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## IMPROVISING VIRTUE: PERFORMATIVE MORALITY IN MOISSY'S *THÉÂTRE D'ÉDUCATION*

PENNY BROWN

### *Abstract*

In *Les Jeux de la petite Thalie, ou petits drames, dialogués sur des proverbes* (1769), Alexandre-Guillaume Mouslier de Moissy appropriated the *proverbe dramatique*, a popular pastime in eighteenth-century drawing-rooms, for pedagogical use with the young. This was the first volume in an ambitious three-volume work offering short dramatic pieces for all the different stages in life. Far less well known than the later *théâtre d'éducation* of Mme de Genlis and Berquin, Moissy's project of moral instruction through performance in *Les Jeux de la petite Thalie* was typical of the genre in its portrayal of character flaws and transgressive behaviour, but it was also innovative in that it offered the participants opportunities for improvisation, albeit well-controlled, marked by 'Impromptu' passages in the text. Moissy's recommendation was that the young 'actors' should be chosen for their resemblance to the role, so that they were playing themselves in scenarios that ultimately forced them to recognize and acknowledge their faults. This paper draws on modern theories of improvisation in drama to assess Moissy's implementation of his didactic agenda and the implications of involvement for the young participants in performances that were, in effect, rehearsals for their future in society in which the correct fulfilment of their role and the ability to improvise in word and deed from a basic moral script would be essential skills.

Of all groups of readers, the most impressionable and vulnerable to textual seduction and indoctrination are, arguably, the very young, whether as readers themselves or when being read to, or in the company of adults. John Locke's argument in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) that the child was a 'tabula rasa' on which social and moral values had to be imprinted had immense influence on the ideas of both English and French educationalists in the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> His equally influential contemporary Fénelon, tutor to the duc de Bourgogne and author of *De l'éducation des filles* (1687), shared the view that the educational process was vital in shaping the intellectual and moral development of the individual and hence of influencing the transformation of society. The evolution of children's literature in France is therefore, unsurprisingly, characterized by a didactic impulse that recognized the value of the suggestibility of the young and exploited the written word both to educate and to inculcate

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<sup>1</sup> Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) was translated into French by P. Coste in 1695 and reprinted several times over the next hundred years.

social, moral and religious ideas, which would perpetuate and ensure acquiescence to the prevailing dominant culture.

It has been estimated that there were some 180 books, plans and projects on the subject of education published in the course of the eighteenth century as well as numerous articles and reviews.<sup>2</sup> Among the most significant was Charles Rollin's *Traité des études (De la manière d'enseigner et d'étudier les belles lettres par rapport à l'esprit et au cœur)* (1726–28), the ideas and language of which were to influence the way books written for children presented themselves in order to validate their work as part of a pedagogical enterprise. The aim of education, Rollin argues, is a dual one, encompassing moral as well as intellectual instruction: 'elle s'applique à rectifier et à régler leur cœur par des principes d'honneur et de probité, pour en faire de bons citoyens'.<sup>3</sup> The primary duty of a teacher is to inspire a love of learning, but, Rollin adds, 'le but des maîtres, encore plus que cela, est de former l'esprit et le cœur', an expression that was to become a *leitmotif* in the titles of many subsequent books for children to stress the fundamental dualism of their approach.<sup>4</sup> The issues involved in the debate about education throughout the century were complex and diverse and have been well documented elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> The crucial issue to note here is that the traditional emphasis on a morality derived from religious faith was, by the middle of the century, and especially after the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1762, changing to a new social morality which aimed at the happiness and usefulness of the individual in the context of the interests of the common good. Theorists began to stress the importance of civic virtues and patriotism and the relationship between intellectual, moral and social education for the young.<sup>6</sup> The twin concepts of reason and virtue not only dominated educational treatises in the second half of the century, but were to inform the newly emerging genre of children's literature too. In the years following the publication of Rousseau's *Émile; ou, de l'éducation* (1762), the validity of his view that young children should be educated in isolation from society and of the privileging of a domestic over a public education was hotly contested by many who felt that children should develop their moral sense within the social context from

<sup>2</sup> James A. Leith, 'Introduction: Unity and Diversity in Education in the Eighteenth Century', *Facets of Education in the Eighteenth Century (Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, 167)* (Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1977), p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Traité des études (De la manière d'enseigner et d'étudier les belles lettres par rapport à l'esprit et au cœur)* (Paris, Estienne, 1775), p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> *Traité des études*, p. 358.

<sup>5</sup> See Jean Bloch, *Rousseauism and Education in Eighteenth-Century France (Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, 325)* (Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1995); Marcel Grandière, *L'Idéal pédagogique en France au dix-huitième siècle (Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, 361)* (Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> See Marisa Linton, *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2001) for an analysis of the notion of political virtue.

the start.<sup>7</sup> This, in brief, was the climate of ideas that writers attempted to negotiate in their books aimed at instructing and entertaining the young.

