

***Ideology in French Revolutionary theatre, with particular
reference to Maréchal, Chénier, and Laya.***

The Revolutionary playwright Jean-Baptiste Radet closes his 1794 vaudevillian comedy *Le Noble Roturier* with the following strophe:

Au Théâtre offrir, sous des traits séduisants
Des rois orgueilleux, des lâches courtisans,
Des pères trompés, des valets complaisans,
C'était l'état monarchique.
Peindre, tels qu'ils sont, les tyrans oppresseurs;
Chanter les exploits de nos fiers défenseurs,
Faire du Théâtre un école de mœurs,
Voilà quelle est la république.¹

Written during the *Terreur*, the infamously bloody period of the French Revolution between the summer of 1793 when the Jacobins gained control of the *Comité du salut public* and Thermidor of *An II* (July 1794) when Maximilien de Robespierre, amongst other members of the *Comité*, was deposed, Radet's passage neatly encapsulates the feelings of many of his peers concerning the purpose of revolutionary theatre. Jean-Louis Laya, as far back as 1789, had written in a

¹ Radet, Jean, *Le Noble Roturier*, (Paris, 1794) p.54

pamphlet that actors are ‘instruments in the hands of the moralists of a country’², while Marie-Joseph Chénier, as Hemmings reveals, was convinced of the power of theatre to assist in public education³. The theatre of the French Revolution, then, was to have as its goal the moral, social, and political improvement of its audiences. This yoking of theatre’s power to political ends is demonstrably underlined by the statistic, quoted by Hemmings, that roughly two thirds of the 450 plays produced in France during the Terror were inherently political⁴. This essay isolates but three of those 450 plays for further study: Sylvain Maréchal’s *Le Jugement dernier des rois*, Marie-Joseph Chénier’s *Timoléon*, and Jean-Louis Laya’s *L’Ami des lois*. Despite being temporally separated by mere months, each of these three plays displays a distinct style, was received very differently, and offers a unique perspective on the events of the Revolution. They all, however, demonstrate overtly political aims, and it is this that renders them worthy of study.

Given that the importance of political themes in the theatre of the French Revolution has already been well established, this essay will not focus on the prevalence of ideologies *per se* in revolutionary theatre. Instead, it aims to compare the political goals of *Le Jugement dernier des rois*, *Timoléon*, and *L’Ami des lois*, exploring and contrasting the ideological messages therein. Furthermore, this essay will, with particular focus on their characters, examine how these plays transmit their politics, and how successful they are in doing so.

² Hemmings, F.W.J., *Theatre and State in France, 1760-1905*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) p.92

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. p.97

The ultimate aim is to come to some conclusions as to the ways in which political thought was disseminated in the theatre.

All three of the playwrights that are to be discussed in this essay were celebrated at the time, as indeed were their works. Brother to the more illustrious André Chénier, Marie-Joseph Chénier, who has been described as the leading tragic playwright of the Revolution⁵, was also politically very influential, being a member of the *Convention Nationale* in the camp of Danton. His play *Timoléon*, which was first performed in autumn 1793⁶, is a three-act classical tragedy in verse, and is thus in the same vein as his earlier work *Caius Gracchus* (1792). Set in Corinth in the Greece of antiquity, it deals with a conspiracy by Timophane to have himself declared king of the venerable republic, a plot that is foiled by his brother, the eponymous Timoléon. Jean-Louis Laya, too, was a playwright who made his name in the early years of the Revolution, and he is best remembered today for his *L'Ami des lois*. This biting satire of Jacobin extremism, audaciously first performed on 2nd January 1793 during the trial of Louis XVI, is set in contemporary France, and is evidence of its writer's growing disenchantment with the direction of the Revolution⁷. The frustration with Revolutionary leaders evident in the play is in stark contrast to the attitude of Sylvain Maréchal, who was anything but disillusioned by the Revolution. Indeed, his *Le Jugement*

⁵ Maslan, Susan, *Revolutionary Acts: Theatre, Democracy, and the French Revolution*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, c2005) p.58

⁶ Carlson, Marvin, *The Theatre of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966) pp.175-176. Some versions of the text of the play list the first performance as being 11th September 1794 by the *Théâtre de la République*. Knowing, as will be discussed later, that the play was banned by the *Comité* in 1793 after a couple of performances, I can only assume that Chénier edited the text and re-released it in September of the following year.

