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# A study of the moral tone of Restoration comedy

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A STUDY OF THE MORAL TONE  
OF RESTORATION COMEDY

BY

HERBERT ROBINSON BLACKWELL

A THESIS  
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*T. N. Henry*

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## PREFACE

The so-called "Restoration period" in English literature stands as an age of comic production that ranks as one of the most brilliant in the history of the English stage, second perhaps only to the preceding Elizabethan period. Restoration comedy has been famed for its indecency and immorality, and critical judgment has always been influenced by concern over the "excesses" which the playwrights introduced into their works.

Morality is a relative term. What is sinful in one age is commonly accepted in another. Semantic differences may cause different moral connotations to be placed on certain words. Thus in considering whether Restoration comedy was immoral, one must judge it to a large extent by the moral standards of the age and by the opinions of the playwrights themselves as to the degree of licentiousness appearing in their comedies. It was a common characteristic of nineteenth century critics to judge the Restoration by nine-



teenth century moral standards, and critics of the eighteenth and twentieth centuries have often permitted their critical estimates to be affected by their moral sensibilities.

The essential question is, "Did Restoration playgoers find the comedies immoral?" The answer is yes. They expected to hear language that they considered bawdy and to observe scenes that they felt were indecent. It was fashionable to flaunt recognized moral standards, and for many, who dared not indulge in the flagrant excesses of men such as Rochester or Buckingham, the theater offered the setting wherein fictionalized heroes could display the cleverness that was considered ideal. The comic writers catered to the public taste.

Yet there is far more to Restoration comedy than studied immorality. For the writers of the day had keen minds and sharp eyes, and their plays are filled with excellent satirical barbs directed against the foibles of the period. Although they shared the vices of the age, the playwrights did not hesitate to ridicule those vices.

This paper attempts to measure to some degree the extent of immorality found in Restoration comedy and to set forth a brief description of the common characteristics of that comedy, to discuss the general status of the society supporting the stage, to examine the controversy which led to the moral reform of the theaters, and to witness the

decline in the quality of dramatic production. The basic conclusions reached are these:

1. The comedies were deliberately immoral.
2. Their immorality is not so much a reflection on the playwrights themselves as a commentary on the social mores of genteel society during the Restoration, for the playwrights understood that society thoroughly and wrote to satisfy its whims.
3. The plays were successful, they are genuinely funny, and they are a real dramatic achievement.
4. Both the playwrights and their contemporary critics were unable to recognize the importance of judging their plays on artistic merits, but that it is on their artistry alone that the plays can be defended.
5. That the comedies present us with an excellent and accurate satirical portrait of fashionable society after the Restoration.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF RESTORATION PREDECESSORS

The period from 1660-1700 has long been cited as the most licentious era in English history, for the Cavalier society which sprang to life with the return of Charles was utterly corrupt, both morally and socially. Degenerate, selfish, and idle though they were, however, the men of this generation managed still to provide us with an important segment of our dramatic literature, both in comedy and in tragedy.

Because it gives us such a complete picture of Court society at that time, and because it was written for the amusement of that society, Restoration comedy is itself immoral and licentious, so that its study has, with a few notable exceptions, generally been shunned until the nineteen-twenties, when our own age of supposed sophistication has been able to view the work of the period with less concern for its moral outlook and more concern for its artistic merit. Restoration comedy was pushed into obscurity during the latter half of the eighteenth century; leading critics

of the Romantic era such as Lamb, Hazlitt, and Hunt made superficial studies of the principal playwrights, but their criticism is often faulty; the Victorian critics, of course, tended to gloss over these "loose" plays, and to Lord Macaulay, who did make some serious study of them, their licentiousness far outweighed their artistic merits. Macaulay said:

...this part of our literature is a disgrace to our language and our national character. It is clever, indeed, and very entertaining; but it is, in the most emphatic sense of the words, 'earthly, sensual, devilish.' Its indecency, though perpetually such as is condemned not less by the rules of good taste than by those of morality, is not in our opinion, so disgracefully faulty as its singularly inhuman spirit....We find ourselves in a world in which the ladies are like very profligate, impudent, and unfeeling men, and in which the men are too bad for any place but Pandaemonium or Norfolk Island. We are surrounded by foreheads of bronze, hearts like the nether millstone, and tongues set on fires of hell.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the strict moral censure of the Victorians, some twentieth century critics have perhaps disregarded the moral aspects too much as witness the following comment:

To discuss the morality...is nugatory and impertinent, and the whole matter may be dismissed in a few sentences. In the first case it is largely a question of expression. Successive generations employ different names (or it may be periphrases) for certain actions and things. The nomenclature alters; the actions and things remain eternally the same. Much of the ordinary language of the Middle Ages, many of the words quite frankly spoken by Chaucer also, would today seem infinitely shocking and grossly offensive. Yet, it should be remarked, the niceness which demands that a later generation shall castrate

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1. Macaulay, "The Comic Dramatists of the Restoration." Miscellaneous Works, V, 114.

its vocabulary by no means implies a stricter morality; it may, in fact, herald the advent of a general hypocrisy, but no whit of actual amendment. The method of expression is purely conventional....But everything has its equivalent; and there is neither a word nor a situation in Congreve that has not been reproduced, set forth in modern terms, by many of our most popular writers. Congreve and his fellows spoke one set of words; our contemporaries say exactly the same in other phrase.<sup>2</sup>

The question of immorality is not one that can be disregarded in any study of Restoration comedy, for the moral attitude of the playwrights and of their audience is an integral part of that comedy. The key to Restoration comedy is its indecency. Its humor depends upon its violation of standards of moral propriety. The audience found it funny because it mirrored so well the society which it depicted, and because it joked about that society's defiance of moral conventions. Many playwrights sought to defend themselves from the charge of indecency by maintaining that their work was only satire, but this defense is not valid because, even though many of the scenes were satirical, they were presented in terms that were designed to delight the salacious tastes of the playgoers.

In actuality, for the country at large, the Restoration period in England was an age of relatively strict moral propriety. The great bulk of the population followed either the traditional life of their forefathers, or, swayed by Puritan influences, maintained a rigid, sober existence. It was only the Court circle which defied previous conventions and deli-

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2. Summers, editor, The Complete Works of Congreve, Introduction, I, 63.

berately tried to show a complete rejection of Puritan strictures. It was this morally corrupt, minority class which gave us most of the familiar literature of the period, and it was this minority class which formed the exclusive audience for Restoration comedy:

The spectators, then, for whom the poets wrote and the actors played were the courtiers and their satellites. The noblemen in the pit and boxes, the fops and beaux and wits or would-be-wits who hung on to their society, the women of the court, depraved and licentious as the men, the courtesans with whom these women of quality moved and conversed as on equal terms, made up at least four-fifths of the entire audience. Add a sprinkling of footmen in the upper gallery, a stray country cousin or two scattered throughout the theatre, and the picture of the audience is complete.<sup>3</sup>

Because of the nature of its audience then, the comedy had to be immoral:

...any comedy of manners which depicted the actual life of the upper class of the times had to be in one sense corrupt if it was to be true. It could not picture the times and be pure. It is not strange that under the circumstances people of the time should not have been shocked by the drama as its modern readers have been shocked, because the people for whom it was written were familiar with open corruption in a way that most modern readers are not. Dorimant and Mirabel may seem to some mere creatures of fancy, but the audience at the Restoration theater not only knew that they existed but had come into personal contact with them. This audience was not likely to resent on the stage what it knew to exist openly. Nor is there anything in this which need damn the dramatists as men. They had no deliberate intention of encouraging vice which, being men of sense, they no doubt hated.<sup>4</sup>

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3. Nicoll, A History of Restoration Drama, p. 8.

4. Krutch, Comedy and Conscience After the Restoration, p. 39.

As with all critical statements, those quoted here are subject to some exception. Before examining Restoration comedy in detail, however, some brief background should be given to show its development as a specialized art for a limited coterie of patrons.

The Elizabethan stage had been a universal stage. Its patronage had come from all classes of London society. But the stage even then had been subject to attack on moral grounds. As early as 1576 a minister named Thomas White had written, "...the cause of plagues is sinne, if you look to it well: and the cause of sinne are playes: therefore the cause of plagues are playes."<sup>5</sup>

The agitation grew, and in 1612 Thomas Heywood published a vigorous defense of the stage. One of his contentions was that the theater served as a valuable educational medium:

...playes have made the ignorant more apprehensive, taught the unlearned the knowledge of many famous histories, instructed such as cannot reade in the discovery of all our English Chronicles: & what man have you now of that weake capacity, that cannot discourse of any notable thing recorded even from William the Conqueror...?<sup>6</sup>

Of greater pertinence to the subject at hand is Heywood's defense of comedy, which in its main contentions sounds exactly like the defense of Congreve and Vanbrugh when they were attacked for licentiousness:

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5. Quoted by Wilson, J.D. in The Cambridge History of English Literature, VI, 424.

6. Heywood, An Apology For Actors, Book III, n.p.



And what is then the subject of this harmless mirth? either in the shape of a Clowne, to shew others their slovenly and unhansome behavior, that they may reforme that simplicity in themselves, which others make their sport, lest they happen to become the like subject of generall scorne to an auditory, else it intreates of love, deriding foolish inamorates, who spend their ages, their spirits, nay themselves, in the servile and ridiculous imployments of their Mistresses....<sup>7</sup>

Heywood's comic characters and those of his contemporaries may have been the objects of scorn and ridicule, yet they were not portrayed as such for didactic purposes as he claims, and Heywood, like his successors at the end of the century, simply weakened his defense by so maintaining. Heywood's extraordinary claims for the virtues of the stage brought forth the retort that "Impiety is then grown to its full heighth, when it once presumeth to boast of it selfe."<sup>8</sup>

Elizabethan drama seems relatively innocuous to the reader of today, although there can be found bawdy scenes and ribald characters. And only the most abstemious critic today would object to the Elizabethan drama on moral grounds. Yet the Puritan critic of the times felt that the comedies were "full of filthy words and gestures, such as would become not even lacques and Courtezans: and have sundry inventions which infect the spirit, and replenish it with unchaste, whoorish, cosening, deceitful, wanton and mischievous passions...."<sup>9</sup>

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7. Ibid., Book III, n.p.

8. I.G., A Refutation of the Apology for Actors, p. 1.

9. Ibid., p. 39.

Heywood, himself, has been accused of following a trend of general moral decline which occurred among later Elizabethan playwrights, and one of his works has been described as "a comedy, which, although perspicuous in construction, has little or nothing to redeem the offensiveness of its plot."<sup>10</sup> And speaking of the Elizabethan stage in general, a recent critic says, "Judged by modern standards Elizabethan drama admitted at its best considerable vulgarity and indecency of speech, and in the period of its decline showed increasing tendencies toward grossness of thought as well as freedom of phrase."<sup>11</sup>

Thomas Dekker may be considered one of the first precursors of the Restoration comedy to appear in Elizabethan drama. In his comedy Westward Ho! we find a vivid description of London society and a cynical portrayal of the London citizen as a penny-pinching cuckold. Dekker's plays have been described as rude and coarse,<sup>12</sup> but despite the rowdiness of many of his scenes, there is a warm, sympathetic appeal in his work. It is his sharp satirical depiction of London society which stamps him as a predecessor of the Restoration comic playwrights, albeit he depicts a far broader base of society than is mirrored within the narrow confines drawn by Etherege

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10. Ward, A History of English Dramatic Literature, II, 571.

