



# Bernard-Joseph Saurin, the comédie de mœurs and the civic function of plays

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After the success of plays of Marivaux and Destouches in the decades 1720 and 1730, the conceptions regarding the social role and function of theatre change, since the moral conversion of the public was now supposed to be achieved by stirring its sensibility, and not through the manipulation of the more classical tool of ridicule. If this last resort had not been entirely abandoned, the focus now undeniably fell on what French writers call « le touchant ». As a consequence, the *comédie de mœurs*, which had flourished at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, now became unfashionable, since the latter had specialised in representing series of characters displaying cynicism and despicable, or even criminal, behaviour.<sup>1</sup> Less interested by the cynical vision of human nature shared by the play writers in the decades after Molière's death, the Enlightenment preferred to concentrate on notions such as enthusiasm, passions, kindness, and so on. It is significant that in his detailed and nuanced dramatic system, Diderot did not include the *comédie de mœurs* - or rather an equivalent of it, since the label as such is a product of the 19<sup>th</sup> century -.

It is therefore all the more surprising to observe that this forgotten genre made a sort of come back in the middle of the 1760's, coinciding with a high point of discussions and reflections upon the notion of « virtue ».<sup>2</sup> This paper tries to understand this unpredictable resurgence, through an analysis of the play *Les Mœurs à la mode* by Bernard-Joseph Saurin (1706-1781), written in the theatrical key having had its hour of glory in Lesage's generation.

The reputation of Saurin is mainly related to *Beverlei* (1765), a play reputed to have put into practice the dramatic system imagined by Diderot.<sup>3</sup> The scarce dramatic reflections remaining by Saurin indicate that he read Diderot as an invitation to give a prominent role to virtue. He used it as a force driving for certain characters and the plot as a whole. This is what can be understood from his speech at the French Academy, in which respecting the morality and fighting for moral improvement appear as the very condition of literary, and moreover artistic, success:

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1 For a definition of *comédie de mœurs* and a short history, see I. Galleron *La Comédie de mœurs aux siècles classiques. Essai de définition générique et perspectives historiques*, (Oxford, Oxford University Series in the Enlightenment, 2017).

2 Beyond Saurin's play discussed here, the revival of *comédie de mœurs* is visible in *Le Méchant* by Gresset (1747), *Le Financier* by Poullain de Saint-Foix (1761), *Le Cercle ou la soirée à la mode* by Poinsinet (1764), to give but a few examples.

3 Concerning this relationship between Saurin's plays and the dramatic system by Diderot, see l'"Opinion de M. Fiévée", in *Œuvres choisies de Saurin, avec des remarques, des notices et l'examen de chaque pièce, par Messieurs Ch. Nodier et P. Lepeintre*, (Paris, 1824), p.476 and following. Fiévée explicitly links *Béverlei* to Diderot's theory of drama. Other critiques mentioned in the same volume (La Harpe, Grimm, Fréron) suggest the same ideological proximity.

le dispensateur de la gloire est le Public; et on ne l'obtient de lui, qu'en prenant en main la cause de sa vertu, qu'en faisant valoir les droits de l'humanité, qu'en vengeant le mérite humble et pauvre du riche qui l'insulte ou du puissant qui l'opprime.<sup>4</sup>

It comes thus as no surprise that Saurin rallied the definition of the theatre as a "public school of morality", and that he aimed at writing tragedies able to stir the admiration for the great men, "a noble feeling, beloved by our souls, and inspiring great and virtuous actions" ("sentiment noble, auquel notre âme se complâit, et qui la porte aux actions grandes et vertueuses").<sup>5</sup>

