Chapter 6

Bienfaisance, Fellow Feeling, and the Public Good

In 1777 the Affiches du Poitou published a letter from a law student named Dupuy describing a wedding in the nearby town of Pouzioux, where the bride, the groom, and their families invited “all the poor in the region” to partake in the festivities. According to the writer, the “compassionate charity” of the two families, both of whom were fermiers, was well known, so it was little surprise to the writer that they had included the peasantry in their celebration. They invited peasants to the church for the wedding ceremony, and then the wedding party and all of their guests went together to the village, where the couple distributed a piece of bread weighing three pounds to each person in equal portion, so that “none was forgotten, and so that no one had more than the other.” The writer praised the contributions made by the bride’s and groom’s families and the sensitivity they felt for their fellow man. This account of giving at a wedding underscored two themes prevalent in the discussions of social welfare at the time: first, that benefactors saw the poor as like themselves, in the words of their letters to the editor, as “leurs semblables,” and second, that they acted out of a sensitivity and emotional connection (sensibilité) to the condition of the poor. That evening at the dinner and dancing that followed, friends and fellow villagers gathered to celebrate with the bridal couple. On observing the nuptial feast, the writer exclaimed, “O sainte humanité!” He had witnessed the couple enact love for and support for their fellow man, which he
described as “the most beautiful light of virtue that brings humanity closer to its author.” The letter concluded with a call to the readers to receive and admire this great example of bienfaîance, in the hope that the public might in turn emulate it.  

Letters from readers throughout the kingdom chronicled their own accounts of spontaneous and organized philanthropic and charitable work that invoked a similar vocabulary of fellow feeling, sensibility, and virtue. The affiches described these acts as bienfaîance. Between 1785 and 1789, writers authored more letters to the editor on bienfaîance than any other topic. In the correspondence describing bienfaîance, writers expressed their concerns about the material conditions of people in their community, people they described as like themselves. Their letters reflected an earnest philanthropy, but they also were a way of presenting oneself and establishing one’s credentials to the readers of the affiches. The scale of their work tended toward the local, but the steps that members of the public took and the way that writers described their philanthropic action revealed the importance of emotion in their decisions. They also suggested that the scope of social change the literate public imagined was possible. In their letters, they justified why they themselves were the ones to enact that change. Participation in the social welfare projects documented in the affiches was a way to express public virtue and demonstrate the sincerity of one’s empathy through action. Through their letters, writers found new ways to situate themselves not only as beneficiaries but also as active contributors to society. Above all, letter writers wanted to be useful. Bienfaîance was a significant avenue to finding practical solutions to the difficulties of daily life. In their letters, writers expressed a sense of confidence that they could ameliorate their condition.

This chapter begins with a discussion of what bienfaîance meant in the eighteenth century in both theory and practice. The information press reinforced some long-standing practices of social welfare by supporting Old Regime charitable authorities, including parish clergy, foundling hospitals, and local relief after fires. While such practices were not new, the language of sentiment and the material emphasis that writers used to describe their efforts were novel. The affiches also printed proposals and progress reports about new philanthropic organizations, which illustrated the expansive visions for social change that circulated in the last years of the Old Regime. In all of the letters describing charity and bienfaîance, the letters to the editor situated the information press as the public record for philanthropic work that served the public good. Finally, while bienfaîance took many forms, the anecdotes describing beneficent action provided models of what virtue
looked like for men and women according to their social station. While bienfaisance did not elide social difference, it made room for men and women from a range of backgrounds to exercise their agency in the press. By offering myriad portraits of bienfaisant action, letters to the editor encouraged fellow feeling and emulation. In doing so, editors and writers pushed the information press beyond the aims of entertainment and information as they sought to move readers to empathy and to action.

Situating Bienfaisance in the Affiches

The popularity of bienfaisance in the affiches reflected, at least in part, the interest of the newspaper editors themselves. The editorial team of the Journal de Paris was especially involved in philanthropic projects, and bienfaisance was part of their rationale for starting the paper in the first place. Moreover, the history of newspapers as employment centers and pawnshops facilitated this connection. Since their seventeenth-century inception, general information newspapers had functioned as a public and secure venue for getting the word out about philanthropic work and support for the poor. By the late eighteenth century, calls for bienfaisance included notices that the public could make donations to the editor’s office with the assurance that the funds would go toward the specified cause.

Published correspondence in the information press depicted how readers interpreted and applied the idea of bienfaisance in their own lives. Like Dupuy’s letter describing the wedding feast, their correspondence interwove a new orientation toward emotion, fellow feeling, and virtue with religious explanations. In eighteenth-century France, charity and poor relief were still largely organized by the church and by urban and rural institutions such as hospitals. Over the century, the explanations for why one ought to support such institutions began to shift away from traditional religious explanations of charity as an act of Christian love and duty that usually consisted of almsgiving or caring for the sick, poor, or orphaned. Charity was understood as an act of love of God. In its place, the discourse for bienfaisance emphasized the material conditions of the poor and compassion for the well-being of other people. When the Abbé de Saint-Pierre coined the term “bienfaisance,” he described it as an inclination to do good toward others. Bienfaisance was something one did. Only the king was beneficent in character, whether he enacted good works or not. And yet even he was described in the affiches as a “Roi bienfaisant,” because he cared for the happiness of his subjects. Voltaire would later popularize “bienfaisance” in more utilitarian and paternalistic terms through care for the poor, orphaned, and hungry. Diderot and
Rousseau emphasized sympathy for others who shared a mutual condition; to be bienfaisant was in part to commiserate. Jean-Baptiste Greuze’s engravings likewise introduced a visual repertory of bienfaisance, through which one could envision the proper recipients and enactors of philanthropy. Popularized in visual and print media, bienfaisance, which emphasized compassion for the material conditions of the poor, was widespread by the end of the eighteenth century.