11. Nettleton, English Drama of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century, p. 6.

12. Ward, II, 451.

or Congreve.

Thomas Middleton, like Dekker, also depicted London society in realistic terms. But Middleton's characters come from the baser citizens of London who, by their very nature, were bound to be offensive if presented realistically. Middleton not only presented a host of unsavory characters, he drew them with an air of cynicism and lack of moral reprobation which was unusual for the time and served as an example for later playwrights. There is probably nothing in Stuart drama which can quite match the grossly cynical audacity of Allwit in A Chaste Maid of Cheapside as he outlines the advantages of being a cuckold.<sup>13</sup> Middleton has been described as the first playwright to write for the kind of person who applauded Restoration comedies,<sup>14</sup> and his plays proved popular throughout the Restoration period with only slight modifications.<sup>15</sup> He has presented us with a series of arch-villains, who are totally debased in their dealings with one another. Quomodo expresses the cynical attitude so typical of Middleton's characters when he discusses the proper occupation for his son:

Quomodo. Some gave me counsel to make him a divine.

Easy. Fie, fie!

Quomodo. But some of our livery think it an unfit thing, that some of our sons should tell us of our vices: others to make him a physician; but then, being my heir, I'm afraid he would make me away:

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13. Boas, An Introduction to Stuart Drama, p. 222.

14. Schelling and Black, editors, Typical Elizabethan Plays, p. 514.

15. Summers, The Playhouse of Pepys, p. 149.

now a lawyer, they're all willing to, because 'tis good for our trade, and increaseth the number of cloth gowns; and indeed 'tis the fittest for a citizen's son, for our word is, what do ye lack? and their word is, what do you give?<sup>16</sup>

There is an important difference between the debauched society portrayed by Middleton and that portrayed by the Restoration comic writers, however. Middleton is bitter, his characters are not represented as ideal types, and there is retribution in the fifth act--in these characteristics he differs from those who followed; however, Middleton does not really condemn his villains, he simply presented them as he saw them.

Shortly after the turn of the century we find frequent treatment of the subject of sexual immorality in general, and of prostitution in particular.<sup>17</sup> When treated in the comedies of the period there is always a virtuous ending, and the courtezans are usually provided with husbands before the play ends. Among the better plays on the subject is Marston's Dutch Courtezan, which first appeared in 1605. Marston intended his play as a severe attack on immorality, but in the violence of the language and in his characterizations he provided material which might well shock the reader today. One critic says, "He wades through so much mud that we are

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16. Michaelmas Term, II, 111.

17. Thorndike, English Comedy, p. 159.

inclined to apply to him words used by a character in the play: 'In very plain truthness, you are the foulest mouth'd, profane, railing brother....'<sup>18</sup> Marston shows the development of a trend which is noticeable in Jacobean and Stuart drama towards poor taste in the presentation of material, which is in itself an indication of the moral decline of the stage during the period.

With the probable exception of Ben Jonson, it is likely that Beaumont and Fletcher had more influence on the Restoration comic stage than any other writers. Their plays were continual favorites in the Restoration theater. Fletcher was the more influential since he wrote his individual plays at a later date than Beaumont, at a time when the general tone of the theater was closer to that of the drama of Charles II, but the collaborations of the two playwrights were frequently performed, and Beaumont's Knight of the Burning Pestle had a particular appeal to the aristocratic taste of Restoration audiences.<sup>19</sup> The two playwrights "instituted changes in theatrical methods and fashions that were destined to dominate the Elizabethan drama until the triumph of Puritanism. After the Restoration their reputation remained undiminished and their plays continued to set

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18. Boas, p. 141.

19. Schelling and Black, p. 556.

the tastes and fashions of a new age."<sup>20</sup> There is in their comedies a tendency to depict rather loose behavior at times and to be somewhat licentious, although the comment of A. W. Ward that "Beaumont and Fletcher seem devoid of the conception of female purity" seems hardly justified.<sup>21</sup>

Richard Flecknoe, the poet and dramatist whom Dryden made famous in his satirical poem MacFlecknoe, said that "Fletcher was the first who introduc't that witty obscenity in his plays, which like poison infused in pleasant liquor, is always the more dangerous the more delightful."<sup>22</sup> There is a distinct connection between Fletcher's later comedies and those of the Restoration dramatists. One play in particular, The Wild Goose Chase, shows many of the characteristics of Restoration comedy. Of this play Thorndike writes, "In the general artificiality of construction, grossness and liveliness of wit, and unsentimental presentation of sex relations, the way is being prepared for the Restoration comedy of manners,"<sup>23</sup> and Nicoll says, "Here is just such a play as the best Restoration authors present to us, just the same subservience of the plot to

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20. Thorndike, p. 206

21. Ward, II, 757.

22. Sprague, Beaumont and Fletcher on the Restoration Stage, quoted in the author's introduction.

23. Thorndike, p. 208.

witty dialogue, just the same air of graceful abandon, just the same loss of all more sober moral standards."<sup>24</sup>

As has been said, both authors were favorites of the Restoration audiences, and the ease with which their plays were adapted shows how well suited they were for the court society which patronized the theaters after 1660. Many of the plays were presented with little or no change, while the adaptation of others gives us an insight into the moral attitude of the times. Thus D'Urfey at the height of his popularity adapted three plays which are distinguished by their added obscenity and the brutalizing of the characters,<sup>25</sup> while a few years later an anonymous adaptation of Wit Without Money softened the language of the original because of the reforming influences which were putting pressure on the stage.<sup>26</sup>

As the seventeenth century progressed, there was a notable decline not only in the dramatic quality of the theater, but in its moral tone as well. John Ford has often been cited as being typically representative of the decadence of later Elizabethan dramatists.<sup>27</sup> The cause of

24. Nicoll, p. 170.

25. Sprague, p. 265.

26. Ibid., p. 256.

27. Neilson, W.A., in the Cambridge History of English Literature, VI, 219-20.

this is the sympathetic treatment which Ford has given to adulterous and incestuous characters, particularly in Love's Sacrifice and in Tis Pity She's a Whore. He has been said to show not only "abnormal taste" but "moral obliquity",<sup>28</sup> and in his attempts at comedy he is charged with sinking to a lower level than any dramatist of his class.<sup>29</sup> Yet Ford was not immoral; he was sympathetic to his characters, but he seems to be stressing a moral lesson, and he cannot be accused fairly of pointing the way towards vice.

Much closer to Restoration dramatists is James Shirley, whose plays were written for a theater that catered more and more to a particular class of society. Shirley wrote a comedy of manners in which the characters frequently sound like those of Restoration dramatists. However, he never portrayed vice as triumphant, and there is always a moral resolution to the plot in the final act, although this resolution frequently seems as artificial as that of Cibber's Love's Last Shift and its successors.

One cannot ignore Ben Jonson in this discussion for certainly he exerted a profound influence on Restoration comedy. But Jonson's influence was not a moral one, or

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28. Ellis-Fermor, Jacobean Drama, p. 244.

29. Neilson, W.A., in the Cambridge History of English Literature, VI, 220.



rather it was not an immoral one. Jonson employed a didacticism in his comedies which is totally foreign to the Restoration stage. Thomas Shadwell, who tried to emulate Jonson, may have thought he was pointing out a moral lesson by his portrayal of vice, but Shadwell's plays are quite licentious. In his comedy, Jonson shows the beginnings of an absorption with a particular mode of society, and in this he prepares the way for the later comedy of manners.

Some mention should be made of Brome, whose plays, because of their "grossness and noisiness, their loose women and tricky spendthrifts, their humours and intrigues" are closer to the Restoration than are the plays of his contemporaries.<sup>30</sup>

Throughout the first forty years of the century attacks continued to be made against the stage, particularly as the Puritans became stronger politically and as the theater became more closely allied to Court society. The earlier attacks concentrated on the indecency and licentiousness found in the theater:

For exempt their licentiousnesse only out of Playes, too too small alas will be their gettings to maintaine their idle life; that being the thing which most pleaseth the multitude, who chiefly run flocking to the Play-house, that they might make mirth of such folly and laugh at it, and that they might tell it to others

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30. Thorndike, p. 251.

when they come home, to make more fooles laugh  
for company.<sup>31</sup>

As the attacks increased, however, everything connected with the theater was considered prophane and blasphemous, and the assaults were directed not at particular instances within plays, but at all plays in general. To the modern reader the virulence of these attacks and their insistence that drama itself was something sacrilegious almost completely negates their value as dramatic criticism. Most famous of the attacks was that of Prynne, whose Histori-omatrix caused him to lose his ears, not because of his general criticism of the theater which was contained in the document, but because of his pointed reference to the Queen's encouragement of the drama. Shirley made a pointed attack on Prynne in his play Bird in a Cage in 1633, and the frequent satirization of Puritans is one of the characteristics of Restoration comedy which was carried over from the pre-revolutionary stage.

There were legitimate ethical grounds for attack during the latter period of Stuart rule. For there was a general debasement of stage morality. Jacobean and Caroline drama are not completely immoral, however, and there is always the insistence on poetic justice and the triumph of virtue. There was an increasing use of

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31. I.G., A Refutation of an Apology for Actors, p. 27.

smutty language, racy intrigue, and dissolute living in the characters depicted; there was a concentration of stage entertainment for a more limited audience; and there was, in company with the moral decline, a general decline in the dramatic quality of the plays presented.

With the beginning of the civil wars the theaters were closed, and they remained closed throughout the Commonwealth period. In spite of this, theatrical activity continued. Surreptitious performances were given from time to time, many plays were printed, and some new plays were written. There was developed the droll, a short dramatic presentation of a portion of a play, and the presentation of the drolls was permitted by the authorities. Scenes were taken from known plays and selected for their popular appeal, and the drolls were designed primarily for the more vulgar and least refined audiences.<sup>32</sup> Such presentations certainly did nothing to raise the moral tone of the drama, but it is doubtful if the drolls had any pronounced influence on the plays which were written after Charles II returned to England.

There is no doubt that Elizabethan and Stuart dramatists played a major role in influencing Restoration comedy. Not only was the earlier comedy popular on the

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32. Schelling, Felix E., in the Cambridge History of English Literature, VIII, p. 132.

Restoration stage, albeit often altered to satisfy the licentious tastes of Restoration audiences, but the earlier playwrights were frequently emulated by their successors. The immorality of Restoration comedy marks a continuation of a trend which began in the reign of James I, but that trend was slow to develop on the pre-Commonwealth stage. It may be seen in the poetic literature of the time as exemplified by Suckling, and it is certain that the growing degeneracy of the Court would have influenced the theater more had not the Puritans wrested control of the government from the Royalists.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE EMERGENCE OF TRUE RESTORATION COMEDY AND THE GROWTH OF ITS IMMORALITY

G.M. Trevelyan gives this description of English society after the Restoration:

England was sound enough. But her courtiers and politicians were rotten. For the King himself and the younger generation of the aristocracy had been demoralized by the breakup of their education and family life, by exile and confiscation leading to the mean shifts of sudden poverty, by the endurance of injustice done to them in the name of religion, by the constant spectacle of oaths and covenants lightly taken and lightly broken, and all the base underside of revolution and counter-revolution of which they had been the victims.

