Rethinking the Center-Periphery Nexus in the Early Modern Period: The Paris-Province Relation in Pierre de Villiers' *Entretiens sur les contes de fées* (1699)

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Introduction

This article examines the Paris-province relation in the early modern period insofar as it relates to the world of letters. Historians often consider these relations in the context of a narrative that I call "the plight of the provinces." In it, the provinces enjoyed but pale imitations of the cultural life of the capital at least since the second half of the seventeenth century.¹ Daniel Roche and L. W. B. Brockliss have both presented a more nuanced version of this argument, suggesting that provincial culture remained vibrant even into the eighteenth century,
though they also see the provinces as taking their cues from Paris. However, the extent to which Paris could dictate taste in the provinces remains an open question. Roger Mettam and Katherine Stern-Brennan, for example, have argued for the agency and cultural independence of the provinces, at least before the 1690s. Since this problem is of unusual pertinence to any study that seeks to go beyond the confines of local developments in one city, reflecting on it through a concrete and rich case study—Pierre de Villiers's *Entretiens sur les contes des fées* (1699)—establishes potential points of entry for further work. Taking the discussion from the provinces back into Paris,
this article argues that the Paris-province relation should be understood as the expression of conflicts in the literary field, in contrast with approaches that view it simply as an effect of a mentalité or a general decline in a once robust provincial cultural life.

The "Plight of the Provinces" and the World of Letters

The "plight of the provinces" narrative is based on a contrast between the allegedly blooming culture of Paris and the declining intellectual vitality of the provinces. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, provincial towns enjoyed a bustling culture and produced their own luminaries. Montaigne became one of the most successful authors of the century writing from Périgord; the print industry of Lyon rivaled the Parisian presses in its prestige; and, as Peter Miller claimed in his study of the erudite Claude Nicolas Fabri de Peiresc, "Peiresc's 'out of the way,' provincial headquarters was not a liability in an age just before the emergence of modern capitals like Paris and London made the term 'provincial intellectual' an oxymoron."5

By the early eighteenth century, however, a completely different relation between Paris and the provinces had emerged. As Alain Corbin has suggestively claimed, during the period 1650–1670 the term province came to define "the hell of disgrace, the banishment of internal exile, the obsessive fear of oblivion . . . La province was where one went to be 'buried alive.'"6 Surprisingly enough, according to Corbin, even provincials did not protest this depiction; they instead sought


legitimacy from the center: "Fascinated by the City and the court, in thrall to a desire for acceptance, immobilized by the expectations of correspondence from Paris, \textit{la province} offered no counterimage to oppose the disparaging figures of satire, patiently allowing the erudition of its scholars and prestige of its jurists to be mocked for the amusement of court society."\textsuperscript{7}

This decline ostensibly mirrored a decline in the print industries of the provinces, which was evident both in the numbers of books produced and in the printing infrastructure. While during the "long sixteenth century" Paris accounted for 64.2 percent of titles produced in France, by the eighteenth century the figure had reached 83 percent.\textsuperscript{8} In 1520, Lyon had at least eighty printers, who exported books using the city's far-flung commercial networks. By 1700, Lyon had only 29 \textit{ateliers}, and only 88 printing presses, compared to 180 in Paris.\textsuperscript{9} Indeed, in the early sixteenth century, books printed outside Paris enjoyed widespread European circulation, and their printers depended on such circulation for their economic survival.\textsuperscript{10}

Contemporary definitions of "\textit{province}" emanating from Paris seem to support this narrative of "the plight of the provinces." Most prominently, Antoine Furetière's dictionary defined the term first as specifying "a part of a kingdom, monarchy, or state usually defined through a spiritual or temporal jurisdiction," but added that "[it is] also said of areas

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\item\textsuperscript{7} Corbin, "Paris-Province," 1:431; for challenges to this view, see notes 2 and 3.
\item\textsuperscript{10} Andrew Pettegree, \textit{The Book in the Renaissance} (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 65, 87–88.
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remote from the court, or the capital city." A "provincial" was not only someone who held an office in the provinces, but also "a man who does not have the manner of living of the court or the capital." Thus, during the seventeenth century, Paris became the central node in France's cultural geography while the provinces were quickly becoming the backwaters of intellectual life.

