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The Parallel Canons at the Opéra and the Comédie-Française at the End of the Ancien Régime

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The Opéra, or the Académie royale de musique, had a lot to do with the Comédie-Française in the long term. Formed eleven years apart—the Opéra in 1669 and the Comédie-Française in 1680—the two institutions were given similar monopolies by the monarchy and as such took central roles within the entertainment world and public life. What is particularly striking is that both theaters developed remarkably powerful canons of great works by, on the one hand, Jean-Baptiste Poquelin or Molière, Pierre Corneille, and Jean Racine, and on the other by Jean-Baptiste Lully and Jean-Philippe Rameau. Works by the two composers and the three playwrights can be considered to have played the role of *high canon* in the repertoires of the two theaters.

This essay will show how parallel canons evolved at the Opéra and the Comédie-Française and entered into periods of major change in the 1770s and 1780s. On the one hand, the arrival of Christoph-Willibald Gluck as the principal composer at the Opéra in 1774 led to the abandonment of its old repertory, save for Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Le Devin du village*, premiered in 1752, and stimulated an intense controversy as to the relative merits of music by Gluck and by Niccolò Piccinni, and indeed the whole future of French opera. On the other hand, the Comédie-Française experimented in new kinds of stagecraft, most often called *le drame*, which stimulated intense controversy over shows involving plots deemed improper to the theater's high traditions. Challenges arose against the theater's monopolistic status, paving the way for it to be stripped of the monopoly in 1791 and then abolished in 1793. In contrast, the Opéra managed to establish a popular new canonic repertory which lasted through difficult political times up through the 1820s.

An article on the Comédie-Française in the *Mercure de France* in 1778 typifies much of what was going on in the press at the time:

Ce goût, devenu excessif, a déjà été la cause de la décadence de notre Théâtre; il menace encore d'être celle de sa chute totale. C'est au moment où les Juges des Arts se multiplient davantage, que les Arts sont le plus mal jugés, que les talens médiocres abondent, qu'ils trouvent de la protection chez les faux Connoisseurs. . . & l'on peut être surpris sans doute que la Nation qui a le droit de s'enorgueillir d'avoir vu naître dans son sein des hommes tels que Molière, Corneille, Racine, Regnard, Destouches, Crébillon, Voltaire se soit rassasiée de leurs chef d'œuvres au point de leur préférer des productions dont tout le mérite consiste en un jargon brillant, en un amas de tableaux accumulés, de situations forcées, invraisemblables, et dans lesquelles le goût, la Nature et la vérité sont blessés à chaque page. Cette révolution, qui s'est opérée presque subitement, tient à plusieurs causes dont nous allons entreprendre de développer quelques-unes.¹

Likewise, in 1782 an administrative memorandum at the Opéra spoke of an epoch of revolution in music since 1774, and in 1783 another saw it as truly a revolution in musical taste.²

But questions immediately arise as to how similar the movements or their consequences were in the two theaters. How might we compare the august canonic repertoires which evolved in the two theaters? How much did new works compete with the canonic repertory in the two theaters either before or after the 1770s? What role did public taste play in the crises which came about, and were they resolved significantly in either case?

I. The Concept of Canon

Let us examine three theoretical approaches suitable for defining canon formation. First, Aby Warburg avoided imposing post-romantic assumptions upon historical objects when he argued that medieval paintings survived in public places with a *Nachleben* (afterlife) which denoted respect or honor but did not involve written aesthetic articulation. Georges Didi-Huberman, the recent interpreter of Warburg's thinking, suggested that such an afterlife might eventually experience a reawakening and reinterpretation within written discourse.³ Thus the operas of Jean-Baptiste Lully were given little written aesthetic articulation while enjoying an assumed order of canonic respect, such as is best understood in Warburg's terms. Attacks upon their increasing antiquity generated a succession of disputes about the comparative value of French and Italian opera but even then their recognition came about chiefly by reaction rather than positive articulation.⁴

Frank Kermode's writings can also help us understand historically how both the Opéra and the Comédie-Française developed parallel canons. In *The Classic: Literary Images of Permanence and Change*, Kermode argued that Augustanism, the new face of classicism, evolved into "a secularized, a demythologized imperialism; or, as Eliot would say, we are now dealing with a relative, not an absolute classic."⁵ As a result, he concluded, by the end of the seventeenth century "neoclassicism succeeds imperialism"—or rather, it is "a second-order classicism." Thus, because the reverence for ancient literature became seriously weakened in its authority, the way opened up for strong canons to emerge for works in native languages. We can see a consequence of this profound change going on in Corneille's recognition in the course of the dispute over *Le Cid*. What began as a conventional literary dispute ended up establishing a new order of high canonic standing for him and subsequently for Molière, Racine, and, in some minds, Jean-François Regnard. Historical commentary on the roots of the canon, as we shall see, was attempted by a succession of writers up to Louis-Sébastien Mercier, who though known for his harsh critique of the Comédie-Française, labelled writers from Étienne Jodelle to Jean Rotrou as "les vrais fondateurs de nôtre scène" in his 1773 essay *Du théâtre, ou Nouvel essai sur l'art dramatique*.⁶

By comparison, an even deeper-rooted change had to occur for music to gain literary recognition of a high canon. Writings on music had been limited to scientific or philosophical theory, and music theory

tended not to be accessible to amateurs. Rather as happened in the case of Corneille, it was literary disputes over the virtues of French and Italian opera which began opening up musical commentary to the general public. Yet the writings produced by the several *querelles* remained largely polemical, essentially defensive in nature. In my view, what might be regarded as self-consciously evaluative music criticism, comparable to what became central in the early nineteenth century, did not develop in France until the 1780s.⁷

To explain how a self-conscious order of canon can arise we turn to the model set forth by Hans Robert Jauss, who argued that a *horizon of expectations* emerges around works admired for originality and novelty on a new high level. His argument applies historical evidence to show how such an intellectual authority can evolve “from simple reception to critical understanding, from passive to active reception, from recognized aesthetic norms to a new production that surpasses them.”⁸ By this notion, the public develops a set of expectations which must be accomplished on a long-term basis, while being compared with potentially rival new works. Mercier suggested just such a process: “Les successeurs de Corneille, sans avoir le même ton, la même profondeur, ont choisi de semblables sujets; mais ils n’ont pas conservé à l’art la même énergie.”⁹ Still, opinion may change over time about a canonic figure. I have argued that we should speak of the *incipient* nature of canonic authority during the lifetime of a highly regarded composer, a term appropriate to Voltaire’s plays at least from the mid-1760s. Such a reputation may, of course, prove temporary, when a disillusionment arises in regard to such a figure, as happened most strikingly to Louis Spohr and Giacomo Meyerbeer in the course of the nineteenth century.¹⁰

Moreover, an established canonic reputation can be challenged by changes in artistic style and public taste, bringing a crisis which might usher in significant reinterpretation or end the canonic status of the composer. The latter such alternative can be seen in the worlds of music and theater in France during the 1770s and 1780s. On the one hand, the old repertory at the Opéra came entirely to an end—save, ironically *Le Devin du village* by Rousseau, last performed in 1829—and was replaced by works of Gluck, Nicolò Piccinni, and Giovanni Sacchini.¹¹ Despite the acrimony which broke out during the process of change, the Opéra built up a popular new repertory and obtained stronger internal organization, thereby surviving through the revolutionary epoch. On the other hand, the canon of the Comédie-Française entered into a period of deep crisis in the 1780s, since even though works from Corneille to Regnard were still performed, controversial new pieces by young authors sparked a severe reaction from conservatives. During the Revolution only Molière among the four great figures earned major public attention.¹² Indeed the Comédie-Française itself closed for a period of time and was stripped of its monopoly, delaying any broad renewal of the canonic repertory for another decade.

The most basic difference between the canonic repertories in the two theaters was that the Comédie-Française featured a broader selection of such authors than did the Opéra. Not only did Corneille,

Molière, and Racine still comprise a high canon, but also seventeen respected authors who wrote prior to about 1720 were still performed fairly often. By contrast, the high canon at the Opéra comprised only a few more composers other than Lully and Rameau in the 1750s and 1760s, and these composers had been born at least twenty years later than the parallel figures at the Comédie-Française. One is tempted to see a parallel between the historical roles played by Rameau and Voltaire, since each one rivaled the greatest early figure (Lully and Corneille, respectively) and in effect updated the canonic tradition in their respective theaters, producing what we might call a new *horizon of expectation*. Still, we shall see that performances of works by Lully and Rameau made up a much larger part of the repertory in the 1780s than was the case with any of the four playwrights save Molière.

What terms did the two theaters develop for old repertory? Musical culture tended to find words by which to identify and thereby honor the foremost composers. By 1700 British writers were referring to *ancient music* to denote compositions from the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, and from around 1770 the term was broadened to mean any work more than several decades old. French musical commentary likewise began referring to *la musique ancienne* from the 1750s, specifically operas of that age. But I have found no comparable terminology for the playwrights honored by commentators on French theater, least of all the term *classical*, which did not seem to be used frequently though later critics did apply it. Simply naming the figures of the high canon together suggested such an honorary category. We will see how many playwrights from the late seventeenth century appeared frequently in the repertory of the Comédie-Française right through the early years of the Revolution of 1789. Still, it is significant that commentators avoided finding a generic term for the high canonic figures, perhaps because there were so many other figures of that time who were not being thus honored.