The rationales for social welfare in the press were likewise complex and often drew on both religious and secular repertories. Historians of religion and charity have tended to view the eighteenth century as a period of transition, during which an increasingly less devout French populace was no longer as motivated by the church’s precepts, and they acted instead out of a more secular impulse to improve society. Such a shift in attitude toward virtue and compassion was evident, for example, in the language in wills in eighteenth-century Provence, which drifted away from traditional and religious charity. Yet charity before and during the eighteenth century was not uniform or unchanging. Charitable practice had long ebbed and flowed with the material needs of the community, periods of spiritual renewal, and gender politics, and it would continue to do so well into the nineteenth century. Moreover, emotional and religious rationales for charity and poor relief had long been intertwined. For many writers to the affiches, charity and bienfaisance remained connected, even as the editors labeled their correspondence as bienfaisance.

Discussions of pragmatic and local social welfare efforts were a frequent occurrence in the information press. To motivate donors to support bienfaisant causes, philanthropists relied on a vocabulary that appealed to fellow feeling when they wrote to the affiches. They made the case that the poor or sick whom they wished to help were like themselves, save for unfortunate circumstance. While some writers used religious language to describe beneficent action, they combined the discussion of their faith with sentimental and material motivations. Indeed, the letters show a general shift toward bienfaisance, but one in which writers traversed the blurry boundaries between religious and secular philanthropy.

When it came to framing their accounts of bienfaisance, the readers of the Parisian and provincial papers underwent an education of sorts. Letter writers responded to previously printed content, adopting the topics or language that other writers had employed. In one such letter in the Journal de Paris’s first year, the writer proposed donations to a “society for the public good,” and the writer invited a response from an anonymous locksmith who had proposed a similar project in the paper. Early letters on bienfaisance
drew on readers’ personal experiences. Writers emphasized the way that their larger concerns about the public good were reinforced by personal testimony, especially in cases when the bienfaisance in question was a medicinal remedy. For example, one writer documented a remedy for fevers; when he sent the recipe to the paper, he expressed the hope to see it in print in terms of his duty to humanity and usefulness. In sharing their remedies, writers such as this man situated the paper as a repository of helpful knowledge, in this case of medical information for a lay audience. In the information press, recipe sharing was an important way to provide useful knowledge and to express one’s social-mindedness.

The letters concerning bienfaisance that proliferated in the 1770s emphasized that their particular experience had merit because it would benefit humanity. Their contributions to the press were, by the 1780s, a sustained conversation. In the winter of 1783–84 the Parisian daily the Journal de Paris was printing at least two discussions of philanthropy a week, though the paper had long exhibited an interest in such work. Thereafter, the Parisian press dedicated sustained attention to bienfaisance. Much as the correspondence on agricultural improvement had relied on personal anecdote in order to convey results, letters on bienfaisance emphasized the writers’ own experiences. The precise and personal nature of the accounts of bienfaisance bolstered the claims made in the letters. The immediate benefit the writer had witnessed was conveyed as a public good once published by the affiches.

In their letters to the editor writers often described medical treatment as acts of bienfaisance, which spread good deeds and conveyed humanity. An anonymous writer from Saint-Léger wrote in these very terms to describe the local seigneur’s establishment of a surgeon to care for the poor in the vicinity free of charge. Doctors wrote letters in which they offered not only their medical expertise but also their concern about improving the lives of others. And patients wrote letters to the editor in which doctors were described as bienfaisant figures. Writers also asked the editors of the affiches to print medical recipes, and they couched their requests in the belief that sharing the remedy served the public good. When the letter writers were themselves the recipients of bienfaisance, the help they had received almost always manifested in the form of health care, as a medical cure or expert knowledge ensured their recovery. For example, an anonymous woman wrote in to report on her husband’s successful treatment for chest pains and fever and to commend the doctor Helvetius who first devised the recipe that had delivered her husband “from the arms of death.” As historians of early modern England have shown, sharing recipes was a critical way of making and circulating knowledge about the natural world—a process that experts
and practitioners shared. In the information press, recipe sharing likewise encouraged the spread of knowledge among readers from disparate backgrounds. The anonymity of many of the writers to the affiches underscored the altruistic claims they made as they eschewed credit or personal notoriety in their letters to the editor.

Writers who contributed information on medical treatments and noted the efforts of local bienfaiteurs who helped the ill pressed readers to emulate their behavior. They blended religious and secular justifications for carrying out good works. The letters situated the paper as the storehouse where such good works were entrusted. In addition to the importance that writers ascribed to the newspaper, they also made larger claims—they acted to inform, to reform behavior, out of love or duty, because of piety, or for la patrie. For the readers of the affiches, learning how most effectively to express philanthropic concerns, motivations, and activities was a dynamic process that required a changing set of approaches in their efforts to engage the public.

**Organizations of Bienfaisance**

One of the avenues that editors pursued to support bienfaisance was to print letters by individuals associated with establishments of charity and bienfaisance, such as local churches, schools, hospitals, or orphanages, and new private organizations. Their correspondence drew attention to local efforts to care for those in need by advertising, soliciting donations, or offering suggestions for an institution’s improvement. They provided poor relief, assistance for disaster victims, and monetary aid for the release of debtors. In doing so, the press participated in ongoing activities.

