Introduction

On 26 August 1789, the Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen enshrined freedom of speech in law. The next day, Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Suard,[1] the censor responsible for the theatres, wrote in the *Journal de Paris*:

> Il serait étrange que la liberté civile consistât dans le droit illimité de rassembler dans de vastes théâtres les citoyens d'une grande ville, pour y exposer à leurs yeux des scènes licencieuses ou atroces; pour y tourner en ridicule la religion, la morale et les lois; pour y insulter le souverain, les magistrats, les prêtres, les particuliers; pour y prêcher la sédition et dénoncer aux vengeances du peuple des citoyens innocens.. . . Ces excès sont exagérés, direz-vous, et la licence n'ira pas jusques-là. Je l'espère; mais si la liberté ne peut pas aller jusques-là, il y a donc une borne où elle doit s'arrêter. Là commence la censure.
>
> It would be strange if civil liberty consisted in the unlimited right to assemble citizens of a city in vast theatres, to expose them to licentious or atrocious scenes; to ridicule religion, morality and laws; to insult the sovereign, magistrates, priests, or private individuals; to preach sedition and denounce innocent citizens to the people's vengeance.. . . These excesses are exaggerated, you will say, and licence will not go that far. I hope so; but if liberty cannot go that far, then there is a limit to where it must stop. That's where censorship begins.[2]

Initially, Suard's observations could be dismissed as those of a civil servant keen on keeping his job in the tumultuous days of 1789. Upon closer inspection, however, his argument is more nuanced: Suard recognized not only the need for moderate regulation but that royal censors were not the only people to exert it. Indeed, a whole plethora of figures, from heads of

[1] In general, first names have not been given in the main body of the text unless necessary for clarification; first names, if known, are given in the index.
[2] *JdP*, 27 August 1789. Translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

state to enraged soldiers and impassioned students, attempted to exert their own censorship over the longer French Revolution.

This is the first study to tackle theatre censorship during the longer revolutionary period. Theatre is so important in understanding the period because it assembled hundreds if not thousands of spectators together, most of whom had to part with their money to secure a place. It thus tells us what interested ordinary citizens as well as heads of state, both in Paris and across France. Theatre could both support the political and cultural status quo and pose a significant risk for those in power. Its censorship, therefore, reveals the limits of what people were prepared to tolerate or the state was ready to air within the electrified atmosphere of one of the period's largest cultural arenas, which could have a real impact on spectators' world-views. To analyse theatre censorship, this study examines bureaucratic censorship processes alongside 'lateral censorship'. The latter is a new methodological approach to censorship that helps us to understand better constraints on free speech, both historical and modern. The study concentrates on the period from 1788, which marked the relaxation of censorship in the run up to the Estates General of 1789, to 1818, the end of the allied occupation of France and the transferral of theatre censorship from the Police Ministry to the Interior Ministry. The book's central research question is: How did a diverse cast – from censors to spectators – try to tailor plays to shape the world around them? This in turn brings us to questions of *how* contemporaries believed that theatre could shape their world, what they thought of theatre censorship, how they supported or subverted it, and what continuities and ruptures we as scholars can decipher as France hurtled through seismic political change – from the Ancien Régime to a Revolution, Republic, Empire, and Restoration – and as freedom of speech was enshrined in law. We will see, first, that despite the political and social changes, bureaucratic censorship offered theatres a safety blanket that protected their standing and income, as well as an occasional target for ire that went down well with partisan spectators, and, second, that spectators were willing to exert their power to enforce their own lateral censorship throughout this period, regardless of the legal context of the freedom of speech. Liberty went only so far.

***

For over three decades, using theatre to study understandings of the self and one's political, social, and cultural world has been a growing field. The major turning point for Ancien Régime theatre was Jeffrey S. Ravel's *The Contested Parterre* (1999), which unearthed how the parterre could contest

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

royal power.[3] Although Ravel's study terminates in 1791, his emphasis on theatre's ramifications for political culture uncovers the consequences of individuals' actions within the auditorium. The dynamics between the revolutionary and political stages have also been at the fore of research on Revolutionary theatre since Paul Friedland's (2002) and Susan Maslan's (2005) work, which in turn built on Marie-Hélène Huet's (1982) study of the theatricalization of Revolutionary politics.[4] Mark Darlow's study (2012) of the Paris Opéra from 1789 to 1794 shifted the ground once again, through not only its meticulous research, but its cultural history approach, one sensitive to a work of art's poetics and 'its place within a specific field of signification and/or representation, and in a defined social and historical context'.[5] I previously used cultural history for my exploration of Napoleonic tragedy (2020), showing that although it could act as propaganda, its success could not be ensured or it could backfire.[6] Denise Davidson (2007) also included theatre in her cultural study of the restructured social order under Napoleon and the Restoration.[7] Narrowing the lens further, Sheryl Kroen (2000) centred on *Tartuffe* (1669) to analyse the struggles of the Restoration, including how spectators used plays to interact with the political sphere.[8]

Whereas the majority of the studies above focus on Paris, this study also dives into the provinces. I am indebted not only to the rich local histories of theatre – Henri Lagrave, Charles Mazouer, and Marc Régaldo's tome (1985) is an excellent example[9] – but also to Max Fuchs' analysis (1986) of the Ancien Régime's vibrant and complicated provincial theatre, revealing how it could be at odds with Parisian orders.[10] More recently, Cyril

[3] Jeffrey Ravel, *The Contested Parterre, Public Theatre and French Political Culture 1680–1791* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

[4] Paul Friedland, *Political Actors: Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Susan Maslan, *Revolutionary Acts: Theater, Democracy and the French Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Marie-Hélène Huet, *Rehearsing the Revolution: The Staging of Marat's Death, 1793–1797,* trans. Robert Hurley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

[5] Mark Darlow, *Staging the French Revolution, Cultural Politics and the Paris Opéra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 5.

[6] Clare Siviter, *Tragedy and Nation in the Age of Napoleon*, *Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020).

[7] Denise Davidson, *France After Revolution: Urban Life, Gender, and the New Social Order* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[8] Sheryl Kroen, *Politics and Theater: The Crisis of Legitimacy in Restoration France, 1815–1830* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[9] Henri Lagrave, Charles Mazouer, Marc Régaldo, *La Vie théâtrale à Bordeaux, des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1985).

[10] Max Fuchs, *La Vie théâtrale en province au XVIIIe siècle, personnel et répertoire* (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1986).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

Triolaire's examination of provincial theatre under Napoleon (2012) laid bare the complexities and paradoxes of theatre 'on the ground'.[11] Lauren Clay (2013) succinctly married Parisian and provincial research to study Ancien Régime theatre as a business, extending her research to the colonies.[12] Eighteenth-century French colonial theatre is now a field in itself, but Julia Prest's new extensive study (2023) only raises a contemporaneous reflection on censorship.[13]

Coming onto the topic of censorship, Ancien Régime censorship of the book trade is a flourishing field, animated by the works of Raymond Birn, Simon Burrows, Robert Darnton, and Barbara Negroni, to name but four.[14] Not all in agreement, this wave of research reveals the murky, at times paradoxical, relations between the repressive forces of the state, authors, printers, and book sellers. Although censorship is not absent from scholarly debate on the Revolution, there are markedly fewer works about it considering how much actually went on during the period 1788–1818. One work that bucks this trend is Charles Walton's remarkable study (2009), which uncovered early Revolutionary debates about free speech and how calumny was used to curtail it, but concludes in 1794.[15] Increasing the temporal span, Carla Hesse (1991), Veronica Granata (2006), and Odile Krakovitch (2008) have illuminated regulations of the printing world between 1789 and 1810, with Hesse in particular demonstrating how this control was desired by both the state and members of the book trade after Revolutionary freedoms.[16] Patricia Sorel (2020) has recently extended this analysis to 1815, showing how Napoleonic censorship was far from total and went in hand with desires to professionalize the

[11] Cyril Triolaire, *Le Théâtre en province pendant le Consulat et l'Empire* (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise-Pascal, 2012).