The government established unusually restrictive monopolies for the Opéra and the Comédie-Française. In the long term, royal edicts protected them from becoming entrepreneurial theater companies of the sort that toured Europe, usually being given greater opportunities to entertain the local nobles, bourgeois, and professionals. The Académie française differed in this regard; even though also established under royal edict, it did not have direct means by which to control the book business or the press. Writers of books and pamphlets, including the best-known *philosophes*, functioned to a large extent as entrepreneurs in an increasingly open market, the state controlling them much less than the two theaters. For that matter, plays and operas were not influenced as much by Enlightenment thought as were religion, science, or philosophy. Voltaire apart, not that many playwrights actively took up the cudgels for enlightened causes such as religion or free speech. Likewise, musical life as a whole experienced a slow, and in some respects problematic, relationship with enlightened thinking. The intellectual identity of the Opéra remained close to the traditions of state culture, and the *philosophes* did not interact with it very much until the *querelle des bouffons* of 1752-53. It is indicative that Rousseau, the *philosophe* most closely associated with the Opéra, was the most idiosyncratic of such figures.¹³ Indeed, the writer usually credited with originating modern

theatrical criticism was Julien-Louis Geoffroy, Élie-Catherine Fréron's successor at the *Année littéraire*, who began publishing articles on plays and operas in the 1780s and invented the *feuilleton* with the *Journal de l'Empire* in 1800-1814.¹⁴ A conservative tradition in musical culture has likewise been disclosed by Olivia Bloechl, whose recent book on the "political imaginary" in *tragédie lyrique* shows how the authority of the monarchy was conceived in these works with little implication of the Nation or influence by enlightened thinking.¹⁵

The most important difference between the Opéra and the Comédie-Française was their relationships with European cultural life as a whole. The canonic plays of the seventeenth century were performed widely in Europe, even though it has become clear that not all that many people understood the French.¹⁶ English plays were translated for performance in Paris fairly often, and considerable interaction occurred between the two countries, as Maximillian Novak has shown, highlighting comparisons of Corneille with Shakespeare.¹⁷ By contrast, only twice, briefly, did Paris experience the Italian companies which swept across Europe as the cosmopolitan standard of elite culture. The Opéra remained as the only major theater which held off the Italian onslaught, drawing much derision from visitors by the 1750s, especially for the old repertory called *la musique ancienne*. In the summer of 1752-53 an Italian company dazzled the public while the Opéra troupe performed at Fontainebleau, but the experiment was dropped eighteen months later, probably because the three subsidized theaters were wary of competition.¹⁸

The crisis which occurred at the Opéra in the 1770s brought an entirely new international framework to French opera. The operas by Gluck involved a hybridized style drawn from Italian, Viennese, and French origins, though always considered to be French opera. Yet the replacement of the old repertory with the new was accepted by most of the public, bringing a new era to the Opéra. Moreover, the Crown changed the administration of the Opéra from a functionary responsible for profit or loss to an official appointed by the Department of the *Menus Plaisirs*. The troupe's overseers granted the tenured performers greater collective authority in the affairs of the company when they established an annual meeting.¹⁹ Subsequent commentators saw the decade as leap forward for the institution in terms of effective administration and development of repertory.

By comparison, the Comédie-Française underwent a protracted general crisis. As early as the mid-1760s criticism appeared against the theater's royal monopoly on spoken French drama, and by the late 1780s a movement of opinion arose demanding the end of that privilege.²⁰ That point of view was strengthened by the movement calling for better property rights for authors, led by Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais. Arguably, these two tendencies contributed to a rise in the performance of new works from living playwrights, which occurred in the 1780s. Nevertheless, the high canon, or old plays in general, did not come into great disrepute, as happened at the Académie royale de musique. Respect for the plays of Corneille, Molière, and Racine remained strong; indeed, it is significant that

Mercier remained devoted to them and did not argue in so many words that living authors should be favored. The deep resistance expressed by traditionally-minded critics and members of the public against new genres, especially *le drame*, also hindered acceptance of new works by younger authors. We will see how deeply divided critics and the public were on the question of new genres.

II. The Decline of *la musique ancienne*

In 1984 I published a study of the old repertory at the Opéra which mapped out its progress, decline, and disappearance in quantitative terms, and recently Michel Noiray has made a major contribution to this subject.²¹ Central to the survival of the old repertory was the eleven-and-a-half-month schedule at the Opéra which was in place by the 1740s and probably much earlier, a convention which existed nowhere else in Europe. Solveig Serre has deepened analysis of the genres and schedule during the year in a recent volume, and Victoria Johnson developed a sociological approach to interpreting the theater's conservatism.²² Figure 1 shows the extent to which the works by Lully and Rameau dominated the repertory in that time. The final performances of works by the former came in 1770 and 1779; the very last work of *musique ancienne* came with the latter's *Castor et Pollux* in 1785.

Figure 1. Operas by Lully and Rameau at the Académie royale de musique, 1756-57 to 1781-82.
Source: *Journal de l'Opéra*, NUMP 10137 (1671-1987), Bibliothèque de l'Opéra, BnF.

The long survival of the old repertory was unique in the international opera world. From at least 1710 Italian opera predominated in virtually all capital cities, serving as the cosmopolitan norm in music and theater for the entertainment of the elite classes. No works other than Giovanni Pergolesi's *La serva padrona* (1733) were performed more than ten years in a row.²³ By contrast, even though visiting

troupes brought Italian works in 1729 and 1752-54, the Opéra did not produce a work by a foreign-born composer until Gluck devised a hybridized kind of theater from 1774. Lully had moved to France at age thirteen in 1646 and proceeded to develop what was agreed to be a distinctively French form of musical theater. The Opéra therefore became the only major European theater where no Italian opera was produced, remaining isolated from trends elsewhere in England and on the continent. The situation seems to have arisen largely from resistance to foreign troupes or works by the emerging Opéra-Comique and indeed the Comédie-Française.²⁴

Figure 2. Performances of works by dead composers as a percentage of total performances by season, 1756-57 to 1786-87.
Source: *Journal de l'Opéra*, NUMP 10137 (1671-1987), Bibliothèque de l'Opéra, BnF.

Figure 2 indicates the variable proportion of old works between the 1750s and 1780s, showing that in only two seasons between 1756-57 and 1773-74 did less than 42 percent of the evenings at the Opéra offer a work by a dead composer, with the norm close to 60 percent. The chart for the decade after 1755 shows a high point of 94 and 100 percent works by dead composers; these peaks are explained in large part by the passing of Rameau in 1764, shifting his popular works into the category of those created by dead performers. By 1770 some sections in operas by Lully were replaced with new ones, but he was always credited for the opera.²⁵ With the arrival of Gluck at the Opéra in 1774, the proportion of dead composers steadily decreased: the percentage dropped to twenty or so, then rose briefly, chiefly thanks to Giovanni Pergolesi's *La serva padrona*. It then declined to only a few percent in the early 1780s.

Figure 3. Performance frequency for some operas composed between 1674 and 1727, 1757-58 to 1773-74.

Source: Michel Noiray, "The Practical and Symbolic Functions of l'ancienne musique at the Paris Opéra before Gluck," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Operatic Canon*, forthcoming.

Figure 3, offering data provided by Michel Noiray, shows the evolution of new works composed under the influence of Lully through 1727, prior to the premiere of Rameau's *Hippolyte et Aricie* in 1733, which was regularly performed from 1747 through 1773.²⁶ Noiray's analysis proves how frequently works not only by Lully but also by composers who were thought to continue his school of French opera were revived. By contrast, in Italy it was rare for a work to hold the stage longer than five years, save for the idiosyncratic case of *La serva padrona*, which lasted into the nineteenth century. From this data we see that during the fifteen seasons from 1756-57 through 1772-73 there were 927 performances of seventeen works written between 1674 and 1727. That meant that in a season on average about 58 of the roughly 150 evenings included a work of such antiquity. Even though two or sometimes three works were represented on any one night, only one usually dated to the pre-1728 period. It is valuable to point out here that the contribution by Derek Miller to the Comédie-Française Registers Project web site, "[Four Perspectives on the Comédie-Française Repertoire](#)," shows how long and how frequently plays first performed in the 1680s remained in the repertory of that theater over a hundred years later.

Noiray's research, seen in Figure 3, explains the survival of the old repertory as a set of dogmatic assumptions about the Opéra which differentiated the works of Lully and his immediate successors from those of Rameau. These composers followed the practices of Lully closely in works they composed from his death in 1687 through 1720s: Pascal Collasse (1649-1709), André-Cardinal Destouches

(1672-1749), André Campra (1660-1744), and Joseph Mouret (1682-1738). Even though the operas of Rameau became quite popular and were often performed, musical commentary narrowly revered the Lullian tradition right up to the end of the 1760s, aided by policies of the tightly-knit administration of the Opéra. The public remained deeply supportive of the old repertory, comparing the styles by which leading singers performed their favorite numbers. Noiray concluded that “though the repertory evolved in progressive fashion, its process of accumulation was not simply a collection of pieces, but rather an internal modelling of music which after a hundred years became so unwieldy that it ended up breaking from within when under the pressure of change.”²⁷ The situation was the exact opposite at the King’s Theatre in London, where Italian composers and genres were favored almost to the exclusion of anything of British origin. Few works lasted in that repertory more than five years until the end of the century, when a few *opera buffa* productions began to stay around much longer.

The epochal French disputes over Italian *versus* French opera in 1733 and 1752-54 failed to dislodge the old works ; the *Mercure de France* began condemning foreign operas as subversive to “the national genre” or “our national music.” As Noiray and Elisabeth Cook have pointed out, those who supported Italian music, most notably Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm, were of foreign extraction or had opportunistic motivation derived from the political dispute over government attacks on Jansenist preachers.²⁸ During this time, operas by Rameau gained strong public support and themselves became part of the old repertory, so that by his death in 1764 Lully and he were seen as twin icons of *ancien opéra*.

The transformation of repertory stimulated a *querelle*, arguably the nastiest of them all, between supporters of Gluck and Piccinni. To some extent the debate also touched on the legitimacy of *la musique ancienne*. Whereas those loyal to local composers vilified the abandonment of old works, the supporters of Gluck and Piccinni took up verbal arms against one another in a dispute which had little intellectual substance. The episode formed part of the fragmentation of the world of the *philosophes* which arose from desperate competition among young figures to gain prominence as Rousseau, Diderot, and Voltaire passed away.²⁹ Still, the works of Gluck, Piccinni, and Giovanni Sacchini gradually emerged as a new canon which survived for the next half a century, taking on a role similar to that of the operas by Lully and Rameau. Critics interpreted this changeover in musical repertory and taste as an event in *les progrès de la musique*, a term explaining the cyclical nature of cultural time by which musical styles rose and fell in public popularity.

