

Goethe's translation of Denis Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew/Satire Seconde: le Neveu de Rameau*
Or
Denis Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew* and the bizarre story of its survival

The history of Diderot's manuscript of *Rameau's Nephew* is as patched and parti-coloured as the picture it gives of its hero - strange enough to make those who sigh and roll their eyes at textual history change their minds, a little anyway.

In a project to create on the web a set of resources around Diderot's great dialogue, we are posting Goethe's translation of 1805. This differs from the autograph version (most recently edited by Marian Hobson, Droz, 2013) and thus from the version in English translation by Kate Tunstall and Caroline Warman. But why publish this German version? Because it was the first printing in any language of Diderot's dialogue. As the Preface to this Multi-Media edition has made plain, it is through Goethe's translation that the work first came into the world and first attracted the attention of that philosopher, Hegel, whose influence did so much to make Diderot's dialogue better known. It reminds us of the Europe-wide influence of the *philosophe*.

Joanna Raisbeck has been responsible for posting:

- i. her transcription of Goethe's translation
- ii. *Anmerkungen* [remarks], with which he followed the translation of the original 1805 edition
- iii. excerpts from Goethe's and Schiller's correspondence on *Rameau's Neffe*, with the relevant entries from Goethe's diary
- iv. *Nachträgliches*: Goethe's account of his undertaking of the translation, and of his dealings round the 'back translation' from his work, published in 1821 by de Saur and Saint Geniès, which they attempted to pass off as the original work by Diderot. It is this material in particular which reveals his admiration both for Diderot and for *Le Neveu de Rameau*.

After Goethe's publication of his translation, the very first, more or less reliable version in French had to wait for the edition of Diderot's works by Brière in 1823, where volume XXI of *Œuvres inédites de Diderot* bears the date 1821. This was an edition in which Diderot's daughter had a hand, and where the false date was placed on the title page to cut down to size the activities of the couple of adventurers/fraudsters with noble names, the afore-mentioned vicomte de Saur and vicomte de Saint Geniès, who seem to have eked out a living by translating from the German. These gentlemen had published in 1821 a back translation from Goethe, claiming it was Diderot's text. The autograph manuscript, which differs from both the Goethe's and Brière's versions, was only published in 1891, having been discovered, by the librarian of the *Comédie française*, no less, on a *bouquiniste's* stall on a Parisian *quai*.

We are posting Goethe's translation not merely because it was the first version known, but because in it the great public European intellectual, as Goethe was by 1805, crowned Diderot's work. He was in contact with several people who had actually known the *philosophe* – Herder, Princess Golitsyn, the separated

wife of Dmitry Golitsyn, high born aristocrat, and geologist, and a good friend of Diderot's for many years, so much so that Diderot stayed with him on the way to and back from St. Petersburg, when Golitsyn was Russian Ambassador in the Hague. The manuscript Goethe translated has disappeared, but already the work of Assézat-Tourneux, confirmed by Rudolf Schlösser, *Rameaus Neffe* (1900, 2014), suggested that it was Schiller who persuaded Goethe to make the translation. Schiller was in contact with a roving intellectual who had had access to the Petersburg archives and who had made a copy. As said above, the German version by Goethe differs from the French versions available. Posting it on line makes it possible for readers to judge for themselves.

From Joanna Raisbeck's work presented in the notes to the Goethe text it appears that they indeed differ less markedly than has sometimes been hinted. In his magisterial edition of 1950, Jean Fabre suggested that the German does not constitute evidence for an earlier and distinct version of Diderot's text. We are not, it seems, confronted with a really different line of transmission: the divergences between Goethe's translation and the autograph seem to have causes which are not textual but sexual, that is, reactions to the overtly sexual stories, allusions, and vocabulary. In fact, one of biggest lacunæ is a bowdlerization of the wonderful story of the tax-farmer Bertin nearly crushed by his inflamed lover, the actress Mlle. Hus (p. 59 in the English translation on-line). In the main, Fabre's analysis seems confirmed.

But – there are two 'but's. First: the general interpretation of the differences between Goethe and the autograph manuscript. Some seem to spring from a lack of contextual knowledge, yet in one case an example is added to a list. The second 'but' is more weighty: there is one passage which does not appear in the autograph, and yet appears in Brière (1823, p. 31). There is a note in Assézat-Tourneux (p. 408, n.1) saying that the same passage was in the copy they were using. It is a kind of metacommentary, not attributed to ME, but to an editor. In Goethe's version it runs:

Hier findet sich im Manuskript eine Lücke. Die Szene ist verändert und die Sprechenden sind in eins der Häuser bei dem Palais Royal gegangen. (Goethe's translation on line p. 13, n.24 and 25).