[12] Lauren Clay, *Stagestruck: The Business of Theater in Eighteenth-Century France and Its Colonies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

[13] Julia Prest, *Public Theatre and Enslaved People of Colonial Saint-Domingue* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), p. 72.

[14] For example, Raymond Birn, *Royal Censorship of Books in Eighteenth-Century France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012); Simon Burrows, *The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe, vol. II: Enlightenment Bestsellers* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); Robert Darnton, *Censors at Work: How States Shaped Literature* (London: British Library, 2014); and Barbara de Negroni, *Lectures interdites, le travail des censeurs au XVIIIe siècle, 1723–1774* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995).

[15] Charles Walton, *Policing Public Opinion in the French Revolution: The Culture of Calumny and the Problem of Free Speech* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[16] Carla Hesse, *Publishing and Cultural Politics in Revolutionary Paris, 1789–1810* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Veronica Granata, 'Marché du livre, censure et littérature clandestine dans la France de l'époque napoléonienne: les années 1810–1814', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 343 (2006), 123–45; Odile Krakovitch, *Les Imprimeurs parisiens sous Napoléon 1er. Édition critique de l'enquête de décembre 1810* (Paris: Paris Musées, 2008).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

field.[17] The censorship of the press has also garnered attention,[18] but it is a decidedly delicate subject, and scholars continue to misunderstand the legislation in place.[19]

Things are even patchier for theatre censorship. Certainly, there are a handful of essential sources for the period at hand that focus on theatre censorship specifically – often of a specific regime – by Victor Hallays-Dabot (1862), Henri Welschinger (1887), Claude Gével and Jean Rabot (1913), and Odile Krakovitch (1982, 1992, 2008).[20] Hallays-Dabot's work is valuable as he had access to the archives of Paris's Hôtel de Ville before the fire of 1871, which destroyed sixteen boxes of theatre manuscripts from the Ancien Régime censorship system.[21] Hallays-Dabot rarely referenced as modern scholars do, but having read over 150,000 pages of archival documents, I find his work faithful to the surviving material. Welschinger's and Krakovitch's contributions are likewise rich for their case studies and understanding one historical period. However, although they underlined that censorship could be unsuccessful, they focused predominantly on the Archives nationales' police holdings, which shows only half of the picture. Censorship also formed a significant part of Frederick Hemming's *Theatre and State* (1994),[22] and more localized studies such as

[17] Patricia Sorel, *Napoléon et le livre: la censure sous le Consulat et l'Empire (1799–1815)* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2020).

[18] Alma Söderjelm, *Le Régime de la presse pendant la Révolution française*, 2 vols. (Helsingfors: Imprimerie Hufvudstadsbladet, 1900); André Cabanis, *La Presse sous le Consulat et l'Empire (1799–1814)* (Paris: Société des études Robespierristes, 1975). Henri Welshcinger has a chapter on newspapers in Henri Welschinger, *La Censure sous le Premier Empire* (Paris: Perrin, 1887). Maximilien Novak undertook a thesis on public opinion, journalists and historians that touches on censorship at the EHESS, which has now been published as *Napoléon et l'empire des lettres: l'opinion publique sous le Consulat et le Premier Empire, 1799–1814* (Paris: PUF, 2023).

[19] For example, Maxime Dury declares that there was no censorship during the Empire because no legal text claimed freedom of the press, Maxime Dury, *La Censure: la prédication silencieuse* ([Paris]: Publisud, 1995), p. 69.

[20] Victor Hallays-Dabot, *Historie de la censure théâtrale en France* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1862); Welschinger, *La Censure*; Claude Gével and Jean Rabot, *La Censure théâtrale sous la Restauration, extrait de la* Revue de Paris *du 15 novembre 1913* (Coulommiers: Paul Brodard, 1913); Odile Krakovitch, *Les Pièces de théâtre soumises à la censure (1800–1830): inventaire des manuscrits des pièces (F18 581 à 668) et des procès-verbaux des censeurs (F21 966 à 995)* (Paris: Archives nationales, 1982); Odile Krakovitch, 'La Censure théâtrale sous le Premier Empire', *Institut d'études napoléoniennes*, 158–59 (1992), 9–105; and Odile Krakovitch, 'Le Théâtre de la République et la censure sous le Directoire', in *Le Théâtre sous la Révolution, politique du répertoire (1789–1799)*, ed. Martial Poirson (Paris: Desjonquères, 2008), pp. 169–92.

[21] Henri Malo, 'Inventaire sommaire des archives de la préfecture de police, série AA', Paris, Archives de la préfecture de Police.

[22] Frederick Hemmings, *Theatre and the State in France, 1760–1905* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

Darlow's work on the Opéra,[23] research on individual playwrights,[24] and critical editions of *causes célèbres*, such as *L'Ami des lois* and *Paméla* (both 1793).[25] These are sterling works but they adopt the traditional understanding of censorship as a repressive state force often espoused by historians of the book trade. There is, therefore, much work to be done on taking a more global approach to theatre censorship and on excavating new sources. By giving a voice back to those involved in a play's progress from composition to consumption, from state employees to enraged spectators who might otherwise fall between the historical gaps, we can properly explore how French people used censorship to shape their rapidly changing world.

Archives – and their archivists – have been central to this and pre-existing works. The Police Ministry's archives at the Archives nationales were crucial to Krakovitch's research in particular. Undoubtedly precious, they present a certain picture. In researching theatre censorship for Paris, I have also consulted institutional archives (split across the Archives nationales, the Bibliothèque nationale de France, and the Bibliothèque-Musée de la Comédie-Française), generalist police surveillance reports, political debates, and personal papers, to name but four extra domains. For the provinces, my approach was more global as I inventoried the theatre holdings of seventy-five municipal and departmental archives for the period 1791–1813 as part of the Thérepsicore project at the Université Clermont Auvergne, discovering uncatalogued gems in the process. I adopted this wider approach to provincial archives on my own trips, expanding the time frame from the late Ancien Régime to the early 1820s, as later reports can recall past events. Surprisingly, I discovered papers relating to the Opéra and the Comédie-Française[26] under Napoleon at Toulouse's Archives municipales.[27] Some holdings are particularly rich, for

[23] Darlow, *Staging*.

