Spontaneous Human Combustion and Claude-Nicolas Le Cat's Hunt for Fame

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On the evening of February 19, 1725, a merchant named Jean Millet, his wife, Jeanne Le Maire, and their servant, Lucie Dauxerre, ate dinner at their home in Reims, France. Afterward, they played cards and then went to bed. But the cold February air bothered Le Maire, and she went to warm up in the kitchen. At 2:30 in the morning, Millet awoke to a "bad odor spreading throughout his home."[1] He made his way to the kitchen and saw his wife's body on fire. Dauxerre ran to fetch water, but it was too late, and Le Maire was dead. The following day, local authorities launched a murder investigation and Millet emerged as their chief suspect. He was eventually convicted of his wife's murder. In a surprising turn of events, however, an "enlightened" higher court saved him from the gallows and set him free. Why? Because the judges had decided that Le Maire had not been murdered at all. Instead, she had spontaneously combusted because of her drunkenness and sloth.

It's a good story, but much of it was fabricated by the prominent French surgeon Claude-Nicolas Le Cat, an anatomist, medical popularizer, and founding member of the Académie des Sciences, Belles-Lettres et Arts de Rouen. In a *mémoire* he wrote in 1752, Le Cat warned his fellow citizens that they were "at risk of being, while they are still alive, the prey of the flames, which are both the product of and punishment for their debauchery."[2] He was neither speaking metaphorically

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[1] "[M]auvaise odeur quy estoit repandüe dans sa maison." 17B art. 1604, Bailliage Royal et Présidial de Reims, Archives Départementales de la Marne (ADM), Reims, France.

[2] "[S]ont menacés d'être, dès leur vivant, la proie des flammes, le produit et le châtiment de leurs débauches." Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés," 154.

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nor warning of the dangers of hellfire: he was talking about the phenomenon of spontaneous combustion, something he insisted was not just a theory but had been the recent and unfortunate fate of several women. He knew that some might mock him—was this fantastical topic really appropriate for an academician? But Le Cat forged ahead, seeing spontaneous human combustion as a topic that would accomplish several goals in one fell swoop: make clear the critical role that learned medical practitioners had to play in social reform and moral hygiene, delineate the boundaries of properly enlightened expertise, and bolster his own authority. The flashy topic was an enticing opportunity to drum up publicity for himself and his ideas.

To make his case compelling, however, he needed a narrative hook: a case study that would grab his readers' attention, provide conclusive evidence of his theories, and establish his scholarly bona fides. Nothing quite suited, so he took the trial of the merchant Millet (whom he knew from his time in Reims) and tweaked the story to make it work. He succeeded in turning Le Maire's death into an eye-catching narrative: his version of events appears in nineteenth-century medical treatises, Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852–53), and present-day scholarly analyses. He made Jeanne Le Maire's allegedly spontaneous demise and her husband's narrow escape from a miscarriage of justice one of the most famous stories of spontaneous combustion. But when I looked up the case in the archives, I saw that while Millet had indeed been accused of murder, the Parlement of Paris never intervened on the grounds that Le Maire had spontaneously combusted. Instead, they issued an interlocutory judgment reserved for the potentially guilty. To my knowledge, no one else has read Le Cat's *mémoire* alongside the Reims judicial record, and so Le Cat's fabrication has gone undetected.

Spontaneous human combustion was something of a fringe theory in eighteenth-century Europe and, as a result, has received little scholarly attention. Alleged cases were rare: approximately a dozen women over the course of a century and a half. Yet Le Cat's writings are more than an oddity to be glossed over, for they demonstrate an exploding interest in social and moral hygiene, fears about women's bodies, and the pressure on medical authors to package their ideas in exciting, even alarmist, terms. Le Cat's *mémoire* adds to our knowledge about eighteenth-century French medicine and philosophy and reveals the public relations strategies of ambitious medical practitioners eager to have more influence in shaping health and society.

For eighteenth-century medical practitioners were indeed ambitious. Rather than treating disease on a case-by-case basis, they preferred a broader approach: reforming society and improving health collectively, not individually. Alarmed by the degeneration they thought they saw all around them but confident in their own ability to effect change, elite medical practitioners aspired to reform morality and transform humanity. Their fears and aspirations contributed to the rise of "health panics" in the second half of the eighteenth century: disproportionate responses to

perceived threats to public health, often interpreted as dangerous harbingers of civilizational decline. These panics were so prevalent because eighteenth-century medical theory saw the body as highly reactive. Practitioners of vitalist medicine (which held that the body contained a dynamic and reactive fluid) and sensationalist philosophy (which held that sensations are the source of all knowledge) both focused on the effects of external stimuli. In particular, these doctors worried that the civilizing process was making people sick and weak. Modern urban lifestyles—replete with trips to the theater, visits to cafés, and lazy days spent reading novels—struck medical practitioners as unhealthy. Modernity allegedly had pernicious effects, including depopulation, excessive masturbation, attacks of the vapors, and declining morals.[3] These doctors held themselves up as the antidote, styling themselves as enlightened figures whose moral authority rivaled that of priests.[4]

But eighteenth-century medical practitioners had neither the clout nor the funding simply to demand reforms. They used their pens to cultivate public support for their ideas and, like all men of letters, they had to fight for attention.[5] This generated a great deal of pressure to produce what we might think of as eighteenth-century "clickbait": enticing publications well spiced with intrigue and drama. At the same time, publicity could have its downside. Appearing too eager for fame made an author seem less like a serious man of science and more like a charlatan. The balance between engaging the public without seeming desperate for attention was a tricky one. Medical print strategies were thus very different from those used in Old Regime gossip blogs, as Robert Darnton has called them; these scurrilous texts featured naughty nuns, corrupted youth, and debauched royals.[6] In contrast,

[3] Sean M. Quinlan, *The Great Nation in Decline: Sex, Modernity, and Health Crises in Revolutionary France c. 1750–1850* (Hampshire, 2007), 6–7; Lisa Jane Graham, "What Made Reading Dangerous in Eighteenth-Century France?," *French Historical Studies* 41, no. 3 (August 2018): 449–71, 449–51; Anne C. Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore, 1998), 46.

[4] Quinlan, *Great Nation in Decline*, 20–22; L. W. B. Brockliss and Colin Jones, *The Medical World of Early Modern France* (Oxford, 1997), 80.

[5] See esp. Laurence Brockliss, "Starting-Out, Getting-On, and Becoming Famous in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters," in *Scholars in Action: The Practice of Knowledge and the Figure of the Savant in the 18th Century*, ed. André Holenstein, Hubert Steinke, and Martin Stuber (Leiden, 2013); George Sebastian Rousseau, *The Notorious Sir John Hill: The Man Destroyed by Ambition in the Era of Celebrity* (Lanham, MD, 2012); Sarah Easterby-Smith, "John Hill, Exotic Botany, and the Competitive World of Eighteenth-Century Horticulture," in *Fame and Fortune*, ed. Clare Brant and George Rousseau (London, 2018), 291–313.

[6] Robert Darnton, "Blogging, Now and Then (250 Years Ago)," *European Romantic Review* 24, no. 3 (June 2013): 255–70.

medical authors needed to establish their scientific bona fides while still holding their readers' attention.[7] They had to walk a tightrope.

In this article, I take a page from Antoine Lilti's *Figures publiques* (*The Invention of Celebrity*), which has supercharged the study of eighteenth-century fame through its focus on the mechanisms that made modern celebrity, especially the rise of new media and the mass production of material culture.[8] Scholars of celebrity generally focus on actors, authors, and politicians, and so the intersection between medicine and fame remains underexplored.[9] Yet fame and publicity matter a great deal in contemporary medicine. Health professionals work to educate the public, draw attention to vital public health issues, and elevate themselves over uncredentialed amateurs. Charismatic, even famous, doctors can help accomplish all of the above.[10] The more medical practitioners have wished to reform society, the more they have needed to find strategies to capture the public's interest. And yet, then as now, the superficiality of celebrity and unseemliness of excessive enthusiasm made too much fame a dangerous thing.

[7] In this sense my work expands upon other studies of expertise by looking at more emotional and sensational dimensions. Steven Shapin, "Trusting George Cheyne: Scientific Expertise, Common Sense, and Moral Authority in Early Eighteenth-Century Dietetic Medicine," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 77, no. 2 (2003): 263–97; Zachary Dorner, "'No one here knows half so much of this matter as yourself': The Deployment of Expertise in Silvester Gardiner's Surgical, Druggist, and Land Speculation Networks, 1734–83," *William and Mary Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (2015): 287–322; Sarah Easterby-Smith, *Cultivating Commerce: Cultures of Botany in Britain and France, 1760–1815* (Cambridge, 2018); E. C. Spary, *Feeding France: New Sciences of Food, 1760–1815* (Cambridge, 2014); Cathy McClive, "Blood and Expertise: The Trials of the Female Medical Expert in the Ancien-Régime Courtroom," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 82, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 86–108.

[8] Antoine Lilti, *Figures publiques: L'invention de la célébrité (1750–1850)* (Paris, 2014), translated by Lynn Jeffress as *The Invention of Celebrity, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, 2017).

[9] Stella Tillyard, "Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century London," *History Today* (June 2005); Brian Cowan, "Doctor Sacheverell and the Politics of Celebrity in Post-Revolutionary Britain," in *Intimacy and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Literary Culture*, ed. Emrys D. Jones and Victoria Joule (Cham, 2018), 111–37; Felicity Nussbaum, *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater* (Philadelphia, 2010); Margaret E. Boyle, "Portrait of an Actress in Eighteenth-Century Peru," *Dieciocho* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 71–82; Giacomo Lorandi, "Les dynamiques d'une célébrité transnationale: Théodore Tronchin et l'inoculation de l'infant Ferdinand de Parme en 1764," *Gesnerus* 74, no. 2 (2017): 240–67.

[10] The need for charismatic, authoritative medical experts is particularly strong during a crisis. As I finish revising this article during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, Dr. Anthony Fauci is featured on the cover of *InStyle* magazine, and graffiti stating "in Dr. Nirav Shah we trust" has popped up in Portland, Maine, where Dr. Shah is director of the state CDC. Fans of both doctors can purchase material objects celebrating them.

Claude-Nicolas Le Cat's essay on spontaneous combustion neatly encapsulates all of these trends and illustrates how they operated in a feedback loop. Like many medical authors, Le Cat suspected that modern and idle lifestyles could have devastating health effects (although his predicted result, spontaneous combustion, was more dramatic and much less accepted than ubiquitous symptoms such as "enervation"). Likewise, his solution to the alleged menace of spontaneous human combustion related to the larger culture of eighteenth-century medicine: he called for elite medical practitioners to have greater social and cultural authority. And to share his ideas with as many people as possible and (not coincidentally) bolster his own reputation, Le Cat sought ever-wider audiences for his texts and ever-greater fame for himself. He never achieved the celebrity of Rousseau or Voltaire, but as a relentlessly ambitious individual, he is ideal for understanding the tools that medical practitioners and, more broadly, men of letters used to pique interest, "enlighten" their audience, and chase fame. Their task was complicated by the fact that they viewed the public with both hope and suspicion: they were eager to educate and enlighten but also worried that the public was too distractible, too easily swayed by hacks and swindlers.[11] Engaging the public, even as an expert, was not a purely rational exercise. Studying Le Cat's public relations strategies as well as his ideas makes clear how complicated this endeavor could be. While fame had its risks for everyone, the stakes were especially high for those who wanted to be seen as serious men of science.

