Fortuna Goes to the Theater

Lottery Comedies in Seventeenth-Century France

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In his 1637 poem "Excuse à Ariste," Pierre Corneille describes the contrasting historical fortunes of authorship by alluding to a game of chance, stating that in the "âge doré" of the French Renaissance, literature had been "une Blanque à de bons bénéfices," that is, a lottery full of enticing monetary rewards (780). At present, Corneille laments, "[la Blanque] est épuisée," conveying his opinion that writing had become an unstructured, desperate competition among would-be authors. Corneille's choice of metaphor not only expresses the movement away from friendly and aleatory authorial success toward a contemporary *agon* but does so in terms that were historically specific: the *blanque* had been a prominent royal institution in the reign of François I but was banned in the period in which Corneille was writing. However, the decades that followed would see the French revival of both the actual lottery and Corneille's metaphorical money machine as gambling and theater (in their myriad forms) became the entertainment options of choice for all classes of Parisian society. In fact, several comedies collapsed the two, staging the lottery and the variety of individuals who participated in it; notable examples include Donneau de Visé's *Les Intrigues de la Loterie* (1670), Montfleury's *Le Gentilhomme de Beauce* (1670), Bordelon's *La Loterie de Scapin* (1694),[1] and Dancourt's *La Loterie* (1697). These comedies reflect the era's increasing fascination with games of chance as well as the concepts and strategies developed by individuals grappling with shifting notions of the random. More importantly, they illustrate the problematic nature of representing chance on the seventeenth-century stage, obliquely fulfilling Lisette's promise in Dancourt's comedy that exposure to Monsieur Sbrigani's lottery will prove revealing: "On y connoîtra le fonds & le très-fonds de la bonne foi des Loteries" (310). The theatrical lottery in these plays effectively

becomes a touchstone for early modern efforts to understand and represent chance—or more accurately, the double failure to do so.

The seventeenth-century origins (or rather the reappearance) of the lottery in France were well documented by Henri Sauval in his *Histoires et recherches des antiquités de la ville de Paris* (manuscript 1676, published 1724). Despite the popularity of the practice in surrounding countries, the sixteenth-century *blanques* had a lingering poor reputation in French public memory—of the term *blanque*, Sauval notes that it was "si connu & si decrié en ce Royaume" (60). In 1644, a certain De Chuyes nevertheless received royal permission for a proposed revival of the *Blanque Royale*. While the project initially attracted some prominent advocates, including the writer and grammarian Vaugelas, significant legal opposition arose from the merchants' guilds, anxious to protect their economic prerogatives. Vaugelas's death and De Chuyes's departure to the colonies placed the lottery on unstable footing until the successful intervention of the Scudéry family led to the appointment of two new directors, Carton and Boulanger. Having changed the name from *blanque* to *loterie* (Sauval notes that Carton and Boulanger were "plus entreprenans & moins scrupuleux en notre langue que Monsieur de Vaugelas" [62]), the two were again prevented from carrying out their plans by the merchants' guilds and had to reapply for royal permission in 1658. A further legal prohibition ensued, dramatized in the 1658 *Ballet de la Loterie*, which stages the vision of wealth and riches promised by the lottery and ends with the abrupt ban that upsets the fantasy.[2] Despite these setbacks, Carton and Boulanger's misadventures piqued the public's interest and led to the widespread organization of smaller private lotteries. The year 1658 constituted a veritable lottery mania—according to the gazetteer Jean Loret, more than four hundred lotteries were held in the aftermath of the ban placed on the royal lottery, including prominent events held at court by Louis XIV and Cardinal Mazarin (Fournel 477). Boulanger's perseverance, along with the broad social acceptance of the practice, would result in the successful establishment of a royal lottery in 1659.

