

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Politics of the Bagatelle: Opera and Smallpox Inoculation in Enlightenment France

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Abstract

This article examines the production and reception history of C. S. Favart's *La fête du château*, commissioned by a French noblewoman, the Marquise of Monconseil, to mark her granddaughter's inoculation against smallpox in 1766. The first half of the article situates the *vaudeville* comedy at the Bagatelle (Monconseil's private theatre), underscoring the gendered tropes that had accrued to the disease in the late eighteenth century and the function of elite sociability in promoting its prevention. The second half of the article reconstructs the public trajectory of the work, which was presented at Versailles after the controversial inoculation of Louis XVI in 1774. Notably, the agent behind this theatrical public-health campaign was the queen, Marie Antoinette. A consideration of *La fête du château's* popularity and influence broadens our understanding of the conditions under which *ancien-régime* opera took on political meaning, as well as the role of women patrons and consumers in this process.

Keywords: C. S. Favart; Marie Antoinette; *Opéra comique*; 'Society' theatre; Inoculation

In spring 1766, Cécile-Thérèse-Pauline Rioult de Curzay (1707–87), Marquise of Monconseil, commissioned a *vaudeville* comedy for the Bagatelle, her estate on the outskirts of Paris.¹ The work, *La fête du château*, was conceived by the noted playwright Charles-Simon Favart, with music arrangement by the *opéra comique* composer Adolphe-Benoît Blaise.² The act of patronage was not in itself unusual for the wealthy and well-connected marquise. As a prominent *salonnière* – and mistress to a powerful statesman, Louis François Armand de Vignerot du Plessis, Duke of Richelieu – Monconseil regularly marked court and society events with entertainments at her country home. What was outside the norm, in this case, was the occasion that the *divertissement* celebrated: Favart's opera commemorates the inoculation of the marquise's ten-year-old granddaughter, Cécile-Suzanne, against smallpox.³

¹ For a history of the Bagatelle, see Henri-Gaston Duchesne, *Le château de Bagatelle (1715–1908): d'après les documents inédits des Archives nationales, des Archives de la Seine et des mémoires manuscrits ou imprimés* (Paris, 1909). Although Monconseil described the Bagatelle as a 'château', it is better understood as a 'petite maison' or 'maison de plaisance': a suburban dwelling dedicated to aristocratic leisure. On this architectural phenomenon, see Claire Ollagnier, *Petites maisons: du refuge libertin au pavillon d'habitation en île-de-France au siècle des Lumières* (Brussels, 2016).

² Charles-Simon Favart, *La fête du château, divertissement mêlé de vaudevilles & de petits airs* (Paris, 1766).

³ These circumstances are outlined in a handwritten note on a libretto in the collections of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (F-Pnas, Rf-10038). The patient's full name was Cécile-Suzanne de La Tour du Pin Gouvernet;

When *La fête du château* premiered, smallpox was a leading cause of global mortality – an excruciating illness that killed roughly 30 per cent of its victims and left countless others with permanent impairments. Inoculation, in turn, was a medical marvel of the Enlightenment, introduced to Europe via China, Africa and the Ottoman Empire in the early decades of the eighteenth century.⁴ The preventative practice – which (ideally) induced an attenuated smallpox case and lifelong immunity through subcutaneous incision – held the potential to alleviate both individual and societal impacts of the disease. Nonetheless, it was fraught with controversy. (Unlike the later developed technique of vaccination, which deployed a comparatively mild cowpox virus, inoculation caused a true smallpox infection, posing a risk to the patient and their community.) The procedure faced particularly strong resistance in France. For much of the *ancien régime*, it was opposed by the Bourbon monarchs, banned within the walls of Paris and fiercely contested among royal administrators, physicians and *philosophes*.⁵ The literary scholar Catriona Seth surmises, with only modest hyperbole, that in this period there were ‘seemingly more polemical texts circulated about smallpox ... than people actually inoculated against the disease’.⁶ *La fête du château* offers a fascinating window into this historical moment, recording a rare, private encounter with inoculation, as well as the cultural baggage that act elicited.

This article presents the first comprehensive account of *La fête du château*’s origins and performance history, drawing on extensive archival material to elucidate the social and political repercussions of the Enlightenment inoculation debates – and the persuasive power of fashion, theatre and music within them.⁷ Read within its initial production context, Favart’s opera offers an intimate portrait of the Monconseil family’s experience with the disputed procedure. The librettist had a long-standing personal relationship with his patron; his occasional work, accordingly, alludes to both the practical details of Cécile-Suzanne’s treatment and the ways in which she and other members of her household were expected to benefit from it. *La fête du château*, in other words, serves as a sort of aristocratic conduct manual for the management of smallpox, demonstrating how Cécile-Suzanne’s inoculation might bolster her marriage prospects, while solidifying her grandmother’s reputation as an ‘enlightened’ champion of science and *sensibilité*. As such, the opera underscores the gendered tropes then accruing to the disease, as well as the significant – and traditionally undervalued – function of elite sociability in promoting novel techniques of its prevention.

Although *La fête du château* originated within the quasi-domestic sphere of the Bagatelle, it soon achieved success in public venues throughout France. From the late 1760s, it was incorporated into the repertory of the Crown-subsidised Comédie-Italienne, the primary Parisian theatre for *opéra comique*; and in the 1770s, it

after her 1777 marriage to the politician Augustin Louis Charles de Lameth, she was generally referenced as ‘Madame de Lameth’.

⁴ For a historical introduction to the disease, see Frank M. Snowden, *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present*, rev. edn (New Haven, 2019), 83–96. On the implementation of inoculation and vaccination outside of a European context, and the entanglement of these procedures in imperial projects, see Elizabeth A. Fenn, *Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775–82* (New York, 2001); and Paul F. Ramírez, *Enlightened Immunity: Mexico’s Experiments with Disease Prevention in the Age of Reason* (Stanford, 2019).

⁵ On these controversies, see Genevieve Miller, *The Adoption of Inoculation for Smallpox in England and France* (Philadelphia, 1957); and Catriona Seth, *Les rois aussi en mouraient: les Lumières en lutte contre la petite vérole* (Paris, 2008).

⁶ ‘Il y a probablement eu plus de textes rédigés sur la méthode ... que de personnes inocuées’. Seth, *Les rois aussi en mouraient*, 39. Translations are my own throughout the article.

⁷ While *La fête du château* has been mentioned as a curiosity in discussions of literary depictions of smallpox, the present article is the first to connect the full circumstances of its commission, its performance record at the Comédie-Italienne and its subsequent association with Marie Antoinette.

was showcased before the royal family at Versailles. Entirely overlooked until now, these court-sponsored performances had an unmistakable political valence, coinciding with Louis XV's death from smallpox in May 1774 and the highly scrutinised inoculation of his successor, Louis XVI, in the months that followed. This was a reversal of the monarchy's entrenched anti-inoculation stance, and a key turning point in France's battle against the virus. Notably, it was the queen, Marie Antoinette, who spearheaded the programming of Favart's comedy, a fact that sheds new light on this change in *ancien-régime* medical policy and the agency behind its implementation. As in other matters of privileged taste, Marie Antoinette was a compelling trendsetter in the realm of public health, with theatre an important tool in her fashionable arsenal.

Capturing the cultural traces of an epidemic – and the extent to which style, social networks and contemporary media structured responses to it – *La fête du château* is an opera with clear and continuing reverberations in the age of COVID-19.⁸ I would argue, though, that the interest of the work lies both in and beyond its relevance to the history of medicine and its attention-piquing parallels to current events. This article situates *La fête du château* within a robust literature on early modern disease; more broadly, it contributes to a recent scholarly recuperation of amateur theatricality (*théâtre de société*) in the French Enlightenment.⁹ The very name of Monconseil's estate – the Bagatelle – conjures an image of 'feminine' frivolity. And yet, the spectacles that originated there were substantive both in their dramatic aspirations and in their capacity to sway their audiences, exemplifying the serious implications of sociable music-making in eighteenth-century France.¹⁰ The trajectory of *La fête du château* shows, quite strikingly, how a work conceived for a limited, private context might exert a sizeable public impact – expanding our perspective of the conditions under which *ancien-régime* opera took on political meaning and the role of women patrons and consumers in this process.

Monconseil, smallpox and the Château de Bagatelle

For a woman of her time and circumstances, the Marquise of Monconseil's life is fairly well documented. We are able to reconstruct the details of her familial and social networks, the development of her theatrical practice and the extent to which both were affected by the pervasive threat of smallpox. The Monconseil family papers, currently held at the French national archives, trace the basic outlines of her domestic circumstances.¹¹ The marquise was born into a wealthy family in Paris. In 1725 she wed

⁸ For a general reflection on the resonances of COVID-19 in a transhistorical French context, see Junko Thérèse Takeda, 'Introduction: Plagues, Pandemics and Pathologies in French History', *French History* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/fh/crab021>.

⁹ For an introduction to domestic, or 'society' theatre, see Marie-Emmanuelle Plagnol-Diéval and Dominique Quéro, eds., *Théâtres de société au XVIIIe siècle* (Brussels, 2005); Maria Teodora Comsa, 'Society Theater: A Laboratory for Esthetic and Social Change (1715–1815)' (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2014); and David Charlton, 'Opera at Home: Performance and Ownership in Eighteenth-Century France', in *Performing Arts in Changing Societies: Opera, Dance, and Theatre in European and Nordic Countries around 1800*, ed. Randi Margrete Selvik, Svein Gladsø and Anne Margrete Fishvik (London, 2020), 22–37.

¹⁰ Recent work on the signification of amateur music-making in this period includes Rebecca Cypess, 'Madame Lavoisier's Music Collection: Lessons from a Private Library of the Nineteenth Century', *Notes* 77 (2020), 224–52; Emily H. Green, 'How to Read a Rondeau: On Pleasure, Analysis, and the Desultory in Amateur Performance Practice of the Eighteenth Century', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 73 (2020), 267–325; and Glenda Goodman, 'Bound Together: The Intimacies of Music-Book Collecting in the Early American Republic', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 145 (2020), 1–35.