A significant trend in the appropriation of different literary genres for young readers (fairy tales, fables, novels of letters, dialogues) was the burgeoning of interest in the second half of the eighteenth century in the educational potential of drama. Paradoxically, the same period saw a renewal of the debate about the morality of theatre generated by Rousseau's denunciation in his *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles* (1758). This was a significant work because it marked the move of the quarrel from the traditional religious arena to a secular one in which arguments about the moral benefits or dangers of theatre would be grounded in a more personal and social context.<sup>8</sup> The development of *théâtre d'éducation* was in some respects an extension of the use of the dialogue method favoured in contemporary pedagogical texts, but it was also connected with *théâtre de société*; the concept of dramatic performance had, for many decades, no longer been restricted to the realms of scholastic exercise or courtly and salon entertainment, but had become a popular pastime in aristocratic and bourgeois households.<sup>9</sup> The writers of plays for children, like Mme de Genlis and Berquin, saw the dramatization of moral precepts as a dynamic pedagogical tool for the socialization of the young and focused on situations and dilemmas relating to everyday life that would instil the values deemed essential for both individual growth and future social responsibility. There were also, as Mme de Maintenon had been aware in her experimentation with dramatic activities at Saint-Cyr in the late seventeenth century, significant personal benefits to be derived therefrom, and writers frequently stressed in their prefaces the transferable skills, so important to those who would play a prominent role in society in adulthood, of confidence in speaking in public, improved pronunciation and articulation, the training of memory, the overcoming of self-consciousness, and increased assurance in physical bearing and interaction with others.

One type of theatrical activity, pioneered by Mme de Maintenon in an educational context at Saint-Cyr and reappropriated for didactic purposes in the eighteenth century from the *théâtre de société*, was the dramatized proverb.<sup>10</sup> A popular activity for decades in the drawing rooms of polite

<sup>7</sup> See Bloch, *Rousseauism and Education in Eighteenth-Century France* for a full discussion of the different views.

<sup>8</sup> J. H. Davis, *The Happy Island: Images of Childhood in Eighteenth Century Théâtre d'Éducation* (New York — Berne, Peter Lang, 1987), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> C. D. Brenner, *Le Développement du proverbe dramatique en France et sa vogue au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, in *University of California Publications in Modern Philology* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1937), vol. 20, no.1, pp. 1–56, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> See Brenner, *Le Développement du proverbe dramatique en France et sa vogue au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ch. 5; M.-E. Plagnol-Diéval, *Mme de Genlis et le théâtre d'éducation au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (*Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 350) (Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1997); Penny Brown, 'Rehearsing the Future: Mme de Maintenon's proverbs dramatiques for the demoiselles of Saint-Cyr', *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 26 (2004), 209–18.

society, the representation of proverbs in mime or dance, or improvised around a loosely scripted text, offered an amusing guessing-game and the light-hearted opportunity for social comment. The nature of such pieces, with their tightly knit, single strand plot, the thrust of which was geared towards an inscription of received wisdom and demanded the involvement of the spectators in decoding the significance of the performance, admirably suited a more serious pedagogical agenda.

An innovative and now little known exponent of the dramatized proverb was Alexandre-Guillaume Mouslier de Moissy (1712–1777), whose penchant for gambling ruined him financially on more than one occasion and forced him to earn a living as a tutor in Russia before embarking on a literary career at the age of thirty-eight. His theatrical works, which include pieces in the tradition of Italian comedy and bourgeois drama, span the years 1750 to 1771. In 1769, after the interest in pedagogical writing for children had been ignited by the publication of *Émile* (paradoxically, as Rousseau disapproved of children reading books before the age of twelve), Moissy embarked upon an ambitious project of didactic theatrical pieces based on proverbs, which were to encompass the whole of human experience. In these three volumes, *Les Jeux de la petite Thalie, ou Petits Drames, dialogués sur des proverbes (Propres à former les mœurs des Enfants et des jeunes Personnes, depuis l'âge de cinq ans jusqu'à vingt)* (1769), *L'École dramatique de l'homme, suite des Jeux de la petite Thalie, âge viril, depuis vingt ans jusqu'à cinquante ans* (1770) and *L'École dramatique de l'homme, suite des Jeux de la petite Thalie, dernier âge* (1770), he attempts to explore exhaustively the moral pitfalls of life from the cradle to the grave. The central characters in each group of plays represent the relevant stage in life and the plots exemplify dilemmas and conflicts he deems common to that age. The organization of the playlets in the first two volumes reflects the growing up process and the flaws in character and behaviour alter in seriousness accordingly. A consequence of this strategy is that the last volume, dedicated to late middle and old age, depicts characteristics and situations that are no longer remediable in the future and with which the characters must come to terms at the end of their lives.<sup>11</sup> For reasons of space, it is, however, with the plays in the first volume that this discussion is concerned.