III. The Repertory of Canonic Authors at the Comédie-Française

A crisis over repertory and taste can be seen in the evolution of the Comédie-Française in the decades prior to the outbreak of revolution in 1789. The Revolution itself made the institution deeply vulnerable to political instability in the larger community. Logan J. Connors has recently shown how commentary on the Comédie-Française reflects the growing authority of the public in the 1760s, establishing a judicious relationship between the monopolistic institution and its diverse public.³⁰ This tenuous relationship began to break down in the early 1780s, as critics began challenging the taste of the public and the monopoly of the Comédie-Française was questioned by pamphleteers.

Jean-Claude Bonnet and David A. Bell have explained these issues more generally, suggesting that for all the grandeur of Louis XIV's court, little sense of national pride for French literary or artistic traditions emanated from that milieu.³¹ As Bonnet put it, "les français se sont montrés beaucoup plus oublieux envers leurs gloires nationales, parce qu'ils sont plus légers de nature, si bien que le moment de faire réparation est venu."³² Indeed, even though Corneille, Molière, Lully, and Rameau were proudly celebrated within their appropriate institutions, little broader cultural consciousness emerged uniting them with any sense of the monarchy or the state through statues, celebrations, or government-sponsored publications. Bell has likewise shown that national consciousness had remained weak, especially compared with the British situation, until the ravages of the Seven Years War raised tough new political issues and provoked the modern era of nationalistic thinking.³³ Indeed, let us remember that the word *nation* had long been applied chiefly in the plural, as seen in the medieval notion of *les nations*. Through this terminology groups derived from different regions were identified through the Latin terms *populus*, *gens*, and *natio*, designating the identities which had long existed in town or cultural institutions, rivaling one another but none of them acting in any way as agent of state.³⁴ Arguably, that ancient concept of *les Nations* undergirded the rivalry between French and Italian opera in the eighteenth century. But from the 1760s an aggressive new genre of political ideology, *protectionist nationalism*, arose as a tool to argue the authority of a region's music against that of encroaching outsiders.³⁵

A conception of canon arose on a much deeper level at the Comédie-Française than at the Académie royale de musique. By 1700 or so playgoers and specialists linked Corneille, Racine, and Molière as having demonstrated standards "of the first order," as Ronald Tobin has defined it.³⁶ That was the case even though Racine had challenged Molière in what was then called "*la querelle du théâtre*", a significant predecessor to what later occurred in musical debate.³⁷ The commentary of Voltaire further deepened the canonic framework, even though he challenged Corneille's aesthetic vocabulary as antique. As Magali Soulages argued, Voltaire in his 1764 essay *Commémoration sur Corneille* came close to "sacralizing" Racine's poetry at the same time that he attacked the antique language he saw in

Corneille's plays.³⁸ By contrast, musical commentary on the operas of Lully and Rameau did not often go beyond either congratulatory or opportunistic polemical vocabulary. A milestone in musical commentary came in 1773 when an article, author unnamed, appeared in the *Mercure de France* which offered a detailed analysis of *Castor & Pollux* by Rameau, including suggestions for changes in future productions of the work.³⁹ Note that the piece was not a performance review, but rather an expository discussion of a musical work that had few earlier parallels in the monthly journal.

IV. Eighteenth-Century Analyses of the Comédie-Française Repertory

We can gain a broad perspective of attitudes toward old and new repertory at the Comédie-Française by examining three works on the subject published between 1735 and 1752. The authors—Pierre-François Godard de Beauchamps; the brothers François and Claude Parfaict; and Charles de Fieux, Chevalier de Mouhy—approached the subject with quite different publics and literary objectives in mind. As a group they drew on the critical discourse about the theater which had developed since the controversy surrounding *Le Cid* in 1637. Commentators argued that this clash began the formation of a high canon of plays by Corneille, Molière, and Racine. The three eighteenth-century works identify a French theatrical tradition thought to have begun with Étienne Jodelle (1523-73), followed most significantly by Alexandre Hardy (c. 1570/1572-1632), and Jean Rotrou (1609-50).

Godard de Beauchamps (1689-1761) published what amounted to a bibliography of authors, plays, and performance dates, initially disclaiming any critical purpose to the book. In the section on Racine, he insisted that “je me suis fait une loi, non-seulement de ne rien dire qui puisse offenser les auteurs vivans, mais même les morts, dont la mémoire est aussi respectable que celle de Racine.”⁴⁰ Yet the three-page section on Corneille argues that *Le Cid* went far beyond his earlier plays in dramatic quality and in so doing transformed dramatic life, arguing that henceforth “il n'était pas possible de choisir une époque plus brillante.” Indeed, in places the book enters into gossip stories about the authors and the scandals surrounding them, most significantly against Alexandre Hardy, the most prolific French playwright in the early seventeenth century. Even Corneille came under fire because his plays served to “alarmer ceux qui travaillant pour le théâtre prévirent que [s]a réputation naissante allait obscurcir la leur.”⁴¹ Curiously enough, the section on Molière offers nothing beyond a list of his works and their performance dates.

The Parfaict brothers (François 1698-1753; and Claude 1701-77) developed a more detailed but also more substantively critical work, the *Histoire du théâtre françois, depuis son origine jusqu'à present* published in fifteen volumes between 1735 and 1749. Hans Finke argues that the close relationship between the brothers and ex-Jesuit Élie-Catherine Fréron was part of the growing division between conservative

and enlightened thinking at that time, bringing the more traditional writers to emphasize features of the kingdom's cultural life.⁴² One can argue that the *Histoire du théâtre françois* established a landmark in canonic discourse about the theater, moving beyond simple bibliography and gossip to trace the evolution of French theater in critical and historical terms. Even though the fifteen volumes endeavor to show the primacy of the high canon, the texts credit other playwrights for their significant contributions. The preface to the first volume attacks the competing books, most of all that of Godard de Beauchamps, for lacking any sophistication in analyzing the aesthetic and critical primacy of the high canon:

ces flateuses idées [qui] se trouvent totalement confondues lorsqu'on consulte les Histoires générales & particulières des chef-d'œuvres de Messieurs Corneille & Racine, & ceux de l'inimitable Molière, portèrent à sa plus haute perfection. Quel heureux canevas à remplir ! & qu'il est facile avec un pareil fonds d'instruire & d'amuser les Lecteurs ! (I: iii-iv).

The critical commentary offered by the *Parfaict* brothers is quite nuanced, open-ended, and in places notably harsh. Their discussion of Corneille and Racine, sometimes drawing on the writings of Fontenelle, abounds in subtle comments: Racine is described as “un génie moins élevé, mais plus sage, [qui] prit place auprès de ce grandhomme”, and Molière is seen as “paîtri, animé, & conduit par la simple & belle Nature” (I: xxii). Other authors are examined in some detail: the critique of Hardy is more substantive than in Godard de Beauchamps, and Jean de Rotrou (1609-50) is seen as “une imitation assez servile de la Comédie de Plaute qui porte ce nom ; à l'exception que les femmes y paraissent d'avantage, l'intrigue en est simple, l'idée très-comique” (IV: 530). Comments on other figures of the seventeenth century are discerning ; Paul Scarron (1610-1660) is seen as “ce singulier génie. . . [qui] avait ses défauts, mais il en fit disparaître beaucoup d'autres qui étaient dans les Comédies de son temps” (VI: xii). The brothers also appreciated the leading recent author, Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon (1674-1762), speaking of the *succès* of his tragedy *Rhadamiste et Zenobie* (1711) as “un succès si éclatant [qu'il] était en effet bien capable de mettre le sceau à la réputation de l'illustre Auteur de cet Ouvrage” (XV: 80).

The third author, Charles de Fieux, Chevalier de Mouhy, wrote novels rather than plays and at times assisted Voltaire in collecting subject materials, sometimes writing under the latter's name. In 1752 he published a guidebook to the repertory of the Comédie-Française, aimed at the general public rather than learned commentators: *Tablettes dramatiques, contenant l'abrégé de l'histoire du théâtre françois, l'établissement des théâtres à Paris, un dictionnaire des pièces, et l'abrégé des auteurs et des acteurs*.⁴³ The book suggests the evolving crisis by which living authors could not compete easily with the massive repertory of old works which still drew the public steadily. Mouhy pays remarkably little attention to living authors, since the great majority of the book details works by old or deceased authors, dividing them into *auteurs bien connus* and *auteurs peu connus*. The tone tends to be less harsh on the second-

ranking authors than that found in the work of the Parfaicts; Hardy, for example, is credited as “un des premiers Restaurateurs du Théâtre François.” By comparison, the section on les *auteurs vivants en 1752* is simply a list of names, perhaps suggesting that Mouhy wanted to avoid taking sides about writers he saw on a daily basis. One suspects that Beaumarchais was appalled when he looked at this book at age twenty or so.

It is revealing, too, that the Comédie-Française and the French economy went in opposite directions economically during the 1730s and 1740s. Claude Alasseur pointed out that, while the economy was growing in that period, the theater was contracting in public support.⁴⁴ It is thus significant that these works on French theater history emerged at a time of significant decline, both in box office receipts and in participation by canonic authors. Figures 4 and 5 show that both receipts and performances for the three seventeenth-century authors began dropping in the 1710s, revived somewhat in the next decade, but slumped greatly during the 1740s. While Voltaire’s receipts grew in the 1710s and 1720s, his performance numbers matched with those of the other three authors through the 1740s. Even though none of the three works mentioned these tendencies, the authors surely were concerned about what was happening to the theater, and what that meant for the future of the high canon specifically.

	Corneille (Pierre)	Molière (Jean-Ba...)	Racine (Jean)	Voltaire (François...)	Somme des r...
1710	303,276.55	351,852.38	277,496.31	59,013.00	991,638.24
1720	342,018.75	323,911.10	316,583.72	123,957.50	1,106,471.07
1730	115,568.60	133,151.50	142,618.00	278,910.50	670,248.60
1740	138,338.50	168,562.50	133,323.50	391,178.50	831,403.00
1750	7,313.00	2,129.00	520.00	33,824.00	43,786.00
Somme des r...	906,515.40	979,606.47	870,541.54	886,883.50	3,643,546.91

Figure 4. Total receipts for performances of plays by major authors, 1710-1750.
Source: [Cross-Tab Browser](#), Comédie-Française Registers Project.