This article argues, in contrast, that interpretations based on changes in the meaning of the term province or on a simple comparison of Paris to the provinces miss important aspects of center-periphery relations in early modern France. First and foremost, the Paris-province relation was open to a range of appropriations. Notably, authors could create representations that portrayed the province in a positive light, especially in order to satirize Parisian mores. I do not dispute the broad claims about the growing importance of Paris for French and European culture. And the authors Corbin cites did describe the provinces as the place where literature went to die—though this claim needs qualification. I would add nuance to this image by arguing that the negative assessment of the provinces was simply one in a repertoire of options available to seventeenth-century authors. Indeed, we do not need to look for provincials who tried to offer counter-images of their cities because, in fact, the disparaging image was not continuously used even by authors critical of provincial life. Mme de Sevigné, for example, described the environs of the Seine around Rouen as "the most beautiful place in the world," and she crowned Caen the "most beautiful city... and the source of all our plus beaux esprits." One of the most celebrated works of the seventeenth century, Blaise Pascal's Les Provinciales (1656–1657), portrayed the "provincial" as well-

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11 Antoine Furetière, Dictionnaire Universel (1690), s.v. "province," "provincial."
connected to the French Academy and literary life.\textsuperscript{13} In other words, rather than seeing Pierre de Villiers as an exception, examining his positive representation of the provinces can shed more light on the development of the Paris-province relation.\textsuperscript{14}

By interrogating the ways Villiers represented Parisians, provincials, and the relations between them in his \textit{Entretiens sur les contes des fees} (1699), this article argues that authors could appropriate center-periphery relations for their own purposes. Therefore, the representations they created did not reflect commonly shared views in an unproblematic manner, but rather different positions in the literary field. In other words, conflicts with significant literary dimensions led to particular choices from the repertoire of possible representations and hence to the attribution of different meanings to the relation between Paris and the provinces. Pointing to the literary field as a particular mechanism that shaped the Paris-province relation also opens the way for further study of this problem. Thus, the approach presented here goes beyond comparisons of cultural life in the provinces with that of Paris and stresses the particular ways in which alliances or discordances between Paris and the provinces emerged.

\textbf{Center and Periphery in the \textit{Entretiens}}

The abbé Pierre de Villiers (1648–1728) was certainly a second-class author.\textsuperscript{15} Not much is known about his life, and he

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\item \textsuperscript{15} On Villiers, see Louis Moréri, \textit{Le grand dictionnaire historique} (Paris, 1759), s.v. "Villiers, (Pierre de)"; Evrard Titon du Tillet, \textit{Le Parnasse français: dédié au Roi} (Paris, 1732–1743), 2:631–33.
\end{itemize}
seems never to have reached a prominent position in the world of letters. Villiers joined the Society of Jesus at the age of eighteen, but left in 1689, ten years before composing the *Entretiens*. He wrote plays for the Jesuit college of Louis le Grand, and he published a treatise on the art of preaching that went into several editions; moralist tracts, such as "reflections on the faults of others"; and works in literary criticism, such as "conversation on tragedies." According to an eighteenth-century critic, Villiers' work had been forgotten—"and deservedly so." But this disparaging remark serves as a key for understanding center-periphery relations in his work.

Published anonymously and dedicated by the printer, Jacques Collombat, to the French Academy, the *Entretiens* is one of Villiers' works of literary criticism. In it, Villiers tried to convince would-be authors either to devote enough effort to improving their writing or not to write at all. As Collombat claimed in the introduction, "[Villiers] took upon himself the task of ridding the public of so many frivolous books, which he sees as the fruit of laziness and ignorance." The work is divided into five dialogues between a Parisian and a Provincial and treats a range of topics related to bad writing: on ignorants who decide to publish books; on theatrical comedies and fairy tales; on short stories and novels; on ana literature and other falsely attributed books; and on the means for advertising and selling books that are not worthy of purchase in and of themselves. The dialogic structure of the book, which contrasts the opinions of a Parisian and a Provincial, makes it an ideal source for studying representations of the Paris-province relation in the late seventeenth century. Here I focus on how the *Entretiens* represents the Parisian cultural scene; I examine how the literary skills of the Parisians and the provincials are represented to assess whether the work reproduces or not the stereotypes

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17 Villiers, *Entretiens*, dedication, unpaginated.
regarding provincials; and I relate this work to Villiers' position in the world of letters.