Moissy was influenced to some extent by the philosophical debates of the time and introduces topics such as the privileging of the countryside over the city, the nature of education and the role of educators, and questions of personal and social responsibility as well as contemporary prejudices and preconceptions. He is concerned, however, with general morality rather than an overt engagement with political issues and is steadfastly on

<sup>11</sup> See Plagnol-Diéval, *Mme de Genlis et le théâtre d'éducation au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, for a comprehensive discussion of the three volumes of Moissy's plays.

the side of enlightened paternalism and social utility. In his 'Discours préliminaire', Moissy validates his enterprise by placing it within the contemporary debate on education, and makes it clear that his agenda has a secular orientation ('Il faut instruire les Enfants pour le Monde').<sup>12</sup> Following the prescriptions of Locke and Fénelon, his strategy is one of persuasion rather than coercion. He stresses that the most seductive and effective instruction is covert, encouraging and exploiting the young person's enjoyment of participation in the playlets in order to promote the attraction of the emulation of virtue and horror at the spectacle of vice: 'que ces tableaux diminuent dans leur cœur et dans leur esprit, la pente que l'humanité a pour le vice, et leur fasse trouver les vertus de chaque âge assez douces, assez nécessaires à la vie, pour que ces mêmes Enfants désirent de les pratiquer sans effort, et comme un moyen de tranquillité et de bonheur'.<sup>13</sup> The importance of the ludic aspect is clearly signalled in the use of the word 'jeux' in the title, coupled with the allusion to the Muse of Comedy, Thalia, as a child: 'Le grand Art est donc de les conduire à la Vertu, pour ainsi dire, par le chemin de la séduction, et qu'ils ne s'aperçoivent pas même qu'on ait voulu les séduire'.<sup>14</sup> The form and material presentation of the texts, however, makes evident the didactic agenda, identifying the moral import of each playlet in the titles with such expressions as 'bel exemple', 'correction honnête', or 'ruse utile'. The action and dialogue are always closely geared to the moral lesson of the relevant proverb, avoiding the digressions of subplots or extraneous characters. The proverb itself is overtly flagged in the closing speech by a formula such as 'Nous avons éprouvé tous deux que ...' or 'Je sens bien maintenant que ...', thus giving it axiomatic and authoritative status, and is articulated by one of the characters, either the transgressing or exemplary protagonist or authority figure. The placing of the punchline in a list of proverbs at the end of the volume also serves to permit the spectators to guess which proverb has been enacted. This didactic apparatus enables the volume to serve as a manual of moral education for the parent who is encouraged to participate in both the selection of pieces and the actual performances. In effect, the pedagogical import of the playlets applies to adults too, for they are obliged to perform a model, or sometimes, imperfect role along with their children and thus are instructed on how to handle or avoid an undesirable situation. This aspect clearly aligns Moissy's work with the view of many of his contemporaries that education was best carried out in the home by a parent, ideally, or a tutor.

<sup>12</sup> A.-G. Mouslier de Moissy, *Les Jeux de la petite Thalie, ou Petits Drames dialogués sur des proverbes* (Paris, Bailly, 1769), p. vi.

<sup>13</sup> *Les Jeux de la petite Thalie*, p. vi.

<sup>14</sup> *Les Jeux de la petite Thalie*, p. vi.

The twenty playlets in *Les Jeux de la Petite Thalie* are typical of the genre, exemplifying character flaws and transgressive behaviour of a socially or personally undesirable nature to be avoided (disrespect for authority, prejudice, anger, arrogance, cruelty, or greed, vanity, dissipation) and virtues (prudence, reason, kindness, charitableness) to be emulated. Those for younger children usually portray the child as a passive recipient of correction for a fault or misdemeanour administered by an adult authority figure, a situation that reflected in microcosm the requirement of obedience to accepted moral and social prescriptions deemed the essential key to personal happiness and successful social integration. An alternative, and arguably more effective, strategy is the depiction of situations in which the young protagonists are persuaded by experience to recognize their fault or resolve a dilemma, rather than merely being coerced into good behaviour. In such cases, the young person is seen to participate more proactively in their own development, and virtue becomes not so much an abstract lesson to be learned and parroted as a matter of self-knowledge and the exercise of the individual conscience. Such an approach, which has affinities to Rousseau's theories on the importance of example and experience, is based, of course, on a fundamentally optimistic view of the inherent goodness of children and the improveability of human nature, and an assumption that the individual will inevitably willingly embrace the desired moral transformation.

