

Forming the Sociable Citizen: Appealing to Intense Emotions on the French Stage

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There is no question that there are common threads running through the dramatic theories of Denis Diderot, Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais and Louis-Sébastien Mercier, three of the most notable contributors to the rise of the *drame* in the second half of the eighteenth century. As a group, Diderot's *Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel* (1757), Beaumarchais' *Essai sur le drame sérieux* (1767), and Mercier's *Du théâtre, ou Nouvel essai sur l'art dramatique* (1773) promote a new serious genre situated between Tragedy and Comedy, with the ultimate goal of social reform. The most frequently recognized connection between the three authors is their mutual desire to create a new sort of theater-going experience, one that will transform spectators into more sociable citizens.¹ This paper investigates the various dramatic theories and techniques each of these authors proposed for carrying out this mission, from gestural acting to other appeals to intense audience emotion.

In an age defined by the cult of sensibility, Diderot's methods capitalized on an eighteenth-century audience that, as Anne Vincent-Buffault put it, "cried a lot" at the theater, "and took pleasure above all in being seen to cry."² What, we may well ask, did contemporary playwrights believe was most conducive to provoking such emotion in theater-goers? To explore that question, I will begin by considering how Diderot proposed to make his characters' emotions more immediate and powerful for his audience, in addition to the dramatic practices he used to create the illusion of genuine feeling on the stage. I will then examine the ways in which

¹ See Harris, Joseph. "Identification and the *Drame*." *Nottingham French Studies* 47:3 (Autumn 2008): 56-67. Print; Hayes, Julie C. "Changing the System: Mercier's Ideological Appropriation of Diderot". *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 18 (1988): 343-357. Print; and Lloyd, Caryl L. "Pre-Revolutionary Dramatic Theory From Diderot to Beaumarchais". In *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History*. Vol. 16. Auburn: Auburn University, 1989. Print. 167-174.

² Vincent-Buffault, Anne. *The History of Tears: Sensibility and Sentimentality in France*. Trans. Teresa Bridgeman. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991. Print. p. 54.

Beaumarchais and Mercier built upon those techniques, while also devising their own methods for eliciting strong and even painful emotions in their audiences.

Diderot introduced his theory of the *drame* in his *Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel* (1757). He further developed that theory—and the ideas on audience response that underpinned it—the following year in *De la poésie dramatique* as well as in the *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (written in 1769 but published posthumously).³ Given that Diderot’s theories are complex and sometimes contradictory, I will focus primarily on the techniques he proposed for engaging theater audiences in the *Entretiens*, which he published as a companion piece and defense of his first play, *Le Fils naturel*. In this work, Diderot reimagines the theater as a place where spectators can reconnect with humanity and engage in a new morally driven sympathetic society. Two of the techniques he encourages playwrights to adopt, in order to bring about this change, are the creation of visually striking *tableaux* and characters that represent common *conditions*.⁴ Together, these techniques constitute two symbiotically interrelated components of Diderot’s effort to create an aesthetic experience that will touch the hearts and souls of any spectator; though, as we will see shortly, Diderot’s ideal spectator is decidedly male.

Diderot defines his *tableau* technique in the *Entretiens* as, “Une disposition de ces personnages sur la scène, si naturelle et si vraie, que, rendue fidèlement par un peintre, elle me plairait sur la toile” (79). As the first key element in his process, Diderot urges playwrights to incorporate *tableaux* into their works in place of artificial and forced plot twists; as he reasons,

³ Diderot, Denis. *Entretiens sur le Fils naturel, De la poésie dramatique, Paradoxe sur le comédien*. Ed. Jean Goldzink, Paris: Flammarion, 2005. Print. All references to Diderot’s *Entretiens*, *De la poésie dramatique*, and *Paradoxe* will be to this edition.

⁴ Scholars such as Pierre Frantz, Peter Szondi, Julie C. Hayes, Jane A. Hale and Scott S. Bryson have studied these techniques at length; however, I intend to show how *tableau* and *condition* are not separate but interdependent components of Diderot’s dramatic process.

that through the careful staging of his characters' bodies, he will be able to communicate aspects of the dramatic plot to the audience with appealing realism and greater immediacy. In one example, Diderot (Moi) and his character Dorval (the fictional author of the play, with whom Moi is speaking) discuss the purposeful juxtaposition of the actors' bodies in Act two Scene four of *Le Fils naturel*:

MOI. – Je gagerais presque que, dans la quatrième scène du seconde acte, il n'y pas un mot qui ne soit vrai. Elle m'a désolé dans le salon, et j'ai pris un plaisir infini à la lire. Le beau tableau, car c'en est un, ce me semble, que le malheureux Clairville, renversé sur le sein de son ami, comme dans le seul asile qui lui reste...

