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The Voltaire Moment

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In the eyes of his contemporaries, Voltaire was above all else an epic poet. *La Henriade*, the *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*, *Zaïre*, *Mérope*, *Mahomet*, *L'Enfant prodigue*, *Nanine*: such works brought Voltaire a well-deserved glory, both in Europe and in the Americas. Voltaire hoped to ultimately become immortalized through poetry, tragedy, epic, and comedy, the major genres of his time. When Voltaire was crowned on the occasion of the sixth performance of his last tragedy, *Irène*, on March 30, 1778 at the Théâtre-Français, the enormous ovation that he received was undoubtedly due to his role as philosopher, as France's first *intellectual*—but even more than that, to his status as a dramatic poet.

There is no need, here, to review the role of dramatic writing, above all, tragedy, in the work of men of letters in the eighteenth century; in this regard, we can refer the reader to Gregory Brown's study of Beaumarchais.¹ René Pomeau has observed that it was precisely with the publication of *Œdipe* that Voltaire made his name, and that Arouet became "Monsieur de Voltaire."² Indeed, the philosopher never stopped writing for the stage: this is why Voltaire's theatrical works open the "deluxe edition" of his complete works. At a moment in which Voltaire's reputation as an epic poet was already in decline, Louis Moland, in his edition of Voltaire's complete works (which appeared between 1877 and 1883), justified his decision to open with the dramatic works due to their essential role in the writer's corpus: the intention in doing so, Moland wrote, was to represent Voltaire to the reader "just as he had been seen in the eyes of his contemporaries."³ Indeed, alongside Racine and Corneille, Voltaire occupied the top tier of playwrights in France and beyond for well over a century. It is therefore just as necessary to interrogate the formation of Voltaire's immense fame as it is to interrogate the disappearance of that same fame in the nineteenth century.

There are numerous ways to explain Voltaire's evolution. I will limit myself here to just a few reflections on what we might call the "Voltaire Moment," which is to say, not to the writing and production of Voltaire's works over time, but to the consolidation and appearance of those many works as an *Œuvre*—that is, as a collection of works perceived to bear the stamp of the writer's genius, and destined to become classics, as the registers of the Comédie-Française indicate.

From around 1760 onward, once conflicts amongst the Encyclopedists had become particularly heated, Voltaire the Polemicist began to push aside Voltaire the Poet. Diderot puts it thus in *Le Neveu de Rameau*:

I know of certain deeds which I would give anything to have done. Voltaire's *Mahomet* is a sublime work; but I would have rather resuscitated the memory of the Calas.⁴

Diderot's comment points to Voltaire's changing status as a writer in the eyes of his contemporaries: the writer's moral and political philosophy has begun to take precedence over his theatrical writings, and his prose works (*Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, *Histoire de Charles XII*, *Dictionnaire philosophique*) have begun to take precedence over his poetry (*La Henriade*, *Nanine*, and *Zaïre*). On the whole, however, until the nineteenth century, Voltaire the Poet, revered as almost equal to Racine, received the most admiration from his peers.

The presence of Voltaire in the registers of the Théâtre-Français, the study of which finds a formidable resource in the Comédie-Française Registers Project ([CFRP](#)), can offer us a few points of reflection. Of course, the numbers need to be properly contextualized in terms of the historical period covered by the database. Voltaire's role during the Revolution, for example, cannot be entirely determined: the database does not extend beyond 1793, and from 1791 onward we find reports of him in other contexts, most notably, at the *Théâtre-Français de la rue de Richelieu* and at the *Théâtre de la République*. Furthermore, the period of the Empire, the Consulate, and even the Restoration, all belong to the same post-revolutionary moment. Therefore, our study will work within the framework provided by the [CFRP](#) database, namely, that of the eighteenth century.

The number of texts written by Voltaire that were performed as the second play of the evening at the Théâtre-Français is not insubstantial. Indeed, since *petites pièces* were more often performed in the second half of these *soirées*, and since Voltaire's works more often are categorized as *grandes pièces*, his presence is less evident in these second halves of the evening. It is thus difficult to ascertain the attraction that Voltaire's comedies might have had for spectators when performed as *petites pièces*. However, we can remark that a play such as *Nanine* is more often performed as a *petite pièce* (144 performances) than it is in the first half of these *soirées* (51 performances). We can also note certain particularly atypical *soirées*, however rare, in which a "curtain-raiser" (*lever de rideau*) or a comedy is performed first, followed by one of Voltaire's tragedies in second half of the evening.