The affiches also offered new explanations for traditional practices. The church continued to hold a predominant influence over social welfare projects. Parish priests often wrote letters to the editor to advertise charitable efforts or solicit public support for the social services they provided. Clergymen sometimes wrote in the same vein as the letters that referenced medicine as bienfaisance. For example, a Brother Bernard wrote in to discuss the prevalence of a medical treatment, addressing his letter to the paper as a way to “instruct the Public.” Priests also acted as trustworthy mediators, and in some cases they supported the charitable work of anonymous benefactors by acting as a go-between for interested parties. In one such letter, a village curé wrote to advertise a small ivory sculpture of Jesus on the cross; the anonymous owner, knowing its full value, had bequeathed it to a poor orphan so that its sale could pay for his education and establishment in the clergy. The curé informed his fellow readers that the work would be on display at his
home every day in the afternoons until someone offered an appropriate price to fulfill the intentions of the anonymous benefactor.21 Such an act was not particularly novel: the concept of a pious donor who would help a boy enter the clergy was common in the post-Tridentine period. What was new was that the newspaper had become an intermediary in such practices, by vouching for the truth of the priest’s fundraising campaign, and by spreading the announcement to a wider audience.

The example of the priest facilitating the education of young orphans was emblematic of eighteenth-century writing about the figure of the bon curé, the good priest. The model of the good priest emphasized the role of parish clergy in the civic and social life of the community. Such depictions emphasized the priest’s generosity and morality, both as a teacher and as a “servant of humanity.”22 This role was crafted not only by writers but also by the clergy themselves, who took on the role of a “citizen priest” by acting as tutors and servants to their local community—functions the communities largely welcomed.23 The published correspondence by parish priests reflected these roles they had fashioned for themselves. In their letters to the editor, priests fused their concerns for the material and moral conditions of their parishioners. For example, M. Tallerye, the archpriest of Parthenay in the Aquitaine basin and curé of the Chapelle-Saint-Laurent, wrote that among the laudatory words guiding the occasion of his new appointment was that “bienfaisance will walk before you.”24 Another priest petitioned the newspaper’s readers for help with the illnesses and poverty faced by his parishioners.25 Other writers adopted a similar vocabulary to describe parish priests. One anonymous writer to the Journal de Lyon described priests as particularly aware of the needs of the people in the countryside.26 In the information press, bienfaisance had become a characteristic of the clergy too.

Priests also took on roles as intermediaries and as caretakers in the press. A letter written to the editors of the Affiches de l’Orléanois retold the efforts of a M. Vervoort, a curé on the outskirts of Paris in Rosny-sur-Montreuil, who had recently died of the same fever that was plaguing his parishioners. The anonymous letter writer described the curé as a man who was “faithful to all his duties, who held all the poor in his heart.” His treatment of the poor and infirm extended beyond the duty of his profession and conveyed the depth of his commitment. Without fear or precaution for himself, he was “as assiduous in his care for them as a father with his cherished children.” The tribute to Vervoort emphasized both the fatherly duty and the personal dedication of this parish priest.

The idea of the philosophe as father was a popular conceptualization in the eighteenth century. Men of letters in the eighteenth century had come
to understand their intellectual life and family life as concomitant strands of their identity, and their usefulness to society relied on their ability to embody both.  

Letters to the editor show that some priests had adopted a similar framework. The author described the curé’s care for his parishioners as an apt work that, “enlightened by religion, honored humanity.” He described the curé like a father caring for his children; the priest located a doctor who could treat the sick and continued to attend to them until his death. Such behavior mirrored the traditional conceptualization of the priest’s religious and social duty, and the imagery of Vervoort as a father certainly drew on a long tradition within Christian theology. But the writer also described Vervoort as a “Christian philosophe” who had sacrificed himself to support those in need. The letter concerning Vervoort fused traditional notions of the clergy with new ideas that animated his public service as a curé bienfaisant, a Christian philosophe. The correspondence about priests enacting bienfaisance connected the language of feeling, social responsibility, and enlightenment.

The memorialization of bienfaiteurs who had died was also emblematic of a larger effort by the editors of the information press to take on a new journalistic role by crafting the genre of nécrologie, not merely as a listing of a figure’s actions in life but rather as a narrative of a life that would connect with their readers. The nécrologie was a short-form article developed by the editors of the eighteenth-century press to celebrate remarkable figures who had died. Anne-Marie Mercier-Faivre has described such articles as a “Panthéon de papier.” Being worthy of such obituaries also relied on the assumption that the public already knew the person; they were tributes to public figures. In the 1770s and 1780s, some writers adopted the style of the nécrologie in their letters to the editor in order to celebrate the social commitments of those who had recently died. Their accounts built affective ties by prompting their readers to consider the actions of the exemplary figure they eulogized.

Philanthropic institutions also used the press to propose new solutions to the problems they faced. Suggestions for small yet meaningful improvements animated much of the correspondence. In February 1781 a writer who wished to remain anonymous offered a detailed account of the administration of foundling hospitals and an innovation to improve their work. The letter described the manner in which infants were taken from Paris’s foundling hospitals and distributed to wet nurses in the countryside; some fifteen or so babies at a time were transported by carriage from the foundling hospital, accompanied by only two or three women. The writer was pessimistic about the fate of the orphaned babies, as most did not survive
their time in the countryside, and the children that did survive suffered other maladies owing to malnutrition. As the writer saw it, the major problem was that wet nurses were so poor that they took in more babies than they could care for.

Unable to address the systemic problems of poverty or infant mortality, the writer turned instead to a small but implementable remedy. To that end, he or she suggested a new kind of carriage that would transport sixteen babies at a time in little baskets so they would not touch each other or sleep on one another. The carriage also made room for five attendants, thus increasing the care they received on their journey to the country. According to the writer, the nuns who ran the foundling hospital liked the idea of the new carriage, and both the writer and the women religious overseeing the hospital hoped to see it implemented soon. The proposal received support in the following days in the form of a subsequent response to the paper that emphasized the importance of work on behalf of foundlings. The writer was deeply moved to live “in an age where the love of humanity acts so powerfully upon sensitive souls.” By outlining the way a particular charitable institution ran, highlighting the problems inherent in it, and suggesting means of improvement, such letters articulated an interest in innovation and a confidence that material solutions could ameliorate the conditions of others.

