

“Une voix Plébéienne” in Eighteenth-Century France: Charlotte Curé, “La Muse Limonadière”

Paul J. Young

Charlotte Curé, also known as “La Muse Limonadière,” occupied a unique position in eighteenth-century French literature. Curé’s literary output—although largely forgotten, and at times forgettable—offers a rare look into the life of a working-class female writer in the second half of the eighteenth century. A “maîtresse de café” (or *limonadière*), she was nevertheless a female writer who occupied a surprising position in the “Republic of Letters,” maintaining a correspondence with some of eighteenth-century France’s most influential writers. Her literary career and her successes are all the more exceptional when considered in tandem with her biography: by her own admission, she seems to have had no formal literary training. Moreover, she composed her works (in prose and in verse) and carried on her literary correspondence while also exercising her trade at Le Caffé Allemand on the Rue Croix des Petits Champs, not far from the Palais Royal.

abstract

“PRIVILEGE—OR the leisure it ensured—was a *sine qua non* for creativity and intellectual development” in the literary world of eighteenth-century France, and the majority of that century’s writers “were not bound by the mindless grind of manual labor.”¹ Although certain exceptions come to mind (Rousseau’s working as a music copyist, Laclos’s military career playing an important role in his writing of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*), the majority of eighteenth-century French writers are not associated with any trade other than the craft of writing. However, in the literary milieu of eighteenth-century Paris there was one notable exception, Charlotte Curé, who enjoyed a hybrid status in her century as a successful author who exercised a trade as a “maîtresse de café” (or *limonadière*), and for whom her working identity became inseparable from her identity as a writer.² Also known as “La

¹ Roland Bonnel and Catherine Rubinger, introduction, *Femmes savantes et femmes d’esprit*, ed. Bonnel and Rubinger (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 5.

² Throughout this article, I refer to this author as Charlotte Curé, since she first began writing under this name and garnered her initial fame with

Muse Limonadière,” Curé was largely forgotten by eighteenth-century studies³ even though she occupied a surprising position in the “Republic of Letters”: she maintained a correspondence with some of eighteenth-century France’s most influential writers (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, Voltaire, Graftigny, Prévost, Hamilton, Helvétius, Fontenelle) and wrote poems that were read before the most important heads of state of her time (Frederick of Prussia, Louis xv). Her literary career and her successes are exceptional when one considers that, by her own admission, she seems to have had no formal literary training. Moreover, she composed her works (in prose and in verse) and carried on her literary correspondence while also exercising her trade at Le Caffé Allemand on the Rue Croix des Petits Champs, not far from the Palais Royal.⁴ In this article, I examine

the publication of her *Ode en prose au roi de Prusse* in 1750. However, her anthology, published in 1755, bears witness to a name change following her second marriage, sometime shortly after the death of her first husband in July 1751: *La Muse Limonadière, ou recueil d'ouvrages en vers et en prose, par Madame Bourette, cy-devant Madame Curé, avec les différentes pièces qui lui ont été adressées* (Paris: Sébastien Jorry, 1755), 2 vols. References are to this edition, original spelling preserved. The texts offered in *La Muse Limonadière* are signed “Curé” or “Bourette” according to the date they were written. The *Encyclopédie* offers an initial definition of “Limonadier” as a “marchand de liqueurs,” but adds that “ils ne font maintenant qu’une communauté avec les caffetiers.” The article “Caffetier” echoes this point, describing a “caffetier” as “celui qui a le droit de vendre au public du café, du thé, du chocolat, et toutes sortes de liqueurs froides et chaudes,” and that “les *Caffetiers* sont de la communauté des Limonadiers. Voyez Limonadier.” Both definitions are cited in the *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences des arts et des métiers, nouvelle impression en facsimilé de la première édition de 1751–1780* (Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1988), 9:545, 527.

³ Raymond Trousson, in his “Préface” to *Romans de femmes du XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1996), mentions Curé in passing, in a discussion of professions available to women writers, noting that some, like Curé, had “situations pittoresques” (xii).

⁴ We know the name of her café and its location through numerous references that the author makes to this site in *La Muse Limonadière*. In the preface, she remarks in a footnote that “Madame Bourette est la Maîtresse du Caffé Allemand, Ruè de la Croix des Petits-Champs” (1:viii), and in a later poem she chides one of her correspondents for referring to the café as “[le] Caffé de Monsieur Curé,” noting that “la loi met en commun tout bien / Ce Caffé donc est aussi mien” (1:6). Moreover, vol. 1 of *La Muse Limonadière* contains a poem by an anonymous author about changes to the façade of this café, entitled *Vers à Madame Curé, au sujet des embellissemens qu’elle a fait donner à son Caffé par M**** (1:148–49). The notes to the *Correspondance générale d’Helvétius* suggest that the café was located “au 18 ou 20 de la rue Croix-des-Petits-Champs, non loin de la résidence d’Helvétius,” which could explain, in part, Curé’s

the unique position in eighteenth-century French literature of Curé's anthology *La Muse Limonadière*, published during her lifetime in 1755. Curé's literary output—although largely forgotten, and at times forgettable—offers the reader something quite rare: a look into the life of a working-class female writer in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Curé's description of herself in the second stanza of her *Ode en prose au roi de Prusse* as “une voix Plébéienne” (1:33) and the identity that she forges through her association with her trade mark her as an outsider from the “Republic of Letters.” Dena Goodman attests, in her ground-breaking work on this milieu, that “the Enlightenment Republic of Letters was true to its name, for there was no hierarchy of genres, no queen of the arts, in a republic whose citizens engaged in all the variety of literary practices, stretching the limits of the literary itself.”⁵ However true this may have been, Curé's image of this republic suggests that other, more important hierarchies still existed. *La Muse Limonadière's* interrogation of the place for a writer born without “honneurs, [...] titres, [...] dignités” (1:33) and her assertion that “il n'est point d'autre noblesse que la Vertu” (1:33) offer an insight into the position of a writer and tradeswoman in a republic that, at least according to Curé, still replicated the exclusions based on birth and rank that were the standard in *ancien régime* France.

Curé's biography echoes the paradox encountered in her writings; while there is a fair amount of verifiable biographical information about Curé's life, her trade, and her literary output, the biography nevertheless raises unanswered questions about why she started to write and about the reality behind the anecdotes she offers in *La Muse Limonadière*. Certain facts are clear. She was born Charlotte Reynier in 1714, and she died in 1784; beginning around 1750, she published a series of works in prose and verse. According to the *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises*: “Pendant trente-six ans, elle tint Le Café [*sic*] Allemand, rue Croix-des-Petits-Champs, fréquenté par les gens de lettres. Au contact de sa clientèle le goût lui vint d'écrire. Elle se mit à composer des vers et même des comédies, dont l'une,

correspondence with the philosopher. Cited in *Correspondance generale d'Helvétius*, ed. David Smith, Jean Orsini, Marie-Thérèse Inguenaud, Peter Allan, and Alan Dainard (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 4:301.

⁵ Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 136.