For these reasons a hard disbelief in virtue of any kind was characteristic of the restored leaders of politics and fashion, and was reflected in the early Restoration drama which depended on their patronage.<sup>1</sup>

Trevelyan is accurate in his general summation of the Cavalier society, but when he speaks of the "disbelief in virtue" being reflected in the early Restoration drama, he

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1. Trevelyan, Illustrated English Social History, II, 119.

is not giving a complete picture. For it is not the early period of Restoration comedy which truly reflects the moral degeneracy of the age; rather, the debasement of comedy was at its height (or more accurately its depth) in the period after 1670, or ten years after Charles' return to London. It should be remembered that of the four dramatists generally regarded as the outstanding comic writers of the Restoration--Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar--only Wycherley produced his plays during Charles' lifetime. Of those comic writers who were near the top, Etherege produced his most renowned comedy, The Man of Mode, in 1676; Shadwell wrote his first comedy in 1668; Aphra Behn's first play appeared in 1671; Dryden's most indecent plays, Marriage-a-la-Mode, The Assignation, and The Kind Keeper, came in the period from 1672 to 1678; and Thomas D'Urfey, one of the most indecent playwrights, did not write his first comedy until 1676.

Restoration comedy at the outset was a changed drama from that which had appeared on the boards eighteen years before. But, as Thorndike says:

There is danger, however, in emphasizing the change. Old playhouses, old actors, and old plays were all employed at the beginning of the new epoch, and no complete revolution occurred in the practice of the stage or in the habits of the people. In every respect the new was a continuation of the old.<sup>2</sup>

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2. Thorndike, p. 269.

Restoration playgoers, though they may already have begun the life of profligacy which was later transferred to the stage so completely, were not yet ready to accept its full theatrical representation. Pepys, who was certainly no moral purist, witnessed a performance of Jonson's Bartholomew Fair in 1661 and noted that the play was "too much prophane and abusive."<sup>3</sup> Certainly if such objection were made to Jonson, there was no readiness to receive a Wycherley or a D'Urfey. Two months later Pepys went "to Drury Lane to the French comedy, which was so ill done, and the scenes and company and everything so nasty and out of order and poor, that I was sick all the while in my mind to be there."<sup>4</sup>

John Wilson's comedy, The Cheats, was forced off the stage in 1663 because of its indecency.<sup>5</sup> One of the Court rakes, Henry Savile, told in 1665 of the indecencies of a play which quite turned his stomach.<sup>6</sup> Sir Robert Howard, who was a successful playwright at the time, wrote in 1665:

The easier dictates of Nature ought to flow in Comedy; yet separated from obsceneness. There being nothing more impudent than the immodesty of words. Wit should be chaste; and those that have it, can only write well.<sup>7</sup>

*For sample of early Restoration...*

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3. Pepys, Diary, 8 June, 1661.

4. Ibid., 30 August, 1661.

5. Summers, The Playhouse of Pepys, p. 219.

6. Ibid., p. 195.

7. Howard, "Preface to Four New Plays," reprinted in Critical Essays and Literary Fragments

All this is not to imply that immorality was not present in the theater at this time. The French troupe which Pepys saw undoubtedly gave performances that would be considered risqué even by modern standards. Dryden's Wild Gallant appeared in 1664 and helped to set a pattern that was followed by other comic writers. There are scenes in this play which are typical of the period to come and which are in a different atmosphere than was found in pre-Commonwealth drama. There is the sharp satirical dig which Failer throws at Nonsuch, who "now has got a habit of swearing, that he may be thought a cavalier."<sup>8</sup> There is Isabel's statement to Timorous that "He I marry must promise me to live in London: I cannot abide to be in the Countrie, like a wild beast in the wilderness, with no Christian souls about me."<sup>9</sup> And there is the highly farcical scene where Loveby and Trice are entertaining three prostitutes when Constance and Isabel come in, and Loveby frantically tries to avoid introducing them.<sup>10</sup> There is indecency aplenty here, but it should also be remembered that the play was not a success.

Another sample of early indecency may be found in

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8. The Wild Gallant, I, 1.

9. Ibid., IV, 1.

10. Ibid., III, 1.



Killigrew's The Parson's Wedding, which had been written during the Interregnum. The play has been charged with "unexampled coarseness"<sup>11</sup> but it was a popular work, perhaps because of its biting satire on the Puritans.

Theater-going habits were also changing during this period. Actresses were appearing on the stage, and ladies were frequently in attendance in the audience. Pepys tells several times of taking his wife to the theater. In 1663 he discusses the improvement of the ladies' dress in the pit and of their increasing use of vizards.<sup>12</sup> Pepys gives us a good insight into the general moral character of the actors when he describes a visit to Mrs. Knipp's dressing room in 1667. He tells how the "base company of men comes among them, and how lewdly they talk," and he says, "But to see how Nell cursed, for having so few people in the pit was pretty."<sup>13</sup> Pepys also tells of seeing Howard's play The Change of Crownes, which he thought was a "great play and serious, only Lacy did act the country-gentleman come up to Court, who do abuse the Court with all the imaginable wit and plainness about selling of places, and doing every thing for money."<sup>14</sup> Howard's play provides a

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11. Schelling, Felix E., in the Cambridge History of English Literature, VIII, 136.

12. Pepys, 8 May and 12 June, 1663.

13. Ibid., 5 October, 1667.

14. Ibid., 15 April, 1667.

sharp attack on the growing corruption of the Court, and it is a more particularized satire than later Restoration audiences would allow.

The first ten years then following the return of Charles were active ones for the theater, but what we consider to be true Restoration comedy was only emerging from its infant state at the end of this period. The backbone of the playhouses for this first decade had been pre-Restoration plays. The new plays which appeared were preparing the way for those to come, but they had not achieved that brilliance of wit nor descended to the levels of indecency for which Restoration comedy is noted.

The theater-going society could now be considered fully ready for what was to come, for they had thrown off the shackles of Puritan restraint at the outset of their return, and they were now hardened to the point where there was no sense of shame at witnessing a lewd or bawdy performance. Licentiousness, intrigue, double dealing, profligate drinking and gambling, and general dishonesty were rampant in the Court. The wit had risen to the top of society; the fop strutted and preened himself in the theater, the park, and the coffee-house; the cuckolded husband and the sufferer from venereal infection had become standard subjects for jest; nymphomania and satyriasis were expected modes of

conduct; and the ladies were concerned only with their reputations and not their honor, while the gentlemen were concerned with neither. All this was to be reflected on the stage and, in fact, was already being satirized on the boards. As one of Sedley's characters remarks, "'Tis a mad Age, a Man is laught at for being a Cuckold, and wonder'd at if he take any care to prevent it."<sup>15</sup>

The degeneration of society evidenced itself in the behavior of theater audiences. To begin with, the theater became the regular meeting place of women and their beaux. There were times when half the audience consisted of courtezans.<sup>16</sup> The wits frequently tried to outdo the actors and addressed their remarks to the audience at large, completely ignoring the performers on the stage. Needless to say, their remarks were often most lewd. Wycherley's Sparkish comments on the typical wit's behavior at the playhouse when he says, "We find fault even with their bawdy on the stage, whilst we talk nothing else in the pit as loud."<sup>17</sup> Pepys had the misfortune to be spit upon while watching a performance,<sup>18</sup> and audiences often became so unruly at a play they disliked that it was

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15. Bellamira, III, 111.

16. Nicoll, p. 20.

17. The Country Wife, III, 11.

18. Pepys, 28 January, 1661.

impossible to follow the performance. Fights, and even murders took place in the pit.<sup>19</sup> Nicoll, however, despite his excellent account of the theater audience, perhaps overstates the case when he says, "...not only, therefore, did the actors play to empty houses...but the meager audiences who did put in an appearance barely gave the actors leave to perform."<sup>20</sup> Despite the distractions in the playhouse, the audience at large went to enjoy the performances, and the comments of Pepys, Evelyn, et al as to the quality both of performances and performers show that the theatergoer was usually able to follow the play completely.

An understanding of the theater audience and of Restoration society in general is absolutely essential to a comprehension of the nature of Restoration comedy. The comedy is brutal, noisy, and lewd because it was written for an audience that was brutal, noisy, and lewd, and which expected to find brutality, noisiness, and lewdness portrayed on the comic stage:

The new comedy became indeed not merely a follower of English or French models but very distinctly the reflection of the manners of the new age. The drama must always respond to the audience, and perhaps no drama ever did this more completely than that of the Restoration....Comedy represents

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19. Nicoll, p. 17.

20. Ibid., p. 16.

a leisure class devoted to wine, woman, and song, and also to 'scowering', duelling and adultery. Society, like the king, was selfish and sensual, and it delighted in its depravity. Its audiences desired a comedy that is restricted in subject to adultery and seduction and that is not merely plain spoken but foul-mouthed.<sup>21</sup>

Sedley again furnishes us with a protrait of society in the following inquiry made to a stranger in London:

What Business, or what Hope brings thee to Town,  
Who can't not Pimp, nor Cheat, nor Swear, nor Lye?  
This Place will nourish no such idle Drone<sup>22</sup>

The great idol of the age was the wit, of which Sedley, Rochester, and Buckingham, a trio of the most dissolute profligates ever known, were considered to be the ideal types. As the comedy of manners developed to its highest degree, all of its heroes were great wits, and in Congreve we have the witty dialogue of the period polished to the ultimate. Naturally, in real life, many of those who aspired to be wits fell short of the mark, and they are satirized through the various fops who adorn the stage. Wycherley gives us a long discussion between Dapperwit and Lydia concerning the wits of the time:

Dap. There are as many degrees of wits as of lawyers: as there is first your solicitor, then your attorney, then your pleading-counsel, then your chamber-counsel, and then your judge; so there is

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21. Thorndike, p. 274...

22. Sedley, poem "To Dextus", from The Complete Works of Sedley, I, 61.

first your court-wit, your coffee-wit, your poll-wit, or politic-wit, your chamber-wit, or scribble, and last of all, your judge-wit, or critic.

Lyd. But are there as many wits as lawyers? Lord, what will become of us! What employment can they have? how are they known?

Dap. First, your court-wit is a flattering, insinuating, fashionable, cringing, grimacing fellow--and has wit enough to solicit a suit of love; and if he fail, he has malice enough to ruin the woman with a dull lampoon:--but he rails still at the man that is absent, for you must know all wits rail; and his wit properly lies in combing perukes, matching ribbons, and being severe, as they call it, upon other people's clothes.

Lyd. Now, what is the coffee-wit?

Dap. He is a lying, censorious, gossipping, quibbling wretch, and sets people together by the ears over that sober drink, coffee: he is a wit, as he is a commentator, upon the Gazette: and he rails at the pirates of Algier, the Grand Signior of Constantinople, and the Christian Grand Signior.