¹¹ These papers are collected in F-Pan, T//206 (1–8) and contain records of births, marriages and deaths; materials related to military appointments and to the administration of real-estate holdings; and miscellaneous receipts and household inventories from the marquise and her younger daughter, Adélaïde-Félicité.

Étienne Guinot de Monconseil, a member of the established nobility and a lieutenant general in the royal army. In the early years of their marriage, the couple was associated with the court of Stanislas I, Duke of Lorraine and King of Poland. (Monconseil forged her aristocratic connections as a *dame du palais* for Stanislas's wife, Catherine Opalińska.) While the marquis spent most of his career in provincial France – he was given a diplomatic appointment in Colmar in 1751 – the marquise ultimately returned to the capital. During her husband's multi-year absences, Monconseil enjoyed a largely independent existence. She divided her time between the Bagatelle estate and an apartment in central Paris, assuming primary responsibility for these residences and the extended family that inhabited them. (Monconseil had two daughters and several grandchildren; her family tree is included, for reference, in Figure 1.¹²)

Court memoirs and correspondence reveal that the marquise was a fixture of elite society in the years around mid-century. At Versailles, she enjoyed the rights to dine and ride in carriages with Louis XV's queen, Marie Leszczyńska – enviable privileges in a hierarchy based upon access to the monarchs.¹³ She also entered into several high-profile romantic liaisons: in addition to her relationship with the military official Richelieu, she was briefly linked to the minister of war, Marc-Pierre de Voyer de Paulmy, Count of Argenson.¹⁴ As Monconseil engaged in the public life of the court, she cultivated a well-regarded salon at the Bagatelle, surrounding herself with a coterie of liberal aristocrats and artistic notables; her most famous guests were 'enlightened' royals, including her former employer, Stanislas I, and Louis Philippe I, Duke of Orléans.¹⁵ Such was the marquise's standing that the British diplomat Lord Chesterfield recommended her gatherings as among the most erudite in France: 'You will find at Paris good authors, and circles distinguished by the solidity of their reasoning. You will never hear TRIFLING, AFFECTED, and far-sought conversations, at Madame de Monconseil's.'¹⁶

These legal records and scattered court recollections provide a preliminary picture of Monconseil's status among the lettered nobility of the late *ancien régime*. By far the most important source for the marquise's personal experiences and artistic influence, however, is a somewhat unusual set of documents: an annotated collection of the dramatic works she commissioned to entertain her guests – and shape her social reputation – at the Bagatelle.¹⁷ At the height of the marquise's patronage activities (from roughly the

¹² The details of Monconseil's family history can be found in a thirty-six-part, serialised biography by Léon Bouyer: 'Une intrigante et son mari au XVIIIe siècle', *La nouvelle revue* (December 1918–June 1920).

¹³ Charles Philippe d'Albert de Luynes, *Mémoires du duc de Luynes sur la cour de Louis XV (1735–1758)*, ed. L. Dussieux and Eud. Soulié, 17 vols. (Paris, 1860), XI: 177. The entry is dated 24 June 1751. Leszczyńska was the daughter of Stanislas I and Catherine Opalińska.

¹⁴ The latter affair is chronicled in the letters of the *salonnière* Claudine Guérin de Tencin. Louis-Simon Auger, ed., *Lettres de Mmes de Villars, de La Fayette, et de Tencin* (Paris, 1823), 247.

¹⁵ Perhaps the best-known image of a Parisian salon from this period, Michel Barthélemy Ollivier's 'Le thé à l'anglaise servi dans le salon des Quatre-Glaces' (1766), features several of Monconseil's associates, an indication of the reach of her network. These figures include Marie-Charlotte Hippolyte de Campet de Saujon, Countess of Boufflers (a friend of the marquise and a patron of Jean-Jacques Rousseau); Charles Alexandre Marc Marcelin de Hénin-Liétard d'Alsace (her future son-in-law, known as the Prince of Hénin); and Septimanie d'Egmont (Richelieu's daughter, a prominent *salonnière* in her own right). For an analysis of this painting, see Philippe Bourdin, 'Le thé à l'anglaise', *Histoire par l'image* (September 2013), <https://histoire-image.org/fr/etudes/anglaise>. For further discussion of Monconseil's social ties, see Bouyer, 'Une intrigante et son mari' (15 June 1919), 341–6.

¹⁶ Philip Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield, *Letters to His Son on the Art of Becoming a Man of the World and a Gentleman* (Project Gutenberg ebook, 2004), Letter CXXV, London, 24 December 1750, www.gutenberg.org/files/3361/3361-h/3361-h.htm. Inventories of the marquise's library suggest that she was highly educated; she owned the works of Shakespeare, Homer's *Iliad*, numerous theatrical compendiums, essays by Voltaire, grammars for the study of Italian and German, and many other items. See, for example, a 'Mémoire des livres ... fournis à Madame la Marquise de Monconseil', 4 November 1766, F-Pan, T//206 (6).

¹⁷ The set consists of three manuscript volumes and most likely originated as a commemorative gift for Marie Leszczyńska. These volumes are now held at the Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal in Paris (F-Pa, Ms-3269–3271), and are

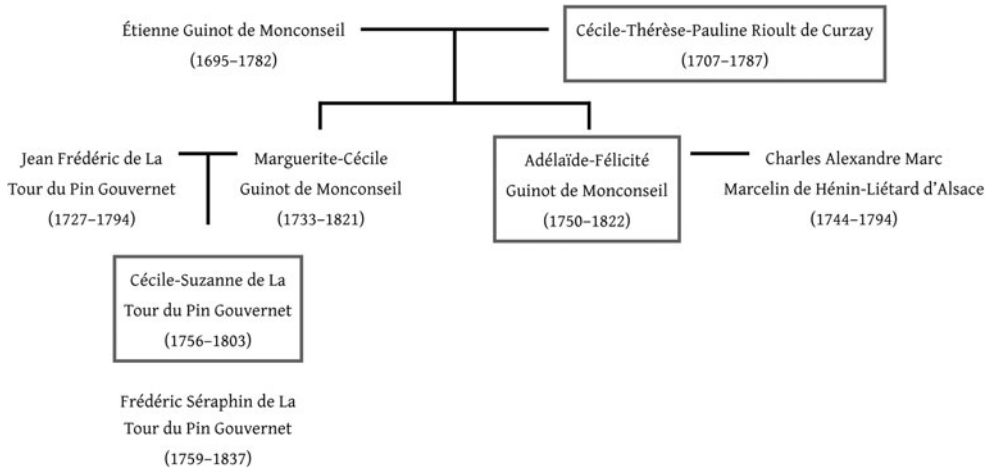


Fig. 1. The Monconseil household in 1766. (Boxes denote family members referenced in *La fête du château*.)

mid-1750s to the mid-1760s), theatre was a prominent attraction at the Monconseil estate, presented alternately in a drawing room within the château and a seasonal structure in its gardens.¹⁸ Two principal features of these spectacles are worth underscoring here. First, the Bagatelle manuscripts suggest that the literary and performance standards of the marquise's productions were quite sophisticated, reflecting the porous boundaries between modes of 'society' and 'public' theatricality. The repertory of the Bagatelle, for example, was closely aligned with that of the prestigious Comédie-Italienne; Favart adapted *opéras comiques* from the Crown company for Monconseil's use and also, conversely, allowed his private commissions to be transferred to the Parisian stage.¹⁹ These spectacles, moreover, relied upon a mix of professional and amateur talent; the marquise employed leading actors from the royal troupes, such as Marie-Justine Favart and Silvia Balletti, to appear alongside members of her household in performances.²⁰

Second, the *divertissements* of the Bagatelle exemplify the elisions between art and life that arose in the practices of pre-revolutionary *théâtre de société*. On a logistical level, Monconseil's theatrical activities were deftly interwoven into the quotidian rhythms of recreation at her estate. An afternoon's entertainment might feature a 'formal' opera or spoken play alongside looser dramatic sketches, songs, card games, refreshments and literary discussion.²¹ On a textual level, these works contain an abundance of information about the marquise, her family and acquaintances, from their personal affairs to their perspectives on politics and current events. Even ostensibly fictionalised pieces are

further described in Paul J. Salvatore, *Favart's Unpublished Plays: The Rise of the Popular Comic Opera* (New York, 1935), 364–96.

¹⁸ On the sites of performance in a typical 'maison de plaisance', see Ollagnier, *Petites maisons*, 152–61.

¹⁹ Monconseil seems to have been particularly fond of Favart's collaborations with his wife, Marie-Justine, sponsoring performances of both *La fête d'amour, ou Lucas et Colinette* (1754) and *Les ensorcelés, ou Jeannot et Jeannette* (1757) shortly after their premieres at the Comédie-Italienne. The marquise had presumably come to know the latter Favart through their mutual connection to the court of Stanislas I; Favart's father was a court musician in Nancy. David Charlton, 'Marie-Justine Favart, née Duronceray: Some New Biographical Details', *Eighteenth-Century Music* 13 (2013), 95–103.

²⁰ See, for example, cast lists included in F-Pa, Ms-3269, 30r, and Ms-3271, 14v.

