

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH THEATRE AS MEDIUM FOR THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Despite the great dramatists of the preceding century—Corneille, Racine and Molière—the 18th century is often considered the great age of French theatre.¹ Obviously “the great age” should not be understood in the usual literary history sense as the “classical age”, for the structures and the content of French dramas originating in the 18th century did not have normative effects on the dramatic production of the centuries that followed. Nevertheless, we are doubly right in using the term “the great age” for French theatre of this period. On the one hand, from the viewpoint of the *history of theatre*, because certain dramatic techniques originating toward the middle of the 18th century have, down to our own times, influenced theatre so decisively and have become so natural that they form true hermeneutical barriers to the interpretation of

Translated by R. Scott Walker.

¹ See for example Maurice Descotes, *Le public de théâtre et son histoire*, P.U.F., 1964, p. 173.

plays from earlier epochs. And secondly from the viewpoint of *social history*, for theatre attendance at that time was indissolubly linked to the everyday life—or at least to holidays and festive occasions—of various social levels in France. As a result we can no doubt consider the theatre as *the* decisive center of critical knowledge, the gradual transmission of which is at the very heart of the process of the Enlightenment.

Considering French theatre of the 18th century as a *medium for the Enlightenment* requires concentrating on three problems that will give this survey its scholarly identity. A) We will only consider the dramatic genres of the 18th century that helped spread “enlightened knowledge”. B) We will analyze these genres by asking ourselves what were the conditions that enabled them to transmit such “enlightened knowledge” to spectators; in other words, we must determine in what specific manner did the structure of these plays modify this knowledge and how various theatre communication contexts disposed the reception readiness of viewers. C) If we accept the basic hermeneutical presupposition that we cannot think “Enlightenment” without “Revolution”, then this implies—contrary to preceding literary histories—that we must also take into consideration the theatre of the revolutionary years; given that change in conditions of communication also led to a change in the function of the theatre between 1789 and 1799, the nature of the French theatre in the Enlightenment should clearly stand apart from the background of the theatre of the revolutionary years.

I. TOWARD A PRAGMATIC VIEW OF A “PLAY” AS MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION

Analyzing texts from a *pragmatic* point of view means (re)placing them in their communications contexts in order to understand the functions (the effects on the pre-existing knowledge of the receivers) that the authors hoped to achieve by their production and which are realized at the moment of reception. In other words, from a pragmatic point of view we always consider texts as a medium, as instruments for the circulation of knowledge. The texts as instruments for the communication of knowledge are, of course,

on the one hand, obviously objectivizations of this knowledge and thereby sources that make it possible for social historians to reconstruct past knowledge. On the other, from a pragmatic point of view we cannot remain at a simple reconstitution of knowledge transmitted and presupposed by these texts.

If we consider the genres of texts as a medium, we must first separate the knowledge they articulate from their institutionalized structural models in order (as indicated earlier) to be able to ask ourselves whether and how its objectivization into spoken or written language marks the knowledge meant to be articulated. Textual structures, as constitutive element of a genre, must then be distinguished from their "*Sitz im Leben*", which represents a second constitutive element of the genre. We must then distinguish these textual structures from the communications contexts in which they reach their receivers and which are essential for the specific dispositions of the public when acquiring knowledge.

To characterize the theatre as medium, we refer to three pragmatic facts which, in all periods and in all societies (although with variable intensity and effects), together (and not taken alone) constitute its specificity.

A) Plays are *received collectively*; experiencing the reaction of other viewers is a factor conditioning each viewer's own reception. (This is why "theatre scandals", for example, have a different structure as events than scandals caused by books).

B) Even if normally the setting is determined in dramas, *the simultaneity of the experience of the actors and the receivers* implies a specific margin of "freedom in their interactions"; this margin, for example, can be filled by the reactions of spectators as well as by the diverse responses of the actors, and in any case the conditions of attention it requires of the receivers are different from those of a book. (The tradition of the *commedia dell'arte* as art of improvisation, still alive in France at the beginning of the 18th century, used this specific means of communication.)

C) The knowledge destined to be articulated during the performance is certainly contained conceptually in the text of the drama (as in a book), but the work of transposition performed by the actor presents this knowledge to the receiver in a manner *more approximate to the experience of every-day interaction* than the experience of reading a book.

This fact seems to have two consequences for a pragmatic view of reception. First it can be admitted, for several reasons but especially because the receiver, thanks to the actor, is no longer required to appeal to his "imagination" from a concept of reality, that the theatre especially stimulates the viewer's (emotional) mechanisms.² Secondly, the intermediate situation represented by the dramatic performance effectively distances the receiver from the playwright and the effects he intended to achieve, given that the (greater or lesser) conciseness with which such intentions are objectified in the conceptual structure of the text can be attenuated by the interpretation of the actor and by the a-conceptual nature of the performance, proper to theatre. (It is possible that theoretical treatises on the theatre and prologues to plays, quite frequent in 18th-century French literature, function, among other things, as a means of bringing the receiver into contact with the author's intentions.)³

In order to make a valid contribution to social history conceived on new bases, our presentation of 18th-century French theatre should be oriented toward such pragmatic premises. Taking them into account is the necessary condition for integrating the conclusions from research into the history of literature and theatre into social history in a theoretically intelligent manner. This program—despite or precisely because of the dimensions of works relating to the history of literature and theatre—naturally cannot be completely fulfilled in an initial approach. An *outline*, a *first evaluation* must be developed in order to respond to two complex questions: in which of the many communications contexts of 18th-century French theatre was knowledge transmitted whose circulation can be seen as part of the Enlightenment process? What *genre structures* were formed during this process to allow the articulation of enlightened knowledge, and to what extent were the conditions of their formation and their effective potential comprehended by contemporaries?

² See Wolfgang Iser, "Akte des Fingierens", *Funktionen des Fiktiven*, edited by W. Iser and Dieter Heinrich, Munich, Fink, 1981 (=Poetik und Hermeneutik 10).

³ This survey, which seeks to determine pragmatically the identity of the theatre as means of communication, is based on results of a seminar on "dramatic texts and the staging of plays", held in Bochum during the winter semester 1979-80.

II. THE CONTEXTS OF COMMUNICATION IN 18TH-CENTURY FRENCH THEATRE

We can define as “context of communication” the relationship between those elements of knowledge brought into play by the partners in communication in order to communicate.⁴ There is, with regard to the levels of abstraction, a great distance certainly between this definition and the conclusions from studies of 18th-century French theatre. But this can be surmounted by considering the two following observations, and their consequences. First, the specific knowledge proposed by theatre directors and playwrights in 18th-century France—and which was presupposed in receivers—can be evaluated through the reconstruction of given *types of repertoires*. And second, *the location of individual theatres*—at least within the topography of Paris—and *information about the entrance fees they charged* make it possible to draw conclusions with regard to the social status and thereby—directly—the educational level of their audiences.

