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English theatre in Enlightenment France

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Abstract

French playwrights of the second half of the eighteenth century found inspiration in the themes, characters, and scenarios they borrowed from British theatre, and more largely from British sensibility. The advent of drama and dramatic comedy testifies to the importance of pathos and spectacle during this time. This type of theatre encouraged spectators to identify with the characters and their passions. Sociability thus operated on two levels—on stage, and in the audience. It also fuelled the debate on Franco-British relations.

'It has been said that 'the French only truly discovered British theatre in the eighteenth century,'¹ but it immediately gave rise to debates surrounding theatre, culture, and morality. Sociability was a central issue in the debate. The discovery was part of a general wave of Anglomania which 'manifested more readily in literature than in other domains. And though it was a perfectly natural mindset on the other side of the English Channel, once it had arrived on our side, it took on an air of rebellious independence which was quite to the liking of our illustrious philosophers.'² Those of a more philosophical bent did indeed highly value the theatre for its civilising virtues, but also for its political and moral impact. Diderot would declare that the role of theatre was to 'inspire men with love of virtue and abhorrence of vice...,'³ two qualities that Enlightenment thinkers saw as the genesis of sociability. French theatre, suffused with this spirit, underwent a profound transformation that affected comedy in particular. Laughter was no longer the preordained response to a theatrical performance: the fate of the exemplary characters was meant to stir up profound emotion in the spectator. The terms used most to describe the new fashion—bourgeois drama, bourgeois comedy, bourgeois tragedy, or domestic tragedy—speak to how it was in fact a hybrid genre, a melding of the traditional comic and tragic registers in proportions that varied from one play to the next. It was instrumental in disseminating the socio-political ideal of the Enlightenment: the high born, as much as comedic characters, could find motivation in their own internal preoccupations, while 'commoners,' much like tragic heroes, were now entitled to express noble sentiments.

British theatre was largely responsible for the theatrical revival of the Enlightenment in France, imported through various translations.⁴ In 1745-49, Pierre-Antoine de La Place published *Théâtre anglais*, an eight-volume anthology of liberal, 'occasionally mutilated or sugar coated,'⁵ even abridged, adaptations of plays plundered mainly from Shakespeare's oeuvre. Though the productions were aesthetically 'still entirely foreign to French sensibilities' (Soulatges 50), they initially aroused the admiration of Voltaire, whose tragedies bear the mark of a spectacular, striking dramaturgy, which ignored the ideal of the three unities, and classical moral codes and good taste. The 'English air' (Soulatges 50) which permeated [Voltairean](#) tragedy also suffused comedic dramaturgy. Michel-Jean Sedaine, for one, acknowledged his debt to *The Merry Wives of Windsor*⁶ in the prologue to his opéra-comique entitled *L'Anneau perdu et retrouvé*.

In 1768 and 1769, Madame [Riccoboni](#) published *Nouveau théâtre anglais*, a two-volume collection of plays by Moore, Murphy, Kelley, and Coleman that had all been written between 1755 and 1768 at [Drury Lane](#).⁷ Yet it was mostly Claude Pierre Patu's 1756 publication of *Choix de petites pièces du Théâtre anglais* that formed 'a piquant contrast to our timid national taste, cleverly designed to ignite the zeal of reformers.' One of Patu's selections, Robert Dodsley's *The King and the Miller of Mansfield* (1736), would inspire Sedaine and Pierre-Alexandre Monsigny (*Le Roi et le Fermier*, 1762, Hôtel de Bourgogne) and later Charles Collé (*La Partie de chasse d'Henri IV*, 1764, théâtre de société du Duc d'Orléans). In both plays, a poor man rescues a king lost in the forest. The latter conceals his identity, happy to enjoy a friendship that, he claimed, should not depend on one's lineage. In

exchange for the hospitality the king receives, he unmasks a local lord for abuse of power, finally revealing his identity. In both plays, friendship—a ‘beautiful sympathy’ that reflects the ‘fundamental longing of each soul for another’,⁸ —, is depicted as an exemplary sociable deed.