Letters concerning the care of orphans and the funding of foundling hospitals continued throughout the 1780s. One letter that appeared in the Journal de Paris and then in Grenoble’s affiches called for contributions that were “so useful and so necessary” for the foundlings’ shelter at the Bicêtre Hospital. The letter elaborated on the history of such institutions by drawing the readers’ attention to a plaster statue of Saint Vincent de Paul in the Cour du Salon at the Louvre, which featured two foundlings at the saint’s feet. The two children symbolized the first foundling hospital in France and Vincent de Paul’s role in its founding. The writer elaborated, in 1638, the police established a foundling shelter [hospice] at rue Saint Victor, “But is it enough to found one? Properly administering is truly the character of bienfaisance.” Bienfaisance by its definition involved an investment in the community that provided for those in need, foundlings in this case. But the formulation of bienfaisance articulated in this letter also fused public and administrative interests; the responsibility of continued management inherent in the concept of bienfaisance suggested that the public had an interest and duty to care for the ongoing needs of the poor, sick, and orphaned—a commitment that municipal administrators shared.

The role of local leaders in carrying out bienfaisance also surfaced in cases of emergency. Letters about fires were vivid examples of “faits divers,” that
is, timely and local news stories that featured emotional accounts of danger and neighborly aid. But the narratives also described the responses to fire as acts of bienfaisance. In these accounts, administrators took responsibility for fighting the fire and caring for those displaced by it. Members of the clergy, nobility, state administration, and in some cases, the military also appeared in letters reporting on fires. In one such letter, Montplanqua, a doctor from Nogent-sur-Seine, reported on a fire in his town in detail. His account ended with an assurance that the local seigneur, “who always spreads his benefits on his vassals,” took measures to give them aid, and a lady who had spent the previous summer at the nearby château contributed a sum to support those affected by the fire.  

The letters by local doctors or priests that drew attention to the actions of local nobles emphasized that the landlord was fulfilling his responsibility by supporting the victims of the fire. In other cases, a curé acted, according to the letter writer, with courage and patriotism to contain the fire in Aix-en-Othe. A priest also wrote the letter to the paper documenting the loss of homes, furniture, and livestock in the fire in Courtenot. He beseeched the paper to print his letter soliciting support, which he specified the secretary of the subdelegation would collect.

Writers in the provinces who described bienfaisance in the wake of a fire also emphasized the swift response from the military. For example, the Affiches des Trois-Évêchés et Lorraine reported the 300 livres that a passing regiment had donated from their own salaries to help the villages of Juville and Moncheux south of Metz rebuild after a fire. The letter’s author, a lawyer by the name of Bauquel, included the aside that “the Major added that he had not had the time to know the intention of all the soldiers, but he was sure they were also in a hurry to deprive themselves to relieve the unfortunates for whom they had already worked so effectively.” Whether the regiment felt the same way is unknown, for the paper did not print any comments from the soldiers. The Journal de Provence printed a similar letter from Varange, an eyewitness and retired captain of the Normandy regiment, which listed the exact amount of donations made by Charles-Joseph, Prince de Ligne immediately after a fire in the village of Velaines not far from Ligny-en-Barrois in the northeast of France. The letters covering poor relief in the wake of a fire underscored the importance of local-level responses, which they framed as acts of bienfaisance.

Most discussions of fire emphasized administrative institutions. Officials themselves wrote letters to the editor reporting on the aid mobilized to help victims. A surnuméraire employed by the Ferme générale wrote the letter concerning a fire in Crest. The letter by a notary documenting the
fire in Saint-Dizier noted how the town magistrates felt the suffering of the public. The lieutenant general of police in Paris wrote a series of letters to report the donations made in response to a report of a fire that had left many homeless in the cul-de-sac Basfour, a pedestrian corridor in the Saint-Denis neighborhood. The letters submitted by the lieutenant general consisted of a register with the amount of donations made to the victims of the fire and the names of the people who contributed, although most of the donations were printed anonymously or with an attribution that read, “a servant on behalf of his master.” In all, some 2,669 livres were raised to support the Parisians left homeless by the fire. Letters printed in provincial newspapers throughout the kingdom reported on fires and recorded the amount of funds collected. In cases of fire, the affiches functioned as a record keeper where a mix of administrators and traditional figures responsible for charity, including the military, nobility, and clergy, appeared as agents responsible for the welfare of the community.

Finally, leaders of private charitable or philanthropic societies wrote to the affiches to publicize their work and solicit support. De Boissy, the treasurer and administrator for a private organization to support families of men in debtor’s prison, which he called the Compagnie de MM. de Charité pour l’assistance des Prisonniers & la délivrance des Débiteurs, wrote at least a dozen letters published toward the end of each month in the Parisian daily. In each letter, he offered an account of those who had donated funds. The letters included the precise amount that each party contributed and specified the use to be made of the funds. Occasionally, de Boissy would include the name of the contributor—though most gave anonymously. The reasons for their contributions often invoked religious explanations. One anonymous woman contributed funds “with the intention of appealing to God’s benediction for her marriage.” Another anonymous donor gave “in thanksgiving of healing from a disease.” De Boissy spoke of contributions as alms, and he explained the motivations of contributors as petitions or gifts of thanksgiving. He made clear that the acts of his bienfaisants were known in heaven. At the same time, his appeals referenced the material needs of humanity and tracked the practical changes that donations made in the lives of those who received aid. His letters showed the permeability between ideas of charity motivated by religious belief and of bienfaisance focused on material conditions.