²¹ See, for example, the diversity of entertainments outlined in a 'Feste donnée à sa majesté le Roi Stanislas par Madame la Marquise de Monconseil, à Bagatelle le 5 Septembre 1757', F-Pa, Ms-3269, 11r–34v.

topical in scope, and littered with allusions to happenings in the marquise's social circle. In this collection we find spectacles celebrating the weddings of Monconseil's children and the births of her grandchildren;²² poetry praising her illustrious visitors;²³ and elaborate dramatic reflections on French victories in the Seven Years' War.²⁴ Favart's correspondence indicates how closely he tailored this output for the people and occasions that it commemorated. In one undated letter, for instance, the playwright admonished Monconseil for not having provided enough detail about a friend for whom she desired a set of laudatory couplets:

You have recently asked me to write a poem about a distinguished man by the name of Louis. ... But you haven't truly described to me the character of this person, nor given a full account of the deeds that he has accomplished. A set of couplets for someone must be specific to them, and not devolve into clichés – these must not be a saddle for any horse, so to speak. ... I therefore ask of you, Madame, to be so kind as to instruct me a little further about how to properly celebrate your hero, and not to spare those little insights that might lend substance to these praises.²⁵

Monconseil's manuscripts thus provide insight into the lives of the aristocrats and intellectuals that gathered at the Bagatelle, as well as the literary and philosophical issues that animated them. In so doing, they attest to the inseparability of sociability and substantive discourse within her theatrical pursuits – a conceptual tension that lies at the foundation of recent studies of the *théâtres de société* (and the historiography of Enlightenment salons, more broadly).²⁶

Though smallpox might seem a surprising dramatic subject, several of Monconseil's commissions responded to contemporary anxieties about the illness and controversies over its treatment, and it was in these works that the personal and political facets of her theatre most closely coalesced. It is clear that the marquise's *société* had been intimately affected by the disease, reflecting the ever-present dangers it posed to the inhabitants of eighteenth-century France. The first Bagatelle *divertissement* of which we have record, dating from c.1756, marked the recoveries of two close family members – Monconseil's sister, Marie Rioult de Curzay, and niece, Cécile-Pauline-Marie d'Ennery – from the virus. The work articulates the trauma these women had suffered; one *chanson*

²² 'Feste donnée par Madame de Monconseil à l'occasion du mariage de Mademoiselle sa fille avec Monsieur de La Tour du Pin', F-Pa, Ms-3270, 19r–24v; 'Feste donnée à Bagatelle par Madame de Monconseil à l'occasion de la naissance de la fille de Monsieur de La Tour du Pin', F-Pa, Ms-3270, 25r–42v.

²³ 'Feste donnée à sa Majesté le Roi Stanislas par Madame de Monconseil, à Bagatelle le 29 Septembre 1756', F-Pa, Ms-3269, 2r–9v; 'Feste donnée à Monseigneur le duc d'Orléans', F-Pa, Ms-3270, 1r–8v.

²⁴ See, for example, Favart's *Le mariage par escalade, opéra comique à l'occasion de la prise de Port-Mahon* (Paris, 1757); the work celebrates a French naval victory at the Battle of Minorca in May 1756.

²⁵ 'Vous me demandez des couplets pour une personne de considération qui se nomme Louis. ... mais vous ne me dites point quelle est cette personne, et ne me donnez aucun renseignement sur toutes les actions d'éclat qu'elle a faites. Il faut que les couplets que l'on fait pour quelqu'un soient relatifs, autrement ce ne serait que des lieux communs, et pour ainsi dire une selle à tous chevaux. ... Je vous supplie donc, Madame, d'avoir la bonté de m'apprendre ce que je dois dire pour célébrer votre héros, et d'entrer même dans les détails qui pourroient fournir matière à son éloge.' Charles-Simon Favart to Cécile-Thérèse-Pauline Rioult de Curzay, undated letter, in Favart, *Mémoires et correspondances littéraires, dramatiques et anecdotiques*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1808), II: 414.

²⁶ In his well-known revisionist history of the salon, Antoine Lilti situates the French fashion for amateur theatre within a broader framework of aristocratic sociability. Antoine Lilti, *Le monde des salons: sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 2005), 249–60. Recent musicological discussions of salon performance have built upon Lilti's ideas, while interrogating more seriously the public and political impacts of these repertoires and practices. See, for example, Rebecca Cypess, *Women and Musical Salons in the Enlightenment* (Chicago, 2022). I am grateful to the latter author for sharing her work prior to publication.

compares smallpox to ‘a monster escaped from hell / and driven by vengeance / infecting the air with its breath / and pouncing upon’ its prey.²⁷ Such ‘monstrous’ imagery was not inappropriate, for smallpox was a truly terrifying illness. Its victims endured debilitating symptoms (fevers, haemorrhaging, swelling so severe it might render them unrecognisable), and were often plagued by lifelong after-effects (scarring, vision problems, the loss of hair and eyelashes). Nor did the text of the song exaggerate in its ‘predatory’ metaphors. Paris and its environs had been struck by devastating waves of infection throughout the *ancien régime*; an epidemic in Monconseil’s adolescence, for example, had claimed some 20,000 of the city’s residents – roughly 1/25th of its total population.²⁸

If smallpox was a pressing, individualised concern for Monconseil and her associates, inoculation was a subject of widespread societal debate. The procedure had been recognised and contested in France since the early 1720s – the moment of its famed ‘introduction’ to Europe by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu.²⁹ While the preventative practice was steadily adopted throughout Montagu’s native Britain, it faced significant and enduring scepticism across the channel. Several factors contributing to the French hesitancy were ideologically rather than scientifically grounded, relating to the personal resistance of the monarchs and the entrenched conservatism of the Parisian Faculté de Médecine.³⁰ But these political incentives intersected with legitimate medical and moral uncertainties. Although most inoculated patients developed a mild expression of smallpox, some experienced very serious illness (and even death); they also remained contagious throughout their treatment, capable of seeding outbreaks within their households (and beyond).³¹ Inoculation was simultaneously, then, a miraculous breakthrough and a source of excruciating ambiguity. It raised fraught questions regarding the ethics of imposing sickness on healthy individuals (especially children), and the tensions between familial and communal assumption of benefit and risk.

Inoculation became a *cause célèbre* in progressive French salons of the mid-eighteenth century, for the most prominent advocates of the technique were not physicians but literary figures and *philosophes*.³² Voltaire established a persistent link between medical innovation and the politics of the *Lumières* with an essay, ‘On the Engraftment of Smallpox’ (‘Sur l’insertion de la petite vérole’), in the *Lettres philosophiques* of 1734.³³ Pro-inoculation arguments – also set forth by luminaries such as Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert – brought together several prominent themes of Enlightenment discourse. Certainly, support for inoculation aligned with support for scientific progress, writ large; Diderot’s article for the *Encyclopédie* hailed inoculation as the

²⁷ ‘un monstre échappé des enfers / conduit par la vengeance, / de son souffle infecte les airs, / et contre vous s’é lance’. ‘Feste donnée à l’occasion de la convalescence de Mesdames de Polignac et de Blot, par Madame de Monconseil, à Bagatelle’, F-Pa, Ms-3270, 16r. The manuscript of the *vaudeville* indicates that it was sung by Marie-Justine Favart.

²⁸ Seth, *Les rois aussi en mouraient*, 23.

²⁹ Montagu, influenced by practices she had observed in Constantinople, had the procedure performed on her children in 1718 and 1721, famously setting off a fashion for the prophylactic within her elite social circle in London. Diana Barnes, ‘The Public Life of a Woman of Wit and Quality: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the Vogue for Smallpox Inoculation’, *Feminist Studies* 38 (2012), 330–62.

³⁰ On these factors, see Miller, *Adoption of Inoculation*, 195–240; and Heiko Pollmeier, ‘Le Conseil de la Raison or Tenter Dieu? On Some “Objections Morales” in the French Debate on Smallpox Inoculation (1754–1774)’, *Intellectual History Review* 16 (2010), 129–44.

³¹ The most common procedure in France involved making a superficial incision on the arms or legs of the patient, and therein inserting a small amount of infectious material from a person with an active (but not severe) case of smallpox. Snowden, *Epidemics and Society*, 104–6; Meghan K. Roberts, *Sentimental Savants: Philosophical Families in Enlightenment France* (Chicago, 2016), 73–4.

³² Andrea A. Rusnock, *Vital Accounts: Quantifying Health and Population in Eighteenth-Century England and France* (Cambridge, 2002), 75.

³³ Voltaire, *Lettres écrites de Londres sur les Anglois et autres sujets* (Basle [London], 1734).

'greatest medical discovery ever made, with regards to the preservation of human life'.³⁴ The choice to submit to the procedure, along similar lines, could be justified through objective statistical principle – accepting the calculated risk of the prophylactic to avoid the 'random cruelty' of full-fledged disease.³⁵ As inoculation appealed to 'enlightened' rationality, so too were defences of the practice steeped in the contemporary rhetoric of *sensibilité*. The *philosophes* reinforced their claims to logical authority by invoking ideals of sentimental, domestic duty. The mathematician and *Encyclopédiste* Charles Marie de La Condamine, for example, argued that protecting one's children through inoculation was an act of 'enlightened love' – a turn of phrase that encapsulated the duality of reason and feeling at the heart of the Enlightenment project.³⁶

The earliest French adopters of inoculation were social elites invested in these reform-minded values: members of the privileged urban classes in general, and adherents of Monconseil's salon in particular. At the vanguard was the Duke of Orléans, who inoculated his children to great fanfare in spring 1756.³⁷ Orléans sought to solidify his reputation as a foil to his reactionary cousin, Louis XV, earning public accolades and numerous printed panegyrics in the process. A poem from the librettist Antoine-Alexandre-Henri Poinciset emphasised the judiciousness of the duke's decision, which had secured him the esteem of all 'enlightened' Frenchmen:

Le Français éclairé lève un œil curieux;
Il voit ton fils,³⁸ il sent ta fermeté sublime,
Un Prince philosophe, un Père généreux,
Est l'immortel objet de sa nouvelle estime.³⁹

The enlightened Frenchman lifts his curious gaze;
He sees your son, he senses your sublime resolution,
A *philosophe* prince, a selfless father,
Is the immortal object of his newfound esteem.

The royal inoculations made a celebrity of Théodore Tronchin,⁴⁰ the doctor who performed them, and sparked admiration among other notable visitors of the Bagatelle.⁴¹ As Voltaire quipped of Septimanie d'Egmont (the daughter of Richelieu, and a member of Monconseil's inner circle), the practice became such an indication of taste that those with natural immunity regretted their exclusion: 'I believe that Madame the Countess of Egmont has already had smallpox. That's really too bad. If she hadn't, we could have inoculated her, and had an excuse to throw a nice *fête*.'⁴²

³⁴ 'la plus belle découverte qui ait été faite en Médecine, pour la conservation de la vie des hommes'. Denis Diderot, 'Insertion de la petite vérole', in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, *ARTFL Encyclopédie* (University of Chicago), <https://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/>.

