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“Frondeur” Journalism in the 1770s

Theater Criticism and Radical Politics in the Prerevolutionary French Press

NINA R. GELBART

Until recently it was presumed that the legitimate, government censored French press was politically uninteresting before 1789, and that only with the Revolution was Brissot’s wish realized that journalism “inform public opinion . . . , pulling the people out of ignorance and slavery.”¹ New studies of Old Regime periodicals have shown, however, that censors could be tricked or circumvented, especially after 1750 when the number of journals mushroomed to several hundred. Polemics were camouflaged in allegory, or slipped between innocuous pièces fugitives, and readers learned how to extract messages from innuendoes, allusions, and repetitions through which canny editors communicated criticism of the regime.² Still, such elliptical barbs were hardly revolutionary. Better known, though not yet systematically studied, are the underground newsletters circulating beyond the grasp of censorship, to which readers hungry

for subversive commentary had turned ever since the Fronde. During that "révolution manquée," which despite its frivolous name had raised serious constitutional challenges to French absolutism, Théophraste Renaudot's official Gazette de France staunchly defended the queen, Anne of Austria, and Cardinal Mazarin, while a pamphlet literature of popular radicalism called for a republic and vilified monarch and minister.3

Although hitherto overlooked by press historians, revolutionary ideas were not confined to these furtively exchanged clandestine works, but did in fact surface in censored journals fifteen years before the Revolution. Drawing their inspiration from the Fronde, a group of editors in 1775 radicalized the legitimate press itself, blurring the traditional boundary between proscribed and permitted journalism. Demanding freedom of expression, the group published a network of about ten mutually supportive papers. So effective was the government's purge of these papers that the virulence of their contents and their intertwining fates have gone unnoticed. Yet the rhetoric in these newspapers paralleled that of the libelles uncovered by Robert Darnton;4 they even had some authors in common. Moreover, in light of Keith Baker's recent work tracing revolutionary ideology back to the 1770s, the manifestation of this mentality in the legitimate press of that decade is less surprising.5 The problems I wish to address here are what occasioned it, and how these editors managed to print in regularly censored periodicals the strong stuff that previously had circulated only en cachette.

The coterie of new journalists, self-styled esprits frondeurs, frustrated dramatists mostly from the Third Estate, with a smattering of training in law, at first disguised their attacks as theater criticism, since the Comédie-Française had refused their plays. Isolated and sporadic complaints about the privileged, exclusive Comédie, born

3See Marie-Noëlle Grand-Mesnil, Mazarin, la Fronde et la presse 1647–1649 (Paris: Armand Colin, 1967); The Fronde derived its name from the slingshots with which children threw pebbles and dirt.
of frustration and hurt pride, had erupted throughout the century; but now this group of newly thwarted playwrights banded together once they learned of each other's misfortunes and, with a heightened awareness of the legal issues involved, protested what they considered a collective injustice.

Louis-Sébastien Mercier, Le Fuel de Méricourt, du Coudray, Linguet, Grimod de la Reynière, Le Tourneur, Rutlidge, and several others experienced their rejection at the Comédie as a violation of their rights. Although the theater was surely justified in exercising some degree of quality control, the playwrights believed their *drames*, many of which displayed bourgeois and even popular sympathies, were being rejected for political reasons. The Comédie, after all, was royally protected, its governing board composed of Gentlemen of the King's Bedchamber. To Mercier and his *bande* it was but one symbol of an intransigent, privileged, superannuated regime, and their protest quickly overflowed to include such entrenched institutions as the Académie française, state-protected papers like the *Gazette de France* and *Mercure de France*, and the king's ministers themselves. They gave their newspapers innocent-sounding titles which they believed might serve as smokescreens: the *Journal du théâtre*, *Lettres sur les spectacles*, *Journal des dames*, *Nouveau spectateur*, *Journal anglais*, *Babillard*, *Nouveau Journal étranger*, *Correspondance dramatique*. Intending the stage, the press, and the law to inform and educate a public irrespective of social rank, these editors became self-appointed spokesmen for values hostile to the corporate society and divine-right absolutism. As they gained momentum and courage from their united action, they forgot their individual grievances and crusaded as civic-minded, virtuous public servants attempting to save their *patrie*. Filling their papers with such *frondeur* watchwords as tribunal, nation, republic, rights, citizens, liberty, patriotism, the people, and the law, they saluted each other as "Romans," the highest form of praise they could bestow.

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Scholars of public opinion have long recognized the influence of the Fronde on the prerevolutionary imagination. The year 1775 was a particularly propitious time to evoke the memory of the mid-seventeenth-century rebellion. During the early 1770s men of letters had suffered from the stranglehold of Chancellor Maupeou’s “triumvirate,” the repressive ministry that had exiled the parlements at the end of the reign of Louis XV. Taking advantage of the old king’s weakness and indolence, the parlements (law courts) had made increasingly bold use of their right of remonstrance against the crown in the late 1760s. Maupeou feared a replay of the Fronde, when an alliance of magistrates, city mobs, and princes of the blood had almost overthrown the crown. To restore order he suppressed the refractory parlements in an absolutist coup. He then replaced the original magistrates—who called themselves patriotes and claimed to be guardians of the fundamental laws of the realm—with his infamous “yellow judges,” yes-men to the king, drawn largely from the traditionally docile Grand Conseil. The Maupeou years were grim times for writers and journalists. The new ministry, they complained secretly, meant to bring back the Dark Ages. Newspapers were eliminated, few new privileges were granted, and the royalist censor Marin was catapulted to power as editor of the government’s official Gazette de France. Maupeou’s ministry paid Marin 10,000 livres a year to fill the paper with articles upholding the absolutist point of view.

