Comédie]." BCF, "Murville," #20 is the "Protestation" filed at Châtelet on September 26, 1786. André's "Déclaration" to the court, made September 25, 1788, is in AN: Y 14483. A "Signification" was served to the troupe the next day (BCF, "Murville," #20a; September 26, 1788). [Back.](#)

Note 105: BCF, "Murville," #22, #23, #24, #25 were all dated between February 15 and 22, 1790. [Back.](#)

Note 106: BCF, "Murville," #23, February 20, 1790. [Back.](#)

Note 107: BCF, "Murville," #26, "Lu le 24 fer. 1790. A Mrs. les Representants de la Commune." [Back.](#)

Note 108: BCF, "Murville," #28. *Actes IV*: 204 (February 27, 1790). [Back.](#)

Note 109: BCF, "Murville," #30, March 19, 1790. [Back.](#)

Note 110: BCF. "Murville," #31-#36, dated between early 1791 and May 1792. [Back.](#)

Note 111: BCF, "Gouges," #20; September 12, 1789. Beaumarchais had twice proposed publicly that the troupe donate the proceeds from performances of his works to the poor, in the instances of "Barber of Seville" in 1775 and "Marriage de Figaro" in 1784. Moreover, Gouges drew here on the tradition of benefit performances by the Comédie Française for indigent worthies, including the contribution of 600 *livres* per performance to the Hôpital Général, known as the *droit des pauvres*. [Back.](#)

Note 112: BCF, "Gouges," #21, September 21, 1789. [Back.](#)

Note 113: BCF, "Gouges," #22, November 23, 1789. [Back.](#)

Note 114: BCF, "Gouges," #23, December 18, 1789: "Madame de Gouges, having assured the Comédie that M. Suard had approved 'Esclavage des Nègres,' ... the play will be sent tomorrow to M. Boucher to obtain the permission of the mayor." [Back.](#)

Note 115: BCF, "Gouges," #24, December 24, 1789. [Back.](#)

Note 116: Dorigny, "Mirabeau et la Société des amis des noirs," 153-164; and Yves Benot, "La Chaîne des insurrections d'esclaves dans les caraïbes de 1789 à 1791," 179-186, in Dorigny, ed., *Les Abolitions de l'esclavage*. In his journal, the mayor Bailly recorded on October 25, "The petition of the *gens de couleur* has made a great sensation ... and public opinion speaks naturally in their favor. Without a doubt, it will take up equally the cause of black slaves, if the black slaves were to demand their imprescriptible rights," (Bailly, *Mémoires*, Berville et Barriere, eds. 3 vols. (Paris: Baudouin, 1821) II: 291.) The abbot Grégoire made his first speech in the National Assembly on behalf of gens de couleur on December 3, which led to debates on abolition and manumission; see Alyssa R. Sepinwall, "Regenerating France, Regenerating the World: The Abbot Grégoire and the French Revolution, 1750-1831," (Ph.D. diss., Stanford, 1998); Valerie Quinney, "Decrees on Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Civil Rights for Negroes in the Early French Revolution," *Journal of Negro History* 55 (1970): 117-130; and "Rights of Free Men of Color in the French Revolution," *French Historical Studies* 7 (1972): 552. [Back.](#)

Note 117: *Chronique de Paris*, 118, (December 19, 1789), 474. [Back.](#)

Note 118: *Lettre à Mde. de Gouges, En réponse à celle insérée dans la Chronique de Paris, no XCVIII, du dimanche 20 décembre & datée du 19 du même matin*. ["Paris, ce 25 decembre 1789"; New York Public Library, Rare Books Collection *KVR1714] [Back.](#)

Note 119: *Journal de Paris* 362 (December 28, 1789) 1700, letter dated December 27. An identical letter appeared the same day in the *Chronique de Paris* 126, 506. [Back.](#)

Note 120: Supplément au No. 362 du *Journal de Paris* (December 28, 1789), "Lettre de M. Monseron de l'Aunay, député du Commerce de Nantes, auprès de l'Assemblée Nationale, à M. le Marquis de Condorcet, Président de la Société des amis des Noirs"; (December 16 1789), "Post-scriptum du 24 decembre." [Back.](#)

Note 121: BCF, "Gouges," #34. [Back.](#)

Note 122: Grimm, et al., *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique*, 16 volumes, Maurice Tourneux, ed., (Paris: Garnier 1881) V: 566, suggested the play was so badly written that there was no need for a "cabal américain" to shout it down, a typically caustic review for this manuscript newsletter. Other negative press coverage is reported in Etienne and Martainville, *Histoire du théâtre français* I: 58. [Back.](#)