	Corneille (Pierre)	Molière (Jean-B...	Racine (Jean)	Voltaire (Franço...	Représentati...
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	190	344	167	367	1,068
1760	134	367	129	487	1,117
1770	160	353	122	434	1,069
1780	155	295	155	441	1,046
1790	1	8	3	9	21

Figure 1. [Cross-Tab Browser](#), Comédie-Française Registers Project.

In total, Voltaire's theatrical works were performed 2433 times as the first (or *grande*) piece in the Comédie-Française's *soirées*.⁵ [Fig. 1] This tally places him right behind Molière, Corneille, and Racine, and right before Regnard and Thomas Corneille—all of whom, of course, began their careers well before Voltaire's. This differential clearly suggests a limited range of choices in the period. Given that Voltaire's texts are spread out over sixty years, it is thus necessary to carefully consider every total figure. Between 1718 and 1793, for example, we see 187 recorded performances of *Œdipe*, alongside 236 performances of *Alzire* and 167 of *Tancredé*. But *Alzire* appears in 1736 and *Tancredé* was not written until 1760; it is thus necessary to contextualize the comparative figures while noting that *Œdipe* regularly appears in the repertory until March of 1792.

It is more relevant, therefore, to compare periods of equal duration that follow the creation of a given play, as well as periods of “revivals.” *Alzire* saw 216 revival performances between 1737 and 1793; in the same period, *Rodogune*, the most performed play by Corneille, saw 15 revivals, and *Phèdre*, by Racine, saw 218. In twenty-fourth place on the list of all the plays in the Comédie-Française repertory of the period, we find *L'Enfant prodigue* performed 292 times: this is clearly surprising when we consider the fact that this comedy has been categorized among the “tearful comedies” (*comédies larmoyantes*) since the nineteenth century. More generally, we can note that during Voltaire’s most productive period, the number of performances of his greatest successes is equal to that of Racine and Corneille, while Molière outperforms all three.

Figure 2. Frequency of plays by Voltaire, Molière, P. Corneille, and Racine per season, from 1732-33 to 1770-71.

Voltaire dominates in 1732-33, then is ranked second in 1736-37. He dominates again in 1751-52, 1754-55, 1756-57, 1758-59, 1759-60, 1762-63, 1763-64, 1764-65 (virtually tied with Molière), and 1767-68, and then again in 1770-71. This domination is thereafter uninterrupted, with one exception in 1784-85, when *Le Mariage de Figaro* reigns for the entire season with seventy-five performances, over and against forty-one presentations of Voltaire’s works and thirty presentations of Molière. Between the years of 1755 and 1760, and even more so in the decade between 1760 and 1770, the presence of Voltaire’s works in the repertory is overwhelming, constituting at least one-quarter of any season’s performances.

We can turn to the first seasons of the decade between 1760 and 1770 in order to better understand the Voltairean repertory. Unsurprisingly, Voltaire's greatest periods of productivity in the first half of the century correspond to the periods in which he is most performed. From 1750 on, however, little by little, his works begin to be revived.

Figure 3. Voltaire's plays performed in the first part of the *soirées*, 1760-61.
(Source: Comédie-Française Registers Project)

The season of 1760-61 is thus an especially productive one, given the rise of two new works: *Le Café ou l'Écossaise*, with twenty-one performances, and *Tancrède*, with fifteen. [Fig. 3] To this we can add thirty-five performances of a number of other texts from Voltaire's repertory: *Le Fanatisme* (6); *L'Enfant prodigue* (5); *L'Orphelin de la*

Chine (5), *Zaïre* (5), *Alzire* (4), *Sémiramis* (4), *Amélie* (3), *Mérope* (2), and *Nanine* (1). The distribution between original works and revivals is equal.