We would first of all like to make three rather general observations about this brief description of the various communications contexts in 18th-century French theatre. In order to measure the potential effect of the theatre as medium for the Enlightenment, it is important *first of all* to note that the two largest Paris theatres—the *Comédie-Française* and the *Théâtre des Italiens*—could together count on around 350,000 spectators per year. (This figure is roughly the population of Paris at that time, but naturally we should realize that regular attendance at the theatre was a “habit” for most spectators.⁵) *Secondly*, the cost of admission to almost all non-musical theatres in Paris was the approximate equivalent of the daily wage for a laborer. The price of admission to the opera was double that, meaning that, over-all, they greatly exceeded the level of prices current in the 20th

⁴ For this definition of the expression “communication context”, see H.U. Gumbrecht, *Funktionen parlamentarischer Rhetorik in der Französischen Revolution. Vorstudien zur Entwicklung einer historischen Textpragmatik*, Munich, Fink, 1978, p. 10-13.

⁵ From Henri Lagrave, *Le théâtre et le public à Paris de 1715 à 1750*, Klincksieck, 1972, p. 193 ff.

century.⁶ *Third*, it may appear surprising that in the 18th century, given the centralism (which was also cultural) of absolutist France, several types of repertory and thus various contexts for communications in the theatre were created. This is true for Paris as well as for the large cities of the provinces.⁷ Consequently our hypotheses, although primarily referring to theatres in the capital, can be considered, up to a certain point, as representative of the provinces as well. Moreover, the boundaries between the types of repertory are no doubt less clear-cut than what appears from the panorama we are about to present.

As we know, it was the royal privilege accorded to Molière's troupe of actors that led to the creation of the *Comédie-Française*.⁸ Its status as representative of the French theatre during the Enlightenment derives above all from one fact that histories of literature—too interested in innovative elements—tend to neglect. Although the *Comédie-Française* re-performed the dramatic repertory of the 17th century, which was canonized only within the framework of this continuous renewal of the “classical repertory”, at the same time it was presenting contemporary plays of serious or comic content, among the most important authors of which in the 18th century were Voltaire and Beaumarchais. With the exception of the period 1770-1782, performances by the *Comédie-Française* took place in various theatres located on the Left Bank of the Seine, in other words in a milieu whose culture and fashions were impregnated with aristocratic tastes. This is why it is symptomatic that those members of the *Comédie-Française* who tended to be politically conservative, after the violent conflicts during the early years of the Revolution (and we will be coming back to this), remained at the *Odéon* (inaugurated in 1782), on the Left Bank, whereas actors inspired by the climate of political and cultural upheaval created the *Théâtre de la République* at the Palais Royal on the Right Bank of the Seine (where the *Comédie-*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁷ Jean Quénart, *Culture et société urbaines dans la France de l'Ouest au XVIII^e siècle*, Klincksieck, 1979, p. 504.

⁸ A large part of the historical data presented in the following pages is taken from the *Introduction* to the “Pléiade” edition, for which Jacques Truchet was responsible, of *Théâtre du XVIII^e siècle*, vol. I, Gallimard, 1972, p. XV-LIX.

Française is still located today), in order to try to bring a new style to the stage.

Schematically speaking and still looking at socio-historical topography, the Right Bank can be considered the milieu of the well-off bourgeoisie of Paris, and it was there that already in the 17th century performances by *troupes* of Italian actors had been presented. The fact that plays were performed in Italian for French audiences allows us to draw an important conclusion for the pragmatics of reception. The interest of the viewers seems to have been concentrated on the actors' art of dramatic improvisation, for which the tradition of the *Commedia dell'Arte* provided sufficient freedom by offering a limited selection of comic roles (for which the possibilities of variation with regard to contents were incidental). Exiled from Paris in 1697 at the instigation of Madame de Maintenon, the Italians returned to the French capital in 1716. The granting of the royal privilege in 1723 bears witness, along with other reasons, to the influence of their style on Regency culture. Although in the following decades the *Théâtre des Italiens* produced an ever-increasing number of plays in French, the *Commedia dell'Arte* tradition still continued to play an important role. Many literary historians have rightly emphasized its influence on the comedies of Marivaux, which were in fact performed at the *Théâtre des Italiens*. Likewise, the merger of that theatre in 1762 with the *Opéra-Comique* run by the Favarts, earlier theatre directors during the annual fairs in Paris, would have been unthinkable without the affinity between the tradition of the *Commedia dell'Arte* and popular theatre.

Popular forms of theatre had existed since the Middle Ages as entertainments provided to the public at *annual markets and fairs*. Among these in Paris should be noted above all the *Foire St-Laurent*, at the northeast of the city, and the *Foire St-Germain* on the Left Bank. In the 18th century these traditions acquired a special significance for the history of classic theatre, for, after an era of mutual exclusion between popular entertainment and the "official culture" imposed by an absolutist State, they now penetrated into the sphere of cultured spectators and had a stimulative effect on dramatic production, which had an influence on the choice of performances given by the major theatres.

According to the theory of Jacques Truchet, this coming together

of cultural spheres until then separated can be traced to the banning of Italian actors from Paris in the early 18th century. Performances at the fairs to replace the Italians responded to a need for “light entertainment”. The fact that this “contact” between different cultural spheres continued to exist even after the Italians’ return, and—as proven by the birth of permanent theatres on the Boulevard du Temple—that it even was institutionalized, must be considered as a symptom of the new reception needs of the cultivated public. It is also the sign, during the course of the century, that this public was conferring new functions on “its” theatre. The content and structure of popular entertainment were continuously marked by this in their communication context. The “insularity” (Bakhtin) of the fairs and the entertainment they provided in the course of the year is the sociological premise for their playing the role of “permitted excess” (Freud). Like “carnival culture”, popular entertainment broke taboos concerning the expression of sexuality, (and not simply in an allusive manner), overstepped the boundaries of criticism of authority and profaned the sacred.

The importance given to corporal expression in such entertainment (it is primarily in this fashion that such transgressions occur) and which determined its structure, was originally a reaction against the State forbidding plays to be performed outside of theatres enjoying privileges. This is why the actors used printed signs to enhance the understanding of their pantomimes or encouraged viewers to join in singing well-known songs (*pièces à écrire*). Another means of drawing viewers’ attention without language was the successive appearance of actors in the lateral galleries of the theatre structures (“parades”). A concession made to the theatres by the authorities, the granting of theatre privileges to specific actors, was used in the early 18th century by virtuosos of fair monologues. The appearance of such staging structures in performance practice of the major theatres of the 18th century should not be overlooked. This appearance, however, should be the subject of a systematic study, especially from the angle of the changes in function that resulted from it. What is certain is that fair actors made a virtue out of necessity. They transformed the absence of the royal privilege into a theatrical practice whose specific communications possibilities

proved much superior to those of the classic theatre.

