

**Rousseau on Arts and Politics**  
**Autour de la Lettre à d'Alembert**

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## Rousseau and Le Franc de Pompignan on Reforming the Theater

One way to approach the *Lettre à d'Alembert* might be to look for Rousseau's own original contribution to an on-going examination of the morality of the theater in France, to see what arguments he mounts against the establishment of a theater in Geneva, and to compare and contrast his published ideas with those of a contemporary. It would be useful to such an undertaking that the partisan of the theater be himself a man known for his strong religious views and for his published works on religion and morality. And it would be ideal if such an 'antagonist' were also—like Rousseau himself—an author whose theatrical accomplishments include successful runs of plays and operas. We propose here that at least one such antagonist (if that is the word to use for people who did not refer to each other and who never debated these issues in public) did exist.

Jean-Jacques Le Franc de Pompignan won, so to speak, the triple crown in the mid-1730s, with performances of a tragedy, *Didon*, at the Théâtre Français in 1734, of a comedy, *Les Adieux de Mars*, at the Théâtre Italien in 1735, and of a ballet héroïque, *Le Triomphe de l'Harmonie*, at the Opéra in 1737. All of these productions met with success, the opera having performances in the provinces as well as in Paris, over 40 in Lyon alone. Le Franc also published the first edition of his *Poésies sacrées* in 1751; the collection, dedicated to the king, was well received by the critics and by the public at large, with four editions by 1755, and with a much expanded edition in quarto, with plates by Cochin fils and woodcuts by Papillon, published in 1763 and incorporated in the poet's *Oeuvres complètes* in 1784.<sup>1</sup> When Le Franc first published his *Lettre à M. [Louis] Racine, Sur le Théâtre en général, &*

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<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of these works, see Theodore E. D. Braun, *Un ennemi de Voltaire: Le Franc de Pompignan*, (Paris: Lettres Modernes Minard, 1972), especially 71-102 and 127-143. See also Guillaume Robichez, *J.-J. Lefranc de Pompignan: Un Humaniste chrétien au siècle des lumières*, (Paris: Sedes, 1987).

*sur les Tragédies de son Père en particulier*<sup>2</sup> in 1752, he was not only a successful playwright and religious poet but also the Premier Président of the Cour des Aides in Montauban. His credentials as a religious man include, in addition to *Poésies sacrées*, the fact that he was the elder brother of Jean-George Le Franc de Pompignan, the Bishop of Le Puy en Velay who was soon to be named Archbishop of Vienne. A grave magistrate and a serious author whose Catholicism leaned towards Jansenism, Le Franc had ideas on the reform of the theater which contrast sharply with Rousseau's.

What were Rousseau's original contributions to the debate on the morality of the theater? In a word, none, or at least none on the question narrowly defined.<sup>3</sup> All the arguments he marshals concerning the immorality of the actors and especially of actresses, the immorality of acting itself as a form of prostitution, the immorality of virtually all the plays in the Paris repertoire, the deleterious effects of theatrical representations on the impressionable youth in the audience, the dangers of portraying emotions and especially love as a means of leading the audience to a higher morality, the condemnation of the theater by church officials, the moral danger of having men and women share both the stage and the rest of the theater without proper supervision—these and similar arguments had all been stated before, from Plato onwards to the eighteenth century, and often with more heat than Rousseau's arguments could generate. Similarly, his refutations of counter-arguments that proponents of the theater might offer had already been answered in print with devastating effectiveness within relatively recent years.<sup>4</sup>

Some 60 years before the article 'Genève' appeared, a sharp and bitter dispute had erupted in which Bossuet took to task a young Italian

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<sup>2</sup>Jean-Jacques Le Franc de Pompignan, *Lettre à M. Racine. Sur le Théâtre en général, & sur les Tragédies de son Père en particulier*, first published in Louis Racine, *Remarques sur les tragédies de Jean Racine, suivies d'un traité sur la poésie dramatique*, (Paris 1752), vol. 2, and separately in Paris in 1755 and 1773. We use the 1773 edition, the last published during the author's lifetime.