	Corneille (Pierre)	Molière (Jean-Ba...)	Racine (Jean)	Voltaire (François...)	Représentatio...
1710	321	700	322	34	1,377
1720	257	637	324	71	1,289
1730	139	345	194	170	848
1740	184	477	161	277	1,099
1750	4	6	1	15	26
Représentatio...	905	2,165	1,002	567	4,639

Figure 5. Total performances of plays by major authors, 1710-1750.
Source: [Cross-Tab Browser](#), Comédie-Française Registers Project.

Performance data changed significantly by the 1760s: Molière's comedies began outdistancing the plays of Corneille and Racine, and Voltaire's popularity likewise surged ahead, dominating the figures of performances in most seasons until the Revolution.

V. Tendencies Toward Change in Repertory, 1780-1793

In effect, at the end of the Old Regime many more authors and plays survived from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries at the Comédie-Française than at the Opéra. A major difference can be seen between the repertories at the two theaters in that the former involved twice as many performances of plays by authors in the high canon, along with a large, diverse group of respected deceased playwrights. Whereas eleven successors to Lully were represented in the Opéra repertory, almost all of their works post-dated those of Regnard; by contrast the Comédie-Française offered plays by many other authors born by the middle of the seventeenth century.

Figure 6. Performances of plays in the “high” canon at the Comédie-Française, 1780-81 to 1792-93.
(Source: Comédie-Française Registers Project)

Figure 6 shows the performance frequency of plays from the authors seen to be the high canon, including Voltaire, from 1780-81 through 1792-93: 1531 all told. Likewise, Figure 7 shows the numbers of performances given in the same seasons for seventeen playwrights who were born prior to 1684, and in most cases before 1650. In all cases their plays appeared well before the turn of the century. The enduring respect for the canonic authors is suggested by a remark made in the *Correspondance littéraire secrète* in 1785 that one can speak of “les jugemens des trente-deux immortels” in the history of the Comédie-Française.⁴⁵ One can nonetheless easily exaggerate how often plays by the four most honored authors were performed at the Comédie-Française. Even though their pieces appeared more

or less regularly, only Molière and Voltaire could be said to dominate the repertoire. Henri Lagrave reported that between 1715-20 and 1745-50 the percentage of performances of plays by Corneille and Racine had gone from 30 to 11 percent.⁴⁶

Figure 7. Performances of plays written by selected authors born before 1684, 1780-81 to 1792-93.
(Source: Comédie-Française Registers Project)

The names in Figure 7 include numerous major figures in French literature, either in the worlds of poetry or the theater. Among them we see Jean de La Fontaine, who was also revered for his fables, and Philippe Quinault, the famed author of opera librettos. It is suggestive that Quinault's comedies recurred almost every season until 1780 but disappeared at the same point as the operas involving his *livrets* were abandoned at the Opéra. Among the playwrights from Molière's generation in Figure 7 we see Thomas Corneille, Paul Scarron, and Marc-Antoine Legrand, the latter gaining remarkably as many as 198 performances in the time period concerned here. The genres employed by these writers varied quite a bit: whereas Hilaire-Bernard de Longepierre produced some of the most serious tragedies and included learned notes in his editions, Paul Scarron was much admired for the high quality of his burlesques throughout the eighteenth century. About half of the seventeen playwrights also worked as actors, including several from noble families, and some went abroad with travelling troupes.

The canonic tradition at the Comédie-Française moved in an unsure direction after the time of Racine and Regnard. By far the best known playwright outside of the high canon was Florent Carton de Dancourt (1661-1725), whose short *comédies de mœurs*, termed *petites pièces*, followed the genre initiated by Molière and turned up in the boulevard theaters.⁴⁷ All told, Dancourt's plays were performed 414 times from 1780 to 1793. Having been performed 5556 times all told, his plays stood far from Molière's total (21,647), but fairly close to that of Racine (6753) and just above that of Corneille's (5241). Since then works by Musset and Regnard have been performed somewhat more often.⁴⁸ Born in a family from the lesser nobility that claimed titles of *sieur* and *écuyer*, Dancourt went against his parents' wishes by marrying a woman active in the Comédie-Française; he joined the troupe as actor as well as author when he was twenty-four.⁴⁹ He counted among the successors to Molière who struggled for recognition at a time when the master's plays dominated the theater. In 1701, for example, an observer cast great scorn on his plays in a satire naming him as *Danthile*:

Le génie des poètes mal récompensés, produit lentement et ne produira bientôt plus. Celui de *Danthile* largement payé, produit trop et ne produit que du médiocre. Enfin le goût des bonnes comédies se perd : quand on cherchera à y revenir on aura oublié l'art d'assaisonner le burlesque et le sérieux, le grave et le badin, la liberté du Théâtre et la décence des mœurs.⁵⁰

Yet two decades after his death a contributor to the *Mercure de France* cited him among the most distinguished successors to Molière and regretted that some observers no longer recognized the merits of his works:

La tradition théâtrale nous apprend qu'*Armide*, ce chef d'œuvre de l'incomparable Lulli n'eut pas d'abord la réputation qu'il méritait.... L'inestimable *Misanthrope* de Molière énuia nos pauvres aieux.... Ils sifflèrent le début du *Grondeur* [by D.-A. de Brueys & J. Palaprat, 1791] qui depuis a toujours fort divertie le Parterre. Ils ont méprisé hautement bien des petites pièces de Dancourt que nous revoyons tous les jours avec plaisir.⁵¹

Dancourt's biographer André Blanc offered a balanced judgment of Dancourt's plays, arguing that they continued to enliven what went on at the Comédie-Française but did not influence dramatic practices significantly.⁵² Likewise, similar plays by Marc-Antoine Legrand (1673-1728) were performed about half as often as those of Dancourt and remained onstage into the 1780s. It is notable that Legrand also wrote works for the Comédie-Italienne, the Théâtre de la Foire, and the Opéra-Comique.⁵³

The main playwright who achieved special renown after Regnard was the long-lived Crébillon père. Among the nine tragedies Crébillon wrote for the Comédie-Française between 1705 and 1745, it was *Électre* (1708) and *Rhadamiste et Zénobie* (1711) which made his reputation. After being elected to the Académie française in 1731 he became a royal censor and received a pension through Madame de

Pompadour. His pieces were performed 481 times there between 1705 and 1780 and 44 times from 1780 to 1793. Often cited with the four great authors, Crébillon developed a rivalry with Voltaire in which some observers saw him as the victor. Mercier indeed made a glowing citation of Crébillon in *Du théâtre*: “Les comédiens, riches d’un fond étonnant, héritiers des Corneille, des Racine, des Crébillon, des Voltaire, comme s’ils étaient leurs enfans, ont ce dédain & cette paresse que donnent l’opulence & la faveur.”⁵⁴ This comment is notable since Mercier expressed reservations about the plays of Racine and essentially dismissed Regnard as a model for emulation.

This paper can make only limited conclusions in regard to the extraordinary roles which Voltaire held in repertory, reputation, and canon at the Comédie-Française. None of the authors we have just discussed, save Crébillon, could be seen to have joined the traditional high canon, even though the numbers of performances achieved by Dancourt or Phillipe Néricault Destouches were very high. Indeed, as we have seen in the three theatrical dictionaries, speculation about successors to Racine or Regnard more or less stopped by mid-century, save for the case of Voltaire, whose evolving reputation prior to his death might be seen as leading to incipient canonicity. Lauren Clay and Pierre Frantz are among the few scholars to confront this question significantly. In [her contribution to this volume](#), Clay shows that from his first play of 1718 Voltaire became “the runaway bestselling author of his era” both in numbers of performances and money taken in at the till. Thus did so politically controversial a figure succeed in reviving the tragic genre, attracting people to buy better, more expensive seats from which to see his plays, and thereby contributing to the tendency by which tragedies were now occasionally presented as Play 2 as well as Play 1. We shall see how Antoine-Marin Lemierre followed in Voltaire’s footsteps, focusing his career on tragedy and applying certain common philosophical principles.

At what date can we then identify Voltaire’s plays, chiefly the tragedies, taking on some kind of canonic status? [Frantz demonstrates](#) that it was the works written and produced in the 1740s and 1750s which established Voltaire’s special status within the theater world: “Ses grandes œuvres sont presque toutes écrites entre 1718 (*Œdipe*) et 1760 (*Tancrède*), leur entrée au répertoire est progressive mais leur ‘installation’ est postérieure à 1760.” One might conclude that Voltaire’s reputation took on an incipient canonic status at that time, not only because he was a living, functioning figure in the theater work, but also because it was uncommon for plays to engage in political controversy, a tactic not usually thought appropriate at the Comédie-Française. As Pierre Frantz and Logan Connors have demonstrated, Voltaire’s rise to high status explains why Charles Palissot de Montenoy, supported by Fréron, attacked Voltaire through *Les Philosophes*, drawing a counterattack from the latter in *Le Café ou l’Écossaise*.⁵⁵ The trend toward political engagement of playwrights expanded five years later when Pierre-Laurent de Belloy flaunted a strident form of nationalism in *Le Siège de Calais*, and Beaumarchais pushed this tactic to the utmost with his succession of much-discussed theater works from the 1770s.⁵⁶ Connors has likewise shown that nothing comparable to the controversies of 1760 and

1765 had occurred in the theater world, involving wide ranges of cultural and political division, even beyond that surrounding the 1637 première of *Le Cid*. We can therefore conclude that Voltaire's rise into canonicity occurred in a context for which there was no direct precedent.

