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Article abstract

The objective of this article is to explain how Michel-Jean Sedaine’s play *Le Philosophe sans le savoir* (1765), considered the most successful example of the *drame bourgeois*, is characterised not only by the theatrical innovations advocated by Diderot in his writing on drama, but by central aspects of the reforming aesthetic movement that dominated the last half of the eighteenth century, and which has come to be known as neo-classicism.

“Une grâce, une modestie, un sérieux”: The Reforming Neo-Classicism of Sedaine’s *Philosophe sans le savoir*.

D. R. Gamble

Although the warmth of the reception it was accorded when first staged before the French court at Chambord in 1670 is still debated, Molière’s play *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* very soon found the favour it has enjoyed since. This masterful study of human nature, a portrayal of the corrosive vanity and pretentiousness of a bourgeois parvenu, has gone on to become “one of the favourite plays of the French comic repertoire” (Whitton 25): the comic repertoire because the hierarchy of genres and dramatic register that informed French theatre in the seventeenth century determined that any treatment of a middle-class subject, however serious its underlying theme, must necessarily be relegated to comedy. The oxymoron of the title, which may (roughly) be translated as “the upper middle-class nobleman” (Hall 11-13) was considered highly amusing in itself.

The bourgeoisie, however, was the most dynamic element of French society, and as its economic and political power steadily increased, its influence on the arts became more pronounced as well.¹ It fell, therefore, to the dramatic theorists of the eighteenth century to devise a new kind of play that would allow the concerns of the middle class to be aired on French stages with the seriousness befitting its new social position. Chief among them was the *philosophe* Denis Diderot (1713-1784), who in two manifestos particularly, the *Entretiens sur le Fils naturel* (1757) and *De la Poésie dramatique* (1758), advocated the reforms that underlay the creation of the *drame bourgeois*. Through its realistic depiction of the middle class, this new hybrid genre was related to traditional comedy, but also to tragedy through the misfortunes of its central characters and its serious tone, for the *drame*, reflecting its origins in the bourgeoisie, was intended to entertain and educate in equal measure. In the words of one historian of French theatre, “le drame est un genre nouveau créé par le parti philosophique pour attendrir et moraliser la bourgeoisie et le peuple en leur présentant un tableau touchant de leurs propres aventures et de leur propre milieu” (Gaiffe 78).

It was not to be Diderot, however, who breathed life into his carefully elaborated idea of a theatre: both his plays, *Le Fils naturel* (1757) and *Le Père de famille* (1758), were failures on the stage, and while others were better received, it was the popular success in 1765 of Sedaine’s *Philosophe sans le savoir* which really established the viability of this new dramatic form.

Although the son of a Parisian architect and building contractor, Michel-Jean Sedaine (1719-1797) had to abandon his formal education at the age of only thirteen when his father died. To support his family he became a mason, even as he continued to indulge his taste for literature, publishing a collection of *Poésies fugitives* in 1752 and composing lyrics, with great success, for musicians of the popular *opéra comique*, Philidor, Monsigny and Grétry. In this way he met other writers and artists, among them Diderot, who was to become his friend. Sedaine has in fact written that he was first moved to compose *Le Philosophe sans le savoir* to refute the sarcastic portrayal of the *philosophes* in the successful play of that name by Charles Palissot de Montenoy in 1760:

1. Roubine, *Introduction aux grandes theories du théâtre* 56-57.

En 1765, m'étant trouvé à la première [sic] représentation des *Philosophes*, je fus indigné de la manière dont étaient traités d'honnêtes hommes de lettres que je ne connaissais que par leurs écrits. Pour réconcilier le public avec l'idée du mot 'philosophe' que cette satire pouvait dénigrer, je composai *Le Philosophe sans le savoir*. (*Quelques réflexions inédites sur l'opéra-comique* in Pixérécourt, *Théâtre choisi*, Paris, Tresse; Nancy, chez l'auteur, 4 volumes, 1841-43, IV, 509; quoted by Rodmell 107).