While Villiers certainly saw the Province as liable to "backwardness," he drew on this emerging stereotype in order to criticize Paris and the Parisians for much the same faults. For example, while discussing the publisher's trick of enlarging a volume by adding works that were not written by the named author, the Provincial expressed his surprise that not all the works in latest collection of works by the famous author Saint-Évremond were in fact by him: "in the province, all of this is taken to be by Saint-Évremond." The Parisian's reply would surprise those who expected him to express the superiority of Paris: "This happens in Paris, too. Even though Paris is the center of good taste, in no other city can you find so many non-discerning people, who do not bother to check if a work is good or bad."\(^{18}\) In a similar manner, when the Provincial claimed that no one knew better than he did to what extent the provincials deserved the bad opinion Parisians had of them, the Parisian once more shifted the blame to Paris: "Since you are abandoning them [the provincials], I want to take them under my protection. They give refuge to bad works not out of malice. They follow the false instruction and bad examples given even in Paris. I could say that some bad book would hardly sell in the provinces, if it were not for the tricks Parisian authors and printers use in order to sell them."\(^{19}\) In other cases, the only advantage Paris seemed to have over the provinces was the result of getting rid of bad fashions that still prevailed in the provinces. While discussing faulty linguistic usage in the provinces, the Parisian claimed that it stemmed from the facts that the précieuses still ruled there, that there they gained more applause than they did in Paris.\(^{20}\)

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 31–32.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 257–58.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 255. In Paris, précieuses were mostly associated with earlier decades, especially the 1650s and early 1660s.
The provincials depicted in this dialogue did not suffer from any inherent lack of the ability to be polite or civilized in comparison to the Parisians. The Provincial clearly expected to be treated as culturally inferior, saying to the Parisian that he "treats him like a provincial" and that in the provinces it was not possible to contradict Paris.\(^2\) But the Parisian's attitude was not that simple. In fact, when the Provincial asked the Parisian to provide him with weapons for fighting those who supported bad novels, the Parisian claimed that: "You know this, and all the rest, just as much as I do. Surely, the way I hear you speak during our discussion shows that one does not need to live in Paris in order to have a just and polished esprit. You have only tried to appear as a provincial several times in order to make me speak, and this is what you are doing right now."\(^22\)

The possession of literary taste was not simply a quality of the Parisians: while the two discussants agreed that provincials would overlook simplicity and favor obscure phrasings, the provincial laid the blame for this on the titles of books that rarely expressed the contents of the book clearly.\(^2\) Women liked laziness and frivolity, claimed the Parisian, and so they preferred frivolous books not only in the provinces, but also in Paris and at Court.\(^24\) Furthermore, several other details show that the Provincial could be up to date on recent fashions in the literary world. He was aware of changing fashions in choosing book titles, and he had friends who wrote books.\(^2\) In fact, Villiers suggested that the provinces were full of writers whose problems stemmed from the negative example set by Paris.\(^26\) The Provincial was even aware of publishing tricks related to signs of social status, something we might not expect of a "backwards" character. He recounted how a woman who wrote a novel and who wanted to sell it for a high price had a coach with six horses

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 15, 115.  
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 123–24.  
\(^{23}\) Ibid., 269–71.  
\(^{24}\) Ibid., 286.  
\(^{25}\) Ibid., 213.  
\(^{26}\) Ibid., 113.
take the printer to the home of a princess. She waited there, masked, pretending to be the lady of the house. The poor printer was fooled, and he paid what the imposter wanted.  

These passages project an image that differs in significant ways from that of a province devoid of literary life, just one step above a complete social death, and where the best one could hope for was temporary exile. Instead, Villiers presented a vision of Paris filled with vain and failed authors whose pernicious influence corrupted the provinces. This vision of Paris was complemented by a vision of the province as a place where books were produced and of the provincial as someone possessing judgment that was as fundamentally sound as the Parisian's. Indeed, in another work, Villiers argued that provincials had the same potential as Parisians. If they behaved in a rustic manner, it was for lack of education or polish, not a basic character trait. He further described a provincial preacher who could not succeed in Paris simply for lack of education. But why would an author like Villiers choose to represent the Paris-province relation in this way? The answer, I believe, lies in the internal divisions of the Parisian literary field in the period.  

