Introduction

> Vous me demandez, ma chère bonne, ce que nous lisons . . . Avant les Etats, nous avions lu, avec mon fils, des petits livres d'un moment. Mahomet second, qui prend Constantinople sur le dernier des empereurs d'Orient. Cet événement est grand, et si singulier, si brillant, si extraordinaire qu'on est enlevé.
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> *Correspondance*, 1676 Madame de Sévigné to her daughter[1]

> [You ask, my dear, what we are reading . . . Before the Estates General met, we had done some light reading, along with my son. Mohammed the Second, which talks about Constantinople under the last of the Oriental emperors. This event is so grand, so singular, brilliant, and extraordinary, that one is quite carried away.]

> Sa Majesté m'ordonna de me joindre à Messieurs Molière et Lulli pour composer une piece de théâtre où l'on pût faire entrer quelque chose des habillements et des manières des Turcs.
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> *Mémoires* [1670], le chevalier d'Arvieux[2]

> [His Majesty ordered me to join Messieurs Molière and Lulli in composing a play which would present something of Turkish dress and manners.]

In the seventeenth century, the domain of the exotic significantly captured the French imagination.[3] This fascination would represent a crucial phase in the development of a collective French identity. It set the operative terms for a colonial mentality, which, in turn, provided key grounding for the articulation of a national consciousness. Essential to the shaping of a sense of "Frenchness" was the signaling of what it was not, the construction of the necessary "other" against which it could define itself. While frontiers, boundaries, and markets were being staked, mapped out, claimed, negotiated, and disputed in the political realm, cultural lines of demarcation and attitudinal markers were being formalized as well, especially in places like the theatre.

The theatre in seventeenth-century France functioned as a locus of entertainment and site of artistic expression, but it also forged bonds of common culture. It brought urban dwellers of various classes together, organized them economically and socially through seating arrangements into a stratified but coherent population and concentrated their attention around its dramatic discourse.[4] Their shared experience as audience reinforced a sense of collective identity that was being articulated diplomatically, commercially, and militarily, as the state apparatus was consolidated around the figure of the absolutist monarch, Louis XIV.[5] This was a space of high culture where the elite dominated and set the taste, the tone and the desires of the general public. But it was also the domain of the "parterre" where a more popular audience participated in determining the reception of given plays. The theatre was at once a space of contestation and of consensus-building.[6]

During this period, despite the beginnings of a newspaper culture, the mirroring and shaping of public opinion still took place largely in communal spaces where groups of people gathered, focused on shared concerns, and participated in conversation.[7] While one of these traditional spaces, the Church, retained its position of moral authority, the secular theatre offered a less ritualized and more participatory arena. People congregated as well, but less effectively, in smaller salon gatherings and amid the distractions at court. But especially in the theatre, political and cultural messages were conveyed and exchanged, and the theatregoer discovered a sense of official national purpose as "la mission civilisatrice" gradually enlarged its focus from a religiously motivated Crusader vision to embrace the more diffuse realm of a market-driven culture.

At this time, France needed new but sanctioned stories from which to invent and legitimate new behavior. For the nation, spurred by an accelerated and intensified mercantilist drive, broke out of the hexagon and became a colonial power during the seventeenth century. The entrepreneurial French would not only be exploring but actually settling in worlds new to them and imposing themselves and their ways on indigenous peoples. They would be exploiting territories that produced crops or yielded goods for profitable exchange back in Europe, and they would be promoting slave-based economies. They would occupy strategic points for stamping the fleur-de-lis on maps and in minds. Toward the beginning of this era, France had begun by establishing footholds in the Chesapeake Bay (Annapolis, 1603), in Quebec (1608), in Guyana (1609); this act of expansionism spread to Senegal (1626),

several Caribbean islands (Saint Christophe, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Barbados, Saint-Domingue), Madagascar, and by the end of the century France had also set roots in Louisiana, the Antilles, Pondichéry, and Chandernagor.[8] This new colonial venturism represents a major shift, involving personal, social, financial, and institutional transformation, not simply abroad but at home as well. Such profound systemic change called for and came out of a consensual narrative, and the process of shaping the nation's story became a significant function of the theatre. Plays served as the ideal vehicle for nurturing a coherent early colonial mentality.[9]