As in the literary dialogues and conversations, also favoured by contemporary pedagogues, the child reader or participant in most examples of *théâtre d'éducation* was still very much subject to the controlling voice of the adult author, in that they presented an image of the child consonant with adult views of a desirable model of maturation. The child 'actor' spoke lines written for her or him and was subject also to the control of the adult (schoolteacher, tutor or parent) in charge and responsible for the direction of the piece. The interest of Moissy's work lies in his innovative approach to performance. His plays were intended to be read or performed in a domestic context, the acting out of the consequences of unsociable behaviour arguably acquiring more potency in terms of generating self-awareness and an understanding of personal responsibility when located in the intimate environment of the home with family members and friends as participants. Crucial to his concept of performative morality is his intention that the 'actors' should belong to the age range depicted. Moreover, to further enhance the verisimilitude, he recommends specifically that the roles should be allocated appropriately according to the character traits needing to be rectified. The participant thus fulfils a multiple function as 'actor of a role' and 'spectator' who is encouraged to recognize in her or his real self the characteristics embodied in that role. In terms of performance, the participants would, then, to a certain extent be playing

themselves in a scenario that might be uncomfortably familiar, that they may already have experienced or that represented a possible future consequence of their behaviour. Such a recommendation is limited to the plays in the first volume, because in respect of the plays for adults it would, one imagines, have significantly militated against their popularity.

The most original aspect of the playlets in *Les Jeux de la petite Thalie* is the introduction of opportunities for improvisation on the part of the young participants. Moissy's text marks certain speeches with the word 'Impromptu', indicating that these passages are open to elaboration, and indicates in italics the line to which the speaker must return at the end in order to continue the dialogue. The child actor thus collaborates in the production of the text to some extent. As Viola Spolin, the doyenne of dramatic improvisation, remarks, 'there are few places outside play where children can contribute to the world in which they find themselves, a world dominated by adults who tell them what to do and when to do it' and such an opportunity through acting affords an opportunity for freedom, self-respect and responsibility.<sup>15</sup> This freedom is only partial in Moissy's plays, however, for the adults present are invited to exercise directorial control in ensuring that this works smoothly by reminding the children, 'quand ils auront assez fait agir leur petite Minerve', to return to the script.<sup>16</sup> The advantage of allowing the 'actors' to expatiate within limits on their motives or feelings is that they would learn the art of rational self-expression: 'au moyen de cette opération, qui ne sera regardé par les Enfants que comme un simple amusement, il se formera entre eux une vive émulation d'esprit; ils apprendront tout ensemble à agir, à parler, à penser, et à contenir dans des bornes convenables leurs actions, leurs idées et leurs discours'.<sup>17</sup> The speeches identified as 'Impromptu' fall into three categories: those in which the virtuous explain their feelings and motivation, those in which the transgressing characters exhibit their rebellious tendencies for which they are subsequently indicted, and those in which they acknowledge their error and accept correction, thus encouraging introspection and self-knowledge while allowing the young actor to have their say. The child is not just forced to repeat moral sentiment in lines learnt by heart, but encouraged to identify and articulate the reasons for renouncing their faults and endorsing the moral line, thus fostering the habits of confession and rationalization. The performance of recognition and atonement functions, moreover, as a public commitment to self-improvement before their family and friends as witnesses.

The pieces in which the players found themselves cast as the voluble perpetrators of misdeeds may, in one sense, have been a liberating experience in

<sup>15</sup> *Improvisation for the Theatre* (Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1999); p. 256.

<sup>16</sup> *Les Jeux de la petite Thalie*, p. ix.

<sup>17</sup> *Les Jeux de la petite Thalie*, p. ix.



