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The *Drame Commercial*: A Theatrical Experiment of the French Enlightenment

IN 1757, IN HIS *ENTRETIENS sur le fils naturel*, Diderot called for a revolution in theatre: a new genre less socially remote than tragedy and more edifying than comedy, a genre which he tentatively called the *genre sérieux*.¹ One of the major criteria for this new and intermediate type of theatre was that social condition not personal character become the principal object. Accordingly, Diderot suggested that the playwright put on stage representatives of various social conditions such as the man of letters, the philosopher, the merchant.²

Diderot's call was to be heard and put into practice some ten years later in what I call the *drame commercial*. The *drame commercial* was a major theatrical experiment of the French Enlightenment and features three defining characteristics. First, the main character of the play is a merchant. Second, the intrigue features or revolves around payment crises. Monetary obligations drive the theatrical intrigue and this is a change from classical tragedies where political obligations tended to constitute the knot of the play. These two features provide the commercial side of the *drame commercial*. Third, these payment crises provide a dramatic component which enables the merchant to display sentimental virtues, moral rectitude (*probité*) and empathy (*sensibilité*). Because of his altruism, the merchant comes across as a good merchant. In effect, the

¹ Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres esthétiques* (Paris: Garnier, 1988) 136.

² *Oeuvres esthétiques* 154.

drame commercial was putting on stage a new model of enlightened behavior, the good merchant. This *bon marchand* can be thought of as the urban and enlightened counter-model to Rousseau's *bon sauvage*.

I will discuss three plays. If read on their own, none of these plays displays extraordinary theatrical qualities and indeed none has been performed recently. However, if read together, the structure of the *drame commercial* emerges. The first play is the generally acknowledged masterpiece of the *genre sérieux*,³ Sedaine's *Le Philosophe sans le savoir* (The Unknowing Philosopher) of 1765. The second is Beaumarchais' second play, *Les Deux Amis ou Le Négociant de Lyon* (The Two Friends or The Merchant from Lyons), which he claimed was his most strongly composed play,⁴ performed in 1770. The third is one of the most important plays of the most prolific practitioner of the *genre sérieux*, *La Brouette du Vinaigrier* (The Vinegar Merchant's Wheelbarrow) by Louis Sébastien Mercier, first performed in 1775. I will first show how all these plays exhibit the three defining features mentioned above and second, how these plays address important social issues of eighteenth-century France. Indeed, their responses cover a remarkable spectrum of positions.⁵

The Merchant as Main Character

The title character of Sedaine's *Philosophe sans le savoir* is a nobleman who earns his livelihood through international trade. In the most famous scene of the play, he praises merchants and thereby their livelihood, namely trade: "What a man, my son, he who through a stroke of the pen is obeyed from one end of the universe to the other. It is not a single people, not a single nation he serves: he

³ See, for example, Félix GaiFFE's exhaustive reference work on eighteenth-century French drama, *Essai sur le drame en France au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, Armand Colin, 1910) 164.

⁴ Beaumarchais' letter to the Comédiens Français (22 November 1779) in Beaumarchais, *Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard [Pléiade], 1988) 1274.

⁵ I will not refer to plot details. References are to the Pléiade editions of these plays (all translations are my own): Sedaine, *Le Philosophe sans le savoir* in *Théâtre du XVIII^e siècle II*, ed. Jacques Truchet (Paris: Gallimard [Pléiade], 1974) 516–64; Beaumarchais, *Les Deux Amis* in *Oeuvres*, ed. Pierre Larthomas (Paris: Gallimard [Pléiade], 1988) 201–64; and Mercier, *La Brouette du vinaigrier* in *Théâtre du XVIII^e siècle II*, ed. Jacques Truchet (Paris: Gallimard [Pléiade], 1974) 889–942.

serves them all and is served by them; he is a universal man.⁷⁶ The subsequent acts foreground the virtuous behavior of the merchant who is thus shown to be an exemplary individual. By the end of the play, the viewer/reader can interpret the title to mean that there are two kinds of philosophers in Enlightenment France: writers who are theoretical *philosophes* (*philosophes* who know that they are *philosophes*) and on the other hand, merchants who are practical *philosophes* (*philosophes* who are but don't claim the title of *philosophes*). Sedaine's play makes of the merchant the paragon of practical enlightenment.