But the French had long been honing their colonial skills and grounding the legitimacy of their eventual world enterprise. The Mediterranean basin was the privileged arena, at once familiar and exotic, that positioned them with the heritage of example and the sense of entitlement necessary to carry their mission forth into the greater world.[10] Theatre stories organized around the French Mediterranean connection prepared the way for negotiating the pressures of the colonial project. However, this staged Mediterranean narrative did not correlate precisely with the plotting necessary for taking on the rest of the world. For the "Middle Sea" was an old theatre of operations, where contacts were daily and contexts for them went back centuries and through layers of civilizations. The local exoticism practiced here harked back to old traditions of "neighborly" "Othering," and corresponded to the dynamics of a relation of proxemics; this sea basin was a "contact zone."[11]

Proxemics has been defined by human geographers and psychologists, specifically by Edward Hall, as an "elaborate and secret code that is written nowhere, known by none, and understood by all,"[12] having to do with territoriality – at the "face-to-face, architectural, and urban space levels." Cultures each have their own proxemic systems, and differences between them are often sites of conflict, but they can also be sites of enriching hybridization. Proxemics is a useful concept for thinking about areas where different ethnic groups touch on each other, as in the Mediterranean. A more recently formulated concept, developed by Mary Louise Pratt, is of the "contact zone:" "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today."[13] In these arenas, communities must contend with differing sets of habits not only around space, but also competing notions of virtue. Neighbors inevitably evaluate one another; as Tzvetan

Todorov puts it: "Human beings have judged themselves as the best in the world, and they have declared others bad or good according to the degree of their proximity. Or conversely, [. . .] they have found that the most distant peoples were the most fortunate and the most admirable, whereas they have seen only decadence in themselves."[14] Todorov points up the paradox that proximity is an unreliable indicator of attitude – people may despise what is too close to them, and idealize the distant, or just as easily prize and prefer familiarity as opposed to the unknown and far-away. I see both of these attitudes at play simultaneously around the seventeenth-century Mediterranean. Despite rigid political positions, alliances, affinities, and identities could be quite fluid, depending on the needs of the moment. The Mediterranean world bears the marks of the violent contact zone, but also the rich heritage of hybridization, with communities clashing occasionally even as they touch on and inspire one another. It is in this zone that distinct cultures first met and negotiated shared space. The history of these encounters would be both formative and instructive in the shaping of more far-flung ventures.

The important role of the theatre as a public space for the airing of current concerns around expansionism and the shaping of public opinion about the "Other" led me to detect a unified project in seven classical plays that have never been examined as a group. Corneille's *Médée* (1635), *Le Cid* (1637), *Tite et Bérénice* (1670), Molière's *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (1670), Racine's *Bérénice* (1670), *Bajazet* (1672), *Mithridate* (1673) are the best-known plays from the repertoire most marked by concerns with "Other"ing that centre on the Mediterranean world. However, they are by no means the only works to treat the topic. All manner of like-spirited texts proliferated at this time – novels, histories, newspaper articles, and many other plays as well.[15] But I focus on these particular plays for the very reason that they are well known; even today (with the exception of one which is simply overshadowed by its Greek and Latin versions), they continue to dominate the French classical stage; their messages still have resonance for today's post-colonial audience.

