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THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

THE CONCEPT OF LOVE IN THE THEATER OF LOUIS-SEBASTIEN MERCIER

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

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BY

MARTHA GOODE BAILEY

Norman, Oklahoma

1975

THE CONCEPT OF LOVE IN THE

THEATER OF LOUIS-SEBASTIEN MERCIER

APPROVED BY

Seymour Feiler

Besse A. Clement

John N. Alley

James D. Fife

Jim P. Artman

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

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M.G.B.

Norman, Oklahoma
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Louis-Sébastien Mercier was an eighteenth century literary figure who until recently was relatively unknown. Born in Paris on June 6, 1740, he was a professor, writer of some forty plays, author of numerous short stories and a utopian novel (l'An 2440), dramatic theoretician (Du théâtre ou nouvel essai sur l'art dramatique), compiler of a voluminous journal describing Paris at the time of the Revolution (Le Tableau de Paris), and a political statesman. His temperament was quixotic and dynamic and his writings reflect an exuberance which is often uncontrolled and quite rhetorical. His early biographers and critics recognized his stylistic weaknesses, but some gave him credit for the changes he stimulated in the drame bourgeois, for an invaluable record of Parisian life, for his literary efforts to affect social change, and for the encouragement he brought to the pre-romantic spirit in French literature.[1]

More recently, major works have been written concerning his contributions as a precursor in general.

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[1]Helen Temple Patterson, "Petites Clés de grands mystères," Revue de Littérature Comparée, XXV (1951), p.88, attributes the near total eclipse of his work at one time to "L'animosité et l'incompréhension de La Harpe."

Henry Majewski has written a dissertation, a fascinating book, and numerous articles concerning Mercier's pre-romantic imagination.[2] Helen Temple Patterson made the remarkable discovery of Mercier's strong influence on Hugo.[3] W. W. Pusey's L.-S. Mercier in Germany recounts in detail the strong acclaim Mercier's works received in Germany and his influence on such German writers as Wieland, Goethe, and Schiller.[4] This book presents an explanation for Mercier's popularity in Germany: he "...offered a convenient summary of the democratic, progressive French thought of Diderot, Rousseau, and Voltaire."[5] Recent articles have summarized Mercier's theories on drama, on women, on education, etc.[6] In 1968, Anne-Marie Deval wrote a thorough doctoral dissertation in which she

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[2]Henry F. Majewski, The Preromantic Imagination of Louis-Sébastien Mercier (New York: Humanities Press, 1971).

[3]Helen Temple Patterson, Poetic Geresis: Sébastien Mercier into Victor Hugo in Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, Vol. XI (Geneva: 1966).

[4]William W. Pusey, L.-S. Mercier in Germany; his Vogue and Influence in the Eighteenth Century (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939).

[5]Ibid., p. 208.

[6]J. H. Davis, Jr., Tragic Theory and the Eighteenth Century French Critics (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967); Raymond Gay-Crosier, "Louis-Sébastien Mercier et le théâtre," Etudes littéraires, Vol. I, 1968, pp. 251-279; André Monchoux, "Sébastien Mercier et son théâtre," Quaderni Francesi, Vol. I, 1970, pp. 407-420.

described Mercier as a precursor in several literary genres.[7] A later dissertation by Gilles Girard considers Mercier's position as a dramatist between Diderot and Beaumarchais.[8] Other important studies remain to be done on Mercier since his writings, manuscripts, and papers were finally made available to the public in 1967 at the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal in Paris, and a bibliography of these documents was prepared in 1970.

This study will be an analysis of the concept of love in the theater of Mercier. Most critics of Mercier have briefly mentioned his ideas on love, often in concluding remarks, although they recognized that it was an important force behind his literary creations. Considering the quantity and types of work already done about Mercier, why should an entire study be devoted to the concept of love in his theatrical works? First, most of the early studies on Mercier were primarily biographies, with summaries of his writings; only recently have critics begun to analyze in detail the content and style of particular works. Secondly, the concept of love is primary to all of Mercier's works. Like many philosophes of his generation, he had a profound belief in the goodness

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[7]Anne-Marie Deval, "Mercier: Précurseur", Ph.D. dissertation (University of California, Los Angeles, 1968).

[8]Gilles Girard, Louis-Sébastien Mercier, dramaturge (Université d'Aix-Marseille, 1970).

of man and the perfectability of the species and society. As Carl Becker wrote in The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers:

> In the eighteenth century the words without which no enlightened person could reach a restful conclusion were nature, natural law, first cause, reason, sentiment, humanity, perfectibility (these last three being necessary only for the more tenderminded, perhaps)[9]

Mercier is typical of his "tenderminded" peers. He also shares with Hugo a more metaphysical belief in progress:

> Society's future progress towards the "light" is for both writers partly a matter of the progress of knowledge--the spread of literacy, the increase of scientific discovery--but even more a matter of spiritual progress, the growth of the redemptive power of love and pity.[10]

Emotionally, he is some place between Diderot and Rousseau. H. Temple Patterson has tried to define his position:

> Mercier...not only expresses the belief he shares with Diderot in the legitimacy and excellence of passion, but also a belief, nearer to Rousseau than Diderot, that love is the inspiration of all virtue and "le véritable contre poison de la débauche." [11]

Mercier also offers a good example of the "sensibilité" of the century. Pierre Trahard's remarks on the phenomenon quite aptly apply to Mercier's drama:

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[9] Carl Becker, The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932), p. 47.

[10] Patterson, Poetic Genesis, p. 281.

[11] Ibid.

> Elle éprouve le besoin d'attirer à elle la sympathie et la pitié universelles, elle embrasse, à cet effet, non seulement l'amitié, l'amour et la nature, mais l'humanité entière, les sociétés et les individus dans les rapports qui les lient.[12]

A polarization between reason and sentiment typical to the period is found in Mercier's treatment of various types of love and also in his dramatic style and technique. This emotional indecision is found in all his works, and is mentioned by Charles Lenient in La comédie en France au XVIIIe Siècle:

> Chacune de ses pièces est une thèse, la démonstration ou la discussion d'un principe, d'un paradoxe, ou d'une vérité; car l'un et l'autre se confondent perpétuellement dans son esprit comme dans ses oeuvres.[13]

Most of Mercier's theories about the theater are found in Du Théâtre. In this work, Mercier straightforwardly expresses his ideas on love in relation to the theater:

> Je sens que l'amour, l'amitié, la reconnaissance, le désir de la gloire, passions actives et généreuses, échauffent l'âme d'un feu plus vif et l'exaltent à ce point où elle s'élance vers les vertus les plus héroïques.[14]

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[12] Pierre Trahard, Les Maîtres de la sensibilité française au XVIIIe siècle, 2 vols. (Paris: Boivin, 1931); c.f. Gustave Lanson, Nivelle de la Chaussée et la comédie larmoyante (Paris: Hachette, 1903).

[13] Charles Lenient, La comédie en France au XVIIIe siècle (Paris: Hachette, 1888), p. 386.

[14] Louis-Sébastien Mercier, De la littérature et des littérateurs suivi d'un nouvel examen de la tragédie française (Yverdon, 1778), p. 3.

In many respects, Mercier was an ardent admirer of Corneille. He believed that love should be painted in all its force: "parce qu'une passion vigoreuse élève l'âme, et qu'une passion vulgaire l'amollit."[15] He belittled Boileau for not recognizing that a man who is full of love is "un être sacré, et que dès qu'un tel personnage vient à paraître, il nous fait croire tout ce qu'il veut."[16] Nevertheless, instructive plays need not be grave: "La morale n'est ni triste, ni fâcheuse, ni sombre: on peut intéresser, amuser, plaire, tout en instruisant."[17] Although Mercier's dramatic style was often subordinate to his moralizing, he defended himself when speaking of writers: "Etre utile, voilà son but.... Son style, c'est son âme, la vérité, la vertu sont ses modèles."[18] Constantly he reiterated his purpose. An extensive footnote in Nouvel examen de la tragédie française explains: "Emouvoir, éclairer, persuader, agir directement sur le coeur de l'homme; le pénétrer, le remplir de sentiments vifs et profonds: tel est l'Art de l'Ecrivain."[19] In L'An 2440, Mercier's utopian novel, he lauded a writer's power: "la plume d'un écrivain franchit

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[15] Ibid., p. 288. [16] Ibid., p. 380.
[17] Mercier, De la littérature, p. 6.
[18] Ibid., pp. 66-67.
[19] Mercier, Nouvel examen, p. 118, note 48.

l'interval des temps, absout, ou punit les maîtres de l'univers."[20]

Although Mercier dealt with a large variety of subjects and themes, most of them were the problems to which the philosophers addressed themselves: social equality, religious tolerance, fair laws and enforcement, prison reform, improved education and child care, military justice, etc. It was Mercier's concept of love that formed the unity between all these subjects and lends coherence to his unequal works.

For clarity and convenience in this study, love has been divided somewhat arbitrarily into four types: (1) Romantic love encompasses such phenomena as the destructive passionate love of a Manon Lescaut and the divine love and spirtuality found in La Nouvelle Héloïse. (2) Familial love, especially the love of fathers and children (since mothers play but minor roles in Mercier's plays), attempts to uphold the bourgeois family which was threatened by the moral laxity and instability of the era. Included in this category is fraternal love in which Mercier dramatized the strong affection he felt for his own brother. (3) The love of humanity and justice represents the feelings and drives that make of Mercier a social crusader. Elizabeth Souleyman says that "this

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[20]Louis-Sébastien Mercier, L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante, rêve s'il en fût jamais (London, 1771), p. VIII.

dependence of individual happiness and the happiness of others is stressed in the works of L.-S. Mercier."[21] Mercier dealt with law, justice, worthy kings, and social equality. As Béclard explains: "Il s'est fait une conception chimérique et sublime de l'humanité régénerée par la culture de la raison."[22] (4) The love of God and/or tolerance category allowed Mercier to express his views on religion along with his deistic tendencies. His view, like that of Voltaire, saw God as a père de famille. Moreover, like Pierre Bayle, Mercier viewed a tolerant, organized religion as a good counterbalance for society's ills. Although some plays deal clearly with one of these categories, there are often many aspects of love in the same play.

Jacques Vier, in Histoire de la littérature française, XVIIIe siècle, lists twenty-one plays as representative of the bourgeois drama. Of these, thirteen are by Mercier. His importance in the area seems evident.[23] According to Béclard, Mercier's most extensive biographer, he wrote a total of forty-six plays. Many of them were

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[21]Elizabeth Souleyman, Vision of World Peace in the 17th and 18th Century in France (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1941), p. 161.

[22]Léon Béclard, Sébastien Mercier, sa vie, son oeuvre, son temps, d'après des documents inédits (Paris: Champion, 1903), p. VII.

[23]Jacques Vier, Histoire de la littérature française, XVIIIe siècle (Paris: A. Colin, 1965), pp. 272-276.

unpublished or translations and adaptations of other works, or historical dramas meant to be read. Since many of these plays are similar, twenty have been chosen from the forty-six as representative of the types and subjects of Mercier's dramatic production. Only the plays used for this study are listed in the bibliography.

Finally, this study of love identifies ideas borrowed from Prévost, Rousseau, Diderot, and Shakespeare, among others. The seeds for the romantic and libertarian ideas of Charles Nodier and Hugo become evident. Traditional values are seen to joust with the new and to produce naive contradictions. Contrived plots used as means to an end as well as exaggerated, awkward, and emphatic speeches reveal Mercier's desperate struggle to communicate, to demonstrate the power of love and the social and philosophical good it could reap. Béclard wrote of Mercier:

> Ami du bien, le voulant passionnément, le croyant pleinement accessible et fatalement réalisable, tels sont les traits qui caractérisent la vie, le dessin, l'oeuvre de Mercier.[24]

In order to understand Mercier's mixed talents and his place in literary history, it is important to appreciate his warm-hearted, stumbling exuberance and vitality, his love of life and humanity.

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[24] Béclard, Sébastien Mercier, p. VII.

CHAPTER II: THE CONCEPT OF EVIL LOVE

When Mercier depicts romantic love in his plays it is for a distinct purpose. His ideas of love and society's good are inextricably linked. As a result, each play has a didactic goal which Mercier often bluntly describes in the play's preface. Unlike the intellectual and psychological flirtations of Marivaux's characters, the declamations of those of Mercier's are generally obvious, straightforward, and free of any ingratiating subtleties. Romantic love, pure and inspiring, should mellow and uplift all those who come into its contact. It can correct evil kings, make generous the miserly, shame the hypocrite, enlighten cruel parents, restore religious tolerance, and cause all evil-doers to repent.

As was mentioned earlier, Mercier's writings are sometimes contradictory, and his ideas on romantic love are also changeable. He believes in a strict moral code of behavior for lovers: young lovers owe their first allegiance to their parents, libertinage is one of society's worst foes and must be corrected, romantic love is subordinate to honor and duty, lovers should be reasonable. Nevertheless, Mercier is in some plays truly sympathetic to young lovers and presents their case with surprising eloquence and strength. He is forgiving and understanding

of sincere lovers who have transgressed society's moral codes. If their passion is strong enough, it produces a purifying flame and absolves them from unfounded prejudice.

In his attitude toward love, as many critics have pointed out, Mercier was greatly influenced by Prévost and La Nouvelle Héloïse, and, in addition, his plays reflect the popular tearful comedy of Nivelle de la Chausée. Mercier also strongly admired the love-duty dichotomy of Corneille's theater and its stoical characters. Thus, Mercier was somewhat torn between characters who represented clearly good and evil as stereotypes and those who had more facets to their personality. The latter experienced more fully a sort of pre-romantic anguish and often a longing for death to alleviate their agony. On the one hand Mercier was writing as a calm, rational moralist. On the other, he allowed his imagination to soar and his sentiments to pour forth.

For this study, a distinction has been made between the plays depicting the power of evil love and libertinage and those in praise of purifying love. First to be examined is that most awesome monster: evil love.

Evil love in Mercier's view was any strong passion

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[1] For full plot résumés, c.f. Léon Béclard, Sébastien Mercier, pp. 221-342.

which consumed the rational forces of its victim. The result might be parental disobedience, disruption of the marital institution, seduction of innocent women, or even devastation of an individual's mental well-being and capacity to work for the good of society. In dire instances, it engendered grave crime and disrupted society's basic institutions. For these reasons it had to be corrected, and Mercier felt this could be done through the play.

Mercier's first play (Jenneval, 1769) was an adaptation of Lillo's popular London Merchant (1731). Into this first dramatic effort Mercier threw all of his moralistic talents. A young man, Jenneval, had been led astray from his upright life and ideal girlfriend by Rosalie, a conniving, sophisticated woman of the world. As forceful and important as the play itself is Mercier's preface. He was compelled to declare at length his dramatic purpose:

> Echauffé par le désir de donner un Drame utile--j'ai voulu peindre les suites funestes d'une liaison vicieuse, rendre la passion redoutable autant qu'elle est dangereuse, inspirer de l'éloignement pour ces femmes charmantes et méprisables, qui font un métier de séduire, montrer à une jeunesse fougueuse et imprudente que le crime souvent n'est pas loin du libertinage, et dans l'ivresse enfin, on ignore jusqu'à quel point peut monter la fureur.[2]

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[2]Louis-Sébastien Mercier, Théâtre complet, nouv. éd., 4 vols. (Amsterdam: B. Viam; Leyde: J. Murray, 1778-84; Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1970), p. 9.

Such a statement of intent could be applied to most of Mercier's other romantic plays.

Unlike Lillo's protagonist, Jenneval does not murder his miserly uncle. Mercier felt that since he was working for his nation he should not present "moeurs atroces" to the public.[3] In this preface, Mercier continued to speak of the public good. What must a writer do if not combat "les vices qui troublent l'ordre social"? It is up to the century of philosophy to give the public a dramatic form it can understand and characters it can recognize.[4] The theater should be the national school for virtues and duty. In a final exclamation, Mercier revealed his commitment to the drame utile: "Quel art que celui qui, concentrant toutes les volontés, de tous les coeurs peut ne faire qu'un seul et même coeur!"[5]

In the play itself, Jenneval is tormented by his illicit love. He knows he is doing wrong by abandoning his social and familial ties but he is helpless to change. He laments to himself: "Dieu, qu'il est cruel de porter la confusion sur le front et le remords dans le coeur." (I,5) When comforted by his honest benefactor Dabelle, he is self-effacing and ashamed. Mercier supplies Jenneval with abundant lines to express his emotional

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[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., p. 10.

[5] Ibid., p. 11.

imprisonment, such as: "Je me trouve emporté malgré moi." (I,5) In a soliloquy he bemoans his dependency: "Rosalie, laisse-moi respirer. Tu maîtrises tout mon être. Tout ce qui n'est pas toi n'a plus d'empire sur mon âme." (I,6) Instead of finding happiness, he has lost himself and longs for the "calme délicieux" he had with the innocent Lucile. However, delighting in his own consuming suffering, he tells a friend: "Lorsque notre coeur rencontre l'objet heureux qui le captive; ami, c'est le Ciel qui l'amène sous nos regards pour achever notre bonheur." (II,6) From this emotional stage, he finally progresses to one of uncontrolled shame. When a murder of his uncle is plotted, he admits: "Le regard des hommes n'est plus rien pour moi." (IV,6) He is another Des Grieux led astray by Manon Lescaut.

Jenneval's temptress, however, has not the redeeming qualities of her literary predecessor. She does not appear to love Jenneval in the least. She is blatantly using him and plots his undoing with her male accomplice. Ironically, this woman who represents the evil that society can perpetrate is also herself a victim of society. She recognizes that the world "pardonne tout hors les ridicules, et la pauvreté est le plus grand à ses yeux." (II,3) She feels she must work within the wicked system to survive. The nation is divided into those who lend and

those who borrow, and there is no doubt on which side she would rather be. At first, Rosalie is evil but charming. As the play progresses she becomes a mere cardboard representation of the evil enchantress. When Jenneval resists her requests, she fears she has lost her technique and power. Eventually, she resembles Lady MacBeth in her intense evil and demands that Jenneval kill his uncle. Jenneval at last sees the wickedness on her face: "Quelle joie extraordinaire brille sur ton visage!" (IV,7) His amorous disillusionment is complete: "Quoi, tu connais l'amour, et tu peux être barbare!" (IV,7)

Dabelle, the father of Lucile, a wise man with whom Jenneval lives, is the constant voice of the good conscience that parries each of Jenneval's tortured lines: "Si les passions nous égarent, la voix d'un ami peut nous remettre dans le sentier que notre aveuglement abandonnait." (I,5) Elsewhere he states in a compassionate manner that virtue does not mean just <u>not</u> commiting faults, but also <u>repairing</u> those already commited. (I,5) He begs leniency of the cruel uncle when discussing Jenneval's problem: "Chaque faute doit être appreciée d'après l'âge, le caractère." (III,2) He states judiciously in the same scene: "Il faut mesurer la chûte d'après les dangers qui environnent la jeunesse." (III,2)

When the play ends, all is well. Jenneval has refused to kill his uncle and is taken back into the fold.

