

Poetics and problems of the play “The Libertine” by Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt

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Abstract. The article studies the analysis of the dramatic legacy of Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, a famous modern French-speaking writer. The article discusses one of his most famous plays, *The Libertine*. We studied the genre-typological properties of the play and the system of its characters, we actualized the reality of the prototypes of the actors of the play, traced the architectonics of the play. We studied the peculiarities of the organization of plots, protagonist images and their systems in the play *The Libertine*, we analyzed the motives, leitmotifs, chronotopes, themes and issues, which allowed to single out the main conflict of the play. We used comparative-historical, comparative-typological and structural methods to study the stated issues. One of the key factors in choosing the main character of the work, Denis Diderot, whose work inspired the playwright not only to write a dissertation on philosophy and was the source of many worldview ideas, but also to write a fictional literary work and biography. The play *The Libertine* is written in the style of French classicist works with a focus on the unity of time, place, action. The famous Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot, who is working on the article *Morality* in his famous *Encyclopedia*, appears in the play by Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt as the embodiment of immorality. Each character introduced by Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt into the play represents one of the facets of the moral issue around which the play revolves. The problem of morality is constant in this play by Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, that makes it sharpness, dynamism, it revolves around the whole dramatic conflict and the pervasive action of the play. The specificity of the philosophy of language of Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, on the one hand, is based on dialogical discourse, and on the other, manifested in the comic, in humor. In this sense, humor is not a tool to ridicule Denis Diderot, but rather calls for a more lenient attitude of the reader to human weaknesses. Typical of Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt's work is the open finale of the play, the actualization of important metaphysical questions that remain unanswered.

Keywords: modern French-language drama, Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, *The Libertine*, Denis Diderot, poetics, morality

1. Introduction

Problem statement. Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt is a contemporary French-language writer, playwright, film director, short story writer and novelist, philosopher, and member of the Royal Belgian Academy of French Language and Literature. He is the author of more than twenty plays, twelve novels, six collections of short stories, eight novels and plays combined into the

3L-Edu 2022: 2nd International Conference on New Trends in Linguistics, Literature and Language Education, May 18, 2022, Kryvyi Rih, Ukraine

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ACNS Conference Series: Social Sciences and Humanities

Invisible cycle (Invisible) three essays and several short stories. His works have been translated into more than forty languages, including Ukrainian. Plays based on his works have been staged in more than fifty countries around the world. Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt has won numerous literary and theatrical awards as Grand Prix of the French Academy (2001, Grand prix du theater de l'Académie française, France, for all his achievements), Goncourt Short Story Prize (2010, Prix Goncourt, France, for *Concerto à la mémoire d'un ange*), Molière Award (1994, Prix Molière, for his play *Le Visiteur*), Quadriga Prize (2004, prix Die Quadriga, Germany, "his humanity and the wisdom which his humour brings people"), Chronos Prize (2005, prix Chronos, Switzerland, for the short story *Oscaret la Damerose*), Zionist Mother of God Prize (2018, prix Notre Dame de Sion, Turkey, for the novel and other countries, *Les Dix Enfants que madame Ming n'a jamais eus*) and others. He has received special awards for the development of culture and art from the governments of France (chevalier de l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres), Belgium (commandeur de l'Ordre de la Couronne), Canada (chevalier de l'Ordre national du Québec), Ukraine (médaille pour le développement des arts et de culture).

The success of the works of Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt cannot be compared with the theoretical and historical-literary study of his work. Attempts to comprehend it, both in Europe and in Ukraine, are based primarily on the analysis of the philosophical and existential discourse of the writer's novels, childhood issues and more. But even today, the dramatic legacy of Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt has not yet received a proper literary reading, so the relevance of our work is explained by the need for a more thorough study of the dramatic heritage of the writer.

The objective of the article. A study of the poetic features and problems of the play *The Libertine* of the modern French-speaking writer Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt.

2. Literature review

The work of Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt was the object of study for such scientists as Bovsunivska [1], Logvinenko [10], Masetti [12], Robova [16], Öztokat Kiliçeri [24]. They studied the narrative structure of his novels, the paratextual analysis and metaliterary strategies in his works. These studies are based primarily on the analysis of the philosophical and existential discourse of the writer's novels, childhood issues and more. The dramatic work of the writer was directly considered by Lenkova [9], Perovic [15], Vasyliiev [22]. Our previous explorations were also devoted to the analysis of Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt's dramatic works [20, 21]. However, the issues we have analyzed have not yet been the subject of some thorough scientific studies.