allowing them to indulge vicariously in bad behaviour, but ultimately their lack of autonomy is reinforced as their responses are constrained by a script that has already been written. The intervention of an adult, as surrogate for the author, to get the script back on track, resumes control over self-expression and, in effect, over thought itself, as self-indulgence is quickly channelled into the more acceptable discourse of moral and social propriety. This is similar, in effect, to what Rousseau, in the context of the stage-managing of *Émile's* experience by his tutor, calls 'une liberté bien réglée'.<sup>18</sup> Significantly, the 'Impromptu' passages do not appear in scenes where no adult character is present. Whereas modern theories of improvisation in the theatre stress that the actor's own feelings are not an issue, so that they are freed from the fear of exposure in the act of 'showing', in Moissy's concept of performance the young actors were chosen for their resemblance to the part, brought face to face with their own flaws and encouraged to exhibit them in the public domain before being led to a recognition of the error of their ways.<sup>19</sup> Because the stage settings often replicated the home environment (and in fact, ideally, *were* the home environment and thus the site of similar real-life domestic conflicts), the lessons could readily be internalized. The props, furniture and costumes were perhaps their own and part of their everyday life. In this respect, the spectators were implicated too, as they might have been possible antagonists or accessories in analogous real-life scenarios involving the 'characters' they saw before them. Moissy's work thus anticipates to a certain extent modern theories on the value of theatrical improvisation in education, offering differing models of behaviour and allowing the young participants to play with what they have experienced and observed and thus make sense of themselves and the world within their social context.<sup>20</sup> The exercise has two mutually enriching benefits, in that the world outside the plays provides the material for drama, and the drama, in turn, helps develop the participants' perception of the world and of their role in it.<sup>21</sup> There is a clear therapeutic dimension to this approach in affording the young players an opportunity to articulate their feelings about themselves and their situation but there is, of course, also a possible moral danger inherent in exposing them to transgressive behaviour as play. However, the ultimate enforcement of the moral line and the general gladness exhibited by all concerned in the *dénouements* are intended to militate against such a hazard and the Impromptu

<sup>18</sup> *Émile; ou, de l'éducation*, in *Œuvres complètes*, IV, ed. by Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris, Gallimard, 1969), p. 321.

<sup>19</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theatre*, p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> See Peter Chilver: 'all work in improvised drama is an important humanising force, leading us towards a greater awareness of the complexity of human behaviour and motivation, of what people do and why they do it', in *Teaching Improvised Drama* (London, Batsford, 1978), p. 24.

<sup>21</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theatre*, p. 14.

passages on remorse and good intentions act as a kind of test of the participants' understanding of the point being made.

The social setting of the playlets is largely that of Moissy's potential readers and participants, featuring well-to-do families (that is, the future élite and professional classes) and their interaction with each other and with the less privileged. The plays for young children concern, for the most part, the banalities of everyday life, often involving nothing more complex than taking medicine, doing homework or losing one's temper. There is a small range of character types comprising children, parents, tutors, servants and the occasional visitor to the household. The plots might be slight, but the implications of the situations depicted have far-reaching significance. As the age of the protagonists progresses through adolescence, so the settings and dilemmas broaden out to include college, a lawyer's office, a theatre dressing-room, charitable acts, dangerous friendships and even a duel. Issues relating to their education, social position and choice of career are addressed, the situations differentiated by gender as are the character flaws (gambling, dissipation, dangerous friendships for males; vanity, greed and questions related to courtship for females). Social responsibility and utility are, however, stressed for all.

The role of adult authority figures, usually a parent or 'précepteur', is to bear witness and, as in most children's literature of the period, to arbitrate and dispense justice in the form of rewards or punishments, varying in severity from admonition or deprivation to banishment from the family circle. Some plays depict an incident or misdemeanour detected by chance and remedied speedily within 'theatrical time'. In the first play, *La Poupée: instruction pour les enfans du premier âge qui ne respectent pas assez leurs gouvernantes*, for example, the disgruntled five-year-old Minette treats her doll badly as she feels she is treated. The 'Impromptu' passage in which Minette defies her governess who confiscates the doll must have afforded an attractive moment of permitted naughtiness for the young participant, but it is a short-lived one, and Minette's assertive volubility is reduced to a passively repeated and more demurely feminine 'Oui maman'. The play ends with the proverbial injunction that 'trop parler nuit'.<sup>22</sup> From the earliest age then, an unquestioning respect for authority is seen as a *sine qua non* of the socialization process. In other plays a misdemeanour or continual situation is suspected by an adult who, in Rousseauistic fashion, sets up a situation to test the transgressor. In the humorous *Les Gourmandes: leçon nécessaire aux enfans qui sont gourmands et menteurs*, a double caution against self-indulgence, traditionally seen as a particularly dangerous propensity in young females and that most heinous of defects, telling lies, two sisters aged seven and eight consume a frangipane tart and blame the

<sup>22</sup> *Les Jeux de la petite Thalie*, p. 341.

cat, even shutting the hapless innocent in the sideboard with the crumbs. The suspicious father tests their veracity by watching closely their discomfort at the dinner table, their unprecedented eagerness to bestow their food upon their hungry brother soon revealing their duplicity and leading to confrontation and punishment. In *Les Moineaux: leçon agréable et persuasive pour engager un enfant à ne faire aucun mal, aucune méchanceté, même aux animaux*, a sadistic seven-year-old boy is tested by a visiting *philosophe* who, assuming the rôle of director of a little play-within-a-play, arranges for two sparrows to be released into the room separately. He plays on the child's emotions by representing the first as a lost infant and, when the child agrees to let it go, the second as grieving parent come to express its gratitude. The boy, whose decision to free the bird is an 'Impromptu' passage in which he can explore his motives and feel good about himself in overcoming his initial impulse to torture it, is given the punchline, emphasizing that he has grasped the analogy between himself and the vulnerable creature and understood the moral of behaving kindly to others. This play is an example of the type in which the protagonist undergoes a process of self-knowledge effecting a real change of heart, particularly striking in this case because his cruelty to animals and lack of respect for authority seem irredeemable.