And in different ways, Sedaine's play reflects the influence of Diderot: in the opinion of its latest editor, the figure of the eponymous hero, Vanderk, may have been inspired by Diderot's own *Père de famille* (Garapon XIII); and aspects of the *drame*'s plot were perhaps taken from Diderot's suggestion of what a modern tragedy might be ("Prenons un exemple domestique et commun," Diderot, *Writings on the Theatre* 53) in the second of his *Entretiens sur 'Le Fils naturel'* (Garapon XVI). But the transforming influence of Diderot is most evident in Sedaine's choice of bourgeois protagonists and in his presentation of their dilemma: in his intimate but realistic portrayal of the household of a wealthy merchant as its members confront a very contemporary misfortune – a duel – which tries their basic virtues, ensures emotional as well as dramatic appeal and offers, ultimately, a clear moral lesson. Even so, the play was finally approved for performance by government censors only after Sedaine made considerable revisions to the end of the third act (scenes 8, 9, 10, 11, 12) clearly to demonstrate that the elder Vanderk did not condone the participation of his son in a duel prohibited by law. Today *Le Philosophe sans le savoir* is considered the most memorable example of the *drame bourgeois*, "la réalisation la plus avancée dans ce 'genre dramatique sérieux' dont Diderot puis Beaumarchais ont fait brillamment la théorie" (Garapon XL). To his credit, Diderot was among the first to acknowledge its worth:

J'étais à côté de Cochin, et je lui disais: "Il faut que je sois un honnête homme, car je sens vivement tout le mérite de cet ouvrage. Je m'en récrie de la manière la plus forte et la plus vraie; et il n'y a personne au monde à qui elle dût faire plus de mal qu'à moi, car cet homme me coupe l'herbe sous les pieds (Lettre à Grimm [3 décembre 1765], Diderot, *Correspondance* 206).

Given other distinctive aspects of Sedaine's play, however, as well as its appeal to eighteenth-century audiences and its recent appraisal as "un merveilleux miroir de la sensibilité de son époque" (Garapon XLI), it is worthwhile to consider whether it should also be seen as a reflection of attitudes more properly associated with neo-classicism, a pan-European reforming movement closely allied to the Enlightenment. "Emphas[ising] the reforming power of antiquity" (Wilton-Ely 3), neo-classicism has been described as "a drastic moral regeneration [...] in art [...] distinguish[ed] [...] from other eighteenth-century artistic currents [by] the earnestness of its adherents" (Levey 166); for them it was "the true style" (Wilton-Ely 1). Beginning about the middle of the century, in the comprehensive explanation of R. Rosenblum, "a new moralizing fervor penetrated the arts, as if to castigate the sinful excesses of hedonistic style and subject that had dominated the Rococo. The origins of this didactic mode may be traced back, broadly, to the growth of bourgeois audiences. [...] It was around 1760, however, that these currents gained new impetus, especially in France. There, the zealous re-examination of Greco-Roman antiquity was gradually combined with the new demand for stoical sobriety of form and emotion" (Rosenblum 50). Although more often applied to architecture and the fine arts, the term neo-classicism has also been associated with the reforms in opera of Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-1787), which emphasised a limpid style and artless

effect.² In literature it has been used, for example, with reference to such late eighteenth-century Italian writers as Giuseppe Parini (1722-1799) and Vittorio Alfieri (1749-1803) (Brand et al. 380, 393); and in English very broadly to describe the 140 years following the restoration of Charles II in 1660 (Abrams 113). It is, however, the last fifty years or so of this period, "a culmination of the literary and critical modes of neo-classicism and the worldview of the Enlightenment" (Abrams 169), which correspond most closely to what may be called the period of literary neo-classicism in France: but very rarely is.

This movement in French literature was generally impelled by the same aspirations and reforming tendencies as in the other arts: rarely has there been closer collaboration among artists across different media than at this time. Diderot expressed the prevailing mood in his *Essai sur la peinture* of 1765 when he asserted: "Rendre la vertu aimable, le vice odieux, le ridicule saillant, voilà le projet de tout honnête homme qui prend la plume, le princeau ou le ciseau" (quoted by Rosenblum 52);³ as late as 1787, Rigolay de Juvigny published a treatise on the decline in literature entitled *De la Décadence des lettres et des mœurs depuis les Grecs et les Romains jusqu'à nos jours*: "surely a parallel," it has been written, "to neo-classic art critics and savants who deplored a decline of true art and true taste" (Saisselin 23).

It is at the beginning of this movement that the innovative drama of Sedaine may be placed: it clearly reflects the central tendencies that characterise neo-classicism across all the arts, and adumbrates still others that were to be further developed only later in the century.