What the history of literature calls “*théâtres de société*” forms the fourth element in the range of entertainment communications contexts of 18th-century theatre. If we here employ this concept, despite its inherent heterogeneity, it is because all types of “*théâtres de société*” share a common denominator. They did not depend on admission fees for their revenues but were financed by amateurs or by non-profit pedagogical institutions. The specific nature of their economic situation implies a series of consequences for *théâtres de société*. The world of entertainment is not identical to the professional world of their patrons and public. Performing entertainments was part of the educational program of “*collèges*”, especially in the provinces, a concrete form of cultivated opening for the bourgeoisie, a situation of interaction between the obligation of performance and—*sit venio verbo*—“aristocratic privacy” at the court. This is precisely the reason why—at least in the bourgeois salons and at Versailles—the roles of the public, the “directors”, the actors and sometimes even of the authors are interchangeable. It is also the reason why the possibility of participating in such “collective creative activity” functioned as a social status symbol.

This brief socio-historical outline of the *théâtres de société* brings to light an essential fact that has been neglected by literary sociology operating in a too schematic manner, and at all times capable of being specifically limited: that it was possible to suspend theatrical censorship in such a context. If we take into consideration the distinction between the noble obligations of performance and “aristocratic privacy”, it is not surprising that the Count of Artois, the future Charles X under the Restoration, played the role of Figaro and Marie-Antoinette that of Rosine in *Le Barbier de Séville* in the Trianon. Nor is it surprising that even the apparently “pre-revolutionary” tirades against the nobility in *Le Mariage de Figaro* were enjoyed by an aristocratic audience before public performances of the play at the *Comédie-Française*. The “*théâtres de société*” were places of socializing for the cultural and economic elite in 18th-century France. The socio-historical status they enjoyed makes it possible to explain why the most advanced positions of the Enlightenment could here be articulated, even though such circulation of enlightened knowledge hardly

contributes to calling into question the social structures and institutions of the absolutist State.

When delimiting the subject of our research in the introduction to this presentation, we stated that only those genres and communications contexts of the 18th-century French theatre that can be considered as “medium for the Enlightenment” would be taken into account. After this rapid survey of four types of communication contexts, it is evident that we cannot arrive at a real delimitation. For, just as could be expected, it is no more possible to circumscribe an institution that exclusively served the spread of enlightened knowledge than a theatre serving uniquely to legitimate the *Ancien Régime*. In the same manner, examining the censorship of the period as a heuristic (mistakenly) means for distinguishing “critical” and “stabilizing” texts, as literary historians so willingly do today, leads to nothing here. For the historian who places so much trust in censorship as a guide is not taking into account the hermeneutic content as a factor for interpretation. Many texts considered as “critical” by posterity must have been judged “innocent” by the receivers of a past era and often were even written by their authors without any polemical purpose. Apart from very rare exceptions, the censorship mechanism in absolutist France of the 18th century only intervened when officials and dignitaries felt themselves under attack or when well-defined taboos were infringed upon.⁹

Although it is not possible to establish a clear distinction between Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment communication contexts in 18th-century theatres, there still is the possibility to formulate an hypothesis—likewise valid as preliminary orientation for subsequent research—with regard to the effect of functional convergence of the different dramatic types and their development. The specific structure of tragedy (virtue rewarded/ vice punished)¹⁰ and of the “comedy of manners” (a parody of excentric forms of behavior), inherited from the 17th century and carried on by the *Comédie-Française*, served above all to transmit, stabilize and

⁹ See for example Lagrave, *op. cit.*, (note 5), p. 68.

¹⁰ See the especially convincing functional historical interpretation of classical French tragedy proposed by Manfred Fuhrmann: *Einführung in die antike Dichtungstheorie*, Darmstadt, Wiss. Buchges., 1973, p. 236-250.

legitimate the basic elements of everyday knowledge, constituted by the identity between State and society in the *Ancien Régime*.

In the *Comédie-Italienne* and the theatres of the fairs there developed performance structures, which could be isolated from everyday existence through the use of the regulators that were royal privileges and state censorship, that made it possible to express feeling of compensation and of release. However, these same structures—through a corresponding transformation of their “*Sitz im Leben*”—could serve as margin for the articulation of criticism and thereby call social institutions into question. Finally, if we ask ourselves about the circumstances surrounding the appearance and the circulation of this knowledge, that we still today can, almost immediately, identify as “enlightened”, we are referred—in a paradoxical but at the same time plausible manner—to “*théâtres de société*”. This is a paradox if we consider the fact that “enlightened knowledge” at the end of the 18th century legitimated transformations in the social structure and political changes, which were incompatible with the “objective interests”—as Marxism would put it—of the milieu of *théâtres de société*. Nevertheless, this statement is plausible because it was easy to have this knowledge circulate in *théâtres de société*, and because only the elite, in fact, were sufficiently cultivated to develop the philosophical positions of the Enlightenment.

Ideally speaking the 18th-century French theatre evolved by converging toward the three functional tendencies mentioned. *Le Mariage de Figaro* by Beaumarchais, a play that, for literary historians, represents a direct incarnation of theatre in the function of “medium for the Enlightenment”, features content and structures that correspond to those of popular theatre and to Italian comedy. A) It is the work of an author who belonged to the cultured elite; it was first performed in an amateur setting. B) It was received, almost against the wishes of Beaumarchais, as the representation of a collective need for social change. C) The play finally appeared in the repertory of the *Comédie-Française*, an institution in which the transmission of knowledge took place under protection of the royal privilege.

III. STRUCTURES OF APPEAL IN THE 18TH-CENTURY FRENCH THEATRE

With the term “structures of appeal” we are designating, in line with Wolfgang Iser,¹¹ the same phenomena that, in one or another fashion, are arranged hierarchically, and are the subject of textual linguistics. By leaving aside the expressions “textual structures” or “plot structures”, we mean to emphasize that we are analyzing verbal forms from the perspective of functional history. This means, as indicated at the beginning, that we must take into account the structuration of the circumstances of knowledge that occurs at the time of its verbalization as well as the ability of the latter to orient receivers’ attention and their capacity to constitute meaning from it.

If, with Martin Fontius,¹² we ask to what extent the theatre served as medium for the development of class consciousness in Enlightenment society, we rapidly encounter a recurring basic constellation in the structures of appeal of 18th-century French theatre. Different forms of representation of “human nature” are set in opposition to ever-changing counter-powers. From this perspective we can relate the phases of development of the theatre to segments of history of the bourgeois public (*bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit*) as it has been sketched by Koselleck and Habermas.¹³ Moreover, these phases of theatre history denote: a) at the beginning, stages in the creation of an anthropomorphic world view out of a theocentric one; b) at the end, stages in the disappearance of the concept of “human nature” replaced by the identity model of the “individual” as criterion for the constitution of reality. It is for this reason that we must consider the structures

¹¹ W. Iser, *Die Appellstruktur der Texte. Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa*, Constance, Universitätsverl., 1970, 3rd ed., 1972.