3. Materials and methods

In this article we used comparative-historical, comparative-typological and structural methods, which allowed to compare the dramatic works of Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt with other literary phenomena and to distinguish his creative heritage on the literary background of modern literature of XX-XXI centuries, whose features Schmitt chooses.

4. Results and discussions

The play *The Libertine* (*Le Libertin*) was created for the Theatre Montparnasse (Théâtre Montparnasse) in Paris and was first published in 1997 by French publishing house Albin Michel. The play was later translated into twenty languages and staged in more than twenty countries. In 2000, it was screened by French filmmakers.

The main protagonist of the play is Denis Diderot, French philosopher, writer, playwright, literary critic, translator of the XVIII century, whose philosophical legacy was dedicated to the doctorate of Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt *Diderot et la métaphysique* [17], defended in 1987 at the Sorbonne University (Sorbonne Paris IV) and monograph *Diderot ou la Philosophie de la seduction* [18] published in the same year as the play.

The protagonist of Denis Diderot in the play has real biographies of the French thinker, acts in real biographical chronotopes (time and place of the XVIII century, France), interacts with characters who were really part of his life at the time.

So, among the main protagonists at the beginning of the play are: “Denis Diderot, Philosophe. Madame Anna Dorothea Therbouche, portraitiste. Madame Antoinette Diderot, épouse de Diderot. Angélique Diderot, fille de Diderot. La jeune d’Holbach, jeune fille. Baronnet, secrétaire de Diderot” [19].

From open biographical sources we know [14] that in 1743 Denis Diderot married the devout Catholic Anne-Antoinette Champion, and in this marriage in 1753 their daughter Marie-Angélique (1753-1824) was born.

Among another protagonist there is also Anna Dorothea Therbusch, an artist. From open biographical sources we know [2] that indeed at that time in France there was such a portrait painter, Anna Dorothea Therbusch, 1721-1782, she was really close friends with Denis Diderot, sometimes he posed for her naked [7, 23] and for some time they even lived together in Paris.

The place in the note at the beginning of the play is: “Un petit pavillon de chasse au fond du parc de Grandval. Le baron d’Holbach a mis l’endroit à la disposition de Diderot” [19].

From the biography of Denis Diderot we know that he was indeed close friends with Baron Holbach (Paul-Henri Thiry, baron d’Holbach, 1723-1789), a French philosopher of German descent, writer, author of several articles for *the Encyclopedia* (*Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 1751-1772 [5]). For *the Encyclopedia*, he wrote several articles on science, politics, religion and morality. Denis Diderot was the editor of his works, a frequent visitor to the salon of his wife Charlotte Susanne d’Holbach (1733-1814). Baron Holbach did have a daughter, Louise Pauline (1759-1830), who may have been the prototype of the play “La jeune d’Holbach, jeune fille” [19].

Thus, the system of protagonists in the play consists of actors who actually existed and interacted with each other in the XVIII century in France, in Paris. Denis Diderot could indeed be at the time described in the play in the cozy hunting lodge of Baron Holbach in Granval Park. However, despite the plausibility of space-time and the system of protagonists, the play *The Libertine* is not biographical, in the traditional sense of the term.

Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt gives the main protagonist real biographical characteristics of Denis Diderot, introduces other real characters, time and place becomes a plausible pace-time, but then narrated story is more likely than plausible. So, it is a purely fictional (imaged) work of art, the main protagonist of which is a character who had a real biographical prototype. Eric-

Emmanuel Schmitt himself in his numerous interviews said that his works with real historical protagonists in the lead roles (besides Denis Diderot, the main protagonist to the writer's works were also Sigmund Freud, Adolf Hitler) are not fictionalized by these literary biographers, these are works in which the writer consciously imagines, fantasizes, invents probable stories from the lives of real famous historical figures.

This type of writing is quite common in modern autobiographical literature, where it is called autofiction writing (autofiction). Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, in turn, transfers the features of fictionality to biographical writing, thus proceeding from the strictly regulated rules of literary biography, written in detail by many researchers of biographical writing [3, 4, 8, 11, 13]. On the one hand, he leaves the story of a real protagonist acting in real chronotopes; a real protagonist, whose main biographies can be verified by valid official, historical, memoir documents. However, on the other hand, the emphasis of the narrative is shifted towards the deeply intimate, intra-psychological life of the main protagonist, i.e. in those areas that are quite difficult to verify, so this is where you can easily invent, fantasize, guess.