In addition to the anthologies, two plays that would have considerable influence on French theatre appeared: in 1748, a translation of George Lillo’s *The London Merchant* (1731), entitled *Le Marchand de Londres ou l’Histoire de George Barnwell*;⁹ and in 1762, a translation of Edward Moore’s *The Gamester* (1753), called *Le Joueur*,¹⁰ Bernard-Joseph Saurin would produce an adaptation of the latter in 1768, entitled *Béverlei*,¹¹ which the Comédie-Française preferred, as the main character was less violent and more prudent of nature (Marchand, ‘Les Lumières et la nostalgie des grands crimes’, 188). In *Marchand de Londres* the paradoxes of societal life are exposed as virtuous Barnwell murders his benefactor for the love of a courtesan. Barnwell delves into the dark side of human relationships, before contending with the remorse that brings him back to virtuous sociability. The eponymous hero of *Béverlei* is consumed by his passion for gaming. Deceived by Stukéli who had pretended to be his friend, Béverlei brings his family to ruin then, imprisoned, takes his life. In the end, Béverlei’s true friend, Leuson, unveils Stukéli’s treachery.

The two ‘*tragédies bourgeoises*’ (as their publisher would name them), played an important role in the development of dramatic comedy (*comédie sérieuse*) in France, with characters driven by private, family, and domestic concerns. Dramatic comedy was intended to ‘evoke pathos, itself destined to sublime into a love of mankind and a propensity for sociability.’¹² The purpose was to ‘teach men to live together better, to offer them the opportunity to rediscover the virtues of a community cemented by common principles... [and] the energy of the passions it stirred up revitalised the newly awakened sociability.’ A sharing of tears accompanied the euphoric gratitude and exalted altruism, until this empathy was transmuted into collective sympathy.’ (Marchand, *Théâtre et pathétique*, 726-27). Producing such acts of sociability on-stage gave ‘the bourgeois audience a mirror that reflected their own world and values. For it to be effective, the mirror had to be presented within tightly constructed dramatic tensions that captivated and projected onto the audience.’¹³

British plays also offered French authors motifs and situations they could recycle into their own plays. Texts were translated, adapted, at times even misleadingly attributed to British authors. In *Le Café ou l’Écossaise* (1760)—a comedy Voltaire purported had been written by David Hume’s brother—a young girl is relentlessly abused by the vagaries of fate. Her character draws heavily on British dramaturgy but also on Richardson’s oeuvre. This ‘interesting’ (Marchand, *Théâtre et pathétique*, 234 *et seq.*) young girl with a touching demeanour uses the emotion aroused in her stage fellows to better communicate that passion to the audience. In Jean-François’s *Amitié à l’épreuve* (1770), Captain Blandford entrusts the care of young Corali, whom he has taken in and plans to marry, to his friend Nelson. But during Blandford’s absence, Nelson and Corali confess their love for one another—a double betrayal, of both a friend and a protector. In the end, Blandford magnanimously accepts the union, as much from his devotion to Nelson as out of reverence for true love.

British theatre unsettled emotions and took hold of the spectator, providing ‘French theorists of drama with more boldness and means to achieve their ideal than they themselves would erstwhile have striven for.’ (Gaiffe 56) The numerous plays translated or adapted from the English brought readers together in a sort of international community of ‘sensitive souls,¹⁴ eliciting the emotional allegiance of an audience gripped by an aestheticism that ‘exalted human sentiment.’ (Delon 279) Translators of Shakespeare such as Jean-François Ducis and Pierre Letourneur,¹⁵ among others, would continue with this tradition into the 1770s, though the question of Franco-British cultural compatibility would remain a point of contention. Saurin’s comedy, *L’Anglomane* (1765), features a virtuous character absurdly suffering from ‘British mania,’ having acquired a British accent without even knowing the language.¹⁶ Though the play mocks the French obsession for all things British, in others, Anglomania is seen as a threat to ‘French gallantry, social spirit, and *toilette*.’¹⁷ A satirical poem condemning *Beverlei* defines the threat in no uncertain terms:

Thanks to Anglomania, Saurin has on our stages
produced a dreadful atrocity;
[...]
Let us leave our neighbours to their bloodthirsty excesses.
Woe to those nations so entertained by blood!
[...]
The French are no tigers or ferocious beasts
Only to be moved by atrocious sentiment!¹⁸

Collé, who like [Voltaire](#) now rejected the style which had once seduced him, had much the same to say of the play:

It draws the attention, yes, but captures it not at all. It does not move you, it oppresses; nor does it make you weep, but asphyxiates; one wakes from it as if from a nightmare, with a belly full of bile all night [...] That is British taste. [...] Let us hope that such barbarism, such lack of *savoir-vivre*, shall not, despite the efforts of our philosophers, become the norm.¹⁹

As upsetting as British theatre was to classical codes and aesthetics, its growing popularity in France worried those who feared that the sociability inherited from aristocratic gallantry—embodied in the noble champion of reason and sangfroid—would forever cease to exist.