[...]

Je me souviens que, tandis qu'il exhalait sa plainte et sa douleur, vous versiez des larmes sur lui. Ce ne sont pas là de ces circonstances qui s'oublent.

DORVAL. – Convenez que ce tableau n'aurait point eu lieu sur la scène ; que les deux amis n'auraient osé se regarder en face, tourner le dos au spectateur, se grouper, se séparer, se rejoindre ; et que toute leur action aurait été bien compassée, bien empesée, bien maniérée, et bien froide. (*Entretiens*, 79)

Diderot, playing the part of both spectator and reader, admires the naturalness with which the two men perform their silent emotional exchange. He emphasizes that what makes this scene unforgettable and meaningful are the inarticulate sounds and the actors' manner of placing and moving their bodies. Consequently, the realistic placement of the actors' bodies is more important than conventional acting rules, one of which Dorval alludes to and criticizes here: an actor must always face the audience so that he is heard and his facial expressions are seen by all of the spectators. Diderot revisits this issue in his reply to Madame Riccoboni's letter in which she criticizes his second play, *Le Père de famille*.⁵ He argues that if an actor's performance must be dictated by the physical limitations of the theater, then it is the building that must change to suit the actor's needs. He suggests that stages be constructed similar to the Shakespearean

⁵ Madame Riccoboni argued that actors must face the parterre for two reasons: first, in order to be heard by more than a quarter of the audience; and second, so that their facial expressions would be lit by the stage lights and visible to the audience, as well ("Lettre de Madame Riccoboni à Diderot." In *Œuvres complètes de Diderot*. Eds. Dieckmann, Herbert, Jacques Proust and Jean Varloot. Vol. 10. Paris: Hermann, 1980. 434-436. Print).

theatre-in-the-round where actors are not inhibited by sightlines.⁶ Diderot imagines how he can liberate the actors' movements from the physical limitations of traditional acting and theater stages in order to preserve the naturalness of the actors' gestures.

Recognizable gestures are understandably the foundation of Diderot's *tableaux*. Moi and Dorval further discuss their implications for the new intermediate genre throughout the *Second Entretien*, using the term pantomime to refer to the gestural mode of acting they favor. At the time, the word pantomime referred to a specific theatrical genre, which had been popularized earlier in the century at the Comédie Italienne, as well as at the bi-annual outdoor fairs in cities such as Paris and the smaller theaters along the Boulevard du Temple.⁷ Diderot appropriates the gestural acting style from this genre for his own purposes, but disassociates it from the popular theaters of his own day in order to harken further back to the Roman and Greek forms. In place of the simple actions or primitive passions that these ancient forms of pantomime expressed, Diderot considers theatrical gestures capable of successfully conveying thought and complex emotions to the spectator with little or no verbal explanation.⁸ Pierre Frantz rightly equates the emphasis Diderot places in his theory of the *drame* on the representational value of an actor's movements and facial expression with the concept of the poetic *hiéroglyphe* that Diderot puts forth in his *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* (1751) while exploring the power of gesture as a primitive visual language, and the emblematic nature of poetry, music and the arts in general.⁹

⁶ "Lettre à Madame Riccoboni." In *Œuvres complètes de Diderot*, op. cit., 437-451. See p. 439-440.

⁷ See Goodden, Angelica. *Actio and Persuasion: Dramatic Performance in Eighteenth-Century France*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986. Print. Chapter 4: Pantomime Performances. pp. 94-111; and Hemmings, F.W.J. *Theatre and State in France 1760-1905*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Print. Chapter 2: The rise of the commercial theatre. pp. 25-43.

⁸ See Dieckmann, Herbert. "Le thème de l'acteur dans la pensée de Diderot." *Cahiers de l'Association internationale des études françaises* 13 (1961): 157-172. Web. Persee 6 Aug. 2012.; and Mortier, Roland. "Diderot et la fonction du geste." *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie* 23.1 (1997): 79-87. Print.