That lotteries would reemerge as a French institution at this historical moment is unsurprising given the contemporaneous rising popularity of all games of chance, particularly among the nobility. As Thomas Kavanagh notes in his discussion of gambling in the *Ancien Régime*, "If the whole of France gambled with abandon in spite of what the law might say, this was in no small part due to the example set at court" (*Enlightenment* 31). Even among the innumerable forms of seventeenth-century gaming—La Forge provides a Rabelaisian catalogue of them in his *La Joueuse dupée* (1664)[3]—the lottery

is unique because in many respects it represents the purest game of chance. Concretizing the whims attributed classically to the goddess Fortuna, the lottery redistributes worldly goods without regard for rank, merit, talent, or effort. Unlike many so-called games of chance that nevertheless include an element of skill or strategy, there is no way to play better at the lottery. The only means to improve one's odds is to buy more tickets, an effort that quickly becomes counterproductive since the collective ticket prices far exceed the value of the monetary rewards to be distributed. The lottery's appeal stems at least in part from this negation of skill and social rank: a purchased ticket makes the buyer as likely to win as any other participant.[4]

Given the ubiquity of lotteries in the latter half of the period, it would seem almost inevitable that the era's playwrights would take notice. Guy Spielman writes, "Puisque les jeux d'argent furent la grande passion des classes supérieures à partir de la fin du dix-septième siècle, il n'est pas surprenant que le théâtre s'en soit emparé, surtout dans des comédies dont le but était de satiriser les mœurs de l'époque" (195). Numerous plays during the *Ancien Régime* deal with games of chance or gambling in some form or another—Elisabeth Belmas's partial list, dealing only with the period from 1681 to 1790, includes over twenty titles (69). Critical approaches to these plays have varied, from Kavanagh's important examination of the era's changing moral tone regarding gambling (*Dice* 110–31) to Spielman's brief but insightful study that uses three plays as a lens through which to explore the growth of capitalism and the use of wealth as a social determinant (197).[5] Other scholars see the inclusion of gambling or games of chance merely as a thin dramaturgical structuring device: André Blanc has argued that the lottery in Dancourt's play serves primarily as a convenient way to introduce a series of short and wildly divergent character sketches (61). Several of these plays could be fairly labeled as *pieces à tiroirs* for the ways in which the principal intrigues often assume a secondary importance to the outrageous comic caricatures who arrive to play, and games such as the lottery, *lansquenet*, or *tric-trac*, with their wide social appeal, provide a veneer of *vraisemblance* for collisions of class, gender, and nationality.

However, the lottery comedies, through the specificity of the game that unites the characters, offer a unique perspective that differs from other theatrical considerations of gambling.[6] In the first place, the lottery and the theater as two forms of play shared significant connections, particularly in their mutual sense of spectacle and performance. Claude-François Ménestrier's extensive account of the charitable lottery held in Lyon in 1700 is a good illustration. As Ménestrier writes, the lottery was held in "une grande

sale de l'Hôpital de la Charité, ou les Directeurs avoient fait dresser un The-
atre," adding that the room also contained "tout au tour de la Sale des loges
avec des bancs pour toutes les personnes de distinction qui voudroient s'y
trouver," while the "parterre étoit ouvert à tous venans" (139–40). With its
elevated stage and arrangement of *loges*, *bancs*, and *parterre*, the room thus
borrowed the typical layout of a French theater. On the appointed date, large
wheels containing the lottery numbers and the outcomes (winning *billets
noirs* or losing *billets blancs*) were set up on this stage and rotated several
times; two children pulled out the slips of paper while city and ecclesiastical
officials announced the outcome to the crowd. The lottery was consequently
the most theatrical of the seventeenth-century games of chance, with per-
formance dates, parts to be played by individuals, and socially diverse
audiences stratified by the seating arrangement but bound together in a
common room and by the shared experience of anticipation, excitement,
and spectacle.[7]

Furthermore, by implicating their participants in a procedure that nom-
inally exposes them to the random in its purest form, the lottery comedies
bring the theater directly into a dialogue with the era's changing and contested
notions of chance. Ever since Ian Hacking's seminal work on the history of
probability, scholars have pointed to the middle of the seventeenth century as
a watershed moment for European notions of randomness, luck, and fortune.
Certainly Pascal and Fermat's 1654 mathematical breakthrough in calculating
the fair way to divide the stakes of an interrupted game heralded the appear-
ance of an entire "absent family of ideas," as Hacking terms it (1), including
revolutionary new ways of thinking about life expectancy, risk, insurance,
decision-making, and inductive reasoning. To a certain extent, this devel-
opment is predicated upon a conceptual shift that objects—and particularly
randomizers like dice, cards, or lottery tickets—adhere to mathematical laws
that can be deduced and that subsequently have predictive value.