He has finally recognized and conquered "cette fièvre des passions, ce délire d'un coeur réduit au désespoir." (V,4) He abruptly takes Lucile as his fiancée because, he tells her, "c'était vous que j'adorais." (V,4) To Dabelle, the forgiving advisor, Jenneval admits, "Tout me fait sentir qu'auprès de vous le sentiment de l'amour surpasse même celui du respect." (V,4) As a final touch, Bonnemer, Jenneval's guardian, explains to him: "Tu verras quelle différence il y a d'un amour bien placé, à celui dont il faut rougir." (V,4)

The play is representative of Mercier's early, successful efforts at moralistic drama. Dabelle and Rosalie are the two moral extremes and Jenneval is emotionally floundering between them. His character, fully described and believable, although extreme, is indeed real and particularly evocative of the nineteenth century romantics. There are many suspenseful passages when Jenneval knowingly continues to be influenced by Rosalie. Although she is the evil character, her depiction at the beginning of the play is still vague. At the end, Mercier "proves" that evil love is destructive, pure love is best, and that a fatherly love is even more important than respect.

In 1734, Abbé Prévost explained the success of Lillo's <u>London Merchant</u>. In his article "George Barnwell

abroad", L. M. Price paraphrases Prévost, saying that "such a success proved either that it was a literary work of high order or that it quite precisely indicated the taste of the nation which admired it so passionately."[6] The latter was true for Mercier. He wrote what the provincial Frenchmen believed, if not the sophisticated Parisians.

Natalie (1775), Mercier's favorite play, also deals with a man torn between two loves. Here, however, the social question is different and more complex. It is not a clear-cut matter of good and evil but rather one of emotional loyalty after passion has faded and the value of marriage.

De Fondmaire has lived with his common law wife Natalie for eighteen years and has had a child who supposedly died in infancy. He is now enamored with Agathe, the virtuous young daughter of the elderly DeClumar. The social and moral problems center around passionate love without marriage. When young, Natalie and DeFondmaire ran away because of parental opposition to their love. Natalie then chose her lover over her father (her mother was dead). The two lovers then agreed to live out of marriage believing that that institution would kill their passion for one another. DeFondmaire

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[6] L. M. Price, "George Barnwell Abroad," Comparative Literature II, 1950, p. 132.

explains:

> Dans notre ivresse nous avons méprisé le titre d'époux, comme une chaîne servile inventée par la défiance et faite pour des amants vulgaires: une tendresse libre plaisait à l'orgueil de nos amours. (I,6)

They were successful until DeFondmaire was struck with an ardent, inexplicable love for the youthful Agathe. As in Jenneval's case, this new love is sudden, all powerful, and unreciprocated. DeFondmaire feels guilty about abandoning the faithful Natalie, but plans to marry Agathe nonetheless. He tells Natalie: "Accuse le destin: il a préparé cet événement; il m'a conduit ici." (II,5)

DeFondmaire, who is not an unsympathetic character, is wise, polite, cultured, and charming. For that matter, all the characters are sympathetic and refined. It is Mercier's intent to present rationally and fairly all sides of the social situation.

The reader becomes more interested in this specific question when he learns that Mercier himself had a common-law wife for twenty-two years, the mother of his three children, whom he married three months before his death. It seems incongruous that such a moralist would behave in this manner. However, Mercier's moralizing is directed at love and emotional questions as they effect social institutions. It must also be mentioned that his Homme Sauvage was a direct influence on Chateaubriand's René and that Mercier preferred primitive, natural love to society's

contrived love games.[7] Thus, at the outset of the play one wonders how Mercier will resolve his moral and emotional dilemma.

The relations between DeFondmaire and Natalie are presented to the audience as he talks to his valet of ten years. Verberie lauds Natalie and "sa conduite, sa tendresse, son attachement fidèle." (I,6) DeFondmaire expresses for Natalie "l'estime, l'amitié, la reconnaissance." However, for Agathe he feels:

> un charme inconnu, invincible, nouveau, quelque chose de plus doux, de plus pénétrant, un désir de la voir, de l'entendre, de la rendre heureuse, de vivre sans cesse à ses côtés. (I,6)

The audience can sympathise with this man. His love is pure and he is its victim. When confronted by the rejected, swooning Natalie, he sighs: "Je ne sais où je suis et la mort est aussi dans mon sein." (II,6)

While DeFondmaire claims to be the victim of destiny, Natalie is the character who undergoes the most emotional agony. She is the victim of a love turned whimsical after eighteen years. With her, Mercier describes a woman tortured by love as was Jenneval. Like him, she begins to feel remorse for her social transgressions. She begs for mercy and tenderness: "Le véritable amour ennoblit la tendresse." (II,5) She now feels it was up to her to have insisted on marriage:

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[7] Gilbert Chinard, "Quelques origines littéraires de René," PMLA XLIII (1928), p. 288-302.

"...j'en suis punie, rigoureusement punie...les lois ont des motifs inconnus à l'imprudence." (II,5) Mercier underlines the efficacy of marriage by pointing out how DeFondmaire has ruined her life: "Vous avez tout détruit, ma santé, mon repos, mon bonheur....le chagrin va consumer le reste." (II,5) She continues to blame herself in front of the charitable Agathe: "L'amour m'aveugla jusqu'à me faire regarder comme superflues ces lois solennelles qui épurent la tendresse." (III,1) She now knows that illegitimate love brings with it unfaithfulness.

DeClumar, the estranged father of Natalie, speaks of her youthful error: "Victime crédule, et malheureuse, elle n'a vu le précipice qu'en y tombant." (I,1) He has the same type of understanding words to give to Agathe regarding love and marriage:

> Une tendresse raisonnée et tranquille est bien préférable à ce sentiment aveugle qui dénature tous les objets et qui finit bientôt lui-même par s'éteindre. (II,2)

One recognizes in him Jenneval's advisor. His sometimes lengthy speeches are vital to the play and to Mercier's concept of love in marriage. As Mercier's spokesman, he tells Agathe of the wonders of a love which approaches friendship. One particularly enlightening passage must be cited in its entirety:

> Il [amour] préserve le ciel de ces agitations furieuses que l'orgueil des hommes veut faire passer dans le sein d'un sexe timide pour mieux l'abandonner ensuite au désespoir de s'être

> vu trompé. L'amour secoue le joug de la raison, et c'est là ce qui le rend dangereux. Il a porté ses ravages jusque dans la paisible union de la tendresse conjugale. Celle-ci doit être plus douce qu'impétueuse, plus ferme que passionnée, plus égale qu'exclusive, elle ne t'arrachera point des soupirs douloureux... L'amitié est plus proche du bonheur que l'amour, et l'estime est le noeud le plus solide qui puisse enchaîner deux coeurs. (II,2)

Here Mercier is advocating friendship as superior to love in marriage because friends are happier than lovers. It is pragmatic, realistic advice, worthy of Diderot and Voltaire. However, until Mercier not many French playwrights had felt it necessary to tell this to their audiences. It is told as if by one who had experienced the rigors of passion and who felt that the calm was preferable to the storm.

In Jenneval, the forces were obviously polar: evil love versus pure love. In Natalie, it is less symmetrical. Mercier has used DeClumar to advocate sane friendhip in marriage while Natalie herself has seen the benefits of that social institution. For both, it is assurance against the whims of amorous passion. In the final scenes, DeFondmaire is moved by Natalie's nostalgic pleas. He declares: "Amour, amitié, estime, tendresse, tout me rend à toi." (IIII,5) For Mercier in such instances, the word "amour" is seldom used without an accompanying "amitié," "estime," etc. Real love is more than "amour." It is all of these qualities. Finally, DeFondmaire seconds all of DeClumar and Natalie's praises

of marriage: "Ah, combien peut devenir coupable celui qui s'écarte un seul instant et des moeurs et des lois." (IV,4) With such confessions, the characters end the play with "une scene muette et attendrissante" à la Diderot.

What seems hard to believe is the facility with which the tortured lovers return to reason. That DeFondmaire could be cured of his inexplicable passion for Agathe is only possible when he learns that she is his long lost daughter. His love is explained as a cri de sang. Natalie is able to give her lover up tearfully only because she has such a selfless love and wishes him happy at her expense. Mercier's lovers are eloquent and forceful and his conclusions are quick and neat. However, there is an awkward link between the two. As Majewski wrote in his Preromantic Imagination of L.-S. Mercier, Mercier goes so far in describing the lovers' passions "...that the moral conclusions of the 'drame bourgeois' appear eloquently inadequate and artificially imposed."[8] Majewski stated earlier in his study that Mercier had gone rather far "in presenting the attraction of illegitimate passion and impossible love, contrary to society's conventions, but justifiable because of their intensity of feeling."[9]

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[8]Henry F. Majewski, The Preromantic Imagination of Louis-Sébastien Mercier (New York: Humanities Press, 1971), p. 184.

[9]Ibid., p. 109.

In 1772, three years before Natalie, Mercier wrote Le Faux Ami. This Tartuffe play dealt specifically with the marital institution and was more stylized than the later Natalie. Less focus was placed on love than on marriage, and the structure was triangular with the husband Merval on one side, the bachelor Juller on the other, and Mme Merval in the middle. A corollary to the marriage concern was masculine libertinage.

This realistic though trite look at French marriage portrays a husband and wife who quarrel over small things but who still love one another. After a squabble, Merval asks: "Si je ne l'aimais pas, mon coeur éprouverait-il le tourment qui le déchire?" (I,1) He confides in the hypocritical Juller who has invaded his home in hopes of surreptitiously alienating the couple and seducing the wife.

Like Rosalie in Jenneval, Juller is depicted as evil from the start and even describes himself that way. He goes to parties all night and tries to inspire envy in Merval. He boasts of his social prowess to Merval's provincial cousin Nerville and tells him the joys of city life:

> Soupers fins, rendez-vous; doubles intrigues menées de front et filées à bas bruit; désespoir de femmes, leurs plaintes, leurs jalousies, leurs lettres, leurs querelles..." (I,2)

He might indeed be a character from Les Liaisons Dangereuses. He constantly reminds Merval that fidelity is monotonous: "Que n'as-tu préféré ce bal étincellant à l'uniformité du lit conjugal?" (I,2) When not giving marital advice to Merval, he boastfully instructs Nerville in the ways of wooing. It is more convenient to love married women. One must banter with them, tease them, and ridicule their prudery. All women want to be loved and to have admirers. Any woman can be seduced. "Et tout cela n'est qu'un jeu....Il faut être de son siècle: l'esprit dominant fait loi." (I,3) Juller, lacking any of the reticence of Tartuffe, will tell anyone: "L'amitié, la religion, l'honneur...ces conventions humaines sont des conventions factices; et le coeur, né libre, ne sait pas les reconnaître." (I,3) He even reveals his modus operandi to Nerville: become a family friend, become secret confident of both spouses, know how to arouse arguments, console each partner, dominate the woman while remaining the man's friend. (II,4) Mercier has simply negated all of his own beliefs in the mouth of this braggadocio monster.

Besides having these clandestine talks with Merval and Nerville, Juller also tries to convince Mme Merval of the evils of marriage. He predicts that of 1,000 marriages, at the end of the year one-half are only barely united by esteem and friendship. (I,4)

Women should not place their happiness in a husband because they are all unfaithful.

Juller's opposite is the young, naive idealist Nerville who listens with awe, unbelieving. Nerville's replies reflect Mercier's response to Juller's blatant provocations. He is in love with Mlle Corbelle, Mme Merval's cautious sister, and he wishes to marry her. Marriage is "un frein nécessaire, utile à la société, fait pour assurer à chacun son bonheur en paix, et surtout sans remords." (I,3) Nerville cannot hold back a declaration of his burning passion to Mlle Corbelle: "Il e'exprime dans ma voix, mon geste, mes regards....Tout décèle un amant passionné, vrai, sincère." (II,1) Even more important is his statement, and Mercier's, that:

> l'hymen, de toutes les institutions, est la plus sainte et la plus digne d'être observée. (II,2)

Mercier could not express himself more clearly. Anyone who tries to disrupt marriage is a curse on society. Nerville shows the same amorous eloquence and exuberance as Mercier's other lovers. He realistically recognizes some stormy days in marriage but believes that serene days outnumber the bad. Perhaps he alone has faith that Merval will not be unfaithful: "Vous ne savez pas combien l'hymen a de puissance sur un coeur vertueux. Il peut s'égarer; mais il revient plus tendre." (II,2) It might seem strange that Mercier has used the youngest,

most inexperienced character as his wise spokesman. His wisdom is mixed with a stimulating, ardent first love.

From the beginning of the play, Mme Merval does not take Juller seriously because she sees him for what he is. For Mercier, she is the ideal loving wife. Nerville, to point out her rare qualities, compares her to other women who:

> ont toutes un caractère d'effronterie qu'elles veulent en vain couvrir d'une modestie simulée. Leur artifice perce, leur âme échappe dans leurs regards tantôt hardis, tantôt froids ou dédaigneux. (I,3)

Thus for Mercier pure love necessitated a pure character, unknown to society women. When Mme Merval feels her marital relationship weakening, she asks tearfully: "Qui sera mon ami, si ce n'est mon époux?" (I,4) She begins to believe reluctantly that Merval wants a separation. Like Natalie, she fears her constant tenderness has tyranized her husband. However, she still sees the evil of Juller and wants to unmask the villain. When he declares his love, she rebukes him immediately: "Vous ne regardez pas comme un crime de la plus grande noirceur de dérober à un ami l'affection et la fidélité de sa femme." (III,5) Juller believes someone else must be listening since it is only in public that one is so noble. She continues that his kind are the plague of society and the authors of all its disorders (III,5).

As in Mercier's other plays, Le Faux Ami has a rapid dénouement. The Mervals have their seven year old son return from boarding school where he was sent at Juller's suggestion. Juller is unmasked and Mlle Corbelle gives a closing speech about scandalous bachelors who try to corrupt the purest morals of society while violating the virtues which constitute its charm and honor. (III,11)

In this play, love is equated with friendship and stability in marriage. Wild bachelorhood, its opposite, is portrayed as society's worst enemy. The characters, particularly Juller, are undeveloped stereotypes. Nerville, though plainly Mercier's spokesman, has a little more depth to his character, probably since Mercier so enjoys painting passionate young lovers.

In 1772, Mercier described a similar type of debauchery and evil passion in L'Indigent. This play also deals with numerous other social issues to be examined in a later chapter. An extremely poor brother and sister, Joseph and Charlotte, live in a wretched hovel and weave day and night, striving to earn enough money to free their father from debtor's prison. Theirs is a strong, pure love which seems to modern readers to verge on the incestuous. Joseph tells Charlotte: "Le seul bonheur de ma vie est de t'avoir pour soeur." (I,1) The idea of his one day marrying saddens Charlotte, but she vows to

live with him and his wife whom she will take as her sister. She, however, cannot bring herself to marry: "je n'ai que toi dont le caractère aurait pû me rendre heureuse." (I,1) Since her early youth he has been her protector, friend, guide, and advisor. (I,2)

The diabolical character of this play is DeLys, a young, rich libertin. He is lazy, pampered, and surrounded by mirrors and perfume. He has seen Charlotte from his window and must have her. He has no doubt that: "la morale la plus farouche se tait à la voix de l'or." (II,1) He is similar to the scheming Juller of Le Faux Ami and carefully plots his amorous strategy. Mercier devotes much time to describing this rogue, his clothes, dwelling, nightly amusements, and petty selfishness. The spectator learns that DeLys has a still long-lost sister from whom he is nervously guarding his inheritance.

The moral tone and stage are carefully set for the meeting of good and evil. DeLys offers Joseph money to release the father from prison. The ever-alert Charlotte recognizes it as a compromise of her honor and vociferously rejects the gift: "Je n'envie point cette grande aisance où l'on oublie tout, où l'on s'oublie soi-même." (II,5) Like Mme Merval, she is not for one moment even slightly tempted to relax her morals. Mercier has made these two women strong, uncompromising and righteously vocal. DeLys

comments in an ironical way: "Elle parle comme Pamela." (II,5)

DeLys, who is less collected than the older, experienced Juller, in the heat of the argument grabs Charlotte and bursts forth with passionate language. His tyranizing love has turned him into a frantic beast and has made him ridiculous in his frenzy. Charlotte too is overwrought and fires at him with a handy shotgun. The action and drama of this play far surpass those previously discussed.

Remi, Charlotte's father, has already been retrieved from prison and she tells him he must return since his release money was detrimental to her honor. He agrees: "...plutôt mourir, elle et moi, que de souffrir son infamie." (III,3)

At this point, Mercier felt it necessary to portray DeLys as less evil and more acceptable. Though not repentant yet, he does propose marriage to Charlotte. A second change occurs--one which the spectator was expecting: Remi announces that Joseph and Charlotte are not brother and sister. At this, DeLys, suspecting that Charlotte is his sister, demonstrates again his vile selfishness and sends word to his lawyer to expedite the inheritance process.

Mercier has compounded DeLys's crime of love of

sensual pleasure with love of money. Charlotte is likewise doubly virtuous because she rejects illicit love and corrupting wealth. She also demonstrates a charitable forgiveness; she does not want to dishonor her real brother with a court suit for the inheritance.

After a shaming, moral lecture by the wise judge, DeLys sees his faults and repents. His evil passion has jousted with pure, uplifting love and has lost. Hugging Remi, he exclaims: "Voilà le premier vrai plaisir de ma vie; je l'ai senti dans vos embrassements." (IV,6)

This play was similar to the others discussed in its didactic message. The evils in society can be eliminated when opposed by staunch morals based on edifying love. DeLys was redeemed morally and other members of society could likewise be made to leave their evil ways. Particularly interesting in this play is the platonic love between Joseph and Charlotte. Although they turn out to be unrelated, Mercier has described an emotional and spiritual sibling relationship that evokes the works of Chateaubriand and that sympathetically and unabashedly advocates strong fraternal affection.