So this is lacking in the autograph manuscript (p. 23, on-line translation into English by Tunstall and Warman; p. 39 edition by Hobson, 2013, Droz; p. 25 edition by Fabre, 1950, Droz). Fabre in his introduction describes this as clearly an intervention in the margin of f^o42 of Tourneux' copy, brought back from Russia, which he attributes to "un lecteur précoce aussi zélé que peu intelligent" (xix).

There are other jumps in the text which might have attracted a similar comment from Fabre's "lecteur précoce", but have not. The first publisher of the text of Diderot's autograph manuscript (1891) pointed this out in a note (p. 37 n. 2, in *Diderot: le Neveu de Rameau, Satyre publiée pour la première fois sur le manuscrit original [...] par Georges Monval*). He quoted the first more or less authentic text, Brière, here:

Nota de l'édition Brière (1823): "Il y a dans le manuscrit une lacune, et on doit supposer que les interlocuteurs sont entrés dans le café où il y avait un clavecin".

Monval (1891) continues:

“l’original autographe montre qu’il n’y a aucune lacune: les interlocuteurs ne sont pas sortis du café, où il n’y a pas de clavecin”.

Coulet, in his edition of the text (Paris: Hermann, 1989, p. 96), which is at present the most up to date and by far the most complete as a critical edition, has suggested that this marginal addition comes from alterations made in other copies (those in Leningrad/St. Petersburg, Vandeul I) which suppress mention of the café *la Régence* in which the conversation is taking place, because, as Monval and before him in an earlier critical edition, Asselineau, have already pointed out, the ‘correctors’ haven’t understood that the harpsichord on which the Nephew plays is imaginary. However, following a suggestion from David Charlton, it seems possible that we have with this problem an almost effaced sign of a slightly different version. He relates this to: “page 70 [...], where the text apparently refers to an earlier version of the scene, imagined taking place outdoors in the road instead of the café interior, when ‘the neighbours came to their windows’”. Charlton believes that the later part of the dialogue, in particular the passages round the nature of song, may incorporate patches of developments out of Diderot’s work *Les Entretiens sur le “Fils naturel”* published in 1757.

Moreover, the version quoted above from Brière is not quite the same as the sentence translated by Goethe, presuming he did so accurately. The manuscript he used seems to have been sent back to the publisher:

Anbei, lieber Freund, sende ich das französische Mscrtpt des Diderot, welches Sie zum Behuf des Correctors wegen des Goethischen Mscrts zu haben wünschten
(Schiller to Göschen, quoted in the excerpts posted on this site from Schiller and Goethe’s correspondence).

What this shows is how little what Diderot was up to was understood by his very early readers and perhaps by us, his modern ones; one can see how the commentary was incorporated – but very early, as Fabre pointed out – into the flow of Diderot’s text if one thinks of his novel *Jacques le fataliste*, where exactly this sort of remark is part of the game played by the writing, and which Schiller and Goethe had so admired. But this is exactly what Diderot himself did in the alterations he incorporated into a text by Grimm in what is now known as the *Préface-annexe* to *La Religieuse*. These very minor divergences in the versions on our web site suggest that the strange angle between the partners in this dialogue, LUI and MOI, not face to face but at right angles, develops out of, or at the same time as, the structure of *Jacques le fataliste*, both allowing the author to experiment with different relations to his material.

List of editions in French consulted:

J.L.J. Brière, *Œuvres inédites de Diderot: le Neveu de Rameau, Le Voyage en Hollande*, à Paris chez JLJ Brière Libraire, MDCCCXXI [in fact, 1823].

Jules Assézat – Maurice Tourneux, *Œuvres complètes de Diderot*, vol. V, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, Paris, 1875.

Georges Monval, *Diderot: le Neveu de Rameau, Satyre publiée pour la première fois sur le manuscrit original* [...]. Paris, MDCCCXCI.

Jean Fabre, *Diderot: le Neveu de Rameau*, édition critique avec notes et lexique, Genève, Droz, 1950.

Henri Coulet, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, in *Œuvres complètes*, édition H. Dieckmann- J. Varloot, vol. XII, Paris, 1989.

Marian Hobson, éd. Denis Diderot, *Seconde Satyre: Le Neveu de Rameau*, Genève: Droz, 2013.

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