Le Cat illustrates a key development in the long eighteenth century: the rise of new cultural personae, and especially new learned personae such as the philosophe. As an elite surgeon determined to make a name for himself in the Republic of Letters, Le Cat best fits the category of "artiste" (artisans with creative talent and a grasp of abstract knowledge) because he placed equal emphasis on his practical skills and his theoretical acumen, a combination he believed stacked up favorably against those who were more or less educated than he.[12] Artistes were generally men, and their model of masculinity differed from the worldly masculinity of elites or the masculinity of sociable men of science.[13] While much

[11] Antoine Lilti, *L'héritage des Lumières: Ambivalences de la modernité* (Paris, 2019), 169–96.

[12] Paola Bertucci, *Artisanal Enlightenment: Science and the Mechanical Arts in Old Regime France* (New Haven, CT, 2017).

[13] On different forms of learned masculinity, see Anne Goldgar, *Impolite Learning: Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680–1750* (New Haven, CT, 1995); Elena Russo, *Styles of Enlightenment: Taste, Politics, and Authorship in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore, 2007); Lisa Wynne Smith, "Remembering Dr. Sloane: Masculinity and the Making of an Eighteenth-Century Physician," *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 42, no. 4 (2019): 433–53; Jan Golinski, "The Care of the Self and the Masculine Birth of Science," *History of Science* 40, no. 2 (June 2002): 125–45; Meghan K. Roberts, *Sentimental Savants: Philosophical Families in Enlightenment France* (Chicago, 2016).

scholarship on gender and the Enlightenment focuses on femininity, masculinity was an equally fraught and contested category.

To explore these interrelated themes, this article is structured as a series of concentric circles. First, I parse the archival records of the 1725 murder investigation, because Le Maire's death and Millet's trial were the foundation of Le Cat's essay. I will then turn to Le Cat's 1752 *mémoire* on spontaneous human combustion in ever-wider contexts. While the story of spontaneous human combustion at first seems like an odd but straightforward anecdote, studying it closely reveals a much more complicated story about the ambitious man who publicly leveraged anxieties about modernity, idleness, and consumption.

The Murder Investigation (1725–26)

Jeanne Le Maire lived with her husband Jean Millet, a merchant of *merrains*, the staves used to make oak wine barrels, in Reims. When the chief royal prosecutor, Maillefer, learned of Le Maire's death that February morning in 1725, he quickly dispatched the general criminal lieutenant Raoul Dorigny to investigate the scene. Maillefer summoned a team of physicians and surgeons—Gerard Le Fils and Simon Hedoüin, professors in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Reims, as well as Nicolas Martin and Pierre Mafeux, master surgeons in Reims—to examine the body and determine what had happened.

The 1725 investigation focused on familial discord rather than medical or moral questions. Le Maire's relationship with her husband and servant merited many pages of notes, versus the handful devoted to medical observations. Medicolegal expertise was tightly bounded: the experts limited themselves to a careful discussion of the body and the medical report played a very limited role in the investigation and trial.[14]

Per the 1670 Criminal Ordinance, which required medicolegal reports in all cases of suspicious death, eighteenth-century doctors and surgeons examined bodies in situ or, if they were summoned later, after they were exhumed. They then wrote up a report (*procès-verbal*) for the judges that included a description of the body and crime scene and explained the cause of death. Medicolegal experts were most commonly physicians or surgeons; the court called midwives only if the crime had a sexual or reproductive component. Experts had their credentials vetted by the court and fit within a long-standing notion of expertise as rooted in artisanal knowledge and practice.[15] Their reports featured sensory evidence—what

[14] Cathy McClive, "'Witnessing of the Hands' and Eyes: Surgeons as Medico-Legal Experts in the Claudine Rouge Affair, Lyon, 1767," *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 35, no. 4 (December 1, 2012): 489–503.

[15] Y 10555, Archives Nationale (AN), Paris, France.

they saw, touched, and smelled—which they interpreted using their experience and learning.[16] But this was no "CSI: Old Regime." Eighteenth-century medicolegal witnesses rarely offered decisive evidence. Even when they agreed among themselves, their judgment did not carry enough weight on its own to justify a conviction.[17]

Le Fils, Hedoüin, Martin, and Mafeux traveled to the Millet residence on the same day that Millet discovered Le Maire's body and they noted the extreme damage the fire had done to the corpse: only the skull (minus the lower jaw), a single buttock, and a leg remained. Some of the brains had spilled out and were found on the floor. Strangely, the rest of the room looked untouched. They concluded that "this fire and destruction of three quarters of the body appears to us to have been caused either by the fire in the hearth or by a woman's warming pan." As for why the fire had flared so quickly, and so thoroughly consumed Le Maire's body, perhaps, they mused, she had fallen asleep in her chair, or suffered from some weakness, vapors, or *affection sapoureuse*. In such a state, she might not have noticed or been able to act if her clothing had caught fire. At that point, the "fatty and combustible parts" of her body could have fueled the fire, stoking it to the point that it quickly consumed most of her person.[18]

Rather than interpreting Le Maire's death as a murder, the medical authorities saw her death as accidental. Perhaps something particular about Le Maire's body explained her death, but they remained vague as to what this might have been and refrained from issuing any moral judgments. While the document is certainly gendered—we see here four male medical practitioners subjecting a female body to intense scrutiny and describing her remains in acute detail—the experts did not blame Le Maire's sex for her death. They simply concluded that something mysterious and idiosyncratic might have been wrong with her.

This was a modest demonstration of medical authority, with physicians and surgeons confining themselves to what they could see and touch. As was customary, the report stressed that the experts went "to see and visit" the body.[19] Cathy

[16] Ursula Klein, "Artisanal-Scientific Experts in Eighteenth-Century France and Germany," *Annals of Science* 69, no. 3 (2012): 304. For more on medical experts, see McClive, "'Witnessing of the Hands' and Eyes"; Cathy McClive, "Blood and Expertise: The Trials of the Female Medical Expert in the Ancien-Régime Courtroom," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 82, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 86–108; Silvia De Renzi, "Witnesses of the Body: Medico-Legal Cases in Seventeenth-Century Rome," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 33, no. 2 (June 2002): 219–42, and "Medical Expertise, Bodies, and the Law in Early Modern Courts," *Isis* 98, no. 2 (June 2007): 315–22.

[17] Given this, some scholars argue that we should not use the term "expert" for the early modern period. Andre Wakefield, "Butterfield's Nightmare: The History of Science as Disney History," *History and Technology* 30, no. 3 (July 3, 2014): 232–51.

[18] "[C]ette combustion et réduction de plus des trois quarts du corps nous parois avoir été causé par le feu du foyer ou d'un chauffoir a femme"; "parties graisseuses et combustibles." ADM 17B art. 1604.

[19] "[V]oir et visitter." ADM 17B art. 1604

McClive has shown that the salience of the phrase "voir et visiter" in medicolegal reports highlights the empirical, rather than theoretical, purpose of such examinations. Physicians and surgeons reported what they saw and touched, resisting the urge to embellish or pontificate.[20]

At roughly the same time, the general criminal lieutenant Dorigny began to interview witnesses and note suspicious details. Neighbors reported having heard a disturbance around seven in the evening on the nineteenth but were not sure the noise merited investigation. After all, Le Maire and Millet had "frequent disputes." The sounds emanating from the Millet home were, however, loud enough that Marie Madeleine Faciot insisted that her brother, Henri Louis, take her over to the Millet house to knock on the Millets' door and see if anything was amiss. Millet refused to open the door but told his neighbors that "it was Nothing." Several hours later, neighbors woke to the sounds of Dauxerre fetching water while crying "Mon dieu! Ah mon dieu!" At this point, Jeanne Nicole noted that she heard "some cries in the house of the said Millet and at the same time was struck by a bad smell."[21] Her husband didn't see or hear anything untoward, and so they went back to bed. It was not until the next morning that Le Maire's neighbors learned she had burned to death, her corpse reduced to ashes.

These events cast the politics of neighborly relations into sharp focus. Neighbors generally intervened in a marital quarrel if a woman's life seemed to be in danger or if her husband grew excessively violent. Le Maire's neighbors did investigate the strange sounds and smells emanating from her house.[22] But when the sounds ceased and Millet assured them that everything was fine, they retreated. This was a liminal case, and the neighbors stepped back over their own thresholds.[23]

[20] McClive, "'Witnessing of the Hands' and Eyes," 493–94.

[21] "[S]ouvent des contestations"; "nestoit Rien"; "quelques cries dans la maison du dit milet et en meme temps fuy saisy par une mauvaise odeur. . . ." ADM 17B art. 1604.

[22] Early modern neighbors were generally aware of and could intervene in domestic violence. Julie Hardwick, "Early Modern Perspectives on the Long History of Domestic Violence: The Case of Seventeenth-Century France," *Journal of Modern History* 78, no. 1 (March 2006): 1–36; Joanne Bailey, "I dye [*sic*] by Inches: Locating Wife Beating in the Concept of a Privatisation of Marriage and Violence in Eighteenth-Century England," *Social History* 31, no. 3 (2006): 273–94. For a related discussion of women policing their neighborhoods, see Jacob Melish, "Women and the Courts in the Control of Violence between Men: Evidence from a Parisian Neighborhood under Louis XIV," *French Historical Studies* 33, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 1–31; for more on divisions between women within and without the household, see Laura Gowing, "The Haunting of Susan Lay: Servants and Mistresses in Seventeenth-Century England," *Gender & History* 14, no. 2 (2002): 183–201. The Gowing article also suggests how fraught interventions into household disputes could be and provides further context for why Le Maire's neighbors did not take additional action.

[23] I thank Julie Hardwick for helping me understand what might have been happening here.

Dorigny benefited from hindsight, however, and his suspicions were further piqued when he learned that Le Maire had accused her husband of having an affair with Dauxerre, their young and pretty servant. Recognizing that the circumstances did not shine the most flattering light on them, Millet and Dauxerre did their best to depict Le Maire as an unpleasant character. She was, they insisted, often drunk. Millet claimed "when his wife was overcome by wine . . . then it was his servant who had to look after her business."[24] Dauxerre went much further, reporting that Le Maire's brother said he had once found her "in a state of drunkenness so profound that he had thought she was dying and had been compelled to fetch the parish priests."[25] Millet and Dauxerre stressed Le Maire's faults, and they did so in much sharper language than any of their neighbors.

These attacks did not distract Dorigny from the holes in Millet's and Dauxerre's testimony. For example, both insisted that Dauxerre had "called for help" before going to fetch water to put out the fire, but Dorigny sternly rebuked Millet that "it is delusional to say that his servant called for help while the house remained closed up." When the two insisted they had extinguished the fire and then left to notify the parish priest and various relatives, the lieutenant criminal grew still more dubious: "We reprimanded [Millet] that it was unnatural to think that in an accident like the one he had experienced, that could have burned down his entire house, that he would have left it unattended . . . without taking any precaution." Still more questions arose: Why did Millet and Dauxerre seek help so far away from the accident? What had happened to Le Maire's entrails, which were missing from the scene? And, especially, how could the body have burned so quickly, quietly, and completely? Had they used "flammable drugs" to accelerate the fire? Millet and Dauxerre insisted they were innocent, even as judges asked Dauxerre "if she was aware that the community charged the said Millet and her with having killed and Burned the said le maire and if since the accident had transpired if they had not been Insulted many times by crowds gathered and rioting against them." Dauxerre confirmed that the public heckled them and assumed their guilt, but they were nevertheless "quite innocent."[26]

[24] "[Q]uand sa femme estoit suprise de vin . . . cestoit sa servante quy agissoit a ses affaires . . . ." ADM 17B art. 1604.