Before leaving plays involving rogues, a quick examination should be made of Charles II, roi d'Angleterre, en certain lieu. This five act comedy, said to be by "un Disciple de Pythagore", was written in 1789 and

dedicated to "Jeunes princes." The rogue in this play happens to be a king. He is not evil, just not sufficiently moral. Mercier tells in the preface that Charles II was so debauched that he sold Dunkerque to France "...car les catins tiennent plus qu'on ne le pense aux grandes et modernes révolutions des états."[10]

One wonders if Mercier, who is light, witty, and often flippant in this unusual play, is describing himself in the character of Rochester: "J'ai étudié le coeur en baîllant, la ville en grondant, les amis en pleurant, les livres en méprisant." (I,4) The play has to do with a plot by the Duchesse and Rochester, the king's friend and an experienced courtesan, to cure the king of his unfaithfulness. Rochester lures the king to a house of ill repute where he is ultimately tricked, shamed, and temporarily cured of his amorous wanderings.

In spite of a fast moving, rather shallow plot, the play concerns the evils of unfaithfulness. Equally interesting is Mercier's account of the prostitutes' profession. He sympathetically describes the burdens placed on them by a sick society. Most of the women are blasé, jaded, and conniving. They have had to play the

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[10]Louis-Sebastien Mercier, Charles II, roi d'Angleterre, en certain lieu, comédie très-morale, en cinq actes très-courts, dédiée aux jeunes princes; et qui sera représentée, dit-on, pour la récréation des Etats Généraux, par un Disciple de Pythagore (Venise, 1789), p. viii.

role that a frivolous society demands of them--a society of impure, superficial love. One of the women, Judith, explains: "...on prend pour l'amour ce qui n'est que le besoin d'aimer." (II,3) However, the woman in charge believes the prostitutes' love is preferable to that of society women:

> On ne connaît pas ici les petits soins, ces assiduités, ces fadeurs, ce mélange ennuyeux qui file les étérnelles journées des amants vulgaires, ni ces refroidissements, ces ruptures, ces explications qui consument les jours d'un oisive et folle jeunesse, mais qui ne doivent pas occuper des hommes nés pour remplir les devoirs de la société. (III,2)

The king, like Juller, DeLys, Jenneval, and DeFondmaire, feels a victim of his own passion. He is powerless to control himself: "Mais quand on se croit le plus à l'abri des coups de l'amour, il nous garde un dernier trait contre lequel on se trouve sans défense." (II,1) Nonetheless, he is abruptly cured as were the others and feels a certain chagrin. The morning after the incident, the following dialog occurs:

> Charles: Quel est cet homme qu'on a mis au pilori?
>
> Le Chancelier: Sire, c'est parce qu'il a composé des libelles contre vos ministres.
>
> Charles: Le grand sot! que ne les écrivait-il contre moi....on ne lui aurait rien fait. (V,1)

Such a play was trivial, but did show Mercier's same ideas of unreasonable love as a social problem and

capable of being "cured." As in the case of Jenneval's Rosalie, it showed the women as victims of society even though they aided in perpetuating the system. They were not the malady, only its symptoms.

One last look at the evils of love has to do with jealousy and the detriment it is to the smooth functioning of individuals and society. Molière was published in 1776, then shortened to a more theatrically feasible La Maison de Molière in 1788. Based on Goldoni's Il Molieré, it purports to be an incident in the life of the famed dramatist. As expected, Mercier has made Molière a spokesman of his own ideas. Molière tells a friend of his love for the theater: "Je l'aime, je l'idolâtre, cet art enchanteur, si utile....et si nécessaire à la société." (I,13)

The preface to this play, like the one to Jenneval, is as important as the play itself. In it Mercier uses Molière as a pretext to discuss dramatic art and its purpose: "car l'art dramatique, rassemblant et parlant à tout un peuple, est une espèce d'instruction publique qui est de la plus grande conséquence dans ses effets."[11] Molière knew that the human heart is interesting to see, precious to seize, admirable to pin down. Mercier defends the drame: since our feelings are mixed, the genre should be also.[12] Regarding a polished style, Molière tells a

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[11]Mercier, Théâtre complet, p. 269. [12]Ibid.

friend: "Quand on s'occupe des masses, sachez qu'on a beaucoup mieux à faire." (II,15)

In this play, Molière is preoccupied with presenting Tartuffe and combatting his censors. However, his great genius is hindered and tormented by the friction of the jealous La Béjart and her young daughter Isabelle whom Molière loves. Molière wants to appease the mother and wed Isabelle when she is older and has maternal approval. Isabelle is too anxious and unhappy to control her emotions.

La Béjart's motives are seldom selfless. She advises Molière to forget this "fantaisie passagère" he feels for Isabelle and later says in an aside: "Que je m'estimerais heureuse, si, à force de soins, je pouvais épouser cet homme illustre et porter bientôt le nom de Molière." (I,12) Not only her jealousy, but also her lack of real love for Molière is to be condemned. When tricked by an evil clergyman into believing that Molière and Isabelle are going to run off after the opening of Tartuffe, she threatens to lock up her daughter for two weeks and shouts to Isabelle: "Apprêtez-vous, ingrate, à sortir de cette maison et pour n'y plus rentrer." (II,9) The pouting mother refuses to act in the play and causes the worried Molière continued distress.

If Molière's love of Isabelle is strong, so is

his passion for the theater. Molière's friend La Thorillière comments on the opposing forces:

> Au milieu des palmes de la gloire, esclave d'un doux regard....Arracher un grand homme au commerce des Muses, l'humilier aux pieds d'une actrice enfant, tourner cette tête qui donne des leçons à l'univers, Amour! voilà ton plus beau triomphe. (III,3)

Molière himself says of Isabelle: "...que m'importe après tout ma gloire et mon théâtre, s'ils servent à rendre cette pauvre enfant infortunée." (IV,11) La Thorillière chides him since he: "s'abandonne, comme un homme vulgaire, aux soins minutieux qu'entraîne une passion amoureuse." (IV,12) Molière defends himself saying that by being in love the writer "descend alors dans le sein propre et en étudie tous les mouvements." (IV,12) (Considering this statement along with all of Mercier's descriptions of enraptured love, he too must have experienced it and descended into his own heart to repaint it.)

After much coaxing of the women, the play is put on and afterwards La Béjart bitterly reproaches Isabelle for the love she has unwillingly demonstrated:

> ...malgré la feinte que tu t'imposes, je t'ai vu exprimer l'amour que tu as pour lui. Tu faisais parler des yeux que tu croyais indifférents. L'accent de ta voix change dès qu'il approche: tu voudrais mentir à ton coeur, et tu ne le peux. (IV,6)

La Béjart becomes a real Fury, name-calling, scolding Isabelle, hurling vicious insults at the innocent, love-struck child. She threatens haughtily to withdraw from

the theatrical troup and ruin Molière. Her wrath is harmful to Molière, to his artistic production, to society which should benefit from such production, and, finally, to her own daughter. She scolds Isabelle: "...ton amour pour Molière t'assure ma haîne, et tu en seras l'objet éternel, tant que tu ne changeras point." (V,6) Such a mother is nearly unbelievable, but Mercier likes his lessons to be understood.

When Isabelle secretly rushes to Molière's study, he does all he can to maintain her honor. Although he loves Isabelle, he is an upright, pure Mercier character and gives the young girl advice: "ce n'est pas assez d'être sage à vos yeux; il faut être irréprochable aux yeux de tous." (V,6) However, the amorous and impetuous Isabelle refuses to leave: "J'ai perdu le repos que je goûtais avant de connaître l'amour." (V,6) When it appears that Isabelle has been discovered and her reputation might be questioned, Molière quickly writes a promise of marriage. He wants to keep the title of a man of honor. "J'en suis jaloux....Je le préfère à tous les titres de bel esprit, de grand écrivain, d'homme de génie." (V,9)

The chief concern of Molière in this play was his useful dramatic career. He struggled to produce the controversial Tartuffe and fought restraining orders,

clerical hypocrites, and pretentious social butterflies. In addition to these difficult encounters, he had to contend with irrational jealousy and his own consuming love for Isabelle. Mercier portrayed him as a tormented genius, a weary lover, and a defender of high moral standards. Mercier had again composed a play with heavy moral predications and efficacious warnings. He had demonstrated his talents at depicting the furies of jealousy and the power of love, emotional ills from which all of society suffers.

The following chapter will discuss edifying romantic love which remedies all of these ills caused by evil passion.

CHAPTER III: THE CONCEPT OF EDIFYING ROMANTIC LOVE

The bourgeois dramas depicting evil love are in contrast with Mercier's plays in which the power of pure, edifying love is described. In these plays, love is passionate, desperate, consuming, but at the same time elevating. It is the same love Natalie felt for DeFondmaire, Jenneval for Rosalie, and Joseph and Charlotte for one another. The difference is that in these plays the lovers use their undiluted emotion to set good examples, improve society, and enlighten parents. Mercier stresses the good of love rather than its detrimental counterpart. Majewski describes at length this powerful emotion:

> It is no longer a sickness or an irrational disorder as it was with Racine's Hermione or Phèdre, but on the contrary an exaltation of spirit and body, an all-encompassing ecstasy which becomes the sole goal of being, in which human sentiment is often elevated towards purity and perfection beyond the possibility of any realization in daily life or marriage.[1]

Frequently, the lovers believe they can only be united in death. It is the sole means they have of escaping the conflicts of a sick society and its stifling hypocrisy and institutions.

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[1]Majewski, The Preromantic Imagination of L.-S. Mercier, p. 100.

One of the first of these emotionally edifying dramas is Olinde et Sophronie (1771). It is reminiscent of Corneille's Polyeucte and Le Cid. In its preface, Mercier says that in spite of the difficulties involved in adapting Le Tasse's second chant of Jérusalem délivrée, "j'en ai été bien dédommagé par le plaisir secret d'abandonner mon coeur à la situation touchante de ces deux amants."[2]

The Christians, led by the elderly Nicephore, are persecuted by the king of Jerusalem, Aladin. Olinde, Nicephore's son, has been fighting with Aladin's army for four years against the Moors and is in good standing, hiding his Christian beliefs. Now, having returned, he is in love with Sophronie, a devout Christian. Only Nicephore knows that she is the daughter of Ismen, the high priest and the evil king's treacherous advisor. The crucial incident in the play is Ismen's plot to assassinate the Christians. He pretends they have stolen a holy scripture, actually having committed the theft himself, and he intends to punish them all. To save her people, Sophronie falsely claims to have done it. To save Sophronie as well as the rest of the Christians, Olinde declares his Christian allegiance and admits to the act. Into this plot is woven Mercier's view of selfless, passionate love. Also included is an unreciprocated love. Clorinde, the princess

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[2]Mercier, Théâtre complet, p. 67.

of Persia, has served as a warrior with Olinde and loves him secretly (resembling l'Infante of Le Cid.)

The evil force which the lovers must combat is Ismen. Mercier describes him as the worst of villains, who easily sways the weak king and constantly plots his treachery.

Olinde, a perfect Mercier hero, tells his father that love has always spurred on his courage in battle. "Mais pourquoi traiter de faiblesse le sentiment le plus précieux du coeur de l'homme?" (II,2) He says his love is a mixture of graces and candor, a rare beauty, a divine modesty.

The innocent Sophronie is a brave Joan of Arc, accepting her martyr's role, but whose lofty thoughts turn continually to Olinde, whom she believes pagan. After she dies, she wants Olinde to be told she thought of him and prayed for his religious conversion. (II,1) When he hears this, Olinde is in ecstacy and rushes to confess: "O mort! moment de joie et de volupté! je mourrai pour elle...O Dieu! je te rends grâce...tu m'aimes...hâte cet heureuse sacrifice!" (II,5)

In the third act, Olinde and Sophronie have a near squabble over who will become a martyr. Sophronie says she confessed for religion, not love. She wants Olinde to save himself for some other task, and comforts

him saying that her soul will remain with him and she will appear in his dreams. They will meet in a better world. (III,6) When Sophronie is alone in the dark, foreboding prison cell, she thanks God: "Olinde est chrétien: je puis l'aimer sans offenser ta loi, l'aimer et mourir." (IV,1)

In the final act, which takes place at the stake, Sophronie still has mystical, elevated thoughts and can imagine herself and Olinde both flying to God's breast. In a similar mystical tone, Olinde wants his breath to leave simultaneously with hers. He is perhaps less exuberant than she and more romantic.

As a seemingly minor character, Clorinde experiences a troublesome, hidden love. She came to Jerusalem not really to serve the king but rather to be with Olinde. She hates the amorous weakness of her sex: "Le vil esclavage où je le vis soumis révolta mon jeune orgueil." (II,7) Now she herself is forced to struggle against "l'oisive langueur qui me fait soupirer." (II,7) Her advisor, like Mercier, says that love adopted by valor marches as an illustrious conqueror. She finally gathers her courage and confesses her love to Olinde only to find that he loves another. Crestfallen, she exhorts herself: "Dompte l'amour, dompte l'ennemi de ta gloire." (IV,7) In the final scene, the spectator

understands why Mercier has used this warrior woman and why it was necessary for her to be in love. Her love for Olinde gave her the strength and courage to convince Aladin of his evil, to slay Ismen and to save the two lovers as well as all the Christians. In a typically rapid surprise ending, Clorinde rushes on stage "semblable à une Divinité guerrière" (V,3) and frees the Christians, warning Olinde that she may some day have to fight against him. Her heroic, noble self effacing love provides an ending that is magestic and moving.

In Olinde et Sophronie, Mercier has depicted a love so pure and powerful that it makes the lovers look forward to death and an idyllic afterlife. They are ready to sacrifice all for one another. However, in many instances the speeches of Sophronie make her appear more interested in glory than in Olinde. She almost jealously wishes to become a martyr. Clorinde's love enables her to achieve something daring and magnanimous.

Another play involving love as it affects politics and kings is Childéric Premier, roi de France (1774). This historical drama was meant to be read and its primary political question will be discussed in a later chapter. Although stressed less in this play, it is love that determines the political events. Childéric, a young, haughty, impetuous king, was forced to leave his

people when they became annoyed and upset at his childish ways. He served in the army of Thuringe, proving himself worthy and honorable. While in exile, he fell in love with Basine, hiding his real identity from her. Her love uplifted him and enabled him to make a successful comeback as king after five years of wandering.

Childéric's old friend Carloman feels that love has helped Childéric become a more worthy king: "En régnant sur son propre coeur, il saura régner sur celui des Français." (I,1) Basine, his lover, feels that Childéric is now ready: "Il est né pour commander aux humains, comme à mon coeur." (I,5) Like Clorinde in Olinde et Sophronie, she is willing to die in battle to restore the throne to Childéric.

Childéric recognizes the change love has made in him. He tells Carloman:

> Connais celle à qui je dois mes vertus, ce courage moderé que je ne connaissais pas, cette grandeur affable, si nécessaire à mon rang.... Non, jamais tes conseils, la raison, mon exile, mes malheurs, ne m'en ont tant appris qu'un regard de Basine. (II,7)

Here Mercier flatly states that this particular kind of love is far above reason! Its mystical, inexplicable power is superior to man's rationality. For Childéric, Basine is worthy of the gods, and since he loves her, he too approaches the godly: "Les Dieux seront pour moi, puisque je regne dans un coeur si digne d'eux." (II,8)

This idea of amorous love bringing one closer to God will be dealt with later.

At the play's end, Childéric returns to the throne and marries the virtuous Basine. One character predicts that Basine:

> plaidera la cause des sujets, elle portera leurs voeux aux pieds du thrône, et l'obéissance ne sera plus que l'expression facile et naturelle du sentiment et de l'amour. (III,6)

The love described by Mercier is that examined in other plays. However, in this play two new aspects appear: (1) love succeeds where reason and intellect fail, and (2) love brings the lover closer to God. These two important elements will be seen again.

In another historical drama, Portrait de Philippe II, roi d'Espagne (1785), the lovers are less fortunate. Don Carlos, enlightened son of the tyrannical Philippe, and Philippe's wife Elizabeth are willing to die because of their impossible love and their desire to correct the despot. Unfortunately, they do die and their death saddens the king for only a moment.

Don Carlos came to love Elisabeth when she was his intended. Later his own father stepped in. Don Carlos laments the situation: "Est-ce donc ainsi qu'il faut appeler le plus pur, le plus légitime amour qui brûla jamais dans un coeur innocent?" (I,2) His passion is so fierce that he compares it to a volcano: "le

volcan a beau se concentrer dans les entrailles de la terre, ses feux n'en ravagent pas moins la surface." (I,2) He is consumed by this devouring flame in the true Mercier fasion.

Elisabeth shows more courage in the face of this ill-fated love and hopes to use it for a noble purpose:

> C'est en remplissant cette noble tâche qu'en dépit du sort nos âmes peuvent encore être unies, et se consoler mutuellement....Que la renommée de nos vertus adoucisse la rigueur de notre séparation. (I,2)

Like Sophronie, she will be comforted by the nobility of her reputation. Sophronie will martyrize herself and Elisabeth will live exiled from her lover in order to improve the world's ills. Don Carlos can only agree with "cette noble émulation que votre coeur inspire." (I,2) Until the play's end and her death, Elisabeth pleads with Philippe to grant religious tolerance to the innocent. He never gives in and she dies, hoping for a better afterlife with Don Carlos.

As in the Childéric play, politics are the main issue. Nevertheless, Mercier has included pure, virtuous love to contrast with the evils of Philippe's régime. Once again, the spectator sees death as the only answer for impossible, persecuted love. It is not contained in itself but reaches out to ameliorate the world situation.

There are several other plays in which edifying

romantic love appears but in a minor fashion. In the most popular Brouette du Vinaigrier (1775), a rich young woman is in love with her father's poor secretary. They feel an unrequited, ill-fated love, but will remain faithful to one another. Eventually, the financial situation is resolved and all is well. Of all of Mercier's lovers, these have perhaps the least personality and are the most superficial. They are minor characters necessary to the main issue of the drama, but they are void of eloquence or life. Their love is virtuous and idealistic but has none of the vital force of more believable characters.