Reference has already been made to the middle-class standing of Sedaine's protagonists, all of whom are closely associated with a broader family unit (whether it is headed by the senior Vanderk, by Antoine, his retainer and confidant of long standing, or by d'Esparville *père*), whose members treat each other not only with affection, but consideration and respect. Like neo-classicism itself, they are essentially serious, with no hint of aristocratic arrogance or frivolity. It is indicative that the elder Vanderk can successfully pretend not to recognize his own daughter when, elegantly dressed for her marriage, she mischievously has herself announced as a *marquise* (I/5). The comic relief to be found in this play is in fact provided by the exaggerated affectation of the few minor aristocratic characters, *la tante* in particular, who in this way are used to lampoon their own class. Sedaine's drame takes place far from the aristocratic glitter of Paris in one of the larger (northern) provincial centres⁴ and is set not in a fashionable sitting room, but rather in "un grand cabinet éclairé de bougies," (I/1, 15),⁵ in Vanderk's main office, with a desk and the inevitable clutter, to reflect the industry and lack of pretention of the man himself. This austerity of setting, manner, and mood is complemented by a sobriety of expression, a lack of rhetorical – and emotional – flourish that set Sedaine apart from contemporary dramatists. It certainly impressed Diderot: "[...] Ce qui est pour moi le mérite incroyable de la pièce, ce qui me fait tomber les bras, me décourage, me dispense d'écrire de ma vie, [...] c'est ce naturel sans aucun apprêt, c'est l'éloquence la plus vigoureuse sans l'ombre d'effort ni de rhétorique. Combien d'occasions de pérorer auxquelles on ne se refuse jamais sans le goût le plus grand et le plus exquis !" (Diderot,

2. See Rosenblum, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth-Century Art*: "The innovations of Orfeo ed Eurydice (1762) and Alceste (1767) are directly parallel to the artistic transformations of the 1760s in their insistence on naturalness and clarity of style and emotion. Translated into visual terms, the reforms set forth in the famous preface to Alceste (1769) amount to a manifesto of Neoclassic art" (52).

3. A perspective clearly shared by Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741-1828), creator of the busts of his famous contemporaries Voltaire, Diderot, Franklin, Washington, et al., who declared: "One of the finest attributes of the difficult art of sculpture is truthfully to preserve the form and render the image of men who have achieved glory or good for their country" (quoted by Wilton-Ely 4).

4. The city is not identified, but Mason suggests Rouen (406), and Garapon, Lille or Amiens (4).

5. All references in this article to *Le Philosophe sans le savoir* are made to the edition prepared by Émile Feuillâtre and published by Larousse in 1936.

Correspondance, V 205) he wrote on 3 December 1765 after seeing the play to Grimm, who himself expressed similar sentiments.⁶

The senior Vanderk's own emotional reticence forms part of his philosophical response to the disaster that threatens to befall his family when his only son becomes involved in a duel on the eve of his daughter's marriage. Dutifully tending to his business and capable, even in his despair, of thinking for all his family and his friends, he is shown through his words and deeds to be an exemplary husband, father, brother, and employer, as well as an honest yet very successful merchant. Vanderk's stoicism, in particular, is reflective of the sober personal traits that neo-classicists championed,⁷ but the combination, in this single character, of so many sterling attributes makes him an example in literature of "Neoclassic idealist art theory" (Rosenblum 23), that is, a compilation of perfections, a paragon whose function is to provide an *exemplum virtutis* (Rosenblum 56), a model of rectitude worthy of emulation: it is through the understated example of Vanderk *père* that honour is shown to be "a moral quality" (Mason 414) rather than an appanage of noble birth. This *drame* contains other lessons as well: in a letter written in 1793 to the Comédie Française, Sedaine claimed that he had written his play to demonstrate equality of rank, the respect due to commerce and its usefulness, the foolishness of duels and the harm they cause, and the need for complete tolerance in matters of religion.⁸ No less didactic, finally, are the modest aphorisms on the act of living happily that course through the dialogue of this *drame*: while other characters make them too, it is through the elder Vanderk that most of these broader social observations are introduced: "Ne perds jamais de vue, ma fille, que la bonne conduite des père et mère est la bénédiction des enfants" (23); or "Monsieur, les honnêtes gens n'ont besoin que de la probité de leurs semblables, et non de leurs opinions" (60), and so on.

In light of his portrayal of the family unit and the inclusion of such homely maxims in his work Sedaine was considered by his contemporary Charles Collé (1709-1783) to be "le Greuze du dramatique" (quoted in Rodmell 27), likening him to the popular painter (1725-1805) of such rustic and moralising compositions as *L'Accordée du village* (1761) and *La Piété filiale* (1763). This remark has often been repeated, but Sedaine can be even more closely associated with another, much younger French artist, Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825), arguably the most significant representative of the neo-classical movement in France.⁹ Sedaine and the much younger David know each other well: until the Revolution finally divided them, Sedaine considered David almost a member of his family, their mutual affection only strengthened by common interests in art, architecture, and the theatre. In these circumstances it is not surprising that, across different genres, their work reveals common themes and similar points of reference: "Dans les arts," Sedaine in 1780 wrote to David, who was returning from his stay in Rome, "il est étonnant combien ceux que nous fréquentons influent sur nos idées, et en diminuent ou en augmentent la noblesse" (quoted in Ledbury 289). Their use of an inspiring figure from Roman history, Brutus the first consul, offers an interesting example. In an appendix to the uncensored version of his play, written in 1778, Sedaine explained that "Mon philosophe sans le savoir était un homme d'honneur, qui voit toute la cruauté d'un préjugé terrible et y cède en gémissant. C'était, sous un autre aspect, Brutus, qui, pénétré de ce qu'il doit à sa patrie, étouffe la voix de la raison, le cri de la nature, et envoie ses