Beaumarchais' *Deux Amis* takes place in the city of Lyons. Lyons was France's capital of silk manufacturing and Beaumarchais thereby chose to set his play in an economic rather than a political capital. The play foregrounds two friends both engaged in economic activities. The first is a silk merchant who is about to be ennobled for his economic contributions to society; the second is a sympathy-inspiring tax collector from the provincial nobility. The two friends, like Sedaine's *philosophe*, are models of virtuous behavior, in particular of self-sacrifice. It is important to note that Beaumarchais' exemplary characters cover a wider financial spectrum than Sedaine, from private commerce (the silk merchant) all the way to public finance (the tax collector). Beaumarchais thus does Sedaine one better by centering his play not only on a good merchant but also on a good financier.

Mercier's *Brouette* has two commercial foci: a *négociant* (i.e., a wholesale merchant not unlike Sedaine's *philosophe*), and a *marchand*, a retail merchant, the vinegar merchant of the title. Here the vinegar merchant, the smaller-scale merchant, is characterized in a particularly favourable light, a model of economic and moral management. He is the *deus in machina*, the agent who, through financial and psychological acumen, manages to bring about the happy outcome.

This foregrounding of the good merchant in the *drame commercial* deserves to be put in historical context. The decade preceding the appearance of the *drame commercial* was marked by the irruption on the French intellectual scene of the economic school known as Physiocracy. The leader of the Physiocrats, Quesnay, in *Encyclopédie* articles in 1757, in the *Tableau économique* of 1758

⁷⁶ *Philosophe sans le savoir* 530 (Act II, Scene 4).

and in subsequent works argued that agriculture lay at the heart of national wealth and that consequently all efforts should be devoted to increasing agricultural productivity and production. Quesnay distinguished three classes of economic agents, landowners, farmers and artisan/manufacturers, and went so far as to qualify this last class as sterile.⁷ Physiocracy, as the name indicates (the rule of nature), argued in favor of a strongly agrocentric economic system. The *drame commercial*, however, reverses the economic perspective: the plays take place in the city not in the countryside and feature industrious merchants not productive farmers. Trade and manufacturing, the physiocratically sterile activities, move to the front and agriculture, the physiocratically fruitful activity, becomes secondary. Through its invention of the good merchant as differentiated from a good farmer, the *drame commercial* functions as an implicit criticism of the dominant economic doctrine of the 1760s, Physiocracy.

Payment Issues as Plot Elements

In Sedaine, the most intense moment of the play occurs when a potential enemy of the *philosophe* (the father of the possible killer of his son) wants to have a bill of exchange cashed. The quandary for the *philosophe* here is whether to do his economic duty and cash a valid bill or whether to follow his personal inclination and punish a family enemy by refusing to cash the bill. In the end, the bill is cashed and thus the public good in the form of economic integrity triumphs over personal interest in the form of paternal egoism. Economic duty does not succumb to paternal love. It is the use of money (the *philosophe's* payment to a family enemy) which demonstrates the merchant's utmost rectitude, his unflagging virtue.

Beaumarchais grants even more importance to payment issues than Sedaine. It is the threat of financial death in the form of bankruptcy that sets everything into motion. When at the outset of the play, the tax collector finds out that his friend, the silk mer-

⁷ See, for example, the *Tableau économique* in *Physiocratie*, ed. Jean Cartelier (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1991) 88–100. The bibliography on the Physiocrats is very lengthy. Two useful summaries are: Philippe Steiner, *La "Science nouvelle" de l'économie politique* (Paris: PUF, 1998) and Jean Cartelier, Introduction, in Quesnay, *Physiocratie* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1991).

chant, will not be able to pay his debts at the monthly Lyons clearinghouse (the merchant's Parisian agent has suddenly died), he decides to (illegally) use the tax receipts at his disposal to bail out his friend.⁸ When the chief tax collector unexpectedly comes and asks for those funds, and meets with unexplained refusal, the silk merchant decides to use secret funds to enable his friend to make the payment. From beginning to end then, the movement of the play is generated by problems of financial circulation. Indeed, the omnipresence and even more the intricacy of these payment issues made the play difficult to follow and contributed to the relative lack of success in Paris.⁹

In Mercier, as in Beaumarchais, the financial death of bankruptcy provides the theatrical knot. After the wholesale merchant's bankruptcy, money is required to make possible the marriage of the children of the two merchants. In the last act, the wheelbarrow of the title becomes a vehicle for payment. It is full of the vinegar merchant's life savings and it is this money that allows for the marriage of his son to the daughter of the wholesale merchant. This unusual foregrounding of moral money did not fail to arouse surprise—the most noted and controversial aspect of this play was the arrival of such a vulgar object as a wheelbarrow on the stage, wheeled on to the stage by such a vulgar person as a vinegar merchant, full of such a vulgar medium as money.¹⁰ In the *drame commercial*, then, money and questions of payment had become a central theatrical vehicle, an opportunity for the manifestation of virtue.