The unique role which Voltaire played involved blunt criticism of Corneille's plays, found in his 1764 *Commentaires sur le théâtre de Pierre Corneille, et autres morceaux intéressans*. As Carine Barbafieri has shown, Voltaire thought the plays were too complicated and set in an antique language, making them "trop raisonneur et trop peu pathétique."⁵⁷ Voltaire indeed went so far as to omit Corneille in the often-cited letter of 1755: "J'aimerais mieux des détails sur Racine et Despréaux, sur Quinault, Lulli, Molière, Lebrun, Bossuet, Poussin, Descartes, etc."⁵⁸ All of which complicated the effort to publish a complete set of Corneille's thirty-two plays in 1764. A report in the *Journal de Paris* in 1786 mentioned "le grand Corneille, qui, à la vérité, n'avait pas encore pénétré dans les profondeurs de son Art."⁵⁹

An indication of the different aspects of Voltaire's reputation came when a plan was made just after his triumphant return to Paris in January 1778 to mount a plaque in his honor at the Comédie-Française alongside those for Corneille and Racine. The Queen backed the project, but the King seems to have kept it from happening, following the resistance to the *philosophes* which was still strong at court.⁶⁰ A particular testimony to Voltaire's status in theatrical life is that three months after his death a journalist declared that no one else had had the right to criticize Corneille or Racine.⁶¹ Indeed, by 1789 repercussions of such efforts, combined with uncertainties surrounding new theatrical genres, made the whole future of his canonic standing deeply problematic at the Comédie-Française. The great plays through which the canon had evolved now lay so far back in time that swearing to the fealty of their authors became increasingly banal, especially when the institution's claim to monopoly began falling apart in 1789.

VI. A Rising Percentage of Living Authors

From 1760 pressure from both authors and the public led the Comédie-Française to routinely accept more works than it could perform, thereby driving down the number of new works presented.⁶² That unleashed a movement by which in 1777 Beaumarchais demanded that the Comédie-Française acknowledge *droits d'auteur* and *propriété littéraire* for all playwrights. At the same time, there were indications that at least part of the public wanted to see more new works, even though just how far that went within management of repertory is not entirely clear. It can be determined that somewhat more works by living authors, indeed by younger ones, were being presented in the 1780s, even though no major change in repertory occurred close to what happened at the Opéra.

Figure 8. Performances of “high” canon at the Comédie-Française per season, 1780-81 to 1792-93.
(Source: Comédie-Française Registers Project)

Despite the major parallels between the canons in the Opéra and the Comédie-Française, one has to be impressed with the durability of the much-honored repertory of works by Corneille, Molière, and Racine. Figure 8 demonstrates their stability from 1780 to 1793, a phenomenon which was paralleled by the Shakespeare tradition in Britain only in problematic, inconsistent respects. I have added the figures for Voltaire because he was by far the most performed figure who arose to canonic status in the late decades of the century. The chart combines records for Play 1 and Play 2, since Molière was the only writer whose works appeared regularly in the second half of an evening. Thus even though Voltaire’s plays appeared primarily at the start of an evening, those of Molière were performed about one-fifth more often. By the same token, even though the plays of Corneille appeared about a third less often than those of Racine, one is impressed by how often his plays were chosen. This is the case even though their language seemed antiquated to commentators such as Voltaire. The table has ambiguous implications regarding the impact of the revolution on performance of canonic works. Whereas the total plays offered did not decline significantly until 1792-93—from totals in the low 300s to 275 in 1791-92—the number of canonic works took a significant downturn in 1791-92 and 1792-93 but not before that. Likewise, [Derek Miller has shown](#) that the 1780s marked the lowest percentage of plays from the 1680s, after which that number went back up in the last two seasons.

Figure 9. Dead *versus* living authors in the Comédie-Française repertory, 1770-71 to 1792-93.
A: First play performed that evening. B: Second play performed that evening.
(Source: Comédie-Française Registers Project)

Figure 9 is significant in that it shows that the percentage of plays by dead authors decreased somewhat, though not a great deal, from 1770 to 1793. Between the seasons 1779-80 and 1785-86 that figure dropped from 75 to 71 percent, and then in 1792-93 it ended at 68 percent. The darkened two seasons in each segment show the extremes of high and low percentage, the lowest being 51 percent in 1787-88, thanks to works by Beaumarchais, Jean-François de La Harpe, and Alexandre Pieyre. Likewise, the season 1774-75 was 58 percent, due to plays by Voltaire, Beaumarchais, Charles Collé, and Claude-Joseph Dorat. Even though these figures do not show a shift to living authors nearly as much as what we see beginning to appear at the Opéra, they do indicate a gradual shift toward recent works. It is important to note, as Michele Root-Bernstein found, that authors of plays for the boulevard theaters rarely managed to make their way into the Comédie-Française.⁶³

VII. The Outbreak of Crisis at the Comédie-Française

Different from what happened at the Opéra, the canon of old works at the Comédie-Française survived through the 1780s, and no major disillusionment with it arose among the public prior to the Revolution. But public pressure for new genres did arise significantly, bringing about serious conflict as to where

the institution should go in the long run. The Comédie-Française was coming under pressure from the boulevard theaters, where shrewd entrepreneurial directors offered shows with more music and plots of a more popular nature, thereby competing successfully with the Comédie.⁶⁴ Some prominent observers disparaged the supposed plebeian public, seeing spectators encouraging new kinds of entertainment which La Harpe condemned for rejecting the Comédie-Française's high intellectual traditions.⁶⁵ Indeed, La Harpe displayed his traditionalist point of view in a sentimental evocation of the canonic repertory published to honor the opening of the troupe's new theater in 1782. Molière serves as the central character here, lauding the two tragedians by declaring:

Que des Racines, des Corneilles,
Ils venaient admirer les nombreuses merveilles,
On les représentait en de tristes réduits
Incommodes, étroits, bizarrement construits.⁶⁶

Newspapers went in significantly different directions in confronting this crisis of opinion. The *Mercure de France* made a harsh attack against the new kinds of plays and taste; the *Correspondence littéraire et secrète* broke sharply with that point of view; and cautious centrist opinions came from the *Journal de Paris* and the *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de la République des Lettres*. At the same time another front of contention opened up among those who demanded a complete rethinking of the statutory monopoly of the theater. The prospect of the institution being guided by the market for its shows won both proponents and detractors. The expanded collective identity and political self-consciousness of the parterre formed part of this process, as Jeffrey Ravel has shown.⁶⁷

The writers of the *Mercure de France* resisted strenuously public pressure to try new kinds of theatrical genres. In 1780, for example, an article declared that “[o]n se plaint tous les jours de la négligence des Comédiens. Avidé de nouveautés, le Public leur reproche de ne lui en donner que très-rarement; impatients de voir représenter leurs Ouvrages, les Auteurs voudraient hâter le moment après lequel ils soupirent.”⁶⁸ A similar warning was uttered again in 1784: “L’interêt de l’Art demande que cette révolution arrive bientôt. Le public n’est que trop accoutumé à cet amas inconcevable de tableaux, d’incidents, de situations, d’effets par le moyen desquels on éveille aujourd’hui le goût usé du plus grand nombre des Amateurs du Théâtre.”⁶⁹ This journalist—perhaps La Harpe—justifiably pointed out that new plays rarely did well, discouraging *les comédiens* from taking the risk of facing half-filled halls. Indeed, even a promising work by the long-popular playwright Charles Collé had drawn weak audiences.⁷⁰ That year four of the eight new plays had failed badly, prompting the theater's leaders to stand by reliable old works.⁷¹ A search emerged for less well known older works that might do well. Thus the theater offered *Les Troyens*, a tragedy by the little-known Jean-Baptiste de

Châteaubrun (1686-1775), that had been first presented in 1743 and revived without seeming success in 1769 and 1783.⁷²

Debate about genres and young playwrights became ever more heated as the decade progressed, bringing an outright condemnation of public taste by some critics. Respect for the wishes of *le Public* had been a central principle of theater commentary; all journalists had to acknowledge the validity of points of view different from their own. The attacks on the public show that a serious breakdown was occurring in the social framework of the theater world. In March 1788 the *Mercure de France* published an eight-page article which opened by declaring, “On se plaint beaucoup du Public, souvent on a raison; mais l’a-t-on toujours?” The article suggested in dark terms that some observers saw public taste had degenerated, lacking any coherent unity of judgement, by which it tended to “éclate[r] en murmures indécens, [et à] passe[r] de là à une licence éffrénée.” This opinion piece blamed the situation on the increasing confusion of social classes in the audience which came in part from interaction with the boulevard theaters. This new audience mix brought a confusion of tastes different from those supposedly held by the wise, clear-minded bourgeoisie of Molière’s time. Besides, this critic thought that women were largely to blame: “[l]es femmes, nous ne parlons pas de celles qui se croient savantes, n’ont guère que le tact exquis qu’elles doivent à la Nature, pour prononcer sur les Arts.”⁷³

Figure 10. Performances of plays by living authors, 1780-81 to 1792-93.
(Source: Comédie-Française Registers Project)

Figure 11. Performances of plays by living authors, 1780-81 to 1792-93.
(Source: Comédie-Française Registers Project)

The list of living authors most often-performed in the 1780s, seen in Figures 10 and 11, is interesting for its great diversity in politics, genre, and age. We have already encountered several of these figures, who came from extremes in genre (Le Mierre *versus* Boutet de Monvel), politics (Diderot and La Harpe *versus* Palissot and Le Franc de Pompignan), and age (Collin d'Harleville *versus* the cosmopolitan Italian Goldoni).⁷⁴ Even though Beaumarchais led the list with 228 performances, it is impressive that four other authors of his generation had between 167 and 107 nights in that period. The next most successful author, Le Mierre, had begun as a specialist in tragedy in 1758 with the highly successful *Hypermnestre*, whose drama some commentators see pointing toward romantic thinking.⁷⁵ In 1780 a journalist noted that Le Mierre had once again won “l’ivresse du public” for his tragedy *La Veuve du Malabar*, and in 1787 a poem on the changing of the guard at the Académie française declared how interesting it was “qu’on a placé le Mierre au rang de Crébillon.”⁷⁶ Along the way tragedies had become more numerous at the Comédie-Française, showing up as Play 2 in an evening as had rarely happened prior to the 1780s. Nevertheless, even though closely involved with Voltaire’s theatrical leadership, Le Mierre took a low-keyed role in public life, avoiding the increasingly harsh disputes which were breaking out in the theater world and also among the *philosophes* themselves. Indeed, his speech upon reception into the Académie française in 1781 was self-effacing, quite different from the bold speech

made by Michel-Jean Sedaine in 1786.⁷⁷ Even though Le Mierre followed the enlightened ideas of the time, indeed praised *l'esprit philosophique* in his *Discours*, he avoided being identified explicitly with that movement in any matters of dispute. Aside from Diderot, the author identified most specifically as a contestatory *philosophe* was La Harpe, who gained 107 performances, counting among the most frequently-played writers of the time. His *Warwick* made a big sensation at its première in 1763, winning strong support from Voltaire. As the editor of the *Mercure de France* in the 1770s and a member of the Académie française in 1776, La Harpe engaged vigorously in literary politics; he indeed led the movement to end the monopoly of the Comédie-Française in 1789-91.⁷⁸

Conservative points of views drew the public as much as philosophical ones, most notably for Palissot's *Les Philosophes*, which figures significantly on this list with 46 performances. By that time the play was deemed one of the best-constructed works by theater critics generally, as did not happen for de Belloy's play of 1765.⁷⁹ Palissot's conservatism points out the opposite points of view on the list: on the one hand, the free-thinking Mercier (70 performances) *versus* an older antagonist of Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Le Franc de Pompignan (29). Thus did philosophical controversy arrive at the Comédie-Française, reinforcing that new path to renown in a direction radically different from traditional canonic reputation. Diderot himself had fifty-three performances in this period, a modest record compared with his widely-read essays on drama.