Lyd. What kind of man is your poll-wit?

Dap. He is a fidgetting, busy, dogmatical, hot-headed fop, that speaks always in sentences and proverbs, (as other in similitudes), and he rails perpetually against the present government. His wit lies in projects and monopolies, and penning speeches for young Parliament men.

Lyd. But what is your chamber-wit, or scribble-wit?

Dap. He is a poring, melancholy, modest sot, ashamed of the world: he searches all the records of wit, to compile a breviare of them for the use of players, printers, booksellers, and sometimes cooks, tobaccomen; he employs the railing against the ignorance of the age, and all that have more money than he.

Lyd. Now your last.

Dap. Your judge-wit, or critic, is all these together, and yet has the wit to be none of them: he can think, speak, write, as well as the rest, but scorns (himself a judge) to be judged by posterity: he rails at all the other classes of wits, and his wit lies in damning all but himself: he is your true wit.<sup>23</sup>

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23. Love in a Wood, II, i.

A pretty lot this, yet one suspects there is more truth than jest in the satire. Such were the persons who patronized the theater. Because of the important relationship between Restoration society and Restoration comedy, a more detailed discussion of that society is given in a later chapter. It can be noted here, however, that comic heroes were based upon the ideals of the time, and the various adventures of the Horners, Lovealls, Valentines show us the licentious nature of the Restoration citizen.

## CHAPTER THREE

### SOME TRAITS TYPICAL OF RESTORATION COMEDY

The period from 1670 to 1700 is the great era of Restoration comedy, and during this era of prolific comic production the licentiousness of the stage fully matched its real-life counterpart and brought forth the completely justified moral objections which caused such a controversy in the century's last decade. In the years 1670 and 1671 there appeared the first two plays Aphra Behn, the first comedy of Thomas Betterton, Roger Boyle's only two comedies, Shadwell's The Humorists, Buckingham's celebrated attack on tragicomedy, The Rehearsal, and Wycherley's first play, Love in a Wood.<sup>1</sup> Brilliant and near-brilliant comic productions followed one another for the next thirty years. Through all these plays there runs a sameness of material and presentation. The comic playwrights, however they might shun and defy

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1. Nicoll, appendix III.



moral convention, adhered strictly to the dramatic conventions of the time, and to the casual reader there is little difference between Dryden, or Aphra Behn, or Congreve other than a general difference in the quality of presentation.

The Cavalier attitude towards marriage appears again and again. Marriage is an institution of convenience and should not weigh too heavily on either party. Indeed, a genuine show of affection between husband and wife is considered vulgar. In Dryden's An Evening's Love Jacinta asks Wildblood about marriage, "What think you of obliging one another from this day forward; and shewing all our ill humours at the first; which Lovers use to keep as a reserve till they are married?"<sup>2</sup> Congreve's Mrs. Frail says, "There is no creature perfectly civil but a husband. For in a little time he grows only rude to his wife, and that is the highest good breeding, for it begets civility to other people."<sup>3</sup>

This disregard of marriage as a romantic institution continued until the end of the period; Vanbrugh's Sir John Brute is particularly bitter:

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2. An Evening's Love, II, 1.

3. Love for Love, I, 11.

What cloying meat is Love, --when Matrimony's the  
Sauce to it. Two year's Marriage has debauch't my  
five Senses. Everything I see, everything I hear,  
everything I smell, and everything I taste--me-  
thinks has Wife in't.

No Boy was ever so weary of his Tutor; no girl  
of her bib; no Nun of doing Penance nor Old Maid  
of being Chast, as I am of being Married.

Sure there's a secret curse entail'd upon the  
very Name of Wife.<sup>4</sup>

There were definite rules of courtship, too, and one of  
the cardinal principles was that there should be no real  
manifestation of love. The contract scene in Act IV of The  
Way of the World wherein Mirabell and Millamant set forth  
their conditions for marriage is too well known to bear  
repeating. This type of scene was developed by Dryden,  
based to a degree on scenes from Shirley and Fletcher. In  
Dryden's The Rival Ladies the contract scene is brought to  
its highest point in the conversation between Celadon, the  
ideal courtier, and Florimel, the sagacious woman of the  
world; this type of scene was reproduced again and again by  
other Restoration dramatists, but only Congreve equalled  
Dryden's performance:

Cel. When I have been at play, you shall never ask  
me what money I have lost.

Flo. When I have been abroad you shall never  
enquire who treated me.

Cel. Item, I will have the liberty to sleep all  
night, without your interrupting my repose for any  
evil design whatsoever.

Flo. Item, Then you shall bid me good night before  
you sleep.

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4. The Provok'd Wife, I, 1.

Cel. Provided always, that whatever liberties we take with other people, we continue very honest to one another.

Flo. As far as will consist with a pleasant life.

Cel. Lastly, whereas the names of Husband and Wife hold forth nothing but clashing and cloying, and dullness and faintness in their signification; they shall be abolish'd forever betwixt us.

Flo. And instead of those, we will be named by the more agreeable names of Mistress and Gallant.<sup>5</sup>

The rules for love-making were frequently set forth, and all followed the general pattern of hypocrisy and lack of any real passion or sentiment. Congreve again furnishes us with a sample as Tattle directs the naive but willing Miss Prue:

Prue. Well; and how will you make love to me? Come I long to have you begin. Must I love too? You must tell me how.

Tat. You must let me speak, miss, you must not speak first; I must ask you questions, and you must answer.

Prue. What, is it like the catechism?--come then, ask me.

Tat. D'ye think you can love me?

Prue. Yes.

Tat. Pooh! pox! you must not say yes already; I shan't care a farthing for you then in a twinkling.

Prue. What must I say then?

Tat. Why, you must say no, or you believe not, or you can't tell.

Prue. Why, must I tell a lie then?

Tat. Yes, if you'd be well-bred; all well-bred persons lie. Besides, you are a woman, you must never speak what you think: your words must contradict your thoughts; but your actions may contradict your words. So, when I ask you, if you can love me, you must say no, but you must love me too. If I tell you you are handsome, you must deny it, and say I flatter you. But you must think yourself more charming than I speak you: and like me for the

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5. The Rival Ladies, V, 1.

beauty which I say you have, as much as if I had it myself. If I ask you to kiss me, you must be angry, but you must not refuse me. If I ask you for more, you must be more angry,--but more complying; and as soon as ever I make you say you'll cry out, you must be sure to hold your tongue.  
Prue. O Lord, I swear this is pure! I like it better than our old-fashioned country way of speaking one's mind....<sup>6</sup>

Wycherley gives us the laws of courtship pertaining to anxious widows in the following conversation between Mrs. Joyner and Lady Flippant:

L. Flip. I cannot deny but I always rail against marriage; which is the widow's way to it certainly.

Mrs. J. 'Tis the desperate way of the desperate widows, in truly.

L. Flip. Would you have us as tractable as the wenches that eat oatmeal, and fooled like them too?

Mrs. J. ...since the widow wants the natural allurements which the virgin has, you ought to give men all other encouragements, in truly.

L. Flip. Therefore, on the contrary, because the widow's fortune...is her chiefest bait, the more chary she seems of it, and the more she withdraws it, the more eagerly the busy gaping fry will bite. With us widows, husbands are got like bishoprics, by saying 'No'; and I will tell you, a young heir is as shy of a widow as of a rock, to my knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

In all these scenes the cynicism and the hypocrisy stand out. And through the cynicism and hypocrisy we see portrayed the moral degeneration of the age. It is rare indeed to find expressions of real sentiment such as Dryden used in his play The Assignation in 1672:

Cam. Violetta, my love!

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6. Love for Love, II, 11.

7. Love in a Wood, I, 1.

Vio. My dear Camillo!

Cam. Speak those words again: my own name never sounded so sweetly to me, as when you spoke it, and made me happy by adding Dear to it.

...

Vio. But night will hide my blushes, when I tell you, I love you so much, or I would never have trusted my virtue and my person in your hands.

Cam. The one is sacred, and the other safe....<sup>8</sup>

It is impossible to imagine such words coming from Etherege or Concreve. And the lines of sentiment are not sustained by Dryden, for the play in which they appear is one of his most indecent. It is the total lack of sentiment in the typical Restoration comedy, and it is the dispassionate satire of all society in general which causes the Restoration playwrights to lose the sympathy of the reader:

Sentiment was totally out of place in Restoration comedy with its fondness for a hard, intellectual and cruel attitude. Comedy had concerned itself with the crimes and follies of mankind, and regarded emotional idealism, if existent, as at least outside its sphere of hard realism.

Thus we find in the comedies of the period the amatory intrigue as the crux of the plot; wit, both in expression and action, as the primary virtue of the hero, who is usually a fornicator or an adulterer, and if he is not, is a scapegrace of some kind; and a failure to place any moral censure on any character, regardless of the extent of his vices. It has been quite accurately pointed out that

8. The Assignment, II, 111.

9. Krutch, p. 247.

those characters who are ridiculed "are only shown as fools by the discrepancy between their ambitions and their achievements,"<sup>10</sup> and the ambitions themselves are not subject to censure. Were it just for these faults Restoration comedy would justly deserve moral condemnation, but added to these faults are the inevitable indecencies of language with which they are presented to us:

It may as well be admitted frankly that in the practice of the Restoration dramatists nothing was more characteristic than habitual lewdness of language. Whatever the matter in hand, and whatever differences may have existed in the shades of their motives, whether they were appealing frankly to the lasciviousness of their audience or whether, as at times was the case, they seemed animated by genuine if transitory disgust with men of manners, the language in which they expressed themselves was always the plainest and most particular that could be found, for they were inspired with a passion for revealing all that convention ordinarily veiled. Moreover, even when the subject under discussion was as far removed from the sexual, they made it habitual to choose metaphors and turns of expression that would bring in a comparison from the subject which seems to have usually been uppermost in their minds.<sup>11</sup>

Among the other particularly characteristic features which show us the debased state of society are the satirizations of special types such as the Puritan, the lawyer, the physician, the country dweller, and the foreigner. The lawyer is always shown as an arch-villain and a master at double dealing:

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10. Knights, "Restoration Comedy: the Reality and the Myth," in Explorations: Essays in Criticism, p. 143.

11. Krutch, p. 84.

Valentine. Why does that lawyer wear black? does he carry his conscience withoutside?--Lawyer, what art thou? dost thou know me?

Buckram. ...Yes, sir.

Valentine. Thou liest, for I am Truth.<sup>12</sup>

The physician is nothing but a quack whose cures are accidental and accompanied by enormous fees. Vanbrugh gives us an excellent sample of Restoration satire of the medical profession in his portrayal of Serringe in The Relapse.<sup>13</sup>

The Puritan is an arch-hypocrite, whose professions of religion are simply a subterfuge for ulterior designs. The cavalier attitude towards the Puritan shows the debased outlook of a society which could find nothing but utter hypocrisy in any expression of piety. It is noteworthy that one of Congreve's defenses when attacked by the Anglican minister, Jeremy Collier, was to insist that he found evil where none existed because he was himself evil-minded.