The Merchant as Model of Virtue

In Sedaine, as we have already seen, the merchant knowingly bails out the father of the would-be assassin of his son. In Beaumarchais, the two friends are ready to sacrifice financial savings and to risk their reputation to come to the help of each other. Mercier's vin-

⁸ In Jean-Pierre de Beaumarchais' well-chosen words, the play is a "drame de l'échéance," a financial deadline drama. He also points out that the clearinghouse with its draconian deadline was an institution particular to Lyons, further justifying Beaumarchais' choice of setting. See Jean-Pierre de Beaumarchais, "Les Deux Ennemis?" *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 100.4 (2000): 1150, 1153.

⁹ See *Les Deux Amis* 1270.

¹⁰ See, for example, W.D. Howarth, *French Theatre in the Neo-Classical Era* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1997) 619.

egar merchant has accumulated all his savings not to live a life of personal luxury, but to be able to come to the assistance of some third party.¹¹ In other words, none of these merchants puts personal gain or interest first. All of them display a decided capacity for altruism: at the very least, fellow-feeling (Sedaine) and sometimes economic self-sacrifice (Beaumarchais, Mercier).

The key word used to characterize the moral rectitude of these merchants is *probité*.¹² By *probité* the playwrights point to the capacity to respect moral rules, to perform moral duties. In *probité* we have a candidate for an Enlightenment virtue par excellence. Through this virtue, the enlightened playwrights of the *drame commercial* appear to be distancing themselves from the less enlightened sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Indeed, the emphasis on *probité* constitutes a move away from the sixteenth century when the militarized and aristocratic virtue of *honneur* was highlighted, and also away from the seventeenth century when the demilitarized and aestheticized aristocratic virtue of *bonnetêté* came to contest *honneur*. The *drame commercial* thus stages a quality more useful than *honneur* because less connected to violence, more useful than *bonnetêté* because more concerned with material effect than with sheer display.

Through the merchant's *probité*, the playwrights are in effect marrying commerce to virtue. This defence of commerce through its union with virtue differs from the defence of commerce advanced by two major English writers. In his *Fable of the Bees* (1732), Mandeville had proposed a society in which the virtues of altruism or self-denial were moved to the background. The action of vices such as greed and self-interest would result in a prosperous society: to quote his famous formula, private vices would result in public benefits.¹³ The *drame commercial* follows in Mandeville's direction to the extent that industrial and commercial activities clearly work to the benefit of society. It does not follow him, however, in acknowledging the virtue of viciousness. The merchants of the *drame commercial* are not egoists; on the contrary, they are altru-

¹¹ *La Brouette* 937-938 (Act III, Scene 6).

¹² *Le Philosophe sans le savoir* 531 (Act II, Scene 4); *Les Deux Amis* 213 (Act I, Scene 11); *La Brouette* 904 (Act I, Scene 5).

¹³ Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, ed. F.B. Kaye (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1924) 1 and 412.

istically virtuous. The *drame commercial*'s formula would be public benefits, private virtues. The second British position of interest is that of Adam Smith. In two separate works, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and *On the Wealth of Nations* (1776), Smith highlighted two different social principles: sympathy and self-love.¹⁴ The tension between these two directions in Smith's thought gave rise to what historians have called the Adam Smith problem.¹⁵ The *drame commercial* bypasses the tension by combining sympathy and self-interest. The merchant heroes of the *drame commercial* are engaged in self-interested activities, but this does not lead them to discard the virtue of sympathy. They do not destroy their enemies (Sedaine) nor do they abandon their friends though that could be in their interest (Beaumarchais and Mercier). To use Adam Smith's terms, they are wealthy and they have moral sentiments. It is Beaumarchais who best formulates this marriage of economic and moral excellence, of profits and sacrifices—at the end of the play, the chief tax collector takes on the financial burden of the two friends because their financial behavior has taught him how to “enjoy (*jouir de*) sacrifices.”¹⁶

Contemporary Social Questions

While the three plays under examination share the three defining characteristics of the *drame commercial*, they also share a concern for social questions that were of contemporary importance. To these questions however, they offer a gamut of solutions.

One such question is the value of consumption, which in these plays is related to the acceptability of luxury. The social worthiness of conspicuous consumption was a lively issue in eighteenth-century France. Two important thinkers had already addressed the issue: Voltaire had defended luxury in *Le Mondain ou l'Apologie du luxe*; Rousseau had argued against it in his two *Discours*. Our three playwrights disengage the question of consumption from that of social hierarchy. They treat the issue of consumption in eco-

¹⁴ See Part I, Section I, Chapter I of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and Book I, Chapter 2 of *The Wealth of Nations*, respectively.