Yet if, in the eighteenth century, French theatre fed off British dramaturgy, it had its own impact on the other side of the Channel. For some, this mutual inspiration only underscored the ambiguous relationship between the British and the French. ‘Our tearful dramas are more popular in London than in Paris, and *Romeo and Beverlei* attract larger audiences here than the masterpieces of Racine and Corneille. It seems that we have taken it upon ourselves to copy one another, to erase all vestiges of our reciprocated hatred.²⁰ Whatever the case, the

acceptance of British theatre in France was paradoxical indeed: the same behaviours that disheartened apostles of harmonious sociability strengthened the feeling of shared humanity that the reformers of French theatre in the eighteenth century so desperately sought.

1. Bénédicte Louvat-Molozay et Florence March, 'Introduction', *Les Théâtres anglais et français (XVIe-XVIIIe siècles). Contacts, circulation, influences* (Rennes : Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2016), p. 14.
 2. Félix Gaiffe, *Le Drame en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris : Armand Colin, 1910), p. 46.
 3. Denis Diderot, *Entretiens sur le Fils Naturel*, dans Laurent VERSINI (éd.), *Œuvres*, t. IV, *Esthétique – Théâtre* (Paris : Robert Laffont, 1996), p. 1176.
 4. In the eighteenth century, translations were more often creative adaptations rather than faithful renderings of the original.
 5. Magali Soulatges, 'La Tragédie' dans Pierre Frantz et Sophie Marchand (dir.), *Le Théâtre français du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris : L'Avant-Scène théâtre, 2009), p. 50.
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 7. Marianne Charrier-Vozel, 'Mme Riccoboni traductrice du théâtre anglais' dans Annie Cointre et Annie Rivara (dir.), *La traduction des genres non romanesques au XVIIIe siècle* (Université de Metz, 2003), p. 187-203.
 8. Robert Mauzi, *L'Idée de bonheur dans la littérature et la pensée françaises au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris : Armand Colin, 1960), p. 592.
 9. George Lillo, *Le Marchand de Londres ou l'Histoire de George Barnwell*, éd. Pierre Clément ([S. l.], 1748).
 10. Edward Moore, *Le Joueur*, éd. Bruté de Loirelle (Paris : Dessain junior, 1762).
 11. See Sophie Marchand, 'Les Lumières et la nostalgie des grands crimes. À propos de quelques adaptations françaises de la domestic tragedy', *Littératures classiques* (vol. 67, n° 3, 2008), p. 187-200.
 12. Sophie Marchand, *Théâtre et Pathétique au XVIIIe siècle : pour une esthétique de l'effet dramatique* (Paris : Honoré Champion, 2009), p. 726-727.
 13. Christian Biet et Christophe Triaou, *Qu'est-ce que le théâtre ?* (Paris : Gallimard, 2006), p. 236.
 14. Michel Delon, 'Homo sum?... Un vers de Térence comme devise des Lumières', *Dix-huitième Siècle* (n° 16, 1984), p. 291.
 15. See the entry on Shakespeare.
 16. See Annick Cossic-Péricarpin et Alain Kerhervé (dir.), *La sociabilité en France et en Grande-Bretagne au siècle des Lumières*, t. V, *Sociabilités et esthétique de la marge* (Paris : Le Manuscrit, 2016), p. 39-96.
 17. Grimm, Diderot et alii, *Correspondance littéraire*, t. XIV, mai 1786 (Paris : Tourneux, 1880), p. 360.
 18. Bachaumont et alii, *Mémoires secrets*, t. II, 1766-1769 (Paris : Brissot-Thivars, 1830), p. 278.
 19. Charles Collé, *Journal et Mémoires*, t. III (Paris : Didot, 1868), p. 195.
 20. Grimm, Diderot et alii, *Correspondance littéraire*, t. X, avril 1774 (Paris : Tourneux, 1879), p. 415.
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[On Conversation \(1756\)](#)

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