In spite of these aspirations, the first dramatic success of Saurin, and a long lasting one, was a little comedy, that was not at all based on the aesthetics of virtue. The very year when his tragedy *Spartacus* was staged,<sup>6</sup> Saurin wrote *Les Mœurs du temps*, a play which remained in the list of works regularly staged by the Comédie-Française, right up until 1785.<sup>7</sup> The comedy was built around the tribulations of Dorante and Julie, a well-matched young couple whose happiness is threatened not so much by the opposition of a ridiculous and authoritarian father (Géronte), as by the malignity of a so-called close friend (the Marquis). Heavily in debt, the Marquis needs to contract a good marriage in order to maintain his social position and to restore his fortune. Helped by the Countess, Julie's aunt, he manages to persuade Géronte that he would be a better match than Dorante. However, the former mistress of the Marquis, Cidalise, who feels betrayed, sets a trap during a bal masqué, and manages to uncover the truth about his hypocrisy and his malignity. Both the Countess and Géronte are hidden and listen to the unwary Marquis revealing his real thoughts about them; they understand they have been blinded and fooled. As a consequence, Dorante's matrimonial proposal is immediately accepted, the Countess and Cidalise heal from their besottedness, and the Marquis is thrown out from the family and the social circle.

What this brief summary does not allow us to perceive is the extent to which the play uses elements of the comédie de mœurs, starting with a dark vision about human nature as well as about society, an outlook that is very similar to that which playgoers would have discovered in the plays staged in the 1680. This is completely contradictory to the philosophical and esthetical principles of the theatre of virtue, since it manipulates a negative anthropology that is not at all coherent with the credo formulated by Diderot, according to whom « kindness is more natural to human beings than malice » ('la bonté nous est plus indivisiblement attachée que la méchanceté').<sup>8</sup> In the discourse accompanying *Le Fils naturel*, Diderot develops the theory of a spectatorial pleasure indexed on the

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4 B. J. Saurin, "Discours de M. Saurin de l'Académie française, prononcé le 13 avril 1761, lorsqu'il fut reçu à la place de M. l'abbé du Resnel", in *Œuvres complètes de M. Saurin, de l'Académie Française*, tome I, (Paris, Veuve Duchesne, 1783), p.11-12. All citations from Saurin will follow this edition; its title will be abridged in OC, followed by the number of the volume and the page.

5 "Préface" to *Spartacus*, OC I, p. vi-vij.

6 The premier of this tragedy is on the 20<sup>th</sup> of February 1760.

7 The database put together by the project "Registres de la Comédie-Française" indicate that the play has been staged 69 times until the season 1785-1786, with 4 to 6 representations per year until 1769.

8 "Second entretien" in Diderot, *Paradoxe sur le comédien. Entretiens sur le Fils naturel*, Raymond Laubréaux (ed.) (Paris, 1981), p.73.

proximity with characters staged in the play whilst *Les Mœurs du temps* supposes, to the contrary, that the public keeps its distance from the universe constructed by the play, both in a moral and in an intellectual sense. With this play, there is no question of provoking passion or even an extremely vivid interest, to the difference of what most play writers would have tried to do in the second half of the 18th century.<sup>9</sup> This is all the more strange as this condescending spectatorial distance, and the laughter of superiority that comes with it, had been the subject of under a attack by Rousseau, who reproached the comédie de mœurs for being, at the same time, less successful and less witty than Molière's plays, and extremely debatable from an ethical point of view. According to the author of *Émile*, the genre was definitely to be abandoned as structurally inapt to reform.<sup>10</sup>

In spite of all these warnings, what Saurin wrote what remains a comédie the mœurs. First, the title of his play is eloquent, being exactly the same as that used by Saint-Yon in 1680. Saint-Yon's *Mœurs* had been staged only for a very short period of time,<sup>11</sup> but almost all books on the theatre history of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century mention it, and underline its significance for the general atmosphere and aesthetic orientations in the decades following Molière's death.<sup>12</sup> Saurin did not rewrite *Les Mœurs* by Saint-Yon: his play is much shorter, the characters are not at all the same, and the intrigue heads towards a marriage in very different ways. However, both plays depict and intend to chastise a society in which moral values are completely forgotten, or not taken into account, and they do so through the destiny of a family supposed to be representative of the modern corruption, of the "world as it is (nowadays)".