Figure 4. Voltaire's plays performed in the first part of the *soirées*, 1761-62.
(Source: Comédie-Française Registers Project)

In the following season, 1761-62, only one new play premieres, a comedy: *L'Écueil du sage ou le Droit du seigneur*, which is first performed on January 20, 1762 with moderate success (eight performances). *Le Café ou l'Écossaise* is only performed five times. [Fig. 4] And yet, this is the season in which Voltaire is most performed, constituting seventy-seven of the season's 282 performances. We undoubtedly see a kind of driving force in the success of *Tancredé* (fourteen performances), which continues its momentum from the previous season. On the whole, however, sixteen of

Voltaire's pieces are performed this season, in which thirty-seven different authors are performed. Voltaire dominates the stage.

Figure 5. Number of performances of Voltaire's plays, 1718-1793.
(Source: Comédie-Française Registers Project)

What, then, are these sixteen pieces? *Tancrède*, *Oreste*, *Zulime*, *Le Droit du seigneur*, *Sémiramis*, *Le Café ou l'Écossaise*, *L'Enfant prodigue*, *Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le Prophète*, *Œdipe*, *Brutus*, *Mérope*, *L'Orphelin de la Chine*, *Alzire ou les Américains*, *Rome sauvée ou Catilina*, *Zaïre* and *Amélie ou Le duc de Foix*. All of these plays from the 1761-62 season were performed at least one hundred times according to our database, and so comprise the Voltairean canon. The standard of one hundred performances is not arbitrary. Indeed, we can see that a strong threshold separates *Brutus* (106 performances) from *Hérode et Mariamne* (fifty-eight performances). The canon thus forms: *Tancrède*, *Sémiramis*, *Le Café ou l'Écossaise*, *L'Enfant prodigue*, *Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le Prophète*, *Œdipe*, *Brutus*, *Mérope*, *L'Orphelin de la Chine*, *Alzire ou les Américains* and *Zaïre*. *Amélie ou Le duc de Foix* constitutes a special case insofar as this tragedy is one version of *Adélaïde du Guesclin*, which belongs to the canon, and which appears under this title in 1761-1762.

Nanine presents another interesting case. Created in 1749, it was performed only fifty-one times as the evening's first play. But starting in 1754, *Nanine* had a magnificent career as a *petite pièce*, with 144 performances. The fore-mentioned existence of a canonical threshold can thus also include *petites pièces*; *Nanine* should be integrated into the canon. We can say, then, that the canon was established in 1760; that it was gradually built up, most clearly during the 1750s; and that the fifteen plays present in the repertory that were performed *less* than one-hundred times do *not* belong to this canon: *Orestes*, *La Mort de César*, *Amélie*, *Rome sauvée*, *Zulime*, *Olympie*, *Eriphile*, *Les Scythes*, *Artémire*, *Le Droit du seigneur*, *Irène*, *Agathocle*, *Sophonisbe* and *Le Triumvirat*.

We should reiterate that the concept of “canon” is articulated from the point of view of theatrical performance, and from the institutional perspective of the Comédie-Française. Our working definition might be further debated by comparing the list established here with those texts that comprise editions and reprints of Voltaire's works, or from the point of view of critical reception. It is quite possible, for example, that such a change in perspective could lead to a re-evaluation of *La Mort de César*, the format of which (*tragédie de collège*) was less suitable to the Comédie-Française and the habits of its audience, but which nonetheless possesses literary significance. As an adaptation of the first acts of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, which Voltaire had discovered in England, this tragedy constitutes a key moment in the reflection and implantation of the Shakespearean model in French theater. We also find *La Mort de César* central to the Voltairean canon taught in schools in the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century. I discovered it, for example, in the Garnier anthology and in that of Firmin Didot,⁶ both of which were used at Bartholdi High School in Colmar—by my father after the First World War, and before him, by my great-uncle at the time of the German occupation.