These are star plays – canonical works at the very heart of the official version of French culture. Having withstood the test of time, they are still performed regularly – both reverently and iconoclastically – in national, experimental, school, and municipal theatres. And these masterpieces are a standard feature of the core curriculum in French state-regulated classrooms today, even those located in former French colonies, and in

French literature classrooms anywhere. Grandparents recite verses to their grandchildren, audiences murmur verses in anticipation or along with the actors, the odd citation pops out here and there in proverbial fashion to suit the occasion. Of course, this is a good deal more likely in a bourgeois or intellectual milieu, where literary tradition is readily integrated into social discourse. As consecrated in the French repertoire, these plays officially represent, even today, for the French and to the world, along with other works from the seventeenth century, not merely handy clichés, but the apogée of French linguistic and esthetic expression – classicism, and hence "Frenchness." However interpreted, they are not to be ignored. They occasion the recitation of the collective imaginary, the national litany.[16]

1998 statistics for the years since 1944 from the Library of the Comédie Française, the state run and traditional showcase theatre for the classics, give us a sense of the continuing importance of these plays:[17]

authors	**titles**	**Stagings since 1944**
Corneille	*Médée*	0
	Le Cid	464
	Tite et Bérénice	36
Molière	*Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*	788
Racine	*Bérénice*	253
	Bajazet	101
	Mithridate	109

We must consider these as mere baseline figures, for, in addition, all over Paris, throughout France, and wherever French culture is prized in any way, these plays are constantly in performance. If we note that Corneille's *Médée* has not been featured at the Comédie, we are wrong to conclude that the play has not been performed at all. Outdone by the Euripides and Seneca (and even the Anouilh) versions, Corneille's story of the wronged and murderous outsider woman has nonetheless appeared on other distinguished French stages, such as that of Ariane Mnouchkine's innovative Théâtre du soleil. And these figures do not take into account the recent Racine tricentennial commemoration (1999) which occasioned the proliferation of productions of this author's plays all over the world. Corneille, Molière, and Racine – this is the sacred trinity of French High Culture.

I am interested in the ideological freight of these plays. As cultural artifacts, they bear an investment of the French imaginary, and point

to a constructed and ongoing sense of French collective identity, of "Frenchness." The constitutive characteristic of this "Frenchness" that most interests me here is "Other"ness. Fascination with heavily loaded, and by now almost invisible (so familiar) notions of East and West has been transmitted unquestioningly through the continued circulation of this fixed canon, with serious implications for a France currently reckoning with its legacy as a colonial power. Despite their enduring appeal, these plays are marked by the times that produced them, and this was a time when France was coming to terms with its "Others."

To date, studies of this moment in the sociology of the theatre have concentrated particularly on the ways in which the king's power was symbolized and represented on the stage.[18] Here I look at another aspect of the organization taking place through the mediation of spectacle: the simultaneous invention of a French and a foreign people. The category of exoticism that was being developed, refined, and displayed on stage contributed to shaping a sense of French cultural solidarity and, eventually, national superiority.

By exoticism, I mean any signals from within normative French discourse pointing to, defining, and relating to, worlds, cultures, and languages outside itself. In the seventeenth-century theatre repertoire these are numerous and various, but in keeping with the constraints that governed classical theatre, they invoke most often a specific terrain. They project a consistent image of the Orient understood primarily as the eastern and southern rims of the Mediterranean basin. In some cases, these signals are still directly derived from the geographic politics of the ancient Greek state as reflected in its classical theatre. In others, they are grounded in the affective and military politics of the Roman Imperium, or in the history of relations between the Christians and the Muslims in the area; in yet others, in actual political tensions existing between France and the Near East (the Ottoman Empire, specifically: Anatolia, the Levant, and North Africa) at the time the plays were being written and performed. Hence, we are considering here a "local" exoticism, a distinctly other cultural world (indeed an amalgam of other cultural worlds) with which nonetheless the French were in regular contact.[19]

Further, the exotic displayed in these plays is various, but none of it is new; it is all recycled material; nor is it uniquely French. It comes from familiar Greek classical myths, or from ancient Latin historical sources; it is an appropriation of a medieval Spanish epic poem, or is gleaned from gossip, letters and diplomatic accounts about Constantinople. Greek, Spanish, Roman, Ottoman – this consideration of sources points up the

interesting fact that the core of the French national literature consists largely in a borrowing and cobbling of other people's stories. Paradoxically, the very corpus that features "Otherness" and thereby shapes the idea of "Frenchness" is itself made up and out of the "Other."[20]