6. Grimm's enthusiastic reception of Sedaine's play has been reprinted by Feuillâtre in his edition on page 78.

7. See Rosenblum 28.

8. "L'égalité des états, en quelque rang que le ciel nous a placés; le respect dû au commerce, son utilité et sa naissance prouvées, la base de ses titres, etc.; l'extravagance des duels et de leur atrocité; [...] le besoin d'une indifférence universelle sur les opinions religieuses" (quoted by Rodmell 14).

9. See Levey, *Rococo to Revolution* 186 ff.

fil à la mort" (quoted by Garapon 129).¹⁰ This reference to Plutarch anticipates David's illustration of the same episode in a painting completed in 1789, which shows the founder of the Roman republic numb with grief as the lictors bring him the bodies of the sons he himself had condemned to death for treason. Brutus was a hero for the reformers of the Enlightenment, a model republican who had not hesitated to place the interests of his nation before the lives of his sons (Monneret 92, 94). The grand themes of patriotism and civic virtue that he exemplifies lead directly to those noble feelings which lie at the heart of French neo-classicism. The paternal bond between the industrious Vanderk and his errant son is used as a vehicle to express just such sentiments, to advocate, in Vanderk's own words, "la droiture, l'honneur, la probité" (II/4, 30): as critics have often observed, this is essentially a play about honour (e.g., Mason 413). The romantic attachment between the young Vanderk and his sister's maid, Victorine, which would have been the exclusive focus of many Rococo playwrights (like Marivaux)¹¹ is left unresolved in this *drame* where, as Sedaine himself claimed in 1778, the word 'love' is not even mentioned: "C'est le seul ouvrage mis au théâtre où le mot d'amour ne soit même pas prononcé" (quoted by Garapon 133).¹²

The nascent spirit of neo-classicism informs other areas of Sedaine's *drame* as well. If his open call for civic virtue and more discreet illusion to Brutus (in an appendix) foreshadows the interest later neo-classicists (such as David, Alfieri, et al.) would take in this heroic figure from Plutarch, Sedaine's glorification of certain social strata, notably those most capable of effecting reform, is clear. In addition to his nation's merchants, represented by the eponymous central figure, in this play Sedaine repeatedly extols the judiciary and the military. "Je ne connais que deux états au-dessus du commerçant [...]: le magistrat, qui fait parler les lois, et le guerrier, qui défend la patrie," declares Vanderk in II/4 (30-31), and all are positively represented in this *drame*: Vanderk's own father died "fort jeune, à la tête de son régiment" (28); his son is an officer in the navy, appearing in uniform to emphasise the fact¹³; d'Esparville *fil*s, his adversary, is an officer in the army; and 'le gendre,' Vanderk's son-in-law, a member of the judiciary (and *noblesse de robe*).¹⁴ The merits of all these groups are also emphasised through the praise other characters reserve for them: the son-in-law defends his caste when meeting the aunt, a marchioness ("Et qui le sont, madame," II/10, 36), but it is most notably Mme Vanderk who, unaware of her son's dilemma, confides to her husband: "Ma fille... mon gendre!... toute cette famille est si responsable, si honnête! La bonne robe est sage comme les lois" (IV/11, 57). And while it is reportedly the view of the comically aristocratic aunt that "Quiconque n'est pas militaire n'est rien" (II/6, 32), her bias does no more than echo the more considered opinion of her brother, the philosopher of the play's title. Sedaine's emphases here clearly anticipate the gradual change that occurred in the subjects of visual art over the course of the eighteenth century while the neo-classical movement gained momentum and "the gods [of classical mythology] were [...] rationalised and explained away [...]. As the gods, fauns and satyrs receded into the background, their place was

10. Garapon's comment on this comparison in his edition of the play is worth noting: "On le voit, Vanderk père, dans l'esprit de Sedaine, est beaucoup plus proche d'un héros de Plutarque que d'un sectateur de l'Encyclopédie" (129).