⁹ Frantz, Pierre. *L'esthétique du tableau dans le théâtre du XVIII^e siècle*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998. Print. Perspectives Littéraires. 27-29; and Diderot, Denis. *Lettre sur les sourds et muets Lettre sur les sourds*

Frantz explains that Diderot applies this notion of a poetic sign as a rhetorical device that conveys “ce qui dans la langue semble échapper à la langue, ce qui du sens ne fait pas discours, ce qu’on ne peut traduire et qui, pourtant fait signe” (28). Furthermore, Sophia Rosenfeld contextualizes Diderot’s *Lettre* in the mid-eighteenth century polemic over the origins of language, and she maintains that though he shared a common purpose with the Abbé Etienne Bonnot de Condillac—to find a “univocal, immediately intelligible, and truly representative language”—Diderot was primarily concerned with finding an aesthetic answer to the debate.¹⁰ Rosenfeld contends that Diderot’s anecdotes and hypothetical examples all illustrate his preoccupation with a “gestural sublime” (48), the verbally inexpressible notions that his *hiéroglyphes* are meant to visually translate. In the context of Diderot’s reimagined theater, the placement and movement of the actors’ bodies are therefore emblematic: they serve as the basis for this “representative language” that expresses the unspoken emotional interaction between the characters. The theoretical implications of such a body language are that any spectator should be able to recognize and appreciate the emotions played out on the stage. One example of Diderot’s practical application of this type of body language can be found in Act II scene 1 of *Le Fils naturel* where a tearful Rosalie admits to her confidante Justine that she no longer loves her fiancé, Clairville and has fallen in love with his friend, Dorval. Within a paragraph-length stage direction, Diderot instructs the actress playing Rosalie to busy herself by working on a *tapisserie*, but she must also appear overcome with sadness: “*Rosalie n’interrompt son ouvrage que pour essuyer des larmes qui tombent de ses yeux. Elle le reprend ensuite*” (II, 1, 56-57). The combined

et les muets. 1751. Ed. Meyer, P.H.. Genève: Droz, 1965. ARTFL Web. 25 Aug. 2012. See in particular, pp. 70 and 81.

¹⁰ Rosenfeld, Sophia. *A Revolution in Language: The Problem of Signs in Late Eighteenth-Century France*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001. Print. p. 48. Rosenfeld discusses Diderot’s text in relationship to the Abbé Etienne Bonnot de Condillac’s *Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines* (1744) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755).

movements—keeping her hands busy and then interrupting that work to wipe away her tears—together externalize Rosalie’s internal emotional struggle. The act of wiping away the tears is a gesture that not only conveys her sadness to the audience but also her desire to hide it from others, specifically Dorval whose arrival at the end of the scene prompts Rosalie to regain her composure (58). As this moment demonstrates, Diderot’s gestures are not representative of one emotion alone; they seek to convey the natural complexity of human emotions where the passions are not felt in one pure form. Rosalie’s gesture simultaneously illustrates her sadness and shame, as well as the causal relationship between these two passions.¹¹ The audience, as a result of her gestural performance, ideally comprehends her moral struggle and shares in her tears.

Along with this universal language of gestures, Diderot calls for a theater that places these intense emotions in settings that will be consistently identifiable for contemporary audiences: hearth and home. He rejects characters that represent comedic types or distant tragic monarchs in favor of those who are able to represent common *conditions*, namely those found in a bourgeois family, which he saw as the “natural” condition of the public he sought to reach.¹² In the *Troisième Entretien*, Dorval explains why the comedic type is not a sufficiently compelling point of reference for the audience,

¹¹ Diderot’s typology of the passions within his first play is characteristic of a Cartesian approach where admiration (or wonder) is the primary passion from which all others are derived. The emotional interactions between his characters all stem from their shared admiration for the main character, Dorval’s virtue. In this example, Rosalie’s sadness and shame are a result of her initial admiration and subsequent love for Dorval. I discuss Diderot’s typology of the passions in greater length in the second chapter of my forthcoming dissertation, *Interpreting the Theatrical Body and Its Familial Ties in Denis Diderot’s Social Drama*.

¹² See Hale, Jane. “Le drame bourgeois et ses espaces,” op. cit. Hale explores how the bourgeois dramatists, in particular Diderot, sought to translate the morals within the private bourgeois family space to the larger public theater space; See also Cohen, Sarah R. *Art, Dance, and the Body in the French Culture of the Ancien Régime*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Print. Cohen discusses Diderot’s gendered approach to ‘natural’ expression (especially as it applies to ballet and painting), and his tendency to equate social performance or artifice with the female body (254-257).