Note 123: *Chronique de Paris* 129 (December 31, 1789), 518. [Back.](#)

Note 124: BCF, "Gouges," #26, January 4, 1790. [Back.](#)

Note 125: BCF, "Gouges," #26b, January 13, 1790: "ils se sont détruits naturellement." [Back.](#)

Note 126: BCF, 26b-30. These four letters blame the poor showings of the second and third performances on a "cabal" and demand another performance, not for her own benefit but for varyingly "my sex," all gens de lettres, "the nation," and "black slaves [*les esclaves nègres*]." The troupe's "deliberation" and vote is recorded in BCF, "Gouges," #31, after which the troupe leader Florence asked Mademoiselle Raucourt "to handle this affair with Madame de Gouge [*sic*]." [Back.](#)

Note 127: In the post-script to the *Réponse au champion américain*, written in January 1790 (and discussed below), she notes that her son had lost his "pension" from the Orléans household as a "justification" for her public interventions. Later, in the preface to *Mirabeau aux Champs Elysées* (Paris: 1793) [BN 8 Yth 11834], written in the spring of 1791, she wrote that, in the fall of 1789, "I have shown myself to be an ardent patriot; for the good of my country, I sacrificed my repose, my pleasures, most of my fortune, even my son's post." According to Blanc (89), the banishment of Gouges and fils resulted from her role in an attempt in mid-1789 by the Orléans entourage, led by the Count de Mirabeau, to force Louis to abdicate in favor of the Duke or at least hand power to him as a regent. Gouges had apparently ruined the plan by distributing too early her pamphlet, *Séance royale* ([Paris]: 1790). [Back.](#)

Note 128: *Mémoire pour Madame de Gouges, Contre la Comédie Française*, which appeared with the prefatory "Adresse aux représentants de la nation" as *Les Comédiens Demasqués, ou Madame De Gouges ruinée par la Comédie Française pour se faire jouer. A Paris, De l'Imprimerie de la Comédie Française*, 1790. (BHVP: 617,434 (3)). [Back.](#)

Note 129: W. D. Howarth, "The Playwright as Preacher: Didacticism and Melodrama in the French Theatre of the Enlightenment," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 14:2 (1978): 97-115, esp. 110-116, suggests the parallels between "evangelical" tendencies of morally and politically "didactic" Enlightenment theater and the melodramatic structure of three character types: an innocent young woman, a *traître* (villain), and heroes (who typically appear in the final act to "redeem" the *traître* through a sudden conversion from vice to virtue, thereby achieving a general reconciliation). Gouges uses these character types and structure not only in her play but also in her *Mémoire*. [Back.](#)

Note 130: *Mémoire*, 1. [Back.](#)

Note 131: Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue*, 15-16; 196-201. [Back.](#)

Note 132: *Mémoire*, 3. [Back.](#)

Note 133: *Mémoire*, 36. These quotes are from a reprinted letter of November 6, 1788 to the actor Molé, complaining of the troupe's "frightful conduct towards me ... my means are strong and my droits uncontestable. I have taken the most *honnêtes*, the most noble, and the most generous steps, but all have been in vain."

The comparison to a Greuze tableau appears in a passage (23-26) that first appeared in the afterword to the 1788 edition of her play *Molière chez Ninon*

(Paris: Cailleau, 1788), 196-201, concerning the theater's rejection of that play. She offers as "evidence" twelve of the "bulletins" with which each company member supposedly had cast a vote, identifying which actors were the most hostile and sarcastic to her as a *femme de lettres*. Ordinarily, these unsigned bulletins, once collected by the troupe leader, were destroyed (BN-MSS, FF, 9232, f. 40), so it is unlikely Gouges would have obtained them or been able to identify their authors, especially if her relations with the troupe were as execrable as she described. The "bulletins," which are not found in the BCF dossier of correspondence, may well have been invented to suit the purposes of her narrative. [Back.](#)

Note 134: *Mémoire*, 38-39. [Back.](#)

Note 135: From the text, it is evident that she revised the narrative in mid to late January 1790 and delivered a manuscript copy to Bailly in early February. In the late summer of 1790, she added a separately paginated "Adresse aux Représentans de la Nation," of which a copy was sent in early October to Bailly (BCF, Gouges #33). [Back.](#)

Note 136: *Mémoire*, 43. [Back.](#)

Note 137: *Mémoire*, 44. [Back.](#)