How did the Voltairean repertory come to be? It emerged initially on the basis of indisputable success at the moment in which each play premiered. Not all of Voltaire's successes necessarily translate into a lasting presence in the repertory. We might take *Hérode et Mariamne* as an example. This particular tragedy was created in the 1725-26 season, and was successful enough to merit twenty-eight performances. But after this it is irregularly performed, leading to fifty-eight total performances. The stage career of *Hérode et Mariamne* ended in 1764. At the same time, other works of Voltaire saw a kind of double success: *Sémiramis* had twenty-one performances in the 1748-49 season, then 18 in 1756-57, a triumph largely due to debates concerning its *mise-en-scène*. In turn, the success of *Brutus* in 1790-91, a play that had never

permanently disappeared from the stage but saw fifteen performances during this particular season, was obviously due largely to contemporary political factors: Voltaire's ashes were being transferred to the Pantheon. Tragedies like *Alzire*, *Zaïre* or *Mérope* show a continuous presence throughout the century.

If we observe the distribution of Voltaire's plays by genre, it will be noted that four-fifths of the performances are tragedies, and only one-fifth are comedies (1951 to 482). Indeed, only four comedies appear in the repertory, but *L'Enfant prodigue*, with 292 performances, appears immediately after plays by Molière, Regnard, Corneille, Baron, and *L'Esprit follet* by Hauteroche, all of whose stage careers started earlier than that of Voltaire. We can thus easily confirm arguments made by Jean-Pierre Perchellet and Maurizio Melai: not only does tragedy *not* die with Racine, but it remains alive enough to attract sizable audiences, and it owes much of its life in the eighteenth century to Voltaire.⁷ Commercial success confirms this observation. In 1760-61, eighteen performances of comedies generated over 2000 pounds, whereas the receipts generated by thirty-six tragedies exceed this number, twenty-four of which are from the pen of Voltaire. In 1761-62, eight evenings are dedicated to comedies, whereas thirty-four evenings are dedicated to tragedies, twenty of which featured only works by Voltaire. The financial recovery of the Comédie-Française, which began in the early 1760s (as observed by [Thomas Luckett](#) in this volume), is undoubtedly related to Voltaire's success.

Another interesting case is that of *Adélaïde du Guesclin*, which was not once performed between 1734 and 1765.⁸ Indeed, Voltaire was not satisfied with the play. But the work did not disappear. Between 1753 and 1762, *Amélie ou Le duc de Foix*, which derives from *Adélaïde du Guesclin*, is frequently performed. After that, the text returns to its original *title* if not to the original work itself: *Adélaïde du Guesclin*. What meaning can be read in the metamorphoses of this tragedy? At the time of its composition, Voltaire wished to write a role for Adrienne Lecouvreur, but she died in 1730 before the work could be completed. At the premiere, in 1734, the role of Adélaïde, which had been promised to Mlle Dufresne, was played by Mlle Gaussin. The play had been a failure, but after the second performance, it was a success. Still, Voltaire was not satisfied and withdrew it. The tragedy was not published until 1765, with changes. The first version only exists partially in a manuscript used by the actor Henri Lekain. There are, however, no fewer than twenty-one subsequent manuscripts, all of which attest to attempts to return to the text. We see several intermediate versions (*Alamire*, *Le Duc d'Alençon ou Les Frères ennemis*), one of which was intended for the Prussian court. In the end, the work became *Amélie ou Le duc du*

Foix, which premiered in August 1752 with great success (fifteen performances for an overall eighteenth-century total of 27). The choice of the name “Adélaïde” constituted an allusion to Madame Adélaïde, daughter of Louis XV, who was born in 1732; that of “Amélie” constituted a tribute to Princess Amélie of Prussia, the youngest of Frederick II’s sisters, who had performed the role of Zaire at Potsdam in January 1751.⁹ In 1765-66, at the insistence of Lekain, a version of the nascent *Adélaïde du Guesclin* was performed. It is under this title that it will belong to the Voltairean canon and to the repertory of the Comédie-Française. It is continually performed until 1792. *Adélaïde du Guesclin* thus refers to a tragedy in two different forms, embodying different historical periods.¹⁰