Second, the dialogue between the Marquis and his agent in scene 8 displays is highly reminiscent of Saint-Yon's play. Both characters manifest the same contempt as regards to the various suppliers of the young man (tailor, carriage maker, caterer, etc.); there is no question of paying the debts of the Marquis, but rather to find the most expedient means of sending the creditors away. This is exactly what was happening, to a greater extent, throughout the first act of Saint-Yon's play. Such a scene between a rich and powerful man and various supplicating craftsmen had not been invented by Saint-Yon as it can be found in Molière's *Don Juan*, but he is most certainly one of the play writers to have exploited it to the full. Even if there is no direct proof that Saurin had read his predecessor's *Mœurs*, it is not impossible to consider his scene 8 as a direct

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9 For an analysis of Diderot's conceptions about the effect of art as "strong emotion" and, beyond, for its influence on amateurs and professionals of theatre, see Pierre Frantz, *L'Esthétique du tableau dans le théâtre du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, (Paris, 1998).

10 Rousseau does not use the label "comédie de mœurs", but one recognizes the genre between the lines he writes about Dancourt's plays, a "clown for dishonest women" ('amuse[ur] [d]es femmes perdues'), and about Regnard, "encourage[ur] des filous". The author of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* draws an implacable conclusion: "these defaults are so characteristic to our theatre that one cannot correct them without destroying it." ("ces défauts sont tellement inhérents à notre théâtre qu'en voulant les en ôter, on le défigure.") (*Lettre à d'Alembert sur son article Genève*, Michel Launay ed., (Paris, 1967), p.112).

11 Staged for the first time on the 13<sup>th</sup> of December 1685, the play continued to be staged until the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 1686. The registers show that it is restaged from time to time until 1694. Data about the representations are available at the following address <http://cfregisters.org/fr/nos-données/faceted-browser> (browsed on the 3rd of December 2015).

12 See for instance Charles Mazouer, *Le Théâtre français de l'âge classique. III. L'arrière-saison*, (Paris, 2014), especially chapter V « Les comédies françaises ».

echo of the text written at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

A more certain link can be established between Saurin's comedy and *L'Homme à bonne fortune* (1685) by Michel Baron, another play reputed to illustrate, at least in some aspects, the predilection of the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century for the comédie de mœurs. *L'Homme à bonne fortune* was well known in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century: the Comédie-Française staged it at least once per season, and the play had been published several times. At scene 9 of Saurin's comedy, the Countess enters wearing a dressing gown, and requires her hair dressing to be done in the common room, since "there is a lot of smoke in my room" ("il fait dans ma chambre une fumée odieuse" OC1, p. 26); this is exactly the reason invoked by the main character in Baron's play for displacing the intimate moment of dressing from his private apartment to the "salle" where the play takes place: his valet, Pasquin, reports that "he says the chimney smokes in his room" ("il dit qu'il fume dans sa chambre").<sup>13</sup> In both cases, this is a subterfuge for the playwright to show the coquetry in act, and to ridicule it, in a feminine version in Saurin's play, and a masculine that of Baron.

Third, the denouement of Saurin's play, when the Marquis denigrates Géronte and his sister without knowing that they listen to everything he says, is not so far from what happens during the last scenes of *L'Homme à bonne fortune*. In Baron's play, the main character, Moncade, is trapped by a false "beautiful brunet" ("une belle brune"), who sets a date, but asks him to attend it blindfolded. As a part of his seduction strategy, Moncade criticises his former mistresses during the date; his intention is to persuade his new conquest that he had never been in love with all these women who pretended to own his heart. In doing so, he just informs the three women that he has never truly loved them, and that he had play a double game all along their relation, which each of them thought it exclusive. There is no date in Saurin's play, but Cidalise and the Countess wear a mask, have similar dresses and change surreptitiously their places; the Marquis thinks, therefore, that he speaks to one of them when, in fact, he is facing the other. The situation is therefore quite close to that created by Baron, and the character acts similarly, even if his motivations are somewhat different: rather than seducing (or re-seducing) one more woman, the Marquis seeks a form of complicity with his interlocutor, a sympathetic ear for the expression of his contempt towards the financier he has to humour so as to obtain the hand and the fortune of his daughter, and towards the infatuated sister of the financier. Unfortunately, he does not know that Géronte is hidden behind a couch and does not miss a word of his malevolent discourse. Unlike Moncade, the Marquis realises his mistake at scene 24, and tries to repudiate his words, pretending that he was joking. However, this attempt to arrange the situation through putting it into a new light is not different, in substance, to what was happening in Baron's play, in which Moncade manages to worm himself out from several tight spots, thanks to his oratorical ability and his cold blood.