<sup>3</sup>See Francis S. Heck and Maria A. Rebbert, 'Rousseau's *Lettre à d'Alembert*: Bossuet Revisited,' *Lamar Journal of the Humanities*, 14 (Spring-Fall 1988), 85-99. Heck and Rebbert demonstrate, by means of countless examples of direct borrowings from Bossuet and others, Rousseau's very real debt to his sources and his lack of originality in the area of the argument over the morality of the theater.

<sup>4</sup>Some critics might find in Rousseau's secularized arguments against the theater an original insight; but in fact, as I will demonstrate, this had been done by the abbé Terrasson as early as 1715 and by Le Franc de Pompignan as recently as 1752.

priest then working in Paris, Francesco Caffaro.<sup>5</sup> Edme Boursault had published as a kind of preface to his *Oeuvres* in 1694 a long *Lettre d'un théologien illustre par sa qualité et par son mérite, consulté par l'auteur pour savoir si la comédie peut être permise ou doit absolument être défendue*.<sup>6</sup> Caffaro pointed out that the Church had never been unanimous in condemning the theater, the Fathers of the Church having fulminated against it and the scholastic philosophers having defended it; St. Thomas Aquinas considered that the Church Fathers had attacked only abuses and excesses, Tertullian had considered the theater to be morally indifferent in itself, while certain great saints (Cyprian, Albertus Magnus, Antoninus) considered dramatic spectacles as good and permitted when accompanied by appropriate precautions. According to Caffaro, plays were moral tales capable of inspiring people to love virtue and detest vice; if in the theater, they excited passions, it was accidentally. Furthermore, he believed that the actors, provided that they led moral lives and did not put on indecent plays, should not be thought of as practicing a profession immoral in itself. Caffaro's enthusiastic support of the theater might seem fairly tame to us, but the Church took it seriously.

Bossuet responded immediately and powerfully, effectively crushing poor Father Caffaro, first in his *Lettre au père Caffaro, théatin* and then in his *Maximes et réflexions sur la comédie* (both texts were written and published in Paris in 1694). Bossuet denied every aspect of Caffaro's defense of the theater. Modern plays were not moral; the actors and actresses did not lead decent lives and did deserve the anathema of the Church; the goal of the theater being to excite passions it is always a moral danger to attend plays, even if love in a play leads to marriage it always depicts physical love—concupiscence—and is therefore dangerous to youth; and furthermore it is sinful even to laugh. He does seem to open the door slightly at the end of his *Maximes* when he advises those who would reform the theater to consider that 'le charme des sens est un mauvais introducteur des sentiments vertueux.'<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For documentation on this conflict, see Theodore E. D. Braun, 'LeFranc de Pompignan et la moralité du théâtre,' *Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century*, vol. 76 (1970), 115-138; and Francis S. Heck and Maria A. Rebbert, 'Rousseau's *Lettre à d'Alembert*: Bossuet Revisited,' *Lamar Journal of the Humanities*, 14 (Spring-Fall, 1988), 85-99.

<sup>6</sup> Edme Boursault, *Oeuvres*, (Paris, 1694); Caffaro's letter and the two responses of Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet to this letter are reprinted in Ch. Urbain and E. Levesque, *L'Eglise et le théâtre*, (Paris, 1930), from which our quotations are drawn.

<sup>7</sup>Bossuet, 275.