¹² “Theaterdebatten in der französischen Aufklärung”, *Theater und Aufklärung. Dokumentation zur Aesthetik des französischen Theaters im 18. Jahrhundert*, ed. by Renate Petermann and Peter-Volker Springborn, DDR-Berlin/Munich, Hanser, 1979, p. 15.

¹³ Reinhart Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise. Ein Beitrag zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt*, Freiburg/ Munich, Alber, 1959, reprinted Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1973. Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, Darmstadt/ Neuwied, Luchterhand, 1962, 9th edition, 1978.

18th-century French Theatre and the Enlightenment

of literary genres not only as a result of but also as a contributing factor to the transformation of the structures of the basic elements of social knowledge.

And finally it must once again be stressed here that in the following pages we can only sketch the main features of the development of structures of appeal in the theatre because we have limited the scope of our investigation and, thereby, even reduced the area covered by our research. Our task is, then, to develop, from a perspective of literary and theatre history, specific possibilities for understanding the process of the Enlightenment rather than considering in every detail all parts of its development.

a) *Early 18th century: Human nature vs. a hostile cosmos*

We would like to use this formula to characterize a recurring structure of appeal of French theatre at the beginning of the 18th century. The term “cosmos”, which here designates the principle opposed to “human nature”, is not being used in a strictly theological or philosophical sense (such an interpretation could only be applied to tragedies from this period); the “cosmos” is distinguished from the opposing principles found in the structure of later dramas by its character, at once impersonal and universal. To justify the thesis leading us to this interpretation, we are going to present early 18th-century tragedy in comparison with ancient tragedy and tragedy of the 17th century.¹⁴

The “average heroes” of ancient tragedies are “guilty and yet innocent”. On the one hand they transgress the laws (which today would be called “objective”) of the cosmos, while the gods are watching out to make certain these laws are respected; on the other hand they transgress other (now termed “subjective”) laws because of flaws in their human capacity to understand, which makes it impossible for them to recognize their failure or to understand its consequences. Such a plot structure, based on the idea of an

¹⁴ Here I am drawing widely from the book by Roland Galle, *Tragödie und Aufklärung. Zum Funktionswandel des Tragischen zwischen Racine und Büchner*, Stuttgart, Klett, 1976.

essential distinction between laws of the cosmos and human possibilities of knowledge, is not conceivable in a Christian world, whose God is seen as just precisely because he has revealed his commandments to man. It is for this reason that heroes in Corneillian tragedies are punished for their virtues and rewarded for their vices. This is why in Racine there is always an offence that functions as means of understanding their failure, even though Racine studies in recent years have rightly stressed that the Jansenist idea of a “*Dieu caché*” leads to a structure that we feel is a disproportion between subjective guilt and divine punishment, and that we can interpret as a representation (for contemporaries certainly a preconscious one) of a need to suspend the laws of the Christian cosmos.

Such a preconscious need was articulated, for example, in Voltaire’s *Oedipe*, which the *Comédie-Française* staged in 1718 to great public acclaim, when the protagonists protest against the cosmos. “*Impitoyables dieux*”, cries out Oedipus in his final speech. “*Mes crimes sont les vôtres, / Et vous m’en punissez...*” (vv. 1344f). With this Voltaire draws near to Ancient tragedy by bringing out the subjective innocence of the hero; but he also addresses the problem of the basic condition underlying such tragedy—the overwhelming validity of divine laws—because Oedipus holds the gods answerable to the same ethical dictates that also apply to man. Naturally it is not enough simply to cry out against “the hostile cosmos”. As he comes to his horrible end, Oedipus acquires a—historically new—self-awareness that comes from maintaining the conviction of his own innocence. “*Poursuis, destin, poursuis, tu ne pourras m’abatre*” (v. 1227) / “*Et je vois enfin, par un mélange affreux, / Inceste, et parricide, et pourtant vertueux*” (v. 1333 f).

The earliest comedies of Marivaux were first performed in the *Théâtre des Italiens*. Already this “*Sitz im Leben*” requires us to give heed to structural differences in comparison to the comedy tradition inaugurated by Molière for the *Comédie-Française*, rather than attempting to relate them as successive stages of development, as is usually done in histories of literary genres. What do not appear in the role repertory of the Marivaux *Commedia dell’arte* are those “reasonable” (in an 18th-century sense, and consequently uninteresting for today’s audiences) protagonists, whose “raison”

stands in sharp contrast to the “*déraison*” of the great monomaniacs in Molière. If we should want to apply our formula “human nature vs. hostile cosmos” to the comedies of Marivaux, we cannot expect that positive “human nature” will always be represented by specific roles.

Thus in *Surprise de l'amour*, first staged in 1722, their servants force Léo and the Countess to an amorous agreement in the end; but such “nature” is here (at least for the servant Arlequin) the end point of a development in the course of which he lays aside his misogyny, which he shared with his master Léo at the beginning of the comedy. In the composition of such changes in his protagonists and in their dramatic motivations, Marivaux goes beyond the traditions of the *Commedia dell'arte*. But why are Léo and the Countess, who by the last act have long since abandoned their fear of love, unable to make the avowal that would provide them relief;¹⁵ and how has the audience, even before the two protagonists themselves, discovered the feelings they share for one another? What their love must ultimately overcome, without the help of the servants, is the precious language and the code of manners that accompanied it: what literary historians call “*marivaudage*”. Precious language and manners function as an impersonal and universal power against which the “natural” character of amorous feelings is unable to make itself felt.

However, the tradition of the *Théâtre des Italiens* allows thinking that it was the mimicry and gestures of the actors that represented “nature” on stage, and all the more so in that the plays of Marivaux contain many indications for the non-verbal actions of the actors. We can conclude from this that the divergence between two simultaneously possible meanings, that of the text and that of the non-verbal indicator, produces a comic effect in the viewers.¹⁶ The impatience which, even today, inevitably overcomes receivers of Marivaux when they conclude their reading, not the least because

¹⁵ See H.U. Gumbrecht, “Die dramenschliessende Sprachhandlung im aristotelischen Theater und ihre Problematisierung bei Marivaux”, *Poetica* 8, 1976, p. 376-379.

¹⁶ On the comic manipulation of language in Marivaux, see Rainer Warning, “Komik und Komödie als Positivierung von Negativität (am Beispiel Molière und Marivaux)”, *Positionen der Negativität*, ed. Harald Weinrich, Fink, 1975 (=Poetik und Hermeneutik 6), p. 341-366.

of the “happy ending” of his plays, proves that the disharmony represented between “human nature” and the “hostile (social) environment” is not perceived as an oppressing fact.