The multiple incarnations of this particular tragedy point to a number of political factors in the construction of what might be called the Voltairean repertory. At the time of the 1734-35 season, Voltaire situated *Adélaïde du Guesclin* in the neo-medieval tradition of *Zaire*, which had been created in 1732. He was not interested in historical research, nor was he aiming to inspire the spectator to reflect on religious tolerance (as he had done with *Zaire*), but simply to “resuscitate” the world of medieval France, including its chivalrous heroes, whose noble descendants were in the audience. As in *Zaire*, Voltaire aims to imitate Shakespeare, who staged events lifted from English history in order to generate a new tragic horizon. The aesthetic project is also a courtly gesture. Voltaire aims to flatter the Bourbon monarchy. The title’s homage, as well as the events surrounding the capture of Cambrai depicted in the play, allowed Voltaire to exalt chivalrous virtues and avow loyalty to the king. The text is a celebration of the French monarchy.

And yet, Voltaire did not achieve total success with the work, even amongst those in the audience whom he wished to flatter. Furthermore, the critical reception led him to feel misunderstood; the premiere of the play did not receive the same praise as the opening of *Zaire had*. A certain number of spectacular effects—the shooting of a cannon, the appearance of Nemours with a bandaged arm—were not yet acceptable to “men of taste” in 1734. In 1733, Voltaire gave a private reading of the text, which earned a tearful applause. But at the public performance, *Adélaïde* was booed, as Voltaire wrote in 1772:

It was booed in the first act. The boos doubled in the second act, when the Duc de Nemours arrives with his wounded arm in a bandage. Things became even worse in the fifth act on hearing the order given by the Duc de Vendôme. And at the end,

when the Duc asks, 'Are you happy, Coucy?,' a number of jokers cried out, 'Couci-couci!'.¹¹

The pit called for more performances at the end of the evening, but seemingly in vain. Voltaire was disappointed. The play, however, had a modest stage career (eleven performances), so the opening night hijinks did not entirely doom it.

Voltaire's courtly projects opened up avenues beyond the Comédie-Française. In 1745, he contributed to the grand celebrations that followed the King's recovery in Metz, the victory of Fontenoy, and the marriage of the Dauphin: he wrote *La Poème de la victoire de Fontenoy*, for example, which sought to revive the classical tradition of *the victory ode*. No new plays were written for the Comédie-Française; there were, however, twenty-six revivals as well as collaborations with Rameau for *Les Fêtes de Ramire*, *La Princesse de Navarre* and *Le Temple de la Gloire*. The operas were performed in Versailles, in a ceremonial room set up in the stables. On February 23 and March 3 *La Princesse de Navarre* premiered; on March 1, *Thésée* (Quinault and Lully) was revived; on March 10, *Zaïde, Reine de Grenade*, the lyric tragedy of La Mare with music by Royer, was reprised; and on November 27, *Le Temple de la Gloire* was played. *Mérope* was also performed on March 17 at Versailles. In short, the encomiastic cycle of 1745 takes place, as is normal, either at court or at the Royal Academy of Music.

In 1752, *Adélaïde* reappears in its other form, *Amélie ou Le Duc de Foix*, which owed its success to Lekain and to Mlle Gaussin. Despite the actors' performances, the play was, by Voltaire's own admission, extremely watered down compared to its first version,¹² having been relocated to the eighth century. Transported from Prussia to France, the courtly allusions became imperceptible and were lost in the Romanesque mood. No doubt certain spectators were familiar with the sentimental life of the princess, who had been separated by politics from the man she loved, the Baron de Trenck, but we cannot be certain. The play thus had a modest career of ten seasons.

In 1765, *Adélaïde* returns, but with a key change. Now, the play has been recontextualized in terms of the French defeat during the Seven Years' War. *Le Siège de Calais* by Pierre-Laurent de Belloy premiered on February 13, 1765 (ten performances, ninety-six total through 1791). The revival of *Adélaïde* on November 9, 1765 both takes advantage of and diverges from the success of *Le Siège de Calais*. The monarchical and patriotic tinge of the references to the Hundred Years War take on new meaning in the context of the eighteenth-century confrontation between France and England, the latter assuming its mythical role as hereditary enemy. Contemporary

events thus politicize the repertory. When Voltaire takes up residence in Ferney, he decides to let Lekain reprise *Adélaïde* rather than the aging *Amélie*. *Adélaïde*, which has now incorporated significant revisions from *Amélie ou Le Duc de Foix*, is thus saved from its encomiastic stagnation and firmly established in the repertory.