[25] "[D]ans un estate d'ivresse sy considerable quon crut quelle en mouraroit et quon fut meme obligé d'aller chercher les prestres de la paroisse." ADM 17B art. 1604.

[26] "[C]ria au secours"; "cest une Illusion de dire que sa servante a appellé au secours puisque leur maison estoit fermé"; "Nous avons remontré au repondant [Millet] que il nest pas naturel de croire que dans un accidant comme celuy la quy peut Incendir toutte la maison on la laisse seule . . . sans prendre aucune precaution"; "drogues bruslantes"; "sil nest point de sa connoissance que la voix publique chargeoit le dit Millet et [Dauxerre] d'avoir tué et Bruslé la ditte le maire et sydepuis que cet accident est arrivé ils n'ont point été Insulté plusieurs fois par la peuple attroupé et muttiné contre eux"; "fort innocent." ADM 17B art. 1604.

Unconvinced, Dorigny ordered Millet and Dauxerre arrested and placed in prison for further interrogation. Without a confession or eyewitness to the crime, it was difficult to establish guilt. Instead, Millet and Dauxerre were sentenced to "the question," the early modern euphemism for torture. That sentence triggered an automatic appeal to the higher court, the Parlement of Paris. The parlement handed down a judgment of *plus amplement informé* (prosecution suspended pending further evidence) and six months in prison for Millet and Dauxerre. At the end of this term, they converted the judgment to *plus amplement informé usquequò* (prosecution suspended pending further evidence and under lifetime suspicion), although the two were released from prison.[27]

Suspended prosecutions pending further evidence allowed courts to continue their investigations and, in the eighteenth century, often functioned as mitigated penalties. Courts could issue this judgment either in conjunction with a prison sentence or with the suspect at liberty; they could further adjust the sentence by limiting its duration or applying it indefinitely.[28] The verdict was a compromise between acquittal and conviction. In other words, judges suspected the accused was at fault but were unable to meet the high burden of proof required for a conviction. Suspended prosecutions—especially those that remained suspended indefinitely—still had punitive components and made the accused social pariahs.[29] In Millet and Dauxerre's case, there was plenty of suspicious circumstantial evidence but no confession or direct eyewitness, so the court placed them under a permanent cloud of suspicion when it could not convict them.

Setting aside the unusual condition of Le Maire's corpse, the case was quite standard in its investigative methods and conclusions. Authorities assumed that Le Maire's death was either accidental or the result of poison administered by an unfaithful husband. On all fronts, this seemed like business as usual, an investigation like so many others. But Claude-Nicolas Le Cat turned the story into something else altogether.

Le Cat's Mémoire on Spontaneous Combustion

In the 1750s, Claude-Nicolas Le Cat was, among other titles and honorifics, chief surgeon of the Rouen Hôtel-Dieu, winner of several essay contests, author

[27] AN X 2a/659. This form of suspended prosecution was used in serious cases and was meant to convey that the court was very suspicious of the accused. Daniel Jousse, *Traité de la justice criminelle de France* (Paris, 1771), 2:558.

[28] Richard Mowery Andrews, *Law, Magistracy, and Crime in Old Regime Paris* (Cambridge, 1994), 1:436–37.

[29] Andrews, *Law, Magistracy, and Crime in Old Regime Paris*, 437–39. Indeed, it was difficult for accused individuals to resume normal lives. One particularly interesting example is in Mary Lindemann, "Aujkliirung, Literature, and Fatherly Love," in *Mixed Matches: Transgressive Unions in Germany from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, ed. Mary Lindemann and David M. Luebke (New York, 2014).

of various medical texts, and founding member and perpetual secretary of the Académie des Sciences, Belles-Lettres et Arts de Rouen. While he is hardly the best-known Enlightenment figure today, he was a well-established man of science in his time. He was something of a local celebrity in his adopted hometown, known for his public courses and, starting in the 1760s, his frequent engagement in the local press. He was committed to the study of the body and passionate about communicating his findings to the public.

Per Le Cat's telling, Le Maire had spontaneously combusted. Some of Le Cat's modern biographers brush past his interest in spontaneous human combustion, but he took the idea very seriously, and historians should as well. This section begins with a focus on the *mémoire* itself and widens from there. Why did Le Cat write about spontaneous human combustion? Why did he fabricate evidence to support his claims? How does the *mémoire* relate to his larger career strategies? How was his intellectual persona gendered?

By the middle of the eighteenth century, surgeons had successfully elevated their work from artisanal craft to liberal profession, complete with university training. They also enjoyed a reputation for useful and engaged public service. Yet in an era before comprehensive regulation and professionalization, a dizzying array of individuals offered health care services and competition was fierce. Credentialed practitioners attempted to dismiss or demean their competitors as incompetent or shamelessly self-serving, but the bitterness of their complaints underscores how much they had to fight to be recognized as experts and valued as practitioners.[30] Moreover, the first half of the eighteenth century had witnessed corporate spats and pamphlet wars between surgeons and physicians, with the latter mocking the former as no more than an unthinking pair of hands. For example, when debating who deserved permission to teach public anatomy courses, physicians warned that surgeons were merely operators who performed dissections; only the physicians could truly comprehend and teach medical theory. If surgeons were allowed to teach, what was next? Would carpenters teach architecture?[31] For their part, and with greater success, the surgeons claimed that theirs was the more useful, experimental, and innovative art. They highlighted their service to the public and dismissed the physicians' arguments as the jealous sniping of ineffective and out-of-touch rivals.

[30] On surgeons' reputation for public service, see Christelle Rabier, "Le 'service public' de la chirurgie: Administration des premiers secours et pratiques professionnelles à Paris au XVIIIe siècle," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 58, no. 1 (2011). On corporate fights, see Brockliss and Jones, *Medical World*, 590–605. For competitions between different sorts of practitioners, see Matthew Ramsey, *Professional and Popular Medicine in France, 1770–1830* (Cambridge, 1988).

[31] "Mémoire pour l'Université de Paris au sujet des patentes des roy, portant etablissement de cinq Demonstrateurs-Chirurgiens, dans l'Amphitheâtre de saint Côme" (1725), *Recueil de Piéces et Mémoires pour les Maîtres en l'Art & Science de Chirurgie contre La Faculté de Médecine, concernant la Déclaration du Roi du 23 Avril 1743*, 3:7.

As Le Cat worked to advance in these highly competitive circles, he learned two lessons. First, to be aggressive when dealing with rivals. He never let down his guard and responded fiercely to any criticism. Second, to focus on the public as a key source of power. He recognized that appealing to the public helped to attract support, and that writing in an engaging, accessible, and striking manner would help his cause. While Le Cat relied on many mechanisms to establish his career—family connections, well-heeled patrons, learned correspondence networks—my focus here is on his efforts to establish himself as a public intellectual because these reveal the most about eighteenth-century intellectual culture.[32]

Le Cat was no ordinary surgeon, for he had a university medical degree as well as his credentials as a surgeon. He valued the respect he commanded in France's medical world, but he wanted more: over the course of his career, he worked tirelessly to advance himself in scientific and academic circles, stretching himself to write on topics far from his original field of expertise. He longed to be esteemed as a man of letters as well as a man of science, and that too was a tough hill to climb.

Le Cat featured the Millet case in the scientific paper (*mémoire*) about spontaneous combustion that he read to the Académie des Sciences, Belles-Lettres et Arts de Rouen in 1752. He had already claimed in letters from 1748 and 1749 that it was possible for the human body to burst into flames without an external source of fire. Yet, as he noted indignantly, these letters had not received a warm reception and had met with "more skeptics than believers." Surely, he insisted, the fault lay with the genre and not his claims per se: "the confines of a letter stopped me from pulling together a sufficient number of authentic facts, which are the best defense against skepticism."[33] Le Cat hoped that his paper, later published in 1813 under the title *Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés de l'économie animale*, would allow him to correct those failings.[34] Nevertheless, he remained concerned

[32] Théodore Vetter, *Claude Nicolas Le Cat 1700–1768* (Rouen, 1968); Pierre Berteau, *Claude-Nicolas Le Cat: Chirurgien rouennais 1700–1768* (Rouen, 1968). On establishing a correspondence network, see Jens Häseler, "Entre République des lettres et République des sciences: Les correspondances 'scientifiques' de Formey," *Dix-huitieme siecle* 40, no. 1 (September 17, 2008): 93–110.

[33] "[P]lus d'incrédules que de partisans"; "les bornes d'une lettre m'avaient empêché de rassembler assez de faits authentiques, qui sont les meilleures armes contre l'incrédulité." Claude-Nicolas Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés de l'économie animale," *Journal de Médecine, Chirurgie, Pharmacie, Etc* 26 (January 1813).

[34] The *mémoire* was published by an aspiring savant named Pierre-Aimé Lair who wrote his own text on spontaneous human combustion: Pierre-Aimé Lair, *Essai sur les combustions humaines produites par un long abus des liqueurs spiritueuses* (Paris, 1800). The publication of these texts does not indicate widespread scientific support for the theory; in fact, when Alexandre Brongniart reviewed Lair's treatise, he found it overly fantastical. Alexandre Brongniart, *Bulletin des Sciences, pour la Société Philomatique*, 2:34. I thank Dena Goodman for this reference.

that his readers might dismiss his claims as embarrassingly fantastic. Eighteenth-century thinkers had to walk a fine line when it came to "wonders" and miracles. They could note extraordinary events, such as awe-inspiring astronomical events, but they needed to classify them as comprehensible consequences of nature's laws.[35] To fail to do so would be intellectually unsophisticated, which explains why Le Cat kept his explanation of spontaneous human combustion both empirical and secular.

Stories of spontaneous human combustion circulated after the 1663 publication of Thomas Bartholin's text on the phenomenon. Thirteen women allegedly burst into flames with no external cause between 1663 and 1782. Twelve had had a great fondness for drink and were members of the lower classes; the lone aristocrat did not drink but allegedly bathed in spirits. Nine of these women were French.[36] Intrigued by these stories, Le Cat seized the opportunity to explain a complicated and dramatic phenomenon while showing off his medical and scientific acumen.