De Boissy’s letters publicized the charitable association’s business dealings, but they also conveyed to the reader the material difference that donations made in the lives of those the charity helped. Each letter ended with a
reference to the men who had been released from their debts and restored to their families. Over the course of 1787, de Boissy reported that 60,503 livres were raised to meet the organization’s goals, and some 920 men were released from prison. In the last letter of the year, de Boissy thanked the contributors by speaking for those the charity had helped: “May we be permitted to testify, on behalf of these fathers and mothers of families, our gratitude to the souls who are sensitive to suffering humanity, and to be the interpreters of these children . . . who cannot yet unite with the authors to bless their liberators and their benefactors.” The donor-oriented approach and the tone of de Boissy’s correspondence that spoke on behalf of the recipients reflected the paternalism that bienfaisance often perpetuated. For the donors, his letters emphasized the importance of fellow feeling. De Boissy’s letters underscored the human impact of his charity on the “sensitive souls” who contributed funds and documented the number of men, women, and children who benefited from his subscribers. Broadcasting the success of his organization by specifying down to the livre how much he had raised seemed to propel the organization forward, as readers continued to contribute donations collected by the newspaper.

Bienfaisance took on many forms in the affiches. To some extent, bienfaisance offered a new material and empathic vocabulary for charitable efforts that had long existed in France. The church, hospitals, municipal administrators, and private organizations mobilized resources and galvanized others to act by writing letters that accounted for their commitments. Their letters aimed to educate the public, identify the needs of institutions, and provide innovations to ameliorate the conditions of those in need. Through their support for Old Regime institutions, the affiches, to a certain extent, undergirded the status quo. Although the discussions of bienfaisance did not question existing institutions outright, they did suggest actionable possibilities for change.

Education and Bienfaisance

In the information press, correspondence on education articulated the urgency of social reform. Writers who discussed bienfaisance took a special interest in intellectual and moral education, holding to the notion that virtue and usefulness were traits that anyone could learn and practice. New schools were proposed in the press, and writers debated the feasibility and impact of new educational programs. Such calls for education identified the students they hoped to reach, such as the poor, children with disabilities, and young girls, whom letter writers believed were in need of support and
instruction. In suggesting new educational programs, the writers envisioned philanthropic efforts on a grander scale.

Letters to the editor concerning educational programs emphasized the opportunities for social advancement and moral instruction they provided to children. In a letter printed in Paris in January 1781, Claude Antoine, comte de Thélis proposed the establishment of a system of national schools that would provide both moral and intellectual instruction to children of twelve or thirteen years of age: “Our principal goal is to work for the reformation of public morals [mœurs], giving the children of the people a Christian and patriotic education.” His primary aim in addressing the paper was to raise funds; he asked his fellow readers of the paper to contribute twelve livres to the school. But in writing to the newspaper he also noted the limitations for economic advancement the children faced, and he sought to improve the situation of young people within the limits of the social hierarchy of the Old Regime. He thought a school was the solution, which he argued would “do good for the entire nation.” Requests for support for new philanthropic societies in the information press often prompted the reader to consider the circumstances of those who would benefit; they argued that bienfaisance was both patriotic and charitable. The correspondence on the founding of bienfaisant societies was one of the few occasions when writers to the affiches made appeals to the nation.

Letters celebrating schools appeared throughout the 1780s. A letter printed in January 1787 recounted the invitation to the royal court of Valentin Haüy and blind schoolchildren from his school, when the students and their teacher had an audience at court where they presented a book to the royal family. The writer, who identified himself as a “philanthropist,” was present at court that day, and he noted the skills the children had learned, the quality of their education, and the dedication of their teachers. Haüy, the influential founder of the school, also wrote two letters to the Journal de Paris in 1787 to advertise his educational endeavors. By underscoring in their correspondence that all children could learn, the information press suggested the possibility of mobility through education.

In a similar vein, correspondence in the provincial affiches publicized schools for the blind and for the “deaf-mute.” A member of a philanthropic society in Angers dedicated to the support of education for the deaf explained that the students could learn “to speak, to develop through reflection the natural laws of morality engraved in their hearts, to know by representative signs the positive laws, and finally to express in writing what they thought and what they felt.” The support for their education expanded beyond basic proficiency in communication and considered their
comprehension and expression of natural laws. The writer emphasized that the students possessed the ability to communicate their thoughts and feelings, and not just as ends in themselves. Their education also equipped them to enter into professions. The letter offered the example of a successful deaf printer named Mame, whom the writer described as “already trained in his art” after just a few years.49 This letter to the Affiches d’Angers illustrated a vision of intellectual and moral education that equipped children to communicate, to think for themselves, and to enter a profession. Moreover, the writer made clear that even the newspaper’s readers with false impressions about the ability of deaf children to learn could influence the opinion of others. He wrote to the paper to correct such false impressions, to offer proof, and to make a compelling case for the education of deaf children.

Letter writers concerned with bienfaisance participated in the growing conversation in France about who education was for. By illustrating that students were capable of abstract thought and of entering a profession, the writer to the Affiches d’Angers underscored principles that philosophers such as Condillac and Diderot had proposed. Although provincial vocational schools such as the one in Angers are less studied, Paris experienced a flourishing of such institutions after mid-century. In the capital, the first free school for deaf children, the National Institute for Deaf-Mutes, was opened in 1760 by the Abbé de l’Epée, and later run by the Abbé Sicard. L’Epée was perhaps best known for his implementation of sign language among his students, which enabled them to communicate effectively and fostered a sense of community that was previously inaccessible to them.50 For the Abbé de l’Epée and other reformers, language itself was a tool for social reform.51 By focusing their efforts on the moral and intellectual instruction of children, the press presented a vision for the future with greater social mobility. The explanations for such programs also presented education as a normative—and increasingly, as a patriotic—good. Moreover, education was a topic that interested many letter writers as parents and caregivers. For example, in Compiègne a father expressed his concern with the education of his children. A governess’s letter on the role of parents and educators in the instruction of children appeared in the Affiches de Dijon.52 Through education, bienfaisance took on more expansive forms in projects to include children and to make their lives visible in the press.

