La Fontaine’s *Contes et nouvelles en vers* were first published in 1665, and reprinted many times during the next hundred years. Their tone, lighthearted and bawdy yet literary and poetic as well, owed much to the inspiration of such writers as Boccaccio, Ariosto and Rabelais; it was this complex mixture of qualities, above all, which ensured that they remained one of the acknowledged, if slightly improper, classics of seventeenth-century French literature. Yet despite the many previous printings of the *Contes*, the publication in 1762 of an edition funded by the Compagnie des Fermiers généraux (who functioned as tax-gatherers on behalf of the French king) was an event of considerable importance, both in the history of publishing in pre-Revolutionary France and in the wider political life of the time. With its eighty engravings based on drawings by Charles Eisen, which are perhaps its chief glory, the book became instantly famous. In the *Année littéraire*, Elie Fréron hailed it as a ‘chef d’oeuvre qui efface, sans exagérer, tout ce que vous connaissez, tout ce que vous admirez, dans ce genre’; in the *Correspondance littéraire*, Grimm described it simply as ‘superbe’.

This 1762 edition was itself the source of several counterfeit printings, and was, in addition, reissued in 1792. So far as its illustrations were concerned, therefore, the ‘Fermiers généraux’ edition of the *Contes* was immediately recognized as one of the most prestigious publishing ventures of the Ancien Régime, a reputation which two centuries have not in the least diminished.

And yet its celebrity serves only to emphasize the problematic, even mysterious, nature of many of the circumstances surrounding

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1 ‘The world that [the plates] depict is that of the *homme moyen sensuel*, where beauty exists to satisfy desire and youth has its way over age, where cynicism is the common coin and virtue the calculated means to an end. But before the force and vitality of Eisen’s scenes, normal scruples dissolve in admiration’ (Gordon N. Ray, *The art of the French illustrated book* New York: Pierpont Morgan Library, 1982), 55).

2 *Année littéraire*, viii (1762), 66.


its publication. While the most sumptuous copies of the edition have a well-documented history, its origins remain largely unknown. To take only one of the questions which it raises: we have no idea by what means Diderot (who, in 1762, was heavily engaged in the massive task of editing the *Encyclopédie*) became involved in writing the *Abrégé de la vie de La Fontaine* which serves as a preface.\(^5\) Neither Fréron nor Grimm (who were better acquainted than most with the gossip circulating in the Parisian literary world) mentions the involvement of the Fermiers in the publication of the book, and it is virtually impossible to discover any documentary evidence which throws light on its genesis. No doubt the same could be said of the majority of books published in eighteenth-century France; but most books of the period were not published by the leading financial corporation of the day, whose other activities were recorded in great detail in innumerable printed and manuscript sources which have come down to us. The documentary silence surrounding this edition of the *Contes* is therefore intriguing, to say the least, as is the very fact that the Fermiers généraux were involved in publishing it at all. One may well ask what they hoped to accomplish by embarking on a venture of which they had no previous experience, and which, as we shall see, became even more mysterious when it came to fruition.

These problems become all the more perplexing when one realizes that, from a purely textual point of view, the edition was not especially remarkable. It simply reproduces the standard text of the *Contes*, to which it adds nothing by way of learned commentary or annotation. The title-page claims that the place of publication was ‘Amsterdam’, but gives no publisher’s name. This point is not in itself unusual. In 1743, for example, an edition of the *Contes*, allegedly printed in Amsterdam, had in reality been published in Paris with the tacit permission of the Directeur de la Librairie.\(^6\) In fact, it seems that none of the many editions of the work published in Paris before 1762 bears any indication of its true place of origin. Somewhat improper books such as the *Contes* were invariably published with a ‘permission tacite’ (signifying that they would be tolerated by the censor) as opposed to a ‘privilège’ (signifying official approval), and were not infrequently misleading in this respect. Hence, by 1762, the principle was well established that La Fontaine’s *Contes* (as opposed to his moralizing *Fables*, which encountered no opposition from the censor) could be published discreetly in Paris, provided that they bore on their title-page the name of some other (non-French) place of origin.