Note 138: [Olympe de Gouges], *Réponse au champion américain, ou colon très aisé à connaître* [8p in12; slnd; on final page: "Paris, le 18 janvier 1790"]. NYPL-RB, *Kfp.v. 69 (#268) [*Citoyens de Couleur* 1789-1790]. Monseron de l'Aunay had signed his earlier, printed attack on Gouges "colon très aisé à connaître." *Actes de la Commune de Paris Pendant la Revolution*, 7 volumes (Paris: 1894-1899), II: 661, reports that Gouges sent the Assembly 300 copies of this pamphlet. [Back.](#)

Note 139: *Réponse*, 4. [Back.](#)

Note 140: Lougee, *Paradis des femmes*, 11-58, 94-112; Goodman, *The Republic of Letters*, 90-135; Steinbrügge, *Moral Sex*, 24-30. This figuring of elite, literate women as recognizably *honnête* and thus socially powerful is evident, for instance, in eighteenth-century playwrights' frequent complaints that actresses's close personal relations to the First Gentlemen influenced the composition of the theater repertory; see Berlanstein, *Daughters of Eve*, 33-42; 67-83. [Back.](#)

Note 141: For a similar example of how the abbot Sièyes altered the language of Old Regime social categories to the new context of Revolutionary political discourse, see William Sewall, *A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994). [Back.](#)

Note 142: This meeting is reported by Gouges herself in her *Lettre aux littérateurs français* (Paris: March, 1790) [NYPL-RB KPF v69], 3-4: "the Americans [Américains] who had boxes [loges] at the Comédie Française had threatened to cancel [their subscriptions] if that incendiary play [*drame*] were to be performed again." The Bureau de la Ville de Paris, Affaires Particulières, has

no mention of such a meeting (AN H1 196). [Back.](#)

Note 143: *Lettre*, 5. [Back.](#)

Note 144: *Lettre*, 8. [Back.](#)

Note 145: *Lettre*, 2-3. [Back.](#)

Note 146: *Réponse*, 4-5. On the recurrence of melodramatic story structure in eighteenth-century cultural narratives, see Maza, "Stories in History," and *Private Lives*, passim. [Back.](#)

Note 147: *Réponse*, 7-8. [Back.](#)

Note 148: *Le Fouet National* 14 (March 2, 1790), 24-26: "His position did not intimidate me, although he *menaced me with all his power*" (emphasis in original). [Back.](#)

Note 149: Gorsas, *Courrier de Paris*, 27, 438. [Back.](#)

Note 150: BCF, "Gouges," #35, December 6, 1790. [Back.](#)

Note 151: BCF, "Gouges," #33, and the response, #34, both dated October 19, 1790. [Back.](#)

Note 152: BCF, "Gouges," #35; December 6, 1790. [Back.](#)

Note 153: *Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées* (Paris: Garnery, 1791); BN 8 Yth 11834; preface iii-xii. [Back.](#)

Note 154: BCF, Gouges, #37-38. [Back.](#)

Note 155: *L'Esclavage des Noirs, ou l'Heureux Naufrage* (Paris: Duchesne, 1792) [ARS GD 689], "Préface," 1-9. [Back.](#)

Note 156: Ledbury, *Sedaine*. [Back.](#)

Note 157: *Maillard, ou Paris sauvé* (Paris: Prault, 1788), with a preface (xii-xv), in which the author attributes his difficulties in getting the work performed to the stylistic innovation of a prose tragedy on a national theme. As further evidence of Sedaine's investment in established norms and practices of literary life, the 1788 edition includes a verse dedication to Empress Catherine of Russia (i-vii). Yet Sedaine remained less influential at court than he would have liked. He sent a copy to the royal troupe, with a letter pointing out that it had three times been scheduled for performance but three times suppressed by orders from the court (BCF, "Sedaine," April 23, 1788). The approbation for the edition, dated August 7, 1788 and signed by Suard and the Lieutenant-General of Police de Crosne, approved "l'impression," implying it had not even been approved for performance (147). [Back.](#)

Note 158: BCF, "Sedaine," January 23, 1790; January 26, 1790. [Back.](#)

Note 159: BCF, "Sedaine," July 25, 1790. [Back.](#)

Note 160: BCF, "Sedaine," September 1, 1790. [Back.](#)

Note 161: See Chapter 4 of my *Literary Sociability in Old Regime France*. [Back.](#)

Note 162: BAF XI, XIII, 36. [Back.](#)