But in this era of quantifiable chance, the lottery comedies demonstrate a
resistance to, if not outright rejection of, logical decision-making based on
probability calculations. After all, if Pascal's "règle des partis" created a dis-
tinction between rational and irrational bets (illustrated most notably in the
mathematician's famous "wager" regarding God's existence), it would dis-
suade anyone from participating in a game like the typical lottery in which
the mathematical expectation (odds multiplied by payout) is a loss. In short,
mathematically, the lottery is a game for suckers, and there are rare characters
in the comedies who realize this. When Du Bois shares tales of lottery mir-
acles in Donneau de Visé's play *Les Intrigues de la Loterie*, Florine responds

coldly with a calculation of the odds: "Pour un, dont le hazard favorise les vœux, / Apprens qu'il fait souvent deux mille malheureux" (549).[8]

However, the vast majority of characters in these plays give no thought to the odds and steadfastly refuse to view the lottery as a random process in which they stand a good chance of losing, or at the very least of winning prizes that are not worth the sums they have spent on lottery tickets. Examples range from the servant Du Bois's shock and disappointment in receiving nothing but *billets blancs* in his boxes (Donneau de Visé 607) to the anger and violence of the losing *lottiers* in Dancourt's play who assault the servants and try to set fire to the house of the man running the lottery (367). As Spielman notes, "[L]e principe même de la loterie n'a pas été compris par les participants: ceux-ci voient dans l'achat d'un billet une sorte d'investissement à rapport prévisible, et non une prise de risque pour tous les joueurs" (201).

While Spielman sees in this an analogy to the new and complex economic mechanisms of early modern capitalism (201), it is perhaps symptomatic of a larger inability to conceptualize the random despite the revolution of probability theory. The attitude of theatrical *lottiers* illustrates what Gerda Reith has called the "paradox of probability," namely that "[i]n the law of large numbers, [probability] could safely make pronouncements as to what *should* happen in the long term, but never what *would* happen next" (32). It thus fails as a heuristic device for gamblers on two fronts: it is "emotionally meaningless" (Reith 157) and is also unable to answer the gambler's most fundamental question, specifically "what will actually happen next" (Kavanagh, *Enlightenment* 15). It is not surprising, then, that seventeenth-century gamblers largely reject, ignore, or misapply Pascal's austere "doctrine of chances"—mere participation in the lottery implies a willful denial of such abstract calculation.[9]

Instead, confronted with the specter of the random, characters in these comedies adopt various strategies in order to mitigate risk, eliminate chance, and guarantee a favorable outcome. The most direct method is simply to corrupt the lottery operators, as Madame La Cloche attempts in Dancourt's *La Loterie* when she tells Monsieur Sbrigani, "Ne t'avises pas de me traiter comme les autres, je prétends être privilégiée, je suis de tes amies" (325). When Sbrigani's servant Lisette responds (disingenuously, as it turns out) that the results are all due to chance and insists, "Il n'y a point de distinction, nous ne favorisons personne," Madame La Cloche states, "Hélas, mes enfans, j'en suis persuadée: mais je ne veux point de petits lots, je ne les aime pas, je vous en avertis" (325), adding a final warning to Sbrigani: "Tu es honnête

homme, je te rends justice; garnis bien mes boîtes. J'ai la langue bonne, & de bons amis, tu y feras réflexion" (326). Madame La Cloche's concern is that the lottery actually will be fair, potentially resulting in her winning nothing more substantial than "les petits mouchoirs" (325) that she has seen others receive. Her threat is a contradictory proposition: if Sbrigani does not rig the lottery in her favor (thereby falsifying its random results), then she very publicly will use her circle of influence to denounce Sbrigani's lottery as rigged.