Although there was, then, no official prohibition on the publication of the Contes, the Fermiers généraux do not appear to have sought permission to publish their edition; at least, no request from them appears in the surviving registers of the then superintendent of the Paris book-trade. The absence of information on this point is particularly regrettable, inasmuch as the terms of such a request might reveal why they decided to publish this work in preference to any other which they might have chosen. Without such evidence, the reasons for their choice must remain a matter for conjecture; but it is at least possible that they wished to rival, albeit in a different format, the sumptuous folio edition of La Fontaine's Fables published (with official blessing and to great acclaim) between 1755 and 1759, and to provide, as it were, an accompaniment to it.

However, while our knowledge of the origins of the edition is by no means complete, we do know a little, at least, of its publishing history. In keeping with established practice, the 'Amsterdam' imprint concealed the identity of a Parisian publisher, in this instance Joseph-Gérard Barbou, a member of one of the most respected bookselling families in Paris. Barbou enjoyed a solid and deserved reputation as the publisher of, among other things, the series of Latin classics initiated by his uncle Jean-Joseph, and he took good care to keep on the right side of the authorities overseeing the booktrade: in August 1759, for example, he had obtained a privilège to publish an edition of Quintus-Curtius translated by Vaugelas, and in 1762 he had secured the right to publish an edition of Cicero and a French grammar book. In that same year, he had also published, with official approval, an edition of Ovid in Latin, which the Jesuit publication Le Journal de Trévoux had reviewed in strikingly fulsome terms: 'Chaque Volume est orné d'une Estampe & d'une vignette gravées sur les dessins de M. Eisen. Cette production Typographique [...] fera recueillir de nouveau au sieur Barbou les applaudissements de la République des Lettres'.

This comment is all the more significant in that it provides evidence that, at much the same time as La Fontaine's Contes appeared, Barbou and Eisen were jointly involved in another prestigious and successful publishing venture. It is not possible to say whether the link between the two works goes any deeper than this, but it does at least seem that the Fermiers généraux took great care to select for the Contes a publisher and an artist whose work...
would please even the traditionally censorious reviewers of *Le Journal de Trévoux*.

Indeed, in its way, the choice of Charles Eisen to produce the drawings on which the plates for the edition would be based was as inspired as that of Barbou. By the 1750s, Eisen had long since established a reputation as a fine artist, capable of producing drawings to embellish works of an impeccably serious kind. In addition to enhancing the prestige of the Latin classics published by Barbou, he had, for example, produced illustrations for a 1751 edition of the *Éloge de la folie* of Erasmus to which not even the most fastidious could object.

However, his output also comprised drawings of a less edifying kind, to which the adjective ‘galante’ is usually applied. In 1754, he had designed the engraved titles and vignettes for a rather licentious Italian translation of the *De rerum natura* of Lucretius which was published in Paris; there is no proof that this work played any part in the decision by the Fermiers généraux to call upon Eisen to provide the illustrations for La Fontaine’s *Contes*, but we do know that a copy was in the possession of one of their number, Savalette de Buchelay. In 1757, Eisen had contributed illustrations to a no less ‘galante’ edition of the *Decameron* of Boccaccio; his collaborators on this occasion were Boucher, Gravelot and Cochin, each of whom was as distinguished an artist as Eisen himself, so that his presence in the group is an eloquent indication of the high regard in which his skills were held by his contemporaries.

Thus, when the Fermiers généraux needed the services of an artist of the highest technical accomplishment, who was also able to furnish drawings of a somewhat unedifying kind, it was natural that their choice should fall upon Charles Eisen. We do not know for certain when they asked him to design the illustrations for the *Contes*, but the initial arrangements must have been made several years before the work actually appeared, since, as Cohen observes (cols. 564–565) a number of the plates which it contains are dated 1759. For the vignettes and the culs-de-lampe, the Fermiers called on the services of Choffard, a man with long experience in producing such embellishments. Choffard was also asked to engrave some of the plates based on Eisen’s drawings, a task in which he worked alongside men of the calibre of Baquoy, Lemire and Flipart, whose skill in such operations was no less well attested.

