

2. Bourgeois Morality and Aristocratic Libertinism in the Comédie Larmoyante of La Chaussée

The name Nivelles de La Chaussée evokes, if anything, a vague and distant memory of plays with implausibly virtuous heroines and excessively noble rhetoric, and a controversy over changing the traditional limits of comedy which was taken up by Diderot and Mercier. It seems quite inappropriate to apply the term 'libertine' to La Chaussée or to his work, especially if one recalls any of the numerous epigrams directed at them, such as Collé's reference to a promised new sermon by the Reverend Father La Chaussée for which all the seats have been reserved.¹ This criticism, from rivals jealous of his success and his early appointment to the Académie française, did not impede the sentimental pleasure of his audience:

Aucune de ces injures, soit ingénieuses, soit insipides, n'empêcha les pièces qui en étaient l'objet d'être suivies et même très-goûtées. On riait un moment ... et on retournait pleurer au *Préjugé à la mode* et à *Mélanide*.²

Yet close examination, which La Chaussée rarely receives, can justify the application of 'libertine' not only to his private life but also to certain aspects of his *comédies larmoyantes*.

La Chaussée is now usually considered a minor playwright, given a paragraph in the standard histories as a necessary if tedious precursor of Diderot and the *drame bourgeois*, and brushed aside. His plays are held to express the moral values of the rising bourgeoisie: 'Le bourgeois prend le devant de la scène et exhibe avec emphase et bonne conscience l'image édifiante qu'il entend donner de sa classe.'³ Reading one of his plays, even the very popular *Préjugé à la mode* or *La Gouvernante*, only confirms this summary judgement. The vocabulary and style of expression mix pretentious maxims with sighs and dramatic exclamations:

Dis-moi ... Qu'est devenue une épouse si chère?
Ah! je suis son bourreau plutôt que son époux. (Durval, *Le Préjugé*; V, i)
Que l'amour-propre abonde en mauvaises défaites,
Quand il faut réparer les fautes qu'on a faites!

(Damon, op.cit.; V, ii)⁴