In Le Libérateur (1797), the case is the same. In this play, written late in Mercier's career, a young woman wishes to marry a man of whom, for economic reasons, her father does not approve. When it is learned he had saved her life, the father graciously gives in. Although these lovers are but cardboard, their love is ideal and has to some extent swayed the father. (Béclard refused even to discuss this play in his Mercier biography, finding that "l'insipidité défie toute analyse."[3]

In Zoé (1782), Mercier writes solely of love. He fills this passion-packed drama with as much extreme emotion as is in any later romantic play or novel. The play has a preface that should be entitled an apology for love. Such a play, states Mercier, is for everyone:

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[3]Béclard, Mercier, note 2, p. 285.

> L'amour est l'âme de la poésie dramatique. Ceux qu n'ont pas aimé, se plaisent néanmoins à connaître les différentes agitations qu'ils auraient pu éprouver. Ceux qui n'aiment plus, goûtent le plaisir que Lucrèce définit si bien, le plaisir de l'homme, qui, calme au port, découvre un vaisseau battu de la tempête. Ceux qui aiment, ajoutent aux traits du poète, et représentent pour ainsi dire, avec ses personnages.[4]

He explains that sweet and tender passions have infinite nuances that he loves to describe. Love brings together all strong and delicate sentiments and is always new to paint. (The reader of Mercier's plays knows this to be a fact!) He terms love "le véritable contrepoison de la débauche," saying that its most beautiful triumph is to "terrasser ce monstre qui prend son masque pour avilir notre âme et obscurcir nos meilleures qualités." The intent of this play is to rescue us from the vice propagated by modern books and to lead us back "aux vertus qui ont toutes leur source dans les lois sacrées de la nature."[5]

This preface could have been affixed to most of Mercier's plays, including all of those in the preceding chapter of this study. A new element that appears is the concept of the sacred laws of nature. Love is natural for Mercier (as seen in Natalie) and is a force to determine and guide society and remedy its corruption.

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[4] Mercier, Théâtre complet, p. 369.

[5] Ibid.

The play's plot is reminiscent of a Cervantes Novela ejemplar. Zoé has run off with her lover Franval and takes shelter in a secluded roadside inn. Franval was at one time approved by her father Saint Maxandre.

Because of a quarrel in which Franval would not admit inferiority in lower classes, Saint Maxandre abruptly and furiously forbade the marriage and threatened to kill Franval. Franval, best friends with Zoé's brother, freed his lover from her carriage on the way to a convent. He was mysteriously made to do it: "Tout-à-coup, quelle révolution dans tout mon être! quel instinct inconnu et puissant me maîtrise." (I,2) The key word here is "instinct."

Franval pours out his suffering to the innkeeper, Mme Gervais: "Elle était née pour moi...Elle est à moi... La nature pour tous deux ne fit qu'une seule âme." (I,1) Like all of Mercier's lovers, his love is much more than "love." "Du premier regard, s'alluma dans mon coeur cette flamme que rien ne peut plus éteindre." (I,2) He does not fear death, only separation. Their love is "une fraternité douce, une confiance inaltérable et pure." (I,2) In his burning and delicious delirium, he exalts in all of the same fiery emotions stifled by Don Carlos in Philippe II.

Mercier feels obliged to state society's opinion in the words of Mme Gervais: "Vous ne pouvez du moins vous dissimuler que vous êtes coupable d'un crime qui offense

et le repos et l'ordre de la société." (I,2) She explains compassionately that love can be strong but reason can also triumph (Mercier is arguing with himself) and advises Zoé to beg her father's forgiveness. In this, she resembles DeClumar in Natalie and Dabelle in Jenneval.

Zoé is similar to Natalie in that she feels a terrible guilt and remorse. Franval can talk of the loftiness of their love, but Zoé is tortured by her conscience. She is even more upset by a dream in which Franval is killed by her father. (Again, the death theme is important.) Furthermore, she knows that God will punish her for disobeying her father. She wants Franval to be realistic (Sophronie wanted Olinde to be realistic). In spite of this, when he leaves in search of an uncle's help, she exclaims: "O Franval! ton amante n'est plus rien, séparée de toi." (I,4) Like Franval, she blames a mysterious force for her error: "Un bras invincible semblait m'entraîner." (I,5) and continues to be upset by the phantoms of her imagination. Yet she also seems to enjoy her agony: "je goûterai une espèce de volupté à être triste et malheureuse." (III,8)

When the father appears at the inn, he is the image of a madman. Mercier wanted to show what a daughter's disobedience could do to a father and, ultimately, to society. Nevertheless, the father is not a sympathetic character. He threatens to burn the inn and

kill the lover. Like La Béjart, he is pitiless when he finds Zoé: "toi que j'aimais, toi que j'ai trop aimée... sois maudite...Que n'es -tu morte au berceau." (II,3)

Zoé's brother shares a moderate, equalizing role with Mme Gervais. Her compassionate experience has taught her what love is, and the young Saint Maxandre seems to know from a mysterious instinct (like Nerville in Le Faux Ami). He tries to reason with his irate father:

> vos volontés trop absolues devaient sentir qu'elles échoueraient contre le pouvoir de l'amour; vous avez voulu briser le plus invincible des liens. (II,4)

Zoé's heart cannot be changed by breaking it with sadness. Even Zoé tells her father: "mon coeur n'a pu changer comme le vôtre: voilà tout mon crime." (III,8) In spite of the son's efforts, the father furiously takes Zoé from the inn.

At the news of Zoé's second capture, Franval becomes as irrational as the father. He displays the whole spectrum of amorous exasperation; he tries to stab himself, he criticizes his best friend's efforts as weak and cowardly, he regrets not having killed the father. He is sane enough to beg pardon for his "convulsions de la souffrance." (III,4) If only the three young people could escape to the new world, that is, an idealized world, and live for "l'amitié, la tendresse et l'amour." (III,4)

The final dramatic moment comes when Franval and Saint Maxandre have a tense confrontation. Zoé's disobedience has made the father uncontrollable to the point that he shoots at Franval, not knowing that the ammunition has been removed. Franval then allows himself to plead his emotional case. God will see them:

> ...moi, avec cette flamme pure et sacrée qu'alluma en nous la main du créateur; vous, avec cette haine vile et féroce, qui dégrade l'homme et finit par en faire un assassin. (III,10)

While the father's crimes are those of pride, his are those of love! For Mercier, a crime of love is not a real crime. In fact, "deux amants unis et malheureux deviennent des êtres sacrés à toute la nature." (III,10) In these final speeches, Mercier is eloquently summarizing his views: lovers are a part of nature and approach the godly. As a last dramatic display of his love, Franval puts a pistol to his head, crying: "La mort, ou Zoé." (III,10) With this, the father sees the light, curses his blindness, and blesses the children. Mercier has used all of the characters in the play to convince him.

The love seen in this play is like that of previous plays, but even more so. It is pure, natural, sacred, and capable of softening an irrational father.

It should be mentioned that the lovers in Le Déserteur (1770) merit comparison with those of Zoé.

They have the same sentimental qualities and exuberance. Mercier uses all of his eloquence to paint their desperate love and tragic separation. This separation seemed so tragic to Marie Antoinette that she persuaded Mercier to give the play a happy ending in a later version. In this play, the love plot, although deeply romantic and moving, is relatively minor and the play will be discussed at length in a later chapter.

A play which nearly equals Zoé in passion, exuberance, loftiness and explicitness of purpose is Mercier's adaptation of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliette: Les Tombeaux de Verone (1782, the same year as Zoé). It is revealing of Mercier's ideas on love and the theater to see how he changed this well-known masterpiece. He has created in Benvoglio a "médecin-naturaliste," whose moral declamations and explanations of true love were not in the original version. The ending, too, is different, with the lovers being united while still alive. As Mercier knew, his bourgeois audience wanted happy endings and would be more disposed to heed the moral of the story if the ending were happy. This play is shorter and eliminates many of Shakespeare's scenes with minor characters. The action is limited strictly to the lovers' declamations and Juliette's false death ordeal. In such a way, Mercier abridged the original play and focused entirely on the

consequences of ill-fated love.

Romeo and Juliette are the same youthful, passionate, pure lovers as before as they sigh and suffer and eloquently convey their emotions. Juliette says: "le cri douloureux, longtemps renfermé, malgré nous perce et s'échappe." (I,2) Theirs was a love at first sight, like that of most of Mercier's lovers: "Nos coeurs dans un moment se sentirent, se touchèrent, s'unirent." (I,2) The young Juliette knows the mysterious power of her love:

> L'amour, comme la pensée, invisible dans son essor, n'est point borné par les limites matérielles. L'amour vole et les barrières tombent. (I,2)

For Juliette, who is willing to die for her love, this has nearly become a death cult: "Pour me livrer toute entière à l'amour, je me suis dévouée à la mort: maîtresse absolue de mon coeur et de mes destinées." (I,2) She tells her mother that a stifled love is more violent than a free one. (II,1)

Romeo, in turn, speaks not only of his love but of everyone's: "Il y a peu d'hommes parmi la foule vulgaire, capables d'apprécier les passions fortes et courageuses." (I,3) Like Mercier, Romeo's love gives him an optimistic hope in mankind: "J'aime trop...pour croire que les malheureux mortels veuillent hafr: ils apprendront enfin à aimer." (I,3) He too speaks of the inevitable link between love and death; one could not love without

envisaging the term where all ends. (I,3) When he believes Juliette to be dead, he exclaims: "Quoi, la mort éteint aussi l'amour? Non, ce feu sacré nous survit, il fait partie de notre âme." (V,1)

As has been seen, Mercier frequently discusses his thoughts on love, often in prefaces to his plays. In Tombeaux he has given Benvoglio the role of spokesman. His speeches are quite important to a solid understanding of Mercier's views. It will be seen in a later chapter that these broad views provide a link between all of Mercier's plays whether dealing with earthly love or spiritual love of God. Benvoglio explains to Juliette:

> On ne vit qu'autant que l'on aime....L'on n'est heureux qu'autant qu'on goûte le bonheur de ses semblables. Eh! peut-on mieux jouir ici-bas que par la félicité d'autrui?... L'amitié pure et sainte qui m'unit à vous, est un lien trop au-dessus de la faible conception des mortels, pour qu'ils l'apprécient. (II,7)

He gives thanks to the kind being who bestowed on him "cette sensibilité précieuse qui m'attache à tous les êtres que l'amour rend infortunés." (II,7) If hate is the god of wicked souls, his god is love: (II,7) Mercier has carried "sensibilité" a step beyond. Love is supreme, sacred; a god. Benvoglio has built a temple to love at the bottom of his heart; "c'est là que je lui ai voué un culte éternel et inviolable." (II,7) This love of Mercier's is indeed a cult and it is the pinnacle of

perfection: "L'amour marque la perfection sublime de notre être, ou son dernier avilissement." (II,7) It is what leads us to virtue "parce que le coeur s'améliore par l'exercice précieux du sentiment." (II,7) Mercier, in all his rhetorical passion, seems to contradict himself when Benvoglio exclaims: "Amour! O sentiment plein de raison...." (II,7) In earlier plays, such as Childéric, Mercier claimed that love was above reason.

At the end of the play, Benvoglio reunited the mourning families, giving them a severe lecture. Their children have demonstrated to them that "les calamités, les désastres sont la suite inévitable des passions furieuses et désordonnées." (V,4) (Love is not included in this category.) Juliette is indeed alive and Romeo tells her: "c'est toi qui métamorphoses les coeurs." (V,4) Truly, it is Mercier who wants to change hearts and who has tried so energetically to do so in this play.

Les Tombeaux is especially important, not so much for reiterating the aspects of love seen elsewhere, but for Benvoglio's role: his passionate love of humanity and his sensitive understanding of romantic love which seem to blend into a succinct summary of Mercier's own feelings and the concept of romantic love in his other plays. In "Sébastien Mercier et son théâtre," André Monchoux comments on Benvoglio's line: "l'amour va

régner! Que de maux son empire universel n'épargnerait-il pas à la terre." He says that this line "confond un peu deux sortes différentes d'amour, et surtout le ton du drame avec le ton d'un sermon."[6] This is doubtless true, but for Mercier all aspects of love are indeed confused and interwoven.

As is now becoming evident, there is a progression in Mercier's concept of love (similar to the Platonic ladder) with romantic love as its base, then familial and humanitarian love, and finally a mystical union with God (in the fashion of the early Spanish mystics). Romantic love as it was seen in this chapter is a necessary ingredient in the formula.

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[6]André Monchoux, "Mercier et son théâtre," Quaderni francesi (1970), p. 417.

CHAPTER IV: THE CONCEPT OF FAMILIAL LOVE

As would be expected of a moral, bourgeois dramatist and follower of Diderot, Mercier's theater puts great emphasis on the value of familial love. Like romantic love, it is a strong element necessary in assuring a virtuous society. While describing familial love, Mercier focuses on such topics as arranged marriages versus marriages for love, inequities of the judicial system, religious intolerance, personal pride and social prejudice, moral corruption, and problems in the military system.

This chapter will consider first a child's relation with an angered parent, then an understanding parent's love for his child and its consequences. Next will be discussed the love of brothers and more distant relatives. Finally, familial love and its place in Mercier's concept of love in general will be considered.

When Mercier depicts parents angry with their children it is often because of the child's romantic love and conflict of loyalties.

In Zoé, Saint Maxandre, once the most loving of fathers, turns tyrant. When his daughter flees with her lover and his emotions reach a near unbelievable extreme

and violence, he curses and threatens her life. His jealousy is as wrathful as any lover's. Since his wife's death, Zoé has received all of his love and affection, and now he cannot share her with a lover who has wounded his social pride. He speaks as a rejected suitor: "Il m'a ravi ton coeur qui était mon bien, que j'avais formé, qui devait m'appartenir tout entier." (III,8) He cannot be moderate: "Modéré...quand on vous arrache le coeur, quand je suis sur un brasier ardent qui me dévore!" (II,2) In all his fury, he also disclaims his son and hopes for his own death. This death may be the doing of Zoé and the "poison amer que tu as versé dans mon coeur." (III,8)

During all of this, Zoé has been a model, repentant daughter. She has begged her father's forgiveness and, though anguished, has chosen obedience to him over her lover Franval. Her love for this irrational father seems primarily respectful; his love for her is jealous and fearful.

When discussing dramatic art in Du Théâtre, Mercier wrote:

> L'amour et la poésie exigent les mêmes transports. Ces moments doivent être du feu, ou ils deshonorent l'âme insipide qui les appelle pour les éteindre.[1]

In the case of Zoé, such a description of love and its purpose also applies to parental love. It is no

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[1]Mercier, Du Théâtre, p. 193.

ordinary love; it is love perhaps more ardent than believable.

At the end of the play, the father has recognized that pride caused his blindness. His struggle with Zoé was the result of a quarrel with Franval and his own refusal to admit that the lower classes could be his equal. When he recovers from his delirium, he is too ashamed to even hug his daughter. This enlightened father says he must become more happy with himself before he can look at her. Thus, a daughter can love her father and lover at the same time, if each love is calm and rational.

A similar father-daughter team is seen in Les Tombeaux de Verone. Juliette is in love with Romeo whom family prejudice has rejected, and she too must decide between romantic love and filial duty. Disobedience seems the only answer for her, and she reluctantly and with much sorrow deserts her father. Like Saint Maxandre's, the father's wrath is violent and unbearable. He seems angered most at being disobeyed and not genuinely sorrowful at losing his daughter's affection. The mother says that he, "peu disposé à écouter les plaintes, à ceder aux gémissements de notre sexe, voudra être obéi." (II,1) He exclaims himself: "Obéissance, entière obéissance, voilà le devoir des enfants." (II,3) Supposedly, he is being strict only for Juliette's happiness: "Je dois

contraindre ma fille, pour la déterminer à son bonheur." (III,2)

Unlike Zoé, Juliette is more outwardly rebellious and resents her master-slave relationship with her father. She does not seem to love him as Zoé did her father. She laments: "Quoi, notre sexe sera donc toujours sous la tyrannie, toujours assujetti à une obéissance muette et passives esclaves." (I[I],6) She is supported in her complaints by Benvoglio whom she considers her real father. He will make up for the inattention which surrounds her. Thus, it appears that Juliette is never really loved by her father, only considered as chattel.

Juliette's mother, on the other hand, is all that a mother should be: warm, loving, sympathetic, lenient. Naturally, Juliette's love for this mother is the same: sincere and theatrically believable. She constantly regrets leaving and deceiving her mother.

When Juliette is supposed dead, her pure love proves to the father that he has erred. He confesses: "Fatale ambition qui me coûterait ma fille, tu m'aurais vendu bien cher tes trompeuses promesses!" (IV,4) Benvoglio, speaking for Mercier, accuses the haughty father and his negative paternal role:

> Vivante, il persécutait, il sacrifiait sa fille; morte, il la regrette, il l'adore.... Telle est la bizarrerie inexplicable du coeur de l'homme quand il s'abandonne aux passions.

> La tyrannie, sous le nom d'autorité paternelle, pèse sur ce sexe aimable. (IV,6)

Juliette's father is moved and prays to God for forgiveness.

The social institution dealt with in both plays was marriage and, in the case of Tombeaux, social prejudice. The poor relations between fathers and daughters pointed out the lack of communication and understanding in society itself. Both sets loved one another, yet were at odds because of extenuating, external forces. When pure romantic love was allowed to speak, it reinstated familial love and understanding.

In Molière, the wrathful parent is La Béjart, Isabelle's mother and Molière's old flame. Mercier has given no hint of La Béjart's love for her daughter. She is jealous of Molière's affections and her own theatrical supremacy. In many speeches, she becomes a shrill Fury, cursing her daughter and revealing herself as heartless and shallow. The depiction of her character is flat and maintains a monotonous, harsh pitch throughout the play. It is hard to imagine this screaming mother as ever loving and warm. She is the female equivalent of Juliette's father.

Meanwhile, Isabelle, true to Mercier's standards, is dutiful and adheres to all of her mother's stringent demands. As with the characters mentioned above, she is unable to communicate or speak rationally to her mother.

Finally, feeling she has no alternative but to deceive her mother, Isabelle sneaks to Molière's room. Molière himself takes the role of wise advisor and mediator, the same as Benvoglio. Finally exasperated with La Béjart's behavior, he lectures to her severely:

> Vous n'avez pas une fille pour la rendre victime journalière de vos caprices. Vous êtes sa mère, j'en conviens; mais le ciel vous l'a donnée pour la traiter avec douceur. Une mère tendre mérite l'obéissance et la soumission de sa fille. Une mère furieuse, emportée, détruit elle-même son autorité, surtout lorsqu'elle s'oppose au choix légitime de son enfant. (IV,8)

His somewhat hasty marriage agreement is an effort to appease the mother and reestablish nature's necessary tie between parent and child. Neither La Béjart nor Isabelle is very realistic, but they provide merely the skeletal play with which Mercier can display Molière's wisdom (and his own).