What is striking above all (at least from the perspective of the functional history of the plays themselves) when reading early 18th-century French treatises on the theory of drama¹⁷, is the discrepancy between innovations in theatrical production and the tradition-bound nature of poetics. It is true that La Motte argued for a less strict respect of poetic norms with regard to the three unities, as they had generally been observed in the 17th century, (and this using the argument of aesthetic effect, that only in this way was the “*unité de l'intérêt*” to be guaranteed). But it is also true that he advocated the use of prose even in serious dramas; however, we should be careful about interpreting such statements too rapidly as an anticipation of a theatre which, in the second half of the century, was concerned with more approximate everyday experience and spectator identification with it. Voltaire, whose tragedies we have characterized as “medium of the (early) Enlightenment”, rejected just such suggestions aimed at modifying the norms of the classical model. Therefore, we must conclude that, although—many—tragedies and comedies of the early 18th century were able to contribute to representation of situations of need that can be correlated with the Enlightenment from the perspective of social history, it is no less true that their authors hardly had the intention to achieve a critical revision of traditional objects of social knowledge within the framework of the communication context offered by the theatre.

b) *The middle of the 18th century*

Around mid-century there appeared types of plays known under the headings of *drame larmoyant* and *drame bourgeois*, which, if approached from a functional historical vantage point, contributed a great deal toward establishing the image of the 18th century, in literary criticism, as the great age of French dramatic tradition. We

¹⁷ For example, as they are presented in the well-commented anthology *Theater und Aufklärung*, see note 12.

18th-century French Theatre and the Enlightenment

would like to classify these plays with the formula “*human nature vs. adverse social circumstances*”. This refers to an innovation, essential for a pragmatic analysis of reception, in contrast to theatrical forms of the beginning of the century. The power opposed to “human nature” is no longer universal and impersonal; it was now made tangible on stage in the representation of institutions taken from contemporary daily existence, and soon even in protagonists whose social position was perfectly understood by spectators.

But when particular (and no longer universal) phenomena of a historical and social nature occupy the place of the power opposed to “human nature”, such power seems to be vincible. Since logically even the representation of “human nature” must also be localized socially, we can correctly affirm that “*drame bourgeois*”, from the middle of the 18th century, provided the initial impulse for the development of class consciousness. Assuredly the contents of this consciousness is most frequently determined only slightly; the “virtue” of “human nature” is—at least when faced with adverse circumstances and wicked persecutors—generally no longer “innocence” but rather the absence of vice.

Two plays by Diderot, written within a few years of one another, *Le Fils naturel ou les épreuves de la vertu* (published in 1757) and *Le Père de famille* (performed for the first time in 1760), along with the play by Mercier entitled *L'Indigent* (which appeared in 1778), can be used to illustrate the scope of this transformation in the structure of dramatic appeal.¹⁸ What prevents Dorval and Rosalie from loving one another in *Le Fils naturel* is not a difference in class, but—once more—social customs. But these customs are no longer, as in Marivaux, a courtly convention but a consequence of the friendship uniting Dorval and Clairville.

Even though Dorval and Clairville are both in love with Rosalie, there is no strife between the two rivals, but a noble and virtuous struggle. As long as Clairville knows nothing of Dorval’s love, he

¹⁸ For the following remarks see Peter Szondi, *Die Theorie des bürgerlichen Trauerspiels im 18. Jh. Der Kaufmann, der Hausvater und der Hofmeister*, Frankfurt, 1973; with regard especially to Mercier and the theatre of the early years of the Revolution see H.U. Gumbrecht, “Über das Versiegen ‘süßer Tränen’ in der Französischen Revolution. Ein Aspekt aus der Funktionsgeschichte des ‘genre sérieux’”, *Lendemains* 4, 1978, p. 67-86.

can accept this renunciation; when he becomes aware of the situation, he still attempts to surpass the kindnesses of his friend. Rosalie would certainly have remained unmarried if her father, in an inevitable "*coup de théâtre*", had not returned from America after a dangerous voyage to recognize Dorval as his natural son.

On the other hand, despite his virtue and kind-hearted nature, as "the father of a family" d'Orbesson cannot resign himself to the desire of his son, Saint-Albin, to marry Sophie, supposedly an impecunious orphan. The "adverse social circumstance" has replaced the virtuous struggle of the rival friends as obstacle to the marriage; but Sophie must also reveal herself to the "father of the family", showing that she belongs to a wealthy family in order for d'Orbesson to understand his error in having considered social status and material goods, instead of virtue, as the condition for a happy marriage for his son.

Finally, in *L'Indigent* by Mercier, the difference between the (supposed) poor and the rich is no longer simply an obstacle to marriage, it is described as a repressive relationship of daily existence. Joseph and his foster sister Charlotte must earn their living by working until late at night on the weaver's loom. And when they finally hope to enjoy their well-earned rest, they are kept from sleeping by the loud noises of an orgy; De Lys, "a rich young man", and his friend Du Noir, are carousing in the same house. The noble father of the two weaving children, formerly a peasant, has been brought to prison by poverty. De Lys, it goes without saying, has an eye on Charlotte, who in reality happens to be his own sister, as we discover without surprise at the end. Virtue, according to Mercier, is linked to "poverty", or at least to an "absence of material pretenses". Wealth, on the other hand, is the condition for vice. "Human nature" is no longer predominantly represented through spontaneous feelings of love, to which are opposed "adverse social circumstances". It is linked to the social level of the depraved petty bourgeoisie, subjected to the "persecutions" of the rich. By mutually consoling themselves and by reaffirming that they do not want to complain about their condition nor even be jealous of the possessions of the wealthy, the poor weavers inspire in the spectators a feeling of pity that forces them to identify with the misfortunes of the indigent characters.

The genesis of bourgeois drama was seen in contemporary

poetics as a break with the so-called “status clause”, a central norm for 17th-century theatrical literature, which clause held that only nobility could appear in a tragedy, with comedy reserved for non-noble protagonists; in bourgeois dramas only bourgeois characters could perform a “serious action”. This fact for a long time restrained questioning and interpretations of literary sociology which, oriented toward all too sketchy representations of classes and their possible interactions, believed it possible to recognize in bourgeois dramas the “portrayal” of the process of the emancipation of the bourgeoisie. However, on the level of dramatic effect, the fact that dramatic action resembles “*expérience journalière*” (Mercier), without there being any coincidence between the two spheres, as “*coups de théâtre*” prove to be the case, is above all an indicator that these experiences from the theatrical medium should now be transmitted to spectators under other conditions.

Beaumarchais defined the *intérêt* of receivers caused by this resemblance, and which La Motte had already placed at the center of his theory of drama, as “the feeling that places us in the position of the one who suffers”. French dramas of the middle of the century, with their new structure of appeal, make it possible to postulate a theory of sensualism, according to which experience can only derive from sense perception. When receivers share in the suffering of the protagonists, they are reminded that “human nature” cannot be developed if it is oppressed by social institutions. But why is a part of the intensity of this experience taken away by the unfailingly happy endings of plays? We can suppose that the relief provided by the final act allowed accustomed viewers, within the framework of a self-reflective culture, called “*sensibilité*” in the 18th century, to return to the feeling of pity (so overwhelmingly felt just shortly before) for the protagonists. This is the pre-requisite for a viewer to experience the capacity of feeling pity for others as the core of a “human nature”, common to all men.