Spontaneous combustion proved an excellent showcase for medical theories du jour. For Bartholin, that meant relying on iatrochemical and Cartesian theories of the body as a machine powered by internal fire. Le Cat's explanation, published later, argued that human bodies were saturated with a vital fluid.[37] This vital fluid, sometimes called an "animal fluid" in medical treatises, was a key principle of sensibility, and belief in its existence was very much in vogue in the eighteenth century. Whereas some physicians such as Albrecht von Haller focused on

[35] Le Cat noted other wondrous phenomena: "Le ciel fut de tout temps chargé directement du merveilleux"; these included "les divers météores ignés, les étoiles filantes, les feux folets, les aurores nocturnes, les phosphores de toute espèce . . . l'aurore boreale." Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés," 41. On wonders and order, see Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York, 1998), 359–63. The declining interest in wonders was neither immediate nor total. See E. C. Spary, "On the Ironic Specimen of the Unicorn Horn in Enlightened Cabinets," *Journal of Social History* 52, no. 4 (2019): 1033–60; Peter J. Bräunlein, "The Frightening Borderlands of Enlightenment: The Vampire Problem," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C: Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 43, no. 3 (September 2012): 710–19; and esp. Sean M. Quinlan, "Monstrous Births and Medical Networks: Debates over Forensic Evidence, Generation Theory, and Obstetrical Authority in France, ca. 1780–1815," *Early Science and Medicine* 14, no. 5 (January 2009): 599–629. On the use of spectacle in eighteenth-century science, see Simon Schaffer, "Natural Philosophy and Public Spectacle in the Eighteenth Century," *History of Science* 21, no. 1 (March 1983): 1–43. For a fuller analysis of wonders, science, and spontaneous combustion, see Michael R. Lynn, "Burning Questions: Spontaneous Combustion in Early Modern Europe," *Gesnerus* 76, no. 1 (2019): 36–57.

[36] Jessica Warner, "Old and in the Way: Widows, Witches, and Spontaneous Combustion in the Age of Reason," *Contemporary Drug Problems* 23, no. 2 (Summer, 1996): 197–220.

[37] Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology*, 46.

"irritability"—a more localized and limited phenomenon, largely characterized by muscle contractions—French philosophical doctors preferred the more expansive concept of sensibility, in which vital fluid permeated the whole of the body. It was highly sensitive and potentially devastating. Any number of external forces—lively music, bright colors—could have marked consequences on an individual's health.[38] According to Le Cat, animal fluid was so reactive that listening to the right kind of music, at regular intervals, could cure fevers and even heal someone bitten by a tarantula.[39] Along similar lines, he insisted in his spontaneous combustion *mémoire* that human beings, like "all beings, are swimming in a kind of lake of flammable matter, and are completely penetrated by it."[40] Understanding sensibility as a delicate but powerful force in the human body led doctors to view modern environments and lifestyles with alarm: urban environments besieged the body and threatened to throw its fluid off balance in what Anne Vila has described as "a daily battle against all kinds of potential stimuli and irritants."[41] Le Cat believed vital fluid to be particularly reactive and powerful, which explains why he understood it to have such potentially dramatic effects.

Furthermore, Le Cat argued that when people ate fatty, oily, or otherwise flammable foods, that material circulated in their blood and accumulated in their tissues. Evidence of this process could be seen by examining urine, which could contain phosphorus, or by dissecting the intestines and ascertaining the presence of flammable gas within them.[42] Such materials could "ignite solely through mixing, or by an effervescence created by their accumulation."[43] Given these facts, Le Cat thought it was a small leap to claim that spontaneous human combustion was possible. Vital fluid was understood to be highly, sometimes dangerously, reactive; Le Cat's text was an extreme version of that idea, but one that makes sense in the context of ideas about sensibility.

As was common in savants' narratives of extraordinary events, Le Cat compiled a list of alleged cases and provided as many details as he could, each time

[38] Carolyn Purnell, *The Sensational Past: How the Enlightenment Changed the Way We Use Our Senses* (New York, 2017).

[39] Downing A. Thomas, *Aesthetics of Opera in the Ancien Régime, 1647–1785* (Cambridge, 2002), 190–91.

[40] "[T]ous les êtres[,] nagent dans une espèce de lac de matières de feu, et en sont totalement pénétrés." Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés," 146.

[41] Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology*, 45–47.

[42] Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés," 147–48.

[43] "[S]'enflamment par ce seul mélange, ou par la seule effervescence qu'a produit leur abondante collection." Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés," 145–46. Le Cat was a proponent of chemical understandings of digestion, in which fermentation was a key part of the digestive process. E. C. Spary, *Eating the Enlightenment: Food and the Sciences in Paris, 1670–1760* (Chicago, 2012), 45, 49; Didier Nourisson, "La combustion humaine spontanée, ou la science à l'épreuve du feu," *Romantisme*, no. 81 (1993): 61–66.

noting his sources.[44] He drew particular attention to the death of Jeanne Le Maire because this "less famous" example would allow him to arrive at "our own observations" because he had spent "four or five months in the year 1724, and a month or two in the year 1725, in the city of Reims" and had "lodged in that city with Monsieur Millet, an innkeeper."[45]

Le Cat was fond of Millet, "one of the most upstanding men in the village."[46] He remembered Lucie Dauxerre as "a very pretty young person from Lorraine" who had received "much attention" from Millet.[47] Le Maire, however, he did not remember fondly, describing her as "drunk all the time."[48] Following these personal reminiscences, Le Cat included a detailed description of Le Maire's corpse, information supposedly gleaned from a surgeon named Chrétien who had examined Le Maire's remains. His description of her corpse closely followed the medicolegal report provided to the Reims court and suggests that Le Cat was familiar with the particulars of the investigation, which he noted began "a few days after I left the city."[49]

Le Cat disagreed with his colleagues about the cause of the conflagration. He found it unlikely that either the fireplace (which, he noted, was a foot and a half away from the body) or the warming pan could have sparked such a blaze. Whereas the original examiners had determined that Le Maire's clothing had caught fire and something about her body had fanned the flames, Le Cat insisted this was impossible. If Le Maire's body had been set on fire by an external source, there would not have been "a consumption as total as that of Madame Millet, nor a consumption started by the entrails, viscera, in the center of the body, and [which was] complete in these regions, nor, finally, a consumption that considerable taking place a foot and a half from the hearth."[50] Le Cat reminded his readers that "everyone

[44] Palmira Fontes da Costa, *The Singular and the Making of Knowledge at the Royal Society of London in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2009), 25–27, 80; Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés," 50.

[45] "[M]oins célebre"; "nos propres observations"; "quatre ou cinq mois de l'année 1724, et un mois ou deux de l'année 1725, dans la ville de Rheims. J'avais logé en cette ville chez le sieur Millet, aubergiste . . . ." Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés," 52.

[46] "[U]n des plus honnêtes hommes de la ville."

[47] "[U]ne jeune personne de Lorraine fort jolie"; "beaucoup d'attention." Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés," 52.

[48] "[S]ans cesse ivre." Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés," 52.

[49] "[P]eu de jours que j'avais quitté la ville de Rheims." Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés," 53.

[50] "[N]I une consomption aussi entière que celle de la dame Millet, ni une consomption commencée par les entrailles, les viscères, par le centre du corps, et complète en ces régions, ni enfin une consomption aussi considérable arrivée à un pied et demi de l'âtre du feu." Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés," 54–55.

knows there is nothing so difficult to burn [as a healthy human body], and that during public executions they must use whole cords of wood, and to further help the efficacy of these pyres they must dismember the bodies." No ordinary fire could explain the scene at the Millet house. Instead, he argued, "these are all circumstances which characterize spontaneous combustion," a process driven by the body's powerful inner forces rather than weaker external flames.[51]

Le Cat thought it especially likely that someone like Le Maire—an elderly woman who drank too much—had combusted. All humans were combustible, but he argued that the danger of bursting into flames became especially great if there was "continual usage of spirits, like wine, and especially brandy."[52] Moreover, women were especially at risk. But this was not, Le Cat insisted, because of innate physical differences. While "our gallant poets" might be tempted to dramatize these women's deaths, more cautious observers would not make this same mistake. Instead, "the careful [*exact*] anatomist and the deep-thinking [*profond*] physiologist" would realize that even if "real differences" distinguished men from women, the differences between the sexes were not absolute.[53]

No, the key factor, Le Cat insisted, was not sexual difference. Instead, "to explain the circumstance we have observed, there is a characteristic of the lifestyle of the fair sex . . . already recognized as the source of the qualities that mark our case: that is, an idle and sedentary life."[54] As Le Cat had just theorized, spontaneous human combustion was the result of the fermentation of the human body's naturally combustible matter, enhanced by fatty foods and (most dangerously) flammable liquors. And as chemists knew well, if you want to ferment something, the process of "effervescence essentially demands that matter be gathered together and left to sit."[55] And so, for "the sex that is more inclined than ours to be in a state of repose,

[51] "[T]out le monde sait qu'il n'est rien de si difficile à brûler [qu'un cadavre], et que dans les exécutions publiques il faut y employer des cordes entières des bois, et aider encore l'action de ces grands bûchers par le dépècement des corps qu'on y consume"; "ce sont là autant de ces circonstances qui caractérisent l'incendie spontané. . . ." Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés," 54–55.

[52] "[L]'usage continuel des boissons spiriteuses, comme le vin, et sur-tout l'eau-de-vie. . . ." Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés," 149. Per chemical understandings of combustion, ether and spirit of wine were very comparable to phlogiston and were highly flammable. Spary, *Eating the Enlightenment*, 173.

[53] "[N]os poëtes galans"; "l'anatomiste exact et le physiologiste profond"; "différences réelles." Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés," 152.

[54] "[I]l est, pour expliquer cette circonstance de nos observations, une particularité du genre de vie du beau sexe . . . déjà reconnue pour être la source la plus féconde des caractères qui le distinguent du nôtre: c'est la vie oisive et sédentaire." Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés," 153. On sedentary lifestyles as a health risk, see Anna C. Vila, *Suffering Scholars: Pathologies of the Intellectual in Enlightenment France* (Philadelphia, 2018), 20–67; Spary, *Eating the Enlightenment*, 262.

[55] "[C]ette effervescence exige essentiellement le repos dans la masse des matières qu'on veut faire fermenter." Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés,"

their humors will be more exposed to stagnate, to ferment, to ignite, and, all things being equal, this flammable effervescence will especially occur in those people whose age or decrepit state makes it even more necessary for them to remain sedentary."[56] Le Maire's lifestyle had set her up to burst into flames.

There are very few scholarly studies of spontaneous human combustion.[57] Within that small literature, scholars like Jessica Warner have argued that the theory of spontaneous human combustion is just one more example of European misogyny: the woman on fire was the new witch.[58] But simple woman-hating does not explain Le Cat's text, which instead reflects larger fears of civilizational decline—a gendered discourse, to be sure, but one gendered in complicated and malleable ways. Le Cat argued that Le Maire, an elderly woman who drank too much, dangerously soaked her body in alcohol and made it combustible; she then lived a sedentary life on account of her sex and age, which allowed her particularly flammable flesh the repose it needed to combust and ignite. In his view, women were prone to injury or death, but not because of innate physical difference.[59] And while nearly all of the women who allegedly combusted were members of the lower classes, he did not

153. For an experiment intended to refute this theory of digestion, see Spary, *Eating the Enlightenment*, 229.

[56] "[L]e sexe est plus que nous dans cet état de repos, ses humeurs seront plus exposées à séjourner, à fermenter, à s'enflammer; et, toutes choses égales d'ailleurs, cette effervescence inflammatoire arriver sur-tout dans les personnes que l'âge ou un état décrépit mettra dans la nécessité d'être encore plus sédentaires." Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés," 153. On skeletal differences caused by sedentary lifestyles, see Michael Stolberg, "A Woman Down to Her Bones: The Anatomy of Sexual Difference in the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries," *Isis* 94, no. 2 (2003): 274–99, 280–81.