More idiosyncratic delinquent characteristics are exemplified in some of the plays for young adolescents, in which the executors of the lesson are often the transgressor's peers. In *La Pièce en vers: correction honnête qui tend à démasquer et à humilier l'amour-propre ridicule d'un jeune homme qui se croit un prodige d'esprit et de mérite*, pretentiousness is castigated by humiliation as a vain adolescent who fancies himself as a great writer is criticized for wasting his time on 'Belles Lettres' and manipulated into reading aloud a poem he claims as his own but which is shown to be plagiarized. *Les Liaisons dangereuses: aventure heureuse qui fait connaître aux jeunes gens l'importance de bien choisir leurs liaisons, pour éviter les chagrins et les malheurs* (published thirteen years before Laclos's novel), depicts a dissipated young man of twenty in danger of ruining his life through gambling and undesirable friendships. This time it is his brother who effects the lesson by donning a disguise, winning all his money from him, and returning it in exchange for a promise that he will mend his ways. The 'Impromptu' speech here is, characteristically, the transgressor's gratitude and heartfelt promise to mend his ways.

A similar structure underpins *Le Goût: leçon d'égalité donnée à des enfans élevés avec hauteur, et qui méprisent les enfans des pauvres*, which raises the issues of social dignity and responsibility and introduces the contrast prevalent in most didactic moral literature between the virtuous poor character and the wealthy who abuse their position. This playlet also depicts disagreement between parents, an unusual feature in books for a

young readership and, by indicating in the subtitle that the children's upbringing has caused their disdain and cruelty, suggests an indictment of the older generation for corrupting the young with their own prejudices. In a situation stage-managed by the father with the aim of both curing his children's city snobbery and persuading his wife of their faults, the parents hide and observe the children's behaviour towards the father's godson Jannot, a peasant boy, over tea. The bullying is evident (they taunt him with the food and try to force him to steal fruit from the garden for them) as is his honesty, and long-suffering amiability and altruism. The fact that he tries to pretend it was all a joke to avert the father's wrath underlines the contrast between them: they fail to fulfil their social obligations of consideration and benevolence, while his goodness is seen to lie not least in his disinclination to rebel or retaliate against oppression. The motif of the unseen watcher, a traditional theatrical device, could be seen to reflect the notion of divine omnipresence, but the implication and consequences are purely secular. Moreover, the parents are the object of the spectator's scrutiny too and how they react to and deal with the situation projects a further didactic dimension to the pedagogical agenda. The situation is not without its problematic side, for the parents do not intervene to prevent his victimization, but retribution is draconian: the daughter loses the privilege of learning elegant accomplishments and will perform useful tasks like sewing and the son will be displaced in favour of Jannot. However, despite the culminating proverb, 'Pauvreté n'est pas vice', the father's pronouncement that his disgraced son will be treated 'comme le fils d'un paysan, je dis plus, comme le plus mauvais sujet de la Nature' suggests a re-inscribing of upper class values and assumptions.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, in another piece, the self-taught son of an impoverished lacemaker is rewarded for his elegant handwriting and grace in dancing the minuet, accomplishments acquired through watching the lessons of the two children of his neighbour, a banker. When the latter discovers that his arrogant son has been forcing the boy to do his homework for him, the children's prospects are reversed: the lacemaker's son, praised for maximizing his opportunities despite his economic disadvantages, is given employment and acknowledged as a surrogate son, while the idle rich boy is banished to boarding school and threatened with having to learn a trade if he does not prove more diligent. The message is clear: that respect and rewards in life must be earned. It also appears to endorse lower-class acquiescence to, and desire to appropriate, upper-class values. However, the dénouement of these plays represent less an advocacy of rapid social advancement and an overturning of the social hierarchy than a warning against improper pride and abuse of privilege and a general

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<sup>23</sup> *Les Jeux de la petite Thalie*, p. 173.

endorsement of individual effort and the will to seek self-improvement. In contrast, in *L'Habit sans galons*, a ten-year-old boy spontaneously gives his birthday money to the family of a poor and sick family servant rather than spend it on himself. Such model paternalistic benevolence on a small scale is a common theme in much children's literature, representing, like kindness to animals, a vital stage in socialization and moral growth based on the recognition of the needs of others and of one's own capabilities and duty to alleviate suffering. Drama, arguably, is a particularly effective didactic vehicle to persuade a possibly sceptical child audience that an act of charity produces a longer-lasting pleasure than a birthday present, as participant and spectator are able to witness and experience vicariously the 'feel good factor' in the manifest delight of all parties.