While morally suspect (and meant to be ridiculous in Dancourt's comedy), such a hands-on approach to controlling chance was not uncommon in the era. The Comte de Grammont in his memoirs mentions unabashedly his cheating at games of chance (Hamilton 29–32). Likewise, the Comte de Brienne writes of Cardinal Mazarin, "Il croyoit que tous les gros joueurs ayant la réputation de tromper, il ne lui étoit pas défendu de faire comme les autres, ce qu'il appeloit, d'un ton plus doux, prendre ses avantages" (La Forge 295). And Madame de Sévigné warns her son-in-law about the ubiquity of card cheats by writing, "Vous croyez que tout le monde joue comme vous (loyalement)? Rappelez-vous ce qui s'est passé dernièrement à l'hôtel de la Vieuville" (La Forge 295). In a sense, cheating at cards complements in a shadowy fashion the era's celebration of reason and is a rebuttal to late Renaissance skepticism and doubt. Instead of resigning themselves stoically to the vagaries of fortune and sighing "Que sais-je?" card cheats like Cardinal Mazarin took matters into their own hands, fabricating their own luck and thereby (to evoke the title of Hacking's study of eighteenth-century probability) "taming chance" in their own manner.

Other characters in the comedies transmute their cheating to the metaphysical plane, seeking to influence the lottery's result or predict it through divination. Not surprisingly, Donneau de Visé, whose *Devineresse* would return to this theme in more detail nine years later, explores the recourses to divination most extensively, particularly through the character Mélisse, a deeply superstitious young woman who, according to her servant, believes that "aux mortels tout doit servir d'augures" (538). For Mélisse, augury is a method for controlling risk by eliminating the uncertain since she argues that those who know how to read the exterior world can predict its future states. In the *accidents* that happen, "le sort parle indubitablement," and this metaphysical calculus is a form of caution, as Mélisse warns her fellow *lottiers*: "Des Planettes on doit voir la conjonction, / Et ne risquer jamais qu'avec réflexion" (569).

Mélisse is joined in her views by Ergaste, who has consulted a *devineresse* in order to know when and where he should purchase his tickets. Assured

by the fortune-teller that he would receive "deux Lots de fort grand prix" (Donneau de Visé 577), Ergaste receives only *billets blancs* in his boxes, leading him to conclude that the lottery is fraudulent since, as he states, "On doit croire, enfin, à la Devineresse" (579).

Other characters likewise invoke luck, magic, and the supernatural in order to guarantee a lottery win. Clarine buys tickets under lucky pseudonyms "qui n'ont jamais manqué d'être favorables" (553). Du Bois uses the name of a famous astrologer as his *nom de loterie* and also anticipates good fortune because of his dream in which he had horns (interpreted by Mélisse in good faith as symbolizing "profit & denomination," undoubtedly to the amusement of the spectators who could recognize the classic comedic sign of dupery [606]).

However, if participants in these fictive lotteries behave as if the outcome is predetermined, they are curiously close to the truth. Perhaps the most peculiar aspect of the lottery comedies is the degree to which they eliminate randomness even while staging the purest game of chance. This manifests itself remarkably in the fact that the lotteries in three out of the four plays in question are fraudulent—and the fourth play, whose lottery is supposedly legitimate, contains the most extensive and detailed descriptions for how lottery operators can cheat. The misdeeds and foibles of lottery participants are largely overshadowed by the spectacular swindles orchestrated by the characters who have organized them.

Each of the plays presents distinct ways to construct a rigged lottery. In Donneau de Visé's *Les Intrigues de la Loterie* (1670), Céliane has distilled the lottery into its purest self-serving form. When a purported winner arrives at the house and demands his prize, the servant Florine is easily able to dismiss his claim as duplicitous since, as she remarks to a fellow servant, "Madame n'a pas mis un billet noir" (532). However, as Florine herself notes, this may not be the best way (or even the currently fashionable way) to defraud the public: "Ma Maîtresse / Devoit tromper le monde avecque plus d'adresse: / Donner des Billets noirs à des gens apostez, / Qui devant cent témoins les eussent rapportez" (535). A little more care would at least add a greater air of *vraisemblance*, and Florine implies that the practice is widespread, stating, "C'est ainsi qu'aujourd'hui . . ." (535) before leaving the phrase provocatively unfinished.