Beyond these precise similarities between Saurin's plays and two of the most famous

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13 *L'Homme à bonne fortune*, act I, sc. 5, in Michel Baron, *Théâtre complet*, tome I, Ioana Galleron and Barbara Sommovigo eds., (Paris, 2015), p.301.

representatives of the comédie de mœurs, it may be observed that the characters staged are those of this genre. The Marquis and the Countess are the characters appearing most frequently throughout the play. It is thus significant that they are represented as a “petit-maître”, a superficial beau, lacking any moral backbone, and a ridiculous widow, full of herself, very attached to her social superiority (acquired through marriage), and absolutely certain that no man can resist her charms. The dialogues sketch other portraits, other images of the “world as it is”, populated by flatterers, financiers ready for any manoeuvre so as to increase their capital, dishonest agents, etc., and driven by an irrepressible appetite for pleasure. The aim of the comedy is clearly to show the negation of all moral value, hidden behind a frenzy of egoistic pleasures. Virtue is considered a myth, a false pretence of frustrated persons:

La Comtesse

Va, ma pauvre enfant, les mots de fat et de coquette ont été inventés par l’envie pour dénigrer les hommes aimables et les jolies femmes. Apprends de moi que tout homme est fat quand il a de quoi l’être, et que, de son côté, avec de l’esprit et des grâces, toute femme est coquette. (scène 18, OC1, p. 37)

Being able to set aside any “old prejudice” (“vieux préjugés”) is, for these new men and women (“hommes du jour”), the ultimate sign of intelligence and superiority, the proof of being a real gentleman or woman of the world. On the contrary, the true love shared by Dorante and Julie, or more generally the objections that simple common sense may oppose to egoistic or unreasonable behaviour, are considered a sign of intellectual and social retardation, caused by provincialism, ingenuity or any other form of inferiority. The Marquis and the Countess speak condescendingly of such behaviour: ‘façon de penser tout à fait gothique’ (scène 6), ‘goût du terroir’ (scène 12), ‘c’est un enfant; cela ne sait pas encore les usages’ (scène 12), ‘ces petits bourgeois ont des idées bien étranges’ (scène 18). This is exactly what the characters of Saint-Yon, Baron, but also Dancourt were saying, and it is precisely their cynicism that shocked Rousseau so much, while provoking the mirth of the most popular part of the public (the “parterre”).

To the contrary of what the author of an introduction to a volume of selected works by Saurin, published in 1812, seems to believe,<sup>14</sup> the playwright gets his inspiration not so much from contemporary society, but rather from a specific theatrical heritage, clearly situated in time, and possessing characteristic aesthetic features. If his *Moeurs* are hilarious, this is largely because Saurin uses the comical sources of the comédie de mœurs. It is worthwhile observing that the intrigue of the play does not necessarily call for a satire of the society at large. From a technical point of view, Saurin could have treated his ridiculous characters as molieresque types. But this is not what he chooses, and instead of concentrating on the malevolence of the Marquis as a sign of

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<sup>14</sup> “The little comedy *Les Moeurs du temps* is full of wit and based on the observation of society. The dialogues are easy and natural, the characters true and well designed.” (“La petite comédie des *Mœurs du temps* est marquée au coin de l’esprit et du talent d’observation. Le dialogue en est franc et naturel, les caractères en sont vrais et finement tracés.”, F. Fayolle, ‘Notice sur la vie et les ouvrages de Saurin’, *Œuvres choisies de Saurin*, (Paris, 1812), p.x.)

his own fallen human nature, he presents it as the product of an era, as a modern social habit: “vous autres gens légers et brillants” (scene 6). Nor is the Countess a simple “coquette”, characterized by an eternal feminine frailty: she is supposed to reflect a contemporary type, to be “une femme du jour”. One must therefore conclude that the similarity with the comédie de mœurs is intentional, and not just a coincidence or the by-product of any comedy writing.