The play consists of twenty-eight scenes. Typically for dramatic works, it is based on the conflict of interests of the protagonists (Denis Diderot has his own vision of morality, which does not coincide with the vision of morality of his family, mistress, servant), all events keep the reader in a certain tension, which grows due to the intensification of the action, the emergence of new protagonists and the accumulation of actions at the end of the work, thus mandatory for dramatic works through action.

Although the play *The Libertine* is modern, it is stylized as a classic, so it follows the rules of three unities – time, place and action.

The duration of the action is one day. All the events of the play fit into one day of Denis Diderot's life, when he hesitates to pay attention to his duty to write an article on morality for *the Encyclopedia* and the temptations that haunt him all day.

The place of action, as mentioned earlier, is the hunting lodge of Baron Holbach, where Denis Diderot temporarily lives with his family, and where he receives guests. The scenery is unchanged. Throughout the play, the main protagonist is in one, even more closed space, his office.

At the heart of the play *The Libertine* Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt put an anecdotal situation, according to him: "*Le Libertin* part d'une anecdote réelle: la séance de peinture qui réunit Diderot et madame Therbouche. Celle-ci demanda à celui-là de se déshabiller entièrement; Diderot le fit mais, comme la dame était jolie, les pensées de Diderot commencèrent à pointer dans son entre jambe" [6], and when Denis Diderot, being in the family circle (wife and daughter), wrote for *the Encyclopedia* (*Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 1751-1772) at the same time he posed naked for the famous portrait painter Madame Therbusch. So the problem of morality becomes key in the play.

From the first remarks, Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt introduces readers to the creative, scientific, personal chaos that reigns in Holbach's house:

"Le baron d'Holbach a mis l'endroit à la disposition de Diderot; celui-ci l'a naturellement transformé en un immense bric-à-brac qui oscille entre le bureau, le boudoir et le cabinet de savant. Livres, télescopes, cornues s'entassent en désordre sur la banquette, les fauteuils et les couvertures brodées. Curieusement, quelques vieux jouets de bois traînent dans les coins" [19].

During the play, Denis Diderot dressed in something similar to the ancient toga, which

is completely unusual for the customs of the time, poses in front of his portraitist, Madame Therbusch. This woman in a flattering tone asks him to pose in front of her completely naked. Eventually, Denis Diderot undresses, and sexual tension arises between them. They are suddenly interrupted by Denis Diderot's secretary, who reports that Jean-Jacques Rousseau refused to write an article on morality for *the Encyclopedia* at the last minute, so Denis Diderot has to write it himself.

It is more difficult for him to write an article than he thinks at the beginning. He is constantly distracted, involved in numerous personal conflicts, and the article in all this chaos becomes a real obstacle. He needs to write a scientific treatise on morality, but first Madame Therbusch tries to seduce him. Later, Denis Diderot's wife, Antoinette, appears and comes to her husband and accuses him of infidelity. Then, the young Mademoiselle Holbach, the baron's daughter, allegedly comes to ask him for advice on a personal matter, while trying to seduce him to distract Denis Diderot and help Madame Therbusch steal his precious paintings. Angelica, his daughter, bursts into the room several times to ask / talk about something, and during these conversations with her daughter Denis Diderot begins to look at the usual things, as it seems to him, from a different side, and this, in turn, makes constant adjustments in his philosophical reflections on the subject of morality for an article for *the Encyclopedia*. Denis Diderot in search of a definition of morality, finds many interpretations of this concept, which often contradict each other.

It is no coincidence that Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, a philosopher by education, made Holbach's house the main place in the play, as it is known that the problem of morality was central to Baron Holbach's philosophical works. Baron Holbach examines it from the standpoint of rationalism, materialism and eidemism. He was an atheist, so he argued that morality can be completely remote from religion, it depends on each individual, his beliefs. He was a well-known researcher of social morality and approached it purely pragmatically. A separate group of philosophical works of Baron Holbach were treatises in which he touched on the role of women in society, expressed progressive, as at that time, views on the need for education, women's inadmissibility of forced marriage, considering it a manifestation of parental and social tyranny.