A completely different social problem is considered through a wrathful father-son relationship in Le Juge (1774). The father, the Count de Monrevel, who has hidden his identity from his son, initiates a court suit against a peasant who owns property at the precise point where he wants to construct a pavilion. When his son the judge decides in favor of the peasant, the Count de Monrevel curses him, slanders him, and threatens to ruin him professionally. He is hysterical and, needless to say, irrational. The son, not knowing this is his

father but accepting him as his previously loving friend and benefactor, refuses to be swayed. He is emotionally distraught, but cannot compromise the rights of humanity even for his own bonds of affection. As in the other plays, the judge's insistance on the truth and the sacred laws of nature eventually enlightens his father. He is led to declare his identity after hearing the peasant praise his son for his virtue. The father is repentant and rekindles his paternal love. This father-son love was painted as strong and respectful at the beginning of the play, then imperilled in the middle. Such a beginning lent more credibility to the dénouement. The love relationship appeared natural and realistic, making more dramatic and poignant the judge's defiant defense of justice. Once again, the social question was inextricably bound to the love relationship, and the two had to be resolved simultaneously.

A play of equal political importance is Le Portrait de Philippe II. This king is a tyrant and Mercier uses the relationship with his son Don Carlos to underline the fact. Their lack of love is important in the play only as it pits good against evil. Don Carlos would like to love his father and cure him of his religious intolerance. However, he can establish neither a satisfactory, understanding relationship for himself nor for Spanish society. His personal cause represents society's

cause in miniature. Mercier, in this case of love lost, represents the whole by a part. Just as Juliette pleaded with her father for tolerance, so does Don Carlos. However, his cause is futile.

In La Destruction de la Ligue ou la Réduction de Paris (1782), the question of religious tolerance and civil war is treated through family relationships and love. A Catholic family is suffering through Henry IV's siege of Paris. They are being starved, in reality because of their own hypocritical leaders. Mercier shows a family scene and the disruption such bureaucratic Catholic hypocrisy can bring to its members. The people are without food and money; family members are pitted against each other. Mme Hilaire, wife of a notable Parisian bourgeois, exclaims: "Guerre malheureuse! tu as brisé les liens les plus chers; le parent repousse son parent, l'ami son ami." (I,3) She says that war divides those who used to love and "ceux qui vivaient sous le même toît dans une tranquille union." (I,3) It is the father Hilaire in this play who becomes irate. His son has cautiously suggested that Henry IV would be tolerant, honest, and good for the nation. Hilaire, a traditional, devout Catholic, can hear nothing of the sort! He disavows his son, calling him an "enfant dénaturé" as well as a heretic. (III,7) The son finds it necessary to leave his cherished father and fight with the Protestants to liberate Paris. Later the mother and

grandmother try to sway the stubborn, infuriated father. As in the preceding plays, the father and son are lovingly reunited when the Protestants have freed the Catholics' political prisoners, among whom is the father. Society's problem has been solved. Again, the poor family ties was not a cause of society's ills, but one of its symptoms. The father and son did love one another and found that religious tolerance would allow this love to continue to exist. The same was true for society as a whole.

Just as Mercier contrasted evil and pure romantic love to make certain points, so he does with poor family relationships and ideal parental and filial love and devotion. Jenneval's substitute father, Mr. Dabelle, is never hostile or belligerent to the suffering youth. His advice is wise and patient. He expects Jenneval to be honorable and punishes him not with wrathful accusations but with signs of disappointment. He resembles Sedaine's Philosophe sans le savoir. It is nothing to love money, but "perdre un coeur sensible et bien né, voilà ce qu'il est important de prévenir." (I,3) He will try to bring Jenneval back to reason:

> Si les passions nous égarent, la voix d'un ami peut nous remettre dans le sentier que notre aveuglement abandonnait. (I,5)

He is, of course, successful in the end and Jenneval is contrite yet jubilant at having been brought to his senses.

Dabelle also has an ideal relationship (in Mercier's eyes) with his daughter Lucile. He wants her to be happy in marriage and is quite perceptive of her emotional changes. He knows it will be hard for her to accept marriage and to leave him, but it will be best. With this father-daughter love, Mercier has slipped into his usual mold. The daughter is obedient and almost subservient, hiding her own feelings in order to please the father. She says: "Je ne me suis jamais trouvé embarrassée avec vous; mais combien de fois vous m'avez émue!" (I,2) Afraid of choosing her own husband, she prefers obedience: "C'est la vertu de mon sexe." (I,2) Thus, for Mercier, ideal father-daughter love consists in a calm, strong, wise affection on both parts and complete obedience and faith on the daughter's part.

Another wise, loving father is found in La Brouette du Vinaigrier. Dominique, a vinegar peddler, loves his son strongly and wants to enable him to marry Mlle Delomer, the "boss's daughter." He has given his son a good education and says: "C'est lui qui est aujourd'hui toute ma joie et toute ma consolation sur la terre." (I,5) Like Dabelle, he is immediately perceptive of his son's moods and asks him: "...as-tu un autre confident, un autre ami plus ancien, plus tendre, plus indulgent." (I,7)

When the young Dominique admits he is in love, the most impressive statement he can make to endear his

lover to his father is: "si vous saviez comme elle aime son père." (I,7) Mlle Delomer is like other Mercier heroines when speaking of her feelings toward her father: "Je l'aime, je crains de l'offenser; et plus je le chéris, plus je tremble de lui résister." (II,2) In turn, her own father has her best interests at heart. He feels he must find her a good husband and provide a decent dowry, even if the system is corrupt.

Dominique fils cannot marry Mlle Delomer because he is too poor. At the end of the play, the vinegar peddler wheels his life savings on stage in a vinegar barrel. The son is a bit embarrassed by the father's clothing and brashness, not knowing the contents of the barrel. However, the father does not leave and reveals the money which is a great surprise to the unsuspecting son, explaining: "A mesure qu'il grandissait, l'amour paternel a fait des miracles, ou plutôt Dieu a béni mon projet." (III,4) It is his intent for the money to "fonder la paix et la sûreté d'une maison où habiteront l'amour et la vertu." (III,5)

The father has done all that he could for the son, educating him and teaching him to be self-sufficient. The son loves his father, but not extremely openly, as Mercier's daughters do. He is obedient to his father, yet is also ashamed of his profession.

In Brouette, Mercier has used a loving father-

son and father-daughter relationship to point out an economic and social lesson. Money means nothing to lovers or to those who love humanity. There are two levels to the story and Dominique's paternal love is enlarged to represent a humanitarian love. If he had had no son, he would have given all his savings away in any case. The play also points out the problem of convenience marriages versus marriages for love, with the latter proving to be the best for society.

A financial question is also treated in Le Libérateur. Ransomet is a prominent banker and cherishes his worthy daughter Antonine. She in turn is very attentive to his needs, bringing him hot chocolate and worrying about his rest, health, and anxieties. However, Antonine, for fear of upsetting her father, has failed to tell him that she was saved from death by Davis and now loves him passionately. Like many other Mercier heroines, she hides her passion from her father for fear of worrying him.

Ransomet, beginning to tire of his reputation as an easy money lender, becomes terribly hard-hearted toward Davis's father who is in debtor's prison and whom he does not know. He also arranges a marriage for Antonine, believing she can do better with such a selected partner: "...nous ne sommes plus dans le siècle des amants; ceux-ci avaient des vertus qui ne sont plus les nôtres." (II,2) However, his intentions toward his daughter are loving, since he does not know the secret of her heart. When he

finds she loves someone, he is delighted and energetically tries to find him. Ransomet impresses on his daughter that he wants to be her confident because he can be the best and most indulgent one.

When Ransomet finally meets Davis, he is greatly impressed by his "piété filiale" and withdraws his financial complaint against Davis's father. All ends well and paternal love has again listened to romantic love. The fact that Davis was so devoted to his own father moved Ransomet to clemency.

In L'Indigent, children's lovefor their father has made them bear all financial hardships and resist all compromising economic assistance. Joseph addresses his father in debtor's prison: "Mais, j'aime encore mieux être ton fils dans la peine, dans l'indigence, que de tenir la vie de ces hommes opulents, dont la conduite me révolte." (I,1) Charlotte, too, cherishes her father and feels he is supremely wise and worthy: "La raison s'exprime pas sa bouche. J'ai tant de plaisir à l'entendre." (I,1) Remi, the father, says of his children: "...leurs tendres soins m'ont fait bénir la pauvreté et l'esclavage." (III,1) This familial love is extremely strong and long-suffering, reminiscent of Diderot's characters. As in La Brouette, it has been contrasted with love of wealth and demonstrates where life's true values should lie.

In 1792, Mercier adapted King Lear for the French stage under the title of Le Vieillard et ses trois filles. The main character is no longer a king but simply a bourgeois. Mercier followed Diderot's prescription and wrote this play to show the "condition" of a father. In the avertissement, he explains the change:

> ...car ce n'est pas comme Roi qu'il nous touche, qu'il nous attendrit dans le délire de sa douleur; c'est comme Homme; c'est comme Père....Il pourra servir de leçon aux Enfants ingrats.[2]

Like Shakespeare's version, the man is not loved by his two older, hypocritical, money-hungry daughters. It is the youngest who shows him what true filial love is. His companion Jones explains to the audience that the old man believes his daughters love him even though he is surrounded by "l'indifférence la plus coupable." (I,1) He eventually recognizes the situation and is disillusioned: "Tout parent crédule et généreux est donc trompé, assassiné par les siens." (II,6) Now he bitterly believes that all is perverted in man's nature.

When the father is finally reunited with the youngest, loving daughter, he envisions in his delirium that she is an angel. Indeed, for Mercier, she is. She says: "Le crime ou l'oubli de mes deux coeurs, je viens l'expier, l'effacer: Je viens accomplir ce qu'elles n'ont

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[2]Louis-Sébastien Mercier, Le Vieillard et ses trois filles. Pièce en trois actes, en prose (Paris: Cercle Social, 1792), pp. 3-4.

pas fait." (III,6) Just as Zoé was a play entirely dedicated to romantic love, so is Le Vieillard a celebration of paternal and filial affection in its most exalted state.

In two plays, this familial relationship is described rather superficially, and the child resembles a deus ex machina, necessary for the play's dénouement. In Le Faux Ami, the parents bring their son home from boarding school in order to save their marriage. The child seems fairly typical, but is clearly only a means to end the play and a pretext for Mercier to discuss education.

In Le Juge, the judge has a very young, obedient daughter who does needle work for him and appears well-mannered before company. Like other daughters, Thérèse has a great esteem and concern for her father: "Je me porte toujours bien, quand je vous vois, car je suis si contente." (II,3) In one scene, the peasant farmer tells the judge: "On reconnaît un digne homme à la révérence de sa petite fille." (III,3) This single line could have provided ample justification to Mercier for including the child in the play. She serves to define her father's character and her upbringing tells something about his values. It seems clear that he loves his daughter, but his love is important to the play only as it adds to his description as an upright man.

Mercier's depictions of brotherly love are convincing, though idealized. Actually, the term

"brotherly love" is deceiving. In two plays, Zoé and Jean Hennuyer, évêque de Lisieux (1772), Mercier describes a pair of lovers and a married couple, respectively. In each play the woman has a very close brother who is perhaps even closer to her lover. In none of the plays examined does Mercier describe a blood-brother relationship between two men. This is a bit strange, considering his love for his own brother and his enthusiasm in praising such a love.

In Zoé, Saint Maxandre fils helps the two lovers in their flight. Franval has faith in his friend: "Son amitié ne ressemble point aux amitiés vulgaires: noble, forte, éclairée, courageuse, elle croîtra dans notre infortune." (I,3) The brother rushes to help them because: "L'amitié sainte et courageuse m'ordonne de me montrer." (II,4) He dramatically pleads their cause to his hardened father. Unable to bend the father with eloquence or sentiment, he grabs Zoé and is willing to die with her: "O soeur si tendrement chérie dès tes plus jeunes années." (II,7) He also states his willingness to die in order to bring the furious, irrational Franval to his senses. Franval apologizes, saying that the three of them can escape to live for love and friendship. Zoé's place "serait d'être assise entre nous deux." (III,4) The two lean against one another and weep together. The brother's moral support and love sustain the lovers in their struggle. Though

indeed different in nature, the brother-sister love and the tie between the two men are almost as strong as the lovers' affection.

In Jean Hennuyer, there is a threesome which resembles the one in Zoé. In this play, all of the Protestants outside Paris seek the protection of the bishop of Lisieux after the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre. Laure is the new wife of Arsenne and sister of Evrard. She is distraught as the play begins because her husband has been in Paris and is late in returning home. Her brother is anxious also. He has been out on the road to Paris frantically and tirelessly searching for Arsenne. A friend Suzanne comments on the two men: "Ils ne sont bien contents que lorsqu'ils se trouvent ensemble; c'est une union aussi rare que charmante." (I,2) When Evrard fears that Arsenne has been killed, he laments: "Si j'ai perdu l'homme que j'aimais, ce frère, ce coeur tendre et généreux, il ne me restera plus au monde qu'à le venger." (II,2) The brother and sister comfort one another in their grief, and when Arsenne returns safely they use their affectionate strength in provoking the outcome of the play.

This brother-sister-husband relationship is rather minor in the play, but once again reveals Mercier's fraternal "sensibilité" -- a sentiment which eventually blossoms into a universal love of humanity.

The final play to be discussed represents familial

love in relation to this blossoming love of humanity. As romantic love was surpassed by duty in plays like Philippe II and Olinde et Sophronie, so is familial love eclipsed by a humanitarian ideal in the powerful Le Déserteur (1770). The humanitarian aspects of the play will receive further mention in the next chapter.

Saint-Franc is the major of a French regiment on the German border. He has been given the terrible task of prosecuting deserters. During the play he encounters his long-lost son Durimel, himself a deserter for seven years. Before finding this son, Saint-Franc had agreed reluctantly to follow his orders, but, he says, "vous ne sauriez imaginer le frémissement que me cause ce sanglant appareil." (II,1) Now, Saint-Franc must make a decision between protecting his son or setting an example for the good of humanity.

Although the father and son have been separated for many years, they both still harbor the hope of finding the other, both experiencing a loss and emptiness. Saint-Franc learns first of his son's identity and suffers greatly. He knows that "sa mort est signée depuis sept ans, et l'arrêt est irrévocable." (IV,3) However, he is happy and proud when he sees that his son is honorable and worthy. If the son had not been noble and valiant, his task would have been less significant for society. When Durimel discovers his father, he exclaims: "Je bénis la

faveur du ciel." (IV,4) The father's sincere and courageous efforts to uphold the law and his unshakeable faith in a better afterlife convince the young Durimel to be stoical. He values all that he will have to give up in death: "amour! amitié! mouvements de la nature! volupté céleste et délicieuse! charme inconcevable!"(V,1) Yet his love of his father lifts him above his romantic love and earthly dreams.

The father-son relationship is dramatically and inspirationally portrayed. The father is so distraught that he cannot give the death signal. He cries:

> Non, vous n'exigerez point que cette main tremblante donne le signal de son trépas. La nature l'emporte et m'arrache mon secret. Blâmez-moi encore d'embrasser la cause de ces infortunés. Celui que vous voyez...Apprenez tous qu'il est mon fils; oui, mon fils. Frappez deux victimes.(V,8)

The lofty father-son love in Le Déserteur far surpasses that of Mercier's other plays. Mercier has eloquently represented all that Durimel must give up: an ideal, passionate love for his fiancée and the vital fatherly love for which he had desperately longed. What is more significant in this play's concept of love is the link it makes between paternal love, love of humanity, and God's love. While consoling Durimel, Saint-Franc tells him that God: "est le père commun des hommes...et toute ma tendresse paternelle n'est qu'une faible image de la sienne." (IV,4) To be worthy of God, one must be worthy

of a pure, romantic love; a father's love; and humanity's esteem. In this play, as in Les Tombeaux, the various aspects of love are inextricably linked.

In most of Mercier's plays there is at least one aspect of love. This sole aspect is usually romantic love. When two types of love are combined, they are romantic and familial love. For more complex plays, Mercier includes a humanitarian sentiment, the subject of the next chapter.

This consideration of family love clarified several aspects of Mercier's philosophy. The strife between parents and children often reflects the discord between duty and passion. Also, it includes the innate conflict between society and individuals. Familial love is frequently rekindled when romantic love shows it the way. Lovers often become alert and sensitive and appreciate more fully their family relationships.

CHAPTER V: THE CONCEPT OF HUMANITARIAN LOVE

Mercier, a true man of the eighteenth century, espoused all of the ideas dear to the age of enlightenment and was particularly exuberant in his love of humanity. For him, the idea of "love" was as vital as that of "humanity." It was not a mere chic philosophical slogan but rather a sincere, overpowering concern about mankind. Béclard describes Mercier's faith:

> Sensibilité, enthousiasme, amour des hommes, croyance passionnée à leur bonheur et à leur perfectionnement indéfini, tels étaient les articles de la foi nouvelle que Mercier embrassait avec transport.[1]

He was interested in politics to improve man's situation and was a delegate at the Convention from Seine-et-Oise. After becoming outraged with the Jacobins, he voted for life emprisonment for Louis XVI rather than execution.[2] As H. Temple Patterson observed: "This independent attitude, rational and humane at a moment when most minds were a prey to unreasoning passion and fear, is impressive, possibly unique."[3] He was later emprisoned for this decision.

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[1] Béclard, Sébastien Mercier, p. 38.

[2] c.f. Charles Monselet, Oubliés et dédaignés. Figures littéraires de la fin du XVIIIe siècle, t. 1 (Paris, Poulet-Malassis, 1857), p. 247.

[3] Poetic Genesis, p. 203.