But, once again, what could be the reasons for such a choice of genre? The beginning of an answer can be found between the lines of the speech to the Academy. This is posterior to the *Mœurs*, but still close enough in time so as to allow us to suppose that Saurin’s ideas and state of mind are still the same as during the writing of his comedy.<sup>15</sup> The new academician takes position against Rousseau, albeit without naming the author of the *Letter to d’Alembert*. A rhetorical question reminds and condemns in the same movement the philosophical thesis of the recent *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*. This is all the more remarkable as this reminder takes almost entirely the place of the eulogy to the founder of the Academy, an indispensable part of any discourse of a newcomer:

Ce grand homme, en faisant lever sur les lettres un jour brillant et nouveau, dont le crépuscule avait lui un instant sous François premier, aurait-il pu penser qu’on regrettât jamais cette nuit d’ignorance et de barbarie, si longtemps répandue sur nous? (OC1, p. 10)

Immediately after comes an allusion to the similarly recent *Lettre à d’Alembert sur les spectacles*. Once again, Saurin uses a rhetorical question and points sadly towards the absurdity of such a position, drawing therefore a proper condemnation of misleading Rousseau’s ideas:

Aurait-il pu penser que les Muses auxquelles il élevait un temple, et dont, après sa mort, un illustre magistrat fut le consolateur et l’appui, que ces muses, dis-je, seraient un jour traitées de corruptrices des mœurs; qu’on s’armerait contre elles de leurs propres dons; qu’on emploierait à les décrier une éloquence digne d’une meilleure cause; et que ce paradoxe étrange, avidement reçu par l’ignorance et par l’envie, deviendrait en quelque sorte un problème? (OC1, p. 10.)

The refutation culminates in a phrase full of energy, reminding us that luxury, and not culture, is “the corrupter of morality, and the main cause of the fall of the empires” (“le corrupteur des mœurs, et qui précipite la chute des empires”, OC1, p. 10-11). One is allowed, therefore, to think that the revival of comédie de mœurs is part of the same reaction to Rousseau’s ideas, of the same strategy, aiming at demonstrating that theatre, even in its more debatable form, is innocuous and useful, and not a “problem”, to use Saurin’s own word. *Les Mœurs du temps* can be seen as a retort to Rousseau’s discourse, a living denial of his theories.

Another conjectural reason may be the desire to experiment so as to try and understand what place laughter can have in a dramatic system organised by the ideas of sensibility and virtue. Indeed, if Diderot writes many pages on the subject of the “genre sérieux”, there is virtually nothing

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15 *Les Mœurs* had been staged on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December 1760. This means the play was probably written during the spring or the summer 1760, that is a year and a half after the publication of *Lettre à d’Alembert sur les spectacles*. Saurin was received at the Academy on the 13<sup>th</sup> of April 1761, just a few months after the premier of the *Mœurs*.

in his works about comedy and the effect of comedy. This is not to say that comic and laughter are excluded from Diderot's system, but it is obvious that he does not spend much time conceptualising either one or the other. Moreover, while the role of sensibility in manipulating the public is largely described, there is nothing about the role that laughter and ridicule can play to infuse the spectator with virtuous feelings. It is only in 1775 that Diderot started writing *Est-il bon ? Est-il méchant?*, a text answering, at least partially, these questions, but destined to be rewritten several times before the philosopher's death.<sup>16</sup> As a close friend of Diderot, Saurin may have nurtured the ambition to remediate to this omission. The *Letters to Sophie Volland* prove that he was exchanging ideas about theatre with Diderot, and that the two men were collaborating on the matter. From a similar perspective, one may note that Saurin did not only experiment with comédie de mœurs. In 1765, he also tried to write a comédie de caractère, entitled *L'Orpheline léguée*, which, remodelled and shortened, becomes *L'Anglomane* in 1772.