¹⁵ For a discussion of this problem, see the Introduction by D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie in Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984) 20–25.

¹⁶ *Les Deux Amis* 264 (Act V, Scene 11).

conomic terms (material well-being) rather than in political terms (social hierarchy). In other words, the *drame commercial* does not ask whether or how consumption should be controlled so as to preserve a social hierarchy. Rather, it asks whether increased consumption results in greater social prosperity. A more quantitative concern for prosperity or well-being has displaced a more qualitative concern for rank in these plays. But within the common concern for material well-being, the plays don't put forward the same position: Sedaine's and Beaumarchais' merchants both deal in large amounts of money.¹⁷ Beaumarchais goes so far as to have his merchant work in the luxury industry, specifically in silk manufacturing; the play also touches on the upper spheres of public finance through its high-level tax collectors. In this way, these two playwrights endorse high levels of spending and an expansive economy. From their standpoint, more is better. Mercier, on the other hand, favours the small-scale retail merchant over the large-scale wholesale merchant. When the wholesale merchant goes bankrupt, the vinegar merchant wheels in his barrow full of money and explains that "while you all were spending every day, I was accumulating money, I was saving."¹⁸ By thus defending the virtue of frugality, Mercier foregrounds saving rather than spending and points therefore to a more restrained, a less expansive economy. "Less is enough" might be his position. Sedaine and Beaumarchais would no doubt argue that luxury is economically desirable, whereas Mercier would view luxury as economically unnecessary and morally undesirable. In this way, our playwrights were taking position in the *querelle du luxe* which had been going on for a quarter of a century. By defending luxury, Sedaine and Beaumarchais were in effect taking the side of Voltaire, who in *Le Mondain* had forcefully pointed out the benefits of luxury. Mercier, on the other hand, could be seen to be adopting the less sanguine attitude of Rousseau.

A second question raised by the *drame commercial* is the merchant as a factor of international peace. This had been the key point in the one of the century's most famous defenses of commerce, namely Montesquieu's in his *De l'esprit des lois*. For

¹⁷ Sedaine's bill is for 2400 livres (558, Act V, Scene 5) and Beaumarchais' merchant has 800,000 francs blocked in Paris (209, Act I, Scene 9). A livre was worth very approximately 50 euros.

¹⁸ *La Brouette* 935 (Act III, Scene 4).

Montesquieu, the spread of trade would lead to the disappearance of warfare. As he put it in the famous formula at the center of the *Spirit of Laws*: "Where there is commerce, there are gentle manners, where there are gentle manners, there is commerce."¹⁹ Sedaine definitely follows in Montesquieu's footsteps. In the most important scene of the play, the *philosophe*, explaining the value of commerce to his son, links trade and international peace. He says of merchants: "We bring nations back to peace through the necessity of commerce."²⁰ For Sedaine, as for Montesquieu, the commercial world is potentially one of perpetual peace. Beaumarchais is less optimistic. His view is not one of perpetual peace through international commerce, but more one of cycles, war followed by commercial reconstruction, which can in turn be followed by war. As the silk merchant puts it: "And all the gold that the war disperses, gentlemen, who brings it back in time of peace?... When the warrior rests, the merchant is happy to see it become his turn to become the helper of the fatherland."²¹ There is no guarantee that the merchant will put the warrior to perpetual rest. In Beaumarchais' play and in his life,²² commerce and war are not mutually exclusive, but feed off of each other. Mercier does not directly address the question of war and peace but does offer an innovative moment on international relations via the issue of education. Discussing the education of his son, the retail merchant criticizes the emphasis on classics and dead languages, and advocates the study of foreign languages in their country of origin.²³ In Mercier then, commerce is associated with peaceful exchange in the form of international educational exchange; indirectly, it might well be a factor of international peace.

¹⁹ Montesquieu, *Oeuvres complètes* II, ed. Roger Caillois (Paris: Gallimard (Pléiade), 1951) 585 (Part 4, Book 20, Chapter 1). Montesquieu figures prominently in Albert Hirschman's claim in *The Passions and the Interests* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977) that major eighteenth-century thinkers offered money-making interests as an antidote against violent passions. See in particular 56–80.

²⁰ *Le Philosophe sans le savoir* 531 (Act II, Scene 5).

²¹ *Les Deux Amis* 223 (Act II, Scene 10).