[24] Adolphe Liéby, *Étude sur le théâtre de Marie-Joseph Chénier* (Paris: Société française d'imprimerie et de librairie, 1901); Laurier-Gérard Rousseau, *Le* Pinto *de Népomucène-Louis Lemercier et la censure* (Mayenne: Imprimerie Floch, 1958); Vincenzo De Santis, *Le Théâtre de Louis Lemercier entre Lumières et Romantisme* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015); Elizabeth C. Bartlet, *Étienne-Nicolas Méhul and Opera: Source and Archival Studies of Lyric Theatre During the French Revolution, Consulate and Empire* (Heilbronn: Musik-Edition Lucile Galland, 1999).

[25] François de Neufchâteau, *Paméla, ou la vertu récompensée*, ed. Martial Poirson (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2007); Jean-Louis Laya, *L'Ami des lois*, ed. Mark Darlow and Yann Robert (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2011), pp. 7–127.

[26] For consistency, I generally use the term 'Comédie-Française' to refer to iterations of the company founded in 1680, unless specification is key, and 'Opéra' for the Academié royale or impériale de musique, unless otherwise specified.

[27] AM Toulouse, 5S203/3-6.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

example, those of Bordeaux, Lille, and Lyon, as these cities had a vibrant theatrical life. However, I have also worked on smaller towns, such as Auxerre, Bayonne, and Châlon-sur-Saône. No archive is ever complete: documents have been destroyed by war; holdings in Bordeaux, Lille, and Paris, amongst others, have suffered fires; and collections have been sold off. Beyond losses, Arlette Farge reminds us that the archive is only a partial picture: what we choose to consult, what the official chose to write down.[28] I have been particularly conscious of this last point, especially when it comes to lateral censorship by actors and audiences. Although archival research throws up a variety of hurdles, it is crucial to unearthing the realities of theatre censorship for the period at hand. To this end, the present study draws on over 1,875 censorship reports, over 150,000 pages of archival documents, and hundreds of manuscripts, from 131 different archives for the period from 1788 to 1818.

This study has encountered three further hurdles, which should be discussed briefly. The first is periodization. Although grounded in years of practice across multiple disciplines, the sharp academic distinctions between the fields of Ancien Régime theatre and those of the Revolution, the Napoleonic period, and the Restoration (classed within 'the nineteenth century') mean that this study works across four distinct periods. The next hurdle is the long-standing division between genres, and specifically spoken and musical theatre. I have deliberately covered a variety of genres from ballets and pantomimes, through musical comedies and *drames*, to tragedy, high comedy, and opera. Methodologically, there is often more paperwork for the 'elite' genres: the theatres where they were performed have their own archive series, and these premieres were considered of high cultural value, entailing more commentary by the police and the press. However, by consciously studying other genres alongside these major productions, we gain a greater understanding of the sheer diversity of French productions. The final hurdle is the number of institutions involved. Where institutional histories exist, they are invaluable, but as with the generic focus, it means current studies on the period are often segmented. It is my hope, however, that taking a trans-periodical, trans-generic, and trans-institutional approach that encompasses Paris and the provinces will improve our current understanding of the interactions between theatre, society, and politics during the longer French Revolution.

To summarize, building on current studies this book aims to trace theatre censorship in France – by the state, the theatres themselves, and

[28] Arlette Farge, *Le Goût de l'archive* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), especially pp. 37–41 and 70.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

individuals – during the years 1788–1818. In so doing, it advances our knowledge and understanding of this period, identifies continuities and ruptures in practice that problematize the current temporal divisions of theatre historiography, and offers a new methodological approach to understanding constraints to the freedom of speech by developing an original and more inclusive concept of censorship that accounts for national and local pressures.

***

Investigating theatre censorship offers a privileged insight into how contemporaries used – and were meant to use – culture to express their political and social allegiances during this period of major upheaval. Studies of cultural phenomena, from festivals to songs and of course theatre, have taught us much about the relationship between culture and politics. However, with theatre censorship we see both sides of the coin: what the state strove for or wanted to stop; what individual members of the theatrical world fought for or rejected; and what spectators and critics welcomed or pushed back on. As evoked above, the spectators' power is even stronger because generally they were a paying public: here, collective consumerism stood up to state interference in ways we can rarely glimpse at. Metaphorically, theatre censorship allows us to go backstage, to see the mechanics, as well as to sit in the auditorium and observe the performance.

'Censure'

It is worth asking what we mean by censorship. Today, it is tinged by association with twenty- and twenty-first-century totalitarian regimes. The word itself, in both English and French, stems from the Latin *censor*. *Censors* were Roman magistrates 'who at first only had the charge of the Roman people and their property, in respect to their division according to rank or circumstances; but gradually came to the exercise of the office of censor of morals and conduct, and punished the moral or political crimes of those of higher rank by consigning them to a lower order'.[29] The subsequent verb, *censeo*, can be today translated as 'to tax, assess, rate, estimate' (hence the English 'census' and French 'recensement') and, especially in reference to senators, 'to be of opinion, to propose, to vote,

[29] Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), entry available at www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0059%3Aentry%3Dcensor.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

to move'.[30] 'Censorship' was thus an inherently subjective concept, depending on the person exercising it, but also potentially had major ramifications for those undergoing its consequences. From the outset, it is a relationship of power that involves at least two entities.

Throughout this study, I understand censorship through the French term 'censure', which is considerably larger than the English 'censorship'. The 1762 and 1798 editions of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* defined 'censure' as:

> Correction, répréhension. *Soumettre ses écrits à la censure de quelqu'un. Subir la censure de quelqu'un. Souffrir la censure. S'exposer à la censure*
> CENSURE se dit aussi en matière de Dogme, d'un Jugement qui porte condamnation. *La censure que la Sorbonne a faite d'un tel livre, d'une telle proposition*
> On appelle aussi *Censure,* & *Censures Ecclésiastiques,* Les excommunications, interdictions & suspensions d'exercice & de charge Ecclésiastique. *Il a encouru la censure. Il a encouru les censures Ecclésiastiques.*
> En parlant des anciens Romains, on appelle *Censure,* La dignité & la fonction de Censeur. *Durant la censure de Caton.*
> Correction, reprehension. To submit one's writings to someone's censorship. To undergo someone's censorship. To suffer censure. To be exposed to censorship
> CENSURE is also used in dogma to describe a judgment leading to condemnation. The Sorbonne's censure of such a book, of such a proposition.
> One also calls Censure, and Ecclesiastical Censures, excommunications, prohibitions, and suspensions of exercise and of Ecclesiastical office. He incurred censure. He incurred Ecclesiastical censures.
> Speaking of Romans, we call Censure, the dignity and office of Censor. During Cato's censorship.[31]

The inspection of books and plays is conspicuously absent in this definition of 'censure' – reticence to name such activities as 'censure' continued throughout the period at hand. It was less easy to eschew such actions when it came to defining a government office, but, even then, a 'censeur'

[30] Lewis and Short, entry available at www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0059%3Aentry%3Dcenseo1.
[31] 1762 and 1798 editions of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, https://artflsrv03.uchicago.edu/philologic4/publicdicos/query?report=bibliography&head=censure&start=0&end=0.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

was first 'Celui qui reprend ou qui contrôle les actions d'autrui' (they who take over or controls the actions of others) and only afterwards 'se dit aussi d'Un Critique qui juge des ouvrages d'esprit. *Consulter un Censeur éclairé*. On appelle *Censeurs Royaux,* et absolument *Censeurs,* Ceux que le Chancelier de France commet pour l'examen des Livres. *Un tel a été nommé Censeur de cet ouvrage. Ce censeur a eu tort d'approuver ce livre*' (is also said of a critic who judges witty works. To consult an enlightened Censor. We call *Censeurs Royaux*, and absolutely *Censeurs*, those whom the Chancellor of France appoints to examine books. *X has been appointed censor of this work*. *This censor was wrong to approve this book*).[32] Likewise, the *Dictionnaire* makes no mention of theatre in its censorship definitions until 1835, although it was regularized by Louis XIV. Nevertheless, from contemporary documents, there is a clear understanding of censorship as the inspection of works by state officials and their subsequent permission, permission on the condition of modifications, or refusal to be printed or staged. I term these activities 'the bureaucratic censorship process', which we will explore in Chapter 1.