³⁵ These general themes are outlined in Catriona Seth, 'Calculated Risks, Condorcet, Bernoulli, d'Alembert and Inoculation', *MLN* 129 (2014), 740–55; the quoted phrase is drawn from Roberts, *Sentimental Savants*, 70.

³⁶ Roberts, *Sentimental Savants*, 82.

³⁷ The first widely publicised adult inoculation in France was that of François-Jean de Chastellux in 1755, as noted in David Charlton and Sarah Hibberd, 'My Father Was a Poor Musician: A Memoir (1756) concerning Rameau, Handel's Library and Sallé', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 128 (2003), 181–4.

³⁸ Orléans's son, then known as the Duke of Chartres, would grow up to be the famed revolutionary Philippe-Égalité.

³⁹ Antoine-Alexandre-Henri Poinciset, 'L'inoculation, poème à Monseigneur le duc d'Orléans' (Paris, 1756), 10.

⁴⁰ Giacomo Lorandi, 'Les dynamiques d'une célébrité transnationale: Théodore Tronchin et l'inoculation de l'Infant Ferdinand de Parme en 1764', *Gesnerus* 74 (2017), 242.

⁴¹ Directly after treating the Duke of Orléans's children, Tronchin visited Stanislas in Lunéville to discuss the procedure, forming an inoculation-based link between these prominent guests of the Monconseil household. Henry Tronchin, *Un médecin du XVIIIe siècle: Théodore Tronchin (1709–1781), d'après des documents inédits* (Paris, 1906), 120.

⁴² 'Je crois que madame la comtesse d'Egmont a eu la petite vérole. C'est bien dommage. Sans cela nous l'inoculerions, et nous luy donnerions des fêtes.' Voltaire to Louis François Armand de Vignerot du Plessis, Duke of

In 1766, when Cécile-Suzanne was inoculated at the Bagatelle, the practice still stood outside the *ancien-régime* medical mainstream. But the marquise's granddaughter was a member of a demographic at the forefront of the procedure's adoption – and she made an impact that would be felt well beyond her privileged sphere.⁴³ *La fête du château* is a revealing record of these private events, as well as the nascent public-health movement in which they took part. In explicating the experiences of the Monconseil family, the work concretises the abstract stakes of the contemporaneous inoculation debates, while illuminating the themes of a 'literary imagination' then consolidating around smallpox. More important, it forecasts how a wider French public would ultimately be convinced of the treatment's effectiveness: not through scientific discourse, but through popular culture – and in particular, through gendered appeals to beauty, marriage and sentiment.

'Un mal qui fait du bien': reading Favart's opera

La fête du château is the only extant evidence of Cécile-Suzanne's inoculation. (There are no payment records for the treatment in the Monconseil family papers, or mentions of it in contemporary correspondence.⁴⁴) Given the nature of Favart's other commissions for the marquise, however, it is reasonable to assume that the opera references specific household incidents at the Bagatelle, as well as the manner in which Monconseil fashioned her self-image in this domestic domain. In structure and basic plot conventions, *La fête du château* is typical of the author's mid-century style: it features dialogue interspersed with re-texted popular airs (*vaudevilles*), and nimbly interweaves a series of comic intrigues. The action unfolds at an estate in the French countryside. At the outset, the household staff prepares a party for their young mistress, Lise, who has just recovered from her smallpox inoculation. As they organise the festivities, the servants become entangled in romance: Madame Jordonne, the concierge of the château, pursues Jacquot, the gardener, who is in turn enamoured of Colette, the daughter of a local farmer. Colette reciprocates Jacquot's sentiments but is hesitant, for her father disapproves of the match. After several light-hearted misunderstandings, the lady of the house sets the proceedings aright. She encourages Colette to marry Jacquot and blesses a new suitor for the jilted Madame Jordonne: the doctor who performed the inoculation.

A number of the allusions in Favart's libretto are self-evident. The estate setting is a stand-in for the Bagatelle; the 'dame du château' and the recuperating protagonist are doubles for Monconseil and her granddaughter, respectively. From the fictional Lise's experiences, we can infer some details about the real-life Cécile-Suzanne. The text implies that the inoculation took place in April, when weather was thought to be optimal for the procedure.⁴⁵ It also relates that the patient fell ill for several weeks, a glimpse of the

Richelieu, letter of 22 June 1763, in *Electronic Enlightenment: Scholarly Edition of Correspondence*, ed. Robert McNamee et al., *Electronic Enlightenment*, doi.org/10.13051/ee:doc/voltfrVF1100281a1c. This quotation is also discussed in Seth, *Les rois aussi en mouraient*, 278.

⁴³ Although statistical information for this period is incomplete, reports indicate that young, privileged women were also among the first to be inoculated in other metropolitan centres. In 1774, for example, the *Journal encyclopédique* related that it was 'jolies dames' who first volunteered when the practice was introduced to Nantes. (See *Journal encyclopédique* [15 March 1774], 496, and the discussion of these statistics in Seth, *Les rois aussi en mouraient*, 111.)

⁴⁴ There are, however, receipts from Monconseil's apothecary that suggest she used the same medical providers as the Duke of Orléans. For example, 'Mémoire des médicaments pour Madame la Marquise de Monconseil, fournis par Lauron Mtre en pharmacie (1782)', F-Pan, T//206 (6). On Lauron's links to the French royal family, see Maurice Bouvet, 'Les apothicaires royaux (suite)', *Revue d'histoire de la pharmacie* 18/71 (1930), 255.

⁴⁵ Favart, *La fête du château*, 24. (For the celebrations to take place in May, as specified in the libretto, the inoculation would have been held the month prior.)

dangers involved.⁴⁶ While the opera's two planes of action (a serious medical situation; a good-humoured love story) might seem incongruous, such a mix of concerns also had a basis in fact. As Monconseil arranged for her granddaughter's inoculation, she was simultaneously preoccupied with the engagement of her youngest daughter, Adélaïde-Félicité. (Adélaïde-Félicité was Cécile-Suzanne's aunt; she was set to wed Charles Alexandre Marc Marcelin de Hénin-Liétard d'Alsace, Prince of Hénin, in autumn 1766, just a few months after *La fête du château* premiered.⁴⁷) Although Favart's romantic ingénue, Colette, is not of noble birth, she is a highly sympathetic character and central to the work's plot; it is no coincidence that her age and dramatic situation – fifteen years old and on the brink of marriage – precisely match those of Adélaïde-Félicité.⁴⁸ In all, the opera celebrates the health of one family member, the nuptials of another and the magnanimity of their matriarch, who facilitated both.

If *La fête du château* references the material circumstances of the Monconseil household at the time of Cécile-Suzanne's inoculation, it also sheds light on the social implications of the practice among the nobility of eighteenth-century France. Put another way, the opera records both the details of the marquise's domestic choices and the idealised ways she wished to represent these choices to her family and circle of acquaintances. One clear goal of *La fête du château* is to praise Monconseil for her management of the Bagatelle. The 'dame du château' goes unnamed within Favart's libretto and appears only once in the course of the work: during the concluding *divertissement*, she stands on the balcony of her manor home, supervising the musical festivities below. (Given the fluid boundary between professional and amateur performers in the private context, it is likely that Monconseil filled this role herself.) While the physical presence of the 'dame du château' is downplayed, her altruistic influence is foregrounded throughout. The other characters praise her progressive support for inoculation; they also commend her financial generosity towards the inhabitants of her estate and her emotional investment in their welfare (as demonstrated in a dowry and in romantic counsel that she provides to Colette). *La fête du château* thus situates a pro-inoculation stance within the paradigmatic constellation of traits possessed by an 'enlightened' noblewoman – and establishes the marquise, in turn, as an aspirational model thereof.

La fête du château holds its most pointed lessons for the young women of the Bagatelle – the group actually being asked to submit to inoculation. The libretto reassures this target audience by glossing over the most distressing symptoms of smallpox, as well as the worst risks of its treatment. Although there are references to the hardships that Lise has faced, the action begins after she has emerged unscathed from her procedure, and her companions express complete confidence in the path that she has undertaken. In the opera's opening scene, the doctor voices befuddlement that anyone would be opposed to inoculation. Given that the 'science' has ancient roots and has recently been 'perfected' in England, there is little reason to doubt its safety. This encouraging tone is reinforced by the musical language of the comedy – the anxieties of inoculation defused in the

⁴⁶ As Jacquot relates, 'the condition of our young mistress has caused us grief for fifteen days' ('Il est vrai que, depuis quinze jours, l'état de notre jeune Maitresse vous a bien donné de l'embarras'). Favart, *La fête du château*, 16.

⁴⁷ After her marriage Adélaïde-Félicité would be known as the Princesse of Hénin; through her husband's connections, she would serve as lady-in-waiting to Marie Antoinette.

⁴⁸ Colette's age is noted at several points in Favart's libretto; see, for example, the dialogue between Colette and the doctor in scene 15 (Favart, *La fête du château*, 57). It may also be significant that Colette marries a gardener: the family's nicknames for Adélaïde-Félicité seem to have referenced flowers, and she had been cast as a 'jardinière' in previous productions at the Bagatelle (e.g., 'Feste donnée à sa Majesté le Roi Stanislas par Madame la Marquise de Monconseil, à Bagatelle le 5 Septembre 1757', F-Pa, Ms-3269, 15r).

popular, singable idiom of the *vaudeville*. As the doctor confirms – in catchy, major-mode refrain, no less – the treatment is ‘one harm that does good’ (*un mal qui fait du bien*).⁴⁹

Favart’s overwhelming emphasis, instead, is that inoculation might render a woman more desirable to her suitors – eliding ideals of beauty, bodily health and sexual purity. As the doctor notes in an air on the tune of Jean-Philippe Rameau’s ‘Dans ce couvent’, his primary responsibility is ‘to make a girl sweeter than ever’ (*rendre une fille / plus gentille / que jamais*).⁵⁰ The sentiment is articulated more explicitly in the subsequent number, a duet between the doctor and Madame Jordonne that takes the form of a jaunty *gigue* (Example 1):

To the tune of ‘V’là c’que c’est qu’ d’aller au bois’

Madame Jordonne

De l’art d’un Inoculateur
C’est l’Amour qui fut l’inventeur.
Pour l’intérêt d’un jeune cœur,
On fait la piqûre:
La cure
En est sure.
Jeunes beautés, ne craignez rien;
C’est un mal qui fait du bien.