Jusqu'à présent, dans la comédie, le caractère a été l'objet principal, et la condition n'a été que l'accessoire. C'est du caractère qu'on tirait toute l'intrigue. On cherchait en général les circonstances qui le faisaient sortir, et l'on enchaînait ces circonstances. C'est la condition, ses devoirs, ses avantages, ses embarras, qui doivent servir de base à l'ouvrage. [...] Pour peu que le caractère fût chargé, un spectateur pouvait se dire à lui-même, ce n'est pas moi. Mais il ne peut se cacher que l'état qu'on joue devant lui ne soit le sien ; il ne peut méconnaître ses devoirs. Il faut absolument qu'il s'applique ce qu'il entend. (135)

Drawing the audience's attention away from the specificity of character traits, Dorval and Moi focus their attention on familiar *milieux* and circumstances with which spectators will be able to identify: Moi lists various professions, to which Dorval adds different family relationships. As Peter Szondi notes, it is obvious "that what ultimately interests him [Diderot] is not *les conditions* as a whole—not, for example the full gamut of professions and their social context—but rather the particular condition which makes a family bourgeois"¹³—namely, a concerned father. Diderot chooses such a specific context in order to convey strong family morals to the masses: "Le père de famille! Quel sujet, dans un siècle tel que le nôtre, où il ne paraît pas qu'on ait le moindre idée de ce que c'est qu'un père de famille!" (*Entretiens*, 136). The patriarchal figure becomes the idealized image of social responsibility. Not only does the father exemplify the values Diderot wants to instill in his spectators, but it is also a recognizably natural male *condition*.¹⁴ In an effort to reach a broader audience (which here is understandably male), Diderot imagines a *condition* that will also be universally approachable: the greatest pleasures and pains experienced between a father and his children. Diderot's patriarch is consequently an allegorical figure whose presence on stage embodies recognizable emotions and moral behavior.

¹³ Szondi, Peter. "Tableau and Coup de Théâtre: On the Social Psychology of Diderot's Bourgeois Tragedy." Trans. Harvey Mendelsohn. *New Literary History* 11.2 (Winter 1980): 323-343. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Aug. 2012. pp. 329-330.

¹⁴ Sarah Cohen highlights Diderot's consistent use of male examples in his *Essai sur la peinture* (1766) and she argues that this "implies a particular urgency to suppress artifice on the part of his own sex," and as she further explains "Men who colored their behavior with the artful trappings and dissimulations of civil society were thought to be denying the natural truth of their masculinity" (256). If we relate this to where Dorval mentions in the *Entretiens* that to be a father is the "vocation générale de tous les hommes" (154), then it is also a man's natural *condition*.

Lysimond, as an example of the allegorical figure in *Le Fils naturel*, swiftly extinguishes any threat of incest by his presence alone, when Rosalie and Dorval both recognize him as their father in the last scene of the play. What is more, the stage directions indicate that “*le vieillard tient ses bras étendus vers ses enfants, qu’il regardent alternativement, et qu’il invite à se reconnaître*” (V, 5, 101). Lysimond, as the ideal father, guides his children toward a moral choice through his gestures; he extends both of his arms and as he looks towards both children, he unites them as brother and sister. This combination of movements becomes a theatrical *hiéroglyphe* for Lysimond’s natural role as the family patriarch (even though he does not appear on stage until this scene).

Much of Diderot’s dramatic aesthetic is built upon this notion of gestural *hiéroglyphes* and the patriarchal allegory he espoused. Gesture and family do not function separately in Diderot’s *drame*; rather, they are two interdependent parts of his larger vision of the process of audience identification. Both reflect his desire to use the *drame* to speak directly to spectators’ hearts and move them to tears, thereby emotionally absorbing them into the fictional family’s daily life. He guides the spectator’s attention to the intense emotions acted out on stage by contextualizing them in an emotionally charged family *tableau*, and by making them visibly legible on the actors’ bodies through gestures. In implicit recognition of the fad of crying at the theater, Diderot seeks to accelerate the process of audience identification by designing a mode of theater that serves a larger sociable purpose grounded in family values. If his spectators’ are able to comprehend his gestural *hiéroglyphes*, and recognize how they express the emotional relationships between the family members, then they will leave the theater tearful and also reminded of their own individual social responsibility towards one another. The last scenes in both *Le Fils* and *Le Père*, for instance, leave the audience with a final *tableau* of the reconciled

family who have overcome their crises by virtue of their mutual sympathy. If the audience members are emotionally invested in these families' struggles, then they too participate in this resolution through their tears and are theoretically more willing to treat one another with the same sympathy outside of the theater.