Mercier felt that it was a writer's duty to work for mankind. Although he was not always in agreement with Voltaire, he stated in L'An 2440: "On ne peut lui refuser la première, la plus noble, la plus grande des vertus -- l'amour de l'humanité."[4] Elsewhere in this utopian novel he forecast the future of a writer:

> Les noms des amis, des défenseurs de l'humanité, brilleront honorés: leur gloire sera pure et radieuse.[5]

The writer may aid humanity, but it is also hunanity that inspires the writer or poet: "L'humanité sera gravée dans son coeur, car sans elle point de génie."[6] Mercier recognized that man loves himself, but "en s'aimant il aime la société et ses semblables, il veut leur plaire, il veut leur être utile."[7] The writer must keep vigil and recognize his society's own weaknesses: "Il faut qu'un Ecrivain ait le malheur d'être mécontent de tout ce qui se fait de mal dans sa patrie, afin que ses écrits aient des traits mâles qui réveillent l'inattention."[8]

It is not just humanity that Mercier considers, but more so the love of it. In all of his plays of social comment, the characters desperately love their fellow men and the idea of justice. Judges and lawyers are fair because they are deeply attached to their brothers.

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[4]Mercier, L'An 2440, p. 208. [5]Ibid., p. VII.
[6]Mercier, Du Théâtre, p. 220. [7]Ibid., p. 232.
[8]Mercier, De la littérature, p. 84.

Soldiers make vital sacrifices because they are emotionally linked to the betterment of their country. Rulers are good if they can establish a loving, fatherly rapport with their subjects and are evil if no love exists.

In such a way, the concept of humanity is combined with the concept of familial love. Kings are worthy fathers, and judges are concerned brothers of all men. Mercier's characters repeat constantly their love of justice and equality and leave no doubt in the spectator's mind.

This chapter will consider first Mercier's views of judicial and economic problems as they affect humanity. Next is a look at military justice and the sentiments necessary to establish it. Finally, Mercier's depiction of evil rulers and their ideal counterparts will be examined.

In Le Juge (1774), the preface is an explicit as the play. Mercier explains that it is a writer's duty to "ranimer les moeurs et les principes de chaque condition." By so doing:

> Il affermit ainsi la base de la société dans laquelle il vit, et il contribue, autant qu'il est en lui, à maintenir l'ordre public, source de tout avantage particulier.

It is the judge in society who needs "plus de lumières, de droiture, de courage, et de sagesse."[9]

M. de Leuyre, a model judge, asks himself in

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[9]Mercier, Théâtre complet, p. 118.

each case if he has always looked for the proof of innocence, if he has distinguished between the seeming truth and certainty. He agonizes over each case and says a judge should be "celui qui a senti dans son coeur une parcelle de ce feu sacré qui invite à la vertu." (II,2) Thus, even a judge's virtue is felt in his heart!

In this play, the judge De Leuyre finds that Girau, a peasant farmer, has right to the land desired by the large landholder Le Comte de Monrevel. He scorns the elegant lawyers who write with finesse and vehemence, trying to distract the judge from the necessary facts. (II,7) Since this question hinges on property rights, the judge states that: "La propriété est un droit sacré... et quelle que soit la distance des rangs, les droits respectifs sont égaux." (II,7)

De Leuyre cannot be bought or swayed by his benefactor: "Qu'importe mon état, mon nom, mon père même? Je suis Juge à cette heure." (II,7) In this respect, he is like a writer (and Mercier equates the two): "l'homme de lettres, pour soutenir les droits de l'humanité, risque la liberté et son repos." (II,10) The Count, in a sarcastic tone, blames De Leuyre's virtuous enthusiasm on the "rêves chimériques de nos livres modernes." (III,5) Thus, the literary profession is very much akin to that of justice and its goals are the same.

The role of the judge and its noble intent are

supported by the character of the peasant Girau. He has complete faith in the judicial system and praises the judge. He is poor but honest and has raised his children well. He trusts naively that: "il y a une justice sur terre comme il y a un soleil au firmament." (II,1) However, he recognizes his weak financial position and its consequences: "Dès que c'est un Paysan, c'est moins qu'un chien de basse-coeur qu'on chasse d'un coup de pied." (II,5) In his eyes, the greatest crime that man can commit, warranting damnation, is to be unjust. (II,5)

The count is eventually moved to see his fault, and Mercier has, both as judge and writer, defended humanity. The judge is a rational, sensitive man whose heart teaches him virtue.

A similar lawyer is found in L'Indigent. When the rich, bored DeLys tries to hide the fact of a large inheritance from his long-lost sister Charlotte, it is the notary who sees that justice is done. Although minor in the play as a whole, he is the major character in the last act and has the final lines. He knows that he is accountable to society and "il faut veiller avec une scrupuleuse sévérité à ne rien laisser faire que dans la rigide équité." (IV,1) He dedicates all of his time to the "Public," and gives his whole self to such a task. In what seems an oddly patronizing remark, he comments that he is never so happy as when the poor people's spiked

shoes tear his carpet. (IV,2)

In an emotional attempt to bring about DeLys's repentance, the notary reads the father's will. The scene is quite tearful and the lawyer brings in the poor, deserving sister. He has DeLys face her, saying: "Toute sensibilité n'est pas éteinte dans votre âme." (IV,6) When invited at the end of the play to be the "King" of the family, he responds: "Non pas, s'il vous plaît... l'Ami." (IV,6)

This play resembles Le Juge in its emotional impact. In each case, an honest, conscientious officer of justice has appealed to "sensibilité" to enlighten the unjust. Both of these men are friends of persecuted poor citizens and fear nothing in their efforts to assure justice. They are the dramatic representatives of Mercier himself who felt:

> Tout écrivain est particulièrement lié à la justice d'une manière solemnelle et avant tout autre obligation. L'infraction de la justice est une injure faite au genre humain.... Il est le vengeur de la cause publique, et l'oppression qui est tombée sur son voisin, doit lui devenir personnelle...et l'Ecrivain le plus estimé, sera toujours celui qui réclamera avec plus de force, les droits imprescriptibles de la justice et de l'Humanité.[10]

In Le Libérateur, there is no judge or lawyer to see that justice is done. Davis has been put in debtor's prison after having had very poor financial luck. He is

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[10]Mercier, De la littérature, p. 3.

honest and conscientious, but is at the mercy of his creditor Ransomet. Ransomet's business associate Hughes begs leniency, saying: "Il y a des circonstances que l'esprit le plus perçant, et que la plus sage expérience ne sauraient encore prévoir." (I,2) This is a typical case in which Mercier interprets the spirit of the law. Theoretically, Ransomet can legally have Davis incarcerated. However, as Mercier hints here and in L'Indigent, debtor's prison is a terrible injustice in itself. Furthermore, the whole concept of emprisoning a man until he can pay is irrational. Justice is done when Ransomet is moved by his daughter's love to see his own cruelty. This ending is artificial and Mercier has taken a short cut in legal theory. However, there is still the relationship between an awakened sensitivity and the enactment of justice.

This same concern with the heart and human justice is the theme of L'Habitant de la Guadeloupe (1786). Mercier describes the play's purpose in his avertissement:

> ...son but a été de livrer la guerre à la dureté du coeur, et d'honorer les vertus compatissantes qui se cachent dans les rangs obscurs de la société.[11]

Vanglenne is a rich man who has returned to France after a

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[11]Mercier, L'habitant de la Guadeloupe, comédie en trois actes; représentée pour la première fois, par les comédiens Italiens, le 25 avril, 1786, dans M. Lepeintre: Suite du Répertoire du théâtre français, Vol. VII (Paris: chez Mme Veuve Dabo, 1822), p. 3.

long stay in Guadeloupe. He wants to share his wealth with his cousins if they prove worthy of it. Disguised, he visits first his greedy cousin M. Dortigni who rejects him. Next, he visits his poverty-stricken, honest cousin Mme Milville who offers him all she has as "une dette que je dois à la parenté." (II,6) She does so "parce que j'ai obéi au premier devoir qu'exige la simple humanité." (II,8)

Mercier has simulated an argument between the rich and the poor. The rich cousin maintains that there are ranks in society, "des classes, une subordination nécessaire." (II,10) Mme Milville is uninterested in wealth and defines her life: "Je n'existe que pour élever ma famille dans les principes de la vertu." (II,1) Mercier has obviously made the argument unequal and Vanglenne has the role of deciding the winner. He sees no hope for Dortigni:

> Quand le premier mouvement du coeur humain n'est pas bon le second devient pire encore; et la triste humanité n'a peut-être d'autre vertu que ce premier cri de la commisération et de la pitié. (III,4)

Vanglenne and Mercier generously choose the poor widow as the recipient of humanity's blessings and Vanglenne's wealth.

The idea of justice in this play was not that of formal legislation. It dealt with natural law. For Mercier, all men should be equal and society should be classless. If there were any scale, those with the most

sensitive hearts would be at the top.

La Brouette du Vinaigrier holds this same moral. The language of its preface is even stronger and perhaps more bitter than the words of Vanglenne:

> Le fait est plaisant et sert à prouver que l'orgueil des rangs, si haut, si intraitable dans ses discours, sait s'humaniser à propos, et qu'il ne s'agit au fond que des conditions pécuniaires.[12]

Mercier explains in this preface too that the best economic system is one in which the wealth is evenly distributed. Huge fortunes should be abolished and the rich should be encouraged to marry the poor.

It will be recalled that Dominique fils could not marry Mlle Delomer because he was too poor. As she put it: "la loi, les préjugés, tout est contre nous." (II,2) Just as she was about to be given in marriage, along with a sizeable dowry, to a man she did not love, her father lost all of his money to a company with which he had dealt for twenty years. Just like the emprisoned father in Le Libérateur, he was simply financially unlucky (a common occurence in the eighteenth century).

Mercier again resolves the problem quickly and somewhat artificially. Dominique saves Delomer with his own earnings of forty-five years. Mercier delights in creating this worker who could come to the rescue of his

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[12]Mercier, Théâtre complet, p. 242.

social "superior." He is blatantly generous and smugly disinterested in wealth. One imagines Mercier proudly and energetically composing the magnanimous speeches of Dominique. (L'Année littéraire, with its usual cynical candor, found the speeches not eloquent but written in "le genre ridicule."[13])

This most popular of Mercier's play vividly describes his view of life and his idealistic vision of a humane society. He believes a writer can achieve such a goal. René Godenne, however, felt that Mercier aimed too high: "Et c'est peut-être parce que Mercier vise trop haut que cette conception relèvera toujours de l'utopie."[14]

More realistic in its idealism is Mercier's treatment of military justice and the love of humanity in Le Déserteur. In 1715, the death penalty was reestablished in France for desertion. There were in fact many deserters due to the wretched conditions within the army: young men were often forcibly recruited and officers were wealthy social climbers, disinterested in their duties. Saint-Franc, Durimel's father and the officer in charge of prosecuting deserters, recognizes all of this: "Tel Soldat est aussi brave que son Officier....Lorsque le soldat déserte, c'est le plus souvent la faute des chefs." (II,1) He believes that the desertion law seemed respectable "lorsqu'elle

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[13]Elie-Catherine Fréron, "La Brouette du vinaigrier, drame en 3 actes, par M. Mercier," l'Année littéraire, VII (1775), 3-14.

[14]René Godenne, "La bibliothèque de l'homme de l'an 2440 selon Mercier," French Review, XLV (1971-72), p.570.

est émanée d'un siècle dont on rougirait de porter les habits." (II,1) (Candide had already well-demonstrated this.)

Mercier's intention is to pose the problem of desertion and the military's true duty to humanity. It becomes a matter of whether one should break bad laws to insure new, better ones (like the dilemma in Diderot's Entretien d'un père avec ses enfants). Furthermore, the question is asked: to whom does one owe allegiance, to his family or to a vague humanity.

Saint-Franc feels he must choose humanity. Simon Davies summarizes his character: "En la personne de Saint-Franc, Mercier crée le type achevé de l'homme sensible qui incarne la bienfaisance, la compassion, la genérosite."[15] His son Durimel had joined the army at the age of sixteen. His colonel was "le plus dur, le plus inflexible des hommes." (I,4) After finally losing patience in an extreme instance, Durimel strikes at the colonel and flees to the German border where he remains for many years, an otherwise honest, virtuous citizen.

Saint-Franc knows all along what he must do. He says: "La Loi est inflexible, et ne connaît personne. Elle n'est même sacrée qu'autant qu'elle est aveugle." (IV,3) He has been accused before of being too lenient.

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[15]Mercier, Le déserteur. Texte présenté et annoté par Simon Davies (University of Exeter, 1974), p.XI.

The wars he has participated in have taught him to value humanity:

> Je tâche, en soulageant l'humanité souffrante, de réparer les maux dont j'ai été le fatal et l'aveugle instrument. Ah! comment le triste spectacle de la guerre, en offrant des scènes si douloureuses ne rendrait-il pas le coeur de l'homme plus tendre et plus sensible? (III,1)

Mercier has made soldiers compassionate and demonstrates how even they can experience the humane feelings of the century. They must in some way reconcile their profession with their ideals. To do so, Saint-Franc has vowed to cherish his fellow men. He has also adopted a strong belief in destiny and God's will. He tells his son: "Soumets ta destinée à la volonté du maître qui conduit tout." (IV,4)

Durimel's death will aid society by serving as an example to other potential deserters. His father tries to console him with this elevated thought: "Songe que ta mort sera plus utile que ta vie; ta mort retiendra sous les drapeaux de la patrie mille jeunes imprudents qui les auraient abandonnés." (IV,4) After Durimel has been executed, Saint-Franc relates that he died with "cette fermeté magnanime, le plus beau caractère de l'humanité." (V,9) ("Magnanimous" is an adjective quite descriptive of Mercier's dramas.)

Saint-Franc and Mercier have upheld the laws, chiefly to protect young men desirous of deserting. It is

not that the army or the laws are correct; they are cruel and rigid. Mercier has pleaded not against deserters but rather for benevolent officers and an enlightened military. There are several one-line comments in the play which place the blame on kings and their despotism. For example, after Durimel's death Saint-Franc says: "Il est maintenant au-dessus des Rois, au-dessus des cruelles lois des hommes." (V,9) Saint-Franc has sacrificed his son to a humanitarian ideal. However, the fact that he has so completely put himself in God's hands and has become resigned to his fate suggests that he is not optimistic that his act was really to any avail.

Whatever the psychological result of his sacrifice, Saint-Franc has made an attempt to better society through a more rational, tolerant military system. He has risen above familial love to a more noble humanitarian love.

Mercier preached that justice must be equal for all of mankind. The principal characters in charge of this justice were kings. In a series of historical dramas Mercier has described what rulers should and should not be. Most of these plays were never intended to be performed, only read. Oftentimes thoroughly documented, they still reveal a moralistic and even socialistic orientation. As C.D. Brenner wrote of these plays, Mercier's ideal was "de bons citoyens sous un bon gouvernement."[16] For Mercier,

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[16] C.D. Brenner, L'histoire nationale dans la tragédie française au XVIIIe siècle (Berkeley, 1929), p.286.

governments were either tyrannical or ideal. Just as evil lovers had been broadly-painted stereotypes, so are evil kings. Lennart Breitholtz contends that Mercier "n'essaye jamais de voir les faiblesses humaines de ceux qu'il admire ou les circonstances atténuantes au profit de ceux qu'il hait."[17]

In Portrait de Philippe II, roi d'Espagne (1785), the king is the epitome of intolerance and hypocrisy. In the précis historique Mercier explains his reason for creating this play which was prohibited in 1792 as being too anti-Philippe II:

> J'ai voulu inspirer aux autres l'indignation dont j'ai été pénétré moi-même....[On] ne conçoit pas ce qui nous porte à frapper dans la tombe ces redoutables ennemis du genre humain. La plume vengeresse de l'écrivain doit flétrir les méchants rois; car c'est là honorer les bons.[18]

According to Mercier, Philippe II wanted to align his government with the church because such a combination "domine l'homme tout entier."[19] Mercier becomes much more explicit in his discussion of laws. When human laws have been violated, all return to primitive law; "assister un peuple opprimé, et le soutenir dans ses généreux efforts, voilà le cri de la nature."[20] Thus, humanity does

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[17] Lennart Breitholtz, Le théâtre historique en France jusqu'à la Révolution (Uppsala: Lundequestska Bokhandeln, 1952), p. 270.

[18] Mercier, Portrait de Philippe II, p. 5.

[19] Ibid., p. 6.

[20] Ibid., p. 31.

have a defender in nature. One recalls that these eloquent and patriotic words were written four years before the Revolution. Mercier, owing much to his admiration for Rousseau, believes that it is humanity that will perfect society and dictate necessary changes: "...le grand intérêt de l'humanité, vu dans les siècles futurs, et dans une immense circonférence, éclaire le génie, et ne le trompe pas."[21]

Before beginning the play, Mercier lauds contemporary rulers for their sound ideas, saying they are well-paid by their subjects' love, respect and hommage.

In the first scene of the play Mercier lists a monarch's necessary qualifications:

> Quoi, ne pourra-t-il donc se placer sur le trône un roi véritablement homme, un monarque instruit, qui chérisse la paix et la concorde, qui fasse aimer la simplicité des moeurs, qui soit l'ami de la vérité, qui apprenne à respecter le sang et la liberté des hommes! (I,1)

The rest of the play is a dramatization of Philippe's lack of any of these qualities. The king plots Inquisition policy with his wicked advisor and Mercier includes numerous accounts of torture and injustice. At the play's end, the king persists in his punishment of humanity.

Two years before this play, in 1783, Mercier wrote La Mort de Louix XI. As Béclard explains, it is "la

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[21] Ibid., p. 32.

peinture des angoisses d'un mauvais roi aux prises avec l'agonie imminente."[22] The menace of death forms the moral unity "d'un tableau qui comprend une heureuse suite de scènes pittoresques."[23] The message in this play's preface is the same as that in Philippe II: it is history that punishes bad princes "dans le sein des grandeurs et jusques dans la tranquilité de la tombe."[24]

In the play, Louis XI, on the verge of death, has a malady of the spirit; he is nervous and tense. Eagerly, he accepts all of the religious relics the deceitful monks offer him, and desperately orders a new prayer to be said on his behalf three times a day.

While he is ranting and raving, the wise Duc d'Orléans talks of an ideal leadership with the young dauphin. If he had been king:

> ...au lieu de m'enfermer dans une tour inaccessible, j'aurais aimé à me montrer sans gardes; j'aurais écouté avec amour tous mes sujets; l'exercice de la justice eût été ma plus chère occupation; je me serais fait le père du peuple. (sc. 21)

These ideas are seen in all of Mercier's model rulers. A king is not above his people; he is a father figure and sensitive to their needs. (These ideas were also included in L'An 2440: "La majesté du trône réside plus dans une tendresse vraiment paternelle que dans un

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[22]Béclard, Mercier, p. 318. [23]Ibid., p. 319.
[24]Mercier, Philippe II, p. V.

pouvoir illimité."[25])

Mercier continues his lesson à la Fénélon through the spiritual hermit, François de Paule. He tells the king: "Plus vous aviez de pouvoir sur la terre, moins il vous sera pardonné d'en avoir abusé." (sc. 45) The king before his death should stop taxing the poor, revoke the unjust laws, and release those who were arbitrarily emprisoned.