[57] Almost none of these focus on the history of eighteenth-century France (this despite the fact that most suspected cases of spontaneous combustion took place in France during the eighteenth century): Warner, "Old and in the Way"; J. L. Heilbron, "The Affair of the Countess Görlitz," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 138, no. 2 (June 1, 1994): 284–316; Sheila Shaw, "Spontaneous Combustion and the Sectioning of Female Bodies," *Literature and Medicine* 14, no. 1 (May 1995): 1–22; Didier Nourrisson, "La combustion humaine spontanée, ou la science à l'épreuve du feu," *Romantisme* 23, no. 81 (1993): 61–66. An exception to that rule is Lynn, "Burning Questions."

[58] Warner, "Old and in the Way," 211–16.

[59] Sex and gender differences in eighteenth-century France were sometimes discussed as binary and sometimes not. On conceptions of these differences as binary, see Londa Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex? Women in the Origins of Modern Science* (Cambridge, 1991); Ludmilla Jordanova, "Natural Facts: An Historical Perspective on Science and Sexuality," in *Nature, Culture, and Gender*, ed. C. P. MacCormack and M. Strathern (Cambridge, 1980), 42–69; Quinlan, *Great Nation in Decline*, 42–50. On less binary constructions of sexual difference, see Cathy McClive, *Menstruation and Procreation in Early Modern France* (Surrey, 2015).

focus on social class. He ignored the specific social position of the women he discussed and instead made his text more broadly about the health effects of idleness.[60]

In making this argument, Le Cat joined the chorus of Enlightenment writers who worried about the corrupting influence of civilization. As Anne Vila and Sean Quinlan have argued, the stakes of eighteenth-century medicine were high. Influenced by understandings of sensibility, in which human bodies were dramatically affected by environmental and cultural changes, doctors saw danger everywhere. Modernity seemed fraught with health risks, with devastating consequences for state and society.[61] Medical writers warned that the sedentary yet stimulating character of modern life was slowly weakening minds and bodies, in sharp contrast to the strong, well-balanced bodies of the long-ago past. This degeneration took many possible forms: feminization, infertility, general enervation, loss of vitality, apathy, and emotional withdrawal. While the symptoms were legion, the fundamental problem remained the same: modernity was unhealthy, and until doctors took action, degeneration would continue unchecked.[62] This medical pessimism functioned as a call to arms that expanded the reach of medical authority, with some physicians even arguing they should weigh in on courtship, marriage, and sexual relations.[63] Le Cat's contribution to this discourse was focused on the corrosive impacts of idleness, "mother of all vices."[64]

Women served as canaries in the coal mine, warning of dangers that threatened everyone. Women, especially elite women, were closely associated with the civilizing process and seen as responsible for the flourishing of commerce and softening of manners that characterized modern society. Being "civilized" entailed idleness or even confinement. In Rousseau's famous critique of a Parisian salon, for example, the men in attendance chafed at their physical restrictions: "see these . . . men perpetually locked in their voluntary prison, get up, sit back down,

[60] By contrast, political discussions around idleness often focused on urban beggars and vagrants. Julia M. Gossard, "Breaking a Child's Will: Eighteenth-Century Parisian Juvenile Detention Centers," *French Historical Studies* 42, no. 2 (April 2019): 239–59, 241.

[61] Mary McAlpin, *Female Sexuality and Cultural Degradation in Enlightenment France: Medicine and Literature* (Surrey, 2013), 70–80; Michael E. Winston, *From Perfectibility to Perversion: Meliorism in Eighteenth-Century France* (New York, 2005), 57–60; Spary, *Eating the Enlightenment*, 245; Sarah C. Maza, *The Myth of the Bourgeoisie* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 41–68.

[62] Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology*, 105–7.

[63] Michael Winston, "Medicine, Marriage, and Human Degeneration in the French Enlightenment," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38, no. 2 (2005): 263–81.

[64] "[M]ère de tous les vices." Claude-Nicolas Le Cat, *Discours qui a remporté le prix a l'Academie de Dijon, en l'année 1750 . . . Nouvelle édition, accompagnée de la Réfutation de ce discours, par les apostilles critiques de l'un des académiciens examinateurs, qui a refusé de donner son suffrage à cette pièce* (London, 1751), 132. See Lynn, "Burning Questions," for a fuller discussion of victims of spontaneous human combustion.

go back and forth without stopping to the fireplace, to the window, to pick up and arrange one hundred times a screen, to leaf through books, to look over paintings, to turn, to pirouette around the room."[65] The men's bodies positively vibrated with energy. Their female host, by contrast, could be found "sprawled motionless on her chaise lounge, with nothing active except her tongue and her eyes."[66] By insisting that the men stay indoors with her, cooped up while she engaged them in idle chatter, the Parisian hostess surrounded herself with "a seraglio of men more womanish than she."[67] Women were simultaneously civilizing and civilized, and a sedentary lifestyle was a key part of that; it was, for Le Cat, "the most fecund source of the characteristics that distinguish [the female sex] from ours."[68] Elite women aspired to leisure because it was a key marker of luxury and status. While men demonstrated their elite status through their professional and vocational accomplishments, women did the same by not working, and conspicuously so.[69]

As Silvia Sebastiani argues with regard to the Scottish Enlightenment, "the measure of civilization foresaw a process of feminization." Women exerted an admirable influence on men in many respects, making them kinder, less bellicose, and more eloquent, loving, and stylish. But that process could go too far and make men soft and womanish.[70] Enlightenment thinkers saw this as a moral dilemma: at what point did a man tip from admirably civilized to lamentably effeminate? In this same vein, by not defining spontaneous human combustion as a necessarily feminine condition and instead the result of idleness, Le Cat left open the possibility that men, too, could become so sedentary, so idle, that they might burst into flames.

[65] "[V]oyez ces: . . . hommes toujours contrains dans ces prisons volontaires, se lever, se rasseoir, aller et venir sans cesse à la cheminée, à la fenêtre, prendre et poser cent fois un écran, feuilleter des livres, parcourir des tableaux, tourner, pirouetter par la chambre. . . ." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Lettre à d'Alembert* (1757), ed. Marc Launay (Paris, 1967), 197.

[66] "[É]tendue sans mouvement dans sa chaise longue, n'a d'actif que la langue et les yeux." Rousseau, *Lettre à d'Alembert*, 197.

[67] "[U]n sérail d'hommes plus femmes qu'elle. . . ." Rousseau, *Letter à d'Alembert*, 197.

[68] "[L]a source la plus féconde des caractères qui le distinguent [the female sexe] du nôtre: C'est la vie oisive et sédentaire." Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés," 153. On women as bellwethers of civilization, including the threat posed to men if they became too much like women, see Silvia Sebastiani, *The Scottish Enlightenment: Race, Gender, and the Limits of Progress* (Basingstoke, 2013).

[69] Dena Goodman, *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters* (Ithaca, NY, 2009), 14; Arlette Farge, *La Révolte de Mme Montjean* (note Goodman's critique of Farge's argument about social mobility).

[70] Sebastiani, *Scottish Enlightenment*, 134.

Authority, Publicity, and the Public

Like many Enlightenment thinkers, then, Le Cat glorified utility, castigated idleness, and worried about decline and degeneration.[71] But how and why Le Cat made these arguments is as significant as the ideas themselves and reveals a great deal about how Enlightenment personae operated in the world.

Writing about spontaneous human combustion enabled Le Cat to demonstrate his sophisticated education and thereby construct his scientific authority. Combustion, and in particular connections between combustion, consumption, and digestion, enabled Le Cat to talk about chemistry and anatomy. These two increasingly prominent areas of inquiry helped elite medical practitioners demonstrate the superiority of their learning over their less formally educated peers.[72] Anatomy in particular was a cornerstone of Le Cat's intellectual reputation. Early in his career and shortly after his arrival in Rouen, Le Cat began giving public anatomy lessons.[73] Reflecting on these courses some years later, Le Cat noted their popularity: "apart from practitioners of the art [of medicine], all those curious about nature, of every status, came in droves to fill my amphitheater."[74]

The anatomy classes were a key forum for Le Cat to demonstrate his expertise. On a basic level, the lessons demonstrated his great dexterity in opening the human body and revealing its secrets. Le Cat's nimble fingers and impressive results with difficult operations such as removing bladder stones were crucial to his reputation; a celebrated surgeon needed a stellar track record.[75] Le Cat's operation success rate and his command of the anatomy stage made him a force to be reckoned with, an expert who embodied a particular kind of medical expertise. The anatomy courses not only made his reputation in Rouen but also provided a critical

[71] In addition to the many, nearly ubiquitous valorizations of usefulness during this period (e.g., Bertucci, *Artisanal Enlightenment*), see the negative discussion of idleness in the *Encyclopédie*. See "Oisiveté (médecine)" and "Oisiveté (droit naturel/morale/politique)," in *Encylclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, ed. Robert Morrissey and Glen Roe, http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu.

[72] E. C. Spary, *Feeding France: New Sciences of Food, 1760–1815* (Cambridge, 2014), 132; Brockliss and Jones, *Medical World*, 501–2.

[73] On civic culture and science, see Paula Findlen, "Science as a Career in Enlightenment Italy: The Strategies of Laura Bassi," *Isis* 84, no. 3 (September 1993): 441–69; Mi Gyung Kim, *Imagined Empire: Balloon Enlightenments in Revolutionary Europe* (Pittsburgh, 2016).

[74] "[O]utre les gens de l'Art, des curieux de la nature de tous les états vinrent en foule remplir mon amphithéâtre." Le Cat, *La théorie de l'ouïe*, 1768, ix.

[75] Surgery to remove bladder stones was a particularly effective way for a surgeon to establish his reputation because the problem was common, painful, and required a surgeon with a deft touch and quick hands. Harold John Cook and Professor Harold J. Cook, *Trials of an Ordinary Doctor: Joannes Groenevelt in Seventeenth-Century London* (Baltimore, 1994), 83–105.

empirical foundation for his publications and helped him secure royal pensions of ever larger values.[76]

Le Cat was especially interested in women's bodies and questions of sexual difference. He demonstrated his intellectual authority by weighing in on menstruation, difficult pregnancies, and cases of suspected hermaphroditism.[77] Women's bodies had long been of interest to male medical practitioners, who demonstrated their expertise by proving they could untangle "women's secrets."[78] Le Cat recognized, as did these other practitioners, that he could show off his medical knowledge if he engaged with thorny but socially valuable questions about sex.

Le Cat brought much more than skilled hands to the table. As a credentialed physician as well as a surgeon, he displayed a broad command of medical theory. As much as Le Cat valued hands-on experience, he did not think it was sufficient. This is most apparent in his spontaneous combustion *mémoire* when he discussed Millet's trial and made it seem as though specialized medical knowledge—the kind of abstract knowledge of invisible forces Steven Shapin has called "ontological expertise"[79]—had been the decisive factor. Sadly, the Reims medicolegal experts had "not ha[d] a vast enough erudition to be informed of all the extraordinary observations in their purview." By contrast, it was precisely that sort of vast erudition that had supposedly enabled the "enlightened" higher court to recognize

[76] That Le Cat's pensions were particularly high was noted after his death, when subsequent holders of the same offices wondered why they were not receiving as much money and were told: "[C]es pensions qui étoient moins, dans la personne de M. Lecat, un émolument des places qu'il remploissoit, qu'une récompense de son rare mérite et de ses travaux utiles à l'humanité, auroient dû cesser à son décès, ou au moins éprouver une grande diminution." Copie de Lettre écrite à M. L'Intendant, par Mrs. les Maire et Echevins de la ville de Rouen, le 7 août 1773, 3E/1/ANC/109, sous-dossier 10, Fonds des archives anciennes de la ville de Rouen, Archives Départmentales de la Seine-Maritime (ADSM), Rouen, France. Many thanks to Marie Groult for her assistance locating this document.