In fact, Florine's strategy provides the denouement to Dancourt's *La Loterie* (1697). The crooked Italian merchant Sbrigani is using a lottery to sell off his merchandise at much higher prices than he otherwise could command. In the process, he claims to have accumulated "graces au Ciel & à la Loterie" (331) the enormous sum of twenty-five thousand *écus* as a dowry for his

daughter, Mariane. By marrying her off to a *commissaire*, Sbrigani hopes to avoid any unpleasant legal investigations into his operations. However, the interventions of Éraste, Mariane's preferred suitor, and his financier uncle, as well as those of a mob of angry lottery participants, force Sbrigani to alter his initial plans. In a victory for young love (but not for better business practices), Éraste's uncle convinces Sbrigani that the best way to avoid having his house set on fire by disappointed *lottiers* is to give out some high-profile prizes to demonstrate that Sbrigani is not simply pocketing the money. This is not to suggest, however, that the prizes will be partitioned out in an equitable fashion. The financier recommends:

> On trouvera le moyen d'appaiser le désordre; tout le monde murmure de ce que vous gagnez trop à votre Loterie; remettez cet argent dans le commerce; faites un gros lot de vingt mille écus, à condition d'épouser votre fille, & la donnez à mon neveu; nous avons des amis, on vous trouvera de la protection. (368)

Sbrigani's lottery remains just as fraudulent, but shifting the *gros lot* in favor of the *innamorati* provides a semblance of moral closure and at least assuages the public's fear that the merchant is only enriching himself.

Bordelon's lottery presents no better alternative. In *La Loterie de Scapin*, the play-within-a-play at the heart of *Molière comédien aux Champs Elysées* (1694), Monsieur Le Sec is cheating people by wording the winning tickets in deceptively optimistic fashions. When the winners come to claim their prizes, they instead find that they have only won, as he candidly describes it to his servant, "quantité de choses qui ne me servent de rien, & dont j'aurois tres peu d'argent, si je les vendois" (62; also Forkey 58). Monsieur Le Sec is being cheated at his own game, though, since his servant Scapin is selling extra lottery tickets on the side. In addition, Scapin is also controlling the distribution of the prizes. With only a single grand prize—twenty thousand *écus* and the hand of Monsieur Le Sec's daughter, Angélique—the winning ticket conveniently falls to Scapin himself, who consequently leverages his own marriage to the servant Lisette through an exchange with Clitandre, Angélique's suitor.

Montfleury's comedy *Le Gentilhomme de Beauce* (1670) presents the rare exception: a lottery that presumably will be conducted in a straightforward and fair manner by Climenne. However, the play's eponymous character is stunned by Climenne's naive probity regarding the lottery funds she has received, exclaiming, "Quoi[!] pretendre employer tout cet argent en lo[t]s!" (31). When he enquires into Climenne's plan regarding the lottery's drawing,

she further confirms that she intends to mix together both winning and los-
ing tickets and have a lackey pick them out "au hazard, & sans choix" (31).
The Beauceron responds by claiming to have purchased a book at the Palais
de Justice's stalls that explains how to set up a lottery that will enrich its orga-
nizer, including extensive details on practices such as skimming a third of
the profits off the top, lending the money generated by ticket sales at interest,
and carefully arranging for one's debtors to receive winning tickets (32–37).

While such underhanded dealings certainly merit a tone of moral
reprobation—Montfleury's *gentilhomme* is described as "ce fantasque"
(39)—there is a general sense not only of cheating's ubiquity but also of its
rationality. The book on running crooked lotteries in Montfleury's com-
edy is entitled *Avis aux Thresoriers des Foux* (32), a fanciful euphemism for
the lottery that emphasizes a lack of reason on the part of participants and,
consequently, a justification in fleecing them. As Bordelon's Scapin states,
"Quand on apporte son argent a un homme comme moi qu'on ne connoit
point, qu'on l'abandonne a sa discretion, qu'on se contente de recevoir ce
que le hazard conduit par le dit homme voudra bien donner, je me persuade
qu'on veut bien perdre son argent" (99).