Bienfaisant programs in education also cultivated new visions of the nation. Writers described those who participated in social welfare projects as the embodiment of a new national character trait, which people of all estates could carry out. What is more, they intended to cultivate the children targeted in such bienfaisant initiatives in this value. The discussions of
bienfaisance in the affiches prompted writers’ reflections on the nature of citizenship and public virtue.

**Model Benefactors and Public Virtue**

The affiches cultivated their readers’ interest in bienfaisance by showing what philanthropic and charitable institutions looked like, what kind of work they did, and what reforms they could offer. They invited readers to suggest improvements, and they solicited donations. In addition, the discussions of bienfaisance in the information press introduced readers to bienfaisance by presenting models of *bienfaiteurs* and *bienfaitrices*. In letters about exemplary benefactors, authors outlined the characteristics of public virtue, demonstrated the importance of the social action of model citizens, and encouraged the newspaper-reading public to participate by following their example. Bienfaisance took a range of forms, but the language of feeling was key. Writers described individuals moved to act out of the sensitivity of their souls, out of love for humanity, out of a desire to be useful. Their discussions followed the literary model of the anecdote, a short narrative with a plausible historical basis, which highlighted larger cultural values. In discussions of bienfaisance, writers found virtue among all social groups, and in doing so articulated who the beneficent citizen could be.

Some of the depictions of model benefactors looked to figures with well-established duties. The letters documenting bienfaisant actions by nobles relied on the trope that a seigneur should care for his tenants as a matter of long-standing custom. One such account describing the role of the nobility in bienfaisance appeared in the *Affiches des Trois-Évêchés et Lorraine*. In the letter an anonymous marquis in the “Village de F . . .” saved one of his tenants, a vigneron, from the collection of debts he could not pay. The letter writer exclaimed, “I cannot express to you the feeling that this act of humanity has made on these good villagers.” The vigneron and his family fell to their knees before the marquis to show their gratitude, but the nobleman shied away from their thanks. He answered instead, “Go, my friends, try to live happier, and you will find in me a protector.” A similar unsigned letter recounted an act of bienfaisance where the writer observed a generous man pay the rent for a family. Without his help, debt collectors at the door would have seized the family’s furniture. The writer believed that the public had to know about what had transpired, but he asked for the editor to print it anonymously so that the writer would not face the reproach of the benefactor. The anonymity of the donors and writers were a common trend in such letters. Like these examples suggest, some of the letters may have been fictive accounts
that drew on familiar tropes. The timing of landlords who stepped in at the most fortuitous moment echoed the depictions of benevolent gentlemen in popular novels.

The depiction of the anonymous landlords resonated with the paternalistic and material orientation of bienfaisance articulated by Voltaire. But the stories in the affiches also reflected the changing relationships between seigneurs and tenants in the late eighteenth century. The prevalence of absentee landlords grew in the eighteenth century, in ways that had reduced the authority of seigneurs in some regions and that had allowed for greater cooperation with the peasantry in others. In some cases, peasants remained on the same farms even as absentee landlordship grew. The letters depicting beneficent landlords show that some writers used the information press as a space for the recuperation of the image of seigneurialism, even as the authority that many landlords exercised over their estates waned.

The use of anonymity in letters depicting the nobility also underscored the more widely shared attitude that benefactors ought to carry out their duties humbly and eschew recognition for their good work. One especially thorough account of a noble benefactor appeared in the *Journal de Paris* in response to a particularly severe epidemic in Savigny. The doctor who composed the letter wrote, “By their nature, the following facts should be consigned to the annals of bienfaisance, and your *Journal* is their storehouse.” In the letter that followed, the doctor recounted the dedication of “Madame la Marquise de M***,” an anonymous local noblewoman who had worked tirelessly for the people of her community. Already forty people in the community had succumbed to an epidemic, but the marquise continued to care for those affected by it. She had opened her home to their care by transforming her chateau kitchen into a hospital kitchen, which she also equipped as a pharmacy. The marquise visited the sick night and day, taking on the most arduous of hospital tasks. The doctor argued that all people should be consecrated to the service of those suffering from maladies. He noted that while her service “honored her sex and her rank,” her actions spoke most of all to “a new trait of the national character.” By framing her actions not as a product of her duty but rather as an illustration of what anyone in the nation might do, the doctor invited readers of all ranks to imagine themselves in her shoes. Because the marquise’s response so clearly typified what he called the new national character, the doctor believed that “its publication could be useful, because there is nothing as persuasive as an example.” The doctor found in this woman’s example a figure worthy of emulation, and he situated the information press as the venue to share such cases.

As the letters concerning anonymous nobles suggested, bienfaisance often involved acts of generosity and care, but the anonymity and empathy of the
benefactor were key. In making their case to the editors to print their letters, writers made claims about the virtues of those who enacted bienfaisance. While virtue was understood in gendered and socially differentiated terms, letters to the editor made clear that many could embody it. In this way, letters in the information press reflected a popular genre known as *annales de la bienfaisance*. The *annales* were books that gathered together accounts of philanthropic acts into a published compendium. Filled with cases of good works performed by virtuous benefactors, they underscored that bienfaisance was enacted not only by men and women of noble birth but also by figures from the working classes. In finding benefactors from all social positions, the affiches suggested that reform was the work of all. Social distinctions did not fall away in their letters to the editor, but public virtue could be enacted by everyone.

Cases of bienfaisance among the working classes described virtuous men and women making swift decisions and acting as benefactors given the means they had. In some cases, the benefactor acted on behalf of his or her own family. For example, when an orphaned young man raised by a traiteur and his wife enlisted in the army to save his adopted parents from their debts, the traiteur who had raised the young man was celebrated in the press as a *bienfaiteur*. In a similar manner, in the *Affiches d'Angers* an anonymous writer who identified himself as “a subscriber” related the courageous and beneficent action of a peasant woman who saved others in the village of Les Ponts-de-Cé from a rabid dog. The dog bit her as she kept it at bay from the children in the village. Like the letters documenting the quick responses to fires, the bienfaisance performed by figures from the working classes emphasized spontaneity and self-sacrifice.