⁷ *Ibid.* p.143

dernier des rois, “écrite,” as Apostolidès has it, “en pleine Terreur,”⁸ has the dubious honour of a reputation as the most “notorious”⁹ and “infamous”¹⁰ rabidly pro-Jacobin *pièce* of the period. Set in a fantasy future, the play, first performed on 18th October 1793, recounts the exile of the deposed monarchs of Europe to a volcanic island.

All three plays may have been well known at the time of their release, but that is not to say that they have any substantial claims to recognition as classic pieces of theatre – a claim that can be broadened to include almost all plays produced during the Revolution. Writing in 1880, Henri Welschinger stated that “en général, considéré au point de vue littéraire, ce théâtre est médiocre. Çà et là quelques pièces émergent de la foule banale”¹¹, going on to dismiss over a thousand theatrical works as “ou banal, ou grossier, ou cynique, ou ridicule, ou enfantin”¹². Interestingly, Laya’s *L’Ami des lois* escapes Welschinger’s scathing indictment, who lauds it instead as “une pièce courageuse”¹³. Others have been less kind, with Hemmings terming it “a mediocre domestic drama”¹⁴ and Paul d’Estrée deploring the plays *inélégance*¹⁵ and describing its creator as “un auteur dramatique de troisième ordre, versificateur médiocre et poète dépourvu de souffle”¹⁶. Maréchal’s *Le Jugement dernier des rois* suffers still more. Despite

⁸ Apostolidès, Jean-Marie, ‘La Guillotine littéraire’ IN *The French Review*, (Vol. 62, No. 6, Special Issue: 1789-1889-1989 - May, 1989) p.985

⁹ Hemmings, *Theatre and State in France*, p.97

¹⁰ Carlson, *The Theatre of the French Revolution*, p.176

¹¹ Welschinger, Henri, *Le théâtre de la révolution, 1789-1799*, (Paris: Charavay frères, 1880) p.3

¹² Ibid. pp.3-4

¹³ Ibid. p.100

¹⁴ Hemmings, *Theatre and State in France*, p.82

¹⁵ d’Estrée, Paul, *Le théâtre sous la Terreur: théâtre de la peur, 1793-1794 : d’après des publications récentes et d’après les documents révolutionnaires du temps imprimés ou inédits* (Paris: Emile-Paul, 1913) p.138

¹⁶ Ibid.

being hailed at the time in Hébert's *Père Duchesne* as "a fit spectacle for republican eyes"¹⁷, has since been disparaged by d'Estrée as "une misérable farce, dont le public de 1913, si blindé qu'il soit contre la littérature de music-hall, ne supporterait pas la représentation, alors que celui de 1793 l'acclamait avec enthousiasme"¹⁸. As for Chénier's *Timoléon*, it seems to have made so little impression culturally that it is extremely difficult even to find a critical analysis of the play.

The political nature of theatre in the period has even been identified by some as the reason behind this lack of production of great cultural works in the period – not just onstage, but in all artistic domains. The painter David aside, there are very few well known revolutionary artists, writers or playwrights, and it has been suggested by Welschinger that this is due to all artistic energies being directed instead into the medium of politics. As he puts it:

Le theatre était devenu une sorte de tribune où les moindres incidents des assemblées, des clubs et des places publiques se reproduisaient presque instantanément et formaient la trame principale des tragédies, des drames et des comédies.¹⁹

Welschinger goes to the extent of implying that in involving themselves in politics, practitioners of the arts inherently lessened the value of their cultural output. Art, in this thesis, is seen to be something that exists outside of mundane

¹⁷ Carlson, *The Theatre of the French Revolution*, p.177

¹⁸ d'Estrée, *Le théâtre sous la Terreur*, p.245

¹⁹ Welschinger, *Le théâtre de la révolution*, p.4

societal situations, focussing instead on transcendent truths and visions of beauty. During the revolution, however, artists and writers could not reach “des conceptions plus hautes et [...] des jouissances intellectuelles plus grandes”²⁰ due to a failure to “se dégager des événements”²¹. I doubt I would go so far as to suggest that political content inherently degrades the artistic merit of an *œuvre*, but such a discussion is in any case not the purpose of this essay; fortunately, a play’s quality, or lack thereof, does not necessarily impinge on its political content.