This same view of games of chance appears in the era's best-known play
on the subject, Regnard's *Le Joueur* (1697), in which Géronte, the father of
the inveterate gambler, remonstrates his son, "Dans ces lieux, jour et nuit,
ce n'est que brigandage. / Il faut opter des deux, être dupe ou fripon" (209).
Géronte's opinion, although with a markedly different corollary, is corrob-
orated by Monsieur Toutabas, who approaches the elderly man later in the
play and offers his services as a professor of cheating, asserting that it is
at present part of the obligatory education for any man of society: "Com-
ment! je vous soutiens que dans tous les états / On ne peut de mon art assez
faire de cas; / Qu'un enfant de famille, et qu'on veut bien instruire, / Devroit
savoir jouer avant que savoir lire" (215). While Géronte reacts in horror and
moral outrage, he and Monsieur Toutabas share in the end the same esti-
mation of the seventeenth-century game of chance, namely that chance has
been completely removed from the game. If everyone is cheating, then the
game has actually been transformed from one of *tyche* to one of *techne*, and
anyone who has not realized this is the dupe.

A ready explanation for the rampant dishonesty in these theatrical com-
edies might be found in the real-life models from which they take their
cue—Dancourt's play was based on a recent incident (Blanc 133). Such an
example was far from isolated if we are to believe Sauval, who writes of the
Parisian lotteries that it would be easier to list the lotteries renowned for

their honesty than to list those whose *lots* were already decided long before the drawing (84). In fact, Sauval attributes the lottery's popularity to the ease with which it can be manipulated: "Il est si facile de pratiquer la Lotterie, on y peut tromper en tant de façons, & on s'y peut enrichir si vîte & si couvertement, qu'il ne faut pas s'étonner si tant de monde l'a mise en usage" (69).

Such a reading, however, fails to see the more subtle and interesting ways in which these plays comment on the era's views of chance and theater (and chance *in* theater). In the first place, it is debatable whether any lottery—fair or not—was seen by seventeenth-century participants as truly random and undetermined. Divine foreknowledge certainly encompassed lottery results, and writers like Ménestrier went a step further in associating chance and God: "Il est dit en general que si les Sorts sont jettez pesle-mesle dans l'urne ou le vase qui les reçoit, c'est Dieu qui prend soin de les demesler" (56–57). As he repeats a few pages later, "C'est à lui [Dieu] de disposer du succés des Lots qui échoient" (118). In other words, the more care that is taken to randomize the results—mixing the lots sufficiently so that there is no remaining bias or human-arranged order—the more assured we can be that the results stem from divine will. Typical for his time period, Ménestrier abhors a vacuum of intentionality; where human intention is removed, divine determinism rushes in to fill the void. In this providential worldview, there is no place for the truly random. Some rational cause must ultimately decide the winners and the losers, either human agents in the case of a scam or the divine in the event of a fair lottery.[10]

Sauval, on the other hand, presents a more nuanced view of the matter, particularly in his comments about a charitable lottery organized by three prominent women whose proceeds went to the freeing of Christian slaves in Algiers: "Elles compterent la moitié de l'argent de leur blanque aux Religieux Mathurins qui exercent si heureusement ce divin trafic, & ce commerce pieux des Esclaves, & distribuerent fidelement l'autre moitié à leurs Lottiers, selon que la fortune, ou pour parler comme ces Dames vertueuses, selon que la Providence divine en ordonna" (76). The alternative (albeit lightly ironic) causalities mentioned here capture in microcosm the era's conceptual shift regarding chance, from a phenomenon conceived in religious terms to a more secularized view of the random. Elsewhere in his writings, Sauval attributes lottery results to more neutral terms like *le sort*, *le hasard*, or *la fortune* (60, 64–65), hinting toward a new worldview in which divine providence does not need to determine the outcome of every roll of the dice—the mechanistic universe can take care of such matters.

Such a shift does not imply a less deterministic perspective. As Reith

has argued, while the seventeenth century represents the first emergence of a precise and calculable notion of chance, the notion was essentially an epistemological category—that is, chance represented what was not presently known or knowable, with the assumption that further progress and discoveries could eventually bring phenomena attributed to chance within the purview of rational causation (29–31). This view is expressed in Antoine Furetière's 1690 definition of the word *hasard*: "Se personnifie quelquefois, & se prend pour certain estre chimerique auquel on attribuë sottement les effets dont nous ne connoissons point la cause" (sig. Aa4r). And this ignorance largely concerns the future, since after the fact the chain of causation can be readily retraced. In a universe whose workings are inevitable but revealed only in the event, chance is about plausibility.