La Coquette punie, fut représentée au Théâtre-Français. Elle a mérité le surnom de Muse Limonadière qui forme le titre des ses ouvrages poétiques. Voltaire lui fit quelques cadeaux.⁶ The editors of Helvétius's *Correspondance generale* also note her marriage to "son garçon de café, un nommé Bourette, quelques mois après la mort de son premier mari, survenue en juillet 1751" (301n1). From the anthology *La Muse Limonadière* and from her letters to fellow writers, readers can glean more biographical information; she had a number of children from both marriages. Her writings attest to her enjoying surprisingly close relationships with the duc de Gesvres and the duc de Penthhièvres.⁷ In volume 2 of *La Muse Limonadière*, Curé notes that the duc de Gesvres signed her second marriage contract; moreover, she writes that "pour finir l'Ouvrage, / Il a donné son nom au fruit / Que cette union a produit" (2:280).⁸ The Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal in Paris has an edition of Curé's 1779 play *La Coquette punie*, which bears a dedication to Penthhièvres and a poem to him on the book's end pages, both written in Curé's hand.⁹ It is unclear why she benefited from such close relationships with these two men or how she formed the connections at court that are apparent in the correspondence reproduced in *La Muse Limonadière*. In her *Vers à M. le Comte de Saulx, Menin de M. Le Dauphin* she suggests that her mother was the nurse of the Comte de Saulx (2:190).¹⁰

⁶ François Moreau, ed., *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises, le XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Fayard et Librairie Générale Française, 1995), 221.

⁷ To put these relationships in context, the duc de Gesvres, whom Curé describes as "Des Seigneurs de la Cour le plus parfait modèle" (1:171), was for many years one of Louis xv's "Premiers Gentilshommes de la Chambre." Penthhièvres served as the "Grand Veneur" for Louis xv, and was both the cousin of this king, as well as Louis xiv's grandson from his relationship with Mme de Montespan.

⁸ In a letter to the duc de Gesvres from 1754, she writes: "J'ai, Monseigneur, encore une grâce à vous demander: comme vous m'avez fait l'honneur de signer sur mon contrat de Mariage, daignez protéger le fruit de cet hymen en m'accordant la grâce de tenir l'enfant dont je dois accoucher dans le Mois de Septembre" (2:261), to which he responds: "vos Vers sont charmants; ravi de tenir votre Enfant, ravi de vous faire plaisir, et de vous donner des marques de mes vœux" (2:263).

⁹ *La Coquette punie, comedie en un acte et en vers par Madame Bourette, ci-devant la Muse Limonadiere* (Paris, 1779). The copy in the Arsenal (cote 8-B-14314) has the following handwritten dedication on the page preceding the title page: "À Son Altesse S... Monseigneur le duc de peinthievre avec differents hommages que j'ay eu l'honneur de luy adresser."

¹⁰ This is one of many poems that Curé writes to ask a favour of someone at the royal court, and she begins the poem by reminding Saulx of the ties between

Along with her relations at court, she also appears to have enjoyed amicable relationships with other notable eighteenth-century figures, and she received a number of gifts from these correspondents: Voltaire's gift to her of a gold-encrusted porcelain cup was widely known at the time, as was the duc de Gesvres's gift of a silver bowl.¹¹ Frederick's envoi to Versailles offered her "un étui d'or" (59) as a recompense for the *Ode* that she wrote about the Prussian king. A closer look at the letters by certain of her correspondents (Voltaire and Graffigny, in particular) offers a more complex version of Curé's story relating to these gifts, as I will examine, below.

Curé, a prolific writer, was known for the series of occasional poems that she wrote to celebrate royal births and other events. As Fréron remarks, somewhat dryly: "Quand il s'agit de célébrer les événements heureux qui intéressent la France, l'Hypocrène où puise Madame Curé, aujourd'hui Madame Bourette, est intarissable."¹² Aside from these poems and her 1779 play *La Coquette punie*, her anthology *La Muse Limonadière* offers the

them: "Celle dont je tiens la naissance / A vû, de votre tendre enfance, / Commencer les jours précieux; / Elle vit croître sous ses yeux / Un des ornemens de la France!" (2:190).

¹¹ Rousseau, among others, knew of the existence of this cup, mostly because of Curé's tireless efforts to ingratiate herself in the life of other writers. Thus, in a letter to Rousseau at the end of February 1761, the purpose of which is to get a copy for free (or discounted in price) of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Curé writes: "J'ay l'honneur, Monsieur, de vous faire part d'une générosité que j'ay reçu de mr de Voltaire, un de vos illustres amis. Il m'a fait donné par mde d'Argental une tasse de porcelaine incrustée en or, faite pour un déjeuner. Vené y prendre du café. Je vous l'avoue, j'ay été aussi sensible à ce présent qu'à celui de sa majesté le Roy de Pologne qui m'a honorée de son portrait dans une boîte d'or." Cited in *Correspondance complète de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. R.A. Leigh (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1969), 8:196. Rousseau takes his time to respond, penning a letter on 12 March 1761 denying her request for a free copy of his novel. He seems more amenable to the offer to drop by Le Caffé Allemand, but notes: "Si jamais l'occasion se presente de profiter de votre invitation, j'irai Madame, avec grand plaisir vous rendre visite et prendre du café chez vous; mais ce ne sera pas, s'il vous plaît, dans la tasse dorée de M. de Voltaire; car je ne bois point dans la coupe de cet homme-là" (*Correspondance complète*, 8:246). Abbé de la Porte, in the fifth volume of his *Histoire littéraire des femmes françoises, ou lettres historiques et critiques, contenant un précis de la vie et une analyse raisonnée des ouvrages des femmes qui se sont distinguées dans la littérature françoise* (Paris, 1769), devotes a long article to Curé, mentioning the "tasse de porcelaine" (409) and reprinting the poem that Curé wrote to thank Voltaire for this gift.

¹² Élie Fréron, *Lettres sur quelques écrits de ce tems* (1754; Geneve: Slatkine Reprints, 1966), 1:560. References are to this edition.

most complete image of her life and her literary efforts. This two-volume work is composed of a mixture of texts, including her most famous works, such as the *Ode au Roi de Prusse*, and simpler occasional poems (notably *étrennes*, or poems sent to wish new year's greetings to friends or acquaintances). The anthology also offers Curé's correspondence to and from a variety of eighteenth-century French writers, ranging from the very famous, to the now-forgotten. The anthology, moreover, covers a gamut of themes, and the poems she includes are in turn pedestrian (poems written to her *Laitière*, her *Blanchisseuse*, and her *Porteur d'eau* [1:248–56]), elevated (the *Ode*), comical (*Réponse à un Petit-Maitre qui me badinoit sur mon goût à faire des Vers* [1:67]), and sometimes almost laughable (her *Remerciement pour un pâté à M. Charpentier mon parent*, about a “Pâté de Pigeons” [1:46]).¹³

Curé's talent seems uneven, which she admits, notably in the preface to *La Muse Limonadière*, which sometimes reads like a warning to potential readers. She claims that, were her circumstances different, she might not have ventured to publish this kind of anthology, which could be viewed as “un ouvrage d'un genre aussi commun” (1:vii). She cautions readers that “mes Ouvrages peuvent être mauvais” (1:viii) and informs them that there is good and bad to be found in the work: “L'on trouvera des épines et des roses dans mon Livre, l'on doit me le pardonner” (1:x). Despite Curé's awareness of the “thorns” in her work, she seems confident that her anthology offers something important to eighteenth-century French readers, and she presents her argument for this in the preface. On the one hand, she notes—as she will throughout the anthology—that she can count many famous names among those who admire her poems, and she cites as examples Fontenelle, Fréron, and the Abbé de la Porte, noting that the last two, in their roles as critics, “ont brûlé généreusement en ma honneur quelques grains d'un encens précieux” (1:ix).¹⁴ Curé suggests that this critical attention is complemented by the opinions of a host of other well-known writers: “Les Auteurs les

¹³ The poem begins: “Le plus friand de tous les dons / Est un bon Pâté de Pigeons” (1:146), and continues with Curé's assurance “c'est avec le jus de Bacchus, / Que dans un repas de bombance, / Nous avons fait honneur aux Oiseaux de Vénus” (1:147).