The country citizen was the object of universal scorn, and country life was held in complete contempt. Dryden expressed the prevailing attitude in these lines:

In the country! nay that's to fall beneath the town;  
for they live there upon our offals here:  
their entertainment of wit, is only the remembrance  
of what they had when they were last in town;  
they live this year upon the last year's knowledge,  
as their cattle do all night, by chewing the cud of  
what they eat in the afternoon.<sup>14</sup>

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12. Congreve, Love for Love, IV, ii.

13. The Relapse, IV, iii.

14. Marriage A La Mode, III, i.

The foreigner is inevitably a dupe and a fop. Wycherley gives us a typical example in The Gentleman Dancing Master, and the same pattern of satirization is found in almost all the comic playwrights.

Certainly the persons satirized have been the subject for similar stage jests throughout English literary history, but the satirical portraits of the Restoration period may be set apart because of their special character.

In almost every instant, society is pictured through the eyes of the Cavalier courtiers, and rarely is there found a comedy like Shadwell's The Squire of Alsatia, which depicts the seamy side of middle class life. One of the distinct differences between Restoration comedy and that of the eighteenth century is the broadening of the social circle, the beginnings of which we find in Vanbrugh, and which is extensively carried out by Farquhar.

For some twenty years the pattern continued unchanged. But while the general licentiousness continued there were forces which were compelling a change. Slow to make an impression, they burst with all their fury shortly before the turn of the century and brought into the open the conflict which had been raging beneath the surface over stage morality.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE CONTROVERSY OVER STAGE MORALITY AND THE COLLIER ATTACK

The immorality portrayed on the Restoration stage, though a product and a reflection of an immoral age, was not an unconscious morality caused by ignorance on the part of the playwrights that they were breaking any moral standards, or a disbelief on their part that their actions were in violation of any code of ethics. Instead the Restoration dramatists made a deliberate attempt to defy moral convention, just as the Court society deliberately sought to override the rules of conventional morality. The bawdiness of the works were humorous to Cavalier audiences because of their deliberate slaps at the principles of decency which gave those audiences a perverse delight. The bawdiness was deliberate, and rather than being incidental to the plot, it formed the essence of the plot.

One of the characteristics of the comedies is the

extreme coarseness of many of the prologues and epilogues. These curtain addresses often made fun of the indecency of the plays themselves. There is many a truth found in these jests, however, and we have a picture of a society laughing at itself for its deliberate naughtiness, yet never escaping a feeling of some guilt over that naughtiness. However suppressed moral condemnation of the theater may have been, the reaction of the playwrights themselves shows that they must have felt the pressure of that condemnation. They all sought some means to justify their indecency. Aphra Behn said that she thought a woman should be allowed to be as indecent as the men,<sup>1</sup> Farquhar said that modest plays so bored the audience that they turned to other amusements in the pit,<sup>2</sup> while Dryden discounted the conventional idea that the purpose of comedy was to reward virtue and punish vice and defended himself against the charge of having debauched heroes by saying that authors from ancient times had done the same and that the purpose of comedy is entertainment, not instruction.<sup>3</sup>

The attacks continued, and although it was the celebrated writing of Jeremy Collier which truly brought the issue to

1. Prologue to Sir Patient Fancy.

2. "A Discourse upon Comedy in Reference to the English Stage." From The Complete Works of Farquhar, II, 23.

3. "On Comedy, Farce, and Tragedy." From Dryden's Dramatic Essays, pp 82-83.

its climax, the subdued and unrecorded criticisms and moral pressures were felt long before the Collier controversy. Nicoll says that the trend towards sentimental comedy began as early as 1680, if not before.<sup>4</sup> A reading of Wycherley's Plain Dealer shows that he had felt the breath of censure because of the indecency of The Country Wife. Wycherley defends himself with the same hollow defense that was to be used by Congreve and Vanbrugh--there is nothing indecent except to those who are deliberately seeking indecency. Although the scene is rather long, it bears repeating as a means of showing the complete cynicism of Wycherley toward moral criticism, not only of his play, but as to the opinion he had that those who preached moral reform were generally hypocrites:

Olivia. Then, for her conduct, she was seen at the 'Country Wife' after the first day. There's for you, my lord.

Lord Plausible. But, madam, she was not seen to use her fan all the day long, turn aside her head, or by a conscious blush discover more guilt than modesty.

Oliv. Very fine! Then you think a woman modest that sees the hideous 'Country Wife' without publishing her detestation of it? D'ye hear him cousin?

Eliza. Yes, and am, I must confess of the same opinion; and think, that as an over-conscious fool at a play, by endeavoring to show the author's want of wit, exposes his own to more censure, so may a lady call her own modesty in question, by publicly cavilling with the poet's. For all these grimaces of honour and artificial modesty disparage a woman's real virtue, as much as the use of white

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4. Nicoll, p. 183.

and red does the natural complexion: and you must use very, very little if you would have it thought your own.

Oliv. Then you would have a woman of honour with passive looks, ears, and tongue, undergo all the hideous obscenity she hears at nasty plays.

Eliz. Truly, I think a woman betrays her lack of modesty, by showing it in publick in a playhouse, as much as a man does his want of courage by a quarrel there; for the truly modest and stout say least, and are least exceptious, especially in publick.

Oliv. O hideous, cousin! this cannot be your opinion. But you are one of those who have the confidence to pardon the filthy play.

Eliz. Why, what is there of ill in't, say you?

Oliv. O fy! fy! fy! would you put me to the blush anew? call all the blood into my face again? But to satisfy you then; first the clandestine obscenity in the very name of Horner.

Eliz. Truly, 'tis so hidden, I cannot find it out, I confess.

Oliv. O horrid! Does it not give you the rank conception or image of a goat, or town-bull or a satyr? nay, what is yet a filthier image than all the rest, that of an eunuch?

Eliz. What then? I can think of a goat, a bull, or a satyr, without any hurt.

Oliv. Ay: but, cousin, one cannot stop there.

Eliz. I can, cousin.

Oliv. O no; for when you have those filthy creatures in your head once, the next thing you think is what they do; as their defiling of honest men's beds and couches, rapes upon sleeping and waking country virgins under hedges, and on haycocks. Nay, farther---

Eliz. Nay, no farther, cousin. We have enough of your comment on the play, which will make me more ashamed than the play itself.

Oliv. O, believe me, 'tis a filthy play! and you may take my word for a filthy play as soon as another's. But the filthiest thing in the play, or any other play, is--

Eliz. Pray keep it to yourself if it be so.

Oliv. No, faith, you shall know it; I'm resolved to tell you and make you out of love with the play. I say the lewdest, filthiest thing in it is his china. He has quite taken away the reputation of poor china itself, and sullied the most innocent and pretty furniture of a lady's chamber; insomuch

that I was fain to break all my defiled vessels.  
You see I have none left; nor you, I hope.

Eliz. You'll pardon me, I cannot think the worse  
of my china for that of the playhouse.

Oliv. Why, you will not keep any now, sure! 'Tis  
now as unfit an ornament for a lady's chamber as  
the pictures that come from Italy and other hot  
countries; as appears by their nudities, which I  
always cover, or scratch out, whereso'er I find  
'em. But china! out upon't, filthy china! nasty  
debauched china!...

But what think you, Mr. Novel, of the play?

Nov. ...I'll tell you what counsel I gave the surly  
fool you spake of....To put his play into rhyme;  
for rhyme, you know, often makes mystical nonsense  
pass with the critics for wit, and a double-meaning  
saying with the ladies, for soft, tender, and moving  
passion.<sup>5</sup>

That the attacks on the stage were felt seems to be  
indicated by the following lines which Sedley wrote in  
1687:

Is it not strange to see in such an Age  
The Pulpit get the better of the Stage?  
Not through Rebellion as in former days;  
But zeal for Sermons and neglect for Plays.<sup>6</sup>

Aphra Behn, who fulfilled her pledge to write as lewdly  
as the men, had earlier accused the playwrights of being  
"the fondest and the lewdest crew about this town," and the  
censors who approved the plays as being "the most debauched,  
or the most unwitty people in the company."<sup>7</sup> Shadwell also  
complained about the indecency of the stage, and he seems to  
have been serious in his professed intention to give moral  
instruction in his comedies, yet his works often sink to a

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5. The Plain Dealer, II, i.

6. Prologue to Bellamira.

7. Prelude to The Dutch Lover.

moral level as low as those of his contemporaries, and in his depiction of Crazy, the victim of a venereal infection, we have one of the most flippant and revolting targets for jests to be found on the stage.<sup>8</sup> Licentiousness continued to rule the day, but the forces for moral reform applied increasing pressure, and in the prologue to another author's play, Sedley once again complains:

Envy and Faction rule this grumbling Age,  
The State they cannot, but they shake the Stage,

...  
In every Age there were a sort of Men,  
As you do now, damn'd all was written then.

...  
But against old as well as new to rage,  
Is the peculiar Phrensy of this Age.  
Shakspear must down, and you must press no more  
Soft Desdemona, nor the Jealous Moor:<sup>9</sup>

The playgoers were ready to accept comedies of a more elevated nature, and in Cibber's Love's Last Shift, the artificial reform of the final act found a receptive audience. Cibber later admitted that the play lacked wit, but said, "the mere moral delight received from its fable" enabled the play to remain popular for more than forty years.<sup>10</sup> By 1696 when Cibber's play appeared, however, Restoration comic creativeness was already moribund. Congreve was to write only one more comedy, although this has generally

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8. The Humorists, passim.

9. Prologue to Henry Higdon's The Wary Widdow.

10. Cibber, An Apology for his Life, p. 115.

been regarded as his finest; Vanbrugh would complete his two greatest comedies in less than two years; and only Farquhar, who, despite his inclusion in the list of Restoration comic playwrights, shows us much that is atypical of Restoration comedy, still had his season of dramatic production ahead of him. It seems obvious then, that in the last decade of the century, the era of debauched wit was drawing to its close, although theater audiences would continue to applaud the old comedies throughout the first quarter of the eighteenth century. With the death of Charles, the atmosphere around the Court took on a more wholesome air; with the Glorious Revolution the debaucherie that had raged rampant in official society was no longer fashionable. William and Mary, though perhaps not moral purists, would not tolerate the indecency which had been openly approved by Charles, and which had been condoned by James. Playgoing audiences were ready for a change, but the playwrights were not yet prepared to set a new trend until Cibber showed them the way almost accidentally. Moral corruption as a laughable trait was ready to yield to a materially rewarding virtue. The increased agitation against stage licentiousness finally found its necessary advocate in Jeremy Collier, the first of the stage's moral critics who was able to attract mass attention to a condemnation

of the stage.