11. See Brady, "Rococo and Neoclassicism," *Studi francesi*, no. 22, 1964, 34-49.

12. It would be left to another, less gifted dramatist, George Sand, to attempt this some one hundred years later in her play *Le Mariage de Victorine* (1861).

13. In his article on Sedaine's *drame* Mason has explained that "naval officers did not generally come from the highest nobility; duties at sea were unfashionable as they kept aristocrats away from the boudoir obligations of Versailles. But while naval commissions did not normally attain to the summit of prestige, they were in all other ways eminently respectable" (409-10).

14. The dramatic value of Vanderk's future son-in-law is minimal: as one critic has noted, "he scarcely exists at all" (Rodmell 46). His presence onstage, however, may well reflect Sedaine's desire to have a visible and appealing representative of the judiciary which he glorifies.

taken by men – by the warriors, law-givers and great philosophers of antiquity” (Honour 44): by subjects, that is, capable of serving as exemplars of patriotic fervour and commitment in a society which believed itself sorely in need of reform.

The artists like David who created these pictures deliberately exploited the power of emotion to call for social change¹⁵; but earlier in the century Sedaine had done no less: in his touching portrayal of contemporary family life, Sedaine engaged his audience immediately, at pivotal moments using dramatic tableaux, where attitudes on the stage are momentarily frozen, to prolong the emotional impact of such scenes as Vanderk’s benediction of his daughter on the eve of her marriage (I/8, 23), or the younger Vanderk’s parting from his father before his duel (III/11, 48). This emotion is further heightened by the skilful and extensive use of contrast, where one part of the play acts as a foil for another: in rhythm, plot, and mood. The antithesis between the household’s joy in the wedding preparations and Vanderk’s solitary despair at the prospect of his son’s duel, for instance, is memorable. No less so is the contrast between his grief on the reported death of his son and his joy when it is revealed, almost at the end of the last act (V/10, 64), that after a timely accommodation both young men have returned from their duel unharmed, honour intact; but the quiet stoicism of Vanderk *père* in the face of this unexpected calamity is a source of pathos in itself: no less a means of instruction than of entertainment with didactic as well as dramatic objectives.

It should be noted that Sedaine’s use of such contrast in this play at times runs counter to Diderot’s caveat in his third *Entretien sur le Fils naturel* (1757) against mixing genres,¹⁶ but in this respect as well Sedaine’s *drame* moves beyond his theatrical innovations to ally itself with the broader reforming movement which came to be known, finally, as neo-classicism. In its lack of stylistic and scenic ostentation, its earnest moral tones, its broad use of idealisation, and the didactic ends to which the emotion is directed, this play may be regarded as an early example of the aesthetic movement which inspired the poet André Chénier, for example, as well as the painter David. The moral inflection particular to neo-classicism can also be discerned through Sedaine’s inclusion of such popular contemporary motifs as the figures of the errant son and his aged father, and the touching deathbed scene, so briefly mentioned (III/4, 29), between Vanderk *père* and his kindly Dutch benefactor;¹⁷ in the prominent place assigned to agents of social change; and finally in Sedaine’s comparison of his eponymous hero to Brutus, the bracing example from Roman history.

After the triumph of *Le Philosophe sans le savoir* Sedaine was to write no more *dramas bourgeois*. He composed a successful comedy, *La Gageure imprévue* (first performed in 1768), but then with few exceptions reverted to his earlier mode with such works as *Thémire* (1770), *Le Faucon* (1772), *Aucassin et Nicolette* (1779), and the extremely popular *Richard Coeur de Lion* (1784), *comédies* or *opéra-comiques* all. The enlightened reforms which underlie *Le Philosophe sans le savoir* and the neo-classical movement was intended to inspire were to be fully realised only some twenty-five years after the creation of Sedaine’s play with the coming of the Revolution; but the changes that then ensued were so extensive that the essential character of neo-classicism in France was degraded. Drama as well as society was transformed, and it soon fell to new forms of theatre, distinct from the *drame* if derived directly from it – like the Romantic melodrama, the *comédie bourgeoise*, and the *pièce à thèse* – to continue, in their own way, the serious depiction of characters from the middle class on the stages of France.

15. See Levey 190 ff.

16. “Il serait dangereux d’emprunter, dans une même composition, des nuances du genre comique et du genre tragique. Connaissez bien la pente de votre sujet et de vos caractères et suivez-la” (*Writings on the Theatre* 75).

17. “Le bon Hollandais mourut dans mes bras; je pris, à sa prière, et son nom et son commerce. Le ciel a béni ma fortune [...]” (29).

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Jean-Baptiste Greuze – *La piété filiale* (1763)



Jacques-Louis David - *Les Licteurs rapportant à Brutus les corps de ses fils* (1789)