The eighteenth century was marked by an exceptional contribution of Irish men and women to the theatre of the English-speaking world. The Irish distinguished themselves as writers, actors and managers. In the realm of comedy they are unsurpassed. Indeed the plays of Farquhar, Goldsmith and Richard Brinsley Sheridan have remained unchallenged in the repertoire since their own day. It would seem therefore that Ireland was a fertile ground for those attracted by the diverse delights of the stage.

The theatre at this time was held by many in disrepute. It provided a precarious living, as the majority of plays had very short runs, and was a form of public entertainment often subjected to the whims and control of governments. Only a brave or foolish manager would defy the desires of the public when various levels of patronage were essential for financial survival. The audience could be anything but well-behaved and a restless element might easily sabotage the enjoyment of a piece through boisterous conduct (in reading these accounts one is reminded of a modern football crowd). The success of a performance could be undermined in advance through the plans of a malevolent claque bent on amusing itself and being the centre of attention, a spontaneous or well-rehearsed quip having the power to devastate the flow of a performance. Audiences came to see their favourite actors and actresses and might manifest their displeasure when they failed to appear. Furthermore, the theatre was a public space where people not only came to see but to be seen, a potential site of collective celebration or factional disapproval.

With those brief, general points in mind, let us turn to the theatre in Ireland. The theatre was at its most active in Dublin, although provincial towns could boast a surprising range of dramatic performances as the century unfolded. Given its prestige and role as a seat of government, it is no surprise that the capital produced a large selection of plays. Theatre-goers preferred comedies to tragedies and were regularly treated to farces, after-pieces, dancing and entertainments. Although theatrical managers kept abreast of stage novelties and successes in London, there was no automatic Irish follow-up and, indeed, the choice of plays could be quite conservative and unadventurous. The most famous theatre was Smock Alley.
which, over the years, had to face up to the competition of a number of rivals such as the theatres in Aungier Street and Crow Street. The capacity of Dublin to sustain such theatrical rivalry was questionable and the competition could cause reciprocal damage.³

Knowledge of the French theatre came from various sources. For a limited and generally privileged number it came from contact with France. This may have been from experiences such as the Grand Tour, commercial relationships with ports like Bordeaux, perhaps service in the French army as wild geese. For example, Daniel O’Conor, the brother of Charles O’Conor of Belanagare, served in the Irish brigades and was interested in the theatre and French literature in general. He penned a tragedy which he hoped that Garrick might produce in London.⁴ It could also have come from reading printed versions of plays in single or collected editions for, although most plays were composed primarily for performance, print-runs were evidently produced for purchase and private consumption.⁵ Those able to read the original or adapted versions were thereby in a position to keep up with the cultural scene in France and display their familiarity as a social asset. Here, one must bear in mind the artistic prestige so often attached to France, even when that country was such a long-standing antagonist on the field of battle.

Information regarding the French theatre might also be gleaned from the periodical press. If the majority of this came from Britain, late in the century details could also be gathered from an Irish source, the Hibernian Magazine. The latter contains frequent accounts of London productions but, sadly, none of performances in Ireland. Here one is evidently dealing with the production of plays in English versions. Such versions were basically adaptations and had no pretensions to being faithful translations; indeed the adaptors could consider their texts as improvements.⁶ It is important to recall that the notion of literary property was fairly meaningless at this time and that dramatists were wont to borrow plots and individual scenes with little or no compunction. This unlicensed free trade was particularly prevalent back and forth across the English Channel⁷ and frequently unacknowledged. A particular audience would not necessarily be aware of the provenance of a play, although its association with a celebrated French author might give it extra spice in the views of some.

Before examining the performances of the adaptations of French plays on the Irish stage, it is appropriate to consider authors who enjoyed some contemporary renown on both sides of the Irish sea. Here I shall draw on material contained in the Hibernian Magazine, as it was locally produced and referred to historically significant playwrights. My survey will be restricted to important eighteenth-century writers and will thus omit