¹⁴ She calls Fontenelle “le Fameux *Nestor* du Parnasse,” while referring to Fréron and La Porte as “deux Aristarques Judicieux ... et sévères [qui] ont mitigé en ma faveur leur critique” (1:ix).

plus Renommés du Siècle ont payé les foibles accens de ma Muse des sons ravissans de la leur” (1:viii).

Yet Curé implies that it is not just the praise of fellow authors that makes her collection noteworthy. Rather, her works have a special merit due to her status not as writer, but as someone who exercised a trade. The very title of her anthology—a reference to the name by which she increasingly signs her works—makes it clear for the reader that Curé occupies a unique place in eighteenth-century French writing. Curé, however, not content to let the title speak for her, underscores this point in her introduction, noting for her readers the gulf that separates her from the majority of other writers. She explains that, contrary to her own situation, the majority of writers are “Gens de Lettres par état et de profession; qui ne connaissent de commerce que celui des Muses abreuvées des eaux de Permesse et de l’Hypocrène” (1:vii–viii). Curé’s profession distinguishes her from these authors, and she describes the day-to-day elements of her life and work in order to drive home this distinction for her readers, exclaiming: “Que je ressemble peu à ces Ecrivains Laborieux! Mon commerce est celui des Marchands; je ne connois d’eaux que celles de *Luneville*, ou *des Barbades*” (1:viii). Whereas these writers spend their days “à compter des Syllabes, et à carrer des Périodes,” Curé has more pressing financial and practical needs, tied to her status as a working woman: “je compte de l’argent, & je ne songe qu’à arrondir mes affaires” (1:viii). The Abbé de La Porte, writing about Curé in volume 5 of his *Histoire littéraire des femmes françoises*, reminds the reader of Curé’s profession as *limonadière* and notes the importance of this trade for her: “C’est principalement sous cette dernière qualité, qu’elle veut être connue dans le monde littéraire” (397). He suggests this adds something unique to her status as a writer and reprints for his readers a poem that Curé writes to “une de ses amies, qui, sans être une Muse, étoit Limonadière comme elle” (401). In this poem, Curé describes her dual position as author and *limonadière*:

Des gens de notre état le seul et vrai mérite
 Est d’être exacte à son comptoir;
 D’examiner, matin et soir,
 La recette qu’il a produite;
 De faire accueil aux bons Chaland,
 De laisser causer les Savans,
 Sans s’immiscer dans leurs rubriques,
 De bien traiter les Pratiques:

L'argent qu'on porte a plus de cours
 Que n'en ont tous les vains discours;
 Et, comme mon goût est d'écrire,
 J'écris avec soin les crédits,
 Et m'occupe souvent à lire
 Le livre auquel ils sont inscrits. (401)

La Porte seems to be an especially “enlightened” critic, and he considers Curé’s work with the kind of non-hierarchical regard that Goodman has described as emblematic of the “Republic of Letters.” La Porte makes it apparent that, for him, Curé’s writings about her trade display the same virtues as her poems to monarchs, and he reprints them for his readers with the assurance that they “mérit[ent] votre approbation” (401). Before reprinting the elegant epitaphs that Curé penned following the death of Fontenelle (1757) or Pope Benedict xiv (1758), La Porte lingers over Curé’s ingenious way of collecting on debts from clients who have outstanding tabs at her café by sending: “non une assignation, mais une pièce de vers qui, non-seulement fait rentrer les vieilles dettes, mais lui procure encore quelquefois des réponses agréables” (402).

Curé’s own awareness of her working-class status functions in various ways vis-à-vis her notion of the “Republic of Letters.” As I noted above, Curé’s writings demonstrate her view that, as a writer whose station in life is defined by her trade, the doors to the republic of letters seem closed to her. Although the dedications and prefaces to her works, as well as the letters she includes in *La Muse Limonadière*, all speak to her belief in an ideal “Republic of Letters” that would function as a kind of egalitarian republic, these same writings demonstrate that she feels her working-class status has kept her from gaining entry into this republic. She makes this explicit in her preface to *La Muse Limonadière*, where she rails against “ces vains personnages, qui déclament contre ma naissance et contre mon état, en ont fait pour moi un titre d’exclusion sur le Parnasse” (1:xiv), and she offers her opinion that in this republic, one should be judged by merit, not birth: “J’ai méprisé leurs mépris, et j’ai toujours pensé que c’est particulièrement dans la République des Lettres, où la noblesse du sang doit le céder à la noblesse du style” (1:xiv).

Yet Curé’s relationship to her trade is complex, and her close relationship to commerce allowed her to approach the republic of letters as a marketplace, and her literary production as a

commodity. Within this marketplace, she seeks to increase the value of her commodity by insisting upon its uniqueness, and, if we look at Curé's approach to her literary output in completely contemporary terms, it seems that she created something of a "brand" through her insistence upon an identity that separated her from the world of "Gens de Lettres" and underscored her status as an outsider. Curé's numerous efforts to market herself distinguish her from other female writers of her time, who published anonymously, or whose pen names left a trail that offers confusion for the scholars who trace their careers.¹⁵ Curé stands as the polar opposite of these writers: her poems appear with her signature, and, when her name changes, she makes sure to keep her readers aware of her new name, signing "Madame Bourette, cy-devant Madame Curé" (*La Muse Limonadière*, title page). The signature that so many other female authors hesitated to add to their works appears with profusion on Curé's oeuvre. Not content to see it in print, she offers those with whom she wishes to gain favour works that have been signed and that sometimes bear inscriptions or even short poems. Some of these are in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal. I mentioned above Curé's signature on her play (see n10); Curé also offered a grouping of two poems (*À Madame la Dauphine avant son dernier accouchement* and *À Madame la Dauphine après son accouchement du septembre 1753*) to the marquis d'Argenson, signing a dedication on the back of the last page and writing at the bottom of the poem in her hand: "Du Caffé Allemand, rue croix des petits champs." Another poem in this collection, *À Madame la Dauphine, sur la naissance de Monseigneur, le Duc de Berry*, from 1754, also bears a hand-written inscription: "À Marquis d'Argenson, de la part de l'auteur."¹⁶ All of these poems, as well as many of the occasional poems Curé published, which would later be reproduced in *La Muse Limonadière*, are signed not only with Curé's name, but also with specific information

¹⁵ For more on the problems inherent in identifying *ancien régime* female authors, and their use of pseudonyms, see Joan Hinde Stewart, *Gynographs: French Novels by Women of the Late Eighteenth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 16–18.