Frondeur sentiment during these years was kept alive in such seditious underground best-sellers as the Mémoires secrets, Maupeouiana, and Journal historique, to which the news-starved public turned. Written mostly by Pidansat de Mairobert—whom the police had been watching and arresting since the 1740s—these works de-

7See, for example, Charles Aubertin, L’Esprit public au 18e siècle (Paris: Didier, 1889) and two works by Frantz Funck-Brentano, Les Nouvellistes (Paris: Hachette, 1905) and Figaro et ses devanciers (Paris: Hachette, 1909).
picted Maupeou as sallow and sickly, "the horror of the nation," "the most repugnant countenance on which one could spit." They painted a romanticized view of the banished parlementaires, depicting them as protectors of public welfare, tribunes of the people, guardians of all citizens against arbitrary royal whim. Pidansat's publications undermined Maupeou's authority and may have contributed to his disgrace. They also provided a model of polemical journalism for the playwrights, whose rejections at the Comédie during these years caused wounds that festered.

The accession of young Louis XVI and his queen in 1774 lightened the political atmosphere, and provided just the opportunity Mercier and his group needed. In their initial eagerness to be loved, the new monarchs seemed playful, even impulsive. Marie-Antoinette enjoyed drames, apparently oblivious or indifferent to their explosive potential. Therefore writers held high hopes for greater freedom. To gain popularity, the king immediately dismissed Maupeou and recalled the exiled parlements. He also replaced the hated "triumvirate" with a liberal reforming ministry that included Turgot and Malesherbes. An intimate friend of the royal couple was the duc de Chartres, a cousin from the customarily rebellious Orléans branch of the family which had traditionally sided with parliamentary opposition against the crown. Chartres, the future Philippe Egalité, seized the occasion to place his protégés in the new government. One of them was Pidansat himself, for whom Chartres now secured a post as royal censor. Another, Crébillon fils, replaced the conservative Marin as censeur de la police. Both Pidansat and Crébillon were close friends of Mercier and his coterie. Such allies in high places encouraged the journalists to print their views on the Comédie in newspapers they were eager to establish, granted privileges for their other works as well, and defended them from all manner of "désagrément fâcheux" and "persécutions presque sé-

11 For a good discussion of these newsletters, see Robert S. Tate, "Petit de Bachaumont: His Circle and the Mémoires Secrets," Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, 65 (1968).
13 See the Almanach royal, 1775, p. 414.
rieuses." Once his protectors were installed Mercier purchased the Journal des dames.

From the start the new journals linked their attack on the Comédie with praise for the recalled parlements. In concert, the press, stage, and law courts were to lift the public out of ignorance and bring about the regeneration of France. Mercier’s very conception of drama was more political than literary. His plays were designed to inspire civic spirit and responsibility by showing that dignity of purpose and greatness of character lay not with the well-born, but with the busy, industrious roturier. Conceived by Mercier, the playwright was a “legislator,” an “interpreter of woes and humiliations,” a “public orator for the oppressed.”

Mercier’s Journal des dames, signed by the censor Hermilly with whom Pidansat worked closely, praised the eloquence of Henrion de Pansey, a magistrate in parlement who had just written several legal memoirs against the Comédie and its governing board. The newspaper even advertised itself in juridical terms, as the official repository for all grievances involving the comédiens, for all evidence in “the trial that the public and the dramatic authors have together launched against the French Theatre.” Mercier recalled the Fronde—which he understood as a fight uniting parlements and the people against tyranny—as one of the great moments in French history. For Mercier, more than the recent royal coronation, it was the recall of the parlements that renewed hope for France. The Journal des dames described the law courts as representative bodies, “Senates

14 L.-S. Mercier, Tableau de Paris, 12 vols. (Amsterdam: 1782–88), X, 25–30. For a fascinating record of Pidansat and Crébillon’s censorship activities, see Bibliothèque Nationale, manuscrit français 22002. Pidansat is referred to as Mairobert in the document. He and Crébillon appear to have worked often in a team with two other censors, Hermilly and Cardonne.

15 For Mercier’s purchase of the paper, see Archives Nationales, Minutier Central, étude LXXXV, liasse 652 (19 April 1775), “Cession de privilège de Mme de Montclos à M. Mercier.”


18 Journal des dames, August 1775, pp. 251–55.

19 Ibid., May 1775, p. 208.

20 Ibid., August 1775, pp. 251–55.

21 Ibid., July 1775, pp. 63–75.
... illuminating the principles of the national constitution.”

Mercier wrote of the “impresscriptible rights” of even the humblest citizen, and quoted from a *Discours sur les mémoires* by the lawyer Delacroix, an American sympathizer, translator of John Adams, and future Jacobin. Mercier praised the work for upholding “the majesty of Laws, the dignity of Man, the force of Justice, and the inevitable dominion she has over all, especially those who seek to violate her.”