[77] In Le Cat's œuvre see especially Claude-Nicolas Le Cat, *La cause de l'evacuation périodique du sexe* (Amsterdam, 1765), *Traité de la couleur de la peau humaine en général: De celle des nègres en particulier* (Paris, 1765), and *Une lettre inédite de Le Cat à propos des naissances tardives*, ed. Dr. Le Pileur (Abbeville, 1879). See also McClive, *Menstruation and Procreation*, 209–19.

[78] Monica Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine: The Rise of Male Authority in Pre-Modern Gynaecology* (Oxford, 2008); Katharine Park, *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection* (New York, 2006); Kathleen Wellman, "Physicians and Philosophes: Physiology and Sexual Morality in the French Enlightenment," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 35, no. 2 (2002): 267–77. As Europeans grew curious about how race intersected with sex, they subjected Black women's bodies to particular scrutiny. Suman Seth, *Difference and Disease: Medicine, Race, and the Eighteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge, 2018).

[79] Steven Shapin, "Trusting George Cheyne: Scientific Expertise, Common Sense, and Moral Authority in Early Eighteenth-Century Dietetic Medicine," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 77, no. 2 (2003): 263–97.

spontaneous human combustion and free Millet.[80] "Enlightened" here meant skeptical but learned, theoretically sophisticated, flexible, and applied to real problems, instructed in the latest and most sophisticated medical theories.[81] Le Cat thus advocated for a particularly elite sort of medicine: one both experimental and empirical, rooted in a broad university education that included courses on anatomy and chemistry. Performing chemical expertise in particular allowed elite practitioners to signal their unique value to the medical ecosystem, especially when compared to others whose expertise drew upon more empiric or informal knowledge. Those who called for chemistry to be a bigger part of medical education and practice were typically elite practitioners who wanted to distinguish themselves from their less-educated peers. Likewise, in their efforts to secure additional privileges and prestige, apothecaries insisted that chemistry was central to their profession.[82] Such knowledge set elite practitioners apart and demonstrated their social utility, even in the adjudication of justice.

The ideal way for Le Cat to demonstrate his *exact* and *profond* expertise would have been for him to have firsthand access to Le Maire's body or the body of another alleged victim of spontaneous human combustion. But he did not have that access, and so he had to settle for a report from a local surgeon. To compensate, he underscored his own experiences with Millet, Le Maire, and Dauxerre; even if he had not been present at Le Maire's death or Millet and Dauxerre's trial, he could at least say that he knew all three of them well and so had a personal connection to this case. In an intellectual culture that placed great emphasis on personal experience and eyewitnessing, this was as close as Le Cat could get to a firsthand account.[83]

[80] "[L]es gens de l'art même"; "n'ont pas tous une érudition assez vaste pour être informés de toutes les observations extraordinaires de leur compétence." Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés," 20.

[81] On "enlightened" courts, see Jeffrey Ravel, *The Would-Be Commoner: A Tale of Deception, Murder, and Justice in 17th-Century France* (Boston, 2008), 226–27.

[82] On chemistry and general mastery of "invisible" processes at work as increasingly significant to the performance of scientific expertise, see Shapin, "Trusting George Cheyne," 270. On chemistry and medicine and especially medical education, see Toby Gelfand, "Empiricism and Eighteenth-Century French Surgery," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 44, no. 1 (1970): 40–53, 46; Brockliss and Jones, *Medical World*, 501–2; Jan Golinski, *Science as Public Culture: Chemistry and Enlightenment in Britain, 1760–1820* (Cambridge, 1999), 16–17. Calls for the centrality of chemistry to medical education and practice were typically associated with elite practitioners, Brockliss and Jones, *Medical World*, 502; indeed, apothecaries insisted upon the centrality of chemistry to their profession as a way to secure additional privileges and prestige. Spary, *Feeding France*, 132.

[83] Le Cat's witnessing challenge was two-fold: to somehow establish his own proximity to the case at hand and hence his credibility, and to describe the bodies and sites of alleged spontaneous combustion in a way that would enable his readers to imagine they could see the scenes. On "collective witnessing," see Costa, *The Singular and the Making of Knowledge*, 78–87; on "virtual witnessing" and literature, see Tita Chico, *The Experimental Imagination: Literary Knowledge and Science in the British Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA, 2018), 17–43.

Proving his case mattered so much to Le Cat that he was even willing to manufacture evidence to support his claims. Despite Le Cat's promise to provide a straightforward account of "authentic facts," his text was founded on a fabrication: that "by appeal to a higher and very enlightened court, which recognized spontaneous combustion, [Millet] emerged victorious."[84] This was not correct. Parlement suspended prosecution pending further investigation (*plus amplement informé*) for six months and then indefinitely; that is an outcome different than a straightforward victory. Le Cat knew the details of the case, so he presumably was aware of the ruling. And as suspended prosecutions pending further investigations were common and could function as punishments, Le Cat surely understood what Parlement's conclusion meant and massaged the truth when he claimed Millet had been "victorious." More importantly, Le Cat claimed Parlement had determined that Le Maire had spontaneously combusted, but there is no mention of such a belief in the extant materials. Le Cat purposely distorted what had happened to suggest that Parlement had heroically intervened and classified Le Maire's death as the result of natural causes, not murder. Why would Le Cat do such a thing? At this point, I have to engage in some speculation. Because Le Cat was not caught, he never provided an explanation for his actions. I would argue he had two motives: to make his theory of events more persuasive by associating it with as august a body as the Parlement of Paris, and to make his story more exciting and dramatic for his audience.

Changing the story in this fashion made Le Cat's theory seem more authoritative and neatly demonstrated the urgent need for learned medical experts like himself. Millet's alleged escape from the gallows thanks to the Paris Parlement's belief in spontaneous human combustion has had a very long afterlife. It became by far the most-cited aspect of Le Cat's *mémoire*, recounted in multiple nineteenth-century treatises on spontaneous human combustion and tomes on legal medicine.[85] The case, or at least Le Cat's version of it, served as compelling evidence of the need for trained medical experts.

Millet's story was even evoked by Charles Dickens, whose *Bleak House* notoriously includes a scene of spontaneous combustion. The plot of *Bleak House* involves far too much chancery court for the purposes of this article, but the key

[84] "[P]ar appel à une Cour supérieure et très-éclairée, qui reconnut l'incendie spontané, il sortît victorieux. . . ." Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés," 55.

[85] Le Cat's version of Le Maire's story figures prominently in Pierre-Aimé Lair, *Essai sur les combustions humaines: Produites par un long abus des liqueurs spiritueuses* (Chez Gabon . . . , de l'imprimerie de Crapelet, 1800); François Jean Matthyssens, *Précis élémentaire de médecine légale: extrait des meilleurs ouvrages généraux et spéciaux de médecine légale, suivi des lois, des arrêtés et des réglemens de police médicale et de police sanitaire: à l'usage des élèves en médecine, des médecins praticiens et des pharmaciens-chimistes* (Chez la Veuve J. B. Heirstraeten, 1838), 3–4; François Emmanuel Fodéré, *Traité de médecine légale et d'hygiène publique ou police de santé* (Paris, 1813), 3:205, among others.

thing to know is that Dickens needed to kill off Mr. Krook, the disgusting, perpetually inebriated and inert owner of a rag and bottle shop, so that key documents could be discovered in his abode. And so two characters went to visit Mr. Krook, who did not seem to be at home. Puzzled, they noticed soot falling inside the slovenly room—[Guppy] "here! On my arm! See again, on the table here! Confound the stuff, it won't blow off—smears, like black fat!" Disgusted, they took further stock: "Here is a small burnt patch of flooring; here is the tinder from a little bundle of burnt paper, but not so light as usual, seeming to be steeped in something; and here is—is it the cinder of a small charred and broken log of wood sprinkled with white ashes, or is it coal? O Horror, he IS here!" The narrator explained the cause of death: "inborn, inbred, engendered in the corrupted humours of the vicious body itself, and that only—Spontaneous Combustion."[86] The social context is different—here we see a man combusting rather than a woman—but the moral and physical dimensions of spontaneous combustion remained the same.[87]

Dickens prided himself on how vividly his novels could evoke reality, and he objected when the critic George Henry Lewes pointed out that Krook's death defied scientific possibility. Dickens even addressed the controversy in the preface to *Bleak House*: "I do not willfully or negligently mislead my readers." To back up his claims, he cited two particularly famous cases of alleged spontaneous combustion, one of which "happened at Rheims . . . and the historian in that case is Le Cat, one of the most renowned surgeons produced by France. The subject was a woman, whose husband was ignorantly convicted of having murdered her."[88] In need of a few succinct examples to back up his authorial choices, Dickens found Le Cat's version of Le Maire's death particularly compelling and authoritative. Le Cat's fabricated evidence thus worked perfectly, at least for a few decades in the nineteenth century: it captured readers' attention and neatly "proved" spontaneous human combustion and his own expertise.

The spontaneous human combustion *mémoire* was not Le Cat's first fabrication. In 1751, irritated by the success achieved by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *First Discourse*, Le Cat wrote a letter in which he impersonated a judge who had examined Rousseau's essay in the contest hosted by the Academy of Dijon, which Rousseau subsequently won. The "judge" claimed that the essay had been divisive and that he had attacked Rousseau's essay as contrary to fundamental truths. Le Cat had no real need to adopt a false identity, but writing from the perspective of a judge in the Academy of Dijon's essay contest made the refutation more exciting and more salacious: this was good gossip. Exploiting this illusion of personal

[86] Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (Oxford, 1948), 450–55.

[87] Émile Zola's *Le docteur Pascal* (1893) also features a man spontaneously combusting, suggesting that the social fears wrapped up with this idea had shifted from the eighteenth century's focus on idle women.