This is certainly true of *Le Jugement dernier des rois*, with its political openness tied to a simple one-act structure and storyline, and a desire to provide a spectacle for Parisians. Expensive special effects involving the explosion of twenty pounds of gunpowder at every performance – which because of the war effort had to be sanctioned specially by the *Comité du salut public*²², itself a sign that the government were pleased with the political content of the play – allowed the Théâtre de la République, just two days after the execution of Marie Antoinette, to stage the deaths of nine other European autocrats, including the Pope. Needless to say, Maréchal’s play is stridently anti-monarchical - a fact perhaps best illustrated by the description of the set during the play, which included:

...un grand rocher blanc, sur lequel on lit cette inscription, tracée avec du charbon:

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Carlson, *The Theatre of the French Revolution*, p.177

Il vaut mieux avoir pour voisin

Un volcan qu'un roi.

Liberté . . . Égalité²³.

Chénier's *Timoléon* is equally anti-monarchical – unusually for classical tragedies (which, with its Greco-roman setting and alexandrines, it undoubtedly is), it is based in the republican city-state of Corinth. Yet the play is also wary of any concentration of political power - not just in monarchy, but also even in a self-professed democracy. Power, in this play, is easily corrupted and abused. Laya takes a similar approach in *L'Ami des lois*, suggesting that the Jacobins who control the Convention are misusing power for their own ends. Like *Le Jugement dernier des rois*, it also subverts expectations concerning the roles of certain types of characters. Whilst the former explicitly reverses the roles normally accorded to royalty and the common people, Laya, in the latter, does the practically unthinkable in making a former nobleman the hero of the *pièce* - this led to the condemnation of the *pièce* by the influential Jacobin newspaper *Journal de la Montagne*; its editor Jean Laveaux seeing in its portrayal of aristocrats a “subtle poison”²⁴. It even resulted in the play being mentioned in a meeting of the *Convention Nationale* on 10th January 1793 by the *député* Pierre-Louis Prieur, who, in response to the verse “Aristocrate, soit, mais avant honnête homme”, wondered “comment on peut être honnête homme et aristocrate”²⁵. To compound the radical characterisation in the play, leading revolutionaries are

²³ Maréchal, Sylvain, *Le Jugement dernier des rois*, (Paris, 1793) p.1 (Subsequent references follow with name and page number in parentheses)

²⁴ Carlson, *The Theatre of the French Revolution*, p.170

²⁵ Welschinger, *Le théâtre de la révolution*, p.386

portrayed as the villains of the *pièce*. Nomophage, the character apparently based on Robespierre, has a name that means ‘eater of laws’ in Greek. His accomplice, meanwhile, is named Durîcrane – an allusion to the hardheaded ruthlessness attributed to the journalist Marat. To a certain extent this could reveal the level of sophistication of Chénier’s audience – it is unlikely that many common Parisians would have had a working knowledge of classical languages, and so the joke was aimed, it seems, strictly at the more educated men in the audience. Such an intellectual reference certainly fits well with the rather traditional structure and style of the play, though. The five acts of alexandrines – the favoured structure of *ancien régime* theatre - are, however, subverted by Chénier through the placing of the action in the present and, moreover, by obviously parodying living politicians – a technique that, ironically enough, would have been banned under the *ancien régime*.

Despite their structural differences, though, the villains of both Maréchal’s and Laya’s play have much in common. They are all highly stylised characters, and they all openly condemn themselves by their own words. Nomophage openly admits that:

[...] de l’ordre et des loix ces fidèles apôtres
Sont les amis du peuple, et ne sont pas les nôtres.²⁶

Similarly, Duricrane reveals to the audience that:

²⁶ Laya, Jean-Louis, *L’Ami des lois*, (Paris, 1793) p.29 (Subsequent references follow with name and page number in parentheses)

J'étois né délateur : épier est mon lot.

Quand j'ignore un complot, toujours je le devine. (*L'Ami*, p.37)

The royalty presented in *Le Jugement dernier des rois*, meanwhile, have their crimes, atrocities and personality flaws listed – for the benefit not only of the Vieillard, but also for that of the audience. The kings and queens are even, ostensibly at least, given the opportunity to defend themselves, though in reality this is little more than a chance to provoke more derision from the audience, and allow the revelation that the assembled European powers-that-be are in fact weak and foolish. Thus it is that George, *le roi d'Angleterre*, protests his treatment by asking, “[p]unit-on un fou?” (*Jugement*, p.19), whilst Charles, *le roi d'Espagne*, admits that “[il n'est] qu'un sot” (*Jugement*, p.20). Moreover, the play goes so far as to identify the monarchs with animals – they are led onstage with “au cou une longue chaîne de fer” (*Jugement*, p.16), and *le roi de Sardaigne* is referred to as “sa majesté dormouse [...], roi des marmottes” (*Jugement*, p.20-21). At the very first opportunity after being left to their own devices, they begin to fight amongst themselves, quarrelling over available food. Just like Nomophage and Durîcrane, then, they are easy characters to hate. Timophane, on the other hand, is a much less satisfactory villain. Though he is plotting to make himself king of Corinth, he remains racked by doubts, aware of the immorality of his actions. It could be argued, in fact, that he really poses little threat to the security of the republic, certainly when compared to the arbitrary power displayed by the former king of France and the diabolical machinations of Nomophage and his henchman. Strong villains help to incite disapprobation from the audience, and a