Mindful, no doubt, of the talents of which Gravelot had shown to such good effect in the 1757 edition of the *Décaméron*, the  

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13 See the index to Cohen, for details of the work of these artists.
Fermiers commissioned from him a number of special tools to be used on the bindings of a small number of copies of the *Contes* which were intended for presentation, and which were bound in the workshop of the greatest master of the day, Nicolas-Denis Derome, better known perhaps as ‘Derome le jeune’. The preparation of their edition was entrusted, no doubt for reasons of security as well as of convenience, to a Fermier général, Seroux d’Agincourt (1730–1814), who was himself a scholar of note, and who devoted many years to the composition of his *Histoire de l’art par les monuments*, which finally appeared between 1810 and 1823. Hence, the Fermiers took great care in choosing the publisher, the artist, the binder and the general editor for their edition of the *Contes*, in a way which bespeaks their concern to maintain the highest possible standards for the book during all the stages of its manufacture.

This concern was especially apparent in the preparation of the copperplate illustrations. The Fermiers took good care to ensure that the engravings prepared from Eisen’s drawings were kept within the bounds of good taste. Of the eighty plates which were initially engraved, twenty or more were rejected, though we do not know by whom. Some were judged to be of inferior quality, in that the characters shown were out of scale with the rest of the drawing. Others, however, were felt to be indecent, in that they displayed too great an abundance of nakedness, or depicted postures which might give offence.

Five designs in particular fell into this category: those for *Le cas de conscience*, *Le diable de Papefiguière*, *Les lunettes*, *Le bât* and *Le rossignol*. Although a number of impressions were struck from these ‘rejected’ plates and in some cases were bound into copies of the work, all of them were made less explicitly erotic either by being re-engraved, or by the addition of fig-leaves, pieces of clothing, and so on, and it is in the latter state that these figures are most often encountered. Thus, while the Fermiers généraux were willing to titillate their readers, they made not inconsiderable efforts to ensure that they could not be accused of sponsoring an indecent book. In

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14 It is presumed that all the copies in presentation bindings were executed by Derome le jeune, since only his ticket is found on the bindings which are signed (see the catalogue of the sale of the collection of Sir David Salomons, London: Christie’s, 25 June 1986, no. 71), and there is no evidence that more than one set of Gravelot’s tools was prepared for use. However, not all copies in contemporary morocco with ordinary tooling were bound by Derome; at least one exists bearing the ticket of the binder Le Tellier (Librairie Quentin, catalogue 10 (Geneva: 1991), no. 42).


16 But see Cohen, 561, who points out that *Le diable de Papefiguère* and *Le cas de conscience* are more commonly found in the ‘découverte’ state. For an analysis of the plates from an aesthetic point of view, see Owen E. Holloway, *French rococo book illustration* (London: Tiranti, 1969), 25–55.
this aim, they were successful: Freron concluded that the plates were ‘gravées avec une délicatesse, un goût, une vérité qui n’a point, ou qui a très-peu, d’exemples’, 17 while Grimm was of the opinion that the plates were decent ‘quand le poète ne l’est guère’. 18

But if the Fermiers spared no pains to ensure that their edition of the Contes should be of the highest quality in material terms, their concern in this respect does not explain why they should have wanted to become involved in such an enterprise in the first place. After all, nothing in the previous history of the Compagnie had given any indication that its members would be interested in publishing anything other than accounts of their financial transactions. And it was not until 1773, with the Chansons of Jean-Benjamin Laborde (who was himself one of their number) that they embarked again on the publication of a literary work. 19

