

THE PHILOSOPHER WITHOUT KNOWING IT BY SEDAINE

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Introduction

"Here's true taste. Here's domestic reality. Here's comedy". This is how enthusiastically Diderot reacted to the first performance of *The Philosopher Without Knowing It* by Michel-Jean Sedaine on the 2nd December 1765. If this play, subtitled "comedy", like *The Father of the Family* incidentally, could please Diderot, it's because it's filled to perfection with all the criteria of a bourgeois tragedy just as he had theorised a few years before.

Sedaine himself relates how the idea of a serious comedy – he was writing fairly minor plays – came to him in response to a sickening attack by Palissot, a man of letters, enemy of philosophers, against the encyclopaedists, in his play *The Philosophers*. *The Philosopher Without Knowing It* was conceived, I quote, "to reconcile the public with the idea of the word philosopher". A promising introduction. So, what is the subject of this drama exactly?

Part 1 – Exposure

We're in the house of the respectable merchant Vanderk. Papers, bank bills indicate his economic profession to us. The family is celebrating Sophie, the daughter's marriage. But right from the first scene, Victorine, the foster sister, Antoine's daughter, Antoine being Vanderk's right-hand man, hurries along the unhappiness which looms over the family. Vanderk junior, a naval officer, a soldier but son of a bourgeois – it's thanks to his father that he has this profession – would be getting ready to dual at dawn with another young soldier.

The tragedy is discretely and progressively announced in a long exposure covering the first two acts in which Sedaine displays perfect mastery of playwriting. Here, he distils a body of evidence through Victorine's worries, Vanderk junior's evasive presence and his confused monologue in Act 2 Scene 3 where he loses his temper with the fate which will strike him on his wedding day, and where he demands quite darkly, it would seem to us spectators, honour as well as filial and class solidarity. "Traders! Traders! This is my father's status!" He cries, "I'll never accept this degradation." There are lots of subtle, dark touches in this happy scene of a bourgeois household on the eve of a marriage, especially as the idea even of the dual, which is an outstandingly tragic and noble motif, contrasts violently with the bourgeois cabinet or salon.

Finally, in contrast, it is to be seen since this long exposure holds another surprise in Act 2. Are we really in a bourgeois home? Vanderk junior learns from his father, who still ignores the dual that's being prepared, that he is from an aristocratic line. Vanderk is in fact a gentleman, who in his youth was forced to take a job, that's to say make a living from working, namely that of a merchant which was an emblematic activity of the bourgeois class, and this came to pass following a dual over affairs of the heart and honour which involved his future wife, the mother of the family. The start of Act 3 forms the crux of the tragedy.

Part 2 – The crux

It's dawn in the house, the young man who wanted to leave in secret to resolve his quarrel cannot find his keys. His father awakens and the young man tells him everything. He attests to wanting to defend

his father's job and the bourgeois class which has been insulted by the young aristocrat. Without a word said, the father lets him leave and remains alone on the stage, expressing his sadness as a father in a quandary over the law's voice which prohibits the duel and the voice of honour.

Part 3 – Dramatic tension

The last two acts, which focus on kindness over the outcome, complete the portrait of this noble father, but with control and restraint. He must dissimulate his pain from joy. Then he must reason with Antoine, who wanted to step in to prohibit the duel. Vanderk, however, asks him to secretly witness his son's fight and if the young man should die, to come knock on the door three times.

Finally, apogee of sublime in truthfulness, this devastated father still fulfils his obligations by paying a bank bill without interest or benefits to a quite arrogant gentleman, Monsieur Desparville, whose visit was announced right at the beginning of the play. It's a really simple scene, extremely deep and tragic, and one which commanded attention at the time. At the same time as the three fatal knocks are heard at the door, and while Vanderk, who suppresses his emotions, is in the middle of counting out the money for Desparville, we understand that Desparville is none other than the father of the other young man involved in the duel. So how does this play end?

Part 4 – The outcome

Well, its outcome will be a happy one, as indicated incidentally in the subtitle "comedy". The son is not dead but, in a gesture which oversteps aristocratic prejudice, he turns the duel, with his apologies, into a reconciliation and a promise of friendship. Father and son Desparville join in the bourgeois wedding celebrations with as much naturalness as the family who is in fact noble. So, to conclude, let's bring together three elements which contribute to the success of this drama.

Conclusion – A successful tragedy

First, its perfect playwriting structure. Sedaine respects and makes good use of the unity of place, time and action. Next, Vanderk's character, which embodies both the sensitive and emotional father, and the merchant, a figurehead of the bourgeois imagination, which is treated here with enormous finesse and tact. Finally, the quite complex and ambiguous closing message of the play, which offers a deep reflection on the structure of social classes.

It is genius to having made the celebration of business heard from the mouth of a born aristocrat who owes everything to it, including his nobility which he is able to buy back. "In an age as enlightened as this, declares Vanderk to his son, what nobility gives cannot be removed". As for the question of the duel, it allows for the limits and contradictions of a character to be brought out. Vanderk remains fundamentally a prisoner despite the codes of honour of another age. *The Philosopher Without Knowing It*, explains Sedaine, is a man of honour who sees all the cruelty of a terrible prejudice and who yields while wailing.