Collier's attack, like Cibber's play, was not successful because of any real intrinsic literary worth, but because it gave real expression to the changed attitude of society. Had it appeared ten years earlier it would probably have attracted little attention. The attack itself contains many statements which seem absurd today, and many of his criticisms are too narrow to be approved by any but the most prudish. Collier maintained that the following is the primary purpose of the theater:

The business of plays is to recommend virtue and discountenance vice; to shew the uncertainty of humour greatness, the sudden turns of fate, and the unhappy conclusions of violence and injustice; 'tis to expose the singularities of pride and fancy, to make folly and falsehood contemptible, and to bring everything that is ill under infamy and neglect.<sup>11</sup>

He lists as the intolerable faults of the stage:

their swearing, profaneness, and lewd application of Scripture; their abuse of the clergy, their making their top characters libertines and giving them success in their debauchery.<sup>12</sup>

In answering Collier's first statement, both Congreve and Vanbrugh apparently accepted his hypothesis as to the purposes of comedy, and this made their already vulnerable position completely indefensible. Had they elaborated on

11. Collier, A Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage, p. 134.

12. Ibid., p. 126.



Dryden's earlier statement that the purpose of his plays was to entertain rather than to instruct, they could have justified their art if not their morals. Their best defense would have been that they were writing to satisfy the tastes of the age, although this would not have satisfied their critics. But their best policy would have been that later outlined by Farquhar, who summed up the matter as follows:

Mr. Collier showed too much malice and rancour for a Church man, and his Adversaries too little wit for the Character of Poets; that their faults transversed would show much better; Dulness being more familiar with those of Mr. Collier's Function, as Malice and ill nature is more adapted to the Professors of wit. That the best way of answering Mr. Collier was not to have replied at all: for there was so much Fire in his Book, had not his Adversaries thrown in Fuel, it would have fed upon itself, and so gone out in a blaze.<sup>13</sup>

In noting Collier's listing of the faults of the stage, some attention should be taken of his attacks against stage portrayals of the clergy. One of the weaknesses of Collier's position, a weakness which Congreve deftly probed, is his oversensitiveness to any frivolity concerning the ministry. His extreme touchiness on this subject led him to write an entire essay devoted to the defense of clergymen from any type of attack.<sup>14</sup>

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13. "Adventures of Covent Garden," From Farquhar's Complete Works, II, 23.

14. Collier, "On the Necessity of the Office of Chaplain," from his Essays on Several Moral Subjects.

Collier makes a plea for the treatment of women as more refined social creatures than men, a position which was universally laughed at by the Restoration playwrights:

Obscenity in any company is a rustic, uncreditable talent, but among women 'tis particularly rude. Such talk would be very affrontive in conversation and not endured by any lady of reputation. Whence then comes it to pass that those liberties which disoblige so much in conversation should entertain upon the stage? Do women leave all the regards to decency and conscience behind them when they come to the playhouse? Or does the place transform their inclinations and turn their former aversions into pleasure? Or were their pretences to sobriety elsewhere nothing but hypocrisy and grimace?<sup>15</sup>

Here Collier shows an apparent ignorance of the ladies of Court society during the debauched years of the Restoration. For there is nothing to indicate that many of the ladies were any less immoral than the men. It is doubtful that Collier really understood the society of Charles II, and it is quite obvious that he did not understand the reasons for the moral degeneracy of that society. He wrote his attack on the stage because he was "convinced that nothing has gone further in debauching the age than the stage-poets and playhouse."<sup>16</sup> Yet it has been shown earlier that the licentiousness of the stage was a reflection of the previous decline in morality, just as at the time

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15. Collier, A Short View, p. 152.

16. Ibid., p. 119.

of Collier's attack in 1698 the drama had not yet matched the moral resurgence of society. Dryden, while not engaging in active controversy with Collier, stressed this idea:

Perhaps the Parson stretch'd a point too far,  
 When with our Theaters he wag'd a War.  
 He tells that this very Moral Age  
 Receiv'd the first Infection from the Stage.  
 But sure, a banisht Court, with Lewdness fraught,  
 The seeds of open Vice returning brought.

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 The Poets, who must live by Courts or starve,  
 Were proud, so good a government to serve;  
 And mixing with Buffoons and Pimps profain,  
 Tainted the Stage, for some small snip of Gain.

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 Now, they would silence us, and shut the Door  
 That let in all the barefac'd Vice before.<sup>17</sup>

Collier was particularly critical of both Congreve and Vanbrugh, and each defended himself rather poorly. Congreve made a very witty defense, but he was standing on very shaky moral grounds, and he apparently sensed it. He refused to admit that his plays were immoral and tried to prove that they gave moral instruction to their audiences. He cited Aristotle as saying comedy was supposed to be an imitation of the worst sort of people. Then he launched into a tirade against Collier, saying that he found evil only because he looked for it with an evil mind:

Mr. Collier, on the stage, shall rock Bawdery  
 and obscenity out of modest and innocent expres-  
 sions; and having extorted it, he shall scourge

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17. Epilogue to Vanbrugh's The Pilgrim.

it, not out of Chastisement but Wantonness; he shall forget, that sometimes to report a fault is to repeat it. The Spectator in the Pit shall plainly perceive, that he loves to look on naked obscenity; and that he only flogs it, as a sinful Paedagogue sometimes lashes a pretty boy, that looks lovely in his eyes, for Reasons best known to himself.<sup>18</sup>

As an example of the way Congreve maintained that his plays give moral instruction, there is the passage concerning the character of Valentine in Love for Love. Valentine is a complete rake, whose principal virtue is that he falls so much in love, he is willing to abandon his inheritance when he feels he has lost his mistress. Congreve defends the portrayal of Valentine thusly:

Mr. Collier says, he is Prodigal. He was prodigal, and is shewn, in the first Act under hard Circumstances, which are the effects of his Prodigality. That he is unnatural and undutiful, I don't understand: he has indeed a very unnatural Father; and if he does not very passively submit to his Tyranny and barbarous Usage, I conceive there is a Moral to be apply'd from thence to such Fathers. That he is profane and obscene is a false Accusation and without any Evidence. In short, the Character is a mix'd Character; his faults are fewer than his good Qualities; and, as the world goes, he may pass well enough for the best Character in a Comedy; where even the best must be shewn to have Faults, that the best Spectators may be warn'd not to think too well of themselves.<sup>19</sup>

Vanbrugh also tried to portray Collier as a salacious

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18. "Amendments of Mr. Collier's False and Imperfect Citation." From The Complete Works of William Congreve, IV, 127.

19. Ibid., p. 136.

man who deliberately tried to find evil. He too defended his plays by citing their moral instruction. It has been said that Vanbrugh's defense went against his personal convictions, but that he lacked the courage to defend his comedy on its artistic merits alone.<sup>20</sup> Speaking of Collier, Vanbrugh says:

All I shall say to this, is, That an Obscene Thought must be buried deep indeed, if he don't smell it out....I believe had the Obscenity he has routed up here, been buried as deep in his Church-yard, The Yarest Boar in his parish would hardly have tost up his Snout at it.<sup>21</sup>

Dryden, who was better qualified to reply to Collier than either Congreve or Vanbrugh, had apparently undergone one of those changes in belief that characterized his career. He wrote, "I have been myself too much a libertine in most of my poems, which I should be well contented I had Time either to purge or to see them fairly burned."<sup>22</sup> In his preface to the Fables in 1700 he apologized for his own licentiousness and said he hoped Collier would accept his pardon; thus Dryden acknowledged publicly his chastisement, but Edward Filmer, writing only a short time after Collier's attack, stated:

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20. Perry, p. 86.

21. "A Short Vindication of the Relapse and the Provoked Wife, from Immorality and Prophaneness." From the Complete Works of Vanbrugh, Volume IV.

22. Letter to Elizabeth Thomas, 1699.

Mr. Dryden particularly always looked upon it as a pile of malice, ill-nature, and uncharitableness, and all drawn upon the rock of wit and invention.<sup>23</sup>

John Dennis, who wrote after the excitement of the Collier controversy had died down, conceded that the Restoration stage was immoral; yet he tried vigorously to defend it:

If Mr. Collier had only attack'd the Corruptions of the Stage, for my own Part, I should have been so far from blaming him, that I should have Publickly returned him my Thanks: For the Abuses are so great, that there is a Necessity of reforming them; not that I think, that, with all its Corruptions, the Stage has Debauch'd the People: I am fully convinc'd it has not....<sup>24</sup>

Dennis claimed that the drama during the reign of James I was just as immoral as that of the Restoration,<sup>25</sup> and later made a rather absurd defense by saying there are four principal vices--the love of women, drinking, gaming, and unnatural sins--and that the stage had encouraged none of these:

...as for Drunkenness, to shew the Sinner, is sufficient to discredit the vice; for a Drunkard, of Necessity, always appears either odious, or ridiculous. And for a Gamester, I never knew one shewn in a Play, but either as a Fool, or a Rascal.<sup>26</sup>

Dennis goes on to say that unnatural vices have not been

23. Filmer, "A Further Defense of Dramatic Poetry." Quoted in the Library of Literary Criticism.

24. Dennis, introduction to "The Usefulness of the Stage." From his Miscellaneous Tracts, p. 313.

25. Ibid., p. 315.

26. Ibid., p. 319.

portrayed on the stage, and he excuses the depiction of woman-chasing by saying it is the most natural of vices and it helps to check the other three.

Farquhar made no attack on Collier, but defended comedy by comparing it to the fables of Aesop and saying that the comic dramatists were simply trying to reform men with the example of men rather than the example of animals. Therefore Fondlewife and his spouse are nothing more than the human counterparts of the eagle and the cockle.<sup>27</sup>

Another early eighteenth century critic tried to show that comedy was designed for moral instruction:

WHERE can Youth more properly go than where they are not only taught, but have presented to their Eyes, what are the rewards of Virtue, and what the woeful Fruits of Vice? The Wit and Humour of a Comedy may be the chief Inducements to the greater Part of the audience to come to the Representation of it; and if so, the Argument for this sort of dramatic Poetry is very strong; because the Objects of Pleasure are made the Lures to Instruction.<sup>28</sup>

Collier's attack was the most prominent step in the campaign to purge the theater of its licentiousness. His Short View brought forth within the next quarter century more than forty books and pamphlets dealing with the issue.<sup>29</sup>

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27. "A Discourse Upon Comedy in Reference to the English Stage." From The Complete Works of Farquhar, II, 39.

28. Cook, Thomas, "Considerations on the Stage, and on the Advantages Which Arise to a Nation from the Encouragement of Arts," Chapter III. Reprinted in The Complete Works of Shadwell, I, appendix I.

29. Krutch, p. 121.

He published a defense of his Short View, which contains no new ideas but adds to the catalogue of improprieties which he found in particular plays. Other forces were at work to suppress the indecencies of the stage. In 1698, the same year as Collier's original attack, there was formed the "Society for the Reformation of Manners," which exerted considerable influence in cleaning up the theaters.<sup>30</sup> At the same time the Master of the Revels became much more zealous in censoring the plays he licensed.<sup>31</sup> These things and the increasing surface morality of the century's last decade led to the moral purification of eighteenth century drama. An example of the changes wrought by moral pressure can be seen in the revisions which were made in The Provoked Wife. In the original performance, Sir John Brute and Lord Rake were seeking to avoid the watch after an evening's carousal when they came upon a tailor carrying a bundle:

Lord R. Let me see what's in that Bundle.

Taylor. And it please you, it's the Doctor of the Parishes Gown.

Lord R. The Doctor's Gown--Hark you, Knight, you won't stick at abusing the Clergy, will you?

Sir J. No, I'm drunk, and I'll abuse anything--but my Wife; and her I name--with Reverence.