When the king dies, the Duc d'Orléans tells the new Charles VIII to follow the movements of his heart (sc. 47) and François de Paule urges all princes to consider the deceased ruler:

> Princes insensés, qui faites tant de bruit, qui causez tant de maux pour agrandir ou consolider un vain pouvoir, venez, voyez de près ce cadavre encore couvert des marques de la royauté. (sc. 50)

A similarly evil ruler is Aladin in Olinde et Sophronie. Béclard recounts a comment by Grimm saying that the public saw in Aladin and the high priest Ismen the characters of Louix XV and Maupeon, even though Mercier probably did not intend it so.[26] Aladin, being quite weak and easily swayed by any powerful, dynamic personality, has a main fault as a ruler, gullibility. Seeming to sense his weakness, he deludes himself: "Pour gouverner les Peuples, pour porter dignement le Sceptre, il faut

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[25]Mercier, L'An 2440, p. 287.

[26]Béclard, Mercier, p. 292.

posséder une âme active et forte." (III,1) He admits at one point that he hates the throne because of its numerous problems. (III,2) When completely puzzled at the confessions of both Olinde and Sophronie, he weakly asks Ismen to determine the culprit. The play's outcome is happy because Aladin once again is swayed, this time by Clorinde. Mercier points out with Aladin that a king must be strong but also capable of bending to humanity's needs. His virtue must protect him from unscrupulous advisors.

Mercier also discusses a weak king in the comedy of manners, Charles II, roi d'Angleterre en certain lieu (1789). As mentioned previously, Charles's weakness is women and the play's moral lesson is smiling rather than grim. However, it seems obvious to Mercier who dedicates the play to "jeunes princes" that libertinage and kingly duties are not compatible. The play is "le portrait d'un roi en déshabillé."[27] After all, Mercier likes to stress, kings are only men.

In the above plays dealing with unworthy kings, Mercier has often inserted the criteria for good ones. Similar descriptions of kings are also included in Mercier's utopia. The king in the year 2440

> aime à retracer l'égalité naturelle qui doit régner parmi les hommes; aussi ne voit-il dans nos yeux qu'amour et reconnaissance;

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[27]Mercier, Charles II, p. V.

> nos acclamations partent du coeur, et son coeur les entend et s'y complaît.[28]

Ideal kings are sensitive, loving, and attuned to the voice of the people.

Childéric premier, roi de France represents just such a king. Brenner mentions that the spectators of Childéric (1774) found many resemblances between the hero and Louis XVI who took the throne the same year.[29] Childéric began his career in a haughty manner and was forced into exile. Now, having learned through Basine the power of love, he has returned as an enlightened monarch. As mentioned, Mercier's kings are first of all plain men. They have left the pedestal and have descended among the masses. Breitholtz explains that these rulers "en déshabillé" "ne nous deviennent que plus chers quand nous pouvons faire leur connaissance sans qu'une barrière se dresse entre eux et nous."[30]

The goal of this play, as stated in its preface, is to describe a nation"fidèle à ses Rois, ayant le besoin de les aimer, oubliant l'adversité, et plus sensible aux bienfaits qu'à l'offence."[31] The play, therefore, requires an effort by the people as well as the king. He must prove worthy, but his subjects must also be loving and

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[28]Mercier, L'An 2440, p. 26.

[29]Brenner, L'histoire nationale, p. 289.

[30]Breitholtz, Le théâtre historique en France, p. 267.

[31]Mercier, Théâtre complet, pp. 168-9.

forgiving. The relationship is definitely two-sided. The people become a principal character in the drama and Childéric's noble, frank conduct "fait aimer le peuple qui s'est montré sans haine et sans vengeance, et cédant malgré ses justes sujets de plainte, à l'ascendant qu'imprime le courage."[32] Mercier is giving a citizenship lecture to his spectators as well as leadership advice to the king.

When the play begins, Childéric's old friend Carloman says that the young ruler now knows the art of ruling "qui n'est, peut-être, que le soin attentif de respecter les droits de l'homme." (I,1) For Mercier, the best way to display a genuine love for humanity is to insure its freedom. French kings are blessed in return by "ce peuple; comme il s'enflamme d'amour pour ses Rois." (I,2) Sunnon, a virtuous spokesman for the French, eagerly awaits a loving monarch:

> Assez et longtemps nos coeurs ont été attiédis par le mépris, fatigués par la haine; faites-nous connaître l'amour et le respect. (II,2)

Mercier again brings in the père de famille theme. When Carloman suggests that Childéric is a father to his people, the young king is moved: "...un père uni à ses enfants. Je m'arrête sur cette attendrissante image, et mon coeur s'émeut délicieusement." (II,7)

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[32]Mercier, Théâtre complet, p. 168.

The idea of reciprocal love is stressed throughout the play. Basine knows that the French, like herself, will have esteem, admiration, and love for Childéric. (II,8) He, in turn, tells his people: "Je suis votre Roi, et par mon amour, né pour toujours l'être." (III,1) After his reinstatement as ruler, Mercier has Childéric eloquently summarize the basis for a lasting king-subject harmony:

> ...c'est dans vos coeurs, surtout que je prétends régner....Fondée sur cet amour mutuel, la base de ce trône demeurera inébranable aux vains assauts des temps et des orages ennemis. (III,6)

Eight years later, Mercier repeated his views on an enlightened monarchy in the lengthy historical drama La Destruction de la Ligue ou la Réduction de Paris (1782). In this play, it is Henry IV who has become an ideal ruler and who demonstrates a royal love necessary for humanity's security. The play also carries other strong political sentiments, "audaciously justifying civil war and proclaiming the inevitability of Revolution."[33] (Civil war is compared to a healing physiological phenomenon: "Mais la guerre civile est une espèce de fièvre, qui éloigne une dangereuse stupeur et raffermit souvent le principe de vie."[34])

In the preface, Mercier claims that all the French kings before Henri IV "dégradèrent la majesté

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[33]Patterson, Poetic Genesis, p. 100.

[34]Mercier, Théâtre complet, p. 326.

royale, la nation française, et l'humanité."[35] Again it is the writer who must protect humanity from such injustice, and Mercier defiantly declares:

> Point de repos, point de trêve; l'étendue des maux passés, les longues plaies non encore cicatrisées, faites à l'humanité...: tout doit engager l'écrivain à soutenir sa massue en l'air.[36]

Once the play has opened on a suffering, bourgeois family, Mercier uses one tearful tableau after another to represent the agonies of war and the absolute necessity for a unifying ruler. In the first act, two Ligueurs are overheard discussing the competition afforded the Catholics by Henri IV:

> Mais il vise à se faire aimer, parce qu'il sent bien que la force d'un monarque est nulle, tant qu'elle n'est pas dans le coeur de son peuple. (I,5)

In true Mercier fashion, these speakers, Guincestre and Aubry, are utterly despicable and willingly display their evil intent, saying that all of the leaders of the League have their own selfish interests and that the words patrie and religion are only for "les esprits crédules du peuple." (I,5)

In contrast to these demons is the paternalistic Henri IV. He is distraught at the thought of the starving Parisians whom he is besieging. He orders his soldiers to get food through to their relatives, who are in reality

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[35] Mercier, Théâtre complet, p. 325. [36] Ibid.

being deprived by the Church. Says Henri: "Je sens que je suis leur père, et qu'il m'est impossible de ne point partager leurs maux." (II,2) He repeats himself in the very next scene: "...mais moi, qui suis leur père et leur roi, je ne puis voir ces calamités sans en être touché jusqu'au fond de l'âme." (II,3) He would prefer not ruling to having obtained the throne "qui coûterait si cher à mon coeur." (II,5) It would be better to break his own siege and free the Parisians than to see them suffer.

Mercier also depicts Henri as grieved by the necessity of compromising his religious faith. Sully reassures him that he has made the right decision. Kings must be above these superstitious practices which "avilissent la raison, abâtardissent les peuples, leur ôtent leur énergie et leurs vertus." As such, they become sublime legislators and the benefactors of humanity. (II,3) Henri, like Mercier, loves all classes and considers them equal, particularly in qualities of the heart: "La générosité, la noblesse, la franchise appartiennent aussi aux classes inférieures." (II,9)

Characters other than Henri IV himself laud his virtues. Hilaire's son tries to convince his father of Henri's desirable qualities: "Le premier fondement de la tranquilité publique, réside dans un chef qui réunisse les divers partis qui se choquent." (III,7) The grandmother on

her deathbed also places her hope in Henri: "Il y règne en père...et son nom sera le premier gage de l'amour qu'on portera à ses descendants." (III,7) When Henri finally enters the city triumphantly and peaceably, Hilaire fils describes his reception: "On accourt, on le voit, et l'on ne peut se rassasier de le voir, et l'on ne peut se défendre de l'aimer....Il est l'expression de l'amour qui ne s'accorde qu'à la bonté." (IV,12)

In this study of humanitarian love, there have been plays that represent many of its facets. In general, Mercier pits the rich against the poor, and the poor are victorious. Formal legislation derives from natural law and any kind of inequality in unwarranted and unhealthy. Laws are established to protect humanity, and their enactment must be humane. Justice is an outward demonstration of humanitarian love and kings are the fathers who must assure it. They are loving, sensible men who are not allowed to forget that indeed they are only men.

In this respect, the concept of humanitarian love leads directly to the love of God and/or tolerance. Kings, army officers, parents, children, and lovers alike must realize that their love is destined for something higher than earthly love. Both Le Déserteur and La Destruction de la Ligue are plays in which there is an

intimate correspondence between these final two concepts of love. The ultimate goal of humanitarian love is the subject of the following chapter.

CHAPTER VI: THE CONCEPT OF CHRISTIAN LOVE

At some point in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, there came forth a strong, urgent belief in progress through reason and in the ultimate perfection of mankind. Theodore Besterman, speaking of Voltaire's religion, states that such a belief is indeed a religion:

> ...the religion (if this highly coloured word must be used), not of science or of any particular scientific theory, but of progress. Religion, after all, is an act of faith. The belief in progress is also an act of faith, whereas science is a framework within which the notions of good and evil are irrelevant.[1]

For Mercier, this "religion" was based in part on the "reason" he had inherited from other eighteenth-century intellectuals but also from the powerful vogue of "sensibilité." Like other dramatists and writers of the period, his ideas do not necessarily comprise a neat philosophical system. Léon Fontaine describes the changes that were taking place in the theater:

> L'humilité chrétienne, qui inspire à l'homme le sentiment de son impuissance, fit place à l'orgueil. Chacun se sentait possesseur d'une dignité native, inaliénable: l'homme se considéra comme une créature sacrée.[2]

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[1]Theodore Besterman, Voltaire (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1969), p. 363.

[2]Léon Fontaine, Le théâtre et la philosophie au XVIIIe siècle (Paris, J. Baudry, 1879), p. 148.

The same phenomenon is dealt with by Carl Becker: "With the Heavenly City thus shifted to earthly foundations, ...it was inevitable that God should be differently conceived and more indifferently felt."[3] Becker stresses that the world was "something as yet unfinished, something still in the making."[4] Eleanor Frances Jourdain clarifies the social aspects of the new theology, saying that man's salvation would come through society since individual and social life were one.[5]

Eventually, the cult of reason mingled with the "sensibilité" outlook and La Nouvelle Héloïse produced a heroine made virtuous by her passionate love: "elle est en union plus directe avec Dieu...; c'est la sainteté de la fille obéissante, de l'épouse dévouée..."[6] Mercier was a direct inheritor of Rousseau's ideas, but his imagination pushed them even further. Majewski describes Mercier's deism as going far beyond that of the Profession de foi d'un vicaire savoyard.[7] He states that "instead of a closed circle Mercier sees life as a spirally,

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[3]Becker, The Heavenly City, p. 49.

[4]Ibid., p. 70.

[5]Eleanor Frances Jourdain, Dramatic Theory and Practice in France 1690-1808 (1921), p. 170.

[6]Charles Dédéyan, J.-J. Rousseau et la sensibilité littéraire à la fin du XVIIIe siècle (Paris: Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1963), p. 275.

[7]Majewski, The Preromantic Imagination of L.-S. Mercier, p. 41.

spiritual evolution toward perfectibility and final union with God."[8]

For Mercier, as for all prolific, changeable writers, it is difficult to form a coherent summary of theological ideas. Mercier attacked intolerance and was strongly anti-clerical, but his actual religious beliefs are seldom succinctly stated. Even in L'An 2440, his utopian religion is not one to be discussed:

> Comme nous ne parlons plus de l'Etre Suprême que pour le bénir et l'adorer en silence, sans disputer sur ses divins attributs à jamais impénétrables, on est convenu de ne plus écrire sur cette question trop sublime et si fort au-dessus de notre intelligence.[9]

Perhaps Mercier is revealing his own reticence at theological explanations.

Among Mercier's plays which deal with Christian love or religion are those that focus on the devastation of religious superstition and clerical hypocrisy. La Mort de Louis XI, Jean Hennuyer, and La Destruction de la Ligue are in this category. These plays also define the role of clergy as humanitarian fathers to all people and agents for a supreme loving father. In Zoé, Mercier vociferously attacks convents and Olinde et Sophronie reveals a spiritual mysticism reminiscent of Victor Hugo's Contemplations. Le Déserteur shows a humanitarian yet

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[8]Majewski, op.cit., p. 47.

[9]Mercier, L'An 2440, p. 73.

resigned theology, whereas the Christian humanism of Les Tombeaux de Verone is brillantly optimistic, exalting the divinity of passion as it leads to God. These aspects will be discussed in detail and their relation to one another and to Mercier's concept of love will be defined.

As previously mentioned, La Mort de Louis XI is a play dealing with the spiritual agonies of an unjust king before his imminent death. He frantically grasps at any superstitious consolation and deceitful priests offer questionable religious relics in an attempt to gain his ultimate favors. Mercier describes these charlatans and their petty squabbles including one debate over the authenticity of the relic of Saint Dorothy's forearm. In contrast to these hypocrites is the hermit François de Paule who offers genuine spiritual guidance, telling the king frankly that he cannot cure his body. The king's worries are "le poids des iniquités qui pèsent sur une âme où le remords n'est pas encore éteint." (sc. 45) The theological message in the play is simple: this life is transitory and one must leave it with a pure conscience. Kings, like all men, must be just and charitable toward their fellow men. The hermit is an ideal Mercier character because he has dwelt apart and has resisted the corruption of bureaucratic religion. He is in sharp contrast with the other clergy members and represents the priests

in Mercier's utopia about whom Mercier wrote:

> ...il y a plus de grandeur à consacrer une vie entière à des ouvrages renaissants et serviles, à se rendre les bienfaiteurs perpétuels de l'humanité affligée et plaintive.[10]

Thus, the hermit is a generous priest who loves humanity and guides it spiritually to God.

Jean Hennuyer, Evêque de Lisieux (1772), describes what a good bishop should be. One surmises even from Le Tableau de Paris that Mercier had, in general, no high regard for bishops. Under "Evêques" he writes:

> Les maîtres de la morale n'enseignent point la morale; ils bravent les anathèmes des anciens conciles et consomment, dans l'oisiveté et les délices de la capitale, des biens qui leur ont été confiés pour le soulagement de leurs ouailles infortunées.[11]

This play describes the plight of Protestants in Lisieux, August 27, 1572. They are seeking protection from the continuation of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre. In the preface, Mercier says that some have argued whether Jean Hennuyer was a Dominican or a Sarboniste. For Mercier, "il fut homme, ce qu'on ne peut pas totalement affirmer de tous ses contemporains."[12] This "humanity" in a priest who lived at the court and was the king's confessor "frappe bien davantage."[13]

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[10] L'An 2440, p. 105.

[11] Mercier, Tableau de Paris. Etude sur la vie et les ouvrages de Mercier par Gustave Desnoiresterres (Paris: Pagnerre, 1853), p. 28.

[12] Mercier, Théâtre complet, p. 190. [13] Ibid.

In a sorrowful comment, Mercier says that his century has nothing to reproach the other centuries of errors and barbarism.[14] He hopes to reach "ceux qui peuvent seuls réaliser les voeux plaintifs de l'humanité" and seems to write the play for the Church fathers. If he accomplishes his goal, he will have accomplished "le métier d'homme et d'écrivain."[15] Once again, Mercier is the engaged writer, this time saving humanity from religious corruption. The theological discussion is not metaphysical, only humanitarian and sociological.

In the opening scenes of the play, the characters discuss the futility of the religious wars. The old father Arsenne asks: "...ne reconnaissons-nous pas le même Dieu? A quoi ont servi tant de combats cruels? Est-ce en se déchirant le flanc que l'on apprend à mieux célébrer le créateur." (I,4) (This is reminiscent of D'Aubigné's Les Tragiques.) When Arsenne fils returns bloodstained from witnessing the infamous massacre, he speaks of the priests: "D'une main ils désignent les victimes avec l'image du Christ, de l'autre ils portent le poignard dans leurs coeurs." (II,3) The Protestant Menancourt remarks that these same priests "effraient par l'anathême de Rome ceux à qui l'humanité parlerait encore." (II,5) They are in Mercier's

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[14] Mercier, Théâtre complet, p. 191.

[15] Ibid.

description the polar opposites of charity. The wise Arsenne will not allow his Protestant son to fight: "Tu vas donc les justifier en les imitant." (II,5) Instead, they seek refuge en masse at the bishop's palace.