Letters profiling model benefactors also underscored the responsibility of the affiches and their readers to enact bienfaisance. Presenting the young woman who defended her neighbors from a rabid dog as a figure to emulate, the writer asked that the paper publish her “act of courage,” which the author found all the more admirable for the way in which she suffered after the attack. The writer solicited donations to alleviate her misery and provide for her children. The editors seconded the call for financial support and offered to collect funds on her behalf. Alongside the monetary request, the author also made a case to the editor that the paper was the record keeper for such good works: “Your pages have for a long time, sir, been the respectable depository in which are recorded these beautiful deeds, worthy of being transmitted to posterity, and of being proposed as models to the present generation.” As letters depicting model benefactors illustrated, writers and editors understood the affiches as a repository for such work. The paper
functioned as a catalog of actions taken, a gallery of those who enacted bienfaisance, and as a bookkeeper of funds raised on their behalf.

The notion of the affiches as the site for bienfaisance was vividly conveyed by a letter in the *Affiches du Dauphiné* concerning a group of market women who prevented a poor farmer from attacking a thief. Seeing the thief steal from the farmer and responding spontaneously to the farmer’s distress, the market women physically restrained and disarmed him to prevent an altercation with the thief and the arrest of the farmer. In an act of compassion, one woman named Jeanne Pascal gave the farmer the sum he had lost. When the other women witnessed her sacrifice, they raised funds among themselves to repay her. The story emphasized the social nature of bienfaisance, because one woman’s action had inspired the other market women to act benefically too. The writer told the editor that the nature of the community response and the act of generosity of one woman in particular had inspired them to write the letter and asked the editor to print the act of bienfaisance, since it would be “the only reward she and her companions will receive, and they deserve it.” Letters like this one suggested that anyone moved by fellow feeling could enact bienfaisance. Moreover, such accounts underscored that the peasantry were not merely victims in such narratives but could also become the benefactors.

While some of the letters depicting model benefactors were dramatic human interest stories, most writers considered how to practice bienfaisance in their everyday lives. This was the case for a group of journeymen who were celebrated in the press as bienfaiteurs. As one anonymous writer to the *Journal de Paris* explained in his letter, after thirty years of work, a journeyman engraver was afflicted by a mysterious paralysis over the entire left side of his body. The writer explained that the “accident had reduced him to the most terrible misery.” Noting the virtue, good manners, and morals of their unfortunate brother, his fellow compagnons graveurs raised enough money from their own labor to support their friend. The anonymous writer who shared this story argued that the editors should print the letter so that the example of the men’s action would become less rare. The writer asserted that “acts of bienfaisance have always merited the highest praise,” and the newspaper would be privileged “to encourage good people to imitate them” by their publication. By sharing examples of philanthropic action in daily life, writers and editors sought to motivate readers to recognize needs in their own community and to act on them.

The information press published letters that profiled benefactors from a range of positions in society whom the writers deemed worthy of emulation. Appeals to good citizenship and the public good, mixed with references to
piety and virtue, were especially evident in the letters that described rosières festivals. The rosière, or rose-girl, was the “queen of virtue” chosen from a group of single women known for their chastity and integrity in eighteenth-century spring festivals. While the tradition supposedly began in Salency, rosière festivals gained popularity in the 1760s and 1770s through enactments in the countryside, literature, and plays. Such festivals celebrated a particular vision of country life and feminine virtue, and they held widespread appeal among social elites. By 1780 the festivals were widely adopted. Even the small village of Saint-Aupre had a lively festival, where some two thousand guests attended the festivities and the marquis Joseph-Marrie de Barral crowned the rosière.

Letters to the editor that documented virtue prizes reinforced gender and social hierarchies, but they also became a space to reconsider the meaning of citizenship. In a letter describing a prize competition similar to the rosières, Cantuel de Blémeur, the curé of Saint-Séverin in Paris, described a foundation run by his parish each year since 1751 and organized to celebrate the morals (mœurs) of the young women in the parish. Like many other writers, he characterized his work as bienfaisance and wrote to the press “for the encouragement of so many religious and beneficent citizens, friends and apostles of virtue by their good works and their examples.” For the priest, virtue, citizenship, bienfaisance, and religion were intertwined.

The competition at Saint-Séverin functioned as a lottery that all young women in the parish could enter, and a prize of 100 livres was awarded to the five young women who won. He explained the selection process, which included an evaluation of the morals, piety, and conduct of each of the young women who entered the contest. The curé assured his readers that the reputations of all the young women were kept private so as not to dishonor any of them, but he noted that a young woman could be removed from the list on the basis of a religious leader’s evaluation. The winners were selected by a drawing held in the presence of witnesses. The judges awarded five prizes to the young women at a celebration their parents attended to honor “morals, religion, and la patrie.” The priest submitted his letter “in the sweet hope that such an interesting example will be followed in the Capital with the same zeal as it multiplies in the Provinces.” He asked for the paper to print his letter about the parish lottery with the aim of inspiring other parishes to reward their own “true citizens.” Depictions of virtue as they were articulated in prize competitions such as the one for the Saint-Séverin parish reinforced traditional mores. At the same time, the writers who pitched such competitions in the press also raised questions about what it meant to be a citizen, and they fused patriotism to piety and moral conduct.
Through the correspondence on bienfaisance, the idea that any individual could be virtuous, in ways appropriate to their social position, circulated widely. Letter writers discussed prize competitions that were awarded according to one’s demonstration of bienfaisance. For example, the intendant in Perpignan nominated three men from nearby villages for a prize in recognition of their moral character and acts of bravery in rescuing others. The correspondence about such contests put forward models of public virtue much as the letters on bienfaisance did, and the writers made clear the social positions of the recipients of virtue prizes. Peasants, craftsmen, and domestic servants appeared in the press as people with agency worthy of recognition.