We could shore up, point by point, this interpretation based on pragmatic effects by referring to quotations and arguments drawn from theoretical treatises published in France beginning in the middle of the 18th century. At the same time as the two plays analyzed above, Diderot published two treatises (*Entretiens sur le*

Fils Naturel and *Discours de la Poésie dramatique*), and the success of such treatises is attested to by their numerous editions. In singular contrast to the only slowly developing interest of the theatre public with regard to bourgeois drama, such analysis leads us to think that the functional relationship between dramatic production and treatises on dramatic art was reversed since the beginning of the century. Because it refers continuously to anthropological constants thought to be part of the psyche, and because it seeks to understand its relationship to contemporary social institutions, a reflection on the functional possibilities of theatre now becomes a “medium for the Enlightenment”.

This can even be seen—and especially so—where results of this reflection seem incomplete or totally unacceptable. Diderot, for example, knew that it was not sufficient to invoke the states inherited from the feudal regime in order to understand “social conditions” opposed to the development of “human nature”. These conditions can also be manifested within family relationships or in relations involving property. Of course Diderot did not attempt an examination of the process of social development leading to class structures. And Mercier no longer sought to reach the ruling classes, who turned a deaf ear to his plays, but distinguished his audience (the “*classe médiocrement riche*”, or the “*peuple* as he calls them) from the “*populace*”, for whom, instead of dramas, he suggests light entertainment and festive events, even though he does note his astonishment at this group’s “human warmth and intelligence”. Rousseau, in his *Lettre à d’Alembert sur les spectacles* (1758), formulates his total rejection of the theatre, motivated no doubt by his rivalry with Voltaire. But precisely because this dispute is based essentially on an analysis of 17th-century tragedies and comedies, we can interpret it, against the author’s intentions, in two respects as a symptom. On the one hand as a symptom that the concept of “theatre” in the 18th century is apparently widely identified with “17th-century theatre”; and on the other the idea is confirmed that this theatre in fact no longer corresponds to the reception needs presumed by 18th-century *philosophes*.

Our objectives, as formulated at the beginning, have led us to interpret mid-18th-century treatises on dramatic arts more as a type of anthropological and (pre)sociological reflection than as a preview of theatrical practice. This functional hypothesis,

naturally, is valid only if in relation to its contemporary reception. For a text such as the *Paradoxe sur le comédien* by Diderot marks a turning point in the history of drama; for he urges the replacement of the until-then standard and above all declamatory type of play with a type of theatre nearer to reality and aimed at viewer identification, just as it was to be generally by the late 18th century, up until several decades ago. It is essential for literary and theatre history of a socio-historical type to note that Diderot was much inspired by *L'Art du théâtre* (1570) by F. Riccoboni, who in turn had for many years directed the *Théâtre des Italiens*. With the assimilation of popular staging structures for plays, mid-18th-century drama created an important precondition for realizing its historical function as “medium for the Enlightenment”. A change in the manner of creating meaning prepared drama for this new function; instead of transmitting knowledge in standard plot sequences (“unity of action”), it now had to stimulate the process of acquisition of experience in viewers.

c) *Late 18th century*

We have seen that the equations “human nature vs. a hostile cosmos” and “human nature vs. adverse social circumstances” mark steps in an evolution in the predominant structure of appeal of plays between the beginning and the middle of the 18th century. Taking this evolution into account, changes like those observable between the late dramas of Diderot, for example, and the pre-revolutionary (in the chronological sense of the term) comedies of Beaumarchais or the tragedies of Marie-Joseph Chénier can no longer be considered as simple nuances, or even as intensification. To characterize the structures of appeal (already conventional in the 1780's) found in the two plays mentioned above, we propose the equation “*human nature vs. depraved holders of privileges*”. The power opposed to “human nature” is now represented by protagonists who, through their social position, use right and might to oppress their virtuous adversaries without their truly being in a position to use these privileges for themselves.

This dramatic interaction is realized in an exemplary fashion in the *jus primae noctis*, claimed on the one hand by Count Almaviva,

and by Figaro's slyness, on the other, which he uses constantly, driven by anger at his master's excesses. Virtue still suffers, but it now provokes a resistance that frightens its oppressors. If we follow Lukacs' perspective of interpretation, propagated for a period of decades, we would once again be led to see in the structure of appeal of a play the reflection of a socio-historical process, which contemporaries, apart from communications, would hardly have been conscious of, as "literature". Erroneous interpretations such as this have been the source of Beaumarchais' reputation as a "pre-revolutionary" author (not merely in the chronological sense of the term).¹⁹ We are no doubt closer to the facts, in a functional history perspective, if, in light of new research into the development of 18th-century society, we accept that, in the structure of appeal of *Le Mariage de Figaro*, viewers' laughter directed against Count Almaviva can also be applied to many other nobles, those whose social consciousness is based on their successful participation in new forms of production or their ability to take part in the discussions of the *philosophes* rather than in privileges linked to their status. Our thesis can now be formulated more concisely: the structure of appeal "*human nature vs. depraved holders of privileges*" condemns to laughter social institutions already considered a part of the past; it in no way represents an anticipation of the Revolution.

Every literary historian knows that Beaumarchais also made profitable use of *the tradition of commedia dell'arte* in the two first plays of the Figaro trilogy: *Le Barbier de Séville* and *Le Mariage de Figaro*. It should now be clear that such recourse was anything but innovative, or even, from a structural history point of view, "pre-revolutionary". What distinguishes Beaumarchais from Marivaux is, above all, the decisive transposition of roles drawn from *commedia dell'arte* into interactive relationships of contemporary society. The person who shares Figaro's mocking laughter at Almaviva's expense can also—in a more or less conscious manner—deride the decadence of many nobles and admire the spontaneous intelligence of "natural" (because simple)

¹⁹ For a nuanced literary-historical revision of this cliché, see Dietmar Rieger, "Figaros Wandlungen. Versuch einer ideologiekritischen Analyse von Beaumarchais' *Figaro-Almaviva-Trilogie*", *Romanistische Zeitschrift für Literaturgeschichte*, 1977, p. 77-105.

people. Moreover, only in *Le Mariage de Figaro* does Beaumarchais make use of such social polarization of the protagonists, which leads to derision and shared laughter. In *Le Barbier de Séville*, the nobleman and his servant triumph over the old Doctor Bartolo, tutor of the beautiful Rosine, as had been the custom for already more than a century in Italian comedy.