That same year, the archbishop of Paris, François de Harlay de Chanvallon, ordered Father Pierre Lebrun to preach against the ideas of Caffaro in particular and against the dangers of the theater in general.<sup>8</sup> If anything, Lebrun's attacks were even harsher than Bossuet's. He called the theater 'l'école de l'impureté, la nourriture des passions, l'assemblage des ruses du démon pour les réveiller,' and stated that in tolerating spectators while excommunicating actors, the Church was exercising 'sa prudence & sa charité.'<sup>9</sup>

Caffaro was devastated, and on the surface it would appear that the issue was settled once and for all. Yet eighteenth-century writers fought back throughout the first half of the century with overt and covert responses to the rigorous attacks of Bossuet, Lebrun, and their allies. In 1706 Chavigni de Saint-Martin published, in Brussels, *Le Triomphe de la comédie ou réponse à la critique des prélats de France*. Then a number of priests defended the theater: abbé Jean Terrasson, in his *Dissertation critique sur l'Iliade d'Homère* makes an interesting distinction between Christian and civil morality (we might say, between sin and crime), and considers the theater to be useful in that it keeps young people from committing crimes that might affect the government or society;<sup>10</sup> abbé Jean-Baptiste Dubos, while warning against abuses, expresses his belief in the moralizing quality of the theater;<sup>11</sup> abbé Charles Irénée Castel de Saint-Pierre proposes in the official journal the *Mercur de France* practical reforms of the stage including censorship and the creation of positions of premier tragédien and premier comédien;<sup>12</sup> père Charles Porée, Voltaire's and Le Franc's teacher, believes that the theater is at least capable of reforming manners and

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<sup>8</sup>Lebrun published the two sermons he preached at the Séminaire de Saint-Magloire as *Discours sur la Comédie*, along with a third sermon condemning plays drawn from the Bible, in 1695 (we use the expanded second edition, Paris, 1731).

<sup>9</sup>Lebrun, xlii.

<sup>10</sup>Abbé Jean Terrasson, *Dissertation critique sur l'Iliade d'Homère*, (Paris, 1715).

<sup>11</sup>Abbé Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, (Paris, 1719).

<sup>12</sup>Abbé Charles Irénée Castel de Saint-Pierre, in *Mercur de France* (April, 1726), 715-731.

bringing about a love of virtue.<sup>13</sup> To the writings of these priests and others like them we should add prefaces and plays written by practitioners themselves, such as Philippe Néricault Destouches, Pierre-Claude Nivelle de La Chaussée, Voltaire, Félicité Ducrest de Saint-Aubin de Genlis, and Diderot. And let us not forget the *Observations sur la Comédie* that abbé Antoine Yart published in the *Mercure de France* in March 1743: Yart goes at least as far in his enthusiasm as Caffaro had gone a half-century earlier.<sup>14</sup> The same year of 1743, however, saw a book published by Luigi Riccoboni, a retired actor of the *Comédie Italienne*, *De la réformation du théâtre*; knowing that suppression of the theater would not be feasible, he proposed a series of reforms touching on the actors themselves (severely regulating conduct, even requiring a *certificat de bonne conduite*), on the plays they put on (requiring that older works be expurgated and that a system of four levels of censors for new plays be established), and even including the days plays can be performed in accordance with the Church calendar.<sup>15</sup>

Now it is highly unlikely that Le Franc de Pompignan, given his scholarly nature, was ignorant of any of these writings when he undertook his *Lettre à Louis Racine* in 1751. Nor is it unlikely that d'Alembert, even if he did not read all the texts involved, had read most of them or was at least aware of them; or that Voltaire, who urged d'Alembert to include the proposal for establishing a theater in Geneva in his *Encyclopédie* article, had not read all these documents through Yart's article and Riccoboni's book. It seems just as unlikely that for Rousseau the *querelle du théâtre* was an unknown quantity. On the contrary, this was part of their literary and cultural heritage, and what they were to say would be largely repetitious.

I do not mean to propose that Rousseau and Le Franc brought nothing at all fresh to the argument. For Rousseau, there is no question of reform of the theater or of improving the morals of the actors. The purpose of his book is to prove (ostensibly to d'Alembert) that the theater is by its nature sinful, and that it should not be established in Geneva. But even if Rousseau's arguments against the theater had been made before in the not too distant past and refuted virtually up to the time of his book-length letter to d'Alembert; even though he chose to ignore or

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<sup>13</sup>Père Charles Porée, *Discours sur les spectacles*, written in Latin, trans. père Pierre Brumoy, (Paris, 1733).