Lord R. Then you shall wear this Gown while you charge the Watch. That though the Blows fall upon you, the Scandal may light upon the Church.

30. The Complete Works of William Congreve, I, 48.

31. Cibber, p. 143.



Sir J. A generous design--by all the Gods--give it me.

Taylor. O dear Gentlemen, I shall be quite undone if you take the gown.

There follows the most unpriestlike behavior and language on the part of the pretended minister. By 1706, however, the clergy could not be mentioned with the slightest breath of disrespect without encountering critical difficulties, and so the scene was rewritten as follows:

Lord. R. Let me see what's in that Bundle.

Taylor. An't please you, it's my Lady's short Cloak and wrapping Gown.

Sir J. What Lady, you Reptile you?

Taylor. My Lady Brute an't please your Honour.

Sir J. My Lady Brute! my Wife! the Robe of my Wife--with Reverence let me approach it. The dear Angel is always taking care of me in Danger, and has sent me this suit of Armour to protect me in this Day of Battle; On they go.<sup>32</sup>

What follows is far more restrained than the original. Thus we find that the stage, which reached the height of its degeneracy during the twenty year period from 1670-1690, was subjected to ever increasing moral pressures. The tone of comedy was already undergoing definite changes in the 1690's which were accented with the devastating attack by Jeremy Collier in 1698. From that time on, there was a general improvement in the moral quality of the comedies, and the comedy of manners gave way to the sentimental comedy.

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32. Both original and revised versions are printed in The Complete Works of Sir John Vanbrugh, Volume II.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE MAJOR COMIC WRITERS

In considering the individual comic dramatists of the time one should start with Dryden. Although his comedies are seldom read today, and he is much better known for his other literary productions, Dryden was a very popular comic playwright in his own day. He exerted considerable influence on his contemporaries, and his comedies are still highly readable. Speaking of the general lack of appreciation of Dryden as a comic dramatist, one of his biographers says:

...of the Restoration dramatists few have met with less favor, in proportion to their general literary eminence than Dryden. Of his comedies, in particular, few have been found to say a good word. His sturdiest champion, Scott, dismisses them as 'heavy'; Hazlitt, a defender of the Restoration comedy in general, finds little in them but 'ribaldry and extravagance'; and I have lately seen them spoken of with a shudder as 'horrible'.<sup>1</sup>

Dryden seemed always to be somewhat self-conscious

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1. Saintsbury, Dryden, p. 38.

about the frequent licentiousness of his plays. His excuse was that he was trying "to delight the age in which I live."<sup>2</sup> While we can find some excuse for Dryden's general immorality by considering the mores of the Court society for which he wrote, we still find a certain lewdness from time to time which it is difficult to excuse. There is often licentiousness that cannot be justified--obscenity or indecency purely for the sake of being obscene or indecent:

The coarseness of Dryden's plays is unpardonable. It does not come under any of the numerous categories of excuse which can be devised for other offenders in the same kind. It is deliberate, it is unnecessary, it is a positive defect in art.<sup>3</sup>

Dryden has the distinction of having written a play whose lack of success has normally been attributed to its being too indecent for the unsqueamish Restoration audience to approve. However, Nicoll says the play failed because it vigorously attacked the prevailing sin of keeping mistresses, and therefore was coldly received by an audience that resented this or any particularized attack on itself.<sup>4</sup> The play is entitled The Kind Keeper, or Mr. Limberham, and a poem written in 1685 says:

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2. "A Defense of Dramatic Poesy." From Dryden's Dramatic Essays, p. 64.

3. Saintsbury, p. 119.

4. Nicoll, p. 81.

...but when his Limberham I name,  
I hide my head and almost blush with shame.

...  
So bawdy it not only sham'd the age,  
But worse, was ev'n too nauseous for the Stage.<sup>5</sup>

Dryden, ever changeable, went through various periods of repentance only to drop again into the same pitfalls. It has been noted that he made no effort to resist Collier's attack, which came only a short time before his death. In 1686 Dryden wrote the following lines:

O gracious God! how far have we  
Profaned Thy heavenly gift of poesy!  
Made prostitute and profligate the Muse,  
Debased to each obscene and impious use,

...  
Oh wretched we! why were we hurried down  
This lubric and adulterate age  
(Nay, added fat pollutions of our own)  
To increase the steaming ordures of the stage.<sup>6</sup>

Four years later Dryden presented his first comedy in twelve years, Amphitryon, which contains, unfortunately, some of the steaming ordures about which he complained.

Dryden was not the master of wit on the stage that some of his contemporaries were, and his comedies achieved their principle comic effect through farce and satire. His most popular comedy, Sir Martin Mar-All, is practically pure farce.

A close friend of Dryden's was Sir George Etherege,

5. Gould, Robert, The Play House, reprinted as an appendix to Summers, The Restoration Theatre.

6. "An Ode to the Pious Memory of Mrs Anne Killigrew," reprinted in Seventeenth Century Poetry and Prose.

whose Sir Fopling Flutter is universally regarded as the perfect example of the typical Court fop. Etherege presents us with an excellent surface portrayal of Court society:

...the merit of Etherege seems to lie in....a certain natural genius whereby he was able to put upon the stage a picture, very little heightened, of the roistering, reckless idleness and licentiousness that actually characterized the brilliant, graceless fops whose society he frequented....As to the women of Etherege, they are fashionable, extravagant, witty as the men and as bold in their intrigues and amours; there is no maiden's blush among them. They are such, in a word, as the Restoration rakes and roués knew them.<sup>7</sup>

Etherege was on intimate terms with some of the most notorious rakes of the era, and so it is no wonder that in his theatrical portrayal of the times we find the customary moral looseness of the age. Theophilus Cibber, writing in the eighteenth century said:

He has not escaped the censure of the critics; for his works are so extremely loose and licentious as to render them dangerous to young, unguarded minds: and on this account our witty author is, indeed, justly liable to the severest censure of the virtuous and sober part of mankind.<sup>8</sup>

Cibber was probably more sensitive than the average reader of today, for although we find frequent instances of the bawdiness characteristic of Restoration comedy, they are, as Allerdyce Nicoll says, "dragged in not for the

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7. Schelling, Felix E., in The Cambridge History of English Literature, VIII, 161.

8. T. Cibber, Lives of the Poets, quoted in The Library of Literary Criticism, II, 39.

sake of the vulgarity or of the sensuality, but because they are witty and amusing."<sup>9</sup> Etherege's most popular comedy, The Man of Mode, is not as indecent as its predecessors, Love in a Tub and She Would if She Could, and these earlier plays are indecent only in particular scenes. Etherege never seems to portray immorality deliberately as did so many of his contemporaries.

The amazing Mrs. Aphra Behn, forced by circumstances to write for a living, was a prolific and competent dramatist, if not a brilliant one. The Cambridge History says of her:

Mrs. Behn was a very gifted woman, compelled to write for bread in an age in which literature, and especially comedy, catered habitually to the lowest and most depraved of human inclinations. Her success depended upon her ability to write like a man. On the score of morality, she is again and again more daring and risquee than any of her male competitors in the art of play-making, and she is as frivolous and as abandoned in speech as the worst of them all.<sup>10</sup>

Mrs. Behn's plays, on the score of immorality, are much like Dryden's. There is always the feeling that she had qualms of conscience over what she was writing, and yet when she is immoral, she is so blatantly indecent that it tends to disgust the reader. Like Dryden, she shows a great deal of sentiment in the portrayal of some of her

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9. Nicoll, p. 187.

10. Schelling, Felix, in The Cambridge History of English Literature, VIII, 161.

characters, and she displays a real sympathy for them.

Nicoll says of her:

The fact is that she is no worse, and is often a good deal better, than the average playwright of her age. Indecent, free, sometimes positively vulgar, she was in several of her plays; but, on the whole, when we compare her works with similar productions of D'Urfey and Shadwell, even of Dryden, we can only stand amazed at the comparative purity of her dialogue. She has, moreover, on many occasions introduced thoughts and ideas which not only display her unconventional and modern attitude towards life's relations, but also formed the basis for not a few moralizations in the sentimental eighteenth century to come.<sup>11</sup>

Richard Garnett gave an apt summary of her, considering the Victorian attitudes which affected his work, when he said, "Her eighteen plays, have, with few exceptions, sufficient merit to entitle her to a respectable place among the dramatists of her age, and sufficient indelicacy to be unreadable in this."<sup>12</sup> The tone of moral criticism has become more liberal since Garnett's day, and modern readers may not find Mrs. Behn so offensive.

Sir Patient Fancy is usually regarded as the most culpable of Mrs. Behn's plays from a moral standpoint. It also serves as an excellent play to illustrate the moral virtues and vices of Mrs. Behn. The characters are treated with a degree of sympathy that was most unusual for the

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11. Nicoll, p. 209.

12. Garnett, The Age of Dryden, pp. 146-7.

times she wrote it, when Restoration stage license was at its height; there is also a great deal of sentiment in the play. The attitude displayed towards conventional morality is scandalous, however. The hero, finding himself in bed with his prospective mother-in-law, whom he had mistaken for his fiancee, willingly makes love to her; when they are discovered by the lady's husband, the hero wins her heart completely by denying that he has had time to consummate the erroneous liaison; the lady then exerts every influence on her husband to permit their daughter's marriage to such a fine gentleman. There are few, if any, characters in Restoration drama more degenerate than these, yet Mrs. Behn excuses them for their transgressions and seems in complete sympathy with them.

Thomas Shadwell was an avowed follower of Ben Jonson. For this reason, there is a difference of tone in Shadwell's plays as compared to those of his contemporaries. Shadwell liked to think of himself as a moral writer, and there is usually a trace of didacticism in his work. Yet he was unable to rise above his age; his plays are as full of licentiousness as are those of any of the other comic writers. A typical character is Prig in A True Widow. He is shown to the audience as a complete profligate, with the supposed intention of revealing to the spectator the evils of such a life as Prig leads. In the presentation of the



character there is so much that is objectionable, however, that the moral instruction is lost. At his first appearance Prig says:

Think, what a pox should a gentleman think of but dogs, horses, dice, tennis, bowls, races, or cock-fighting. The devil take me, I never think of anything else, but now and then of a whore when I have a mind to her. <sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, the other characters in the play are so debased that there can be no poetic justice, and Prig, Lady Cheat, and Gertrude, the worst creatures presented, have the greatest fortune in the denouement. As is often the case in Shadwell's plays, what begins as a moral lesson ends in a study of degeneracy.

The first truly great comic dramatist of the Restoration was William Wycherley, who is also one of the most licentious. He is best known today for his play The Country Wife, but his contemporaries generally regarded the Plain Dealer as his best play.<sup>14</sup> Critics have usually acknowledged the brilliance of his art, but Lord Macaulay, Victorian purist that he was, referred to Wycherley as a "worse Congreve",<sup>15</sup> saying he was "last in literary merit...and first, beyond all doubt, in immorality."<sup>16</sup> Macaulay continues:

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13. A True Widow, I, 1.