Similar to Diderot's *Entretiens*, Beaumarchais' *Essai sur le drame sérieux* is an apologia for the *drame* as well as his own play *Eugénie*, published with the *Essai* as its preface in 1767.¹⁵ In contrast to the fictional world and dialogic style in which Diderot writes, Beaumarchais' *Essai* directly confronts his critics' accusations. He cites a long passage in which his anonymous critic questions how the lackluster and novelistic style of the *drame* can hold the spectators' interest, and moreover how writing in prose rather than verse will not be the downfall of the theater. Beaumarchais attempts to disprove these accusations through his interpretation of Diderot's dramatic theories.¹⁶ Though he cites Diderot's *Père de famille* as the work that he seeks to emulate (iii), the techniques that he mentions throughout the text draw a closer connection to the *Entretiens*: specifically, avoiding character types and distracting plot twists. What he draws from these dramatic principles is that the sequence of events in his play must appear natural and plausible as they culminate in what Pierre Frantz refers to as the *tableau-comble*. Frantz argues that according to Diderot's process, "Le mouvement profond d['une] pièce consistera donc à grouper petit à petit les énergies des tableaux-stases, à en augmenter l'intensité, puis à les empoigner et à poindre le spectateur," which leads to the *tableau-comble* or *tableau-climax*

¹⁵ Beaumarchais, Pierre-Augustin Caron de. *Eugénie, Drame En cinq Actes en Prose, Enrichi de figures en taille-douce ; avec Un Essai sur le drame sérieux*. Paris, 1767. Web. Google Book Search, 7 Aug. 2012. All further references to Beaumarchais' *Eugénie* and *Essai* will be to this edition.

¹⁶ For a thorough account of Beaumarchais' debt to Diderot's theories, see Hayes. Julie C. "Rewriting Bourgeois Drama: Beaumarchais's *double plan*." In *L'Age du Théâtre en France/The Age of Theatre in France*. Eds. Trott, David and Nicole Boursier. Edmonton: Academic Printing & Pub., 1988. 41-51. Print.

where “l’ensemble des personnages [sont organisés] autour d’une pantomime centrale, souvent silencieuse, qui manifeste un comble du pathétique ou un comble du sublime” (168). In the case of Beaumarchais’ play, the final scene where Eugénie is surrounded by her family and must decide whether or not to forgive her lover, Le Comte de Clarendon, who had previously rejected her, is the climactic end to a series of expository *tableaux-stases* depicting her growing suffering (V, 9).

Beaumarchais aims to move the audience through a gradual build-up of negative emotional tension that reaches a climax in this last scene. He foreshadows this *tableau-comble* for his spectators by casting a virtuous and strong main character, Eugénie, who is surrounded by people whose personalities and actions collectively work to bring about her undeserved suffering:

Le sujet de mon Drame est le désespoir où l’imprudence et la méchanceté d’autrui, peuvent conduire une jeune personne innocente et vertueuse, dans l’acte le plus important de la vie humaine. J’ai chargé ce tableau d’incidents qui pouvaient encore en augmenter l’intérêt. [...] J’ai donné à tous mes personnages des caractères, non pris au hasard, ni propres à contraster ensemble (ce moyen, comme l’a très-bien prouvé M. Diderot, est petit, peu vrai, et convient tout au plus à la Comédie gaie) ; mais je les ai choisis tels, qu’ils concourussent de la manière la plus naturelle à renforcer l’intérêt principal qui porte sur Eugénie... (xxxiii-xxxiv)

In keeping with Diderot’s advice, Beaumarchais develops his characters based upon the distressing situation in which he places them. He casts characters whose negative actions and emotions—their “imprudence” and “méchanceté”—will gradually intensify Eugénie’s “désespoir,” which ultimately encourages the spectators to sympathize with her emotional experience because of her innocence and virtue.