When the Paris police ordered Mercier to drop his campaign and a *lettre de cachet* was issued for his arrest, he took refuge in parliament. There his heroic speeches, demanding a fair trial before this “tribunal of the nation,” were transcribed by the admiring Métra, author of the underground *Correspondance secrète*, yet another exposé of the “despotism of kings and cruelty of ministers.”

Mercier also used the *Journal des dames* to plug the papers of friends in his group, several of whom were neighbors on the rue des Noyers in the Latin Quarter—Rutlidge next door, Le Fuel de Méricourt around the corner on the rue de la Harpe. Le Fuel, perhaps the most radical of the bunch, published his *Lettres sur les spectacles*—variously subtitled *Lettre de Mme. le Hoc à M. le Hic, Lettre au diable, Lettre d’une jeune actrice, Lettre d’un célibataire*, etc.—during 1775. The paper, censored by Crébillon, was filled with denunciations of the established order, actors, ministers, even *philosophes*, whom Le Fuel alternately scorned as cowardly and useless, or loathed as a “despotic cabal” blocking the channels by which outsiders might gain literary recognition. Le Fuel contrasted the fresh, uncommonly vigorous ideas in Mercier’s *Journal des dames*, with the vapid and predictable verbiage of the established papers, which had capitulated to the powers and were a disgrace to journalism.

A paper, Le Fuel believed, must inform its readers about public affairs and teach them how, not what, to think. Mercier’s *Journal des dames* returned the compliment by calling Le Fuel a protector of the people, and welcoming his paper with its tales of

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scandal and corruption in the wings of the Comédie, involving the powerful and debauched Gentlemen of the King’s Bedchamber. Such revelations, Mercier hoped, would save the French stage and the nation itself, by allowing drama to become what it was meant to be: strong moral medicine.26

Le Fuel was admired by many for his fire and courage. Pidansat and Métra adored him, for he refused to be intimidated, his irrepressibility manifesting itself in repeated journalistic reincarnations. When the police silenced his *Lettres sur les spectacles*, he launched his *Journal du théâtre*. When this paper too was “asphyxiated” and the sympathetic censor Crébillon himself exiled to the country where he could no longer help his protégé, Le Fuel followed Linguet to London. There he started up his most radical paper of all, to which Mercier contributed several articles, in collaboration with the fierce and bizarre Italian émigré and veteran journalist Giuseppe Baretti. In exile Le Fuel had vowed “to fight injustice until extinction,” to demand the right to express himself as long as he lived. Still invoking the law’s protection and trying to change the world through this last newspaper, the *Journal français, anglais et italien*, he died a “pauvre diable” (in his own words), “pursued by death and all my other enemies.”27

Another paper enthusiastically endorsed in Mercier’s *Journal des dames* was the anonymous *Journal anglais*, edited by a group including Mercier’s closest friend, the translator of Shakespeare, Pierre Le Tourneur.28 Admirer of republican Rome, Le Tourneur had written a politically loaded preface to his Shakespeare translation. It passed, predictably, Crébillon’s censorship scrutiny, and its subscription list included almost all the *frondeur* coterie. Mercier admired Le Tourneur’s independent strength, his refusal to compromise his principles, saying pointedly in an eulogy that he had achieved greatness and yet “belonged to no academy.” Le Tourneur had himself in fact been a censor and booktrade official, but gave up the post, his biographer says vaguely, “to recover his liberty.”29 Le Tour-
neur’s resignation came three days after Mercier took over the *Journal des dames*, so it was probably to avoid any suspicion of collusion.\(^{30}\)

The *Journal anglais* was censored by H.-P. Ameilhon, himself the editor of the increasingly daring *Journal de Verdun* which, after supporting Linguet, Le Fuel and Mercier, and risking some “nouvelles politiques,” had been “denatured” and suppressed at the end of 1776.\(^{31}\) Wiser from his own experience, Ameilhon warned the editors of the *Journal anglais* that foreign ministers were watching the paper closely, and that they should print nothing “offensive to corps and companies that have the credit to get their complaints heard and the power to take revenge.”\(^{32}\) Despite such prudent advice, the *Journal anglais* went beyond its steady defense of the frondeur dramatists against the Comédie; it published the earliest French translations of Edmund Burke’s procolonial *Letters to the Sheriffs of Bristol*, more than a year before France allied herself with America. Subscribers to the *Journal anglais* were thus exposed to Burke’s view of the abuses of tyranny, of war crimes committed in the name of a sovereign power against innocent, freedom-loving men.\(^{33}\) It was, to say the least, provocative reading matter.