consequent rejection of their values. Thus it is, for example, that in *Le Jugement dernier des rois* the idea of rule by a single, hereditary monarch is rendered intolerable through the revelation of the character of those monarchs. In this, *Timoléon* is far less successful as Laya and Maréchal's plays.

Powerful villains serve one further purpose; namely to strengthen favourable opinion towards and identification with the heroes. In Maréchal's play, then, the arbitrary power of monarchs, as demonstrated by the story of the Vieillard's exile, is contrasted with the common people's unanimous vote to exile the kings and queens of Europe. Still further, the people show an act of mercy in refraining from killing the monarchs, when by all accounts, with Louis Capet as a precedent, they would have had every right to. The Vieillard himself questions why they did not, suggesting that "il eût été plus expédient de les pendre tous, à la même heure, sous le portique de leurs palais" (*Jugement*, p.12)

Similarly, in *L'Ami des lois*, having witnessed the plans made by Nomophage and Durîcrane, the audience takes pity on Forlis, innocent victim of a mob wrongly set upon him. Both these cases are in stark contrast with the actions of Timoléon. Though Chénier presents him as a paragon of virtue, a defender of the republic – twisting historical chronology to allow Timoléon to return from defeating the armies of the tyrant Dion (Dionysus) before the death of his brother in order to do so – there remains an element of doubt over the reasoning behind his actions. After all, if, as has been stated, Timophane posed little real threat to Corinth, is the sanctioning of his murder truly justified? It could even be

suggested that Timoléon is as guilty of manipulation of the masses as is his brother – he orders an illegal act and then justifies it retrospectively.

The real issue many people had at the time with these questions, however, was the role accorded by Chénier to the people themselves. In a bold stylistic move, he had reintroduced the idea of *Chœurs*, a technique that on the surface would suggest a grand role for the common people of Corinth. Yet although the crowds deplore the machinations of Timophane, reacting with horror when they are shown the *diadème* hidden amongst the *conjureurs*, their response is hardly comparable to that of the masses in both of the other plays – they do not rise up together to prevent autocracy, nor do they demand and sense the truth of the situation. Timoléon's actions suggest that they are weak, easily manipulated, and need a strong leader to give them purpose and direction - though this may be the reason why the play enjoyed some brief popularity immediately following the events of Thermidor and the establishment of the Directory, it hardly fits with the prevailing ethos of *égalité* and *fraternité*. In *L'Ami des lois*, on the other hand, the common Parisian is lauded as the fount of all justice, with an innate sense of right and wrong, truth and falsehood. Indeed, the play hinges on the different attitudes to the people demonstrated by Nomophage and Forlis. Whilst the former sees them as gullible and easy to deceive, mere tools that can be employed to serve his own political and personal ends, Forlis possesses a profound trust in the people's good judgement. Ironically of course, the play was banned by the Commune on the grounds that it could lead its audiences astray – while the play celebrated the people's ability to judge the veracity of what they

are told, the municipality, like Nomophage, acted on an assumption of their gullibility.

The pivotal role of the people as judge is equally evident in *Le Jugement dernier des rois*, though in this latter play the action takes place in the aftermath of that judgement. The Vieillard – and thereby the audience too – is told how the people of Europe, united in their repulsion towards tyranny, rose up all on the same day and established a pan-European republic, with a convention based (of course) in Paris. There are, naturally, few explicit details as to how exactly this new regime operates, but the idea of equality is pushed to the forefront, and power is shared equally by the people – they alone have the right and the ability to judge. The same is true in *L'Ami des lois*, even if the audience is not explicitly shown the scenes in which first Forlis and then Nomophage go before the court of public opinion. The main difference between the 'people' of *L'Ami des lois* and those of *Le Jugement dernier des rois*, though, is that in the former there is little by way of concrete political definition of the masses. They remain simply an indefinable source of justice. In Maréchal's play, this republican citizen is provided with a name – *sans-culotte* – and, moreover, a full definition:

Un sans-culotte est un homme libre, un patriote par excellence. La masse du vrai peuple, toujours bonne, toujours saine, est composée de sans-culottes. Ce sont des citoyens purs, tout près du besoin, qui mangent leur pain à la sueur de leur front, qui aiment le travail, qui sont bons fils, bons pères, bons époux, bons parents, bons amis, bons voisins, mais qui sont jaloux de leurs droits autant que de leurs devoirs. (*Jugement*, p.11)

It could be argued that Forlis actually fulfils the final and most important criteria as laid down by Maréchal, as do the masses of *L'Ami des lois*. The same, however, could not be said for the Chœurs of *Timoléon*. Indeed, the way the common people are portrayed in Chénier's play, and Timophane's treatment of them, was the cause of much of the criticism levelled at it at the time, as Carlson reveals:

During a performance of *Timoléon* on October 5, a patriot deputy named Antoine-Louis Albitte who was just back from a mission in southern France took offense at the speeches of Timophane and loudly denounced the play and the author.²⁷

As a result of this intervention, according to Carlson, the "chorus and extras fled in panic"²⁸. The interesting thing about this example is that it was led by a speech made by one man in the audience in response to the play, impossible to imagine today. At the time, however, it was certainly not uncommon for a play's spectators to make their feelings known whilst watching a *pièce*. Cheers, boos, demands for the repetition of certain popular speeches or songs, at times even for entirely different plays, were all part of the theatrical experience. *Timoléon* fell victim to this trend. In contrast, both *Le Jugement dernier des rois* and *L'Ami des lois* make use of it.

²⁷ Carlson, *The Theatre of the French Revolution*, p.175-176

²⁸ *Ibid.* p.176

For *Le Jugement dernier des rois*, this process began even before the performance itself. Promotional posters for the *pièce* made much of the status accorded to enemy monarchs in the play, and the public were specifically invited to attend and experience an opportunity to laugh at, deride and abuse the collected kings and queens of Europe²⁹. This forms part of an overall effort on the part of Maréchal to reverse the conventions of *ancien régime* theatre, something he makes explicit in the prologue to the play:

Citoyens, rappelez-vous donc comment, au temps passé, sur tous les théâtres on avilissait, on dégradait, on ridiculisait indignement les classes les plus respectables du peuple-souverain, pour faire rire les rois et leurs valets de cour. J'ai pensé qu'il était bien temps de leur rendre la pareille, et de nous en amuser à notre tour. (*Jugement*, p.vi)

Once there the audience, Parker believes, is offered a choice of identification figures³⁰: the paternalist Vieillard, whose actions and beliefs prefigure the Revolution, and who “evokes the oppressiveness of kings”³¹, the sauvages, the revolutionaries’ *aînés en liberté*, who live in a Rousseauist ideal natural state through never having a leader nor even a verbal language, and finally the *sans-culottes*, who “express the hope of harmony and collective action”³². Finally, at the play’s climax, the *sans-culottes* swear never to “[souiller] l’air d’une expression qui tendrait à prévenir favorablement pour un roi, ou pour toute autre

²⁹ Parker, Noel, *Portrayals of Revolution: Images, Debates and Patterns of Thought on the French Revolution*, (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990) p.48

³⁰ Ibid. p.49

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

monstruosité de cette sorte” (*Jugement*, p.27). In repeating the oath, according to Parker, “those in the audience who had not already expressed their feelings are invited to do so [...], and provided with words to speak”³³. This intentionally makes the audience part of the proceedings. It brings them onto the stage and gives them voice, rendering them equal to the revolutionary examples in the play. In *L’Ami des lois*, a similar process occurs, albeit in a much less explicit fashion. Laya and the theatrical cast would have known that the audience delighted in making itself heard during performances, and I would suggest that it is for this reason that we do not see in the play the addresses made by first Forlis and then Nomophage to the gathered crowds. We do not need to see them, for the audience, taking the role of the crowd, already know the details of innocence and guilt, and were doubtless already voicing their opinions of the characters.