Or, to cast it in seventeenth-century theatrical terms, chance is about *vraisemblance*. Like the workings of chance, comedies (at least in the theory and practice of the era) are based on the tension between predetermined outcomes and probable futures. Grounding their arguments in Aristotle's *Poetics*, French literary critics argued powerfully in behalf of the coherence of narrative incidents—the idea that the fictive developments in a play should all seem believable or likely. In an important temporal distinction, however, they maintained that this should be the case primarily after the reading or viewing of a play since a plot that was too evident to the reader or spectator would induce disinterest. John Lyons writes that a key contribution of seventeenth-century poetics was "the importance of suspense" (169). Citing Corneille and the Abbé d'Aubignac, Lyons points out that neo-Aristotelian poetic theory demanded that the playwright walk a fine line between adequately preparing or motivating the incidents to come and surprising the audience with the dramatic events that take place:

> The spectators see that the characters are caught up in actions that are leading them to some outcome but, if suspense works, the audience will, like the characters, be unsure of what is coming next. However, at the denouement, retrospectively all will seem to lead logically from one incident to the next. Thus a key part of the playwright's art is to achieve the difficult balance between the preparation of the unavoidable, or at least plausible, outcome and the concealment of each step closer to that outcome. (170)

The important corollary to the notion of a carefully prepared plot is the idea that, as Aristotle had argued, an ideal play does not rely on chance events in order to resolve its central conflict.[11] Recourse to an unprepared

solution that appeals to randomness is in this respect analogous to the *deus ex machina*: the author creates surprise by an appeal to the completely unsuspected, sacrificing the logical coherence of plot that, for Aristotle and his followers, constitutes the hallmark of the well-crafted play. Ironically, nothing signals the presence and control of the author like the eruption of the random, thus ruining the impression of verisimilitude and the suspension of disbelief that many French critics felt were crucial for theatrical effect.

This helps explain the particular conundrum faced by playwrights dealing directly with a game of chance such as the lottery. The most realistic result of all—the awarding of the *gros lot* to any one of the participants as a result of pure chance—is simply not acceptable within the parameters of seventeenth-century French drama, which demands that the author craft an emotionally satisfactory and meaningful denouement without invoking the random. While we might envision a scenario in which a twenty-first century troupe might stage a play in which the fictive winner of the lottery is actually decided by a random process for that particular performance, the text-centered seventeenth-century French tradition ascribed intentionality entirely to the playwright. To pick a winner would be an inelegant display of authorial artifice.

To this end, the authors of lottery comedies displace control and agency instead to the characters themselves as a matter of dramaturgical necessity. Any theatrical lottery will of course be rigged since it is ultimately the author who has entire control. However, to hide this fact, Donneau de Visé, Bordelon, and Dancourt create surrogate authorial figures, diegetic agents who instead eliminate the random and determine the lottery's winners and losers.[12] This might help shed additional light on the trend noted by Kavanagh that games of chance increasingly disappeared from the stage between 1687 and 1768. While Kavanagh notes correctly that "watching other people gamble can be intensely boring" (*Dice* 111), we might also add that in the neo-Aristotelian theatrical field of the *Ancien Régime*, the truly random is unrepresentable—that is, it would violate the period's accepted norms of good plot construction.

Half a century after Corneille compared authorship to a broken lottery, its aleatory function interrupted, authors such as Donneau de Visé, Montfleury, Dancourt, and Bordelon were operating within an ideological framework that similarly inhibited chance, navigating between the Scylla and Charybdis represented by two narrative prohibitions: a truly random lottery would lack emotional interest and closure, while a purportedly fair lottery with a theatrically convenient winner would reflect poorly upon an author forced

to resort to such a contrived plot device. In such dramaturgical straits, and in an era where chance was still an epistemological placeholder for unperceived divine will, it is not surprising that these authors opt for a solution that asserts a double and displaced causality. As the characters' machinations flamboyantly evacuate the random from the lotteries that they run, the authors constitute themselves as the true and hidden source of the theatrical intrigue, the *deus absconditas* who, in both the physical world and the fictional world, arranges the coincidences, those momentarily unknowable collusions of the seemingly fortuitous and deeply intentional. Even while staging the random, the authors of seventeenth-century lottery comedies could ill afford to leave anything to chance.