We should be cautious before drawing parallels between this form of censorship and those of the more recent past. Sophia Rosenfeld recalls how many famous *philosophes* recognized that liberty required limits for the proper functioning of society, be these legal or the force of public opinion.[33] In this vein, freedom of speech was not total come 1789, but subjected to the law's limits. Nonetheless, its very recognition led to a dichotomy: as Matthew Bunn explains, defining freedom of speech meant censorship became a coercive force external to speech.[34] Bunn notes how this division impacts historiographical approaches to censorship, a point picked up by Helen Freshwater, who observes a moralizing, anti-censorial bias in recent analyses.[35] We must recognize that censorship was an inherent part of the composition process of plays for most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not something to be maligned.

As Suard illustrated, the state's bureaucratic censorship was not the only form of censorship at play. The eighteenth-century definitions of *censure*

[32] 1762 and 1798 editions of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, https://artflsrv03.uchicago.edu/philologic4/publicdicos/query?report=bibliography&head=censeur.

[33] Sophia Rosenfeld, 'Writing the History of Censorship in the Age of Enlightenment', in *Postmodernism and the Enlightenment: New Perspectives in Eighteenth-Century French Intellectual History*, ed. Daniel Gordon (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 117–45 (pp. 130–32).

[34] Matthew Bunn, 'Reimagining Repression: New Censorship Theory and After', *History and Theory*, 54 (2015), 25–44 (p. 29).

[35] Helen Freshwater 'Towards a Redefinition of Censorship', in *Censorship and Cultural Regulation in the Modern Age*, ed. Beate Müller (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 225–45 (p. 237).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

and *censeur* reveal a dual notion of censorship – to critique and to inspect – that was echoed in contemporary publications like the *Encyclopédie*.[36] These definitions underline the dynamic relationship between the one censoring and the one censored.[37] The archives show that we also need to consider factors such as financial and aesthetic constraints, or the intervention of patrons and artists. It is the impact of these forces that I conceive of as 'lateral censorship', a concept I develop in Chapter 2. Whilst there have been many attempts at redefining censorship in the wake of New Censorship Theory,[38] and cultural commentary with the rise of 'Cancel Culture',[39] what I propose here is a historically grounded approach that draws on modern theory to expand the cast of censorship actors to include four primary bodies that exercise lateral censorship: playwrights, theatres, audiences, and critics.

Using Theatre to Shape the World

Prior to 1789, French society was arranged into three orders – the clergy, the nobility, and the third estate – presided over by the king, who was in power by divine right. Individuals were the king's subjects, and their judicial rights depended upon which *corps* or *communauté* they belonged to. Although there was theological and intellectual discussion about agency in the rise of selfhood,[40] the idea of individual rights, tastes, or votes for

[36] See the entries for 'Censure de livres ou de propositions' and 'Critique, censure', available at https://artflsrv03.uchicago.edu/philologic4/encyclopedie1117/query?report=bibliography&method=proxy&attribution=&objecttype=&head=censure&start=0&end=0.

[37] Gregory S. Brown's important article shows how playwrights sought out censors' opinions as a form of legitimacy, 'Reconsidering the Censorship of Writers in Eighteenth-Century France: Civility, State Power, and the Public Theater in the Enlightenment', *Journal of Modern History*, 75:2 (2003), 235–68. Laurence Macé's project on genetic editions of censored works underlines when changes were made on manuscripts: https://eman-archives.org/Ecume/.

[38] Most famously, Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), especially chapter 4. For more particular case studies, see Sue Curry Jansen, *Censorship: The Knot That Binds Power and Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Robert Post, ed., *Censorship and Silencing: Practices of Cultural Regulation* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1998), in particular, see Richard Burt's deconstructive definition in '(Un)Censoring in Detail: The Fetish of Censorship in the Early Modern Past and the Postmodern Present', pp. 17–41; Michael Holquist, 'Introduction: Corrupt Originals: The Paradox of Censorship', *PMLA*, 109:1 (1994), 14–25; Nicholas Harrison, *Circles of Censorship: Censorship and Its Metaphors in French History, Literature, and Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Freshwater, 'Towards a Redefinition of Censorship'; Bunn, 'Reimagining Repression'.

[39] See Eric Berkowitz, *Dangerous Ideas: A Brief History of Censorship in the West* (London: Westbourne Press, 2021), especially chapter 7.

[40] Charly Coleman, 'The Value of Dispossession: Rethinking Discourses of Selfhood in Eighteenth-Century France,' *Modern Intellectual History*, 2 (2005), 299–326.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

most of the third estate was alien at best; it was radical to assert the contrary, as some Enlightenment thinkers did. Over the fifty years following the first use of 'droits de l'homme' in French in 1763,[41] French people's understanding of their agency would be transformed.

It was not just political theorists who contested the social, political, and judicial set-up from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, but cultural consumers too. Research on the 'public sphere' has underlined how such a public could contest state power through culture, while other scholars have emphasized how changes in consciousness happened through emotional, empathic identification, a process that had a profound effect on how individuals understood their place in the world's shifting sands. These processes are not as distinct as scholarship presents them.

Jürgen Habermas argued that the creation of the public sphere allowed for the 'critical public debate of political matters'.[42] Not disagreeing with the public sphere's weight, Antoine Lilti, amongst others, has questioned the rational basis of the Habermasian model, showing the public to be driven more by curiosity than rational debate.[43] For the theatre, Ravel used the theoretical apparatus of the public sphere to emphasize how the physical space and different peoples' presence within the auditorium created a space to contest the monarchy and contemplate ideas of nation. However, it is worth reflecting further on the dynamics here and how this impacted on ideas of agency.

Theatre had such a large impact on individuals' conception of the world around them because it was a multisensory experience that merged the private and public. Recent work on novels, particularly sentimental, epistolary novels, has underlined their consequences on developing ideas of selfhood, identity, and rights. Suzanne Pucci traced how novels' characters allowed readers to 'try on' new identities and forge greater empathy, which, according to Lynn Hunt, resulted in a shift in the real world.[44] Theatre was no exception. Like novels, plays allowed spectators to engage in empathizing with characters from different social classes, or temporal and geographical locations, through performance and the practice of monologues. Joseph Harris used dramatic theories to explore changes in subjectivity throughout the eighteenth century, arguing that late

[41] Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), p. 23.
[42] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), p. 70.
[43] Antoine Lilti, *L'Héritage des Lumières: ambivalences de la modernité* (Paris: EHESS, 2019).
[44] Suzanne Pucci, *Sites of the Spectator: Emerging Literary and Cultural Practice in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2001); Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, pp. 29, 39–40.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

eighteenth-century spectators recognized their shared humanity with those onstage, in the auditorium, and in the world at large.[45] But theatre also taught people about limits: Jeffrey Leichman argues that '[w]atching actors taught spectators how to understand and manipulate the state of "being looked at" ... that came to characterize both the public sphere and the space of private conduct'.[46] Theatre was a mirror: the reflection was dazzling, but, like the mirror's frame, it allowed spectators to see the limits.