Still, playwrights such as Michel Baron, Barthélemy Imbert, and Sebastien Chamfort followed the conventional career of avoiding literary politics by writing narrowly along traditional principles. Jean-Jacques Collin d'Harleville exemplified this choice. The youngest of the authors on the list, born in 1755 to a lawyer in Chartres, he stuck to old styles of theater writing, avoiding the acting profession while having three plays find great success with the public. His first play, *L'Inconstant*, a provocative set of contrasting comic situations, won attention from Diderot, who remarked that "C'est une pelure d'oignon brodée en paillettes d'or et d'argent."⁸⁰ Another young playwright, Alexandre Pieyre, made a splash with a skillful adaptation of an often-used title in *L'École des pères* (1787), gaining sixty-one performances and rave reviews, particularly in the *Mercure*.⁸¹ Old traditions indeed were very much alive; after its performance at Versailles, the royal printer bestowed a sword from the King on the author.⁸² The *Mercure de France* pronounced the play one of the best realizations of a traditional plot.⁸³

VIII. Crisis between Press, Theater and Public

The playwrights who were developing the genre often called *drame* primarily provoked the crisis which overwhelmed the Comédie-Française in the 1780s. The traditional critics in the press accused such writers of abandoning the long-standing genres of tragedy and comedy, thereby threatening their

institution in both theatrical and moral terms. The critics also raised questions about the authority of the public that favored such plays. In 1788 a piece in the *Mercure* declared that “[a]u théâtre, c’est la multitude qui juge, & certainement ce n’est pas la multitude qui est instruite.” Thus did critics accuse those who liked the new plays of abandoning fundamental principles laid down by Molière. The growth in the public and the influence of the boulevard theaters motivated conservative critics to viciously attack playwrights who produced shows similar to those in the new boulevard theaters, whose public this journalist saw comprising “les dernières classes de la Société.”⁸⁴

Plots focused on sexual immorality had become increasingly common in the 1770s, seen most controversially in the plays of Beaumarchais, whose depiction of sexual activity was deemed unseemly. In 1783 such criticism was directed particularly against *Le Séducteur*, a play by François-Georges Maréchal, Marquis de Bièvre, a military officer who had contributed to the Supplement of the *Encyclopédie*. The critic of the *Mercure* attacked the play as typical of “nos modernes génies” for bringing on stage “l’immoralité, ce vice si commun dans les productions de ce siècle, & dont nous avons souvent parlé.”⁸⁵

Even greater concern was voiced against productions that might be seen to evoke what we would call Hollywood-like spectacles. The writer in the *Mercure* broadly critiqued Jacques-Marie Boutet de Monvel for his 1786 play *Bayard ou le Chevalier sans peur & sans reproche*. Born in 1745, Monvel produced his first play in 1773 and ended up as one of the more famous playwrights in Europe as a whole, ending up as the fourth-ranking living author in that period.⁸⁶ In 1781 he seemingly gave up on the conservatism of the Comédie-Française and moved to Sweden, where he became director of the French theater in Bollhuset and then helped develop native Swedish theater as teacher at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm. The 1786 production involved fourteen characters and five groups of soldiers and peasants, portraying how a young man rivaled King Francis I for the affection of a woman of sexual renown. The report in the *Mercure* stated that “à la connaissance du cœur humain, à l’étude des mœurs, on a substitué la science des effets, le prestige des tableaux, le calcul des situations.” Indeed, it was said that such plays threatened to “étouffer la vérité” and “entraîner une grande Nation.” The *Mémoires secrets* was more reserved, providing a plot summary and listing the show’s “innumerable defects.”⁸⁷ The *Journal de Paris* made its review the lead article of the issue but reached a divided judgement. Whereas it accused Monvel of conforming to “la disette des talents dramatiques” that dominated the theater at the time, it also admitted that “on a trouvé dans le dialogue des traits heureux, qu’on a justement applaudis; des détails des anciennes mœurs, chevaleresques.” Remarkably enough, the critic suggested specific revisions.⁸⁸

Conservative leaders of the press, the public, and the Comédie-Française ended up aggressively resisting innovation in dramatic genres at this time. An unusually long eleven-page essay in the *Mercure* in March 1788 took the debate to a new level of controversy by claiming that the new kinds of

plays had brought a severe decline in dramatic standards by grasping for popularity with the uneducated public. Its vocabulary was far more harsh and uncompromising than had been conventional in that periodical:

Dès qu'on a trouvé bon que l'on jargonât au Théâtre comme dans les boudoirs, & qu'on y fût ému comme dans les prisons ou à la Grève, on a cessé d'aimer la bonne Comédie. On n'a pas relégué Molière au fond du répertoire, parce que l'éclat de son nom & de sa juste réputation lui ont évité cette injure ; mais on l'a négligé, on l'a peu joué, mal joué, peu suivi, presque abandonné, & l'on a traité très-rigoureusement ceux qui l'[ont] voulu prendre pour modèle.⁸⁹

The one strong voice in the press for change in the theater world came from the *Correspondance littéraire secrète*, which launched harsh attacks against the Comédie-Française as early as 1781. Begun by Louis-François Metra, a banker who had fled Paris to central Germany, the periodical offered letters to an unnamed person which were dated but never signed. The letters must have been written by someone living in Paris who was deeply knowledgeable about the theater world, able to provide a lively stream of gossip and pointed opinions. The journalist had no qualms about Monvel's plays; in 1781 a letter described how he had "régulé les spectateurs" in a plot which some listeners nonetheless found "déplorable."⁹⁰ Though imbued with enlightened thinking, the letters expressed the growing opinion that leading *philosophes* were only currying favor for themselves and their friends. Indeed, one letter attacked the l'Académie française, "cette petite république qui a son sénat, ses chefs, ses tyrans, ses cabales, & ses révolutions." Another piece attacked the members of the institution as a privileged few who were "des sectateurs de la Philosophie moderne."⁹¹

A piece published in 1781 piece challenged the Comédie-Française on a broad set of fronts, calling the institution a cultural desert thanks to its failure to maintain a high level of performance and to refresh its repertory:

Plus les Comédiens sont triomphants, moins ils cherchent à contenter le public : la déclamation tragique est maintenant parmi eux dans un état déplorable ; il y a très peu de nos chefs-d'œuvre en ce genre qu'ils puissent jouer d'une manière passable, & l'avenir est effrayant même pour le genre de la Comédie : car la distance est immense entre Préville, Molé & les acteurs qui les doublant aujourd'hui doivent bientôt leur succéder. Ce théâtre devient tous les jours plus désert. Que sera-ce dans huit ou dix ans ? La foule se porte aux vaudevilles des Italiens, aux tréteaux des Boulevards.⁹²

When the Comédie-Française delved into its repertory to honor the centenaries of Corneille and Molière, the *Correspondance littéraire secrète* likewise objected to the choice of producing only one new play along with many canonic works.⁹³ For that matter, this journal was sympathetic to *les entrepreneurs forains* who ran the boulevard theaters, refusing to accept the harsh judgments made by

the *Mercure de France* against their growing competition with the Comédie. The reviews in the *Correspondance littéraire* nonetheless struck a careful balance between acknowledging due respect for great works by Corneille and Voltaire with support for new plays that could compete successfully on stage.⁹⁴

[François Velde's chapter in this volume](#) deepens our understanding of where the Opéra stood in relationship to the Comédie-Française and to agencies of government. Most striking of all is his evidence that ticket sales in both theaters went up significantly from the 1760s, reaching a peak in the late 1780s, prior to the major decline from 1789. During the nineteenth century those knowledgeable about the history of the Opéra saw the 1780s as the best-managed period in the theater's history. Even though the *querelle* between supporters and Gluck and Piccinni troubled the waters of opinion for quite some time, the establishment of the institution on a business model in 1781 put it on a good footing, partly because a director was brought in to negotiate between government and the theater, whose players were allowed to hold an annual meeting to air opinions. Velde's other points help as well: that the Opéra sold fewer tickets, which had higher prices generally, and that those in charge were always looking over their shoulders at the Comédie-Française, which offered a ballet and a small orchestra, thus competing directly with it. The point rings true that the Opéra offered fewer productions than the Comédie-Française and thereby developed a repertory generally better known to the public. Indeed, the canon at the Opéra was inherently weaker because the whole intellectual framework for a performing culture arrived so much later than that which emerged in the spoken theater. All of which helps explain how the Opéra, having undergone successful renewal of repertory and management, survived the troubled times of the Revolution, the Directory, and the Napoleonic period remarkably smoothly.