I would now like to put forward a few ideas. We can observe that the robust presence of Voltaire in the repertory, even as it owes much to the success of a given play at the time of its first performance, only comes after the poet's most significant creations. His greatest works are almost all written between 1718 (*Œdipe*) and 1760 (*Tancrède*), but their place in the canon is not secured until after 1760. New works, often very interesting and innovative, such as *Les Guèbres* and *Les Scythes*, certainly arise after this date. But they do not see a critical reception comparable to that of the works written prior to 1760; and even if they coexist with works from the repertory, they still do not enter the Voltairean stage canon. The philosopher's triumph with *Irène*, which would be celebrated with engravings and known throughout Europe, contrasts with the play's very low number of performances (seven in all). The repertory works like a canon. And this canon, which would be constituted over the next half-century, enshrines works written prior to 1762. Thus, we might second the idea put forth by Mara Fazio, namely, that the dramatic creations of Voltaire weakened the moment that he settled in Ferney in 1759—as soon as his departure from the Parisian scene became definitive.¹³ The private theater in Ferney could not replace live performance in front of Parisian audiences.

But we should not be satisfied with this observation alone. It is also necessary to reflect on the differences between Voltaire and other canonical authors during the decade in question. During four seasons—between 1759 and 1762, and then again in 1766-67—the domination of Voltaire is total. In the other relevant seasons, only Molière rivals him. The case of Voltaire makes at least one thing clear: *an author is performed*. It is Voltaire who enters the repertory and dominates it, not a particular play. The sheer number of Voltaire's works that are played demonstrates this, as do the very high revenues during this decade, which attest to the public success of those same works. The repertory must therefore be seen, not as a kind of glorious but dusty heritage, but as the active affirmation of a historic moment. Molière, Regnard, Racine and Corneille certainly represent a kind of "heritage." But Voltaire represents something else. The gradual departure of Voltaire from the repertory in the 19th century, kicked out by the Romantics, provides a sort of negative confirmation of this idea.

Even if Romanticism rereads the Enlightenment in order to make the Enlightenment its own, its French incarnation is no less dependent on the rejection of Voltaire and all that he represents. The Romantics reject academicism, but also, to a certain extent, an entire ideology—that of the Enlightenment. The numbers have revealed a story; with them, we are touching on the philosophical and political meanings of Voltaire's theater. It seems to me that it is not a question of "fashion" nor of "relevance" but, perhaps, of *the moment*, both in the metaphorical sense that we find in Hegel, and in the sense of a historical period. A set of forces act simultaneously to determine a historical movement; their inscription in time becomes history. Voltaire's theater belongs to the historical time of the years 1760-1770, during which it struggles against the very political and social orders that it embodies and represents. If the previous decades saw the Enlightenment gradually impose itself in France and throughout Europe more generally, the period from 1757 to 1770 is defined by crisis and polemic. The immense reputation of Voltaire—poet, philosopher, man of action—is a decisive force in the public debate between those who seek to kill off the Chevalier de la Barre, Calas, Sirven, Rochette and who try to stall the *Encyclopédie*, and those who laugh, and rage, and provide their generation with a tragic poetry.

The Comédie-Française also takes part in the great philosophical conflict of 1760. Since 1757 and *Le Fils naturel*, the question of the theater was at the heart of a number of ideological battles. In 1758, Palissot, in concert with Fréron, leads a first antiphilosophical offensive against Diderot with the *Petites Lettres sur de grands philosophes*. This same year sees the affair of the "Geneva" article and the *Lettre à d'Alembert*. In the eyes of the adversaries of the Encyclopedists, it is a moment of attack. And the attack is merciless. D'Alembert changes course, Rousseau breaks off, and only the question of separating Voltaire from the Encyclopedists remains. Palissot's satirical comedy is particularly timely in this regard. Choiseul backs the piece and it is performed thirteen times. In Palissot's piece, not only is Voltaire spared, but he is, in a way, linked to the adversaries of the *Encyclopédie*, given that the representation of Rousseau on all fours is a direct allusion to Voltaire's famous letter following the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*.