Plays also offered a key site for rehearsing new cultural practices, from criticism to participation, which were crucial to understanding one's place in the shifting political and public spheres. Crucially, one did not have to read to understand a play; its text was heightened by actors' delivery; gesture allowed for theatre to further play on one's emotions and imagination, crystalized emphatically in the rise of the use of *tableaux* during the eighteenth century. If this were not enough, watching theatre was also a collective experience that played on one's emotions. For those who had read and subscribed to the dominant philosophical arguments of Condillac's sensationalism, theatre was a key example of how culture could impact on imagination and bypass the rational public sphere.

Theatres were one of the largest indoor spaces where people could assemble collectively and consume culture. Pannill Camp showed how spectatorship shifted during the Enlightenment to leave an 'indelible imprint' on spectators' consciousness.[47] The stages from 1788 to 1818 were no different and their size mattered. The Théâtre des Arts, rue de la Loi, also known as the Salle Montansier, was used by the Opéra and could hold 2,216 spectators;[48] the Salle Richelieu for the Comédie-Française, over 2,000;[49] the Théâtre de l'Odéon (home of the Comédie-Française until 1793 and of the Théâtre Italien come 1808), 1,913.[50] It was not just major theatres that could hold thousands: the Feydeau could host between 1,700 and 1,900 spectators; the Montansier, 1,650; the Ambigu-Comique, from 1,500 to 1,600; the Salle Favart, 1,282; the Vaudeville, 1,257; and

[45] Joseph Harris, *Inventing the Spectator: Subjectivity and the Theatrical Experience in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[46] Jeffrey M. Leichman, *Acting Up: Staging the Subject in Enlightenment France* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2016), p. xiv.

[47] Pannill Camp, *The First Frame: Theatre Space in Enlightenment France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 217.

[48] Police report, 15 ventôse an IV (5 March 1796), Archives de la préfecture de la police, AA 161.

[49] 'Fiche pédagogique: Salle Richelieu', www.comedie-francaise.fr/www/comedie/media/document/dossier-richelieutraditionmodernite1314.pdf.

[50] 'Les Lieux', www.theatre-odeon.eu/fr/les-lieux and www.cfregisters.org/en/overview-old/paris-playhouses/théâtre-de-lodéon.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

the Variétés, 1,240.[51] In the provinces, theatre capacities were equally impressive: Bordeaux's Grand Théâtre had 1,794 places and its Salle des Variétés 970;[52] Grenoble's theatre had 912 places.[53] Theatres were adorned with symbols of the regime – monarchical, revolutionary, or imperial – and these quickly became matters of contention, even vandalism, with change.[54] Theatre architecture also facilitated the state's surveillance of the auditorium: high-ranking government officials in Paris and local authorities in the provinces (normally the municipality or equivalent) held a box, commonly by the side of the stage so they could survey the auditorium as easily as the boards.[55] Though not an official requirement, it was not uncommon for the provincial official, such as the prefect or his deputy, to have a box on the other side of the auditorium. Honorary boxes were reserved for the king or head of state; even if not in attendance, they might be used by their representatives.[56] These boxes were frequently decorated with further regime symbols, and the municipal officers or equivalent habitually attended the performance in official dress. Off-duty bureaucrats and members of the military also came and could resume their official functions if need be or denounce audience behaviour.[57] But theatres also posed a threat: they were thus policed, and officers had official positions to survey the auditorium. For example, the Parisian police prefect ordered police inspectors to be placed throughout the Comédie-Française from the parterre to the galleries and the balconies, 'de manière à voir tout le parterre, et à distinguer les agitateurs' (so that they can see the pit and

[51] David Charlton, John Trevitt, and Guy Gosselin, 'IV: 1789–1870', in 'Paris', *Grove Music Online*, https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.40089.

[52] Réglement de la police pour la salle de spectacle, 12 pluviôse an III (31 January 1795), Bordeaux Métropole, D113.

[53] État du nombre d'individus que peut contenir la salle de spectacle, 10 frimaire an IV (1 December 1795), AM Grenoble, LL222.

[54] Bordeaux Métropole, D126, 5 ventôse an II (23 February 1794), payments to a sculptor for removing the signs of feudalism; people proposed smothering cooked pears onto the theatre's eagles, letter from the commissaire de police to Nantes' mayor, 5 December 1815, AD Loire-Atlantique, 177T1.

[55] For the Ancien Régime, Lagrave explains that one of the jurats was always present in Bordeaux and could call upon the guard, Henri Lagrave, 'Le Dix-huitième siècle (1715–1789)', in Lagrave et al., eds., *La Vie théâtrale à Bordeaux*, pp. 127–352 (p. 200); see boxes rented by the year for 1788, AN, O/1/849; for the Napoleonic period, AN, AJ/13/67 and AJ/13/74.

[56] For example, letter from the prefect to Dunkerque's sub-prefect, 23 nivôse an XII (14 January 1804), AD Nord, 1T298/8; Order by Lyon's mayor, 1 July 1815, AD Rhône 4T117.

[57] Letter from a Police Ministry employee to the Police Minister, 6 ventôse an VI (24 February 1802), AN, F/7/3491.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

identify the agitators).[58] In both Paris and the provinces, these policemen surveyed the theatre in uniform, but some were also in plain clothes.[59]

One of the reasons why officials were so keen to use theatre from 1788 to 1818 to ease pressure on the political sphere stems from how theatre set off considerable debate within the controlled confines of the public sphere. This form of theatrical public sphere allowed for catharsis and (relatively) controlled 'spillages', to use Christopher Balme's term,[60] that might momentarily contest the political order, but which were easier to remedy than full-scale revolts. Theatres were inherently political spaces: in a system with pre-performance censorship, applicable to most of the period at hand, the state actively endorsed what appeared onstage. Likewise, through the system of 'privilèges', in place until 1791 and from 1806 onwards, the state sanctioned who performed these works. Additionally, the major theatres, like the Comédie-Française and the Opéra, received significant financial patronage from the state on top of its practical administration, discussed further in Chapter 1. However, theatres were not just sites of top-down power, not least because companies needed to make a living: whilst the state had much to say about what could or could not make the stage, so too did paying spectators.

Reams of archival documents reveal how theatres were also sites of anti-governmental sentiment, particularly from the Directory onwards (though this may stem from the better preservation of archival material). Theatres could act as meeting places for illicit political groups,[61] and political discussions could spread like wildfire within the theatres.[62] Theatrical architecture also allowed for direct confrontations of power given the presence of government officials. Disgruntled conscripted soldiers surrounded the Vaudeville and the Louvois in November 1798,[63] and many

[58] Note about the policing of the Comédie-Française from the police prefect to Mahréault, 4 vendémaire an IX (26 September 1800), BMCF, ARAD 1/2 (4).