The overlapping networking of these newspapers and the mutual support of their editors took many different forms. As we have seen, they advertised each other faithfully. Linguet’s *Journal de politique* reported that Mercier’s plays, stupidly forbidden in Paris, were all the rage in Lyon. He furnished a detailed prospectus of Le Fuel’s journal, pointing out especially the enthusiastic endorsement by its censor Crébillon. On the works of du Coudray, another vigorous crusader against the monopolistic Comédie, Linguet concluded: “We can only say AMEN to the author’s proposals in this area.”\(^{34}\) Linguet

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\(^{30}\) B.N., ms. fr. 22002 shows that Le Tourneur left office on 22 April 1775, and Mercier had taken over the *Journal des dames* on 19 April. See note 15, above.


\(^{32}\) B.N. nouvelles acquisitions françaises, ms. 23943.

\(^{33}\) *Journal anglais*, 15 June 1777, pp. 64–83.

\(^{34}\) *Journal de politique et de littérature*, 1776, I, 134, 509; 1775, II, 504; 1776, II, 227.
explained to his subscribers that he needed to support other like-minded journalists since censors and his publisher were interfering not only with his copy, but also with his concentration, time, and peace of mind. They had already refused his “Discours sur l’état de l’Europe” and “Réflexions sur la déclamation théâtrale.” Protected, conservative papers like the Mercure and Journal encyclopédique prattled on unfettered because they supported the established order, but the journalists actually trying to correct and change the world were considered “criminals.” For these “crimes,” Linget correctly predicted, his paper would soon be wrested from him.  

Meanwhile he gave his support to others who fought for press freedom.

Some of the networked papers worked out of the same address. The Journal anglais was for sale at the Théâtre-Italien on the corner of the rues Montorgueil and Maufaçon. This was a significant location since this theater became the alternative competitive stage the dramatists had been clamoring for to break the Comédie’s monopoly, and it actually performed plays by Rutledge and Mercier. But the Journal anglais also sold with the Journal des dames from a bureau des journaux on the rue du Tournon near the Jardin du Luxembourg which the police raided early one morning in the spring of 1778.  

Four of the journals were distributed in the Palais Royal by the duc de Chartres’s bookseller Esprit, who had himself been a “colporteur sous le manteau” and in the 1760s had clashed with police for smuggling and selling forbidden pamphlets. The Palais Royal, Chartres’s residence, a privileged zone the police could not penetrate, was a hotbed of frondeur sentiment, of “fermentation générale.” Here, as Arthur Young reported, the bookstores surrounding the courtyard filled up hourly with new, turbulent, and violent brochures, “nineteen of twenty in favor of liberty.”

Another technique used by the frondeur network was the printing and reprinting of each other’s articles when crackdowns by book

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36“Saisie faite sur la demande... document conservé aux Archives nationales, Papiers du Châtelet, liasse 375,” Amateure d’autographe, 20e année (February 1882), 19–22.
trade guild officials and the police interfered with their circulation. For example, one year of the *Journal des dames*, 1776, is completely lost today, but we know it existed from numerous references to it in other periodicals, and we know what is said because Le Fuel’s *Journal du théâtre* reproduced articles from it. 39 When Le Fuel’s paper was liquidated in its turn, two new papers were created with the express purpose of carrying on the fight. Du Coudray had always admired Linguet, Mercier, and Le Fuel as “intrepid athletes” fighting “despotist tyrants.” 40 He now launched his own journal, *La Correspondance dramatique*, explaining that he had tried first to revive Le Fuel’s paper but was told that it was being suppressed by “superior orders” and that its privilege could not be negotiated with an “anticomédien.” Du Coudray announced that his new paper would do the next best thing by giving Le Fuel’s former paid subscribers a one-third price reduction. 41 Du Coudray had been inspired to join what he called a “half-literary, half-political war” by the grave injustices of the Comédie toward dramatic authors whose only wish was to use the theater to reach and inform the public. Du Coudray’s own plays, known collectively as the *Théâtre de famille*, had been rejected for years by the comédiens, but it was their mistreatment of Mercier that motivated him to take up journalism, and he too reprinted articles from the confiscated *Journal des dames*. 42 “Mercier’s excommunication from the theatre,” explained the *Correspondance dramatique*, “struck everyone as indecent. It was his protest that fueled the whole revolution.” 43

The second new journal that rushed in to fill the void was Rutlidge’s *Le Babillard*, named after a radical underground newspaper circulating during the Fronde that had been worded so simply and priced so low that it had seemed to be aimed at an audience of commoners. 44 A fierce foe of the Comédie, Rutlidge conceived of the enemy very broadly; he was fighting not just those who rejected

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39 See, for example, *Journal du théâtre*, 1 April 1776, p. 54.
41 *Correspondance dramatique*, I, 1777, 144–46, 111, 254.
42 Ibid., I, 84.
43 Ibid., I, 33.
his plays, but also anyone else who stood in the way of free speech. His paper and all his writings were dedicated to informing his fellow citizens of matters which, though initially shocking and painful, would ultimately make them more responsible and public minded. It was, he knew, unfashionable to use the press for moral amelioration, especially because the state-approved papers were so frivolous, attracting uncritical readers who "would rather give the impression of being au courant regarding chic books and the epigram of the day," than "delve deeply into themselves, a voyage from which they would return most unhappy." He lamented the difficulty of finding readers for his severe but necessary message: "He who wishes to light the torch of truth and morality before the public . . . cannot afford to be impatient." Rutlidge objected to those who accused him of writing a paper more like a "scandalous libel," simply because he aimed at a wide audience including the lower classes. He reported that it was only the stupid, envious, and pedantic who could feel so threatened by his campaign.45