We must now ask ourselves in this analysis of interpretation what are the indicators that led to Beaumarchais being classified as a “pre-revolutionary author”? First it should be mentioned that the action is shifted to Spain, which was considered as a clever manoeuvre on the part of the author for escaping censorship. More likely, since the French Enlightenment had an absolutely stereotyped view of “backward Spain”, Beaumarchais probably wished to bring out the difference between Almadiva and contemporary French noblemen. Louis XVI’s prolonged veto prohibiting any public performance of *Le Mariage de Figaro* also contributed a great deal to evaluating this play politically, as literary histories have done. The more skeptical historian will, instead, note that the last king of the *Ancien Régime* was mistaken, not only in his impression with regard to the effects of the theatre but also in his general estimation of late 18th-century society.

Marie-Joseph Chénier dated the *Discours préliminaire* to his tragedy *Charles IX ou l’école des rois* 22 August 1788, and on 15 December 1789 he added an *Epître dédicatoire à la Nation française* to his preface. The play gave rise to a heated political and cultural conflict in the early years of the Revolution, which explains its presence in all histories of French theatre between 1789 and 1799. But it is perhaps precisely for this reason that up until now the need has been overlooked to examine the structure of its appeal against the background of dramatic production in the next to the last decade of the 18th century. Chénier termed his work “patriotic tragedy” (*Epître dédicatoire*) and “national tragedy” (*Discours préliminaire*). Nevertheless, it is difficult to see therein the proof of Fontius’ thesis, according to which “the needs of the masses who were to become the moving forces of the Revolution (...) are the origin of a new class content, ...which enriches classical tragedy.”²⁰

²⁰ “Theaterdebatten...”, see note 12, p. 21.

As backdrop for his drama Chénier uses Saint Bartholomew's Night, an event in the history of the nation which philosophers regularly cited, as early as the middle of the 18th century, in order to call into question the legitimacy of the absolute monarchy. In this interpretation of the event, Chénier does not at all see the tragic end of the Huguenot heroes as punishment for wrong-doing, as was done habitually in 17th-century drama. It is not even a matter of a distinction between objective culpability and subjective innocence, an essential element of ancient tragedy. The development of the action in *Charles IX* in fact forms a paraphrase of the contrast between "human nature"—represented by the Huguenot heroes—and the proverbial wickedness of the queen mother, Catherine de Médicis, the intrigues of the Cardinal of Lorraine and the weakness of the king. Because the death of the Huguenots is not presented as punishment of a fault, it is incorrect to see the intrigue of this "tragedy" as an example of norms for action. And since the play does not lead to a happy ending, it does not encourage receivers to look into themselves in order to find feelings of pity.

Perhaps it would be better to see in this drama, whose protagonists argue in the manner of Enlightenment *philosophes*, an illustration—highly schematic—of contemporary political events, and in any case a warning to Louis XVI. It is true that Chénier, in a poem dedicated to the king, celebrated the sovereign as the "leader of a faithful people"; but the monarch, as well as his advisors, could also understand the final lines of the work as an allusion to politics at the court and to its representatives:

*Les cruels ont instruit ma bouche à l'imposture:
Leur voix a dans mon âme étouffé la nature;
J'ai trahi la patrie, et l'honneur, et les lois,
Le ciel, en me frappant, donne un exemple au roi.*

It was natural for the relatively cultivated spectators of the 18th century to insert the figure of Charles IX into the then-current concept of historical teleology. It is precisely in this perspective that a parallel between *Le Mariage de Figaro* by Beaumarchais and *Charles IX ou l'école des rois* by Marie-Joseph Chénier becomes evident. If history is seen as teleology, Charles IX is a tyrant who

succeeded, *once again*, in slaughtering his virtuous adversaries, even though his weaknesses can be understood, *e negativo*, as the promise of victory over despotism.

In the praise that Chénier gives to his self-styled predecessor, Voltaire, in his *Discours préliminaire*, it is clear that Chénier was conscious of his drama's role as interpretation of political experiences. He is even completely certain that he was seeing in the emphasis on intended effects the specificity of "tragedy" in his times, in contrast to tragedies at the beginning of the 18th century. "M. de Voltaire has developed morality as such more profoundly than politics in his tragedies." But bringing to light the political effectiveness of the theatre also indicates the boundaries of poetological reflection, which from now on will no longer be extended into the realm of philosophical and anthropological speculation, as had been done with Diderot, Rousseau or Mercier. "The assembled people receive strong and lasting impressions. No one among the Moderns has conceived as well as M. de Voltaire this electricity of the theatre." The commentary on drama here appears, once more, subordinated to the dramatic text and its staging. Chénier's "national tragedy" becomes a "medium for the Enlightenment" at the historic moment in which it finds its field of application in politics.

d) *The time of the French Revolution*

In his introduction to the collection of studies of the history of the French theatre during the years of the Revolution published in 1979, Jacques Proust was able to say that "1789, and not the year 1791 (restoration of freedom of theatres), denoted a true break in the continuity of dramatic production."²¹ In fact our formula "human nature vs. depraved holders of privileges" can also be applied to a large part of dramas written or performed for the first time between the summer of 1789 and the summer of 1792. Nevertheless, the "*bataille*" provoked by Chénier's *Charles IX*, along with performance of this play, are symptoms of an essential

²¹ Jacques Proust, Introduction, *Romanistische Zeitschrift für Literaturgeschichte* 3, 1979, p. 248.

modification in the communication context of the theatre. Works and roles were now interpreted as a manifestation of the political opinions of the authors and the actors respectively, in a manner which seems quite schematic to us. The agreement or divergence of political opinions then became the decisive criterion for interaction between individuals and groups. It is because they considered Chénier's "tragedy" as an affront to Louis XVI that conservative actors of the *Comédie-Française* were opposed to its being performed. And because they felt it their professional duty as actors and as citizens to make of the theatre a "school for the nation" that Talma and other members of the *Comédie-Française* troupe decided to separate themselves from their conservative colleagues and founded the *Théâtre de la République*, located, significantly, on the Right Bank of the Seine.

According to our thesis, the summer months of 1792 mark a decisive point in the history of French theatre, and this thesis is based on the observation that the tendency to equate the political opinions of the authors or the actors with those expressed by the action of the dramas, as seen in the events surrounding the "battle of *Charles IX*", was now radicalized, and resulted in a reduction in the range of possible structures of appeal for dramas. A very short phase of cultural and political liberalism reached its end with the downfall of the king and the proclamation of the Republic. The theatre was from then on used as an institution at the service of the transmission of new official knowledge, and with much more important consequences than ever during the years of the *Ancien Régime*. It probably seemed too risky to politicians, at the height of the Revolution, to appeal solely to the process of receivers' experience, as bourgeois drama had done. The guideline of that time was to use relatively simpler interpretation diagrams, which consequently quickly degenerated into stereotypes, appropriate for transposing the everyday experience of the public into the "meaning desired" by the government.²² It was no longer sufficient for the king or nobles to be represented on stage as "cruel, bloodthirsty, barbarous or hypocritical",²³ it was also necessary

²² The expression "sens vécu/sens voulu" is taken from Mona Ozouf, "La fête sous la Révolution française", *Faire de l'histoire*, under the direction of Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora, vol. 3, Gallimard, 1974, p. 266.