This predisposition amongst the public to make themselves heard at the theatre – a predisposition that has all but died out today – is not a phenomenon that had importance only in the auditorium. Maslan explains that “turmoil in revolutionary theaters was profoundly and increasingly meaningful; the theater was perhaps the most significant crucible for the formation and expression of public opinion”³⁴. This is itself a side-effect of the politicisation of the arts, as this latter was matched by a theatricalisation of politics. This is hardly surprising perhaps, when one considers the fact that the revolutionary ideals were founded to a large degree on the Enlightenment, and as part of the small minority of educated people, artists and intellectuals would have been more aware than many of these

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Maslan, *Revolutionary Acts*, p.2

ideals. The impressively large number of playwrights and actors who wielded political power in the *Convention* and the *Comités* is testament to this – d’Eglantine, Chénier, d’Herbois, and Neufchâteau are just some examples. Even the Convention hall itself came to resemble a theatre, as a passage used by Carlson from Hazlitt’s *Life of Napoleon* that describes the auditorium on the occasion of Louis XVI’s trial illustrates:

The farther end of the hall was converted into boxes, where ladies, in a studied deshabelle, swallowed ices, oranges, and liqueurs and received the salutations of the members, who came and went as on ordinary occasions... The upper gallery, reserved for the people, was during the whole trial constantly full of strangers of every description drinking wine, as in a tavern.³⁵

In a theatrical political arena the common people, as the passage above suggests, became an audience for political debate. In so doing, however, the people were removed from the onstage action – as Maslan says, “public judgement was mediated by representatives”. This was not the case in the theatre. Whereas the people had become “nothing” in the Convention through their election of representatives and ceding of power unto them, the theatre allowed its audience to be immediate and active judges. The theatre, then, became a venue for the manifestation of general public opinion, as guided by the action onstage, and could be seen as being more truly democratic than the political process.

³⁵ Carlson, *The Theatre of the French Revolution*, p.143

It would be trite to suggest that the three plays discussed in this essay aim to transmit their political messages through mere identification of the plays' audience with the characters therein. After all, notwithstanding the epic theatre of Brecht and others, with its *Verfremdungseffekte*, such identification was, and still is, a basic requirement for the success of any performance, whether it be in the theatre, onscreen, or in Parliament. Both *Le Jugement dernier des rois*, explicitly, and *L'Ami des lois*, in a more subtle fashion, go further than simple attempts at identification, though, and actually involve the audience in the play itself by utilising the existing predisposition amongst the public to make themselves heard at the theatre. Tellingly, *Timoléon*, which failed to provoke the same positive audience involvement, proved, it seems, far less popular than the other two plays at the time.

Unfortunately, any analysis of the techniques for transferral of political ideas is necessarily incomplete, lacking as we are in the music for the plays, as well as an idea of how the actors would have performed and, doubtless, sundry other factors. The tragicomic *Timoléon*, with its rounded, faintly contradictory, characters, and a slightly more complex storyline than the other two plays, sells its message seriously and earnestly, but unfortunately alienates the crowd. The ambiguity thus created concerning the play's ideology – particularly in terms of its attitude to the common people - could well have had an impact on its popularity – it certainly seems to have diminished its political message. Both *Le Jugement dernier des rois* and *L'ami des lois*, meanwhile, are comedies, albeit of differing types, and they both rely on simple characters and uncomplicated plotlines to keep the audience involved. Basic as they are, their ideologies are simple to

grasp – the former conforms well to Jacobin political thought, whilst the latter puts forward an uncomplicated case for the necessary primacy of law and order. It seems that both of the comedies approach the transmission of their political messages in the main through the participation of the audience in the play itself. Why is this the case? The answer lies in the fact that, as Maslan reminds her readers, “theater was the closest early modern France came to a mass cultural institution”³⁶. When linked to the tendency for audience members to make interjections, to voice their opinions, this renders the theatre “a collective, public experience”³⁷ – and thus something that can be harnessed for political ends. In presenting obviously ‘good’ and ‘evil’ characters and emphasising the role of the common people, these plays produce, as Parker terms it, “a sort of participation in shared feelings of belonging to an active collectivity”³⁸. At the same time as transmitting revolutionary ideology through their content, plays of the period were, he continues, actively attempting to stimulate “behaviour and emotions in the auditorium which encouraged members of the audience to feel that they belonged together”³⁹. Not only is the subject matter of the plays designed to impress the audience with certain revolutionary values, then; so is the way in which those values are transmitted.

³⁶ Maslan, *Revolutionary Acts*, p.14

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Parker, *Portrayals of Revolution*, p.38

³⁹ Ibid.

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