

FROM SERIOUS TO VULGAR HUMOUR: COMIC FORMS

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Part 1 – Comedy in the 18th century

FM: Hello Sophie Marchand, you're an expert in 18th century theatre and you're going to talk to us about the changes, the transformations in comic forms during the age of Enlightenment. Well, we know all about the importance of Molière's legacy in theatrical production. In this context, to what extent can we talk about a comedy in the 18th century?

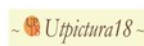
SM: Certainly, the age of Enlightenment inherited Molière's comic model which was given sanctuary through the creation of the Comédie Française and which was, right from the off, perceived as Molière's home. But the 18th century was not satisfied, as we'd often like to believe, with reproducing the same comic model as the 17th century, essentially dulling it down. While some playwrights like Destouches, or even Piron in his *Métromanie*, modernised characters by incorporating new looks, numerous other writers listened to proposals for new forms, motivated by the challenge of making an efficient weapon out of comedy to paint the truth and reform customs of the time. The originality of comic forms put forward by the age of Enlightenment is not to be underestimated, although many pieces of work from this period have been forgotten about today, often unjustly.

Part 2 – New forms of comedy

FM: Can you tell us a bit more about what precisely these new forms of comedy were?

SM: Well, what characterises links between the 18th century and comedy is firstly a broad examination, an aesthetic but also a moral and ideological examination, which would end up having an impact on all the thinkers of the time, notably Voltaire and Rousseau, giving rise to trials of new plays on stage like the *Letter to M. D'Alembert* by Rousseau, published in 1758, but also numerous metatheatrical prologues. Metatheatrical prologues were introductions to plays in which characters produced a speech and a personal reflection about the play.

Some writers called for a reform in the comedy genre as early as the 1720s. They were reacting to two things. Firstly, the cynical and immoral downward spiral of comedy at the end of Louis XIV's reign, as evidenced by plays such as *Turcaret* by Lesage or *The Residuary Legatee* by Regnard, who



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proposed, citing Lesage's words, "ricocheting the most pleasant trickery in the world with characters more perverted than the last." 18th century theatre, rather 18th century comedy was also reacting to another downward spiral, the invaluable and snobbish spiral which held comedy accountable to the cold and aristocratic surveillance of intellect.

FM: What was it that fundamentally drove these writers to critique comedy?

SM: The comedic process ultimately aims for laughter, which had been considered up until then as inseparable from the genre, but which seemed at the time morally unacceptable. Marmontel, the playwright and encyclopaedist, encouraged the banishment of this vulgarity from the theatre which should instead be a school for honesty. As for Rousseau, he suggested that pleasure taken from comedy was founded on a vice in the human heart so, with that in mind, the more a comedy is agreeable and perfect, the more its effect is deadly to our way of life.

Also, philosophical playwrights believed, in contrast to Marmontel, that it was without doubt more advantageous to switch from feeling perverted deference to philosophical pity for the villain. They took it upon themselves to liberate comedy from comic surveillance. It was about inventing an exemplary form of comedy, which would arouse an emotional connection which, at the time, was called "interest"; a form of comedy which preferred the delicate smile of the soul to contorted laughter.

This moral form of comedy would target not only the most foolish of vices but would also contribute to the improvement of customs. Its sponsor would be Terence, a Latin playwright, a disillusioned man, who was called in to offset Molière's model. Writers like Voltaire, Lachaussee, Chamfort, Fagan stepped into the breach and provided the Comédie Française with some of its most successful works of the period which spanned from 1715 to 1750.

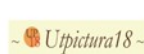
FM: So how would you describe this new comedy of the time?

SM: Contemporaries speak of a serious, moral and sensory comedy. It is the detractors of the genre who speak of "sorrowful comedy" or of "Romanesque comedy", a fusion of Romanesque tendencies and comedy. Until the 1760s, the sensory formula, which had itself been influenced by Marivaux's aesthetic form and the creation of the tragedy, would help to contribute to the fast-moving circulation of middle-class values and views of the world to the wider public as well as to support the Enlightenment struggle against prejudice in favour of truth.

Conclusion – A place of laughter

FM: So, in this context, could we say that the 18th century turned its back on comedy for good?

SM: Absolutely not. It is one of the characteristics of the period which looked to bring opposites together. The public, who cried over Voltairian tragedies or became emotional while watching Lachaussee's sensory comedy, was eager for more slapstick. They made fun of Italian Comedy which



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had then fallen behind the times with its moral plays. The genre of dramatic parody developed in the 18th century and achieved great success. Many people were detractors of this comic evolution, pleading for a return to the old ways of doing humour and to Molière. Beaumarchais himself, who wrote tragedies, would achieve his first successes by claiming to have resurrected true comedy, comic truth.

From the 1760s, street theatres would attract crowds of a sociological mix by performing parodies, Janot's risky use of toilet humour, like in *Les Battus paient l'amende* by Dorvigny for example and, under the revolutionary government, the mischiefs of rude Madame Angot. Finally, theatre in revolutionary times was inclined to present itself as only being serious and political. And yet, at this time, on the contrary, it was light-hearted comedy and Comic Opera which were selling out.

FM: Well, thank you Sophie Marchand for this overview of comedy during the Enlightenment which has allowed us to get a better grasp of the major issues.