[59] For example, the letter from the prefect to Grenoble's mayor, 8 December 1808, AM Grenoble, 2R414.

[60] Christopher Balme, *The Theatrical Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 15.

[61] The 'Cercle de la Comédie' in Bordeaux had a servant on the lookout, letter from Bordeaux's bureau central to the Police Minister, 23 thermidor an V (10 August 1797), Bordeaux Métropole, D167.

[62] For example, the reports that people were talking about Ney's trial in November 1815, report by the commissaire de police, 23 November 1815, AN, F/7/3838.

[63] Eighty conscripts were arrested for surrounding the Vaudeville and twenty at the Louvois in November 1798, report from 8 to 9 frimaire an VII (28 to 29 November 1798), AN, AF/III/167, pièce 39.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

a police report records confrontations between civil and military spectators. Whilst individuals would not be granted an audience with officials, the theatre allowed audience members to express their complaints directly. This could be through codified behaviour, such as turning their backs or refusing to take off their hats in the presence of a certain official, or even the head of state. But theatre also allowed direct access to officials who were present in the auditorium, and aggrieved audience members could express their complaints to them directly. This was usually civil, but officials could also be publicly slighted: in 1798, General Lasne was surrounded at the theatre in Bordeaux, and students in Toulouse spat on the generals sitting below them during the Restoration.[64]

Codified behaviour was another means by which the theatrical experience shaped contemporary subjectivity. Many spectators were swept up by what the playwright Marie-Joseph Chénier, amongst others, termed the 'électricité du théâtre' (theatre's electricity) as a collective experience.[65] It was the very energy of the audiences' experiences that led Suard to argue that theatrical censorship should continue in the age of free speech.[66] There were attempts at heightening the community aspect of the theatrical experience through audience participation. For example, impromptu shouts of 'Vive le … [insert appropriate allegiance]' could rain down. However, such shouting could also be directed against the state by interjections of 'à bas' (down with). Communal singing was another technique through which contemporaries tried to forge communities with audiences. The Comité de salut public ordered that the 'Hymne à la liberté' (liberty hymn) be sung each *décadi* in every 'spectacle' in the Republic,[67] and later regimes capitalized on this habit of collective singing within the theatre.[68] However, once again, it was possible to subvert the intended purpose of these activities: actors sang badly on purpose or audiences started to sing an

[64] Police report on troubles at the Grand spectacle, 19 nivôse an VI (8 January 1798), Bordeaux Métropole, D157; letter from the prefect to Toulouse's mayor, 30 November 1816, AM Toulouse, 1164.

[65] Marie-Joseph Chénier, 'Discours préliminaire', in Marie-Joseph Chénier, *Charles IX, ou l'école des rois, tragédie* (Paris: Bossange, 1790), pp. 11–38 (p. 21).

[66] Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Suard, 'Censure des théâtres', in Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Suard, *Mélanges de littérature* (Paris: Dentu, 1804), pp. 309–14 (p. 312).

[67] Séance du 4 frimaire an II, in François-Alphonse Aulard, ed., *Recueil des actes du Comité de salut public*, 19 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1889–1951), VIII (1895): 670.

[68] In Bordeaux, the local authorities told the Grand Théâtre and Théâtre de Molière to advertise 'Le Réveil du Peuple' and 'Le Cri de mon cœur' every day, 4 prairial an III (23 May 1795), Bordeaux Métropole.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

anti-governmental song instead.[69] Thus, although the audience was not necessarily unified – split socially by the theatre's architecture, politically into distinct groupings or into warring cabals – the performance context was a key site for individual spectators to think through the position of the self, the social body, and the state. This is supported by modern theorists, such as Diana Taylor, who argues that performances 'function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated . . . behaviour'.[70] Theatres were stages not just for actors but for individuals and groups too.

The role of the theatrical experience in shaping subjectivity was underlined by the practice of *applications*. Hemmings shows that the habit of audiences signalling *applications* came to the fore in the political crises of the 1780s and largely died down again in the 1820s.[71] An *application* occurred when a section of the audience drew a link between the stage of the theatre and that of the real, often political, world. This could be a line, a set of verses, or a whole situation. *Applications* could be positive: patriotic characters defending the Republic rallied morale amongst Revolutionary audiences; seeing a glorious emperor onstage made some Napoleonic audiences think positively of their own imperial head of state; whilst the benevolent prince of *Tartuffe* (1669) or imprisoned king in *Richard, Cœur de Lion* (1784) helped the monarchist cause under Louis XVI and Louis XVIII. However, more often than not, *applications* were subversive. Darlow has convincingly shown how Revolutionaries engaged in meta-theatricality: circumstantial plays 'make collage-like citation of a range of external sources and referents . . . and because they constantly refer outside the fiction, they by necessity call for metatextual and/or referential interpretation'.[72] If we extend Darlow's argument to the practice of *applications*, where even a seventeenth-century play could suddenly seem pertinent to the performance context, we can see that his sense of meta-theatricality applies beyond circumstantial plays. Such practices were not unique to the Revolution: audience members were adept at signalling

[69] Letter from the Police Minister to the bureau central, 9 pluviôse an IV (29 January 1796), apparently when the theatres sing 'La Marseillaise' the artists omit part of the fifth verse with reference to French soldiers and Bouillé's accomplices, AN, F/7/3491. Likewise, in Metz, audience members started singing 'Le Réveil du peuple', which led to a series of troubles, letter from Metz's district administrators to its conseil général, 1 brumaire an IV (23 October 1795), AM Metz, 2R/a9.

[70] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 2–3.

[71] Hemmings, *Theatre and State*, pp. 123–26.

[72] Mark Darlow, 'History and (Meta-)Theatricality: The French Revolution's Paranoid Aesthetics', *Modern Language Review*, 105:2 (2010), 385–400 (p. 389).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

applications to their fellow spectators, and censors were actively on the lookout for them across the regimes studied here.

Applications can be tricky to trace as an ephemeral aspect of performance, but along with the debates that surrounded certain plays, they reveal precious information about the impact of theatre and its censorship on contemporary subjectivity. At some points, a censored play could become a cause célèbre, such as *Charles IX* (1789) or *L'Ami des lois*. At others, it allowed for what Danielle Goldman has termed 'practices of freedom' in 'tight spaces', developed from Foucault, and which Clare Parfitt-Brown has recently applied to the can-can in Restoration France. As Parfitt-Brown explains, these Foucauldian 'practices of freedom' 'are small-scale acts through which individuals redefine their relationships with themselves and with others. These acts are not invented anew by each individual but are chosen and adapted from a repertoire of practices available in the individual's particular cultural and historical context.' Goldman argued that improvisation emerges as an embodied response to, and negotiation of, such 'tight places'.[73] Beyond the can-can, Parfitt-Brown's quotation shows show audience members could use codified behaviour in an improvised manner despite the stringency of the regime in place in order to make an intervention in the public sphere. Such practices actively encouraged a reflection on the audience's political and social circumstances within the larger political and social body, and by studying these actions we can give a voice back to individuals in regimes that are often classified as absolute or dictatorial.