Yet their decision to publish a de luxe edition of a well-known text was in reality less surprising than it might initially appear. To understand why the Fermiers généraux took this course, it is essential to know something of the sociological and political circumstances of the time. In the first place, it should be remembered that, in the eyes of some of their contemporaries at least, the Fermiers deserved nothing but praise for their virtue, their example and their self-sacrifice on behalf of the nation. In 1753, Grimm could write that ‘Le financier grossier et ridicule [...] n’existe plus à Paris’. 20 And in the article ‘Financier’, which was published in the Encyclopédie in 1756 (and which makes clear that the word ‘financier’ was synonymous with the Fermiers), Pessélier had asked, à propos of his subject: ‘sa capacité ne rend-elle pas à l’état des services essentiels? son désintéressement ne fait-il pas des sacrifices? & sa vertu ne donne-t-elle pas des exemples à suivre, à ceux mêmes qui veulent le dégrader?’. 21 In 1761, Freron informed the readers of his Lettres sur quelques écrits de ce temps that the attitude of the public towards financiers had changed so greatly that ‘autant que ceux-la [financiers of days gone by] méritaient le mépris et la censure des honnêtes gens, autant ceux-ci en méritent l’estime et les éloges par l’intégrité de leur conduite et la noblesse de leurs sentiments et de leurs manières’. 22

These enthusiastic assessments of the example set by the financiers were not, however, universally echoed in the writings of the time. Those who regarded the Fermiers généraux as cultivated and virtuous men (a description which could no doubt be

17 Année littéraire, viii (1762), 65.
18 Correspondance littéraire, 15 June 1762, ed. cit., v, 108.
20 Correspondance littéraire, 15 June 1753, quoted by Durand, Les Fermiers généraux, 413.
21 Encyclopédie, vi (1756), 815 b.
legitimately applied to at least some of them) were opposed by those who saw them as rapacious parasites preying on the national treasury, and extorting from the ordinary citizen as much tax as possible in order to line their own pockets. If this view was not a novel one, it is noticeable that, in the 1750s and early 1760s, it was expressed with a vigour and a virulence not previously seen under the Ancien Régime. Those chiefly responsible for expressing it were members of the loosely-knit group who had already come to be known as the Philosophes.

In 1757, the chevalier de Jaucourt published, in volume seven of the Encyclopédie, the article ‘Fortune’, in which, without explicitly naming the Fermiers généraux, he launched against them a thinly-veiled attack: ‘Les moyens de s’enrichir peuvent être criminels en morale, quoique permis par les lois; il est contre le droit naturel & contre l’humanité que des millions d’hommes soient privés du nécessaire comme ils le sont dans certains pays, pour nourrir le luxe scandaleux d’un petit nombre de citoyens oisifs’. 23

These barbed comments were echoed more strongly still in the writings of the marquis de Mirabeau, whose career was devoted largely to denouncing the abuses and errors of the financial structure of contemporary France. In a volume of his L’amé des hommes published in 1758, he had inveighed against luxury, which was, he claimed, the chief characteristic of selfish men, and which he regarded as inimical to the State, to industry and to the arts. With the bluntness for which he was both famous and feared, he had concluded ‘le luxe enfin multipliant les fantaisies, & ne connoissant plus d’autres règles, varie à l’infini tous ses ouvrages sans utilité’ 24 If, like de Jaucourt, Mirabeau did not on this occasion expressly identify the Fermiers généraux as the target of his scorn, there was no mistaking his deep hostility to a style of living synonymous with their wealth.

Two years later, in 1760, with his Théorie de l’impôt, he returned to the offensive, but this time his readers were left in no doubt as to the objects of his wrath:

toutes Fermes & tous Fermiers d’imposition sur le travail, sur la subsistance, sur le commerce, sur l’industrie & sur la rétribution quelconque, sont contre le droit public & contre l’ordre naturel. Contre le droit public, parce qu’une telle imposition augmenteroit la charge & diminueroit le revenu réel du fisc & le revenu de la Nation: contre l’ordre naturel, parce qu’elle n’aurait ni mesure ni proportion connue, ni régulière avec les Revenus du Royaume, & qu’en portant sur la rétribution, elle anéantit dans toutes les manières d’agir l’exploitation qui est la source des richesses de la Nation & de la puissance du Souverain. 25

23 Encyclopédie, vii (1757), 206 a. ‘Criminels’ is italicized in the text.
24 Mirabeau, L’ami des Hommes, 5th edn (Hamburg, 1761), 268.
25 Mirabeau, Théorie de l’impôt, new edn (no place, 1760), 131.
Far from being, as some would have it, the motive power of the economy, and an object of legitimate respect, the Fermiers généraux, so Mirabeau argued, were the chief obstacle to economic progress and to the creation of true national wealth.