The French classical stage does not easily admit of a world beyond the confines of its claimed lineage, the Greek and Roman civilizations; nor, in keeping with the classical tradition, does it (except in comedy) encourage reference to religion, with the exception of mythology.[21] Therefore we are looking at a secular Mediterranean basin. However, in the seventeenth century, this space was dominated by the Ottoman Empire, a powerful Islamic agglomeration, and so the immediate everyday referent with regard to the "Other" for the French was the muslim Turk, and an implicit and specific religious tension informs the articulation of the distinction between self and other. Thus, although we may speak broadly of an exoticist fashion in seventeenth-century cultural production, what we witness in the French theatre at this time is a manifestation of early modern Orientalism. This was more than a mere fashion; it was an aggressive mind-set for comprehending and managing the Other which prepared the way for the full-blown orientalist movement by the end of the eighteenth century. It provided the ideological underpinning necessary to justify eventual French hegemony and dominion over its colonial territories.

"Orientalism," as Edward Said and his many fellow critics have more than amply established, represents an entire apparatus for essentializing, objectifying, classifying, and fantasizing the unfamiliar, for constructing and communicating the "unknown" / the "different" / the "Other" as a body of knowledge that can be controlled and manipulated at will. What can be manipulated on paper can be manipulated in the field. The telling and the event, the pedagogic and the performative, go hand in hand, as the post-colonialist theorist Homi Bhabha has argued.[22] Most often, Orientalism is not dated as early as the seventeenth century. For example, although Said traces a long history of Orientalist thought and production since Aeschylus, he enters into his own analysis of Orientalism only in the late eighteenth century with the full institutionalization of colonialism.[23] However, in our post-colonial era, it is crucial to look behind the heyday of Orientalism, and to examine its initial groundings; we must recognize and revisit the stories that first nurtured this mindset. The classical plays under scrutiny here each constitute important facets of France's "Official" story. They represent illuminating moments in the shaping

of an idea of the Orient that in practice proved useful to the early modern French state and beyond. This "story" requires dismantling or at the least close scrutiny if colonialism is truly to be relegated to the past.

This book considers each of the seven plays mentioned above as opportunities for reading documentary texts and events, accessing current concerns and getting at the mentality of the day, and for finding through the contemporary sources new ways to think about these plays. That is, it attempts to reconstruct an ideational reality that bridges fact and fiction, and endeavors to read the documents and plays together as pre-texts and sub-texts of one another, as part of a shared discourse that theatregoers might have experienced at some level as one. Reading through this lens, and through this tension, I examine what I see as formative attitudes, practices, and roles of the "French" *vis-à-vis* the "Other." I seek to produce a suggestive understanding of aspects of French seventeenth-century cultural practices of "Other"ing through this process of contextualizing reading. My aim is to extend the idea of the "stage" metaphorically, and to understand these varied works as integral to a discourse of colonialism that the French were in the process of elaborating for themselves and acting out in the Mediterranean basin.

I situate this study at the conjuncture of various traditional disciplines in that space broadly known as "culture." I attempt to read these plays as one might read Anouilh's *Antigone* or Sartre's *Les mouches* as commentary on contemporary events and concerns occasioned by the Second World War, viewing these same events and concerns as occasions for these plays. Here, however, I need to say a word about what I understand as "culture." Unfortunately, I must renounce Dollimore's inclusive picture of culture, useful as I find the definition for dismantling the preeminence of "high culture": "the whole system of significations by which a society or a section of it understands itself and its relations with the world."[24] Nor is the circular understanding of culture as an interchange between taste and education, or, in Bourdieu's terms "the state of that which is cultivated and culture as the process of cultivating," helpful here.[25] "System," "state," and "process" fail to capture the disparate, messy, sporadic, uneven, and hardly consciously consensual yet necessarily participatory dynamic of culture building.