Villiers' text carefully positioned him as a "savant" and distanced him from "fashionable" writers who made their fame in literary gatherings by appealing to popular styles. In the dialogue, the Parisian presented a fractured view of this literary world. On the one hand, Paris had a few "savants" who only wanted to write good books and who took all the time necessary for this task. On the other hand, it had a great number of ignorant authors—indeed, more than any other city in the world—who wrote bad books. In one sense, Villiers' book was an extended explanation of this situation, since it answered a simple question: how could bad authors get their books published? As we have seen, the replies touched on publishing

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27 Ibid., 220.  
28 See [Pierre de Villiers], Réflexions sur les défauts d'autrui (Paris, 1690), 225–26, 238.  
29 Villiers, Entretiens, 2–6 and passim.
techniques, such as choosing fashionable titles that had nothing to do with the content of the book, or publishing fairy tales and novels that appealed to the public's taste, even though they were morally reprehensible. In fact, the Provincial even claimed that the Parisian relied on "harsh moral principles" in discussing books and publishing.\(^{30}\) The Parisian's position was also borne out by his stance on marriage, which he asserted should not be decided by blind passion. This position contrasted with the way novels presented marriage as the culmination of a passionate love affair.\(^ {31}\)

What could be the meaning of Villiers' positioning as a savant? I would argue that, in the late 1690s, Villiers' career represented the failure of a "strategy of success" and that this failure relates both to the image of center-periphery relations presented in this particular work and to Villiers' more general falling into relative disrepute in the eighteenth century. As Alain Viala has shown in his classic *Naissance de l'écrivain*, the strategies of "professional" writers in the early literary field followed two major paths: the *cursus*, or slow build-up of a career through following literary norms and gaining acceptance in literary gatherings and academies; or the "strategy of success," which relied on audacious appeal to the public, short-circuiting the normal cursus.\(^ {32}\)

Villiers' career demonstrates a contradiction between his attacks on the cursus, which constituted a daring appeal to "success," and the fact that his career as a writer led him to forms

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 183.


of service typical of the cursus. Like other authors who relied on the "strategy of success," Villiers combined an invaluable scholarly capital with weak social capital.\textsuperscript{33} He was born in Cognac to a family that had escaped Paris during the Fronde,\textsuperscript{34} seemingly distant from the literary center, yet his early career as a Jesuit prepared him to deal with "worldly" publics and to invest himself in the world of literature. This training meant that despite the taste Villiers displayed in the \textit{Entretiens}, he was not simply a fossil from an earlier age of Latinate erudition, and he developed his career accordingly. Villiers published a madrigal in honor of the birth of the Duke of Anjou, a work on tragedy, and plays for the Jesuit college of Louis Le Grand.\textsuperscript{35} Indeed, while the Catholic Church still had considerable sway over intellectual life in the seventeenth century, only the Jesuits and the Oratorians attributed an important role to literature, as these two orders were highly invested in teaching and oriented themselves toward the elites.\textsuperscript{36} Villiers left the Jesuits in 1689, however, developed a writing career that did not take off, and relied on moralist works and literary criticism to make his way in the literary world. Villiers' relationships with printers provide further possible evidence for his plodding career. During the early 1690s, Villiers published with the literary publisher Barbin, who belonged to the leading rank of printers in the last third of the seventeenth century, while his later work appeared mostly with the lesser-known Collombat.\textsuperscript{37} Villiers' weak position can

\textsuperscript{33} Viala, \textit{Naissance}, 222–24.

\textsuperscript{34} See François Marvaud, \textit{Études historiques sur la ville de Cognac et l'arrondissement} (Niort, 1870), 2:219, who also claims that even though Villiers made a name for himself in the Republic of Letters, it was only a modest reputation.

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Madrigal fait le jour de la naissance de Mgr le duc d'Anjou. Sur la mort de Mgr le duc d'Anjou} (Paris, 1672); \textit{Entretien sur les tragédies de ce temps} (Paris, 1675).


\textsuperscript{37} See, for example, Villier's \textit{Réflexions; De l'amitié} (Paris, 1692). On Barbin's importance, see the list of prominent printers in late seventeenth-century Paris in Henri-Jean Martin, \textit{Livre, pouvoirs et société à Paris au XVIIe siècle}. Proceeding of the Western Society for French History
also be seen through his attempts to avoid personal conflict. Even in his critical works, he tried to avoid it by stressing that his critiques were not aimed at any particular person and that a critique should only focus on faults that were the result of ignorance and error and not treat other issues.38

The position Villiers presents in the Entretiens was risky, then: By rejecting prevailing Parisian norms, Villiers in fact rejected the cursus. A success for Villiers' critique would have inverted the hierarchy of the prevailing norms, placing Villiers at the top of the literary pyramid. But if it failed to convince the public, this critique of fashionable taste meant that Villiers would not be welcome, on the basis of this work, in literary gatherings or informal academies. Even though Villiers addressed the Entretiens to the French Academy, he did not gain significant recognition from the literary establishment. Because both "Ancients" and "Moderns" rejected the "pedantry" associated with erudition during the 1690s, Villiers' text can be seen as one that put him in an extremely marginal position. In fact, he seems to have garnered only minor praise from a couple of "Ancients" who could at least identify with the attacks on modern taste.39