In spite of not being preceded by an introduction, *Les Mœurs* sketches a theoretical discourse about comedy, through a number of lines. The main idea is traditional: the comical theatre is supposed to produce "portraits", functioning as mirrors in which the public will catch its own reflection. Therefore, laughter is the ultimate proof of a virtuous society. This physiological and psychological phenomenon is efficient to chasten morality, and constitutes no threat to people or society as authentically valuing virtue. Only men and women about town devalue laughter as a mark of inferiority, either intellectually or socially (see above, the speech of the Countess to Finette). As a consequence, it is of paramount importance not to abandon laughter, even if fashion is against it, and knowing that good play writers, with skills to handle it, tend to be rare. It is essential to spare some place to the ridicule, so as to fight a bad usage of laughing, rooted in a frivolous desire to have fun and answering a form of social cruelty:

Dorante

Apprenez vous-même, Monsieur, qu'on ne doit point appeler usage ce que pratiquent peut-être une douzaine de folles et autant de prétendus agréables, dont Molière, s'il revenait au monde, nous donnerait de bons portraits.

Le Marquis

Eh mais! ton vieux Molière, si, comme tu dis, il revenait au monde, crois-tu que les gens comme il faut iraient à ses pièces?

Dorante

Oh! non; car du bon, du vrai comique la mode en est passée. Le rire est devenu bourgeois. On raille, on persifle; mais on ne rit point. (*Les Mœurs*, scène 6, OC1, p. 20)

However, one may wonder if Diderot, fond of jokes and jest, was entirely in agreement with Saurin on this matter.

Either revived in opposition to Rousseau, or as a mean to complete the dramatic system of sensibility, the formula of comédie de mœurs has to be revised from the point of view of a theatre

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<sup>16</sup> About the genetic history of *Est-il bon? Est-il méchant?*, see Diderot *Œuvres complètes*, DPV, *Fiction V*, Jacques Proust et Jack Undank eds. (Paris, 1979), p. 295-302.



aimed at stirring virtuous emulation. Saurin had to master the noxious effects related to the representation of corruption; to this end, he tried to show that, as the *Encyclopédie* and Diderot say, benevolence and virtue are more specific to the human being than malevolence and mischief. To start, “bad characters” are less numerous in his play than the virtuous ones. Significantly, the Marquis and the Countess, the two evil doers, do not have a Christian name; they are opposed by five characters entirely incapable of egoism, even when their best interests are threatened: Dorante and Julie, the two young and innocent lovers, but also Cidalise, a true friend in spite of her being a woman of the world, Finette, maidservant to the Countess, and who has the role to remind her about her heart, and, last but not least, by Géronte himself. In an interesting monologue, the financier expresses his doubts about the decision he has taken, under the influence of his sister, on the marriage of his daughter: ‘Ce marquis ne plaît pas à ma fille... Je crains bien que ma sœur ne m’ait fait faire une sottise...’ (scène 17, OC1, p. 43). In spite of his fortune, one feels that he has a good nature, always ready to put aside the false values he has had to adopt as a newcomer in high society. Julie knows it, and counts on this good nature to avoid the arranged marriage into which her aunt tries to force her: ‘Je me jetterai aux pieds de mon père. Il m’aime...’ (scène 21, OC1, p. 43). In spite of his fast-made and recent fortune, in spite of being similar, in this respect, to M. Damis in the play by Saint-Yon, or to the well-known Turcaret, Géronte is not a parvenu, since his millions did not destroy his honest feelings. And this is valid not only for Géronte, but for any human being, according to Saurin. On this point, he is totally in opposition with the spirit of comédie de mœurs, whose adepts believe, on the contrary, in a human nature irrepressibly lead by vice, by passions in the worst sense of the term; such comedies display a maximum of villains, denouncing the inefficacy of social rules in containing the natural corruption of human beings.