Madame Jordonne

When it comes to the art of inoculation,
Love was the true inventor.
To protect the interests of a young heart,
We prescribe the jab:
The cure
Is certain here.
Young beauties, you have nothing to fear;
This is one harm that does good.

Le Docteur

On apprendra par le succès
Qu’on en est plus charmante après;
On a le teint plus vif, plus frais.
Par-tout ma méthode
Devient à la mode;
C’est pour plaire un nouveau moyen;
C’est un mal qui fait du bien.⁵¹

The Doctor

We’ll learn from the success of the procedure,
That you’ll be more charming afterwards;
You’ll have a fresher and rosier complexion.
Everywhere my treatment
Is becoming fashionable.
It offers a new way of pleasing;
This is one harm that does good.

In this musical extract, the primary advantage of inoculation is construed as aesthetic – and strongly and quite patronisingly gendered. The procedure saves its (female) beneficiaries from the disfiguring effects of smallpox, thereby ensuring their romantic prospects and implied social capital.⁵² Here and throughout the opera – echoing literary tropes then consolidating around the disease – Favart draws links between inoculation and marriageability, and between the transmission of illness and ‘infection’ from love.⁵³ The quoted duet makes a gentle innuendo out of the ‘jab’ (‘piqûre’) of Lise’s treatment; elsewhere Colette remarks upon the physical distress her sentiments for Jacquot evoke, and the curative relief she experiences upon their reconciliation.⁵⁴ The two heroines of *La fête*

⁴⁹ Favart, *La fête du château*, 4–5.

⁵⁰ Favart, *La fête du château*, 3.

⁵¹ Favart, *La fête du château*, 5.

⁵² It was customary for the author of a *vaudeville* comedy to select tunes, or *timbres*, with intertextual connotations deriving from their use in prior dramatic contexts. Favart’s adoption of ‘V’là c’que c’est qu’ d’aller au bois’ for this pro-inoculation duet reinforces the general message of the scene. The melody was first used theatrically in Marie-Justine Favart’s *Les amours de Bastien et Bastienne* (1753; scene 4), where it similarly invokes ideals of beauty and material wealth. On the history of this *timbre*, see the Theaville *vaudeville* database, maintained by the Centre d’études des théâtres de la Foire et de la Comédie-Italienne (Université de Nantes): www.theaville.org/kitesite/index.php. On the early history of the *comédie en vaudevilles*, see John Romey, ‘Songs That Run in the Streets: Popular Song at the Comédie-Italienne, the Comédie-Française, and the Théâtres de la Foire’, *Journal of Musicology* 37 (2020), 415–58.

⁵³ On the gendering of these discourses, see David E. Shuttleton, *Smallpox and the Literary Imagination, 1660–1820* (Cambridge, 2007), 115–36; and Seth, *Les rois aussi en mouraient*, 325–51.

⁵⁴ As the doctor counsels Colette on her romantic affairs, he frames this advice as a ‘prescription’ for healing (Favart, *La fête du château*, 68).

De l'art d'un in - o - cu - la - teur c'est l'a - mour qui fut l'in - ven -
 teur. Pour l'in - té - rêt d'un jeu - ne cœur, on fait la pi - qû - re: la cure en est
 su - re. Jeu - nes beau - tés, ne craig - nez rien; c'est un mal qui fait du bien.

Example 1. C.S. Favart, *La fête du château*, scene 1, 'De l'art d'un Inoculateur'.

du château (the convalescent and the ingénue), along with their counterparts in the Monconseil household, thus represent two interconnected ideals of Enlightenment femininity. The action the younger woman takes to safeguard her health, Favart suggests, will enable her to attain the prize sought by her elder compatriot: the security of an auspicious union.

La fête du château is, to be sure, a wildly inaccurate portrait of the ravages of smallpox. Thwarted romantic affairs were not the gravest consequences of the lethal virus, nor were its traumatic impacts and experimental treatments borne primarily by white, privileged Parisian women.⁵⁵ And yet, the limitations of *La fête du château* belie the significance of its underlying concerns and the eventual extent of its influence. To start, the opera's focus on beauty should not be read as purely superficial – but rather as a euphemistic gloss on the very serious risks of disfigurement from the disease. As David E. Shuttleton has outlined, such physical repercussions of smallpox were viewed with distinct alarm in the rigidly hierarchical society of the *ancien régime*. Bluntly put, 'attractive daughters were more marketable daughters ... serving as trafficable commodities through which a propertied patriarchy sought to cement economically and politically advantageous dynastic ties'.⁵⁶ The women of the Monconseil family were undoubtedly affected by these pressures; the marquise appears to have gone to great lengths to arrange elite marriages and court positions for her daughters and granddaughter – likely the most stable life path available to them. More generally, it bears emphasising that *La fête du château* did not have to be fully truthful or representative to be widely consequential. During this period, there was considerable slippage between literary and scientific depictions of inoculation: novels frequently

⁵⁵ *La fête du château* would have taken on a much different political resonance, for example, in the theatres of colonial Saint-Domingue, where it was presented at least three times between 1769 and 1781. Though beyond the scope of the present article, important recent scholarship has examined the adoption of inoculation in the colonial Caribbean, emphasising both the transmission of African diasporic medical knowledge throughout the Atlantic world and the corporeal exploitation of enslaved subjects by white medical practitioners. See Farren E. Yero, 'An Eradication: Empire, Enslaved Children, and the Whitewashing of Vaccine History', *Age of Revolutions* (7 December 2020), ageofrevolutions.com/2020/12/07/an-eradication-empire-enslaved-children-and-the-whitewashing-of-vaccine-history/; and Elise A. Mitchell, 'Morbid Crossings: Surviving Smallpox, Maritime Quarantine, and the Gendered Geography of the Early Eighteenth-Century Intra-Caribbean Slave Trade', *The William and Mary Quarterly* 79 (2022), 177–210. These authors expand upon ideas presented in an earlier work by Karol Weaver: *Medical Revolutionaries: The Enslaved Healers of Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue* (Champaign, IL, 2006). Performance statistics for the theatres of Saint-Domingue are compiled from www.theatreinsaintdomingue.org/.

⁵⁶ Shuttleton, *Smallpox and the Literary Imagination*, 118.

featured ‘medical episodes’ to ‘help readers come to terms with modern developments’, while medical texts deployed poetic and epistolary devices to amplify the emotional impact of their arguments.⁵⁷ In such cases, ‘prettified’ depictions of smallpox and its victims nonetheless played a role in shaping real-world attitudes towards the disease. Indeed, as the reception of Favart’s comedy affirms, a work that blended fact and fiction might exert a powerful effect on – and leave a striking picture of – the society that absorbed its message.

La fête du château in Paris and Versailles

From its very origins, *La fête du château* gestured beyond the confines of the Bagatelle. Its plot was meant to bolster Monconseil’s image within her courtly social network, while its *vaudeville* melodies were drawn from, and subsequently recirculated within, the urban soundscape of the French capital.⁵⁸ Yet Favart’s opera assumed a more explicitly ‘public’ function in September 1766, when it entered the repertory of the Comédie-Italienne. (The transfer probably occurred through the connections of the librettist.) The work was favourably reviewed in the Parisian press, and regularly revived in the decade thereafter.⁵⁹ The critical and commercial success of *La fête du château* suggests that, as the comedy moved into the ‘official’ domain, it began to reflect – and also provide impetus to – larger changes in French opinion surrounding the medical practice. Although the Comédie-Italienne was a Crown-affiliated institution, it served a relatively broad and heterogeneous audience in the capital. The Hôtel de Bourgogne, the company’s theatre, accommodated roughly 1,500 spectators, split between wealthier, box-holding patrons and the socially mixed crowds of the standing-room pit, or *parterre*.⁶⁰ The Parisian production of *La fête du château* reiterated pro-inoculation arguments to many members of an already converted group (noblemen and intellectuals familiar with the medical controversy from its ubiquity in the press and in mid-century salons). But this sympathetic portrayal of inoculation also undoubtedly served some sceptical viewers (and viewers who lacked access to other media in which this discourse circulated). A number of journalists, indeed, used the occasion to editorialise in favour of the treatment. The *Journal encyclopédique*, for example, briefly diverted from its plot summary to reflect on the ‘marvels of inoculation’,⁶¹ while the *Mercure de France* drew attention to ‘the useful and very prudent procedure’ that formed the impetus for Favart’s comic action.⁶²

It seems, notably, that the unique conditions that inspired Monconseil’s commission contributed to, rather than detracted from, its potential utility in a broader public-health

⁵⁷ Catriona Seth, ‘Textually Transmitted Diseases: Smallpox Inoculation in French Literary and Medical Works’, in *Medicine and Narration in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Sophie Vasset (Oxford, 2013), 129.

⁵⁸ On the permeability between both literal and conceptual expressions of ‘private’ and ‘public’ in the culture of the French Enlightenment, see Antoine Lilti, *L’héritage des Lumières: ambivalences de la modernité* (Paris, 2019), 167–96.