38 [Pierre de Villiers], Traité de la satire, ou l'on examine comment on doit reprendre son prochain (Paris, 1695), 164. It is also possible to see this avoidance of personal criticisms as embodying values of the "old" and erudite Republic of Letters. For the example of Pierre-Daniel Huet's behavior in such circumstances and especially the preference for not attacking living opponents in print, see April G. Shelford, Transforming the Republic of Letters: Pierre-Daniel Huet and European Intellectual Life, 1650–1720 (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 161.

39 In contrast with expressions of literary resentment, often written toward the end of one's career (Viala, Naissance, 236–38), Villiers published the Entretiens in the middle of his career. On the divisions of the literary field in the 1690s, see Alain Viala, "Les palmarès de la querelle," in Roger Duchêne, ed., D'un siècle à l'autre: Anciens et modernes: XVIe colloque (Janvier 1986) (Marseille: Centre Méridional de Rencontres sur le XVIIe Siècle 1986), 171–80. It seems that Villiers received some praise from Boileau (de La Croix, 911–
Villiers' literary choices conflicted with the choices his career would have usually implied. In contrast with his published attacks on the cursus, Villiers established himself in society slowly and only through the traditional modes of service of men of letters: in 1692, he dedicated a publication titled *De l'amitié* (On Friendship) to a certain Monsieur Brunet, *conseiller d'État et garde du trésor royal*; Villiers claimed that the time the two had spent together in Brunoy laid the foundation for the work. Finally, by the early eighteenth century, Villiers became a resident at the house of his former student Nicolas Lambert, a *président* in the Parisian *parlement* and the *prévôt des marchands*. This lack of commitment to a single strategy—namely, the hesitation between the "strategy of success" and the cursus with its forms of service—often led to failed literary careers. Villiers further hurt his chances to make a name for himself by avoiding popular genres such as the novel or the theater (beyond the Jesuit theater), unlike other authors who relied on the "strategy of success."

With the benefit of hindsight, it is safe to say that Villiers failed to establish himself as a successful critic and ultimately to gain formal recognition from the French Academy. This gamble of rejecting Parisian norms, here seen as part of a failed "strategy

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12) and from the Abbé Fraguier, a Latin poet and member of the *Académie française* (Titon du Tillet, 2:632). Fraguier was also a former Jesuit.


41 See [Pierre de Villiers], *De l'amitié* (Paris, 1692).

42 Titon du Tillet, 2:631–32. Titon du Tillet mentions that Villiers was his *préfet* at the Jesuit college. Nicolas Lambert, a *président* at the *seconde chambre des requêtes*, was the *prévôt des marchands* between August 1725 and July 1729; it thus seems probably that Villiers lived with him only after the composition of the *Entretiens*.


of success," sheds new light on the role of the Provincial in the dialogue. Praising the Provincial and criticizing Parisian fashions served to support Villiers' position in the literary world, a position that favored savants at the expense of literary amusements or professional writers who tried to profit from frequent publishing. In these conditions, even a provincial compared well with Parisian literary mores. The Provincial could be convinced to see the value in publishing worthwhile books, as well as to recognize the downtrodden state of good literature in Paris. The meaning of the Paris-province relation depended, then, on the author's position in the literary field, with its specific logic of conflict.

Conclusion

Following the representations of the Paris-province relation in Villiers' Entretiens shows that positive representations of the provinces were certainly possible in the second half of the seventeenth century. By documenting these representations, this article raised one major argument: concepts and representations of "center" and "province" in early modern France should not be seen as deeply rooted mentalités that developed over the course of the century. Rather, Villiers' text shows that attitudes toward Paris and the provinces were shaped by conflicts taking place in Paris. In this case, the satire that gave rise to the positive image of the provincial stemmed from one author's not-so-successful literary career. This conclusion seems also to apply to authors such as Roger de Bussy-Rabutin or Mme de Sevigné, both of whom derided the provinces and are usually taken to represent the "common opinion." Their views should not be seen as deeply held beliefs, but as effects of their social position within the Parisian literary field. As a reply to my initial query—"How