Rutlidge was particularly hostile to the philosophes whom he regarded as insidious foes, preaching reform and parading as liberals when in fact they had become part of le monde, totally dedicated to preserving privilege. They used the Académie française, which they now dominated, and the press, to make pronouncements, and never encouraged readers to draw their own conclusions. Voltaire, whom Rutlidge resented for this hostility to Le Tourneur's Shakespeare, and for his political conservatism, especially abused his reputation by denying the public "the liberty to think for itself." It was this group and their self-interested publisher Panckoucke who had usurped from Linguet, "très philosophiquement et très académiquement" his brilliant and relentlessly probing Journal de politique.46 Rutlidge was not beyond calling past ministers of Louis XV "vile and corrupt," "encouraging the dissipations of their master and crushing, without remorse, the trembling people." Maupeou, of course, was high on his list of villains. For the present king, Louis XVI, to be any better, for France to avoid dissolution and ruin, "we will be obliged to criticize irreverently [fronder] many received

45Le Babillard, II, 369–81.
46Ibid., IV, 262. See also, Rutlidge's Quinzaine anglaise, 1776, x-xv.
opinions, . . . examine abuses, . . . expose, . . . speak with daring . . . about the political errors of the past.”

Rutlidge lamented that Le Fuel’s *Journal des spectacles*, as he called it, “has stopped shedding its light on the exploits of our privileged players,” and hoped his *Babillard* could continue to fuel the ambition of the group, “to improve the human race.” Rutlidge was probably being helped by Pidansat behind the scenes, because his *Babillard* broke off for three months when Pidansat died, and Rutlidge referred to the interruption as due to the death of his “father.” He then published one last issue, referring proudly to his journals and plays as “crimes” of *lèse philosophie* and *lèse comédie*.

Writing in collaboration with the lawyer Falconnet, Rutlidge also composed a brief on behalf of Le Fuel’s *Journal du théâtre*. Falconnet’s own radical politics were about to get him disbarred. According to Métra, every police spy was after the *Mémoire*, printed in Liège because no French libraire would handle it. It described in detail the “castration” of Le Fuel’s paper by censors, comédiens, the director of the book trade, and dukes and peers devoted to the king. It championed “the law” and “the constitution” which should protect even a lowly commoner from ministerial whim. Falconnet, a great admirer of Cicero, believed that eloquence could only flourish in a republic. Lawyers, he said, were the “deputies of the people,” “avengers of the oppressed.” Along with the journalists and dramatists, he believed in the importance of an informed citizenry. “I have defended the weak against the powerful . . . A mémoire establishes the right of a citizen . . . What is a judge? The voice of the sovereign. What is a lawyer? The voice of the nation. Who [but they] will revolt against the injustice of *les grands*? Who [else] will expose all the maneuvers of intrigue?” “If [the authorities] manage to silence us . . . then there will be but two classes, one the powerful

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47 *Babillard*, IV, 249, in which Rutlidge endorses (without admitting authorship) his own *Essais politiques*. Printed in the *E. P.* themselves (London, 1777), pp. x-xv.

48 *Babillard*, III, 12.

49 Ibid., IV, 257.

50 Ibid., IV, 383.

51 *Correspondance secrète*, IV, 244–248 (March 1777).

52 *Mémoire à consulter pour les souscripteurs du Journal du théâtre* rédigé par le sieur de Méricourt (Liège, 1777).
oppressors, and the other the unfortunate victims of oppression."53

Among the signers of the Mémoire supporting Le Fuel was one Hébert, possibly author of the future revolutionary paper Le Père Duchesne. If so, it would be our earliest trace of the so-called “father of popular journalism” in Paris. The hypothesis is plausible since Hébert’s first known address in the capital three years later was near the Place Maubert, a block from Rutlidge.54 Rutlidge in fact became an ardent Hébertiste in the 1790s, and wrote a fascinating Mémoire about his own radicalization, beginning with his early dramatic and journalistic exploits.55

To conservative journalists like Fréron, and even to philosophes, Mercier’s group seemed menacing as soon as it began to take shape. Fréron’s Année littéraire called Mercier “the most delirious maniac of the century” and discredited his conception of the journalist as publicist. “Not only is he oblivious to the extreme derangement of his own mental organization; he claims he is the only reasonable being in a world of imbeciles.”56 Grimm watched what he considered the formation of an unholy alliance. His Correspondance littéraire of the 1770s is full of denunciations of the “insolence,” “barbarousness,” “violent ideas,” and “vulgar sympathies” of both the journalist/dramatists and their lawyers, whose scurrilous mémoires deserved, Grimm thought, “the most severe and rigorous punishment” for fomenting discontent, chaos, and revolution. Commoners had no

right to rise up this way against their masters! Was there no decency left in the world? How could Le Fuel’s scum of a paper dare to include reference to a monarch? “No doubt,” Grimm wrote of Mercier and his frondeur coterie, “they have decided this the propitious moment to declare war on all exclusive privilege and further their

54 Walter, Hébert, pp. 18–20.
55 Mémoire au Roi pour le sieur Rutlidge, imprimé en 1790 (Paris: Rosé, 1790).
56 Année littéraire, 1774, vii, 73.
patriote cause.”