⁵⁹ The *Mémoires secrets* emphasised the ‘inventive, original and graceful details’ (‘détails ingénieux, piquants, et délicats’) that drove the work’s appealing comic plot (*Mémoires secrets* [2 October 1766], 72). The *Mercure de France* praised the ‘little *drame* [as] ingeniously conceived and constructed, and marked by the art, finesse and fine taste for which M. Favart has increasingly made himself known’ (‘un petit *drame* ingénieusement conçu, conduit & dialogué, avec l’art, la finesse, & le goût dont M. Favart a donné tant de preuves’; *Mercure de France* [October 1766], 171). For a record of performances at the Comédie-Italienne, see Clarence D. Brenner, *The Théâtre Italien: Its Repertory, 1716–1793* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1961).

⁶⁰ On the architecture of this theatre, see John Golder, ‘The Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1760: Some Previously Unpublished Drawings by Louis-Alexandre Girault’, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32 (2009), 455–91.

⁶¹ ‘les merveilles de l’inoculation’. *Journal encyclopédique* (November 1766), 112.

⁶² ‘l’utile & très-prudente précaution de l’inoculation’, *Mercure de France* (October 1766), 172.

campaign. In her discussion of the pro-inoculation *philosophes*, Meghan K. Roberts remarks that these authors self-consciously drew domestic practices into the field of public discourse, framing their scientific defences of inoculation with personal anecdotes about their own experiences with smallpox and its prevention. This rhetorical strategy, Roberts points out, not only ‘made texts comprehensible and persuasive’ but also ‘helped associate new procedures with social elites, which informed the reader of the many royal, noble, and otherwise illustrious parents who had inoculated their children and presumably hastened its wider adoption’.⁶³ The inspiration, plot and reception of *La fête du château* together offered a more tangible – and arguably even more compelling – demonstration of this trajectory. The characters within the opera quite literally sang the praises of inoculation, vouching for its utility before the nightly audiences of the Comédie-Italienne. The work’s reviewers, in turn, emphasised the true-to-life sentiments behind Favart’s theatrical message, linking the treatment to the virtuous Monconseil women and their fashionable home. The *Correspondance littéraire* lauded the inoculated patient’s beauty as ‘deserving of celebration by all of our poets’;⁶⁴ the *Mercure de France* described her treatment as a symbol of how much she was ‘cherished by her family’.⁶⁵ The effect was to bridge the gap between the publicly staged fiction and the private reality at its foundation, presenting an enviable model for the growing body of spectators that consumed it.

While the influence of *La fête du château* was strongly felt in Paris, it held a more overt political significance at Versailles. As we have noted, Louis XV was a vocal hold-out in the wider adoption of inoculation, among the progressive nobility within France and among European monarchies more generally.⁶⁶ His hostility was partially rooted in international affairs – in particular, in the acrimonious diplomatic relationship between France and Britain after the Seven Years’ War. Inoculation was strongly associated with English physicians, which precluded its full acceptance at the rival court. A more personal – and ultimately harmful – rationale for the monarch’s conservatism was the mistaken belief that he had been struck by smallpox as a teenager, and thus held immunity to the disease. That Louis XV had vanquished an illness that felled so many others became an important component of his heroic self-image. A poem published during the king’s youthful convalescence, for instance, likened inoculation to the ingestion of foreign poison,⁶⁷ an action rendered unnecessary by the sovereign’s providential bodily attunement and self-control: ‘Louis shows his fellow men that in every sort of duty / the conqueror of himself is the one true hero’.⁶⁸ The king, in other words, had no need for inoculation because he had been endowed with an inner strength that surpassed that of the citizens he ruled.⁶⁹

⁶³ Roberts, *Sentimental Savants*, 86.

⁶⁴ ‘dont la beauté mérite d’être célébrée par tous nos poètes’. *Correspondance littéraire* (1 October 1766), 187. The review names Adélaïde-Félicité as the recipient of the procedure, which has introduced confusion into subsequent accounts of what transpired at the Bagatelle. However, it is highly unlikely that Adélaïde-Félicité was inoculated in 1766 (or ever), for there are multiple reports confirming she contracted smallpox naturally shortly after her marriage. See the *Mémoires secrets* (23 August 1774), 207; and the memoirs of Henriette Lucie de La Tour du Pin Gouvernet, *Journal d’une femme de cinquante ans, 1778–1815*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1920), I: 135.

⁶⁵ ‘une jeune Demoiselle chère à sa famille’. *Mercure de France* (October 1766), 172.

⁶⁶ European rulers voicing support for inoculation included Maria Theresa in Habsburg Vienna, Louis XV’s own cousin (and son-in-law) Philip in the Duchy of Parma, and Catherine the Great of Russia.

⁶⁷ Jacques Martineau de Solleyne, *Les vœux de l’Europe et de la France pour la santé du Roy, poème héroïque sur sa petite vérole* (Paris, 1729), 18.

⁶⁸ ‘Louis montre aux humains qu’en tous divers Travaux, / Le vainqueur de soi-même, est le seul vrai héros.’ Martineau de Solleyne, *Les vœux de l’Europe*, 39.

⁶⁹ Seth, *Les rois aussi en mouraient*, 243.

The governmental status quo was called dramatically into question in April 1774, when some fifty courtiers were infected in an outbreak at Versailles. On the 28th of the month, Louis XV felt unwell and developed a fever. His attendants at first downplayed their alarm, taking solace in the assumption that his adolescent illness would protect him from harm. (The king was reported to have claimed from his sickbed: ‘if I hadn’t had smallpox at eighteen, I would think I had it now!’⁷⁰). Within days, however, the error of the previous diagnosis, as well as the gravity of the situation, became apparent. On 30 April the revised judgement, *petite vérole*, was announced at court and in the capital, and Louis XV’s three grandsons – the only direct heirs from the Bourbon line, all of whom remained vulnerable to the disease – were sent away from the monarch’s bedside. Despite the intensive efforts of the Crown physicians, the king’s condition deteriorated quickly: he died less than two weeks after the appearance of his first symptoms, on the afternoon of 10 May. During the rapid course of the illness, it was the Duke of Orléans’s son, the Duke of Chartres, who brought news from the royal bedchamber to the sequestered dauphin – a benefit of the immunity acquired from his own inoculation two decades prior.⁷¹

The sudden death of the monarch, and the manner the Versailles outbreak laid bare the vulnerability of the Bourbon heirs, immediately altered official attitudes towards smallpox prevention in France. The new king and his siblings, long-time sceptics of the procedure, agreed at last to be inoculated, and retreated to quarantine at the summer château of Marly by mid-June. The abrupt about-face elicited a storm of controversy – a result of the precedent the monarchy itself had so publicly set. Marie Antoinette’s lady-in-waiting, Madame Campan, noted that ‘many Parisians were in a state of alarm’ at the news of the impending procedure;⁷² the *Mémoires secrets* reported that the royal decision had occasioned a ‘new round of debates over the method, which still has numerous opponents in France’.⁷³ (Such was the atmosphere of uncertainty that the stock market plunged precipitously in the days leading up to the inoculation.⁷⁴) Fortunately, the treatment proceeded as smoothly as governmental administrators might have hoped. ‘The smallpox infection has done little to disturb the habitual activities of the king’, wrote the Austrian ambassador, Florimond-Claude, Count of Mercy-Argenteau, to the Empress Maria Theresa in Vienna. ‘Throughout their stay in Marly, [the members of the royal family] have spent their days strolling in the gardens, and their evenings playing billiards and cards.’⁷⁵ A bulletin from the king’s physicians announced his recovery on 29 June (Figure 2).⁷⁶ In the two short

⁷⁰ This anecdote is quoted in Anne Byrne, *Death and the Crown: Ritual and Politics in France before the Revolution* (Manchester, 2019), 26.

⁷¹ For a full account of these events, see Byrne, *Death and the Crown*, 25–39; for an overview of primary sources related to the king’s illness, see ‘Dernière maladie de Louis XV: mort et funérailles’, *Revue des documents historiques* (1873–4), 152–73.

⁷² ‘L’utilité de cette nouvelle découverte n’étant pas alors généralement reconnue en France, beaucoup de gens à Paris furent très alarmés du parti que venaient de prendre les princes.’ Jeanne-Louise-Henriette Campan, *Correspondance inédite de Mme Campan, avec La Reine Hortense*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1835), I: 92.

⁷³ ‘Cet événement occasionne de nouvelles discussions sur cette méthode, qui trouve encore nombre de contradicteurs en France’. *Mémoires secrets* (19 June 1774), 244–5.

⁷⁴ *Mémoires secrets* (15 June 1774), 243. For a summary of these reactions, see Seth, *Les rois aussi en mouraient*, 253–6.

⁷⁵ ‘L’éruption de la petite vérole n’a rien changé au train de vie ordinaire du roi. ... Pendant tout ce séjour à Marly, les journées sont employées à se promener, à jouer au billard et à des jeux de commerce pendant la soirée.’ Florimond Claude, comte de Mercy-Argenteau, to Maria Theresa, letter of 28 June 1774, reprinted in *Marie Antoinette: correspondance secrète entre Marie Thérèse et le Cte de Mercy-Argenteau*, ed. Alfred d’Arneth and M. A. Geffroy, 3 vols. (Paris, 1874), II: 183.

⁷⁶ On the bulletins tracking Louis XVI’s treatment, see Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, ‘Louis XVI et l’inoculation de la variole: quatre bulletins de santé royaux (24, 25, 26 et 29 juin 1774)’, *Histoire par l’image* (April 2020), histoire-image.org/de/etudes/louis-xvi-inoculation-variole-quatre-bulletins-sante-royaux-24-25-26-29-juin-1774.