Note 163: *Adresse des Auteurs Dramatiques à l'Assemblée Nationale, Prononcée par M. de la Harpe dans la Séance du mardi soir 24 Août*. [AN: AD VIII 16 (A)]: "Gens de lettres [were] the first engines of this great and happy revolution ... they alone were able to liberate the human mind [les premiers moteurs de cette grande et heureuse révolution ... eux seuls ont affranchi l'esprit humain." [Back.](#)

Note 164: *Adresse des Auteurs Dramatiques*, 19, 28. [Back.](#)

Note 165: *Discours sur la liberté du Théâtre, prononcé par M. de la Harpe le 17 decembre 1790 à la société des Amis de la Constitution* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, [1789]) [BNF: 8 Lb40 586]. [Back.](#)

Note 166: *La Harpe*, 13-16. [Back.](#)

Note 167: Sauvigny, *Du théâtre, sous les rapports de la Nouvelle Constitution* (Paris: Cussac, 1790), 15 [AN: AD XVIIIc 86, #8.] [Back.](#)

Note 168: Sauvigny, *Du théâtre*, 37. [Back.](#)

Note 169: The first instance of this false attribution appears in Étienne and Martainville (I: 122) and is repeated in Bingham, 43, from which several contemporary scholars have repeated it. [Back.](#)

Note 170: Parisau, *Petition des Auteurs Dramatiques Qui n'ont pas signé celle de M. de la Harpe* (Paris: Potier de Lille, 1790) [BNF: 8 Yf 225 (#17)]. The printed version features 23 signatures, plus three concurring opinions by better-known writers Louis de Boissy, Baculard d'Arnaud, and Poincnet de Sivry. [Back.](#)

Note 171: Root-Bernstein, 167-196. Such writers, throughout the eighteenth century, had frequently presented themselves as less aggressive and self-assertive than aspiring Comédie Française playwrights, towards whom they did not show so much resentment as bemusement. [Back.](#)

Note 172: *Petition*, 5. [Back.](#)

Note 173: *Rapport Fait Par M. le Chapelier, Au Nom du Comité de Constitution, sur la Petition des Auteurs dramatiques, dans la Séance du Jeudi 13 Janvier 1791, avec le Decret rendu dans cette Séance* (Paris: 1791) [AN: AD VIII 16 (A) #7]; the final decree is published in *Journal des décrets de l'Assemblée*

nationale, I: 86. [Back.](#)

Note 174: *Le Moniteur du Dimanche*, February 20, 1791. [Back.](#)

Note 175: Beaumarchais's notarized agreement to allow Framéry to serve as his agent and Framéry's accounting books for 1791-1793 are in BAF XI, XII, 24-25; BAF XI bis, XVIII 23-28; *Revue rétrospective* 8 (1837): 469-472. On the development and administration of a "national network of correspondents" by Framéry to monitor provincial theaters, see Darlow, 292-303. [Back.](#)

Note 176: BAF XI, XIII, 36. His proposal to the SAD of May 7, 1791 was then printed as *Motion faite par Pierre-Augustin Caron Beaumarchais au Comité des Auteurs Dramatiques pour aller au-devant du convoi de Voltaire* [sInd; BN: LN27 29495]. The text of a speech Beaumarchais made to the Legislative Assembly in May 1792 is in BAF XXVII, XIII, 5. On September 18, 1792, Beaumarchais led a delegation of playwrights, including Chénier, to protest the law of August 30 (AN F 17 1001, # 39). For a fuller discussion of these developments, see Brown, *Literary Sociability*, Chapter 5. [Back.](#)

Note 177: Hesse, "Laws," 127-129. [Back.](#)

Note 178: AN (MC) CXV 1069 and AN AJ13 1022. On Napoleonic theater policy, see Hemmings, 101-122, and Ruediger Hillmer, *Die napoleonische Theaterpolitik: Geschäftstheater in Paris, 1799-1815* (Köln: Böhlau, 1999). [Back.](#)

Note 179: Two very different interpretations of this trajectory are offered by Bourdieu, *Rules of Art*, 114-125; and Paul Bénichou, *The Consecration of the Writer, 1750-1830* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999) 76-80; 212-217; 237-242. [Back.](#)

Note 180: Christophe Charle, *La crise littéraire à l'époque du naturalisme* (Paris: PENS, 1979), 27-54. [Back.](#)

Note 181: On how Third Republic literary scholars and historians, led by Gustave Lanson and inspired by Durkheim, rewrote the history of eighteenth-century literature to appropriate the Enlightenment for a research and pedagogical agenda they hoped would create a liberal, secular, and republican culture in France, see Antoine Compagnon, *La troisième république des lettres* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), 19-212. [Back.](#)

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