La Harpe felt threatened by the obsession of this group with “le peuple.” “Why does [Mercier] carry on that our plays must be for the people, repeat ceaselessly this word people, reprimand us for scorning and ignoring the people?” If Mercier seriously believed that the masses should have the time, means, and intelligence to attend the theater, “why, he would turn the world upside down!”

La Harpe was horrified that newspapers had fallen into the hands of “uncultured” and crude men. Mercier’s Journal des dames, for example, undermined “the whole order of the well-bred,” and La Harpe had this to say of the Journal du théâtre:

Talents of all kinds are outraged by this journal, where ... [the greats] ... are vilified. Above all there is a base, barbarous, vulgar style for the whole work. It revolts me to stoop so low as to discuss such illiterate impudence, but we must warn readers that this fraud of a newspaper is by riff-raff of the lowest classes who write in the idiom of the populace and judge reputations in cafés ... How could Crébillon help but endorse a work which attacks genius, since for thirty years nobody has recognized his own?

But even as the movement gained momentum, the censor Pidansat began to worry about repercussions. He stayed rigorously loyal to the frondeurs but was one of the first to see the purge coming and predict the dangers. Though he meant to take full advantage of the “gentleness of the new government,” he sensed that the “license of expression,” and the forays of men of letters into legal and political terrain previously forbidden them, had gone too far and would bring about an “inquisition” reminiscent of the Maupeou years.

Pidansat was correct. By 1776 Louis XVI’s liberal ministry had toppled and Crébillon had been dismissed as censeur de la police. Banished to his lands, he died, reportedly disheartened, a year later. Persecution of Falconnet, Linguet, Le Fuel, Mercier, Delacroix, and Rutlidge followed. According to the Mémoires secrets, all were...

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59 Journal de politique, 1776, III, 260, 389.

60 Mémoires secrets, IX, 174 (30 July 1776): IX, 270 (24 November 1776).
accused of “writings contrary to respect for His Majesty’s authority."

Pidansat attributed the “inhibition of the press in the capital” to the new book trade director, Le Camus de Neville, who immediately antagonized men of letters by adopting the recommendations of the royalist censor Coqueley de Chaussepière on far stricter policing of the printed word. Coqueley—whose name Linget spelled “Cocu-et-laid”—also happened to be the chief legal counsel of the Comédie-Française. He lived, as the gossipy Collé said in his Mémoires, “à pot et à rôt” with the comédiens and he was currently enjoying an apartment at the Louvre. He felt a mission to silence the journalist detractors of the theater and the regime. His first step was to destroy whatever alliance remained between the refractory dramatists and the parlement. He was censor of a work by the comédien Desessarts called Les trois théâtres de Paris which, when it appeared after a period of suspension and delay, contained a section on jurisprudence apparently written by Coqueley himself. The article unequivocally stated that by royal decree Mercier and his group must address all grievances concerning the theater to the King’s Council. The parlement had no further jurisdiction in the matter.

Journalistic expropriations now began in earnest. Some of the frondeur editors were replaced with others thought to be more docile: Le Fuel by Le Vacher de Charnois, son-in-law of the comédien Preville, Mercier by the “gentle poet” Dorat, Linget by the staid academician La Harpe. But the whitewashed papers proved an embarrassment, because subscribers clamored for the original editors’ return, referring to their replacements as traitors to the cause, “groveling,” “pusillanimous,” “impotent,” “flaccid.” Le Fuel’s subscribers likened him to the Flemish artist Teniers, whose realistic scenes of peasant revelry and wild rural landscapes had so disgusted Louis XIV. An admirer of Teniers’s robust work would never accept in

62See, for example, Coqueley’s Mémoires to Sartine regarding censorship, BN. ms. fr. 22123.
63See Almanach royale, 1775, p. 413. His previous address was in the quartier St. Severin.
64Desessarts, Les trois théâtres de Paris (Paris: Lacombe, 1777), pp. 167–68. That Coqueley was its censor, and had delayed it, is confirmed in BN ms. fr. 22002, p. 129, No. 899.
65See, for example, Espion anglais, 2 vols. (Paris, nouv. ed., 1809), II; 428; Journal du théâtre, October 1777, 299 and April 1778, passim.
its place a portrait by the Sun King’s court painter Mignard, the conventional and mannered favorite of the aristocracy. 66 Frondeur dissent even spilled over the borders of France. The Courrier de l’Europe, a new, politically virulent French-language paper launched by émigrés in London, filled up with letters protesting these “lamentably spineless” successors to the original “Romans,” and the poverty of their polemics. 67