These two books had a considerable effect on contemporary thinking. Grimm was quick to report, in the Correspondance littéraire, the scandal caused by the Théorie de l'impôt: 'les gens de finance se sont fort récrifiés sur la fausseté des détails et des calculs; mais qu'importe que, dans un ouvrage de théorie, les détails et les calculs soient faux, pourvu que les principes en soient vrais et inattaquables?'.\(^{26}\) And in September 1776, nearly twenty years after the appearance of L'amis des hommes, he recalled the immense impact which the work had made:

l'ouvrage eut un succès fou; les grands mots d'humanité, de vertu, de liberté, de propriété, qui s'y trouvent prodigués à chaque page en imposèrent au plus grand nombre de lecteurs; le titre seul eût suffi pour les séduire. Il faut qu'un ouvrage qui parle en faveur du peuple, et qui s'élève directement ou indirectement contre les abus de l'administration actuelle [...] soit bien détestable pour ne pas faire la plus grande sensation.\(^{27}\)

The controversy provoked by these hostile assessments of the Fermiers généraux forms part of one of the great debates which marked the Enlightenment, namely the question of luxury, or, more precisely, of whether luxury should be encouraged as a stimulus to industry, or condemned as morally offensive to the poor. This was a question which divided even those Philosophes who were hostile to the Fermiers themselves, and to which, of course, no conclusive answer was ever to be forthcoming.\(^{28}\) It is clear, however, that the Fermiers généraux were associated with ostentatiously luxurious living, and that, for many of their contemporaries, this unashamed parading of their wealth constituted, according to taste, either their most substantial claim to public esteem or their most heinous offence against humanity.

When these conflicting views are borne in mind, it becomes easier to understand why the Fermiers should have decided to publish a book which would, unmistakably, be the epitome of luxury. They felt no need to apologise for their way of life – quite the contrary – and the most effective means of responding to the increasingly vigorous criticisms which were being levelled against them was to finance a venture which would manifest their self-confidence and their determination not to change their outlook in any way. Since they had been attacked in books, what more

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\(^{26}\) 11 January 1761 (ed. cit., iv, 340).

\(^{27}\) Ibid., September 1776, xi, 351.

appropriate riposte could they make to their enemies than to publish a book themselves? A book, moreover, which would make available, in the most luxurious format, a recognised work of one of the great masters of French literature, and display, in its every detail, the taste for which the Fermiers were noted and admired, in some quarters at least. Since, as we saw earlier, the plates indicate that work on the book had begun as early as 1759, its publication cannot have been motivated solely by the appearance of the *Théorie de l'impôt* in 1760. But the virulence of Mirabeau’s denunciation of the Fermiers in that work can only have strengthened their resolve to respond, as effectively and as swiftly as they could, to the hostility to which they had already been subjected by other writers.