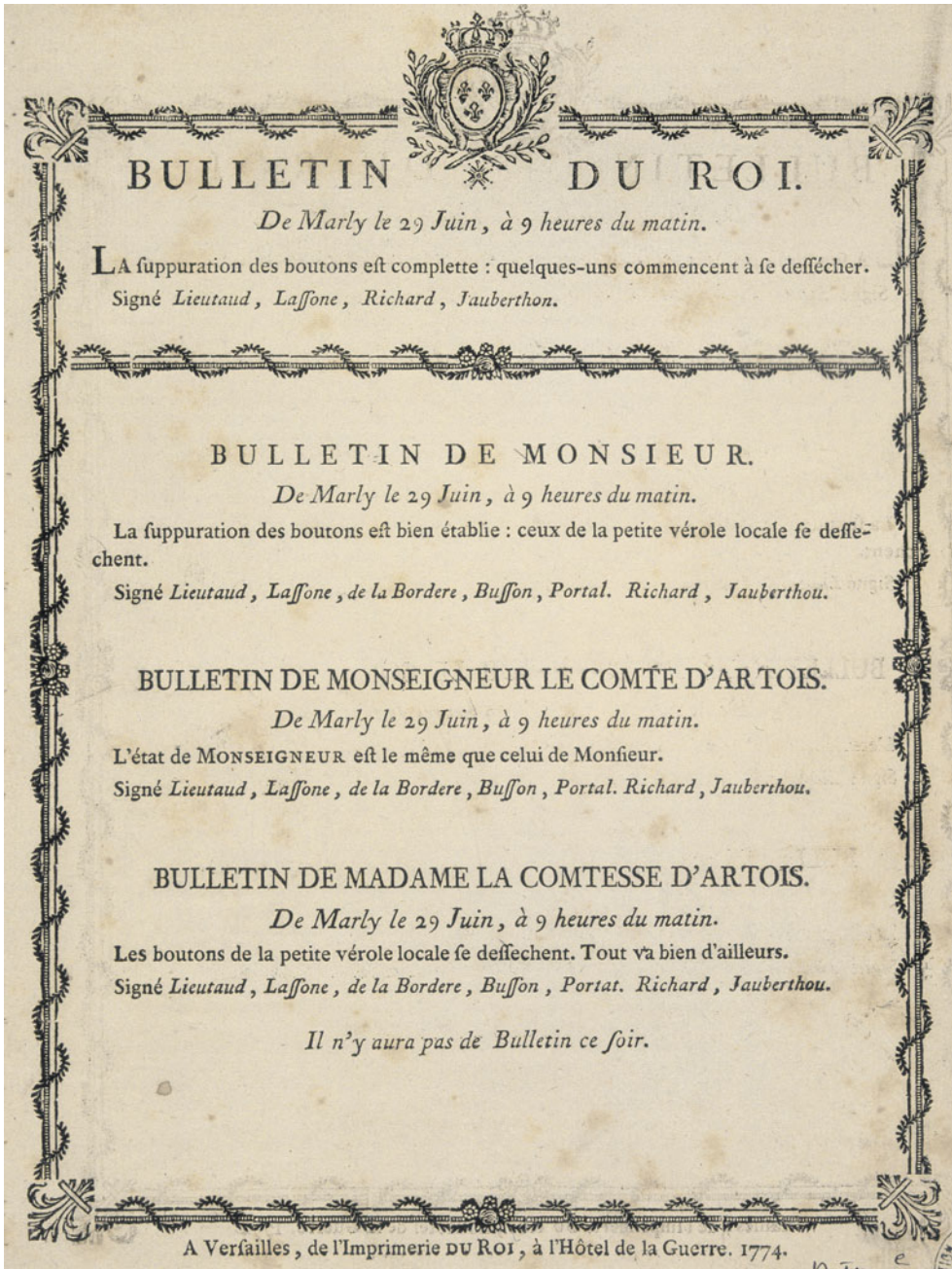


Fig. 2. Medical bulletin announcing the inoculation and recovery of Louis XVI (Marly, 29 June 1774). Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon, Versailles, France. RMN – Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY (Gérard Blot). (colour online)

months since the onset of Louis XV's illness, the French monarchy had undergone a thorough, contested – and ultimately widely influential – transformation in its approach to the management of the disease.

It was in this politically fraught context that *La fête du château* came to prominence at Versailles, broadcasting the reorientation in French public-health policy.⁷⁷ The most vehement advocate for Louis XVI's inoculation seems to have been his wife, Marie Antoinette. (The Habsburg court had been gravely affected by smallpox during the queen's childhood, firmly converting Maria Theresa and her family to the pro-inoculation cause.⁷⁸) Marie Antoinette was also clearly behind the programming of Favart's opera: her support for the comedy can be documented on multiple occasions across a variety of venues. In winter 1775, for instance, she sponsored a visit to Versailles by her younger brother, the Archduke Maximilian of Austria. The diaries of Denis-Pierre-Jean Papillon de la Ferté, the intendant of the royal household, relate that Marie Antoinette was enthusiastically involved in the planning of balls and spectacles for the occasion, including a performance of *La fête du château* in the salon d'Hercule on 15 February.⁷⁹ The queen would continue to patronise Favart's work for at least the remainder of the decade, developing an enduring association with its central message. She presented *La fête du château* at her personal theatre at the Petit Trianon in 1777, an explicit gesture of approval before her inner circle of associates.⁸⁰ That same year, she journeyed to the capital to take in a performance at the Comédie-Italienne – her highest and most public form of artistic endorsement.⁸¹

This theatrical promotion of inoculation was important for the queen's personal politics. Throughout the Versailles outbreak, Marie Antoinette's behaviour had been scrupulously dissected by proponents and critics alike, interpreted (for better or for worse) as a demonstration of her character and readiness to rule. Her pious loyalty at Louis XV's bedside had earned her measured praise, resonating with gendered expectations of caregiving and sentiment. Mercy-Argenteau reported that Marie Antoinette had 'displayed the conduct of an angel' while tending to the stricken king, 'enchancing the public' with her martyr-like devotion to her sovereign.⁸² Shortly thereafter, however, rumours that she had pushed Louis XVI towards inoculation drew intense scrutiny (at least before the successful outcome of the treatment), playing into xenophobic concerns over her lingering Austrian allegiances.⁸³ Critics portrayed Marie Antoinette's influence over her husband's

⁷⁷ Among other performances, *La fête du château* was presented at court on 10 March and 29 December 1775; 'Comédiens italiens, service des menus plaisirs du Roy, année 1775', F-Pan, O¹ 3043.39. The *menus plaisirs* also commissioned a commentary from the playwright Dorvigny, which was produced before the royal family at Compiègne in the direct aftermath of the inoculation: *La fête à l'impromptu, comédie en 1 acte, avec un divertissement au sujet de l'inoculation et de la convalescence du roi Louis XVI* (Compiègne, 1774).

⁷⁸ Three of Marie Antoinette's siblings (Karl Joseph, Maria Johanna and Maria Josepha) died of the illness before reaching adulthood; another (Maria Elisabeth) survived but was badly scarred, ruining her chances of marriage. On smallpox outbreaks at the Habsburg court, see Antonia Fraser, *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* (London, 2001), 26–7. On Maria Theresa's support for inoculation, see Adeline Mueller, *Mozart and the Mediation of Childhood* (Chicago, 2021), 45–7.

⁷⁹ Nearly every journal entry describing the preparations for Maximilian's arrival (spanning 15 January to 27 March 1775) mentions the queen's involvement in some way. Denis-Pierre Jean Papillon de la Ferté, *Journal de Papillon de la Ferté, intendant et contrôleur de l'argenterie, menus-plaisirs, et affaires de la chambre du roi (1756-1780)*, ed. Ernest Boyssse (Paris, 1887), 378–80. The *Mémoires secrets* reported that *La fête du château* had been presented specifically because it was 'analogous to contemporary circumstances' (19 February 1775, 351).

⁸⁰ The performance took place on 18 May 1777; the queen's theatrical programming for this year is catalogued in F-Pan, O¹ 3051 ('Dépenses de la reine, année 1777'). On Marie Antoinette's influence on French lyric theatre, see Julia Doe, *The Comedians of the King: Opéra Comique and the Bourbon Monarchy on the Eve of Revolution* (Chicago, 2021), 83–121.

⁸¹ The performance took place on 3 August 1777; the queen's presence is noted in the daily logbooks of the theatre. 'Recettes journalières de la Comédie-Italienne du 8 avril 1777 au 4 avril 1778', F-Po, Th.OC.60.

⁸² 'Mme la dauphine a tenu le conduit d'un ange ... tout le public en est enchanté.' Mercy-Argenteau to Maria Theresa, letter of 8 May 1774, reprinted in *Marie Antoinette: correspondance secrète*, II: 137.

⁸³ On anti-Austrian sentiment and criticism of Marie Antoinette, see Thomas E. Kaiser, 'Who's Afraid of Marie Antoinette? Diplomacy, Austrophobia and the Queen', *French History* 14 (2000), 241–71. On the musical

decision as a poorly reasoned and perniciously foreign intervention into the affairs of state. As Campan recalled, those who opposed inoculation ‘hastened to blame the error on the new queen – she being the only one, it was said, who could have given [Louis XVI] such reckless advice’, based on her upbringing in a ‘northern court’.⁸⁴ *La fête du château*, then, was doubly useful in burnishing Marie Antoinette’s reputation, for its plot amplified actions for which she had been commended, while addressing points of recent censure. As Favart’s opera reflected well on the Monconseil household, so too did it glorify the queen on a grander stage – lauding her composure in the face of tragedy and vindicating, in hindsight, the good sense of her pro-inoculation outlook.

Louis XVI’s inoculation – and the queen’s marketing thereof – also had broader political implications, marking the end of the most tendentious *ancien-régime* debates over the practice. The monarchy’s belated acceptance of the procedure paved the way for some pragmatic, state-sponsored programming; by the 1780s, for example, children began to be inoculated at government charity hospitals, making the preventative treatment more accessible beyond the aristocratic networks in which it had first gained traction in France.⁸⁵ Less directly measurable, though equally noteworthy, was a shift in the tenor of public discourse: the Crown-sponsored performances of *La fête du château* signalled the moment when inoculation fully entered the French cultural mainstream. Alongside her theatrical sponsorships, Marie Antoinette famously incited a vogue for the *pouf à l’inoculation* – an elaborate hairstyle featuring a serpent, a club and a rising sun (symbolising medicine, conquest and Louis XVI’s recovery, respectively).⁸⁶ Trend-conscious Parisians soon followed suit, declaring their support for the procedure by sporting hats adorned with pox-speckled ribbons (Figure 3), or collecting porcelain figurines after the protagonists of *La fête du château* (Figure 4).⁸⁷ As Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell has argued, the example of smallpox inoculation powerfully demonstrates the ‘interdependence of fashions and ideas in the eighteenth century’.⁸⁸ The practice had been granted initial credibility through the advocacy of scientists and intellectuals; and it subsequently gained practical support through the evolution of governmental policy. Yet it would only attain widespread acceptance in France after it was thoroughly embedded in the cultural psyche – celebrated as both safe and stylish by the figureheads of the consumer marketplace.

implications of these suspicions, see Rebecca Dowd Geoffroy-Schwinden, ‘A Lady-in-Waiting’s Account of Marie Antoinette’s Musical Politics: Women, Music, and the French Revolution’, *Women & Music* 21 (2017), 76.