45 Indeed, "provincialism" could sometimes be a resource for authors such as Pierre Corneille. See Déborah Blocker, "Une 'muse de province' négocie sa
should we conceive of the relation between Paris and the provinces?"—my discussion here suggests that we should study the structure of the alliances between Parisians and provincials rather than simply compare Paris to the provinces. While this article has limited itself to the realm of representation, it suggests as well that a complex picture of the Paris-province relation has deep connections to the structure of the literary field; a study of the potential alliances between Parisian and provincials is thus a promising and worthwhile object of study. Beyond simply claiming that these relations were complex, this article also


47 The range of conclusions of contemporary scholars suggests that this topic would profit from a comparative study. For example, Alix Cooper has recently argued for the importance of "local knowledge" as means for fashioning a regional identity in early modern central Europe, in *Inventing the Indigenous: Local Knowledge and Natural History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Stéphane Gerson has documented the voyages of literary authors who discovered the French provinces in the first half of the nineteenth century in "Parisian Litterateurs, Provincial Journeys and the Construction of National Unity in Post-Revolutionary France," *Past & Present* 151 (1996): 141–73. In contrast with the reactions of the authors discussed by Gerson, literary taste became more uniform over the course of the nineteenth century, as documented in Martyn Lyons, *Readers and Society in Nineteenth-Century France: Workers, Women, Peasants* (New York: Palgrave, 2001). For a study of the London-province relation in eighteenth-century Britain, see John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in The Eighteenth Century* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1997), esp. the overview in chap. 12, "The English Provinces," 493–98, which stresses the diversity of cultural forms in the provinces, related to their amateurish nature, as well as the provincial preference for sensibility (in contrast to Moretti; see note 1).
proposes the literary field as a useful means for studying the manifold dimensions of the Paris-province relation. Indeed, a study of divisions within the literary field has the potential of explaining Enlightenment dynamics, which Corbin glosses over. Corbin briefly describes the developments in the early eighteenth century as a "centrifugal process" leading to the capital criticizing itself, but he does not explain how or why this process took place.\textsuperscript{48} Villiers' work perhaps anticipated this process, but more importantly, it shows us that studying the dynamics of the literary field can explain the development of early Enlightenment criticism of Paris and its mores.

This conclusion opens the way for two especially intriguing hypotheses. First, when we consider the available information on the "decline of the provincial press" as expressing a changing relation between Paris and the provinces, we can see it not only in hierarchical terms, but also in functional ones. In other words, though the Parisian press grew in dominance, the provincial press can be seen not simply as declining, but as specializing. Most provincial presses focused on materials for immediate consumption (e.g., affiches, legal announcements or briefs) while some developed particular specializations, such as Troyes with popular prints and almanacs. This specialization can be seen as a stage in the process of creating a truly national market: the different printing centers, which used to be fairly independent of each other in the sixteenth century, become organized into a network whose constituent parts were complementary.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{48} See Corbin, "Paris-Province," 1:434.

I conclude with a hypothesis regarding the role of the center-periphery relation in literature to knowledge of the French nation. In recent years, Peter Sahlins, David Bell, and other scholars have contributed enormously to our understanding of French nationalism by showing how it operated at the borders or how the concepts of nation and patrie gained increased significance in the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{50} We also know much more about the forms of knowledge, such as cartography and statistics, which defined France for its monarchs and administrators.\textsuperscript{51} It seems to me, however, that these works can be enriched by considering the role of literature in spreading geographical knowledge about the boundaries. As the center-periphery relation developed, books coming from Paris or from a specialized printing market signaled to readers that they could all be placed in relation to Paris or to its literary provinces. Books from Amsterdam or Geneva, for example, would be perceived as foreign, since they were in many cases pirated editions or suspect, smuggled literature. I do not mean simply to suggest, as Benedict Anderson has famously done, that reading the same materials allowed readers to feel as if they were belonging to one and the same community.\textsuperscript{52} If the functional relation between different centers of printing did develop stronger specializations during the early modern period, then by mentally placing themselves on a map through their books, readers could gain


positive knowledge about which places belonged—or did not belong—to the French monarchy. Indeed, in one suggestive passage in the *Entretiens*, the Parisian harps on emerging national differences when he claims that ignorant authors discuss piety like "a Swiss who would like to offer us lessons on French language and politeness." In other words, for French readers, provincials and Parisian, the conflictual center-periphery relation might have served as a common frame of reference for apprehending their place in a kingdom more unified than ever—but exploring this notion would require another article.

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