The time was indeed favourable for retaliation, since the irritation felt by the State towards the *Philosophes* in general was becoming ever more apparent. In 1757, Jacob-Nicolas Moreau, with all the pomp and authority invested in him as historiographer royal, had launched a bitter diatribe against the group, whom he called the ‘Cacouacs’; the following year, his theme was taken up with still more venom by the abbé de Giry in the *Catéchisme des Cacouacs*. In January 1759 the official prosecutor, Omer Joly de Fleury, vilified the *Philosophes* as a rabble bent on insurrection and the overthrow of all the noble Christian values which held the State together. Early in February, the Paris Parlement condemned the *Encyclopédie*, along with the *De l'esprit* of Helvétius, to be burned by the public executioner.29 In 1760, Palissot had published his satirical comedy *Les philosophes*, in which, for example, Diderot was shown walking on all fours eating a lettuce. Within a short time, it was the turn of Palissot himself to be mocked, along with a number of his prominent supporters at Court, in *La vision de Charles Palissot* by the abbé Morellet. The influence of those whom the abbé had unwisely pilloried in this work was sufficiently strong to ensure his incarceration in the Bastille shortly afterwards. In December 1760, not long after the appearance of the *Théorie de l’impôt*, Mirabeau, the chief architect of the campaign against the Fermiers, was imprisoned in Vincennes; although he was released after eight days, his freedom was conditional upon his being exiled to his estate at Bignon.30 There was thus good reason to think that any attempt by the Fermiers généraux to enlist the help of powerful allies in the cause of defending themselves against the vituperations of the *Philosophes* would not go unheeded. And even though their chief

29 See Robert Shackleton, ‘When did the *Philosophes* become a party?’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, ix (1978), 181-99. Helvétius had himself been a Fermier général, but had long since ceased to be a member of the Compagnie.

mentor Mirabeau was not immune from punishment, it was clear that further efforts would be needed if he and those who shared his views were to be reduced to silence.

It was against this background, in the midst of this turmoil, that the Fermiers decided to fund the publication of an edition of La Fontaine’s *Contes*. To whom, then, was it intended to appeal? It would obviously not placate their enemies, who were more likely to be further incensed at this proof that their denunciations had failed to curb the excesses of which they complained. Common sense suggests that a book on which so much care had been lavished would find a ready acceptance among bibliophiles, of whom there were many in contemporary France. But common sense is not always a reliable guide, at least in historical bibliography, and this question is not as straightforward as it might seem.

Of course, such a book would be expensive, and would inevitably be beyond the means of all but a limited number of wealthy collectors. However, when we ask who actually first owned copies of this edition of the *Contes*, the only reliable indications we possess are the examples in the presentation bindings designed by Gravelot, and those which bear the arms of their owners (none are known which have both of these characteristics). Now, copies in presentation bindings were extremely few in number, and it is virtually impossible today to say to whom they were offered. Writing a century ago, Henri Cohen lists seven such examples; of these, only one belonged to an identifiable owner, M. de Beaujon, who was himself a Fermier général.

Copies in armorial bindings dating from before the Revolution are always found in contemporary morocco, and are, if anything, even rarer than those in presentation bindings. One bears the arms of Madame de Pompadour, another those of Madame du Barry, a third those of the Comtesse d’Artois, and a fourth those of the Marquis de Coislin. Madame du Barry did not become the official royal mistress until 1768, and in 1762 the Comtesse d’Artois was a mere child of six. Hence, only the copies belonging to Madame de

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31 There exists another edition, also dated 1762, which seems to be a trial issue of the Fermiers généraux edition (see Cohen, col. 569). It is very much less common, and was issued without plates. There is no indication that it was ever intended for general distribution, and its circulation may have been restricted to the Fermiers themselves.

32 To this total may be added two ‘presentation’ copies bound by Derome in olive morocco, a state not described by Cohen. The first was sold at the dispersal of the Abbey collection (London: Sotheby’s, 22 June 1965), no. 427. The second was sold in 1986 from the Salomons collection (London: Christie’s, 25 June), no. 71.

33 See Cohen, col. 562, who does not, however, mention the copy with the arms of the Marquis de Coislin; it is described in *Vision of a collector: the Lessing J. Rosenwald collection* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1991), 278. Cohen does cite a copy bearing the arms of Millin Duperreux, who can only be the painter of that name, but his lifespan (1764–1843) obviously places him outside our period. Another copy in contemporary morocco by Derome, with unidentified eighteenth-century arms, was sold by Maggs Bros (*Choix de beaux livres du XVè au XIXè siècle*, catalogue No. 12 (Paris: 1938), no. 188).
Pompadour and the Marquis de Coislin are likely to have been acquired immediately. Madame de Pompadour, who died in 1764, was reputed to have been instrumental in the appointment of several Fermiers généraux, and was one of their most powerful protectors later in life. 34 Although the Marquis de Coislin (1728–71) seems to have had no connection with the Fermiers généraux, his wife was reputedly one of the favourites of Louis XV. 35

