Chapter Two
Fermat and His Correspondents

§I.

Fermat's outwardly uneventful life is soon told. He was born into a prosperous middle-class family in Beaumont de Lomagne, a little town in the south of France, not far from Toulouse in the province of Languedoc. His mother Claire de LONG belonged to the “noblesse de robe”, which means that her family had been ennobled through one or more of its members holding a magistrate’s office. He was baptized Pierre FERMAT on 20 August 1601. Before 1631 he spent some time, perhaps some years, in Bordeaux. On 14 May 1631 he was received into the “parlement”, i.e., the provincial High Court of Judicature, in Toulouse, with the title of councilor, an office which he held until his death; in virtue of it he was thereafter styled Monsieur de Fermat, and is so referred to by his contemporaries. On 1 June 1631 he was married to Louise de LONG, a distant cousin of his mother’s. They had two sons and three daughters; the elder son Samuel became a magistrate, and, like his father, a councilor in the Toulouse High Court; his brother took orders and became a canon in the cathedral church in Castres; one daughter got married, two became nuns. Fermat’s professional life was divided between Toulouse, his main residence, and Castres, which was the seat of the “Chambre de l’Edit” of the Toulouse High Court; this was
the judicial instance concerned with the relations between the catholic and protestant communities of the province\(^1\). Fermat died in Castres on 12 January 1665 during one of his turns of office there.

Obviously Fermat had enjoyed an excellent classical education; he was well versed in Latin, Greek, Italian and Spanish, and generally praised for his skill in writing verse in several languages, a skill which he transmitted to his son Samuel. He collected manuscripts; his advice was eagerly sought on the emendation of Greek texts. With such interests, a seventeenth century gentleman might naturally think of a journey to Italy; in Fermat’s case the active scientific life in that country, and the presence there of such men of science as Galileo, Cavalieri, Ricci, Torricelli, should have provided an additional attraction. Indeed some of his best friends did make the trip and visited the Italian scientists on the way: Carcavi in 1634, Beaugrand in 1635, Mersenne in 1644 and 1645. There is no indication that Fermat ever thought of following their example. In 1636, in one of his very first letters to Mersenne (Fe.II.14), he speaks somewhat doubtfully of “finding some occasion for spending three or four months in Paris”, which would have given him, he says, the opportunity for writing up his ideas on geometrical topics; but this was not to happen. Late in life, in 1660, he expresses to Pascal the earnest wish to meet him; “as his health is little better than Pascal’s” this would have to take place “somewhere halfway between Clermont and Toulouse” (Fe.II.450); Pascal, also for reasons of health (Fe.II.450–452), did not undertake the journey, which indeed, in those days, might have been a strenuous one for an invalid. In the same year, Fermat, hearing that Huygens is in Paris (Fe.II.452), assures him that he would go there to meet him if only his health would allow him to travel; obviously he

\(^1\) A number of letters of Fermat’s, touching upon his professional life, have been preserved (Fe.II, letters LI,LIV,LV,LIX,LXIV,LXV,LXVI, CXI, and Fe.IV.15–22; cf. Fe.III.505). Cf. also the excellent study by P. Chabbert, Fermat à Castres, Rev.d’Hist.des Sc. 20 (1967), pp. 337–348.