Furthermore, Beaumarchais places his characters in a family setting similar to Diderot, but this family is no longer an allegory for social responsibility and sympathy. They are instead the collective antagonist and counterexample for the audience. Beaumarchais describes Le

Comte de Clarendon as “emporté par l’ambition” (*Essai*, xxxv); Le Baron Hartley, Eugénie’s father is a “bon père, mais homme violent (xxxvi)” who is quick to seek vengeance; her aunt, Madame Murer is “fière, despotique,” and “imprudente” (xxxvii); and lastly, Sir Charles, her brother, perhaps the least antagonistic of them all, is forced to be “ingrat envers son bienfaiteur,” le Comte who saved his life, when he discovers that the latter has rejected and humiliated his sister (xxxvii-xxxviii). It is through the ensemble of negative interactions between these characters, where all those surrounding Eugénie “ne fasse pas un pas, ne dise pas un mot qui n’aggrave le malheur dont [il veut] l’accabler” (xxxv), that Beaumarchais persuades his audience of the severity of Eugénie’s suffering and the difficulty of her choice in the last scene. Her family is not an example of altruistic sympathy whose moral behavior brings about her happiness. Inciting intense emotions on stage is therefore more important for Beaumarchais’ version of audience identification than providing a model sympathetic group.

Beaumarchais also stresses that this build-up of emotions should be obvious and appear natural to the audience as the play progresses because of “l’attention scrupuleuse” that he took, “d’instruire le spectateur de l’état respectif et des desseins de tous les personnages” (xxxviii). He is concerned with avoiding elaborate surprises that will distract the audience’s attention from the underlying purpose behind each moment in the play—exacerbating Eugénie’s pain. Each line is carefully chosen so as to preserve the simplicity and naturalness of the course of events—making them, in Beaumarchais’ opinion, more approachable and moving to the audience. He claims to have already witnessed his spectators’ heartfelt reactions which prove his point:

L’on doit surtout remarquer que les morceaux qui ont déchiré l’âme dans cette Pièce, ne sont ni des phrases plus fortes, ni des choses imprévues ; ils n’offrent que l’expression simple et vraie de la nature, à l’instant d’une crise d’autant plus pénible pour le spectateur qu’il l’a vue se former lentement sous ses yeux, et par des moyens communs et faibles en apparence. (xl)

What he perceives to be intensely moving for his audience, that which “déchir[e] l’âme,” is thus not a shocking turn of events but the minute details in the crisis which together slowly become more and more frustrating to watch. Beaumarchais’ spectator comprehends the lack of morality in this family’s actions because they find the slow escalation of Eugénie’s suffering “pénible.” As a result, they are emotionally invested or interested in Eugénie’s situation and share in her excessive pain and suspicion of Le Comte’s apology in the final scene.

Beaumarchais’ play in its entirety is the quintessential example of Frantz’ series of *tableaux-stases* that contribute to the final *tableau-comble*. He attempts to gradually draw his spectators into his character’s distressing situation, so that he might present them with the overall “tableau du malheur d’un honnête homme” (here an honnête femme), which will “frappe au cœur [du spectateur], l’ouvre doucement, s’en empire, et le force bientôt à s’examiner soi-même” (xix). The heightened emotional experience he wants his spectators to participate in thus has a moral purpose: their sympathy for Eugénie and disgust over the way she is treated forces spectators to re-evaluate their own behavior. In all, Beaumarchais builds upon Diderot’s theory of situational drama and reconfigures it so that the spectator’s emotional reaction is less dependent upon the actors’ performance and more on how he, as the playwright, writes a plausible yet provocative sequence of events.

Written in a vastly different style than Diderot and Beaumarchais’ texts, Mercier’s *Du théâtre, ou Nouvel essai sur l’art dramatique* is not a companion piece to a play. In a 29 chapter-long treatise, he denounces Comedy and Tragedy, arguing for the practicality of the *drame*. Given that Mercier is not defending his own work, he does not offer succinct examples of how he applies his methods in his own plays, as do Diderot and Beaumarchais. Instead, the purpose

behind Mercier's primarily philosophical text is, as he tells his brother at the end of the *Épître dédicatoire*, "recommander à tout jeune homme qui se sentira quelque génie pour la composition, à jeter préalablement au feu toutes les *poétiques*, à commencer par celle-ci."¹⁷

Mercier's text is therefore also a primer for aspiring playwrights. Even though in this moment, he may seem to unilaterally throw out all previous theories, he does still reference Diderot, along with other authors' *poétiques* that he deems worthy for his pupil throughout the text. Mercier above all adheres to Diderot's theory of common *conditions* that are familiar to an audience. He aims to create a theater that is fully relevant to its contemporary spectators.¹⁸