Before this confrontation, the bishop Jean Hennuyer has already lamented to himself:

> Quelle image épouvantable! que de crimes! O superstition! Quel fanatisme, quand cesseras-tu de profaner ma sainte religion? (III,1)

The king's lieutenant brings the royal order: all priests must go to their pulpits and tell their congregations to be inexorable, "de n'avoir égard à aucune liaison du sang ou de l'amitié." (III,3) The astonished bishop refuses immediately: "Ce n'est que par des exemples de douceur, de modération et de vertu, qu'il nous est permis de les convaincre." (III,3) Not only is the king unjust, but he misunderstands God's role: "...méconnaissant les lois, il méconnaît l'auteur de toute justice." (III,3) It seems quite obvious to Jean Hennuyer that man is an individual and a Christian before being a subject. He places humanity and Christianity well-above royal prerogatives: "L'humanité, croyez-moi, a ses droits bien avant ceux de la royauté." (III,3) Man has the right to resist an intolerant king and it is the virtue in his heart that warns him when such a necessity arises. In a statement echoing Le

Contrat social, the bishop declares: "La loi a pour caractère non équivoque le consentement général de la nation." (III,3)

In the last act of the play, the bishop defies the king's representative and agrees to shelter the frightened Protestants, telling them that the Church loves them as its "enfants égarés." (III,7) They can remain in the palace until the voice of humanity makes itself heard. Mercier defines the true religion: "...celle qui est bienfaisante, qui peint un Dieu comme père de tous les humains, et qui le fait aimer." (III,7) Jean Hennuyer is hailed as the "Héros de l'humanité" and even the soldiers refuse to carry out the king's command. Mercier provides explicit stage directions for the final scene: the curates and their parishoners embrace the Protestants, speaking to them "avec l'effusion de l'amitié et de la tendresse." (III,10)

This play has dramatized Mercier's views on an enlightened religion. Priests are fathers to their subjects and must protect them against injustice. Laws are indirectly dictated by God, requiring the consent of the governed. Thus, God, love of humanity, and justice are all tightly interwoven in Mercier's theological system. Church dogma is irrelevant; it is love alone that counts.

Mercier was no doubt pleased when, upon visiting Voltaire for the first time, the Patriarch of Ferney

looked at Mercier's violet suit and exclaimed: "voilà l'habit de Jean Hennuyer."[16] Mercier had mentioned Voltaire in the preface to Jean Hennuyer and praised his Henriade. Obviously, the play's views parallel those of Voltaire.

Ten years later, in La Destruction de la Ligue, Mercier writes again of religious intolerance and hypocrisy. Here, the two evil priests are painted in extremely derogatory terms. Breitholtz comments that "La haine de Mercier est ici, comme souvent, si forte que son portrait tourne à la caricature."[17] As mentioned earlier, Henri IV and the Protestants are surrounding Paris. The deceitful Catholic priests are themselves starving the people of the city and admonishing them not to surrender for fear of imprisonment or death. The priests take food from their starving parishoners and satiate themselves.

In the extremely important preface, Mercier expresses his desire to uncover the sacriligious piety of the priests: "Qu'elle soit donc présentée sous ses véritables traits, cette vile et méprisable superstition."[18] In contrast, he wants to show that the beauty of religion

> débarrassée des ombres qui défiguraient sa face majestueuse, fera d'autant plus de progrès, qu'elle sera mieux connue, et sa simplicité sera toujours le caractère de sa véritable grandeur.[19]

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[16]Cousin d'Avalon, Mercieriana, ou recueil d'anecdotes sur Mercier (Paris: Langlois, 1834), p.25.

[17]Breitholtz, Le théâtre historique, p. 270.

[18]Mercier, Théâtre complet, p. 330. [19]Ibid.

Mercier comments himself that his concept of religion is simple and explains its simplicity at length. Superstition is a monster which "prend le langage du ciel pour tromper ou opprimer les hommes."[20] He does not mean to attack a pure religion, made "pour parler à tous les esprits droits et à tous les coeurs sensibles."[21] Thus, religion is particularly acceptable in the age of sensibility. It is philosophy's task to bring it back to its pure and sacred origin. Religion brings the idea of virtue and

> elle crée, au lieu de détruire; elle admire, au lieu d'expliquer; elle élève l'âme en écartant les chimères du hasard; elle console le faible et soutient le juste, en leur montrant l'égalité des êtres et leur future perfection; elle annonce enfin à l'univers les réparations d'un malheur passager, en lui dévoilant un Dieu vivant dans l'éternité.[22]

Furthermore, the system of purified religion "dont Jean-Jacques Rousseau fut l'apologiste de nos jours" is based on faith, charity, and hope ("qui fortifie et agrandit le coeur de l'homme").[23]

Mercier has clearly stated everything about religion that one might deduce from his plays. It consoles the world's weak citizens and sustains the just, as was seen in the previous chapter. It shows equality, as in L'Indigent, and stresses perfection (seen in the dénouement of most of Mercier's plays). For those who

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[20] Ibid. [21] Ibid. [22] Ibid. [23] Ibid.

have suffered on earth, as in Le Déserteur, it promises a healing eternity. It is based on faith--the same that Mercier has in mankind, charity--that quality with which his characters abound, and hope which fortifies the heart--the most recurring theme in Mercier's writings.

The play that follows such a dynamic preface is meant to dramatize the "unpurified" religion. The language of the priests is flowery, hypocritical, and revolting to the spectator. Guincestre, a curate, comments: "La Saint-Barthélémy. C'était-là le bon temps." (I,5) He and the evil Aubry discuss their impure motives and the temporal rewards they stand to receive if the Catholics are victorious. Aubry admits that he is amazed at the people's credulity. The two priests also agree that printing is detrimental to the Church and their fortune: "Il n'y a plus d'actions secrètes devant cette langue rapide, universelle." (I,5) The Church should therefore condemn it immediately! This comment on the Church and the press in the sixteenth century is obviously applicable to Mercier's own century.

Henri IV provides the ideal tolerance and hope advocated by Mercier: "...l'on verra naître bientôt une religion que la dignité de la raison humaine pourra avouer sous le regard de la Divinité." (II,3) Sully predicts the time when the Protestants will be victorious and "alors dégagée d'un mélange ridicule et honteux, la religion

sortira éclatante et pure, le front élevé vers les cieux." (II,3)

It is the enlightened son who must finally convince the Catholic Hilaire that he has been duped by his church: "vous avez confondu la religion et ses ministres." (IV,7) After being imprisoned, the father recognizes his naiveté: "l'on s'est toujours servi du nom de Dieu pour faire le malheur des hommes."(IV,6) God's law dictates only love and charity; anything else is dictated by "l'imposture." (IV,6) Likewise, for Mercier, most religious dogma is superfluous and organized religions tend to be too "impure" and bureaucratic. Religion should teach brotherly love and has fulfilled its purpose if it can do even that.

In Le Déserteur, one aspect of Mercier's definition of pure religion is stressed: the reward of a healing eternity. The deserter Durimel is advised by his father to submit his destiny to the will of God who directs all. (IV,4) God is a father whose tenderness will comfort Durimel. Experience has taught Saint-Franc that all is illusion on earth and God alone is reality. (IV,6) After his son's death, Saint-Franc addresses God: "la vie est si passagère, la mort si prompte, que ce n'est pas la peine de murmurer." (V,9)

This play seems strangely pessimistic, although written as early as 1770. Religion provides a solace, but Saint-Franc sees the world as corrupt and unreal.

There is an austere, submissive passivity on the part of the father whose charity for mankind has cost him the life of his son.

It was mentioned previously that Olinde et Sophronie reveals a near mystical religion. Sophronie confuses her romantic love and her exuberant love for God. She will willingly sacrifice herself to enjoy an ideal afterlife with Olinde. It is unclear whether she is really dying to prove her worth to her lover or her God. She seeks immortal glory and, like Saint-Franc, considers her life to be fleeting. With anticipation, she awaits "la palme immortelle qu'un Dieu accorde au sacrifice de quelques jours passagers." (II,1) To her own mother she speaks of leaving for a happier world, repeating the same idea to Olinde in a later act. As in all of Mercier's works, God is a father:..."il pardonne, il attend toute créature qui s'avance vers lui sous l'ombre de la croix." (IV,1) In the play's final scenes, Olinde and Sophronie are both prepared to die courageously and gloriously for their love and their God in what Majewski calls an "extreme psychological state."[24]

Less mention is made of religion in the romantic Zoé, although Mercier takes the opportunity to follow Diderot's lead and attacks religious convents. The worse thing that the irate father could have done was to imprison

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[24]Majewski, The Preromantic Imagination of Mercier, p. 113.

his daughter in such an unenlightened place. In Tableau de Paris, Mercier talks of Parisian convents in the article "Couvents Religieux": "Ces déplorables monuments d'une antique superstition sont au milieu d'une ville où la philosophie a répandu ses lumières."[25] Other than a small reference to convents, Mercier has included one more religious idea in Zoé. Zoé says that "le ciel est juste" and that God troubles her rest and punishes her for disobeying her father. (I,3) Elsewhere, Franval claims that it was God who "alluma cette flamme pure et sacrée." (III,10) It is interesting to see that in Mercier's concept of love familial obedience is directly governed by God and it is also God who is responsible for inspiring pure romantic love.

Religion and romantic love are also mentioned together in Les Tombeaux de Verone. Benvoglio, the intermediary for Romeo and Juliette, expounds beliefs which must be precisely those of Mercier. Just like the love of Franval and Zoé, that of Romeo and Juliette was inspired by God. Benvoglio tells the parents: "Le ciel avait fait descendre l'amour dans le coeur de vos enfants." (V,4) He had said earlier that love is "une passion vraiment céleste." (II,7) The reason is that it makes one "other-directed": "Tandis que toutes les autres concentrent

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[25] Tableau de Paris, vol. 7, p. 94.

l'homme en lui-même, tu le fais vivre dans l'objet aimé." (II,7) This idea then leads to the relationship of virtuous, loving individuals to humanity and Mercier's concept of a charitable religion:

> aimez-vous parce que l'amour est ce qu'il y a de meilleur ici-bas, en ce qu'il nous dispose aux vertus, parce que le coeur s'améliore par l'exercice précieux du sentiment. Que le foyer de votre tendresse se rapproche de celui de l'humanité. (II,7)

In Mercier's scheme of things, God is the vital force which sets in motion man's sensibilities. By such a force, man is awakened to love and all its aspects. Often it begins as a romantic passion inspired by "le ciel," as in Zoé and Tombeaux. It may be a familial love, as in Jenneval and most Mercier plays, which inspires virtue. Whatever its origins, this love leads one to humanitarian love and the appreciation of God, the father of all. Benvoglio, speaking for Mercier, expresses his appreciation for it all:

> Pour moi, qui ai su aimer, je rends grâces à l'être bienfaisant qui versa dans mon âme cette sensibilité précieuse qui m'attache à tous les êtres que l'amour rend fortunés. (II,7)

This ideal religion is informal and natural. Mercier wrote in L'An 2440 that the preacher "ne parlait de Dieu que pour le faire aimer; des hommes, que pour leur recommander l'humanité, la douceur et la patience."[26]

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[26] L'An 2440, p. 111.

Love of God can assure justice to humanity and is supremely practical in government. In Tableau de Paris, Mercier wrote under the title "Jesus-Christ":

> La morale chrétienne serait donc la base d'une excellente constitution politique, où y trouverait ce calme et cette sagesse qui attendent tout de la conviction intime....Un monarque chrétien sera toujours le meilleur des monarques.[27]

This belief is reflected in Mercier's historical plays and elsewhere. Religion can become evil as a covert, corrupt institution, but as a natural, virtuous force is a safeguard for society.

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[27] Tableau de Paris, p. 180.

CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

The plays of Mercier are clearly representative of those plays which came between the bourgeois dramas of Diderot and the romantic plays of the nineteenth century. Whether he is describing a platonic love, amour-passion, familial love, or a certain humanitarian love, his message and the stylistic consequences are frequently similar. While attempting to define his views on love, one encounters the psychological motivations of his characters, the social forces acting on them, Mercier's political intentions, and, especially, his moralistic predications. From all of this there comes a concept of love that seems consistent even in its inconsistency and which explains the subject and style of Mercier's theater. This vision of love determines how Mercier adapts other plays, including those of Shakespeare, and in what light he writes his own original historical dramas. Characters and situations are often handled mechanically and artificially in order to underline a point or demonstrate a moral lesson.

Love is the all-important dramatic device for this prolific moralist. He often merely dramatizes the feelings that were in the air at the time of the

Revolution: optimism in the goodness of man and the type of brotherhood encompassed in that vague term "humanité." He felt it was the writer's duty to defend mankind:

> Il [l'écrivain] est le vengeur de la cause publique, et l'oppression qui est tombée sur son voisin, doit lui devenir personnelle.... L'écrivain le plus estimé, sera toujours celui qui réclamera avec plus de force, les droits imprescriptibles de la justice et de l'Humanité.[1]

For Mercier, love also provides the basis for moralizing in the popular bourgeois drama. The primary purpose of the theater is to teach proper conduct and the morals which strengthen and perfect society. These morals are demonstrated to king, priests, judges, soldiers, parents, children, rich and poor alike. From love, be it passionate, familial, humanitarian, or Christian, comes virtue which will alleviate society's ills.

Mercier's concept of love explains his dramatic theories and vice versa. He states that "tout est du ressort de l'imagination et du sentiment, même les choses qui en semblent le plus éloignées."[2] His sentiments are those of "sensibilité" and his imagination projects them into all realms of dramatic engagement. As is often quite evident in his plays, Mercier is concerned with content rather than style. He explains: "J'aime mieux l'âme que l'art; l'éloquence que l'adresse; le sentiment

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[1]Mercier, De la littérature, p. 3.

[2]Ibid., p. 5.

que l'échafaudage; le Théâtre est l'arêne des passions."[3]

This desire to appreciate great passion and force has molded his theological beliefs:

> Voici ma manière de raisonner. Tout ce qui porte un caractère de grandeur, de force, d'harmonie, je suis décidé à le croire. Je crois en Dieu, à sa sagesse, à sa bonté, au système qui dit que tout est pour le mieux.[4]

It becomes evident that Mercier's concept of love is that felt by other followers of Rousseau. Charles Dédéyan defined this feeling in J.J. Rousseau et la sensibilité littéraire à la fin du XVIIIe siècle:

> Ce n'est plus du libertinage, mais une passion de la nature, une force incoercible, un élan cosmique, une ivresse primordiale, libérée des conventions, qui communie par là avec le cosmos et semble comme l'émanation panthéistique du dieu.[5]

It seems that Dédéyan used Mercier himself as a model of this sentiment. A similarly applicable explanation of "sensibilité" is provided by Pierre Trahard:

> elle éprouve le besoin d'attirer à elle la sympathie, et la pitié universelles, elle embrasse, à cet effet, non seulement l'amitié, l'amour et la nature, mais l'humanité entière, les sociétés et les individus dans les rapports qui les lient.[6]

Mercier indeed wrote plays about deep friendship, love and natural laws, and humanity as it affected and was affected by society. He sought to ameliorate the eighteenth

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[3]Mercier, De la littérature, p. 25.

[4]Mercier, Du Théâtre, p. 115, note a.

[5]Dédéyan, op.cit., p. 269.

[6]Trahard, Les Maîtres de la sensibilité française.

century situation through his passionate love of mankind. Maxime Leroy even considered Mercier a "curieux esprit qui est un des annonciateurs du socialisme."[7] His plays are more than the reflections of his philosophy of love; they are the aggressive heralds of its message.

Romantic love is inspired by God and is all-powerful. Mercier's lovers experience an uncontrolled exaltation which brings with it a love of virtue and a deep concern for all of mankind. Although lovers may break society's laws, they eventually realize the value of such institutions and become ideal citizens from their experience.

Familial love too is protected by God. Mercier felt that the family was a necessary, inspirational institution and a valuable stabilizer of society. Family relationships are by nature strong and powerful and are made even stronger when love inspires virtue. Sometimes it is the parents who receive the charitable lesson; sometimes, the children. Despite the force of this love, Mercier considered it secondary to a love of humanity.

As passionate love is enlarged to encompass familial love, so familial love can be extended to a love of humanity. All of Mercier's works take into consideration and have as a goal the betterment of society. Natural

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[7]Maxime Leroy, Histoire des idées sociales en France. 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1946-54), p. 143.

laws are perceived by those who love mankind, and justice for all is the result. Kings are the family fathers who are responsible for assuring their subjects' rights. The primary prerequisite for an ideal king is a sincere, warm love of his people.

There is a force higher than man's love and it is God's love. Christian love for Mercier represents the epitome of love and virtue. It inspires and protects mankind, in spite of its mystery. For Mercier, religion and God's love are felt and not understood. This love has no relation to hypocritical, organized religion. However, Mercier does acknowledge the usefulness of a virtuous religion; a truly Christian king is the best possible ruler. Finally, when an exhausted mankind has no further alternatives in its fight for justice and equality, there remains the consolation of death and a healing afterlife with a paternalistic God. Lovers, parents, and kings all long for such a reward in Mercier's theater.

Mercier's optimism and ideas on the perfection of the world as stated at the beginning of this study are at the base of his concept of love. Frequent references have been made to his utopia L'An 2440, assuming that it adequately represents his vision of an ideal world. However, it must be pointed out that Mercier's ideas most likely did change. L'An 2440 was published in 1771 at a time when Mercier had written only two or three plays. His

latest published plays date to 1797 and he lived until 1815. Little has been written about Mercier's late life since his major biographer Béclard only completed the first volume of his projected work. It is suspected by most critics that Mercier began to lose his optimism and idealism. After the Revolution and imprisonment, he became the "Contrôleur de la Caisse de la Loterie," having previously expounded vehemently against the Lottery. Desnoiresterres quotes Mercier's explanation to Delisle de Sales:

> ...Mon ami,...je ressemble au Sicambre Clovis: aujourd'hui que mes rêves politiques se sont évanouis, je suis tenté de brûler ce que j'ai adoré, et d'adorer ce quej'ai brûlé.[8]

However, the word "tempted" suggests that Mercier still had a bit of hope left, even at that point in his life. The legacy of this exuberant optimist who perhaps began to despair of his impossible dream ever becoming reality is reflected in the romantic anguish and imagination of the following generation and in such immortals as Victor Hugo.

Mercier's plays are more than dramatic entertainment for the latter eighteenth-century French bourgeoisie. They reflect a concept of love, a belief

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[8]Gustave Desnoiresterres, Tableau de Paris par L.-S. Mercier; Etude sur la vie et les ouvrages de Mercier (Paris: Pagnerre, 1853), p. XLV.

in a purifying passion that touches all levels of society and leads to God. This feeling which announced the Revolution and the romantic literary generation runs throughout the plays of Mercier. Being disinterested in stylistics, Mercier was less sophisticated and more vocal in his emotions than many other writers at the time. Thus, his sentiments are unguarded and provide a valuable indication of what his more stylistic-conscious peers were no doubt feeling and thinking.

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