But Voltaire does not want to join the battle, even as the Comédie-Française offers a magnificent battlefield. At Lekain's request, the philosopher agrees to a performance of *Le Café ou l'Écossaise*, which was a play not intended to be performed, but rather a part of Voltaire's satirical pseudo-theater to which *Saül* (1763) or *Socrate* (1759) also belong. Voltaire refuses to revise *Socrate*, but he agrees to return to *Le Café*. And this piece of pseudo-theater does include certain subtle digs at Diderot: the text makes an

open allusion to Goldoni, for example, whom Diderot was accused of having plagiarized with *Le Fils naturel*. Ultimately, however, *Le Café* attacks Fréron head-on. The play thus affirms Voltaire's solidarity with the Encyclopedists, and its discreet parody pays homage to Diderot's genre.

Le Café becomes a quasi-bourgeois drama, still read by most critics. The enormous stir that the play caused on July 26, 1760, when it was first created, is well known. Fréron was present at the performance, and absorbed a number of insults. *Le Café* also comes on the heels of Diderot's most recent success, *Le Père de famille*, which premiered a few months later, on February 18, 1761, although for only seven performances. However, the establishment of this *drame* by Diderot in the repertoire (120 performances) shows that, contrary to the legend of its failure, the play enjoyed considerable success, both in Paris itself and in the provinces. If the Comédie-Française performed *Les Philosophes*, it would have been under Choiseul's influence; such a scandal would have attracted audiences. But the force of the Enlightenment repertory, mainly that of Voltaire, clearly balances this "official" concession to the interests of political power. The theater is a dazzling presence in the midst of the intellectual combat that defined the century. In January of 1759, Voltaire published *Candide*; in 1762, he published the *Sermon des cinquante* and *L'Extrait de Meslier*; in 1762, the Calas affair begins; in 1763, the *Traité sur la Tolérance* is published, and in 1764, the first edition of the *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif* appears. The powerfully controversial context in which these texts are published cannot be dissociated from Voltaire's theatrical production.

But the causal polygon is far from complete. All the stars are aligned. Voltaire immediately perceived Lekain's genius and intervened on behalf of the young actor's bid in 1750 to join the Comédie-Française troupe. Lekain became a member in 1752, and would be a powerful ally for Voltaire. From the start of his career, Lekain specializes in the great Voltairean roles. In 1752, he performs the role of Catilina in *Rome sauvée*. He performs in *Le Café*, *Olympie*, *Le Triumvirat*, *Les Scythes* and *Les Lois de Minos*. In 1755, he traveled to Geneva in order to have Voltaire explain the role of Genghis Khan in *L'Orphelin de la Chine* to him. In 1760, he performed *Tancredé* with Mlle Clairon, another brilliant actress. The performance of this particular tragedy constitutes an essential moment. The difficulties encountered ten years prior with the "spectacular" tragedy of *Sémiramis* are well known, hampered as the play was by the presence of spectators on stage. Voltaire attached great importance to the Roman decor of *Brutus*, as well as to the exoticism of *L'Orphelin de la Chine*, or *Alzire*. *Tancredé* enshrines epic images of a specific "troubadour" décor.

Voltaire is elated when, at last, he achieves this spectacular quality: “How happy I was when I learned that the theater was purged of powdery white wigs, and rhinoceros and royal bird coiffures! I laughed at the angels while covering the stage with shields and banners.”¹⁴ However, he warns Mlle Clairon, another powerful ally, against decorative excesses.¹⁵ As early as 1761, Brunetti renewed, with a certain timidity, the decorations intended for the classics.¹⁶ In short, the repertory does not allow for a simple staging; it is also an opportunity for a theatrical production that evokes the spectacular. And it is precisely in the repertory, with the revivals, that the genius of Lekain asserts itself. He channels the philosopher of Ferney: in 1759, it is to their double influence that we owe the ousting from the stage of the many *petits maîtres* as well as the liberation of the stage set, which can now be entirely dedicated to the play. The Voltairean repertory is thus rediscovered, with talented actors and in the context of a new visual system. The 1760s made it possible to discover precisely the power in Voltaire’s theater that subsequent Romantic attacks would forever suppress. Indeed, this “moment” is one in which the dramatic work of the philosopher is most fully formed and most powerfully manifests Voltaire’s genius as a dramatic poet.