¹⁶ All of these poems are bound in a "recueil factice" with the cote 8 BL 10181, which is composed of a collection of poems and writings celebrating events that were important for the royal family. Each document has separate pagination.

about where the reader may find Curé. Thus, Curé signs her poem *À Madame la Dauphine, sur la naissance de Monseigneur, le Duc de Berry* as having been penned by “sa très-humble et très-soumise obéissante Servante, Bouret, ci-devant Curé. Rue Croix des Petits-Champs, au Caffé Allemand”; another occasional poem bears the title *Sur la naissance de Monseigneur le Comte D’Artois, par la Muse Limonadière du Caffé Allemand, rue Croix des Petits Champs*. In the same vein, her 1759 poem *À Madame la Dauphine sur son accouchement d’une princesse* is followed by the printed attribution “Par La Muse Limonadière, Rue Croix des Petits-Champs.”

Curé’s experience with the marketplace and her first-hand exposure to writers in her café afforded her the acumen to understand the role of public opinion and the function of two very separate (if not contradictory) arbiters of this opinion: published authors and those who exert political power. In her writings, and through her ceaseless efforts to distribute and promote (or market) these writings, Curé consistently hearkens to the arbiters of public opinion in an attempt to secure a place in the literary landscape. One of the most striking elements that the reader takes away from the collection of texts in *La Muse Limonadière* is the somewhat unflattering image of Curé as a tireless (or shameless) arriviste, who appears to have courted any number of social connections—no matter how minor—in the hopes that these connections would advance her position in the literary world of eighteenth-century France.

These efforts at self-promotion are evident in one of the first poems Curé reproduces in *La Muse Limonadière*. The short text entitled *Invitation envoyée à différens Auteurs* (1:4) was written before 1750, and it was sent to a diverse group of eighteenth-century French writers. This poem offers an open invitation for these writers to visit Le Caffé Allemand and reassures them that their presence is desired “avec ardeur” (1:4). Curé offers no explanation as to the circumstances that led to her sending out this initial poem; however, it is clear that she had been writing poetry for some time, and certain exchanges in the anthology suggest she was inspired to begin composing poetry through her encounter with an author named “Taxil,” whom she calls her mentor and with whom she maintains a close correspondence. It is also apparent that she is eager to have other writers judge her

work, and she seeks instruction from other poets with the goal of improving her writing. Curé's invitation may also stem from a desire to turn her café into the kind of literary salon that was already popular in eighteenth-century Paris.

Despite Curé's status in society being very different from the aristocrats who held salons, Le Caffé Allemand may have served as a locale where writers gathered, as an alternative space to the (mostly) private salon. It is impossible to know whether Curé viewed her café as similar to other salons of the era; however, by her own account, authors such as Fontenelle and Delandes frequented the café, and Helvétius lived nearby. The role of the café in literary life of the period is well known, and Fréron, in his *Lettres sur quelques écrits de ce tems*, describes cafés as "les Lycées des génies naissans," and suggests "c'est dans ces Académies qu'ils font leurs premiers exercices; combien de beaux Esprits aujourd'hui célèbres doivent à ces doctes Ecoles leurs brillantes éducations" (1:292). Beyond her desire to see her café serve as a kind of de facto salon, Curé's invitation in poetry likely also stems from her belief that any connection in the literary world could help her find her footing in this milieu and make a name for herself as an author. Curé's invitation did not pass unnoticed, and she reprints favourable responses from a series of authors in *La Muse Limonadière*. Fréron, in his *Lettres sur quelques écrits de ce tems*, also recalls this invitation, and in his discussion of Curé's *Ode*, he borders on sarcasm, describing Curé as a writer who "a fait des avances à tous les Auteurs tant soit peu connus," and noting that "elle en a reçu des éloges qu'elle doit croire dictés par la justice bien plus que par la reconnaissance et la galanterie" (1:292).

Curé's initial outreach to the literary world was followed by a flurry of correspondence after she composes her most important poem, *Ode en prose au roi de Prusse* (1750). The series of letters Curé sends about this poem that she writes for—and has delivered to—Frederick of Prussia, are written with an awareness of the formation of public opinion and with an eye towards creating a kind of "buzz" around her literary production. In the preface to *La Muse Limonadière*, Curé describes the composition of this poem and the attention it earned her: "De tous mes Ouvrages, celui qui m'a coûté le moins, & qu'on a loué le plus, c'est mon *Ode au Roi de Prusse*. Je fus saisie en la composant d'une espèce de fureur poétique, qui m'éleva au-dessus de moi-même; l'enthousiasme en fut l'Auteur"

(1:xi). The story she narrates in *La Muse Limonadière* about the delivery of the *Ode* to the king seems implausible, and yet it is most likely the only published account of the poem's history and transmission. According to her account, Curé composed the *Ode* to coincide with Voltaire's visit to Frederick's court in 1750. The poem consists of an introduction in verse, followed by thirteen stanzas written in prose. In *La Muse Limonadière*, Curé reprints a letter she claims to have sent to Voltaire accompanying her poem, and she explains her reasons for writing the *Ode* in prose: "mon Ouvrage est une espèce de monstre, ce n'est dans un sens ni Vers, ni Prose; je n'ai pû le versifier parce que j'ai été bien-aise que Sa Majesté le reçut dans le tems que vous seriez à Berlin" (1:40).¹⁷ At the same time, Curé writes letters to Mauvertuis and Algarotti,¹⁸ sending them copies of the *Ode* and informing them that she has mentioned their names in her work. The texts in *La Muse Limonadière* suggest that Algarotti responds, and, in the section of correspondence surrounding the *Ode*, Curé reprints a letter that she sent to Algarotti as a reply to his remarks about the poem.

Curé's account of the reception of the poem at Frederick's court comes from a letter she reprints from "M. de Morand, Correspondant Littéraire du Roi de Prusse" (43). Morand writes that he has received a letter from "M. d'Arget, ... Secrétaire des Commandemens de Sa Majeste" (43). Morand tells Curé that, according to Arget, Voltaire "a présenté lui-même votre Ode au Roi" (43); then, a certain M. d'Arnaud read it to the monarch. Morand notes that the poem was received favourably: "Les beautés de cet Ouvrage n'ont point échappé à cette Cour, le véritable Parnasse de notre Siècle"; moreover, Morand reassures Curé that Arget "vous en auroit lui-même annoncé le succès sans une indisposition qui l'a empêché d'écrire" (43). Despite the lack of a letter from Arget, Curé is nevertheless rewarded for the

¹⁷ Voltaire's preserved correspondence lacks any letters to Curé before 1760, although his letters after this date refer to her and her work. Voltaire's correspondence does not record the receipt of Curé's letter containing the *Ode*, and I have been unable to verify Curé's account of this story.