[88] Quoted in Gordon S. Haight, "Dickens and Lewes on Spontaneous Combustion," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 10, no. 1 (June 1955): 53–63.

contact with the contest, Le Cat published his letter and attached to it a critical edition of Rousseau's discourse, with Rousseau's text in one column and the fictional judge's rebuttals in the next. He meticulously countered Rousseau's every point and insisted that advances in commerce, science, and arts had improved French society. Education and learning made people more, not less, virtuous; in particular, they were safeguards against the idleness that he considered distressing and dangerous.[89]

Le Cat's text was quickly realized to be a fraud and the academy denounced the pseudonymous author, who had acted with "a falseness unworthy of a man who works [as a man] of Letters, and who was in no way obliged to conceal himself."[90] Under pressure, Le Cat came forward late in 1752. His defense? That the honor of the truth and the Republic of Letters had demanded this of him, and that his lie mattered little because he told it in service of larger truths. This happened at roughly the same time that Le Cat wrote his *mémoire* on combustion. Although Le Cat defended his own use of a pseudonym with vigor and noted that many other authors used fake identities, the pushback he faced might explain why Le Cat never tried to publish his combustion *mémoire* more widely and why subsequent mentions of his theory were very brief and elided any mention of Jeanne Le Maire; perhaps he did not want to find himself in the middle of another debate about truth and authorial practices.[91]

[89] Claude-Nicolas Le Cat, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours qui a remporté le prix a l'Academie de Dijon, en l'année 1750. Sur cette Question proposée par la même Académie: Si le rétablissement des Sciences & des Arts a contribué à épurer les mœurs. Par un Citoyen de Geneve. Nouvelle Édition, Accompagnée de la Réfutation de ce Discours, par les Apostilles critiques de l'un des Académiciens Examinateurs, qui a refusé de donner son suffrage à cette Pièce* (London, 1751); Jeremy Caradonna, *The Enlightenment in Practice: Academic Prize Contests and Intellectual Culture in France, 1670–1794* (Ithaca, NY, 2012), 135–37.

[90] "[U]ne fausseté indigne d'un homme qui fait profession des Lettres, & qui rien n'obligeoit à se masquer." Jean-Jacques Rousseau et al., *Les avantages et les désavantages des sciences et des arts, considérés par rapport aux moeurs, en plusieurs discours, lettres, etc., où le pour et le contre sur cette inportante matière est débattu à fonds* (1756), 162.

[91] It is true that Voltaire, among many authors, often played with pseudonyms—sometimes out of a pragmatic sense of self-protection, sometimes as an amusing game, sometimes both. But Le Cat's example suggests that at least some pseudonymous authors may have been regarded with ambivalence. On anonymity and authorial practices, see Mark Vareschi, *Everywhere and Nowhere: Anonymity and Mediation in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Minneapolis, 2018); Antoine Lilti, "Reconnaissance et célébrité: Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la politique du nom propre," *Orages: Littérature et culture* 9 (March 2010): 77–94; Elena Russo, "Parresia, persiflage, falsification: Le Vanini de Voltaire," *Romanic Review* 103, nos. 3–4 (May 2012): 527–52; Kate E. Tunstall, "Pseudonyms, Ghosts, and Vampires in the Republic of Letters: Adrien Baillet's *Auteurs Déguisez* (1690)," *Romance Studies* 31, nos. 3–4 (November 2013): 200–211. On Le Cat and the Rousseau episode in particular, see Gérard Hurpin, "Claude-Nicolas Le Cat ou de la notoriété médicale au XVIIIème siècle," *Histoire des sciences médicales* 35, no. 2 (2001): 151–62, and Caradonna, *The Enlightenment in Practice*, 135–39.

Le Cat's semifictional version of Le Maire's death and Millet's trial accorded a starring role to medicine, albeit medicine of a very particular and elite strain. The *mémoire* offered him the means to construct the new ideal physician and surgeon in the eighteenth century, portraying them as the secular equivalents of the good priest who devotedly cared for his parishioners and offered sage advice to those in all walks of life.[92] For if medical experts were ignored or excluded, the consequences could be dire. The trial ruined Millet's life; he was unable to return to life as usual and wasted away in a hospital. Millet provided proof for Le Cat that "it is essential for the public to be aware of this possibility and these surprising facts, so that they don't blame someone for a crime when it was really the work of a warped constitution." More education, and more willingness to be guided by those with scientific and medical expertise, would help: "What mistakes, what superstitions, what persecutions, what crimes, and, accordingly, what affronts to humanity could have been spared, if one had, at all times, a heart a little more open to discovery and to publishing the extent [of our knowledge] of the laws of nature!"[93] And it was not just a question of saving individuals like Millet from unjust punishment. By warning the public of the danger of spontaneous human combustion, doctors could make society healthier and more virtuous: "morality itself, which is not often the goal of medicine, benefits from our observations in that the suffering of those that succumb to [spontaneous human combustion] is a vivid lesson against the frequent consumption of alcohol, and that those who do so habitually are at risk of being, while they are still alive, the prey of the flames, which are both the product of and punishment for their debauchery."[94] Learning to exercise restraint, consume alcohol sparingly, and engage in industrious pursuits would reap great rewards.

[92] For example, see the discussion on "alimentary abstinence" as a secular virtue promoted by physician "priests" in Spary, *Eating the Enlightenment*, 261.

[93] "[V]ictime innocente de ce phénomène"; "il est essentiel au public d'être instruit de la possibilité et du comment de ces faits étonnans, pour ne point imputer à crime ce qui n'est que l'ouvrage d'une constitution dépravée de l'économie animale"; "Que de travers, de superstitions, que de persécutions, que de crimes, et, par conséquent, que d'affronts à l'humanité l'on aurait épargnes, si l'on avait eu, de tout temps, un peu plus à coeur de découvrir et de publier toute l'étendue du domain des lois de la nature!" Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés," 55–56.

[94] "[L]a morale même, que n'est pas fort communément le but de la physique, tire avantage de nos observations en ce que le malheur de ceux qui y succombent, est une vive leçon contre l'usage continué des liqueurs spiritueuses, et que ceux qui y sont livrés d'habitude sont menacés d'être, dès leur vivant, la proie des flammes, le produit et le châtiment de leurs débauches." Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés," 154. Moderation and discipline were key eighteenth-century virtues and were akin to traditional Christian values, but secularized and medicalized. Spary, *Eating the Enlightenment*, 178–79.

Le Cat's efforts to establish himself as an authoritative expert deeply engaged with the public are part of a key development of the eighteenth century: the rise of new and competing cultural personae, of which the philosophe is the most famous. Le Cat's intellectual persona echoes the *artiste* studied by Paola Bertucci: a figure who married tactical and sensory knowledge with creativity and a strong grasp of abstract knowledge.[95] While Le Cat's hands-on experiences informed his *mémoire* on spontaneous human combustion, personal or manual experience was far from enough. Theoretical acumen mattered just as much, if not more, than personal experience.[96] He was not an automatic supporter of all medical practitioners. Just as the *artistes* considered themselves different from allegedly mindless artisans or obtuse savants, Le Cat believed he and other surgeons with medical degrees best balanced practice and theory.[97]

Altogether, Le Cat presented himself as a model of modern medical excellence, a public figure whose authority was rooted in a liberal education, membership in the cosmopolitan Republic of Letters, and decades of personal experience as a surgeon. He advocated for a more "enlightened" brand of medicine and especially surgery, informed by a broad and scientific education and public engagement. Le Cat lampooned "ignorance," which for him was associated with parochial concerns and a limited education; a more enlightened mind needed to be "vast," "erudite," and engaged with the wider world. A balance of hands-on experience and theoretical understanding was key; too far in one direction resulted in dull empiricism, but too far in the other produced abstract philosophizing divorced from the real world.[98] Although Le Cat focused on medicine, many other groups, including the philosophes, followed these same rhetorical moves.

These claims to expertise were deeply gendered, but in malleable and potentially competing ways. While it is true that Enlightenment print and academic culture was dominated by men, they did not all adhere to the same norms of masculinity and attacked each other in gendered terms. Quesnay, an elite surgeon like Le Cat, criticized philosophes as making no more than "sterile speculations," while the philosophes lampooned their critics either as overly erudite and detached or as pleasure seeking and frivolous.[99] Enlightenment debates on questions of ideal intellectual

[95] Bertucci, *Artisanal Enlightenment.*

[96] Le Cat, "Mémoire posthume sur les incendies spontanés," 149.

[97] Claude-Nicolas Le Cat, *Lettre de M. Le Cat . . . sur les avantages de la réunion du titre de docteur en médecine, avec celui de maître en chirurgie, & sur quelques abus dans l'un & l'autre art* (Amsterdam, 1766).

[98] Sean Takats, *The Expert Cook in Enlightenment France* (Baltimore, 2011), 81–82, 116–17; Bertucci, *Artisanal Enlightenment*.

[99] Quoted in Bertucci, *Artisanal Enlightenment*, 153; Russo, *Styles of Enlightenment*, 1–2, 59–84. On the complex figure of the philosophe, see Stéphane Van Damme, "*Philosophe*/Philosopher," in *The Cambridge Companion to the French Enlightenment*, ed. Daniel Brewer (Cambridge, 2014), 153–66.

practices—To what extent should ideas be rooted in practical experience? How connected should a thinker be to aristocratic high society? How educated and public oriented should a man of letters be?—paralleled and intersected with debates about masculinity. Surgeons make for a particularly compelling focal point when studying Enlightenment personae, gender, and expertise because they greatly elevated their station over the long eighteenth century. They pushed against unflattering depictions of themselves as mindless, mechanical artisans and joined the ranks of liberal professions. And at least in part, this move involved portraying themselves as the right kind of men.

As a founding member of the Académie des Sciences, Belles Lettres, et Arts in Rouen, Le Cat aspired to be a part of elite learned society. A portrait made of him in 1747, three years after the founding of the academy, underscores this identity: with the artist's focus on his face, tidy wig, and respectable if restrained clothing, Le Cat looks the part of a dutiful academician (fig. 1). Tellingly, his hands are kept out of the frame; as Lianne McTavish has noted, surgeons sometimes kept their hands hidden in portraits to keep the focus on their learning and their mental dexterity rather than their nimble fingers.[100]

Dutiful, yes, but Le Cat never wanted to seem dull, and he stressed how accessible and entertaining his courses were: "even the fair sex, who have grace as their natural domain but whose genius, despite prejudice, is as powerful as their charm, honored my demonstrations by their eagerness to listen in a *tribune* furnished with the precautions necessary for decency and delicacy."[101] It took a particular sort of man to make public dissection—which Anita Guerrini has described as the "quintessential impolite science: messy, nasty, and faintly ridiculous"—appealing to women.[102] Here Le Cat borrowed the model of learned masculinity from Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle's 1686 *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds*, which was defined by the ability to entertain as well as educate.[103] Like many eighteenth-century men of letters, Le Cat found Fontenelle's model compelling and went out

[100] Lianne McTavish, *Childbirth and the Display of Authority in Early Modern France* (Burlington, VT, 2005), chap. 4.

[101] "[L]e beau sexe même, dont les grâces sont le domaine naturel mais dont le génie, malgré le préjugé, est aussi puissant que les charmes, honora mes démonstrations de son empressement à les entendre, dans une tribune munie des précautions dues à la décence et à sa délicatesse." Le Cat, *La théorie de l'ouïe*, 1768, ix. Le Cat's interest in popularizing medical science for an audience of men and women is further demonstrated by his work for publications aimed at men and women. Geneviève Artigas-Menant, "La vulgarisation scientifique dans *Le Nouveau Magasin français* de Mme Leprince de Beaumont," *Revue d'histoire des sciences* 44, no. 3 (1991), 343–57.

[102] Anita Guerrini, "Anatomists and Entrepreneurs in Early Eighteenth-Century London," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 59, no. 2 (April 2004): 24.

[103] Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle, *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (Paris, 1686), trans. H. A. Hargreaves as *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds* (Berkeley, CA, 1990).