<sup>14</sup>Abbé Antoine Yart, 'Observations sur la Comédie,' *Mercure de France* (March, 1743), 442-449.

<sup>15</sup>Luigi Riccoboni, *De la réformation du théâtre*, (Paris, 1743).

to answer only vaguely the counter-arguments of the proponents of the theater; even though, in his typically either/or, binary way of thinking, he could see in Geneva either theatrical performances or athletic and military exercises, augmented by an annual dance, either social clubs or circles or a theater (but never an inclusive both/and possibility); and even though his Paris/Geneva opposition was merely an extension of the millennial city/country opposition, with all the evil in the city and all the virtue in the country; despite all that, he did bring to the argument at least one element that was new, perhaps even persuasive. I mean his economic argument that Geneva, a small town with a population of just 24,000, could not afford and could not support a full-time, first-rate theatrical troupe.

One might argue that his polemics are one-sided in that they see only a drain on resources and not a potential source of increasing revenues; that they are but an extension of the argument concerning commerce, industry, and luxury; and that they illustrate the extent to which Rousseau, far from being a revolutionary thinker, shows himself here to be a staunch conservative, wishing to preserve in all its purity a life that he believed (if only in his polemics) once and perhaps even as he wrote truly existed: a patriarchal, paternalistic society based on economic self-sufficiency, with a restricted role for women and a tightly-controlled class system. It seems to me that Rousseau's argument based on the economic consequences of the establishment of a theater in Geneva is at once the most original and the least studied aspect of the *Lettre à d'Alembert*.<sup>16</sup>

If one accepts Rousseau's premises and polar reasoning, the chain of disasters that he predicts seems indeed inevitable. Poor people, hardly able to provide more than the essentials of life, would feel compelled to buy tickets to the theater. Better-off tradespeople would sacrifice some of their little capital for the big-city feel of this amusement. The wealthy, too, would try to outshine their neighbors and begin a ruinous rivalry in dress, in carriages, in jewelry, and in patronage of the troupe. Indeed, all classes of society would need more suitable, city-style clothing. The small-town amusements of Geneva would disappear: the

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<sup>16</sup>As the title of his book, *Rousseau's Political Imagination: Rule and Representation in the Lettre à d'Alembert* (Geneva: Droz, 1984), suggests, Patrick Coleman concentrates on the political aspect of Rousseau's *Lettre* rather than on its theatrical or economic side. This overlooking of the economic discussion in Rousseau is the norm, even in introductions to the text. Similarly, Heck and Rebbert, in their article cited above, do not say a word about the economic argument that Rousseau makes, limiting their concluding arguments to a restatement of Rousseau's predilection for the 'salutary powers' of 'external nature' and of outdoor *fêtes publiques* (92-93).

women's circles, the men's clubs, the gossip groups. Society would begin to unravel. Women and men would appear together in public places, with potentially disastrous moral consequences. With a small population base, the wealthy would soon want to have the state provide subventions for the theater. Eventually, taxes would be levied to support the arts, the poor would be taxed unfairly, and the economic picture would worsen for them and for the city and its canton. Civic virtue would die, and with it all that makes Geneva unique. This domino-effect scenario would have as its cause the opening of just one permanent theater company in the city.

How much more compelling this argument is than the tired rhetoric of immorality of the institution of the theater, the actors and actresses, and the plays they perform!

Yet this is precisely where Le Franc places his argument. His task, however, is quite the opposite of Rousseau's: he must convince a devout Jansenist that the theater is morally neutral in itself, that it can be reformed, and that a reformed theater can be a school of virtue. His object, ultimately successful, is to encourage his friend to publish an edition of his father's plays, with commentaries; to do so he must overcome Louis Racine's scruples and persuade him that such a publication will be justified. His rhetoric is manifold. In one part of the letter, Le Franc examines Racine's tragedies and his comedy, pointing out instances where they reach literary perfection while teaching moral virtue or engaging the spectator or reader in the dramatic action by way of the emotions. He makes in this regard an interesting albeit forgotten contribution to the contrast between Corneille and Racine that had been initiated by La Bruyère.