Now, even if we add to these distinctive copies the dozen or so others in morocco which are listed by Cohen as having come from the Derome bindery (and which may therefore have been in circulation at an early date), the total does not much exceed twenty. While it is tempting to suppose that every member of the Compagnie received a copy, there is no evidence at all that this was actually the case; in fact, only three Fermiers (out of a total of some seventy listed in the Almanach royal for 1762) can be numbered with any certainty among the first owners of the work. 36 From the evidence we do have, it appears that the copies initially distributed, other than to members of the Compagnie, were acquired (perhaps as gifts) by people who were in a position to exert influence at Court on behalf of the Fermiers in their struggle against their detractors. Since the number of copies in this category is very small, it does not appear that the edition was intended to have a wide currency.

There is, however, a further complication here, in that, according to eighteenth-century testimony, the Contes were printed in an edition of 800. 37 What is more, in 1767 there appeared a circular, signed only by 'les éditeurs', which offered provincial booksellers a large number of copies, bound in calf, which, so it was claimed, were available immediately from stock. 38 This mysterious, and extremely rare, circular is both valuable and perplexing;

34 Durand, Les Fermiers généraux, "5. 76.
36 In addition to the Beaujon copy, there was another belonging to Seroux d'Agincourt (Cohen, col. 560), while a third, bound in eighteenth-century calf with morocco-covered spines, belonged to Deschamps de Saint-Amand (Laurent Coulet, Livres anciens et modernes, catalogue no. 8 (Paris, September, 1990)). The binding of this latter copy indicates that not all those in full morocco were intended for the Fermiers themselves.
37 This is the figure given in the Prospectus issued in 1792 by the Parisian bookseller Plassan to announce his intention to reprint the 1762 edition, using the remaining stock of the original plates which he had acquired. This document is reproduced in Cohen, col. 570. Plassan himself claims to have carefully verified the statement that only 800 copies of the 1762 edition were sold, despite the fact that 2,000 copies of each of the plates were printed. Certainly, his 1792 edition does use the same plates, often in excellent impressions, so that there is no obvious reason to doubt his word on the matter.
38 ‘M. P.’ [Maurice Péreire], ‘Une circulaire du temps concernant l’édition des Contes de La Fontaine dite des Fermiers généraux’, Bulletin du bibliophile (1922), 272-5. The text of this document was obviously the inspiration for the Prospectus issued by Plassan, with which it shares a number of textual similarities, including the assertion that provincial booksellers had not known where to acquire copies of the original edition when it appeared.
valuable because it gives some clue as to what happened to the remainder of the edition, and perplexing because it creates at least two further problems.

In the first place, it claims that provincial booksellers had experienced difficulties in acquiring copies of the *Contes* for resale: ‘ayant été annoncée comme faite à Amsterdam, sans nom de Libraire, la Province n’a pas su à qui s’adresser pour en avoir.’ Anyone with even a cursory knowledge of the booktrade in eighteenth-century France would find this statement surprising, to say the least. There existed well-established methods by which booksellers throughout the country could obtain even the most seditious and severely prohibited works, allegedly published in places such as London, Rome or Peking; acquiring copies of an edition of La Fontaine’s *Contes* which had not been subject to any official prohibition would therefore have presented no great obstacle to them, had it been available through the normal channels. 39

In the second place, the statement in the circular ignores the plain fact that at least two pirated versions of this edition were already on sale, one dating from 1764 and the other from that same year, 1767. In each case, the title-page proclaimed that the book had been printed in Amsterdam, and each was none the less widely available. 40 It is very difficult to see why, when two counterfeit editions were being published, Barbou (or someone, perhaps, to whom he had sold his stock of the *Contes*) should have allowed the book to moulder in a warehouse for five years. Even an entrepreneur with less business acumen than one of the most prominent Parisian publishers of the day would scarcely have failed to profit from the considerable demand for a work which had already achieved wide fame.