The main theme of the play is morality, and it's also chosen not by chance. The main protagonist of the play is the subject of Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt's youthful fascination, later the object of his scientific research. The playwright studied in detail the works of the Enlightenment philosopher, researched many memoirs, thus while writing his dissertation he drew attention to the collision – the mismatch of philosophical interpretation of the problem of morality Denis Diderot, expressed in his many philosophical treatises, including in life. So, after defending his dissertation in 1987, Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, by his own admission, could not help but fictionalize in one of his plays this extraordinary intellectual of the XVIII century:

“Je voulais lui rendre sa chair, sa folie, sa vivacité, montrer comme il était libre, libre de changer d'avis, libre de se contredire, libre de repartir à zéro, toujours pensant mais toujours incertain” [6].

This discrepancy was already evident at the level of the correlation between the title of the play (*The Libertine*) and the title of the article (*Morality*), which Denis Diderot tries to write during the play for his multi-volume great work *the Encyclopedia*.

In the play *The Libertine* Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt not only presents his own, undoubtedly subjective, vision of the image of Denis Diderot, but also skillfully recreates the spirit of the era

in which the French thinker lived and worked. He skillfully emphasizes the current trends that shaped the worldview of many members of the Enlightenment elite.

For example, he does not pass over such a phenomenon as libertinism – a nihilistic philosophy that denies generally accepted social norms (especially moral norms). Libertinism originated in France in the XVII century and was very popular in intellectual circles throughout the XVIII century. Libertinism developed as a reaction to the severity and power of religion. At that time, libertinians (or prostitutes) were, above all, philosophers, scientists, inquisitive and impartial people, people who sought greater freedom of thought, especially in matters of religion. They did not disclose their main ideas directly to avoid censorship and repression. The debauchery of morality experienced a significant boom in the Enlightenment. In the XVIII century, libertinians (or prostitutes) expressed themselves primarily in the pleasures of love, which turned into an erotic game based on temptation. Staging of love conquest, intellectualization pleasure and freedom from any moral restrictions limit the practices of libertinians of this time. Literature, of course, bears the imprint of this social fact. Denis Diderot considers marriage absurd and, therefore, fidelity, which also follows from it, because the desire, which is so diverse, multiple, changeable, it would be wrong to limit.

To confirm this, Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt not only introduces a key theme in the play's title (*The Libertine*), but also reproduces it at all textual levels. For example, as in the mind of the philosopher, so in his room there is chaos, many different objects that have no logical connection indicate the dissimilarity of the ideas of Denis Diderot, the constant change of views and priorities.

The play *The Libertine* is a work with an event type of composition, which is common to dramatic works in general. The play begins with a scene where one of the protagonists (artist Anna Therbusch) paints a portrait of Denis Diderot and expresses her views on philosophy, philosophers and men in general. She is a seductress, because she persuades Denis Diderot to commit obscenities: “Je ne veux pas que nous nous contentions de cette pose” [19], “Un tableau unique, franc: le philosophe dans son plus simple appareil” [19], and she is also a manipulator:

“Monsieur Denis Diderot, vous avez écrit que la pudeur n'est pas un sentiment naturel. (Elle sort violemment un petit volume marqué à une page.) Vous l'avez montré lorsque vous étudiez la morale de l'aveugle..!” [19].

Their obscene conversations are interrupted by Denis Diderot's Secretary Baronne, who in his play is the voice of the philosopher's common sense. During the day, he repeatedly reminded Denis Diderot of the need to write an article on morality for *the Encyclopedia*, because it is the work of his life. In the episodes with the sudden appearance of the Baronne in Denis Diderot's office in the first four scenes we can observe the culmination of the conflict of moral and immoral, because Denis Diderot, posing naked for the picture and thinking only of lust, must write a treatise that forms the moral and aesthetic education of the generation. This contrast fills the entire play, giving it many contradictions and portraying Denis Diderot in his new role as a world-renowned philosopher and enlightener as a simple, trusting man with ordinary carnal needs.