²³ Quoted from the *Journal des Spectacles*, 11 September 1793.

that in the end virtue triumph.

In a setting imposing such conditions on communication, Beaumarchais' recourse to the tradition of the *comédie larmoyante* in the final part of the Figaro trilogy (*La Mère coupable*) was perfectly inopportune. The late adaptation of the Almaviva family to the behavioral norms of bourgeois intimacy did not conform—in the literal sense of the word—to the rules of the game. On the other hand, perfect agreement between the prescribed ideology and the structure of appeal of the theatre seems, in the long term, to have satisfied at most only a few representatives of official cultural policies. Already well before Thermidor, in drama critiques in many Parisian newspapers, the praise showered on authors subservient to “republican intentions” is merely an introduction to criticism of their plays' lack of interest.

Le Jugement dernier des rois, a play by Sylvain Maréchal performed for the first time several days before Marie-Antoinette went to the guillotine, is one of the rare plays dating to the period of the Terror that managed to escape the criticism of those representing official cultural policies without also having bored its audience. Certainly the political event of the moment served as a pragmatic setting, and determined Maréchal to return to an aggressive political parable he had composed before 1789. All the peoples of the earth capture their kings and abandon them on a deserted island. There they prove to be “men without human nature”. Instead of living together like “good savages”, they quarrel among themselves, kill one another, and thereby free the people from their tyrants with their own hands. It should not be overlooked that this plot legitimated the execution of the queen as a fulfilment of natural law. It is particularly interesting to observe, from the angle of the pragmatics of reception, in what way the complex and abstract conceptual systems and logical conventions proper to Enlightenment philosophy are transmitted to the *sans-culottes* through the “medium of theatre”. Representatives of the people of Europe, come to the deserted island to abandon their kings, there encounter not only “good savages”, but also an old man who had sought refuge there from the pursuits of the nobleman who had seduced his daughter. When the volcano on the island erupts, nature herself seals the self-accomplished “last judgment of the kings”.

A text-structural element for the fabulous success encountered by Maréchal's play among the public seems to be his recourse to a performance tradition found in fair entertainments—that of parades. The play begins with a procession of *sans-culottes* entering on stage one after another: a Frenchman, an Englishman, a Spaniard, a Sardinian and, finally, a German. They rival one another with their curses of the tyrants. The play ends with a scene in which the empress, the king of Poland, the king of Naples, the king of Prussia, the Pope, the emperor, the king of Spain and Catherine of Russia fight over a piece of cake.

From the perspective of structural and functional history, there are good reasons for ending this survey of French theatre as medium for the Enlightenment with the first years of the Directory. If we turn one last time to the diagram for interpretation with which we have attempted to bring out the fundamental changes that occurred in the structure of appeal of plays, it seems that “human nature” is now frequently presented as the negative value in a basic semantic contrast. Instead of being confronted with unfavorable social circumstances or of being persecuted by the depraved privileged elite, it is now the point of departure for a new and pessimistic anthropology, a sort of “dark impulse” that menaces protagonists representing the new ideal of the “great solitary individual”. In July 1795, a version of *Paméla*, largely drawn from Goldoni, was brought to the stage in Paris. The author accompanied it with a gallant poem in which he makes it clear that he in no way sees his virtuous heroine as a symbol of the innate aptitude for good of all men, but, to the contrary, as a woman who should awaken the hope of being able to sublimate the “fundamentally” animal nature of human beings. “*Sans doute, l'espèce humaine est une espèce atroce, / qui du tigre et du singe unit les attributs: / De tous les animaux, l'homme est le plus féroce; / le ciel, pour l'adoucir, a crée vos vertus.*”²⁴

The image of the individual setting himself apart from society, such as now is found everywhere in literature, must certainly be seen in relationship to the everyday experience—relatively new from a socio-historical angle—which came to light in France

²⁴ Neufchâtel, “Aux femmes”, *dedicatory poem for Paméla* (newly performed, for the first time after Thermidor, on 24 July 1795).

precisely during the years of the Revolution. This was the experience in which in the new society, unlike the *Ancien Régime*, no longer did a way of life depend on the state into which one was born, and therefore the future became—from a subjective point of view—less and less predictable. By stressing the pathos of the individual, literature made a virtue of the necessity of this overwhelming experience. It seems that it then rapidly shifted from the role of being medium for the Enlightenment or the stimulator of processes of critical experience to a new function consisting in compensating the “costs” of this process of transformation of social structures. And if literature probably helped set this process in motion, it most certainly accelerated its progress.

IV. WHY DID 18TH-CENTURY FRENCH THEATRE NOT BECOME “CLASSIC”?

We began our survey of dramatic history by pointing out the discrepancy between the important socio-historical role that 18th-century French theatre seems to have played and its limited attraction for theatre audiences of today. Now, at the end of our study, before asking what reasons make its revival impossible, an important distinction must be made. Even though they always stand in Molière’s shadow, comic authors like Marivaux or Beaumarchais still appear on today’s theatre programs, whereas it is difficult to imagine how Voltaire’s *Oedipe*, Diderot’s *Le Père de famille* or Mercier’s *L’Indigent* could be staged with success in our times.

Initially there are two types of explanation for this situation, neither one of which, in the final analysis, is satisfactory. The first is that a revival of *serious plays* from the past is impossible. But this is refuted, and not only in France, by the constant practice in today’s theatres of replaying an entire series of works by Corneille and especially Racine. The second explanation would have it that the action of 18th-century dramas is related to everyday experiences that are too closely linked to historical details of the period, but this too does not answer our problem. For if this might be the explanation for the absence of *drame bourgeois* today, the tragedies of Voltaire, for example, are for the most part based on

the myths of Antiquity and should therefore have remained in theatre repertories.

Presumably serious dramas of the 18th century have become foreign, and even painful, for us because they present with pathos an anthropocentric image of the world which, for lack of an alternative, no longer seems comprehensible to us today because it too tearfully laments man's being determined by external powers that many of our contemporaries see as having been overcome. It is, in fact, precisely because they depart from such pathos and tearfulness, and that they subject to derisive laughter phenomena (such as the *jus primae noctis* or precious language) which appear even more shocking in our eyes than for 18th-century viewers, instead of asking about something that has seemed evident to us for a long time, that the comedies of Marivaux and of Beaumarchais have been able to "survive". The reasons that lead us, from a socio-historical perspective, to attribute a special significance to 18th-century French theatre are the very ones that reduce the chances of seeing it revived.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht
(University of Siegen, Germany)