¹⁸ Francesco Algarotti (1712–64) was friends with Frederick and was the author of *Le Newtonianisme pour les dames*, translated into French and published in France beginning in 1738. In her letter responding to Algarotti, Curé thanks him for this text: "votre plume a donné de l'amour-propre à mon Sexe; vous n'avez pas dédaigné de nous initier aux mystères de la lumière, et de créer exprès pour nous un aimable *Newtonianisme*, où il nous est permis de cueillir des fleurs" (1:42).

poem. By her own account, she receives a series of letters praising the poem from a variety of contemporary authors, including those now widely forgotten—"M. Roy, Chevalier de l'Ordre de S. Michel" (44), or M. Deslandes, "Auteur de l'*Histoire Critique de La Philosophie*" (48)¹⁹—and more well-known writers such as Fontenelle, who, commenting on the form of the *Ode*, penned the following verses: "Si les Dames ont droit d'introduire des modes, En Prose desormais on doit faire des Odes" (*La Muse Limonadière*, 1:60). Curé also sends a copy of the *Ode* to a M. Dammon, who represents Frederick at court in Versailles. In *La Muse Limonadière*, she recounts that his response came in the form of a gift: "un étui d'or, dont il m'a fait l'honneur de me faire présent; et j'ai eu celui de le recevoir des mains de M. le Chevalier de Mouhy, qui est venu chez moi dans l'Équipage de M. Dammon" (1:59). Curé writes a poem to Dammon to thank him, and (as is often the case in *La Muse Limonadière*) she reprints poems addressed to her about the gift she had received.

Two of the period's literary critics—Fréron and the Abbé de La Porte—also noticed the poem, and both wrote favourably about Curé's literary productions, although Fréron's remarks bear a trace of the sarcasm I noted above. Fréron discusses the *Ode* in volume 4 of his *Lettres sur quelques écrits de ce tems*, and he remarks on the uniqueness of Curé's situation, noting that before she starting writing his century had not yet witnessed "qu'une Maîtresse de Caffé elle-même ait changé la moitié de son Comptoir en pupître, et que les Vers coulent de sa veine avec autant d'abondance que le Nectar qu'elle verse aux Dieux assemblés autour d'elle!" (292). Fréron suggests, however, that Curé's work is not simply notable because of her métier. His

¹⁹ Fréron mentions Roy twice in vol. 5 of Fréron's *Lettres*, calling Roy "un Poète illustre" (186) and publishing a "Bouquet" by Roy (192). Deslandes (1697–1757), who seems to have been a close friend of Curé's, is best known as a correspondent of Françoise de Graffigny. She mentions his visits on several occasions, expressing her regret in letter 1232 (17 April 1748) for having been too sick to accept a visit from him, and noting in a letter from 29 June 1748: "Mr Deslandes est arrivé enfin. Il est extrêmement aimable. Je serai fort aise de le voir souvent. Il me paroît l'esprit gai." Cited in *Correspondance de Madame de Graffigny*, 16 vols., dir. J.A. Dainard, ed. English Showalter, et al. (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1985–), 9:56, 165. References to Graffigny's correspondence are to this edition. The *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises, le XVIII^e siècle* discounts Deslandes's literary production: "un grand nombre d'ouvrages portant sur l'histoire, la philosophie, des romans. La plupart n'offrent plus aujourd'hui d'intérêt" (398).

critique of the poem praises her ingenuity for choosing to write her *Ode* in prose, and he remarks about Curé's writing: "Elle ne marche point dans les routes vulgaires. Son *Ode au Roi de Prusse* est en Prose, et l'Épître dédicatoire est en Vers. La Prose m'a paru très-poétique, et les vers très-prosaïques" (292). La Porte, for his part, offers less ambiguous praise of Curé in his *Histoire littéraire des femmes françaises*, calling her a muse who is "également honnête et citoyenne" (397) and reprinting all but two of the *Ode's* thirteen stanzas in this volume.²⁰

The success that Curé achieved with this poem encouraged her to write poems in a similar vein to the French royal family, with which she may have been hoping to earn a deeper recognition or a royal patronage. The fact remains that the following year Curé composes a *Prédiction sur la naissance de Monseigneur le Duc de Bourgogne* that she describes in *La Muse Limonadière* as an "Ode en Prose que Madame Curé a eu l'honneur de présenter au Roy et à Monseigneur le Dauphin le jour de Saint Louis 1751, sous la Protection et les Auspices de Monseigneur le Duc de Gesvres" (2:1). This poem differs substantially from Curé's *Ode* to Frederick. The *Ode*, despite the originality of the form, contains elements that can be viewed as formulaic: Curé describes Frederick as "un Roi Philosophe," calls him the "Vainqueur de Charles et d'Auguste," and suggests that this enlightened ruler has crushed "La Superstition, l'Ignorance, le Fanatisme" (1:33, 38, 39).

La Prédiction sur la naissance de Monseigneur le Duc de Bourgogne is anything but formulaic: in it, Curé claims to see the future and posits herself as a kind of mystic who, having gazed into the future, now reveals a series of prophecies to the royal family, most notably predicting a male heir to the throne. In language worthy of a sibyl, Curé describes this experience: "Quels sentiments inconnus s'emparent de moi! Je tremble, je frissonne; quels rayons viennent m'éclairer! L'avenir se dévoile à mes yeux! J'entends les bords enchantés de la Seine retentir de mille concerts harmonieux; les Peuples enivrés de joie et de l'allégresse, célèbrent à l'envie la bonté des Immortels; un nouveau Lys va naître sur nos rives

²⁰ La Porte does not reproduce the two stanzas where Curé addresses her situation as a female writer and in which she asks "Mais convient-il à un Sexe foible & ignorant de marcher sur les traces de tant de Grands Hommes?" (*La Muse Limonadière*, 1:35), and where she suggests about her writing: "mes accens annoncent mon Sexe" (1:35).

fortunes" (2:3). The rest of this piece mixes the prophetic, the political, and the personal, with Curé predicting an abundant harvest ("Quel spectacle frappe mes yeux? Je vois sous un Ciel serein et tranquille mille et mille Laboureurs amasser à l'envi les dons abondans de la blonde *Cérès!*" [2:9]), addressing France's role vis-à-vis the Ottoman Empire (2:6), and mentioning the recent death of her husband: "le passé funeste, où la Parque m'enleva le Mortel vertueux dont l'hymen avoit uni nos destinées!" (2:10).

Although Curé's prophetic tone in this poem is a kind of poetic licence, she takes her role of seer very seriously. In subsequent poems to members of the court and the royal family, she insists upon her prophecy of a male heir. In a poem entitled *Vers à Monseigneur le Dauphin, après la naissance de Monseigneur le Duc de Bourgogne*, she recalls her predictions about heirs to the French throne: "Notre sort n'est plus incertaine / Et le Dieu dont je suis saisie, / Par une juste Prophétie, / Annonça notre heureux destin" (2:20). In *À Madame la Dauphine, avant l'Accouchement du Duc d'Aquitaine*, she reminds the dauphine of her prediction: "À Louis, à toute sa Cour, / J'ai prédit, Princesse Adorable, / Qu'au gré des vœux de notre amour / Vous donneriez un Prince Admirable" (2:203). This poem is followed by another, *À Madame la Dauphine après son Accouchement du 8 Septembre, 1753* (2:204), in which Curé confirms her "gift." Finally, in *Épître à M. Dy...., Écuyer de Madame la Dauphine*, that Fréron publishes in volume 7 of his *Lettres*, Curé again reminds her interlocutor of her prophecy, and offers another one:

Sage Dy.... il doit vous souvenir
 Que dans une Ode, en perçant l'Avenir
 J'avois prédit cette illustre naissance.
 Protée encore a daigné m'inspirer.
 Cette brillante et vaste Monarchie
 Dans peu de tems va se voir enrichie
 D'autres appuis qu'il faudra célébrer. (560–61)

These poems are written and delivered one after the other, and the image they offer in *La Muse Limonadière* is of a poet desperate to ingratiate herself into the good graces of anyone of importance at court, and yet a poet who is failing miserably. Curé seems willing to use any entry, and maintain any acquaintance, in the hopes that it will allow her to have her poems read before members of the royal family. If what she recounts in *La Muse*

Limonadière is true, this initially seems to work, and as the title *Prediction sur la Naissance* notes, it was through her connections with the duc de Gesvres that she was able to present this poem to the king. As her poetic output continues, however, this kind of access seems to become more difficult to attain; the people to whom she sends her poems tire of her attentions, and of her writing. The dauphine's "écuyer" to whom she sends a series of poems, in the hopes that he will pass them on to more important figures at court, tries to tell her as much, in a letter that Curé (perhaps believing that there really is no bad press) nevertheless sees fit to include in *La Muse Limonadière*.

This letter—a model of discretion—dates from 1754, a short time after Curé had sent a series of poems to celebrate the dauphine's latest birth. In his letter, the *écuyer* replies to Curé's question about whether or not he had been able to distribute her works and remarks that he did so "avec précaution," but gently cautions her not to expect much from this favour: "Mais avec ma sincérité ordinaire, je vous dirai que vous faites bien de ne pas attendre d'autre récompense de vos soins que la satisfaction intérieure de les bien employer. On vous favorise toujours beaucoup à la Cour, quand on vous préserve la malheur de déplaire" (2:266–67). Moreover, this letter-writer tries to inform Curé that court may not be a good fit for her: "On n'est bien qu'avec ses égaux, et il ne faut jouer qu'avec eux" (268). Finally, he tries to turn Curé away from her poems celebrating the "heureux événements" by which she had made a name for herself, writing that this task might better be left in the hands of a more experienced (read: more educated, or more talented) poet: "il me semble en un mot qu'il faut laisser la trompette qui chante les hauts faits, les grands événements, et les Rois, à ces mains exercées dans un Art si difficile" (2:268). The *écuyer's* letter ends with a judgment of Curé's works in the context of her life; he tells Curé that she does not have the time that other poets take to perfect their craft. Luckily for her, however: "L'heureuse facilité de votre imagination vous épargne les longueurs presque inséparables de l'art des Vers" (2:271). In his final remarks to Curé, he indicates that, for better or worse, Curé's poetic work is inextricably linked to her other work, her métier as a *limonadière*. He evokes the image of her writing at her "comptoir" and mentions the effect of her trade on her poetry, calling her situation: "Circonstances

remarquables qui doivent augmenter le mérite des jolies choses repandües dans plusieurs de vos Ouvrages, et attirer l'indulgence du Lecteur sur ceux que votre Profession ne vous a pas laissé le loisir de perfectionner" (2:271–72).

These discreet remarks about Curé's talent are echoed in other remarks written both to and about Curé, some of which she was aware of, and others which are eclipsed by her version of her story as it is presented in *La Muse Limonadière*. As I have mentioned in my discussion of the "Préface," Curé knew of some of the critiques of her writing, and she does not hesitate to offer her readers some examples of these critiques. She prints a hostile poem written by an anonymous author about the gift of a bowl she received from the duc de Gesvres. The author of this poem claims that Curé is mad and suggests that the duc's gift is his attempt to tell her so:

Gesvres, dont l'oeil vaut une loupe,
Vit bien qu'il n'est rien de meilleur
Pour une folle que la soupe;
Et d'une écuelle il te fit don,
Curé, le tour est assez bon. (2:23)

Curé, undaunted, replies to the writer that soon she will be in a position to "donner la soupe / A des Poètes indigens, / Dont vous augmenterez la Troupe" (2:23). In response to another anonymous writer who scoffs at the idea of a "maîtresse de café" writing verse, Curé again demonstrates her mordant wit:

Je suis Marchande de Liqueur,
J'en vendis, et j'en vends encore,
Veux-tu de mon eau d'ellebore?
Je t'en offre de tout mon cœur. (1:67)

Curé has no response, however, to the critiques that circulated most likely without her knowledge. If she was aware of these remarks, she did her best to conceal them in the version of her place in the literary world that she offers in *La Muse Limonadière*. This is perhaps most evident in regards to Curé's relation to Graffigny and Voltaire.

The reality of Curé's relationship with Graffigny provides an insight into the role that Graffigny played in the French literary scene in the 1750s, as well as into Curé's own positioning of herself as a woman writing in eighteenth-century France. It

is obvious that by 1750, following the publication of *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* and the performances of *Cénie*, Graffigny had garnered a great deal of fame, and to some extent she had become the benchmark for what it meant to be a talented female writer in eighteenth-century France. Curé, aware of this, held Graffigny in a special sort of esteem and wrote to her on 29 June 1750 to congratulate her for the success of *Cénie*. In this letter, she notes “l'estime que paroissent avoir pris pour vous tant de Savans qui fréquentent chez moi” (1:68) and mentions the appreciation shared by a friend they have in common, “M. Deslandes, votre ami et le mien” (1:68). The letter that follows in *La Muse Limonadière* is curious because it is announced as a “Lettre de Madame de ***,” but in the context of Curé's correspondence, it can only be read as a letter from Graffigny, since it refers to details in the letter directly preceding it. In the letter, the author compliments Curé: “vous faites des vers si bien tournés que je ne doute point que bientôt nous ne voyons de vous, Madame, des Ouvrages qui donneront [du] plaisir à lire” (1:70). Curé would have welcomed such praise from a writer she so clearly admired, and one of the highest compliments that other writers felt they could pay to Curé was to compare her to Graffigny.²¹

However, there is nothing to indicate that Graffigny actually sent this letter, and Curé's publication of a letter from an unnamed correspondent could be a ruse to cast herself in a better light. After all, at one point in her anthology Curé proudly publishes the *étrennes* she sent to Graffigny (*La Muse Limonadière* 1:170), without noting that, in the beginning of January 1751, Graffigny, most likely exasperated by Curé's attentions, actually refused

²¹ This is evident throughout *La Muse Limonadière*. “M. de Morand, Correspondant Littéraire du Roi de Prusse,” writing to Curé about her *Ode* to Frederick, congratulates her with: “Voilà donc, Madame, votre nom aussi célèbre dans le Nord qu'il l'est en France, et bientôt il sera mis à côté des Deshoulières, des Graffigny, & des du Bocage” (1:43–44). In a letter written by M. Clerambaut, he compares Curé's writing to Graffigny's, and Curé responds: “c'est pour moi un nom bien respectable: que je suis charmée de vous trouver les mêmes sentimens que moi sur son compte!” (1:120). Another writer, M. Olivier, notes that “il m'est bien gracieux, Madame, de passer du commerce de Madame de Graffigny au vôtre dans un genre différent” (1:132). In response to a letter by M. Le Beuf, who compares Curé to Graffigny, Curé writes: “Vous me comparez aux *Sapho*, aux *Deshoulière*, & surtout à Madame de *Graffigny*, que je considère autant que toutes les Dames savantes: cela est assez flatteur pour moi, mais très-humiliant, en ce que je sens combien je suis au-dessous de la comparaison” (1:136–37).

her *étrennes* (*Correspondance*, 11:xxx). Moreover, Graffigny's correspondence offers numerous examples of her disdain for Curé. In a letter dated 9 July 1750, Graffigny refers to Curé as "la maitresse de caffè," and describes her as the worst kind of arriviste: "C'est une folle qui écrit à tous les auteurs qui ont du succès" (*Correspondance*, 11:16). In a letter to Devaux in July of the following year, Graffigny remarks that Curé is finally leaving her in peace, but only because of Graffigny's consistent refusal to see her: "Il y a lontems que la Curé me laisse en repos, mais elle est furieuse contre moi car je me suis obstinée a ne point lui repondre et a ne pas la recevoir" (*Correspondance*, 12:27).