Later, the next actor is introduced – the wife of Denis Diderot Antoinette. Their relationship echoes the current era of Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, as the couple's relationship is a clear example of the destruction of the institution of marriage and the promotion of free relations, which correlates with the philosophy of libertarianism that prevailed in the Denis Diderot's era. Wife

knows about her husband's betrayal: "J'en ai assez d'être la femme la plus trompée de Paris" [19] and, manipulating Denis Diderot's views on marriage and morality, she suddenly admits that not only he but she is also not averse to experiencing love pleasures outside of marriage, although it is well known that she has always been a devout Catholic and therefore could not even allow such views. Denis Diderot is positioned as a traitor, and betrayal in the play is an immoral act. Thus, through the prism of Denis Diderot's relationship with his wife, that the author shows us during one typical day of the philosopher, Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt actualizes the problem of family relationships, personal relationships, love, morality.

Another aspect of the issue of morality in the play the author shows through the image of the philosopher's daughter – Angelica and the image of Baron Holbach's daughter, young girls about the same age, similar social status, similar upbringing (both were raised by philosophers, liberal views, moralists). Angelica comes to her father's office to inform him of her intention to have a child with a man who, according to her age, is more like a father than a lover. Denis Diderot, despite his liberal views on morality, strongly disagrees with his daughter, disapproves of her intentions regarding her private life, tries to prove her daughter wrong. In this moment, the play features a young and attractive friend of his daughter and the daughter of his good friend Baron Holbach, whose house he now occupies with his family – Mademoiselle Holbach, who acknowledges similar feelings, but in relation to the very philosopher. Denis Diderot likes this very much and he no longer sees anything immoral in his daughter's actions, because he is ready to enter into a relationship with a girl who suits his daughter. In this episode, Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt shows how easily an Enlightenment artist can change his attitude toward certain established principles and moral norms. He is exposed to the usual sexual depravity, simply put, the philosopher loves women and is ready to be tempted at any convenient time and on any occasion.

Since Denis Diderot began writing an article on morality in rather courteous circumstances, his postulates about morality were initially extremely freedom-loving. However, life makes its adjustments. It is necessary to restrain the love of freedom very quickly and recognize the need for public conventions. The ambivalence of Denis Diderot's philosophy thus follows from the mobile psychophysical constitution of the great educator. All this is complemented by provocative mistresses, who aim to deceive the philosopher, making him a laughing stock. They enter into a romantic relationship with him only in order to obtain some personal benefit, to meet their material needs. In these circumstances, the article on morality in the play *The Libertine* remains unfinished. Denis Diderot eventually realizes that he is unable to write an article on morality. He leaves only a few lines on the draft that first come to his mind:

"Il ne paraîtra pas. Pour la morale, dans ma vie, jeme contenterai de bricoler, bricoler en faisant le moins de mal possible aux autres et à moi-même, bricoler au jugé, au toucher, en improvisant. Je ne produirai pas de philosophie morale, je me limiterai au bon sens et à la bonne volonté, comme tout le monde. Je me demande si la sagesse, parfois, ne consiste pas à renoncer d'écrire" [19].

And this is a typical feature of all the literary work of the talented playwright Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt – to focus on certain metaphysical problems that are typical for any historical period, to leave numerous unanswered questions in the text, without reaching the final truth and without providing reader ready answers.

In *The Libertine*, the actual problem of morality remains unresolved, so each reader has the

opportunity to draw their own conclusions about what is morality and what is moral and what is immoral in the life of each person and society as a whole.

Denis Diderot, who is due to write an article entitled *Morality* for the next volume of his famous the Encyclopedia, appears in the play by Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt as the embodiment of immorality. In the play, Denis Diderot is not a great thinker, but rather a touching man in his smallness, an ordinary man who is uninterested in himself, who does not need any intellectual or Don Juan feats. He simply follows his desires, instincts, and is filled not so much with a love of philosophy as with a love of women, because it is inherent in his mind by nature.

5. Conclusions

The play *The Libertine* by the famous modern French-speaking playwright Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, created in the tradition of fictionalized biographies, raises an important metaphysical problem of morality. All the poetic properties of the work are subject to a comprehensive disclosure of the problem analyzed in the play. The problem of morality is actualized scientifically (through writing an article with the appropriate title for *the Encyclopedia*), privately (through a complex system of relationships between the main character Denis Diderot and his wife, daughter, mistresses). However, invariably for Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt's plays, it remains relevant, but not definitively resolved. Further study of the dramatic work of Eric- Emmanuel Schmitt will provide a deeper understanding of the problems of modern drama.

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