Parents behaving badly also feature in *La Petite vérole: exemple fort utile pour consoler les jeunes demoiselles que la petite vérole enlaidit et morale consolante pour les jeunes personnes laides*, in which the mother of a sixteen-year-old girl whose beauty has been ruined by smallpox laments the 'disaster', voicing society's cruelly superficial standards: 'une jeune personne très laide, n'a autre parti à mon gré que celui de se cacher dans le fond d'un couvent, et d'y gémir toute sa vie de la perte qu'elle a faite, car elle est sans remède'.<sup>24</sup> The mother's shocking cynicism in planning to extract her other daughter from a convent to put her on the marriage market instead is a strong indictment of the contemporary commodification of women. The implied criticism of the implication that the misfortune is somehow the daughter's fault, reiterated in the view that her illness is tantamount to a broken promise to society, is interesting as disfiguring ailments, and smallpox in particular, are frequently employed in juvenile literature of the period as a punishment for vanity or improper pride. Here, however, the expectations of the spectators are subverted because the girl herself sees her situation as a *bonheur* that will free her from the social and moral hazards of being perceived as a great beauty and enable her to focus her attention on more worthwhile pursuits such as her education. The 'Impromptu' speech in which she is encouraged to outline the disadvantages of female beauty (vanity, coquettishness, envy, malice, vulnerability to seduction and fortune-hunters) forces the actor to deliberate upon reasons for refusing to be objectified in such a demeaning and dehumanizing way and thus potentially has considerable therapeutic value in empowering young females to reflect upon their own futures. Her positive outlook is, of course, rewarded when her former fiancé, who has overheard her words from his hiding-place behind a screen, declares that his desire to marry her has been increased by her intelligence and courage.

<sup>24</sup> *Les Jeux de la petite Thalie*, p. 250.

In two playlets, Moissy uses the setting of a theatre to introduce and emphasize the idea of social roles. The praise of country life and simple living informs *Le Petit Paysan hardi: exemple qui tend à inspirer de la hardiesse aux enfans trop timides et qui n'osent rien entreprendre*, which ostensibly is a lesson in self-confidence. A peasant boy, Lucas, who is seen boldly sitting on the stage of a village theatre before a celebration of the installation of the new Seigneur, expects to be chased away but ends up collaborating with the Seigneur's son and daughter in performing their play. The embrace between the Seigneur's son and the peasant boy and their shared nervousness about performing in public suggest an intriguing crossing of boundaries and an assertion of equality. The former stresses their mutual responsibilities to the community, representing them both as the sons of 'labourers' in a sense and his sister as the chief shepherdess of the village. Yet the social hierarchy is also reinforced and legitimized in his assertion that they embrace as 'representatives' of their class and, rather than the obliteration of social distinctions, acceptance of one's role in life and mutual cooperation is seen as essential to maintain social stability. The children agree to support each other in acting out the 'comédie' together, just as they will have to overcome their uncertainties and lack of self-confidence in order to accept and perform their social roles in future life, as indeed will the young actors themselves. The 'Impromptu' passages here are those that underline and support the notion of social duty and responsibility at every level. A note tells us that this playlet was written specifically for one such celebratory occasion and acted by the Seigneur's three children, which would have allowed one of them to experience such a social contract from the side of the underprivileged. Indeed, an interesting didactic aspect of the plays that depict class relationships is the opportunity it offered for children of a well-to-do background to experience vicariously the life of the poor and exploited. Being on the receiving end, however temporarily and artificially, of viciousness and prejudice and having to articulate their feelings about poverty, hunger and social marginalization would, arguably, encourage a more enlightened approach and appreciation of their own position and responsibilities. The idea that high birth is a matter of chance is reiterated in *La Comédie: occasion plaisante de détruire l'orgueil mal fondé d'un enfant séduit par les apparences*, set in a theatre dressing-room in the interval between two plays and featuring two actors and their children. The seven-year-old son of one actor, puffed up with pride because his father has been playing a king in the first play, abuses his schoolfriend, whose father plays a valet, but is deflated and appalled when he sees his father dressed as a peasant after the interval. This play not only visualizes dramatically the importance of not judging by appearances and underlines the fragility of privilege and power, but offers a robust defence of theatre, validating its role as a purveyor of moral education.