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Notes

1. Bordelon's play is part of his larger work *Molière comédien aux Champs Elisées* (1694).

2. The ballet's text can be found in the second volume of *Les Contemporains de Molière* (1866), edited by Victor Fournel.

3. Claiming that he could name a thousand, the marquis provides the following versified list: "La beste, le berlan, la ferme, la reale, / Le trente et un, la belle, avec l'impériale, / Le here, l'entre-lut, le trois, le lansquenet, / Le hoc, le reversis, la prime, le piquet, / La triomphe, le trut, le cubas, la chouëtte, / Le jeu de Cupidon, de l'oye, et de gillette, / Le double trique-trac, le hoccat, le billard, / Les dames, les échets, la poule, le renard, / Le jeu des coins du monde et de toute la terre, / Les quatre fins de l'homme, et celuy de la guerre" (La Forge 306).

4. As Guy Spielman has noted, "Le jeu promeut de fait une égalité entre les conditions (ainsi que le remarquait justement la Bruyère) qui semble fortement préjudiciable à l'ordre social: à la table de bassette ou de lansquenet, les hiérarchies sont en effet abolies face au hasard (ou éventuellement au talent de chacun), et un roturier de la plus basse espèce, s'il dispose de fonds suffisants pour faire la mise, peut fort bien y triompher d'un noble sans que celui-ci puisse user de sa qualité pour modifier l'issue ou les conditions d'une partie, comme il pourrait le faire dans nombreuses autres situations de conflit" (196).

5. The three plays that form the center of Spielman's analysis are Baron's *L'Homme à bonne fortune* (1686), Dancourt's *La Loterie* (1697), and Dufresny's *La Coquette du village* (1715). Kavanagh's study principally concerns Dancourt's *La Désolation des joueuses* (1687), Regnard's *Le Joueur* (1696), and Saurin's *Béverlei* (1768).

6. In this I follow the lead of Kavanagh, whose studies pay careful attention to the kinds of games that are represented and eloquently construct meaning out of various modes of play. A good representative example is Kavanagh's discussion of *brelan* in the context of libertinage and seduction (*Dice* 72–76).

7. Sauval notes that Parisians mockingly compared the lottery to the theater in its earliest iteration, albeit in a different sense. When the lottery operators grandiosely announced the date of the lottery, only to have to delay it frequently, Sauval writes that "on ne laissa pas de s'en railler, & de comparer ce procédé à celui des Comédiens, qui annoncent plusieurs fois une pièce de théâtre avant que de la jouer, & ennuient leurs spectateurs par leurs défaites & par les raisons imaginaires sur quoi ils les fondent ordinairement" (66–67).

8. Florine has additional motivation for mistrusting lottery outcomes since at the time of her conversation with Du Bois, she is actually helping her mistress, Céliane, run a rigged lottery in which the outcomes are anything but random.

9. In this respect, they are no different from their modern equivalents, as Reith argues in her analysis of gamblers' "magical-religious worldview": "Despite the knowledge of random events, percentages and odds generated by that tool of chance—probability theory—gamblers on the whole tend to ignore its insights, continuing to play when the odds are against them, behaving as though they could influence games of pure chance and stubbornly expecting to win in the midst of catastrophic defeat" (156).

10. Randomizers have from their origins been associated with divination (Reith 14–17). In fact, Reith claims that part of the early modern religious objection to games of chance came from the way in which they "forced God's intervention to 'decide the lot' on trivial matters" (5).

11. See Lyons's excellent discussion of Aristotle's notion of chance, including the ways in which the concept appears in both the *Poetics* and the *Physics* (Lyons 1–8).

12. And Montfleury removes the problem by placing it outside of the play's frame: the curtain falls as the characters announce their intention to go draw the results for Climenne's lottery (305).

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