In a similar manner, one nomination letter for an annual virtue prize written by a lawyer appeared in the Journal de Paris and then later in the Affiches du Dauphiné and the Affiches de Montpellier. He nominated a servant woman who had demonstrated remarkable commitment. The nominated woman, La Blonde, had been in the employ of the Migeon family for some twenty years. When the merchant Migeon died, he left his wife, aged thirty, and their two young children destitute, in the words of the lawyer, “without bread.” La Blonde refused to abandon the family and stayed with them; despite Madame Migeon’s encouragement to seek new employment, La Blonde demurred. After all, she argued, “who will take care of the family if I leave it?” She continued to serve the family, but within months the widow Migeon fell ill, consumed with grief. La Blonde sold everything she had to pay the family’s bills. After the widow’s death, La Blonde didn’t want to leave the children, so she offered to continue to care for them. After sharing La Blonde’s story, the writer enclosed the attestations of ten men familiar with the events that had transpired.

La Blonde’s self-sacrifice was central to the narrative of bienfaisance presented in the paper, but the writer also encouraged fellow feeling by drawing the reader’s attention to the precipitous fall of a bourgeois family and to the welfare of children. The writer asked that the paper publish this letter for two reasons: first, because “your Journal has become more interesting and more valuable since you have made it your duty to transmit to public veneration good deeds which, without you, might be ignored,” and second, to nominate La Blonde for a virtue prize. Like the rosières, letters concerning prize competitions were a way to idealize the status quo, but the motif was also a way of highlighting social tensions and critiquing arbitrary power. Letters held up the conduct of the benefactor as an example, and in doing so they highlighted the material and social conditions of journeymen, domestic servants, widows, and orphans. Their letters asked the reader to empathize with them. By featuring marginalized figures as the agents in the stories, letter writers pushed against social hierarchies.
The letters explaining why men and women participated in bienfaisance relied less on appeals to one’s duty as a member, for example, of the nobility and clergy, and instead they made the argument that empathy and fellow feeling compelled all people to action. The role of emotion in discussions of bienfaisance marked an important shift away from the early modern conceptualization of compassion that had reinforced social difference. In the seventeenth century, compassion was the attitude of a spectator, who looked on attentively but remained an observer.\textsuperscript{70} By contrast, the emotional accounts of eighteenth-century bienfaisance depicted a reader who was moved to tears but also to action, whether to write about the event or to emulate it.\textsuperscript{71} The applied nature of beneficent models in the affiches relied on the power of an example to influence the reader. The information press supplied such models in abundance. The figures who enacted bienfaisance were portrayed as courageous men and women who jumped into action motivated by a sense of fellow feeling. Such benefactors simultaneously maintained an archetypal element that was not overly contextualized. In doing so, the letters to the editor about bienfaisance allowed readers to imagine themselves in a similar situation.

The editors of the affiches published letters to the editor on a multitude of topics, but most of all on bienfaisance. For the writers of the affiches, the newspaper served an important function: it kept them informed, afforded a space for debate, and offered avenues for the amelioration of daily life. In their correspondence, writers conveyed that change was possible at the local level. Those who situated their discussions of bienfaisance in a letter to the editor expressed the sense that by writing to the paper, they could be a part of such change. The depictions of bienfaisance in their letters revealed that writers had differing motivations, vantage points, and approaches to philanthropy and charity. While many of those who undertook bienfaisance were associated with institutions who were traditionally responsible for such work, such as parish priests, doctors, or the nobility, the language they used to explain their actions and their motivations emphasized that compassion should guide people to action. Above all, bienfaisance was the work of good citizens, of men and women of virtue. As the writers emphasized, social reform and spontaneous bienfaisance alike served humanity.

In formulating a model benefactor on whom readers could pattern their own philanthropic efforts, writers depicted agents of change from all positions in society. Bienfaisance often supported established organizations, and some letter writers characterized the people from the peasantry or the working classes they aimed to help in paternalistic terms. But writers also suggested changes of social consequence, such as the expansion of education and the amelioration of local problems. Descriptions of model benefactors
asserted the universality of virtue as a quality that anyone could possess, and bienfaisance as a practice anyone could adopt. Writers offered examples of virtuous character, of fellow feeling, and of honest conduct in daily life. Moreover, the discussion of bienfaisance suggested that bienfaiteurs and bienfaitrices came from all social ranks. Such representations mattered, for even among those who merely read the affiches without writing a letter, they could begin to see images of people like themselves as agents in the newspaper.

Making the case for bienfaisance in the press was both a public act and a personal one, for it relied on empathy. The majority of the published letters on charity and philanthropy encouraged the reader to emulate the individuals about whom they read by acting locally to care for those who were victims of circumstance—of theft, fire, illness, hunger—but were otherwise like the readers. They encouraged fellow feeling explicitly, by casting those they helped as like themselves (leurs semblables), and arguing that those with sensitive souls would act to support them. Through the forum of letters to the editor, private citizens formulated ways to participate in shaping their society. By forging affective ties among readers, the information press prompted writers to consider the public good. The debates over the projects and participants involved in bienfaisance were part of a wider conversation about the formulation of civil society.

Letters to the editor that explained social welfare projects and encouraged other readers to participate serve as a powerful reflection of the ways in which members of a more expansive writing public made sense of the current events within their community and sought to change their social environments. Indeed, imagining a completely new society, like the one that the Revolution would introduce, remained largely unexplored before 1789. Nevertheless, writers discussed public service frequently, and their correspondence in the newspapers showed that many sought to enact change, both through written critique and direct action. The practice of imagining and enacting local, material changes in the affiches equipped readers with habits of mind they would soon put to new uses.