Another important modification consists in the use of portraits and discourse instead of lively representation of corruption. Comédies de mœurs themselves make tremendous use of portraits, but this is only because one cannot multiply the number of actors. In Saurin’s play, this is clearly part of a strategy to avoid confronting the public with too revolting a representation of the world. Certain characters are deliberately left aside, when one might have expected to see them participate to the play, even in passing. This is the case of the secretary of Géronte, a flatterer who knows how to please his master and to rob him at the same time. He is mentioned in a dialogue, and while we expect him to play a very similar role to that played by Frontin in *Turcaret*, he never appears in the play<sup>17</sup>:

Dorante  
Quoi! ce petit monsieur qui donne ses décisions pour des oracles?  
Cidalise

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17 At least, he does not appear so in the play as we can read it. The 1818 edition of the comedy has 27 scenes (it had only 19 in 1783), with several stage directions rewritten. These may be the result of an editorial decision taken at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it may also echo late modifications brought by the author. Saurin may have changed other elements of his play, amongst which, maybe, the list of characters and their distribution in the play.

Il est celui de G ron te, qu’il a pris pour le h ros de ses vers. On vous les montre, ces vers, qui de M. G ron te ne font pas moins qu’un grand homme, un homme d’ tat, et vous n’applaudissez pas de toutes vos forces! (sc ne 1, OC1, p. 7-8)

One has the feeling that Saurin is cautious when he manipulates the topos of a modern corrupt society. If, on the one hand, he has to build a complete image of this not so brave new world, he has, on the other hand, to minimise the negativity of his representation. He does so through selecting the aspects he asks his actors to embody, while everything else becomes the object of a narrative.

The wish to render the comedy less harsh in its representation of the world is also visible in the contrast between the preliminary portraits of the characters and their true nature as revealed through their actions. In most cases, they are worth more than what the initial depictions lead us to think. There is a big difference between the initial portrait of G ron te as parvenu, and his manners and opinions, as revealed in his interaction with the others. Contrary to what Cidalise affirms during the first scene, G ron te does not boast about his financial and social success.<sup>18</sup> His discourse is rather sensible, and he does not seem to entirely lack culture. He is therefore not Moli re’s “bourgeois gentilhomme”, nor “ma tre Guillaume” from *Les Enl vements* (1685) by Baron. There is no real reason for his sister to rebuke him when he tries to object to the way of life she imposes on him, and, far from pointing a ridicule of the financier, her speech reveals only her own villainy:

G ron te

Ma s ur, j’ai lu quelque part qu’il n’y a de vrais plaisirs que ceux du peuple, qu’ils sont l’ouvrage de la nature, que les autres sont les enfants de la vanit , et que sous leur masque on ne trouve que l’ennui.

La Comtesse

Mais voil  qui est bien  crit, au moins! Vous lisez donc quelquefois, monsieur? Vraiment, j’en suis ravie! Je croyais votre biblioth que un meuble de parade... (sc ne 12, OC1 p. 31-32)

In a similar way, the Countess is not so much of a coquette, contrary to what the representation leads us to think, and the Marquis fulfils only half of the character attributed to him. Indeed, he may appear to be a flatterer and a sharp tongue, but never a petit-ma tre, interested by seducing as many women as possible – to the contrary of what Julie and Finette affirm about him:

Julie

Persuad e qu’il m’aimait, s duite par l’ l gance de ses ridicules, ses d fauts ne me paraissaient que des gr ces. Je suis presque s re que, si je l’ pouse, je serai la femme du monde la plus malheureuse. Mes r flexions me conduisent souvent   vouloir me vaincre. Je crois quelquefois y  tre parvenue. Il para t; toutes ces id es s’effacent: mes r flexions s’ vanouissent; je ne sens plus que mon amour pour lui: je suis d sesp r e. (sc ne 1, p. 12)

Finette

ce n’est qu’un fat, mis   la mode par deux ou trois coquettes. (sc ne 13, p. 37)

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18 ‘Je vous avais pourtant bien mis au fait: je vous avait dit que le p re de Julie, riche financier, faute d’esprit, se piquait de bon sens, qu’il se mirait sans cesse dans son opulence, et croyait qu’un millionnaire  tait le premier homme du monde’ (OC1, p. 7).