Many of the scholars mentioned so far – Friedland, Harris, Maslan, Leichman, and Pucci, amongst others – agree that theatre allowed for a major shift in individuals' conception of the world, but studies on theatre and subjectivity often end before the Revolution or shortly after the Terror; only Leichman goes beyond Thermidor to 1797. The time has come to correct this and reintegrate the longer Revolutionary period into discussions around theatre and concepts of self and individual agency to shape one's world-view.

The start of the Revolution marked a watershed moment in the history of the self and understanding one's potential impact on the world. A plethora of contemporary publications question the state of people's limitations, their oppression, and the grounds for such constraints, be it

[73] Clare Parfitt-Brown, 'Movements of Freedom: Performing Popular Liberty in the Early Canan', in *The Oxford Handbook of Improvisation in Dance*, ed. Vida L. Midgelow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 243–58 (p. 249).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

entries in the *cahiers de doléances*, the *Adresse de la Société des Amis des Noirs à l'Assemblée nationale* (1791), or Olympe de Gouges's *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* (1791). There were certainly radical writings prior to the convocation of the Estates General, but the Revolution launched an active reflection on the self and one's position as pre-existing political, social, and economic structures were abolished; as France transitioned from a divine to a constitutional monarchy, and then a Republic; and as French inhabitants transformed from subjects to citizens.

However, analysis of speeches and publications, not to mention the burgeoning press, clearly shows that there was no unanimity around the position of the individual during the Revolution, and the Revolutionaries' attachment to universalism was deeply problematic in practice. In theory, however, universalism prevailed. Jan Goldstein has convincingly argued that Condillac's sensationalism became 'nothing less than a quasi-official component of the Revolutionary ideology' and that 'the Republic gave high priority to teaching sensationalist psychology to its citizens', not blindly or secretively, but 'making them conscious collaborators in their own political education'.[74] Crucially, alongside the revolutionary calendar and the festivals, two of Goldstein's key examples stem from theatre, including Suard's arguments for the upholding of theatrical censorship.[75] For Suard, one reads a book calmly and coolly in private, whereas '[t]heatrical representations, by contrast, speak to the *imagination* and the senses'.[76] The iconic playwright Chénier recognized the influence of theatre too: 'Les mœurs d'une nation forment d'abord l'esprit de ses ouvrages dramatiques; bientôt ses ouvrages dramatiques forment son esprit' (a nation's *mœurs* first shape its drama's spirit; soon, its plays shape its spirit).[77] From radical playwrights to royal censors, theatre's power to shape – 'former' – how people understood their worlds was evident to contemporaries.

Official orders reveal how theatre was also part of the Revolution's sensationalist policy. Theatres held ceremonies for the inauguration of new busts – like that of Brutus – and new tricolour flags now framed the stage.[78] From May 1792, the Comité d'Instruction publique destined theatre to become an 'école du peuple' (school for people). This

[74] Jan Goldstein, *The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 80 and 87.
[75] Goldstein, *Post-Revolutionary Self*, pp. 22–30 and 73. [76] Suard quoted in ibid., p. 73.
[77] Marie-Joseph Chénier, 'De la liberté du théâtre' [15 June 1789], in Marie-Joseph Chénier, *Charles IX*, pp. 173–218 (p. 174).
[78] For example, État des objets de décorations et effets de la salle, 8 nivôse an V (26 February 1797) AD Hérault, L2537.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

instrumentalization was formalized in its debates by July 1793 where theatrical performances were imagined to have the same enchanting effects as public festivals.[79] The theatrical legislation of 1793 underlines theatre's ability to shape the *esprit public*[80] and produce 'énergie républicaine' (republican energy).[81] It is noteworthy that the first of these laws – that of 2 August 1793 – was also the first of the Revolution that explicitly banned anti-government plays.[82] In short, theatre's ability to shape public opinion went hand in hand with censorship. Indeed, such language about the *esprit public* and republican energy would continue throughout the Revolution's policing of the theatres.[83]

Theatre also became a key site of surveillance and instruction, especially following the Terror. The Thermidorian reaction debated the need to 'civilize' people from November 1794 by giving them boundaries and controlling their emotions after the Terror's madness.[84] This project was solidified by the foundation of the Institut in 1795. In short, scientists, writers, and artists assembled to alter the country's morals through 'ideology' or the 'science of man'. As Jean-Luc Chappey explains, during the Directory, 'the political elite's mission was to "treat" the people by enforcing new communication rules'.[85] Crucially, during the Directory and the Consulate, *idéologues* set to work on reconceptualizing language, deliberately modifying the meaning of words to ensure political and social stability and creating a series of non-verbal sign systems.[86] By fixing language – 'linguistic *dirigisme*' to use Rosenfeld's term – thought could be controlled and events like the Terror avoided on the simple grounds that they were unthinkable, striking a cord with New Censorship Theory, as we will see later.[87] Theatre was an ideal medium to serve as a means of 'instruction'.

[79] Martin Nadeau, 'La Politique culturelle de l'an II: les infortunes de la propagande révolutionnaire au théâtre', *Annales historiques de la révolution française*, 327 (2002), 57–74 (pp. 57 and 61); Goldstein, *Post-Revolutionary Self*, pp. 75–82.

[80] 'Esprit public' has numerous potential translations during this period from public opinion to public attitudes and atmosphere. Given this changing meaning, I have italicized the French in English.

[81] Examples include 2–3 August and 14–20 August 1793, 25 pluviôse an IV (14 February 1796), in A. Vulpian and Gauthier, *Code des théâtres* (Paris: B. Warée, 1829), pp. 309–21.

[82] Article 2 of the law of 2–3 August 1793, *Code des théâtres*, p. 309.

[83] For example, the order of 25 pluviôse an IV (14 February 1796), *Code des théâtres*, pp. 318–21, and a letter from Paris's bureau central to the Entrepreneurs du théâtre de l'Opéra-Comique national, 22 Thermidor an VII (9 August 1799), BnF, 4-MRo-104.

[84] Jean-Luc Chappey, 'The New Elites: Questions About Political, Social, and Cultural Reconstruction After the Terror', in *The Oxford Handbook of the French Revolution*, ed. David Andress (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 556–72 (p. 557).