²² Beaumarchais' career brought together war and trade. His wealth was not linked to peace, but rather to war, since he made his money in arms dealing for the armies of Louis XV, Louis XVI, the American army and the Revolutionary army. See René Pomeau, *Beaumarchais ou la bizarre destinée* (Paris: PUF, 1987) 124.

²³ *La Brouette* 904 (Act I, Scene 5).

A third question taken up by the *drame commercial* is the relationship of nobility to commerce, of the Second Order to the Third Estate. On this question, the three plays stage the spectrum of possible attitudes. Sedaine's protagonist is a nobleman engaged in trade, albeit under a Dutch name. For Sedaine the nobility can and indeed should trade. Beaumarchais takes a different tack; he stages a merchant on the eve of his ennoblement for outstanding economic service. In this case, it is not a nobleman who trades, but rather a merchant who is ennobled. Sedaine and Beaumarchais were thus restaging one of the midcentury's most visible quarrels, the quarrel of the *noblesse commerçante*, which broke out in 1756.²⁴ This quarrel was initiated by the Abbé Coyer in his work *La Noblesse commerçante*, in which he advocated the right of the nobility to engage in all forms of wholesale trade (a right they did not have). The Chevalier d'Arcq argued against such a degradation of the nobility in a pamphlet appropriately entitled *La Noblesse militaire*. In another response, the economist Forbonnais, contributor to the *Encyclopédie*, argued against Coyer that noblemen should not engage in trade but that merchants should be ennobled. In this way, Sedaine and Beaumarchais can be seen to be putting the *querelle* on stage: Sedaine's *philosophe* is the commercial nobleman endorsed by Coyer, Beaumarchais' silk merchant is the ennobled businessman endorsed by Forbonnais. Mercier takes a more radical position than his two predecessors: he bypasses the nobility entirely. Neither of his two merchants are noblemen (the case in Sedaine) and neither is on the verge of nor dreams of joining the nobility (the case in Beaumarchais). The Third Estate occupies the stage all alone; the Second Order has disappeared, neither necessary nor useful. Mercier's merchants have no need for the nobility; the Third Estate has emancipated itself from the Second Order.

In summary, with regard to the structure of Ancien Régime society, Sedaine and Beaumarchais are reformists, not revolutionaries. They propose types of reform while maintaining the coexistence of the nobility and the Third Estate. Their plays advocate changes while preserving the three-order framework of the Ancien

²⁴ For a more extended discussion of this quarrel, see Catherine Larrère, *L'Invention de l'économie politique au XVIIIème siècle* (Paris: PUF: 1992) 150–62.

Régime.²⁵ Mercier's position is already more revolutionary—the nobility is done away with²⁶ and a wheelbarrow has replaced mitres and swords.

Whatever their ultimate political differences, Sedaine, Beaumarchais and Mercier all answered Diderot's call for a new theatre based on social condition, situated between tragedy and comedy. All three chose merchant figures. By choosing such an unaristocratic figure, they were bypassing the social elitism of tragedy. By portraying such a figure in a positive light, they were breaking away from comedy, which had traditionally denigrated financiers and merchants (one can recall two very successful comedies which portrayed moneyhandlers in a negative light: Molière's *L'Avare* and Lesage's *Turcaret*). Tragedy raised doubts about all enterprise; comedy regarded financial enterprise as vicious; the three playwrights went against both genres in foregrounding successful and virtuous commerce. They used commercial crises to provide dramatic intensity and to prove their merchants' probity. Their answer to the call of Diderot, in the form of what I have called the *drame commercial*, was a striking experiment of the *Lumières*, in which the urban merchant was proposed as a model of practical enlightenment (*pace* Rousseau and Quesnay). The merchant might not have known that he could be a *philosophe*: Sedaine, Beaumarchais and Mercier ensured that the spectator/reader knew that he could be one.

²⁵ Sedaine's play sparked, some twenty-five years ago, a dispute regarding its revolutionary character: Elisabeth Guibert-Sledziewski arguing for ("Le spectacle bourgeois des antagonismes de classe," *Dix-huitième siècle* [1975]: 259–74) and Haydn Mason arguing against ("Le *Philosophe sans le savoir*: an aristocratic *drame bourgeois*?" *French Studies* 30.4 [1976]: 405–18). I concur with Mason: the *philosophe* who comes from the aristocracy does not in any way propose that the aristocracy disappear.

²⁶ On Mercier's revolutionary proclivities, see Marcel Dorigny, "Du 'despotisme vertueux' à la république," *Louis-Sébastien Mercier: un hérétique en littérature*, ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris: Mercure de France, 1995) 249–77.