FIG. 1.—Claude Nicolas Le Cat. Print made by Jean Georges Wille after Thomiers, 1747. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Color version available as an online enhancement.

of his way to mention the appeal of his anatomy classes to women (and especially, it would seem, to elite women). This enabled him to stress his talent at enlightening the public without boring them. Likewise, he published in Jeanne Marie LePrince de Beaumont's *Nouveau Magasin François ou Bibliothèque instructive et amusante*, highlighting once again Le Cat's efforts to popularize science for a mixed-gender audience.

But Le Cat's brand of masculinity was also aggressive. He had worked hard for his reputation and was not willing to lose an inch of ground to potential critics. He attacked anyone who disagreed with him, from anonymous letter writers to the great savant Haller. This combativeness was Le Cat's most salient characteristic and was likewise prevalent among male artisans and *artistes*. The determination to compete and win at all costs was fundamental to Le Cat's brand of masculinity, which demanded he address any and all slights.[104] He could not leave mockery or criticism unanswered, or he would lose his intellectual honor. Le Cat had initially shared his theory of spontaneous human combustion in letters and had not receive a positive reception. The *mémoire* was his effort to silence those critics. He needed it to be persuasive; hence, the pressure to make the Millet case into the perfect example of spontaneous combustion and the emphasis the story placed on the value of listening to elite medical experts.

Le Cat's combativeness proved a useful tool. In the early 1750s, Le Cat was fairly well established as a surgeon and man of science. But he wanted more: he wanted to be famous. To elevate himself from well-respected surgeon to star, he needed to make some noise. Some of his most well-known feuds—his heated back-and-forth with Rousseau and his quarrel with Haller—took place at roughly the same juncture as the *mémoire* on spontaneous human combustion. They share a common element: Le Cat's burning ambition to gain both a wider audience and the respect of his academic superiors. Like many other authors, he tried to grab his readers' attention. Good stories or, even better, provocative stories stood out from the pack. It is worth noting, however, that Le Cat was not desperately trying to eke out a living. His ambition was motivated more by his determination to succeed and to become as famous and widely respected as possible than by a concern about putting food on his plate. The pressures to publish came from multiple directions.

[104] Among many other works on honor in eighteenth-century France, see Jay M. Smith's work on the nobility, including *The Culture of Merit: Nobility, Royal Service, and the Making of Absolute Monarchy in France, 1600–1789* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1996); *Nobility Reimagined: The Patriotic Nation in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY, 2005); and *Monsters of the Gévaudan: The Making of a Beast* (Cambridge, MA, 2011). See also Charles Walton, *Policing Public Opinion in the French Revolution: The Culture of Calumny and the Problem of Free Speech* (Oxford, 2009); Gregory S. Brown, *A Field of Honor: Writers, Court Culture, and Public Theater in French Literary Life from Racine to the Revolution* (New York, 2005).

And so, in the 1740s and 1750s, after he established a solid medical reputation and helped found the Académie de Rouen, Le Cat produced many different texts intended to appeal to different publics. He presented a wide array of *mémoires* for an audience of academicians and savants. Some drew upon his medical training: the health effects of consuming hot food, studies of epidemics, reports of his successful operations. But he certainly did not confine himself to that area of expertise: he also presented *mémoires* on fantastic topics such as the history of giants. Even when he focused on learned audiences, he worked hard to attract and hold their interest. A few years later, Le Cat started engaging with the wider reading public by publishing letters and responses to reader queries in the local *Annonces, affiches et avis divers de Haute et Basse Normandie* upon its debut in 1763. This was the natural continuation of the public-facing work he had begun earlier with his anatomy courses and underscored how much Le Cat valued engagement with a wider audience in addition to his academic work.

Some of his letters in the *Affiches*, starting with a series of essays on apoplexy, provided free medical advice, showed off his mastery of medical knowledge, and made him seem like a dutiful servant of the public.[105] Transparency was a very important quality for enlightened medical practitioners: they saw this as a clear difference between "good" practitioners and greedy charlatans, who kept their dubious cures secret to make more money. One of the clear claims to authority that medical practitioners made in the eighteenth century was that their art had a great impact on everyday life. The quotidian nature of these essays is thus significant.

But everyday ailments did not always attract attention; novelty did. In the *Affiches*, just as he had at the academy, Le Cat made sure to include more exciting texts, especially letters discussing monstrous births or mysterious deaths. Sean Quinlan has argued that provincial practitioners often wrote to Paris-based academies with similar stories as a way to curry favor with elites and establish their reputations. By sharing such stories in the *Affiches*, Le Cat appealed directly to the public as a valuable patron. They were the audience with which he wished to share his most interesting discoveries.

Le Cat's impulse toward novelty and dramatic discovery explains why he went to extraordinary efforts to make his case for spontaneous combustion as splashy as possible. He needed to get attention, to produce eye-catching stories that would keep his name in circulation. And so he massaged the details of the Le Maire murder investigation to make the story more dramatic and moralizing. His efforts to capture the public's attention speak to a key tension running through the Enlightenment: the deep commitment to public engagement and in particular to "enlightening" the public, coupled with a suspicion that perhaps the public—seen as

[105] *Annonces, affiches et avis divers de Haute et Basse Normandie*, September 3, 1762, 55–56; September 10, 1762, 58–60; September 24, 1762, 66–67; October 22, 1762, 83–84; October 29, 1762, 87–88.

regrettably mercurial and not yet fully enlightened—would only pay attention to shiny new ideas. Dressing up the Le Maire murder as something more exciting than the mundane reality was a way to capture attention, the spoonful of sugar that would help the medicine go down.[106]

But this was not a strategy without risk. Becoming too famous or, worse, seeming too avid for fame was not a good look for a serious scholar. As Colin Jones notes, it was somewhat uncouth for midcentury medical professionals to advertise their skills openly and seek out patients.[107] Le Cat discovered this for himself when he was invited to Lille to remove bladder stones, his most famous operation. Le Cat urged those who had invited him to be circumspect in advertising his visit: if they did not, "that comes too close to the sort of operators with whom I will be too ashamed to be confused." Despite this warning, however, word of Le Cat's visit circulated and even appeared in the local Affiches. When this news reached the Académie Royale de Chirurgie, it demanded more information from another academician: "The Academy, having at heart everything that interests its honor and those of its members, would be offended if M. Le Cat comported himself on this trip in the same manner as charlatans . . . and desires to be informed by you, Monsieur, of everything that happened in Lille."[108] The line between public engagement and service and personal promotion and charlatanism was thin indeed.

All in all, Claude-Nicolas Le Cat makes for an interesting case study of an ambitious and public-oriented figure of the French Enlightenment. He established

[106] While Jürgen Habermas may have seen the rise of a rational public sphere during the eighteenth century, historians and literary scholars working on print culture, sentimental literature, and celebrity have long known that the eighteenth-century public was swept up in many fads and enthusiasms. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA, 1989); Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge, MA, 2009); Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley, CA, 1993); David Denby, *Sentimental Narrative and the Social Order in France, 1760–1820* (Cambridge, 1994); Lilti, *Figures publiques*.

[107] Colin Jones, "The Great Chain of Buying: Medical Advertisement, the Bourgeois Public Sphere, and the Origins of the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 101, no. 1 (February 1996): 13–40. Recent work has stressed provincial *affiches* as an important part of Enlightenment print culture. Allan A. Tulchin, "Weekly Enlightenment: The Affiches de Bordeaux, 1758–1765," *French Historical Studies* 42, no. 2 (April 1, 2019): 175–202; Elizabeth Andrews Bond, *The Writing Public: Participatory Knowledge Production in Enlightenment and Revolutionary France* (Ithaca, NY, 2021).

[108] "[C]ela sent un peu trop cette espèce d'opérateurs avec laquelle je serai trop honteux d'être confondu"; "L'Académie ayant à cœur ce qui intéresse son honneur et celui de ses membres, serait froissée que M. Le Cat se fut comporté dans son voyage comme le font les charlatans . . . et elle désire d'être informée par vous, Monsieur, de tout ce qui s'est passé à Lille." Quoted in Théodore Vetter, "Claude-Nicolas Le Cat, 1700–1768," *Mémoire couronné par l'Académie des Sciences, Belles Lettres et Arts de Rouen, en 1968*, 74.

himself as a very successful surgeon; he occupied a number of important posts, founded public medical courses, won heaps of academic essay contests, and became a member of several scientific academies and correspondent with many more. Along the way, he worked very hard to keep his name in circulation, so much so that it caused contemporaries to raise the occasional eyebrow. But that makes him very useful to historians, as his example reveals the many strategies that a highly ambitious and upwardly mobile surgeon and savant could use to get ahead. Le Cat's deep curiosity for strange phenomena like spontaneous human combustion, eagerness to explain medicine to the public, and unstinting focus on his own reputation make him a compelling study in an aggressive brand of eighteenth-century learned masculinity. He fought, often and hard, to establish himself as a respected surgeon and man of letters, and he never stopped. While much scholarly literature currently focuses on the importance of genteel learned conduct—and it was indeed important—Le Cat serves as a useful reminder that unbridled competition and assertive machismo could also get you quite far. But perhaps not far enough. For all his successes, Le Cat never did break into the upper echelon of the Republic of Letters. He was a correspondent with but not a member of the Académie des Sciences; he wrote letters to Haller, but Haller did not treat him as an equal; his Rousseau essay did not earn him the plaudits he hoped for. He never did transform himself into the famous man of letters he aspired to be.

Conclusion

In sum, Le Cat's *mémoire* on spontaneous human combustion contained a significant falsehood: that the Parlement of Paris had ruled Le Maire's death a case of spontaneous human combustion. It made for a more exciting story than the all-too-ordinary reality. Le Cat took the basic facts of Le Maire's death and Millet's trial for her murder and turned it into a heroic narrative, with elite medicine as the star. A woman had tragically died, and only appeal to a higher court that recognized cutting-edge medical knowledge had spared Millet from a tragic miscarriage of justice. This much more dramatic spin on the 1725 investigation enabled Le Cat to use Le Maire's sad but— he would argue—natural death to demonstrate larger truths about the human body and to spotlight erudite medical practitioners as legally, morally, and intellectually vital to the conduct of an enlightened and moral society. As even very short summaries of the case going forward included Le Cat's fabricated verdict and acquittal, Le Cat's editing of the historical record clearly struck a chord: his ending made the case a more compelling and instructive story for his readers.

We might think that certain elements of our academic and media cultures are relatively new: the pressure for scholars to "publish or perish" or, much more recently, the need for journalists to generate eye-catching content for a twenty-four-hour

news cycle. But although medical and scientific writing took a very different form in eighteenth-century France than it does today, Le Cat's career demonstrates that the pressure to publish—and to publish material that would attract attention—could be very acute indeed.

When Le Cat told the strange events of Le Maire's death in 1752, he blamed her demise on her excessive consumption of alcohol and used her story to show off his medical and scientific bona fides. In this article, I have used his text to advance two major arguments. First, that the text highlights the profound and gendered anxieties prompted by "modernity" and especially idleness and consumption in eighteenth-century France. And, second, that for Le Cat—zealous for every opportunity to elevate his reputation and incapable of overlooking any perceived slight—writing about spontaneous human combustion allowed him to attract attention and defend his intellectual honor. While spontaneous combustion might be a relatively obscure topic, Le Cat left no stone unturned in his quest to advocate for a larger social role for highly educated medical practitioners like himself. Otherwise, who could possibly say how many more women—and maybe even men—would fall "prey to the flames"?