Just as Graffigny's correspondence presents an image that is quite different from the picture of cordial relations intimated by the texts in *La Muse Limonadière*, Voltaire's much-vaunted appreciation of Curé, exemplified by the famous porcelain cup he sends to her, also needs to be re-examined. Voltaire's correspondence indicates that he shared Graffigny's feelings about Curé and that he was eager to send her a gift in an attempt to get her to leave him alone. In 1760, M. d'Argental sent Voltaire a copy of a quatrain that Curé wrote about the success of *Tancredè*. In a letter dated 13 October 1760, Voltaire notes this and suggests a gift: "M. d'Argental vient de m'envoyer un quatrain de la muse limonadière. J'imagine qu'on pourrait lui donner une breloque pour les 36 livres de Mme de Courteilles."²² Two weeks later, in a letter again to d'Argental, he writes: "La muse limonadière me persécute. Si Madame Scalinger, qui se connaît à tout, voulait lui faire une petite galanterie de 36 livres, je serais quitte" (52). By December, his tone is more irritated, and on the topic of *la muse limonadière*, he notes: "j'aime beaucoup mieux lui donner une carafe de soixante livres que de lui écrire" (148). At the end of December of the same year, Voltaire is at Ferney, but the question of sending a gift to Curé remains unresolved. In another letter to d'Argental, dated 31 December 1760, he writes: "Madame d'Argental est bien bonne de daigner se charger de faire un petit présent à la muse limonadière. Je l'en remercie fort bien. C'est la seule façon honnête de se tirer d'affaire avec cette muse" (179). Finally, in a letter to Mme d'Argental from Ferney, on 14 January 1761, Voltaire expresses his gratitude to her for having sent Curé

²² Voltaire, *Correspondance*, Volume VI, 1760–62, ed. Théodore Besterman (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 23.

the now-famous porcelain cup on his behalf: “Je suis à vos pieds, Madame, moi et la muse limonadière. Comment, du cercle de mes montagnes pouvoir reconnaître tant de bontés?” (205).

The remarks by Graffigny, Voltaire, and the other critics, who (gently or otherwise) tried to steer Curé away from writing, complement the numerous examples of praise that Curé reproduces in *La Muse Limonadière*, praise that necessarily must be read with a degree of scepticism. The question remains of how to fairly appraise Curé’s addition to, and place in, eighteenth-century French literature. Does she merit a closer look, or is she simply an oddity—a working woman, who, by sheer force of her persistence, managed to briefly forge a place for herself in the milieu of eighteenth-century French letters, and who, despite the opinion of some of her acquaintances, maintained a correspondence with some of the Enlightenment’s most important writers? Curé may be a writer best known for offering a hybrid work—a poem in prose, an anthology of bits and pieces, not all of which were penned by her—and her very career echoes this hybridity, as she occupies two worlds, forging a curious link between them. Any fair evaluation of her work must embrace this dual nature, praising its originality while also remarking on a reliance on thread-bare tropes, contrasting the verve of her *Ode* with the strangeness of the *Prédiction* that follows, and accepting that Curé’s own evaluation often veers towards hyperbole.

Exaggeration aside, Curé’s work is important for the liminal space that it occupies, and for the kind of “missing link” it offers for scholars of eighteenth-century French literature. Curé’s status as a female author in eighteenth-century France places her in the minority, but her status as a female author who is not part of the nobility makes her more exceptional. Because of Curé’s place in the working-class world, her writings offer an important counterpoint to the fictionalized accounts of eighteenth-century working women. Despite the occasional awkwardness of Curé’s expression, her meritorious efforts at writing exceed how her century imagined the literary output of the working class.

It is useful to look at Curé in contrast to the real and imagined figure of the “*poissarde*,” who, as Carla Hesse notes, became commonplace figure in French literature following the publication of Jean-Joseph Vadé’s work in the 1740s.²³ Curé’s desire to write poems celebrating royal births owes much to this tradition: her

²³ Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 12.

presentation of these poems shares striking similarities with—and notable differences from—how *poissarde* writing is often presented. If we consider a poem such as the prophetic *Ode en prose que Madame Curé a eu l'honneur de présenter au Roy et à Monseigneur le Dauphin le jour de Saint Louis 1751*, the date that Curé offers in the title points to a connection with *poissarde* literature. As Hesse notes, market women visited Versailles to appear before the king “on special occasions such as royal marriages and births or the recovery of health of a member of the King’s family or the celebration of French military victories” (16–17). Hesse also points out that delegations of these women visited the king twice a year, on the Feast of Saint Louis (in late August) and on New Year’s Day. Curé’s presentation before the king, which comes shortly before a royal birth, falls upon a day when market women were likely to be in attendance before the king. Although the circumstances of Curé’s presentation to the king and the simple titles of her poems that celebrate royal births offer an echo of what we know about similar events involving market women, we must gather that, at least in regards to the eighteenth-century French literary imagination, the tone (and the content) of these poems is very different. To underscore these differences, I consider Curé’s 1754 *Sur la naissance de Monseigneur le Comte D’Artois*, which has a published equivalent in the *poissarde* literature of the period.

In Charles-André Cailleau’s *Le Goût des Porcherons, ou nouveaux discours des halles et des ports, entremêlés de plusieurs chansons grivoises* (1759),²⁴ a group of noblemen decide to go to “Porcherons” (a fictional locale often cited in *poissarde* literature) in order to mingle with the lower classes, or, as the narrator describes it, “De voir du peuple la folie” (5). In these carnivalesque surroundings, the narrator serves up for the reader all of the *lieux-communs* associated with the *poissard* genre—loose (*grivoise*) women, domestic spats (accompanied by a heavy dose of conjugal violence from abusive husbands and wives), and, eventually, a speech by a market woman. The narrator remarks that while walking: “Nous passâmes plus loin, et nous arrivâmes à propos pour entendre le discours suivant, qui fut prononcé devant le Roi par celle qui fut députée à cet effet par les femmes des Halles et Marchés de la Ville et Fauxbourgs de Paris, à l’occasion de la naissance du Comte d’Artois” (19–20). The elevated tone of the narrator

²⁴ Charles-André Cailleau, *Le Goût des porcherons, ou nouveaux discours des halles et des ports, entremêlés de plusieurs chansons grivoises* ([Paris?], n.d.).