The only obvious, satisfactory explanation for this apparent failure to dispose of the substantial remaining stocks of the *Contes* is that the Fermiers généraux had ordered that they should not be sold at once. 41 This prohibition would have the effect of making the book all the more desirable to those few fortunate individuals who possessed copies in fine, perhaps even in presentation, bindings, or who took care to have them embellished with their arms as a sign of their pride in ownership. The very fact that the copies mentioned in the circular of 1767 were apparently bound only in calf shows that some care was taken to ensure that those in morocco bindings would remain the exception.

40 See Cohen, col. 571. These editions are quite distinct from that of 1762, both typographically and in having reversed impressions of the plates.
41 Plassan’s *Prospectus* does little to elucidate the truth of the matter, but hints at some secret manoeuvering by describing the 1762 edition as having been ‘séquestrée depuis 1767 par des circonstances particulières’ (Cohen, col. 570). This date must be erroneous, since the ‘circulaire’ offering the remaining copies itself dates from 1767.
If, indeed, circulation of the book was initially restricted to a small number of important or influential recipients, it would obviously be preferable not to draw attention to the manoeuvre or to the reasons behind it; this would explain why the distribution was handled with a lack of ostentation which ill assorts with the care lavished on the book beforehand. Whether the decision to distribute it in this way was taken at the outset of the enterprise, or at a late stage in production, it is impossible to say, though commercial considerations incline one to the latter view. On the other hand, if the edition had always been intended only for limited, private distribution, this might explain why no attempt was apparently made to obtain a *privilege*.

It seems incontestable, on the other hand, that the Fermiers généraux's wish to pay for this edition the *Contes* was motived by the fact that, in reply to the attacks they had endured, they were keen to reaffirm their confidence in their way of life and the values for which they stood. They hoped, in addition, to put an end to these criticisms by offering copies of the *Contes* to those who could help them to retaliate, at a time when, so it appeared, the State had become sufficiently angered by the activities and utterances of the *Philosophes* to allow punitive measures to be taken with little prompting. It is not possible to prove that all the copies initially distributed outside the ranks of the Compagnie were intended for recipients who could assist the Fermiers in this way, but the circumstantial evidence points strongly to this conclusion. Furthermore, we know for a fact that they enlisted Diderot's help to write the *Abrege de la vie de La Fontaine*; they can only have hoped that, in doing so, they could recruit to their cause the editor of the *Encyclopedie*, and so put an end, by other means, to the hostility shown towards them in that work.

Despite the money lavished on the *Contes* in an attempt to use the book as a weapon against their critics, there is little evidence that the Fermiers succeeded in reducing them to silence: for years to come, Mirabeau went on publishing vituperative attacks on their activities and all they stood for, while the last ten volumes of the text of the *Encyclopedie*, which contained many no less bitter denunciations, were issued without official opposition in 1765.
Much of what has been said in the latter part of this study is, inevitably, speculative, in that it is an attempt to piece together such facts as we have, and these are far from revealing the whole story. In one sense, this tentative interpretation of the publishing history of the *Contes* is not at odds with the view taken by other commentators, who argue that the Fermiers wished to use the book to win the backing of powerful protectors. But previous writers have claimed that their purpose was primarily to safeguard their monopoly of tax-gathering,\(^{45}\) whereas there is no evidence that, in 1762, this monopoly was threatened in any way.\(^{46}\) And no other commentator has remarked on the very odd situation revealed by the circular of 1767.

In publishing their edition of the *Contes*, the Fermiers were undoubtedly reacting to a climate of hostility largely created by the *Philosophes* and those who sympathised with them. In the long run, however, they were fighting a losing battle, for the criticisms which they attempted to suppress were subsequently to be vindicated, in the years of financial crisis which preceded the Revolution itself. The eventual triumph of their adversaries would sweep away not only the ostentatious luxury of which the *Contes* were the supreme example, but with it the whole system in which the king’s tax-collectors played such a central, and controversial, part.