One might also add that the expansion of the Comédie-Française in the 1770s and 1780s itself must have intensified the conflicts which arose in the press over *le drame*, which attracted different kinds of people than the older genres. Disagreement towards new shows arose not only among the *philosophe*-friendly press, but also among clerical conservatives who wrote for the *Année littéraire*. As early as 1778 an essay in that journal, probably written by Julien-Louis Geoffroy (critic for the *Journal de l'Empire*—formerly and afterward the *Journal des débats*—from 1801 to his death in 1814) noted that “le public n'applaudit plus aux Français que des sentimens outrés & des attitudes forcées, aux Italiens & à l'Opéra que des cadences & des passages difficiles....ce qui n'est que fin & délicat ne nous touche plus.”⁹⁵

Mechele Leon has demonstrated that from 1789 on Molière was the only figure among the great playwrights whose plays were performed prominently and successfully.⁹⁶ She cites a December 1789 essay in the *Chronique de Paris* which spoke with alarm about the various imitators and enemies of Molière but mentioned none of the other canonic authors. By contrast, in a pamphlet published in

1789, the moderately successful, aging playwright Rochon de Chabannes spelled out a diverse list of playwrights from Regnard to the present, making no effort to define a high canon, indeed marveling at the disorder which the names represented:

Le Théâtre Français qui comptait alors une soixantaine de bonnes ou de médiocres Pièces, tant tragiques que comiques, tant grandes que petites, en compte aujourd’hui plus de trois cens....Les Voltaire, Crébillon, Campistron, la Motte, de Belloi, la Grange, la Fosse, &c. Les Regnard, Dufréni, Destouches, la Chaussée, Marivaux, Piron, Dancourt, Poisson, le Grand, Sainte-Foix, Fagan, Gresser, &c &c. ont paru depuis cette époque, & nous ont laissé une infinité d’ouvrages.⁹⁷

Early in the next century, a history of the Comédie-Française likewise cited no one from the high canon save Molière, recalling anecdotes about how revolutionary ideology had forced changes in works by Corneille and Racine. The book’s authors, Charles-Guillaume Étienne and Alphonse Martainville, mourned the fate of dramatic tragedy in their time: “Depuis quelque temps, les anciennes tragédies se jouaient peu, ou étaient montées avec une négligence, une médiocrité qui indisposait le public.”⁹⁸

Conclusion

During the last two decades of the Old Regime, parallel crises took place in the Paris Opéra and the Comédie-Française. On the one hand, the Opéra underwent a complete repertory transformation, finally engaging with international opera practice. The theater ended up on a sounder administrative basis than before, even though recovering from the crisis in public life took a decade to work itself out. A new canon, focused on operas by Gluck, lasted through the 1820s. Fifty years later it was likewise abandoned for a new repertory associated with Gioachino Rossini, Daniel Auber, and Giacomo Meyerbeer, all soon called *grand opéra*.

On the other hand, the Comédie-Française experienced a deeper crisis caused by controversy over plays by living authors set in new genres. Because no fundamental change in repertory occurred, harsh debate and public conflict over new genres ended up bringing an end to the theater’s royal monopoly under the Revolution. The chaotic situation among many theaters after removal of the Comédie-Française’s monopoly ended up stimulating restrictive state controls in 1806-1807, which were even more restrictive than those prior to 1789. Nonetheless, the famed actor François-Joseph Talma helped bring revival of the high canonic repertory and a rethinking of its meaning, though the plays of Voltaire suffered significantly.⁹⁹

Looking at what happened in the two institutions, we see how the acute instability in French public life evident from the early 1770s ended up provoking parallel crises with different outcomes: stability at the Opéra and a more fundamental reshaping at the Comédie-Française. Looking back at what

transpired in the two theaters, I am all the more impressed at the unique tendency which can be seen in the two French theaters, when compared with repertories in Britain, Germany, or Italy. Even though old works were abandoned in one repertory, and substantially diminished in the other, one has to be struck by the special nature of theatrical canonicity which evolved in France for over a hundred years.

Footnotes

1. *Mercure de France* (hereafter MF), 3 March 1778, 225. [↵](#)
2. "Mémoire," 22 July 1782, Archives Nationales (hereafter AN), 01 614, *pièce* 196, "Précis sur l'administration de l'Académie Royale de Musique" (hereafter ARM), 1 March 1783, AN, 01 614, *pièce* 203. The term was used often in this sense. See also "Réflexions sur la position actuelle de l'Opéra," AN, 01 616, *pièce* 85; "Mémoire à M. Gluck," c. 1780, AN, 01 621, *pièce* 49. [↵](#)
3. Georges Didi-Huberman, "Artistic Survival: Panofsky vs. Warburg and the Exorcism of Impure Time," *Common Knowledge* 9 (2003): 273-285. [↵](#)
4. Georgia J. Cowart, *The Origins of Modern Musical Criticism: French and Italian Music, 1600-1750* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1981). [↵](#)
5. Frank Kermode, *The Classic: Literary Images of Permanence and Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 67, 72; William Weber, "Intellectual Foundations of the Musical Canon in Eighteenth-Century England," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 47 (1994), 488-520. Kermode made suggestive comments on the popularity of Handel in *Pleasure and Change: The Aesthetics of Canon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 33. [↵](#)
6. Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Du théâtre, ou Nouvel essai sur l'art dramatique* (Amsterdam: Van Harreveldt, 1773), viii, 99; Jeffrey S. Ravel, *The Contested Parterre: Public Theater and French Political Culture, 1680-1791* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 191-192, 213, 227. The names cited are Étienne Jodelle, Robert Garnier, Alexandre Hardy, Jean de Mairet, Tristan L'Hermite, and Jean Rotrou. [↵](#)
7. William Weber, "Louer ou critiquer? Le Concert spirituel dans la presse, 1725-1790," in Michael O'Dea, ed., *Presse, théâtre et beaux-arts à la fin de l'Ancien Régime* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, forthcoming). [↵](#)
8. Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 19. Mark Everist discussed Jauss's thinking in "Reception Theories, Canonic Discourses, and Musical Value," in Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist, eds., *Rethinking Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 382-284, as did Robert C. Holub, in *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1984), 52-82. [↵](#)

9. Mercier, *Du théâtre*, 28. [↵](#)

10. Clive Brown, *Louis Spohr: A Critical Biography* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Flora Willson, “Phantoms at the Opéra: Meyerbeer and De-canonisation,” in William Weber and Cormac Newark, eds. *Oxford Handbook of the Operatic Canon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). [↵](#)

11. David Charlton, *Opera in the Age of Rousseau: Music, Confrontation, Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). [↵](#)

12. Mechele Leon, *Molière, the French Revolution, and the Theatrical Afterlife* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009). [↵](#)

13. Michael O’Dea, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Music: Music, Illusion and Desire* (London: Macmillan, 1995); Tili Boon Cuillé, *Narrative Interludes: Musical Tableaux in Eighteenth-Century French Texts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 107-120. [↵](#)

14. Katharine Ellis, “A Dilettante at the Opéra: Issues in the Criticism of Julien-Louis Geoffroy, 1800-1814,” in Roger Parker and Mary Ann Smart, eds., *Reading Critics Reading: Opera and Ballet Criticism in France from the Revolution to 1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 46-68. [↵](#)

15. Olivia Bloechl, *Opera and the Political Imaginary in Old Regime France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017). [↵](#)

16. Rahul Markovits, *Civiliser l’Europe: Politiques du théâtre français au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2014). [↵](#)

17. Maximillian E. Novak, “Drama, 1660-1740,” in *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, Vol. 4, *The Eighteenth Century*, eds. H.B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 167-183. [↵](#)

18. Andrea Fabiano, ed., *La ‘Querelle des Bouffons’ dans la vie culturelle au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2005). [↵](#)

19. Solveig Serre, *L’Opéra de Paris, 1749-1790. Politique culturelle au temps des Lumières* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2011). [↵](#)

20. Jean-François Cailhava de l’Estandoux, *Causes de la décadence du goût sur le théâtre* (Paris: Dufour, 1768); Marc-Antoine-Jacques Rochon de Chabannes, *Observations sur la nécessité d’un second théâtre français* (s.l.n.d.). [↵](#)

21. William Weber, "La musique ancienne in the Waning of the Ancien Régime," *Journal of Modern History* 56 (1984), 58-88; Michel Noiray and Solveig Serre, eds., *Le Répertoire de l'Opéra de Paris (1671-2009). Analyse et interprétation* (Paris: École des Chartes, 2010). [↵](#)
22. Serre, *L'Opéra de Paris, 1749-1790*; Victoria Johnson, *Backstage at the Revolution: How the Royal Paris Opera Survived the End of the Old Regime* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). [↵](#)
23. Michael Burden found that at the King's Theatre, London, the first opera to last more than five seasons was Piccinni's *La buona figliuola* (London, 1766-96); see Michael Burden, "From recycled performances to repertoire at the King's Theatre in London," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Operatic Canon*. [↵](#)
24. Fabiano, "Introduction," *La 'Querelle des Bouffons,'* 11-22. [↵](#)
25. Alexandre Dratwicky, "Lully d'un siècle à l'autre: du modèle au mythe (1754-1774)," in Agnès Terrier and Alexandre Dratwicky, eds., *L'Invention des genres lyriques français et leur redécouverte au XIX^e siècle* (Venice: Symétrie, 2010), 309-346. [↵](#)
26. See Michel Noiray, "The Practical and Symbolic Functions of l'ancienne musique at the Paris Opéra before Gluck," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Operatic Canon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). I am indebted to him for providing these research materials. [↵](#)
27. *Ibid.* A work recognized for going significantly beyond Lully's practices, the 1706 opera *Alcyone* by Marin Marais (1656-1728), was staged by the Paris Opéra in 2017. [↵](#)
28. On the religious aspect of the subject, see Andrei Pesic, *The Enlightenment in Concert: The Concert spirituel and Religious Music in Secular Spaces, 1725-1790*, Princeton University Ph.D. Thesis, 2015; and Beverly Wilcox, *The Music Libraries of the Concert spirituel: Canons, Repertoires, and Bricolage in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, University of California, Davis Ph.D. Thesis, 2013. [↵](#)
29. Mark Darlow, *Dissonance in the Republic of Letters: The Querelle des Gluckistes et des Piccinnistes* (London: Legenda, 2013). [↵](#)
30. Logan J. Connors, *Dramatic Battles in Eighteenth-Century France: Philosophes, Anti-philosophes and Polemical Theatre* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2012). [↵](#)
31. Jean-Claude Bonnet, *Naissance du Panthéon. Essai sur le culte des grands hommes*, (Paris: Fayard, 1998); David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003). [↵](#)
32. Bonnet, *Naissance du Panthéon*, 103. [↵](#)

33. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation*, *passim*. [↵](#)
34. Claire Weeda, "Ethnic Identification and Stereotypes in Western Europe, circa 1100-1300," *History Compass* 12.7, 2014, available at <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12174>. Last accessed 5 May 2020. [↵](#)
35. William Weber, "Domestic versus foreign composers at the Opéra and the King's Theatre in the Eighteenth Century," in Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, Philippe Bourdin, and Charlotta Wolff, eds., *Moving Scenes: The Circulation of Music and Theatre in Europe, 1700-1815*, *Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment*, 2018:02, 9-22. [↵](#)
36. Ronald W. Tobin, *Jean Racine Revisited* (New York: Twayne, 1999), 161. [↵](#)
37. Robert McBride, "Les frères ennemis: Racine, Molière and 'la querelle du théâtre'," in Tobin, *Jean Racine Revisited*, 120-134. [↵](#)
38. Magali Soulages, "La Tragédie: Introduction," in Pierre Frantz and Sophie Marchand, eds, *Le Théâtre français du XVIII^e siècle: Histoire, textes choisis, mises en scène* (Paris: L'avant-scène théâtre, 2006), 53-63. [↵](#)
39. "Castor et Pollux," *MF*, March 1773, 169-171. [↵](#)
40. Pierre-François Godard de Beauchamps, *Recherches sur les théâtres de France depuis l'année onze cent soixante-un, jusques à présent* (Paris: Prault père, 1735), 2: 254. [↵](#)
41. *Ibid.*, 2:156-157. [↵](#)
42. Finke also states that François Parfaict took intellectual leadership in their common efforts, and that Claude took over their publications after his brother's death in 1753: see *Les Frères Parfaict: Ein Beitrag zur Kenntnis des literarischen Geschmacks in der ersten Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Dresden: H. Dittert, 1936), 8-11. [↵](#)
43. On Mouhy's *Tablettes dramatiques*, see also the essay by Jeffrey S. Ravel, "[The Comédie-Française by the Numbers, 1752-2020](#)," in this volume. [↵](#)
44. Claude Alasseur, *La Comédie-Française au XVIII^e siècle: Étude économique* (Paris: Mouton, 1967), 11-13, 133-134. [↵](#)
45. *Correspondance littéraire secrète* (hereafter CS), 11 May 1785, 111, concerning a dispute between the abbé Morellet and Sedaine. [↵](#)
46. Henri Lagrave, *Le théâtre et le public à Paris de 1715 à 1750* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1972), 331. [↵](#)

47. Michèle Root-Bernstein, *Boulevard Theater and Revolution in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1984), 167-193, 209-210. [↵](#)
48. Alexandre Joannidès, *La Comédie-Française de 1680 à 1920. Tableaux des représentations par auteurs et par pièces* (Paris: Plon, 1921), 11. [↵](#)
49. André Blanc, *F. C. Dancourt (1661-1725): La Comédie-Française à l'heure du soleil couchant* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1984), 18-40. [↵](#)
50. Pierre-Jacques Brillon, *Le Théophraste moderne* (Paris: Henry van Dole, 1701), 22. [↵](#)
51. "Comédie Française," *MF*, June 1746, 1: 154-155. [↵](#)
52. Blanc, *F. C. Dancourt*, 261. [↵](#)
53. Mary Scott Burnett, *Marc-Antoine Legrand, acteur et auteur comique* (Paris: Droz, 1938). [↵](#)
54. Mercier, *Du théâtre*, 364 and 164. See also "Idées sur Crébillon," *CS*, 19 Aug. 1788, 139 and "Anthologie française," 23 May 1778, 325-326. [↵](#)
55. *Ibid.*; see also Connors, *Dramatic Battles in Eighteenth-Century France*. [↵](#)
56. On Belloy and French national identity, see Ravel, *Contested Parterre*, 191-224. [↵](#)
57. Carine Barbafieri, "Corneille vu par Voltaire: portrait d'un artiste en poète froid," *XVII^e siècle* 225 (2004), 616. See also François Bessire, "Voltaire éditeur de Corneille," *ibid.*, 595-604. [↵](#)
58. Voltaire to Nicolas-Claude Thieriot, 15 July 1755. [↵](#)
59. *Journal de Paris*, "Comédie-Française," 6 February 1786, 252. [↵](#)
60. "Versailles," *CS*, 26 February 1788, 49. [↵](#)
61. "Lettre de M. le Marquis de Villevieille à M. Pankouke," *Journal de Paris*, 12 July 1778, 316-317. [↵](#)
62. Gregory Brown, *A Field of Honor: Writers, Court Culture and Public Theater in French Literary Life from Racine to the Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 240. [↵](#)
63. Root-Bernstein, *Boulevard Theater and Revolution*, 177-199. [↵](#)
64. *Ibid.*, 173, 177-178, 202-203, 206, 210-213. [↵](#)
65. *Ibid.*, 177-178, 202-203, 210-213; James van Horn Melton, *Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 179-181. [↵](#)

66. Jean-François de La Harpe, *Molière à la nouvelle salle, ou, Les Audiences de Thalie*, comédie en un acte et en vers libres (Paris: Lambert & F. J. Baudouin, 1782), 4. [↵](#)
67. Ravel, *Contested Parterre*, 191 and *passim*. [↵](#)
68. MF, 28 March 1780, 176. [↵](#)
69. MF, 19 April 1784, 129. [↵](#)
70. MF, 14 November 1787, 189. [↵](#)
71. MF, 14 April 1787, 84-88. [↵](#)
72. MF, 9 August 1783, 86-87. [↵](#)
73. MF, 6 December 1788, 40, 41, 43. [↵](#)
74. Another play with a conservative point of view was *Le Philosophe*, anti-drame (Paris: Veuve Duchesne, 1773), by Alexandre Louis de Beaunoir (in some editions “Mme. Beaunoir”), who became an active anti-revolutionary. [↵](#)
75. Louis-Gabriel and Joseph-François Michaud, *Biographie universelle ancienne et moderne* (Bad Feilnbach: Schmidt, 1988), 24: 84-88. See also France Marchal-Nonosque, “Le théâtre d'Antoine-Marin Lemierre, une école des citoyens,” *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 2003:1 (Vol. 103), 49-62. [↵](#)
76. “La Veuve de Malabar,” CS, 27 May 1780, 397; Louis Petit de Bachaumont, *et al.*, *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de la République des Lettres en France depuis 1762 jusqu'à nos jours* (London, 1783-1789, hereafter MS), Vol. 26, 6 September 1787, 446. [↵](#)
77. *Discours prononcé dans l'Académie Française*, Le jeudi XXV Janvier MDCCLXXXI, à la réception de M. Le Mierre (Paris: Demonville, 1781). See “L'Académie Française,” CS, 7 January 1781, 1:1; Michel-Jean Sedaine, *Discours prononcé dans l'Académie française, le 27 avril 1786, à la réception de M. Sedaine* (Paris: Demonville, 1786). [↵](#)
78. *Discours sur la liberté du théâtre, prononcé par M. de La Harpe, le 17 décembre 1790, à la Société des Amis de la Constitution* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1790), 14, which cites Crébillon along with Corneille, Molière, and Racine. [↵](#)
79. See Connors, *Dramatic Battles in Eighteenth-Century France*. The *Journal de Paris* treated Palissot and *Les Philosophes* with respect: see “Comédie-Française,” 2 January 1786, 3. [↵](#)

80. "Collin d'Harleville," in Gustave Vapereau, *Dictionnaire universel des littératures* (Paris: Hachette, 1896), 490. [↵](#)
81. "L'École des Pères," *MF*, 9 June 1787, 137-141. [↵](#)
82. "Versailles," *CS*, 5 March 1788, 52. [↵](#)
83. "L'École des Pères," *MF*, 8 July 1787, 182-184. [↵](#)
84. "Réflexions sur les causes de la décadence de la Comédie en France," *MF*, 29 March 1788, 230. [↵](#)
85. *MF*, 5 November 1783, 225, 228. [↵](#)
86. Charles-Guillaume Étienne and Alphonse Martainville, *Histoire du théâtre français, depuis le commencement de la révolution jusqu'à la réunion générale*, 2 vols. (Paris: Barba, 1802), 49, 80. [↵](#)
87. *MS*, Vol. 27, 12 September 1786, 23. [↵](#)
88. "Amours de Bayard," *Journal de Paris*, 25 August 1788, 977. See also the largely positive review in *Affiches, annonces et avis divers, ou Journal général de France*, 15 May 1788, 1390-1391. [↵](#)
89. "Réflexions sur les causes de la décadence de la Comédie en France," *MF*, 29 March 1788, 227. See also "Comédie," *Journal de Paris*, 25 August 1788, 977; *Journal de politique et de littérature* (Brussels), 1 June 1777, 261-264. [↵](#)
90. *CS*, 7 January 1781, 4. [↵](#)
91. *CS*, 7 January 1781, 1; 13 June 1782, 289. [↵](#)
92. *CS*, 14 January 1781, 3. [↵](#)
93. *CS*, 28 September 1784, 51. [↵](#)
94. *CS*, 1 December 1784, 160-163 (on J.-F. Marmontel's *Cléopâtre*); and 7 April 1785, 7, 14-15 (on Beaumarchais' *Mariage de Figaro*). [↵](#)
95. *Année littéraire*, 1778, Letter XII, 220. See also Letter VII, 145-148. [↵](#)
96. Leon, Molière, *the French Revolution, and the Theatrical Afterlife*. [↵](#)
97. Rochon de Chabannes, *Observations sur la nécessité d'un second théâtre français* (s.l.n.d.), 17, 24. [↵](#)
98. Étienne and Martainville, *Histoire du théâtre français*; on Molière, 1: 49, 66, 72; 2: 132, 150; on the tragedies, 1: 99. Martainville was prominent in the 1820s as editor of the conservative newspaper *Le*

Drapeau blanc. [↵](#)

99. We can see an institution and set of traditions functioning parallel to the Comédie-Française in regard to the droit des pauvres; see Patrick Taïeb, “Le concert et le droit des pauvres de l’an V,” in Étienne Jardin and Patrick Taïeb, eds., *Archives du concert. La vie musicale française à la lumière de sources inédites (XVIII^e-XIX^e siècle)* (Venice: Palezzetto Bru Zane, 2015), 63-75. [↵](#)