[85] Ibid., p. 559. [86] Rosenfeld, 'Writing', p. 136. [87] Ibid., p. 139.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

Despite the crackdown on the *idéologues* after 18 Brumaire and Napoleon Bonaparte's rise to power, the idea of theatre to instruct and to ensure order would continue well into the Empire and the Restoration. From the initial censorship measures of the Napoleonic regime in 1800 during the Consulate through to the Empire and then the 100 Days, when Napoleon returned briefly to power, the principle of maintaining 'bon ordre' (law and order) whilst improving taste and the prosperity of the arts underpinned Napoleonic theatre regulation. As Fouché explained to the prefects in 1800 when banning performances of *Athalie* (1691), '[l]e premier des besoins sociaux, c'est l'ordre' (the first societal need is order) and the government's intention is to 'favoriser de tout son pouvoir les progrès des arts et des connaissances; à mesure qu'une société se perfectionne, les arts qui l'embellissent tendent à la conserver' (promote the progress of art and knowledge to the best of its abilities; as a society improves, the arts that enhance it tend to preserve it).[88] Orders relating to policing theatres repeatedly underlined the importance of 'le maintien de la tranquillité et du bon ordre' (maintaining tranquillity and good order).[89] Even during the 100 Days, the Interior Minister emphasized the importance of theatrical policing to prefects: through well-managed theatre, they could establish 'un ordre désirable' (a desirable order).[90] The Restoration – both in its first (April 1814–March 1815) and second (from July 1815) iterations, when Louis XVIII returned to power – took a similar approach to theatre's role in society and maintaining law and order, as the Ministre Secrétaire d'état de l'Intérieur (the Restoration's equivalent of the Interior Minister) wrote to the prefects:

> Les Théâtres, considérés sous le rapport de l'art, ne peuvent être indifférens à l'autorité. Bien dirigés, ils offrent les plus nobles délassemens à la classe instruite de la société: surveillés avec soin, ils peuvent répandre de saines maximes et servir des vues utiles. Souvent les Magistrats y trouvent les moyens d'occuper, aux heures de loisir, une population inquiète, et qui, abandonnée à elle-même, pourrait devenir dangereuse.
>
> Theatres, considered from the point of view of art, cannot be indifferent to authority. Properly managed, they offer the noblest of diversions to the educated classes of society: carefully supervised, they can spread sound maxims and serve useful purposes. Magistrates often find in them the

[88] Letter from the Police Minister to the prefect, 5 floréal an VIII (25 April 1800), AD Hérault 4T37.
[89] Article 11, arrêté, 5 brumaire an IX (27 October 1800), *Code des théâtres*, p. 331. The decree on the policing of theatres from 17 frimaire an XIV (8 December 1805) reiterates that mayors were in charge of maintaining order, *Code des théâtres*, pp. 341–42 (p. 342).
[90] Circular from the Interior Minister to the prefects, 1 May 1815, AD Nord, 1T295/1.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

> means to occupy, at leisure, a restless population which, left to its own devices, could become dangerous.[91]

This Restoration document reveals how decades after the sensationalist heyday of the Revolution, theatre remained an essential tool in controlling the French population and its agency within the public sphere.

Looking at the early years of the Revolution, as most studies do, lays the foundation for understanding the relationship between the political and theatrical stages, but we need to move the field beyond 1794 to the Restoration to truly understand the Revolution's impact on how French individuals understood and shaped their worlds through theatre. Theatre censorship's ability to show both sides of the coin can expose this very construction. In so doing, this study responds to Howard Brown's call to better investigate this longer period so that we can properly understand revolutionaries' issues with 'individual rights, representative democracy, constitutionalism, and the rule of law'.[92] Indeed, by going beyond the Empire to the first years of the Restoration and constitutional democracy's bumpy ride during the early years of Louis XVIII, we can better understand the sheer number of changes that the Revolution brought about. Democracy was one, but we should not forget others that continued to impact how people understood their place in the world past 1794: to Brown's 'abolition of seigneurialism and redefinition of property, the realignment of church and state, the remaking of gender roles and family structures, [and] the placing of limits on the exercise of political power'[93] we can add the industrialized military, the reorganization of education, revised social ranks, geographical re-organization, language standardization, the idea of *patrimoine*, the reframing of historical periods ... the list continues.

Overview

So how did a diverse cast – from censors to spectators – try to tailor plays to shape the world around them? Why did they think they could do this through theatre censorship? How did they try to support or subvert the

[91] Circular from the Ministre Secrétaire d'état de l'Intérieur to the prefects, 8 March 1816, AD Nord, 1T295/1. The Interior Minister reminded the prefects in 1818 that theatres were important to public order on many grounds, circular from the Interior Minister to the prefects, 7 November 1818, AD Nord, 1T295/1.

[92] Howard Brown, *Ending the French Revolution: Violence, Justice and Repression from the Terror to Napoleon* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), p. 4.

[93] Ibid., pp. 2–3.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

censorship of others? And how did this evolve over the seismic period 1788–1818?

Part I addresses methodology, which is then applied to five chapters in Part II. Chapter 1 details the bureaucratic censorship process and sets out in detail, and for the first time, all the major laws relating to theatre censorship over the period from 1788 to 1818. This novel comparative analysis of regimes reveals that despite the legal activity in Paris, there were frequently hiccups in how laws were applied. It also shows how this process from the Directory onwards was deeply indebted to the Ancien Régime and challenged Revolutionary pretences to free speech. Chapter 2 details my conception of the lateral censorship process by drawing on theory and archival sources to show how theatres, actors, audiences, and critics could all exert their own forms of censorship. This is a novel concept of censorship, and although I develop it in relation to the period at hand, it could be adapted to other temporal and geographical contexts.

Part II comprises five thematic chapters that reflect the censors' primary concerns: morals, religion (largely understood as Christianity), and governments (which I treat separately as monarchy, Revolution, and Empire). Governments were concerned not only with how they were presented in the present, but also with references to their predecessors – whether a monarch, a republic, or an emperor – thus, managing memory plays a large role here. Certainly, as a censor could have multiple issues with a play, this thematic approach is not perfect, but the thematic arrangement of these studies allows for their clearest analysis. What is evident across these chapters is that although there is generally continuity in the practices used by both bureaucratic and lateral censors, context was key in reaching decisions, while changes of regime had a significant impact on what could make the stage. Sometimes, this brought a degree of liberation, as during the early years of the Revolution when topics about the Church or politics made the stage, but at others, it ushered in a policy of forgetting, such as when trying to discuss the Revolution or Napoleon under the next regime. That said, audiences never entirely forgot: they inventively employed allusions to launch political conversations, twisting, say, a religious play to become a forum for discussing monarchy. Indeed, allegory became so unstable under Napoleon that the censors worried it might backfire rather than succeed. In employing a methodology that also gives spectators back their voice, we can decipher how audiences long desired to see themes that had become banned from the stage and used the theatre to advance their world-views, whether this supported the regime in place or not. This in turn dramatically complicates our current understanding of terms such as

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001

'propaganda' and the efficiency of governmental machinery during the period at hand.

In short, our current knowledge of theatre censorship during the period from 1788 to 1818 is patchy at best, and scholarly temporal divisions do little to help us understand how it developed over this transformative period. This book helps remedy this situation by offering the first sustained analysis of theatre censorship from 1788 to 1818, comprising traditional approaches to censorship through the bureaucratic censorship process and a novel approach to theatre censorship through my concept of 'lateral censorship'. The central argument here is that theatre censorship allowed contemporaries to shape the world around them: in fighting to stage a theme, remove it from the stage, highlight it, or smooth it over, they were able to influence what thousands of people saw, and thus the internalized effects of these plays. Alongside this argument, this study increases our knowledge of contemporary theatrical life, dramatic productions, and the regimes in place. Certainly, there was state intervention when it came to censorship, but there was also a considerable amount of censorship exerted by other forces. It is imperative to understand the variety of censorial agents at play to comprehend censorship better, and to appreciate how it is sustained in periods that proclaim the freedom of speech, notably during the early Revolution and the Restoration. In this respect, several striking parallels with today's world are revealed.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 10 Nov 2026 at 06:34:17, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009645942.001