The publisher of theatrical texts might find in these observations a challenge to the new theatrical-editorial religion that sanctifies the moment of the *emergence* of a play—that is to say, of a play’s first performance. Our study of the Voltairean repertory clearly demonstrates that the “Voltaire moment” is at least as much that of his canonization as that of his initial appearance in the repertory. Voltaire’s historic moment is the decade of the 1760s; the complete edition of his works, which includes a careful study of the theater, is thus a kind of culmination. This edition, the last entirely supervised by the author, embodies a kind of self-awareness of the Voltairean canon. The “moment” that we have sought to elicit here thus comes to an end, in a sense, in 1775.

Footnotes

1. 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). [↵](#)
2. René Pomeau, ed., *Voltaire en son temps* (Paris/Oxford: Fayard/Voltaire Foundation, 1995), vol. 1, 86-88. [↵](#)
3. Louis Moland, “Introduction au théâtre de Voltaire,” in *Œuvres complètes. Théâtre I* (Paris: Garnier, 1877-1885), vol. 2, 3. [↵](#)

4. Diderot, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: CFL, 1971), vol. 10, 342; our translation. [↵](#)
5. We should add 203 performances of Voltaire in the second part of the evening to this number. This number is only important in the case of *Nanine* (144 performances) and *L'Indiscret* (twenty-three). [↵](#)
6. *Théâtre de Voltaire* (Paris: Librairie de Firmin Didot frères, fils et Cie, 1867) and *Théâtre de Voltaire contenant tous ses chefs d'œuvre dramatiques, Nouvelle édition revue d'après les meilleurs textes* (Paris: Garnier frères, n.d.). [↵](#)
7. Jean-Pierre Perchellet, *L'Héritage classique: La tragédie entre 1680 et 1814* (Paris: Champion, 2004); Maurizio Melai, *Les Derniers feux de la tragédie classique au temps du romantisme* (Paris: PUPS, 2015). [↵](#)
8. We find all the details of this affair in a critical edition by Michael Cartwright, in the tenth volume of the *Œuvres complètes* de Voltaire (Voltaire Foundation, 1985). [↵](#)
9. See Lettre à Madame Denis, 12 January 1751, D4344. [↵](#)
10. We would add, once again, *Le Duc de Foix*. [↵](#)
11. See the Preface to the 1772 edition of the *Théâtre de Voltaire*, quoted by Manuel Couvreur in his article on *Adélaïde Du Guesclin*, in Raymond Trousson and Jerom Vercruysse, eds., *Dictionnaire général de Voltaire* (Paris: Champion, 2003), 6. [↵](#)
12. "Je donnai quelques années après la même tragédie sous le nom du duc de Foix, mais je l'affaiblis beaucoup par respect pour le ridicule. Cette pièce, devenue plus mauvaise, réussit assez, et j'oubliai entièrement celle qui valait mieux." "Préface de l'éditeur," in *Théâtre*, ed. 1772. Quoted by Couvreur, "*Adélaïde Du Guesclin*," 9. [↵](#)
13. Mara Fazio, "Voltaire et la mise en scène d'après sa correspondance," in Mara Fazio and Pierre Frantz, eds., *La Fabrique du théâtre: Avant la mise en scène (1650-1880)* (Paris: Desjonquères, 2010), 135-143. [↵](#)
14. See Lettre aux d'Argental, 18 June 1759. [↵](#)
15. See Lettre à Mlle Clairon, 16 October 1760. [↵](#)
16. See "Dossier Brunetti," Bibliothèque-Musée de la Comédie-Française, as well as Jacqueline Razgonnikov, "Décors et costumes pour les tragédies antiques de Racine: évolution/révolution (1760-1830)," in Vincenzo De Santis, Mara Fazio and Pierre

Frantz, eds., *Les Arts du spectacle et la référence antique dans le théâtre européen (1760-1830)* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2018), 181-197. [↩](#)