But it is early on in the letter that Le Franc makes his first important point, proposing that the theater of mid-century France, corrupted as it is, is capable of reform. Like other defenders of the stage, he sees the theater as being, at least potentially, a necessary teaching tool. One of his innovations is derived from the only source he cites: Jonathan Swift's *A Project for the Advancement of Religion and the Reformation of Manners* (1708).<sup>17</sup> Why quote Swift instead of one or more of the critics mentioned above? Because Swift is a man 'qui n'est point accusé de trahir trop gravement les choses [et qui est] moins indulgent que nous

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<sup>17</sup>Jonathan Swift, *A Project for the Advancement of Religion and the Reformation of Manners*, text of the 1719 edition published in London by Benj. Tooke, in Herbert Davis, editor, *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, 14 vols. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1939-1968), 2, 43-63; the reforms of the theatre are discussed on 55-56 and 62.



sur les abus du Théâtre.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, by this citation he puts the quarrel of the stage in a broader, European, context, and extends its arguments beyond the Catholic Church alone, to embrace at least Anglicanism, as Rousseau's arguments had included Calvinism. Swift's reforms, less stringent than Riccoboni's but in execution quite harsh, are the germ of *Le Franc's*. They reflect ideas on strict censorship exercised on older as well as modern plays, all of which would have to be expurgated; jokes and jests, even isolated words that might be considered indecent would have to be removed or altered, as would any double entendre, anything that could shock modesty.

*Le Franc* also wants to make sure that the performers live up to the highest standards of public morality, with severe sanctions, including banning them from the stage. Unlike Riccoboni, however, he enlarges on the idea introduced by the abbé Terrasson, that crime and sin must be separated: 'il est des fautes secrettes & cachées qui ne sont pas du ressort de la police.'<sup>19</sup> He goes further in pursuing this line of thought: 'il y a bien des degrés entre la sainteté & le crime, entre la perfection Chrétienne & le violement total des loix du christianisme. On permet à la foiblesse humaine des délassemens frivoles, pourvu qu'ils ne soient pas criminels.... Il ne s'agit point, dans la question présente, de projets de récréation pour les Religieux de la Trappe, ou pour des Chartreux, mais des amusemens nécessaires aux gens du monde, qu'on doit tâcher de leur rendre utiles autant qu'on le peut.'<sup>20</sup> If the use of Swift as an acknowledged source put the argument in a broader geographic context, this fresh and unexpectedly nuanced perspective puts the argument in a different and surprisingly modern and secular moral context.

Our two Jean-Jacques, Rousseau and *Le Franc de Pompignan*, arrayed as they are on different sides of this issue in the middle of the century, bring each one something new to the argument. Rousseau's most original contribution is to examine the economic consequences of introducing a full-time theatrical troupe to a small town. Indeed, similar-sized cities in France, such as *Le Franc's* native Montauban, had a theater as a building, but no permanent troupe. This part of Rousseau's argument, while doubtless overstated for polemical purposes, is strong and convincing. This aspect of Rousseau's case should be studied more carefully, I think, than the moral arguments he merely repeats. On the other hand, for *Le Franc*, the theater is a good and necessary institution

<sup>18</sup>*Le Franc*, 12-13.

<sup>19</sup>*Le Franc*, 17.

<sup>20</sup>*Le Franc*, 19.

capable of being greatly improved by means of some powerful reforms. More importantly, however, as we have seen in the quotations above, he insists on the necessity of relatively innocent pleasures for the laity, and reminds his intended reader, Louis Racine, that there is a distinction between crime and sin, and that there is a whole gamut of moral behaviors that must be permitted according to the situation. Like most of his contemporaries, he never raises the economic issue that Rousseau saw, but he sets himself apart from the others by his major contribution to the quarrel, setting the moral issue in a supple and multilayered rather than a rigid and uni-dimensional black-or-white context.

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