⁸⁴ ‘Ceux qui le blâmèrent hautement se plurent à en rejeter tout le tort sur la reine, qui seule avait pu, disait-on, se permettre de donner un conseil aussi téméraire, l’inoculation étant déjà établie dans les cours du Nord.’ Campan, *Correspondance inédite*, I: 92. Maria Theresa seems to have been very concerned, for the sake of political liability, that Marie Antoinette not appear to have influenced her husband’s decision. Maria Theresa to Marie Antoinette, letter of 1 July 1774, reprinted in *Marie Antoinette: correspondance secrète*, II: 190.

⁸⁵ Catriona Seth, ‘L’inoculation contre la variole: un révélateur des liens sociaux’, *Dix-huitième siècle* 41 (2009), 152.

⁸⁶ Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, *Fashion Victims: Dress at the Court of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette* (New Haven and London, 2015), 23. A contemporaneous description of the hairstyle is found in the *Anecdotes échappées à l’observateur anglois et aux Mémoires secrets*, 3 vols. (London, 1788), I: 63; the entry is dated 4 September 1774. On the political importance of the queen’s fashion choices, see Caroline Weber, *Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution* (New York, 2006).

⁸⁷ There is evidence that Marie Antoinette circulated similar figurines among her close associates. Sarah Grant, *Female Portraiture and Patronage in Marie-Antoinette’s Court: The Princesse de Lamballe* (New York, 2019), 152–4.

⁸⁸ Chrisman-Campbell, *Fashion Victims*, 6; also, the same author’s ‘How Fashion Helped Defeat 18th-Century Anti-Vaxxers’, *The Atlantic* (21 January 2015), www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/01/how-fashion-defeated-the-18th-century-anti-vaxxers/384696/.



Fig. 3. Nicolas Dupin, *Gallerie des modes et des costumes français dessinés d'après nature* (45^e cahier, 1785). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. (colour online)

The politics of the Bagatelle

La fête du château offers insight into the development of French attitudes towards small-pox inoculation in the late eighteenth century: its trajectory parallels the procedure's bumpy path to acceptance and emphasises the role that popular cultural artefacts played in this process. In so doing, Favart's comedy also testifies to the wide-ranging influence of the theatrical activities of the domestic sphere – and the women who took part in them. Historians of medicine have described a gendered gap between the prescriptive literature on inoculation and the logistical initiative vital for its adoption. While public debates on the subject were dominated by men, the weighty decision to inoculate members of a household was often taken on privately by women. An analogous disjuncture might be seen in *ancien-régime* expectations of artistic practice. Critical and didactic writings of the Enlightenment period tend to portray women as passive consumers of music; but they exerted independent initiative within their social *milieux*, with consequences that resonated far beyond this domain. Both of these corrective trends are substantiated in the production and reception of *La fête du château*. Within their respective families, it was the Marquise of Monconseil and the Queen Marie Antoinette who most forcefully advocated for the medical procedure – and then moved to affirm and advertize that choice through progressive musical patronage.

Recent scholarship on the *théâtres de société* – and on amateur music-making, more generally – has emphasised the 'liminal status' of both physical venues of performance and the repertory they showcased. Rebecca Cypess, for example, suggests that it was the inherent 'ambiguity' of Enlightenment salons that facilitated women's cultural agency



Fig. 4. Étienne-Maurice Falconnet, figurine in soft-paste biscuit porcelain depicting Colette and Jacquot in *La fête du château*. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. (colour online)

within (and outside of) these spaces. The quasi-domestic positioning of the salon allowed women to ‘exercise their taste, influence, and talents’ in ways that did not threaten the perceived limitations of their gender and that might thereafter ‘spill out’ into the public sphere.⁸⁹ The case of *La fête du château* demonstrates, along similar lines, how elite women’s operatic patronage served as a means of entry into a field of discourse that otherwise excluded them. Going one step further, it underscores that this process operated not solely in artistic, but also in explicitly political terms. Indeed, I would argue, Favart’s comedy achieved its impact precisely because of its ‘liminality’ – by thwarting bifurcated conceptions of ‘serious’ and ‘sociable’ register, while collapsing divisions between the theatre and the world beyond the stage.

The form of *La fête du château*, as well as the circumstances of its commission, enabled it to function simultaneously as a ‘mirror and deflection’ of wider societal concerns.⁹⁰ As we have traced, the ‘amateur’ status of Monconseil’s theatre belied the prominence of its actors and audiences. Venues such as the Bagatelle were effective testing grounds for contentious philosophical and political ideals because they were granted greater autonomy

⁸⁹ Cypess, *Women and Musical Salons*, 26–7. For a parallel refutation of the ‘simplistic dichotomies’ ascribed to women’s music-making in this period, see Rebecca Dowd Geoffroy-Schwinden, ‘Music as Feminine Capital in Napoleonic France: Nancy MacDonald’s Musical Upbringing’, *Music & Letters* 100 (2019), 302–34.

⁹⁰ This defining feature of the *comédie en vaudevilles* is theorised in Erica Pauline Levenson, ‘Traveling Tunes: French Comic Opera and Theater in London, 1714–1745’ (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2017), 3.

than the 'official' dramatic institutions of the *ancien régime*.⁹¹ (Works on controversial subjects often premiered on private stages to smooth their path towards adoption by the nation's royally sanctioned companies.) The evidence suggests, moreover, that the domestic origins and topical inspiration of Favart's comedy, instead of detracting from its broad legibility, formed an essential facet of its appeal. *La fête du château* made a persuasive case for inoculation because it eschewed the abstract grandeur of courtly opera. Through its accessible musical language, it deflated the fears that surrounded smallpox; through its allusions to real people and events, it portrayed new techniques of disease prevention as at once attainable and fashionably aspirational. The success of *La fête du château* highlights the degree of 'performativity' inherent – then as now – in submitting to a medical procedure with communal, rather than strictly individual, benefit. For Monconseil and Marie Antoinette, support for Favart's inoculation-themed opera was an act equally of public relations and of public health – but the motivations of the former did not preclude the efficacy of the latter.

Favart's occasional commissions have received relatively little attention within the larger revival of interest in his plays and *opéras comiques*. Yet the librettist viewed these works as a critical component of his output – and, notably, the one that best reflected the political landmarks of his lifetime. In November 1774 – as *La fête du château* was prepared at Versailles – Favart described his achievements in a letter to Monconseil. 'I have now been writing for more than forty of my sixty-four years', he noted. 'And in this time there has hardly been an important national milestone that I have not celebrated.'⁹² The list Favart supplies his patron is lengthy, spanning several decades of current events and courtly intrigue: *Les amours grivois* for France's victory in the battle of Fontenoy; *Le bal de Strasbourg* for a youthful Louis XV's recovery from illness; topical commentaries for the birth of the Duke of Burgundy, and the wedding of the dauphin. Those who accused him of frivolity, Favart argues, underestimated the potential of such entertainments. The librettist recalls the success of *Le mariage par escalade* (Monconseil's tribute to Richelieu during the Seven Years' War). He claims that the *opéra comique* was so stirring that 'the hearts of all those in attendance were in a state of delirium – to the point that four tailors, two wigmakers, and a cutlery maker went directly from the spectacle to the recruitment office', to offer their services to the illustrious general.⁹³

Although Favart's anecdote is patently hyperbolic, his larger point is not: intimate, personal engagement with a dramatic repertory and relevant ties to contemporary circumstances made it more affecting, and not less. 'This goes to show', he concludes, 'that these bagatelles might well be good for something.'⁹⁴ Here Favart refers, of course, to both the Monconseil estate and the spectacles that flourished there. Light-hearted though it may be, Favart's play-upon-words encourages us to take seriously the implications of sociable patronage, as a critical (and neglected) lens on the cultural politics of the French Enlightenment.

⁹¹ Charlton, 'Opera at Home', 31–2; Lilti, *Le monde des salons*, 254–5.

⁹² 'J'ai soixante-quatre ans, il y en a plus de quarante que je travaille; il n'y a point d'événemens intéressans pour la nation, que je n'aie célébrés.' Favart to Monconseil, letter of November 1774, in Favart, *Mémoires et correspondances*, III: 49.

⁹³ 'Tous les cœurs étoient dans l'ivresse, au point que quatre garçons tailleurs, deux perruquiers et un coutelier, allèrent s'engager à la sortie du spectacle pour servir sous un si grand général.' Favart, *Mémoires et correspondances*, III: 49–50.

⁹⁴ 'Ceci prouve que les bagatelles peuvent être bonnes à quelque chose.' Favart, *Mémoires et correspondances*, III: 50. On the etymology of the term 'bagatelle' and its use in a musical context, see Cypess, *Women and Musical Salons*, 105.

Acknowledgements. For their editorial assistance and generous comments, I would like to thank Callum Blackmore, Rebecca Dowd Geoffroy-Schwinden, the members of the 18th-Century France Working Group (Columbia/NYC) and the anonymous readers for this journal. Support for this project was provided by a Lenfest Junior Faculty Development Grant from Columbia University.

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Cite this article: Doe J (2022). The Politics of the Bagatelle: Opera and Smallpox Inoculation in Enlightenment France. *Cambridge Opera Journal* 34, 135–156. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586722000210>