In the same way that Beaumarchais never mentions gestural acting in his *Essai*, Mercier's version of the *drame* either politely ignores or at worst rejects Diderot's pantomime as a potential universal language for this relevant theater. Angelica Goodden maintains that Mercier in fact does not value pantomime in the same way as Diderot because he does not believe that it "required men to exercise their interpretative faculty, and that the visible presented itself too unequivocally for such interpretation to be possible."¹⁹ Nonetheless, Mercier like Beaumarchais also refers to theater as a *tableau* but states at the beginning of his introduction that it serves a precise function:

Le spectacle est un mensonge; il s'agit de le rapprocher de la plus grande vérité: le spectacle est un tableau; il s'agit de rendre ce tableau utile, c'est-à-dire de le mettre à la portée du plus grand nombre, afin que l'image qu'il présentera serve à lier entr'eux les hommes par le sentiment victorieux de la compassion et de la pitié. (1)

Mercier's *drame* is thus still characterized by this metaphorical *tableau* but only to the point that the dramatic illusion is not recognizable as such to the spectator; it should appear true rather than

¹⁷ Mercier, Louis-Sébastien. *Du théâtre, ou Nouvel essai sur l'art dramatique*. Amsterdam, 1773. Web. *Google Book Search*, 2 Aug. 2012. p. xiv. All further references to Mercier's *Du théâtre* will be to this edition.

¹⁸ For further information on Mercier's political appropriation of Diderot's dramatic theories, see Hayes, Julie C. "Changing the System: Mercier's Ideological Appropriation of Diderot". op. cit.

¹⁹ Goodden, p. 4. Goodden paraphrases Mercier's opinion of pantomime which he published at various times in the *Journal de Paris* (1797).

artificial. Verisimilitude is still essential to the illusion Mercier wants the *drame* to portray; however, it is based on subjects that will be universally identifiable to the audience—what Joseph Harris labels as “general, essential qualities of humanity” (63). In the eighth chapter, *Du Drame*, directly addressing his readers as aspiring playwrights, Mercier exclaims, “Je suis homme, puis-je crier au poète dramatique! montrez-moi ce que je suis, développez à mes yeux mes propres facultés” (95). Mercier wants the playwright to capture the essence of current spectators and not unapproachable monarchs or comedic types. He later uses Greek Tragedy as an example of theater that placed its contemporaries on the stage, and he wonders why current tragic playwrights should not do the same, why they should not glorify the “homme obscur” with his crises that are more immediate to current theatergoers (102-103). If we consider these words along with what he explains are the validating characteristics of an aspiring playwright in his second to last chapter, there is no doubt that Mercier’s illusion is based on the everyday, what a playwright observes taking place around him. He addresses his pupil directly with the informal *tu* and lists a series of actions that should come naturally and therefore validate his pupil’s chosen vocation:

si dans la société tu examines chaque caractere, si les nuances te frappent, si ne perdant pas de vue les ressorts primitifs de leurs passions, tu observes parmi les hommes une différence étonnante, si tu sais bien distinguer le vice du ridicule, rire de l’un, être indigné de l’autre; si ce qui est muet & inanimé pour le vulgaire te parle éloquemment: voilà des signes évident de ta vocation. (319-320)

Mercier’s talented playwright draws inspiration from what he sees in his contemporaries, and he is able to translate this into their “essential qualities.” His playwright recognizes the slight nuances in the emotional interactions taking place around him. Mercier thus encourages his playwright to craft scenes that are based on the lives of his audience, consequently making the

play “plus à la portée de la foule des citoyens” (94) and giving the playwright’s vocation the social and moral mission of unifying all citizens.

At the end of chapter eight, Mercier then pinpoints the setting that he perceives to be the emotional epicenter of his audience’s daily lives—the inside of the family home. He assigns the playwright the new role of historiographer, who will not only present the audience with a realistic image of their own lives but also record it for posterity. In opposition to Corneille, Racine, Voltaire and Molière’s plays, Mercier sees the *drame* as an opportunity for playwrights to convey to future generations what society was at that moment in time, including what constituted its values, private lives, government, and more. He explains this in the context of a body metaphor where he describes the domestic space as the bowels of a nation. “Découvrirait-on le tableau de nos mœurs actuelles, l’intérieur de nos maisons, cet intérieur, est à un empire ce que les entrailles sont au corps humain?” (103). Taking into consideration that parts of the body such as “le diaphragme” and “les entrailles” were also a literal and figurative reference to where a person’s *sensibilité* originated,²⁰ the emotions associated with private family life thus become a theatrical synecdoche for those at the broader national level. Mercier clarifies for what purpose Diderot’s patriarchal allegory is a universal identifier for spectators. As spectators collectively recognize their daily private struggles in what they see on stage, it reaffirms their participation in the values of a national society.