The purge was clearly too big an operation for Coqueley to handle alone. The publisher Panckoucke, the ministers’ henchman, together with his brother-in-law Suard whom the Almanach royal listed as the new censor replacing Crébillon in 1777, helped eliminate these troublesome publications whose competition had caused the official Mercure and Gazette to languish. Panckoucke, as Robert Darnton has shown, was entirely devoted to the power structure and order of the Old Regime, and feared radical journalism. 68 Suard’s politics, revealed by his wife in her Mémoires, fit perfectly what the government needed for the job. Ministers had “the most perfect confidence” in Suard, and immediately put him in charge of censoring and keeping in check the daily Journal de Paris, which was launched in 1777, and many other papers. 69 “M. Suard was always royalist, in sentiment, by education, by principle, by reasoning.” “He never,” his wife continued, “advocated the adoption of the English constitution,” and “filled the papers of that day with his feelings about the monarchy, the respect we owe the King, and [against] the license of the press and of the theatre.” 70 Suard deplored “incendiary, defamatory and scandalous writings designed to irritate the people, lead opinion astray, and cause insurrection against all they should love and respect.” Suard declared war on such “perverse and idiotic writers” who call themselves “patriots” but are really bent on destroying the patrie. 71 Suard himself wrote a revealing piece on the Censure des théâtres, arguing the dangers of free speech in a medium which “stirs up passions later expressed with extraordinary energy because of the simultaneous reaction of a multitude of as-

sembled men.” Crowds could easily get out of hand and such “popular effervescence” must be avoided at all costs, for order would never be restored.72

By 1779 all of the networked papers were gone, most of them bought up by Panckoucke. Their subscribers instead received the newly refurbished, government-approved *Mercure de France*, “le premier journal de la nation,” of which Panckoucke himself was the privileged editor. Pidansat, divested of his duties as censor, assumed the responsibility of recording the destruction of the newspapers that had dared to challenge the conspiracy of official privilege and repression. Printed in England, Pidansat’s *Observateur anglais* and *Espion anglais* described how corrupt ministers, censors, and bookdealers had snuffed out the only worthwhile papers published on French soil, while the king circumvented parlement by referring grievances to his own Council, “a trick the Court uses to extinguish all contestations that displease it.” Pidansat’s favorite case study was *Le Fuel’s Journal du théâtre*, a paper he could talk about quite freely because Crébillon, not he, had been its censor. *Le Fuel*, wrote Pidansat admiringly, “had the black humor, the fire, the boiling intensity of a Juvenal; and his style, though not elegant, was natural and correct.” “His critical diatribes derived force and energy from his austerity, his firmness.” Pidansat described with obvious relish how editors of other disrupted or silenced papers outwitted authorities by publishing anonymously in *Le Fuel’s* discussions, telling the truth with the license allowed in celebrations of misrule. But their eventual “unmasking” had ended the “saturnalia,” and they had been forced to flee for their lives, chased by their own ungrateful patrie which they had tried to correct and save.73 Pidansat, who clearly admired *Le Fuel’s* lawyer Falconnet, was discomfited that the parlement found him too concerned with the commoners and, far from supporting him, had forbidden him to write any more mémoires for the oppressed “on pain of exemplary punishment.”74

Parlement, for which the frondeur journalists had had such unrealistic and naive hopes, wound up disappointing them. Motivated

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74Ibid., V, 254–55.
by private interests, the magistrates retreated from their bold constitutional rhetoric of 1774, and lapsed into a period of quiescence which would last through the early 1780s. Gone were the days when Henrion de Pansey would write Mémoires defending Mercier. The parlement, after censuring Beaumarchais, joined in threatening or disbarring the maverick lawyers: Linguet, Beaumarchais, Falconnet, Delacroix. In the spring of 1779 Pidansat himself was ruled against in a matter of honor, his victorious opponent a wealthy marquis. A similar schism between parlementaires—nobles, after all—and those with more popular sympathies, had occurred during the Fronde and had rent it asunder. It is ironic that a repetition should not have been anticipated by those who so strongly identified with the original frondeurs. Overwhelmingly distressed by the parlement’s betrayal, Pidansat committed suicide in 1779. The ever-snide Grimm was quick to point out that Pidansat had done even this in Roman style, like Seneca, opening his veins in the public baths.75

With Pidansat’s death, the network of frondeur journalists was effectively disbanded. Le Babillard was the last paper to go, silenced by Suard when Rutlidge threatened to sue Panckoucke. Rutlidge had earlier expressed his disgust for the new press lord, parading around as “Seigneur Mercure,” “le nouveau Dieu,” playing up to censors and ministers, buying their praise with base adulation, lying to please them, and turning out a paper that was really a travesty, a laudanum meant to muddle the mind, “guilty of maintaining artificial and frightened silence, for its own interest.”76 The Journal de Paris and the Gazette de France (both watched over by Suard) were seen by Rutlidge as part of the conspiracy to obstruct the “habit of thinking,” to keep readers in darkness.77 Rutlidge’s last issue of the Babillard was an “article extraordinaire” blasting Panckoucke and the Comédie for discrediting his latest play, Le Train de Paris ou les bourgeois du temps, because it laid bare the vices of the nobility. When Rutlidge said he would bring Panckoucke to trial for the slanderous lies in the Mercure, Suard took over the paper and eliminated it.78 Rutlidge would later describe his mar-

75 Grimm, Correspondance littéraire, XII, 338.
76 Babillard, II, 374, 377, 381.
77 Ibid., IV, 270.
78 Ibid., IV, 381–84. That Suard was the paper’s final censor is shown in BN, ms. fr. 22002, p. 195.
tyrdom during these years, when he was “reduced to poverty and ruined by my oppressors.” He had been jailed for five days, kept in solitary confinement, interrogated about his writings, his papers seized. His Babillard would have been far more radical, he explained, but to get his thought into print at all he had to “prostitute” himself to the powers, “ferocious and unprincipled,” “lying and depraved,” “extravagant and uncaring” ministers whose politics were dedicated to “coddling rich corps and powerful individuals, and sacrificing to them the poor and unprotected.”