Once again, the public discovers a character who is much less ridiculous than expected, and much less persuaded of his superiority and sex appeal than any *petit-maître*. Rather than the will to simplify and to unify the characters, this toning down reflects the precautions Saurin thinks fit to take when manipulating the topos of the modern corruption. Forced to use it by the very nature of *comédie de mœurs*, he biases and avoids getting too convincing about such a “reality”.

This is also the reason why he feels the need to render less absolute the principles and ideas of the corrupted characters, suggesting that they may be just a façade. Are the Marquis or the Countess deeply persuaded that “love is nothing”, as they claim in front of Dorante or Finette? Do they really think that a tender feeling is ridiculous, and even more so when it concerns married people? Nothing is less certain. It is true that the Marquis is ready to marry Julie, in spite of the fact that he is not in love with her, but this is because he has to urgently find a way to settle his debts. In other circumstances, he may not have been so cynical. His refusal to acknowledge the very existence of love is a facility, a way to simplify his own task and to avoid taking into account what he deprives himself of, and the pain he inflicts upon his friend. As for the Countess, her denial is linked to her jealousy. She cannot bear the idea that the Marquis could be more attracted by Julie’s youth than by her ageing charm:

Finette

Mais si elle vengeait Cidalise? si Julie allait plaire au marquis?

La Comtesse, *en se donnant des grâces*.

Julie? un enfant novice au monde, qui n’entend rien à l’art de plaire, qui ne se doute pas même qu’il y en ait un?

Finette

Oui, mais la nature s’y entend pour elle. Sans songer à plaire, Julie se montre et plaît. On ne peut disconvenir qu’elle soit charmante?

La Comtesse, *en haussant les épaules*.

Charmant?... Donnez-moi d’autre rouge: celui-là est pâle comme la mort. (scène 18)

Therefore, when she mocks her niece for thinking that “love is essential” (“l’essentiel c’est de s’aimer”), the public understands that seduction is not an innocuous game, to the contrary of what she professes.

This difference between what the characters say and what they think is one of the most significant differences between Saurin’s comedy and the *comédie de mœurs*. In Saint-Yon’s play, Mariane was not at all upset by the idea that his future husband might take mistresses; all she expected from him was a free rein. None of the characters of this first *Mœurs du temps* show an appetite for true love, or a sense of what the real values are in life; this does not mean that Saint-Yon considers both to be ludicrous myths – just that he did not feel the need to mention them in his play. But remaining silent on these aspects is unacceptable at a time when virtue was valued. Saurin felt the need to send a strong message to his public, and to let it know that even the vilest characters recognise virtue, even if not openly saying so. This is why he did not depict a world having entirely lost any sense of values, and relentlessly pursuing pleasure. His universe is one of men and women

who cheat themselves with false pretences and discourses, but who can wake up at any moment to discover the extent to which they are wrong. He is not accusing the Countess of not leading the modest and retired life of a widow, but rather of being fond of “staying awake for staying awake’s sake” (“veiller pour veiller”), and more generally for being dishonest with herself. The contemporary people are not so much sinners, as guilty of preaching against virtue, of denying its reality and its efficiency.

Rewritten by Saurin, the *comédie de mœurs* appears therefore as an acceptable genre, that can be included in the dramatic system renewed by the idea of virtue. It is true that the ideology founding this type of play is contradictory to the confidence in human nature displayed by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, in other words, contradictory to the representation of a human nature nurtured by the wish to do well. But the *comédie de mœurs* continues to attract both playwrights and the public. Even if the genre seems to deny the existence of scenic forces able to stimulate virtue, it has the power to make the audience laugh – a strange device that the civic theatre imagined by the Enlightenment philosophers cannot leave aside.