It would be tempting to examine these plays from the perspective of a "reflection" or a "centrality" theory, given that in the seventeenth-century French theatre space, audience and performance were generally

organized around the person of the Monarch. But it would be presumptuous to claim that literature "mirrors" its culture, that it condenses and essentializes a culture's experience. This perspective would posit the homogeneity of culture and the primacy of literature as expression of that culture. Rather, I subscribe, if guardedly, to the notion that literature is merely one of many equally significant facets of a "raggle-taggle after-the-fact construction that we call 'culture',"[26] as Ross Chambers reminds us, or, as Bhabha puts it, merely a shifting collection of some of "the scraps, patches and rags of daily life [which] must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture."[27] But we cannot ignore the evidence: some "rags" endure and serve longer than others, so long and so well as to translate into monuments for their culture. And so, while I attend here to various facets of texts, documents, and events that I consider to speak to one another arbitrarily and roughly, but significantly, through a relation of approximate synchronic production, my eye is on these revered plays. I believe I can then consider them most productively by juxtaposing and weaving them into what of course ultimately is only my own narrative, my own version, my own signifying. This study would like to be able to claim a unifying principle behind the prismatic effects of its various facets, but such a simile infers an impossible notion of coherence. Classical French theatre is indeed "High Culture," but here it is even more than that: it is the equivalent of a national pledge of allegiance – it is a political position.

In the five chapters that follow, reading the plays for the French "Orient," I trace the connections between the staging of cultural "Other"ness and the construction of French collective identity. In the broadest of terms, I map out the practical apparatus (or the spectrum of ideological symptoms) that was necessary to enable the very possibility of a colonial, and hence a national situation. I first sketch out a profile of the traveler-informant / nascent civil servant / anthropologist (*Médée*). I then examine the usefulness of the "Other" as the alien yet essential coalescing force in mediating domestic politics (*Le Cid*). Following this, I study the crucial tools of translation, diplomacy, commerce, and the regulating of class (*Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*). I next consider the phenomenon of gendered geography in the articulation of East–West relations (the two Bérénice plays). In the last chapter, I look at the key role of long-distance correspondence, at lines of contact and demarcation, and the development of the double standard (*Bajazet*); and here also, finally, I take stock of the place of military might and strategizing, hero-building, Realpolitik, and ambivalent alliances, in defining France's sense of self

(*Mithridate*). So integral to the workings of all of these plays is the question of gender, that I do not focus on it as a topic apart, but as a constitutive element in the broader construction of colonial thinking, and it crops up consistently throughout my study.[28]

To summarize, I speculate on the preoccupations the French audiences might have brought to the theatre, and how these concerns might have illuminated and even given shape to aspects of the plays less striking to us today, but crucial to understanding the formation of colonial thinking. By closely examining aspects of seventeenth-century relations between the French and the Ottomans, and by locating resonances of these relations in key French theatre productions of the times, I attempt to ground historically and consider critically the uses and purposes of early modern Orientalism in the cultural construction of the support apparatus of colonial France.

Classical French cultural expression, built by and around the King, came to epitomize for the French, and for the world, its identity, and still does, to this day. Classicism functions even today as the strongest marker of "Frenchness." This identity is most readily assumed by those who have the greatest investment in maintaining a status quo favorable to their interests – i.e. the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. Here, however, I hope to tease out how not-so-"high" culture is unwittingly just as bound up in fixing France's image, how the everyday "raggle-taggle" struggle of life and material interest around the Mediterranean played a major role in establishing France's production of France.

Several theoretical frameworks have informed this study: of these, "The New Historicism" or "Cultural Poetics,"[29] "Cultural Materialism"[30] or "Cultural Studies,"[31] "Post-colonial Theory,"[32] and especially "Orientalism,"[33] discussed earlier, have influenced my thinking over the course of recent years, as I was deep into archival work and into my reading of the plays. I have found these theories illuminating and useful, but have avoided a programmatic application of any one approach. My main concern has been to study the plays as motors of French mentality and not merely as products or symptoms.

The "new historicists" renegotiated understandings of and relations between what traditionally had been considered the discrete fields of "literature" and "history." They forged ahead with the understanding that these two disciplines were defined by false distinctions – that text and context were inextricable; and that the end project was not to contribute