Seeing the fate of their comrade who remained in France, the others found it more prudent to seek asylum and continue their fulminations from outside their patrie. Mercier only narrowly escaped the Bastille, and there was a last-minute rush to lock Le Fuel in Bicêtre prison. Mercier and Grimod de la Reyniere (who had helped Le Fuel for a time at the Journal du théâtre) fled to Neuchâtel, Le Fuel and Linguet to England. Although Panckoucke’s journalistic takeover was obviously a financial coup for the ambitious businessman, the frondeurs could only see it as an “infamy,” a foul political conspiracy. Linguet’s Annales politiques, printed on foreign soil but smuggled into France, called Panckoucke’s maneuver an “unparalleled bloodbath” in the world of the press, and carried obituaries for the silenced newspapers, case studies of victimization under despotism. The “Mercure Panckoucke,” sent to subscribers instead, was perceived by Linguet as pablum, a “drogue,” a force-fed tranquilizer, sure proof that the Old Regime was about to collapse. Linguet was slightly heartened by the fact that some 500 former subscribers of the frondeur papers rejected the substitution of the Mercure, demanding their money back and refusing the ministers’ poison.

Theater criticism in the prerevolutionary press had thus erupted into a full-blown attack on the hallowed but vulnerable institutions of the Old Regime. As Linguet explained when Panckoucke fired

79 Mémoire . . . Rutledge, especially pp. iv, v, 30–31, 38, 44.
81 Annales politiques, civiles et littéraires, IV (1778), 103–11; 189–91.
him from the *Journal de politique*, “Observations on the theatre, and on the acting ability of those pensioned by the prince to give him pleasure, are not, one would think, as dangerous as political remarks. Theatre secrets are perhaps slightly less redoubtable than those of the Court. But do not be fooled into thinking they are without peril. The stage, like the corridors of power, can never be discussed with candor.”

In France, after this elastic moment in the mid-1770s, repressive journalistic censorship reasserted itself, and the royalist press became dominant once again. The exiled *frondeurs*, radicalized further by the usurpation of their papers and the closing off of legitimate channels, turned to writing libels. Le Fuel churned out furious pamphlets and political pornography. Linguet sent open letters excoriating the whole French administration, letters so indecent that even the supportive Mêtra condemned them as a “veritable vomiting of insults,” totally beyond the pale. Mercier devoted himself mostly to the forbidden *Tableau de Paris*, in which he charted France’s paranoia and decline during the 1780s. By way of explaining his own seemingly cowardly retreat to Switzerland, he wrote that it was now totally impossible to speak truthfully on French soil. Not only the king, ministers, and censors, but also the one-time hope for salvation, the parlements, were obstructing rather than protecting those who fought for an expansion of human freedom. “All papers for sale in [Paris] say the same thing . . . none contradicts each other, all are under the official thumb . . . all recite equally well their lessons.” Even the manuscript *nouvelles* which try to “escape enslavement to the protocol of ministerial wishes” are deprived of political foresight by the regime’s strict censorship and are obliged to proceed as if they had “their heads in a bag,” forced to rely on rumor.

The new *frondeurs* had put forth an original conception of the journalist’s role which Mercier would revive in his revolutionary

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82 *Journal de politique*, 1775, III, 246.
83 Le Fuel’s last project was advertised on the back flap of his third newspaper and was to be a many-volumed *Histoire philosophique et politique du commerce des courtisannes, acteurs et actrices les plus célèbres et les plus honnêtes du siècle*. Meant to illustrate “l’égalité des conditions,” this work never materialized because Le Fuel died in 1778.
84 *Correspondance secrète*, IV, 267 (5 April 1777).
Annales patriottiques et littéraires (1789). They saw themselves as publicists, protecting by informing the public, using their papers as they did their plays, mémoires, and open letters, to put facts out into the open, to expose intrigue. They were convinced that it was the underlying weakness and corruption of the regime that made the king and his allies so fearful. Le Fuel liked to say "les scélérats craignent le grand jour," and Mercier's "les brigands n'aient pas les réverbères" reiterated the view of journalists as beacons revealing the truth, of papers as "streetlamps that illuminate too well the prevarications and vices of people in high places." It is not surprising that the writings of Linguet, Pidansat, Rutlidge, Le Fuel, and Mercier, whose insurrectionary prose and demand for press freedom preceded the Revolution by fifteen years, were confiscated so vigilantly by the police, great packets of them continually sent to be locked up or pulped at the pilon de la Bastille.

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86Ibid., II, 79–80.
87Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Archives de la Bastille, ms. 10305.