(with its insistence upon the *passé simple*), offers a contrast with the speech that he and his companions hear, which the speaker presents as a faithful account of her address to the king, upon the occasion of the birth of the comte d'Artois: "J'ons l'honneur d'être à votr' respect les Députées de la Compagnie des Dames Poissardes de la Halle de votre bonne Ville de Paris. Je venons à la queue des autres pour vous faciliter comme z'eux sur la naissance propice de Monseigneur votre petit-fils le Comte d'Artois, que j'aimons déjà de tout notr' cœur, autant que Monsieur son pere" (20). This less than lofty discourse grinds to a halt as the speaker excuses herself for not staying longer, noting that she must return to work, and she imagines that the king must also have things to do: "Je resterions plus long-tems, si c'nétoit aujourd'hui jour du marché; vous avez de même peut-être vos affaires de votre côté, faut faire chacun son thème, comme vous savez" (21). In this discourse by a simple representative of Les Halles appear "the pseudophonetic form" and "intentional phonetic misspellings of words" (12) that Hesse describes as typical of this genre.

Curé's poem celebrating the same occasion asks readers to reconsider their preconceptions about working-class women's self-expression. The familiar and titillating elements that the slumming aristocrats sought in their foray into the world of the "peuple," are absent in Curé's poem. Rather than offering the image of the worker as a vaguely wanton creature unsure of how to conjugate the verb "avoir," Curé's poem expresses a sense of the dignity and respect she associated with the royal family, and the historic nature of the event she describes:

Pour le Prince nouveau que le Ciel nous envoie,
 L'on doit faire éclater une nouvelle joye.
 La Tige auguste des Bourbons
 Fût-elle encore plus féconde,
 Ne peut jamais avoir assez de Rejettons²⁵
 Pour donner des Maîtres au Monde.
 Nos Rois, dont ils sçauront soutenir les grands Noms,
 Et qui toujours en eux se plairont à revivre,
 Leur fourniront assez de Modèles à suivre.
 On voit déjà frémir dans les plus noirs cachots
 La Discorde, l'Envie, et surtout l'Insolence.
 Nos voisins étonnés de voir tant de Héros

²⁵ Curé frequently uses this word to refer to royal offspring, and it does not carry a negative connotation.

Croître dans le sein de la France,
Ne seront plus tentés de troubler son repos.²⁶

Curé's sustained interest in feting every royal birth might have added to her outsider status within the Republic of Letters; although her *Ode* contains within it something of the *Zeitgeist* of the Enlightenment, her persistent kow-towing to the royal family likely frustrated some of the era's readers and writers.

Rather than being a simple "maîtresse de café," Curé was a "femme d'esprit" in both senses of the phrase. The simple elegance of her writing—far from the awkward vernacular that writers used to create images of market women—is apparent even in the "Préface" to her work, where she offers the reader an honest image of her talents. Responding to those who criticize her writing for being less than perfect, Curé retorts: "Que ne font-ils naître, ces Esprits difficiles, le siècle merveilleux dont parle *Malherbe*; alors au gré de leurs souhaits, *tous métaux seroient or, toutes fleurs seroient roses*: en attendant, faites grace, hommes parfaits à l'argent & aux violettes" (xiv). The suggestion is well put: her less-than-perfect writing does offer readers something approaching elegance.

Curé's *esprit* is apparent in her correspondence, which is rife with examples of her curiosity and intelligence. If we can take her letters at face value, Curé was well-versed in, and had a great appreciation for, the works of her contemporaries. She praised Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* and *Cénie*, admired Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (see n11), and compared *Cleveland* and *Killerine* (1:201–2) in her correspondence with Prévost. She sent Voltaire poems that show not only an admiration for Voltaire as a central figure in the Republic of Letters, but also a fairly sophisticated appreciation for his works. She was also a writer of wit (*esprit*), as is obvious in her poems to her detractors, or in the "Exploit" that she writes out and sends to creditors to ask them to pay their debt to her:

De par le dieu des Vers, et de par les neuf Muses,
Il vous plaira de payer sans delai, sans excuses,
Au porteur du present en monnoye ayant cours;
Sans prendre pour cela les choses à rebours [...]
Et d'ailleurs comme les bons comptes
Firent de tous les tems les bons amis, dit-on,
Je crois trop des miens pour me prouver que non.

²⁶ Curé, *Sur la naissance de Monseigneur Le Comte D'Artois* (Paris, 1754).

Vous en êtes, vous dis-je, avouez-moi la dette,
Ou payez-la plutôt, et la preuve est complete. (1:161–62)

The *écuyer* who tries to steer her away from writing elevated poetry could not quibble with encouraging Curé to continue writing the simple poems that have a charm equaling much of the poetry of her period. Her poem *À Madame Calabre, allant à une fête, où elle devoit danser, en 1755* (2:316) contains an undeniable beauty, which is obvious even in these few stanzas:

À ta seule vuë
Toute âme est émuë
Tout cœur est soumis;
Et de ta cadence
La légère aisance
Surprend les esprits!

Ce beau port de tête,
Ce maintien honnête
Et ce tout charmant
Qu'en toi l'on admire,
Fait que l'on soupire
Le plus tendrement.

Lorsque tout s'empresse
Charmante Déesse,
À chanter ton nom,
Souffre, à ta guirlande,
Que ma main appende
Ce petit fleuron. (2:316–17)

Curé's "heureuse facilité" that the *écuyer* suggests spares her "les longueurs presque inséparables de l'art des Vers" has something about it that is reminiscent of the ideal and egalitarian republic of letters that she dreams of—Curé's simple verse seems to suggest that other would-be writers could follow in her footsteps. There may even be something contagious about her "heureuse facilité": the "Approbation" to *La Muse Limonadière*, written by De Cahusac, appears in verse. He writes, about her poems:

Le Public les trouvera beaux,
Pour l'esprit et pour les oreilles.
Vous pouvez les faire imprimer;
Faites bientôt rouler la presse,
Car vous savez vous exprimer,
Comme une Muse du Permesse. (2:329)

In the final analysis, perhaps La Porte best explains Curé's place in eighteenth-century French literature. Writing in the *Histoire littéraire des femmes françaises* about Curé's productions, he suggests: "La versification de Madame Bourette n'est peut-être pas fort exacte, parce qu'elle n'a jamais appris cet art par principes; mais chaque petite pièce est toujours terminée par une pensée ingénieuse; ce qui est assez rare aujourd'hui. Ceux qui ne jugent des vers que par une certaine élégance, seront étonnés qu'on place la Muse Limonadière dans le nombre de nos Poètes; mais si l'on ne fait attention qu'aux pensées, on ne sera plus surpris du rang qu'on lui assigne" (409). Curé herself, in a poem she addressed to Louis xv to mark the fiftieth year of his reign, offers the fairest evaluation of herself and her work:

J'ose, en ces foibles vers, m'élever jusqu'à toi;
 Je ne suis rien au monde, et rien sur le Parnasse;
 Mais regarde mon zèle, et non pas mon audace:
 Je suis Française, et Louis est mon roi. (cited in *Femmes Françaises*,
 410)



Paul J. Young, associate professor of French at Georgetown University, is the author of *Seducing the Eighteenth-Century French Reader: Reading, Writing, and the Question of Pleasure* (2008). He is currently working on a book about eighteenth-century French women writers.