The entertainment factor of Moissy's proverbs for the young participants is considerable. The action is brisk and concise, the dialogue crisp and lively. He exploits a number of theatrical devices familiar to the 'théâtre de société', such as hidden eavesdroppers, unexpected confrontations, and sudden reversals of fortune. Expositions orientate the spectator quickly and the action stimulates a range of emotions: amusement, anticipation, disgust and sensibility. The latter is exploited blatantly in *L'Heureux naturel: bel exemple de tendresse d'un fils pour sa mère, qu'il ne connaît point*, in which a dying boy is saved when he is reunited with his disgraced mother who visits him in disguise. There is also a not infrequent humour that is appealing. In *La Version*, the boy's rage at his inability to finish his Latin homework ('Peste soit du Latin', 'Chienne de version') offers the opportunity to deliver the lines with gusto.<sup>25</sup> In *Les Deux Médecines*, a relatively uneventful piece, which encapsulates the notion of obedience, the impromptu speeches are those that allow the young actors to elaborate on their acceptance or refusal of their medicine and are to be accompanied, the stage directions suggest, by groans and grimaces. Other plays allow the participants to strut, boast, argue, discuss ghosts or pretend to fight with swords. On two occasions, the protagonists overstep the mark in a manner that, given the moral imperative driving the text, is surprising, in that an angry child accuses the tutor or governess who chastises them of impropriety. The small girl in *La Poupée* speaks of the governess's 'conversations' with the valet and the boy in *Les Moineaux* threatens to tell his mother that he saw his tutor, an Abbé, caressing the *femme de chambre*. Such precocity can perhaps be explained as humour aimed by the author at the adult audience over the heads of the child participants, but also serves as a warning against the insidious effects of dissipation on the young and innocent.

Although Moissy's dramatized proverbs received favourable reviews in both the *Année littéraire* and the *Journal encyclopédique*, he earned harsh treatment at the hands of some of his contemporaries: Grimm, for example, dismissed the didactic playlets as evidence of the imminent exhaustion of the author's talent.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, they were obviously thought interesting and effective enough for some of them to be appropriated and reproduced, almost verbatim, in the far more successful *L'Ami des enfants* (published from 1782) by Berquin, who also edited the 1797 Belin edition of *Les Jeux de la petite Thalie*. Moissy's work has, in effect, been eclipsed by that of his more famous contemporaries, Berquin and Mme de Genlis, whose *Théâtre à l'usage des jeunes personnes* of 1779 became an influential model for children's drama. Her plays exploited the form and techniques

<sup>25</sup> *Les Jeux de la petite Thalie*, p. 123.

<sup>26</sup> Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique*, ed. by M. Tournieux, 16 vols (Paris, Garnier, 1877–82), IV, 272–73.



of the *comédies* and *dramas* of *théâtre de société* rather than the dramatized proverb and explored similar issues to those depicted by Moissy in more developed and dramatic pieces. The taste for dramatized proverbs continued to inspire educational drama in the latter half of the century in such works as Charles Garnier's *Nouveaux proverbes dramatiques; ou, Recueil de comédies de société pour servir de suite aux théâtres de société et d'éducation* (1784), the title of which proclaims its dual allegiance and address, but disappeared during the years of the Revolution and its aftermath. The fashion resurfaced, however, in the nineteenth century in works addressed to adults, most notably those of Musset in the 1830s and 1840s, and were reintroduced for children in the comtesse de Ségur's *Comédies et proverbes* (1865). This collection contains two proverbs which reiterate the themes found in Ségur's novels, the domestic *On ne prend pas des mouches avec du vinaigre*, which indicts the perpetrator of an overly strict and unsympathetic treatment of a pair of young girls, and *Le Forçat ou à tout péché miséricorde*, which, in the different social setting of a village, stresses the need to exercise charity and compassion to repentant wrongdoers. By the mid-century, however, interest was focused more on the novel as a vehicle of instruction and entertainment for young readers.

There is very little evidence available of the extent to which Moissy's plays were received, or, indeed, performed in the homes of his readers. However, in distinguishing the different stages of childhood, adolescence and young adulthood in his first volume of plays, Moissy shows an originality not hitherto seen in children's literature and his contribution to the development of didactic drama deserves to be better known. In his *discours préliminaire*, he asserts that the most useful of all roles for Art is that of forming the character of civilized human beings. His dramatized proverbs can be seen as 'rehearsals' for social existence, offering models of behaviour for real-life scenarios in which self-regulation, the fulfilment of one's role and, given the vicissitudes of fortune, the ability to improvise in word and deed would be essential skills, but for which the basic 'script' would already have been learnt by heart.

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