²⁰ In Diderot’s *Éléments de physiologie*, he claims that the diaphragm is “le siège de toutes nos peines, et de tous nos plaisirs,” and he further explains, “Sa liaison, sa sympathie avec le cerveau. C’est la différence du diaphragme qui fait les âmes pusillanimes et les âmes fortes: on ne sait pas encore comment on lui donne du ton; l’âge seul a quelque empire sur cette membrane: la tête fait les hommes sages, la diaphragme les hommes compatissans, et moraux” (Diderot, Denis. *Éléments de physiologie*. 1784. Ed. Mayer, J. Paris: Didier, 1964. Web. ARTFL. 27 Aug. 2012. p.138); See also, “Entrailles.” Entry 5. *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*. 4th ed. 1762. Web. ARTFL. 27 Aug. 2012.

Building on Diderot's allegory for common *conditions* and sociable family values, Mercier's aesthetic relies heavily on what is culturally relevant to his particular audience. Rather than communicating emotions through gestural acting, he uses the immediacy of contemporary families. Family is not only the universal identifier in Mercier's aesthetic, it is also a metaphor for the morals he hopes to instill in his spectators. As Harris notes, the fraternal relationship that Mercier describes in his *Épître dédicatoire* is exemplary of the sympathetic "intersubjective state" he hopes the *drame* will bring about in society (56). Furthermore, Julie C. Hayes explains this phenomenon as Mercier's attempt to reorganize "public life [...] under the familial model of equality, intimacy, and exchanges based on trust" (*Changing the System*, 349). By showing spectators how a mutually sympathetic family behaves, and placing the emotional struggles in a context that is applicable to their own experiences, Mercier creates his socially useful *tableau* that reengages his spectator in society and records the egalitarian sense of morality in late eighteenth-century France.

The intense emotions associated with daily family life are what Diderot, Beaumarchais, and Mercier all find to be a morally unifying and essential aspect of humanity. Diderot seeks to communicate this to his audience by inscribing his characters' emotional experiences on their bodies. Beaumarchais, on the other hand, takes these same emotions and places them into a family whose situation becomes increasingly difficult; and Mercier, explores how these emotions occur within a family whose trials mirror the spectators' own daily lives. Each method reflects a desire to control and sustain the illusion of what is *naturel* or *de la plus grande vérité* in these intense emotions. To achieve such an outcome, all three authors observe and reduce what they see in society to a pleasing and persuasive image of emotions. Diderot's legacy, for

Beaumarchais, and Mercier, is thus the ability to create a space on stage in which these emotions are identifiable and approachable to the spectators; plays which, like Beaumarchais' first act in *Eugénie*, "nous incorpore à cette malheureuse famille, et nous fait prendre, sans nous en apercevoir, un rôle d'ami dans la Pièce" (*Essai*, 48-49). Whether or not these processes succeed in reforming society is a question that Diderot posed in his later works. In clear contrast to his declaration in *De la poésie dramatique*, where the theater is a place in which spectators are reminded of their shared humanity (168-169), in Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, theater may no longer be the powerfully edifying force he once envisioned. His first of two interlocutors reasons that society is too corrupted to benefit from a model sympathetic group:

Le citoyen qui se présente à l'entrée de la Comédie y laisse tous ses vices pour ne les reprendre qu'en sortant. Là il est juste, impartial, bon père, bon ami, ami de la vertu; et j'ai vu souvent à côté de moi des méchants profondément indignés contre des actions qu'ils n'auraient pas manqué de commettre s'ils s'étaient trouvés dans les mêmes circonstances où le poète avait placé le personnage qu'ils abhorraient. (318-319)

Similar to how Jean-Jacques Rousseau refutes the theater's ability to change a spectator's preexisting morals,²¹ Diderot questions whether his new theater-going experience has any lasting moral effect upon his spectator. No matter the outcome, Diderot's aesthetic and family-oriented approach to audience identification had a lasting effect upon the way in which future playwrights formulated their own dramatic processes to engage spectators.

²¹ See Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Lettre à Monsieur d'Alembert sur les spectacles*. 1758. Ed. Fuchs, M. Lille: Giard, 1948. Web. ARTFL. 9 Sep. 2012.