14. Summers, p. 320.

15. Macaulay, p. 144.

16. Ibid., p. 128.

The only original thing about Wycherley, the only thing which he could furnish from his own mind in inexhaustible abundance, was profligacy. It is curious to observe how everything that he touched, however pure and noble, took in an instant the colour of his own mind....In truth, Wycherley's indecency is protected against the critics as a skunk is protected against the hunters. It is safe because it is too filthy to handle, and too noisome even to approach.<sup>17</sup>

All of which makes an exaggerated portrait and sounds a little like Wycherley's own character, Olivia. Wycherley's plays are indecent; the "china scene" in The Country Wife is notoriously immoral. But Wycherley's indecency is presented with a great deal of comic brilliance and is not as pernicious as that which is found in many other works of the period. Hazlitt is more sympathetic, saying:

Notwithstanding the indecency and indirectness of the means he employs to carry his plans into effect, he deserves every sort of consideration and forgiveness, both for the display of his own ingenuity, and the deep insight he discovers into human nature-- such as it was in the time of Wycherley.<sup>18</sup>

Montague Summers maintains that Wycherley was not truly licentious. That really he was using his plays as a means of expressing his hatred towards the vices and persons of the time. He says that Wycherley was an immoral writer only to serve a moral purpose, that his characters were deliberately

17. Ibid., p. 145.

18. Hazlitt, "On Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar," reprinted in the introduction to Hunt's edition of the comedies of these four authors.

depraved in order to show the playwright's contempt for the depravity of the contemporary society.<sup>19</sup> Summers' appraisal is far more generous than that of most critics. Wycherley, to be sure, does show indications of contempt for mankind in The Plain Dealer, but such contempt is not directed particularly at the members of Restoration society. Olivia, for example, is treated with complete contempt, yet that treatment does not offer a full excuse for such actions as she takes or for the lines concerning her. Manly's revenge is the kind that would especially appeal to the Cavalier courtier, but his behavior does not point out any moral or social lesson, and it is a debasement of a character who is usually treated with a degree of sympathy, perhaps with as much sympathy as Wycherley was capable of offering. Nor can The Plain Dealer be considered as completely representative of Wycherley. Summers' apology fails to cover the overall indecency of the "manly" poet.

Wycherley was perhaps the most cynical of all the Restoration dramatists, in itself a major distinction and one which could be hotly disputed by Congreve. What makes an important difference between the two is that Wycherley does show a definite resentment toward some social foibles, whereas Congreve apparently accepts them as a matter of

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19. Summers, p. 313.

course. Wycherley's resentment could take the form of vicious satire as it does in The Plain Dealer, or it could be a lighter satire such as that found in The Gentleman Dancing Master, in which he makes fun of affected French and Spanish mannerisms. The Country Wife is not a satire, but a brilliantly contrived story of a clever man who dupes his fellows and who makes great sport of cuckolding the suspicious but stupid Pinchwife. Indecency forms the crux of The Country Wife; take away its indecency and you destroy its humor.

Wycherley himself, in defending The Plain Dealer from attacks made upon it says, "'Tis the plain-dealing of the play, not the obscenity; 'tis taking of the ladies' masks, not offering at their petticoats, which offends them..."<sup>20</sup>

Congreve, like Wycherley, became famous for the quality rather than the quantity of his plays. Like Wycherley also, is Congreve's complete cynicism. Unlike Wycherley, however, is his means of producing the comic effect. Wycherley emphasized plot, and his humor depends on the development of the situations presented. Congreve, on the other hand, depends on the highly polished wit which is found in his dialogue. For example, there is the following conversation between Mrs. Foresight and Scandal:

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20. The Plain Dealer, Dedication.

Mrs. F. Hark ye, devil! do you think any woman honest?

Scand. Yes, several very honest; they'll cheat a little at cards, sometimes; but that's nothing.

Mrs. F. Pshaw! but virtuous, I mean.

Scand. Yes, faith; I believe some women are virtuous too; but 'tis as I believe some men are valient, through fear. For why should a man court danger, or a woman shun pleasure?

Mrs. F. O Monstrous! what are conscience and honour?

Scand. Why, honour is a public enemy; and conscience a domestic thief; and he that would secure his pleasure, must pay a tribute to one, and go halves with t'other.<sup>21</sup>

Thus we see both the cynicism and the wit of Congreve. Though he defended himself against the attacks of Collier, he was particularly vulnerable on the score of indecency. His characters either have false moral values, as has Valentine, or no sense of moral values, as has Mirabell. One should be slow to condemn Congreve as immoral personally, however, for in later life he was described by Pope as a "most honest hearted, real good" man, and he apparently enjoyed quite a close friendship with such advocates of moral reform as Addison and Steele.<sup>22</sup>

Perry finds definite tendencies toward eighteenth century morality in Congreve's work, and cites the scene in The Old Batchelor where Vainlove shows Ariminta the forged letter as a definite forerunner of sentimental comedy and its

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21. Love for Love, III, iv.

22. Spence, Anecdotes, Observations, and Characters of Books and Men, p. 46; p. 338.

accent on moral reform.<sup>23</sup>

Sir John Vanbrugh, though a lesser comic playwright than Wycherley or Congreve, still must be ranked with the finest of Restoration dramatists. Vanbrugh's plays feature the same bawdy dialogue and the same series of amorous intrigues that characterize the earlier productions of the period, but there is a broadening of the scope of subject matter, which is no longer confined to the narrow limits of the London Court social circles. Vanbrugh could be completely immoral fully as much as his predecessors, and the scene in The Relapse where Loveless seduces Berinthia is full proof of this.<sup>24</sup>

His dialogue, lacking the wit of Congreve's often seems more bawdy. Bonamy Dobree says that although his plays seem indecent today, Vanbrugh "did not transgress the bounds acknowledged by the average polite society of his day."<sup>25</sup>

One does not receive the impression, as he does in reading earlier plays of the period, that Vanbrugh is maliciously indecent. His humor, although bawdy, is presented with a lightness of spirit that often lessens the impact of its licentiousness.

The last of the Restoration dramatists was Farquhar.

23. Perry, p. 67.

24. The Relapse, IV, 111.

25. The Complete Works of Sir John Vanbrugh, editor's introduction, I, xv.

He belongs to the Restoration because of the earthiness of his humor as well as his mental outlook, but Farquhar is definitely a transitional playwright, and there are characteristics in his plays which are completely different from those of the other Restoration authors. The most notable of these is his abandonment of the London scene. Farquhar's characters are often loose, both in action and in conversation, but they are seldom coarse and brutish as are earlier characters. He treated his personages with a great deal of sympathy, something which his predecessors usually failed to do. The overall moral standard of his plays, however, is still relatively low, and a performance of The Recruiting Officer in the early nineteenth century was condemned because "the piece was altogether too broad for the present state of manners and taste, the vices of which lean towards the sordid and hypocritical rather than the debauched."<sup>26</sup>

The works of the major dramatists were produced in the conventional mode which their lesser contemporaries followed. The writing of those contemporaries will be discussed in the next chapter.

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26. Houtchens, editor, Leigh Hunt's Dramatic Criticism, p. 206.

CHAPTER SIX  
THE MINOR COMIC WRITERS

It was one of the fashionable occupations of the Restoration to write plays, particularly comedies. Thus we have a multitude of comic productions during the period apart from those of the more important playwrights mentioned in the preceding chapter. There are comedies written for diversion by noblemen such as Buckingham, Sedley, or the Duke of Newcastle; there are works by such theatrical hacks as Tom D'Urfey; and there are the comic productions of such fine writers of tragedy as Otway and Lee. All of them bear the same general stamp of conventionality.

Thomas Killigrew is far more important to the theatrical history of the time because of his stage management, but he also wrote plays, and one of these, The Parson's Wedding, gave Restoration playgoers an accurate foretaste of what was to come in the latter years of the century.



The Parson's Wedding was actually written during the Interregnum, as were most of Killigrew's plays. Richard Flecknoe made an extremely virulent attack on Killigrew, saying:

...few or none ever read what he has writ, excepting such as are so bad already, his writings cannot make them worse, and so corrupted, as they cannot corrupt them more.

Which he perceiving, was so impudent to bring them upon the stage, to infect that with it too, by which he has frightened all chaste ears from thence, and will all the rest in time, if he may have but his plays acted, on the appointing of those which are.<sup>1</sup>

Flecknoe, to be sure, is an extremely biased critic, but the fact is that none of Killigrew's work is very distinguished and that it shows none of the sparkling wit that made Restoration comedy notable.

Another early writer was Edward Howard. Pepys' reaction to his play, The Change of Crownes, has already been cited.<sup>2</sup> This is one of five comedies or tragicomedies known to have been written by Howard. This play, first produced in 1667, has few of the characteristics of the later comedy of the age, but it is interesting because of its general satire on the Court and on London society. For example, the countryman, Asinillo, gives his impression of London to three city gentlemen:

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1. Flecknoe, The Life of Tomaso the Wanderer, p. 10.

2. Supra, p. 22.

Lodovico. But how came you to leave the Country?  
Asinillo. A dull, sweaty place, not fitt for the  
 Aiery & Refyn'd....Besides here are the fine things,  
 the fayre things, the Amorous things--I could wish,  
 I might present my Agillitys to the Queene, & her  
 Ladyes.

Florelli. I wounder being a stranger, that you can  
 keepe your Feet so well, the Pavement here is slip-  
 pery.

Asinillo. My Feet? they cost me more than all the  
 Rest of my Body.

Lodovico. As how Sir?

Asinillo. Why since I came out of the Country in  
 Learning to Dance: I was told it was a Quallity  
 very much Respected here; and I have liv'd three  
 Months together in a Dancing Schoole, this is the  
 first Day I came out.<sup>3</sup>

The moral tone of this comedy is inoffensive; as a  
 dramatic work it is mediocre.

A more famous Howard than Edward was Dryden's brother-  
 in-law, Sir Robert Howard, who collaborated with Dryden and  
 others. He wrote two comedies of his own, The Surprisal and  
The Committee, each of which met with moderate success.  
 They are both devoid of the usual Restoration characteristics.  
 They are comedies of situation and are frequently farcical.  
 Produced in the early 1660's, they are true predecessors of  
 the later comedy, even though they lack its principal features  
 of wit, satire, and modish behavior. As to their moral  
 nature, the two comedies are coarse but not bawdy. There is  
 a carry-over from Stuart drama which enables us to see the  
 continuous development of certain stock scenes that were

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3. The Change of Crownes, II, 1.

commonplace in the latter years of the century. Perhaps the most amusing scene that Howard wrote occurs in The Surprisal when the poltroon, Montalto, having been soundly beaten by a rogue in friar's costume, has with great ostentation put on his sword and boasted of his fighting ability. Suddenly he encounters his enemy, Miranzo, who is dressed in the habit of a friar:

Montalto. What Apparitions this as a Friar?  
 I hope 'tis not another fighting Friar.  
 What an unlucky posture he has found me in,  
 Would my Sword were up to th' hilts in him  
 Or a Dunghill, or anything that wou'd  
 but hide it.<sup>4</sup>

The scene continues in rollicking farce until Montalto receives another drubbing and loses his sword.

The Committee was more popular than The Surprisal and enjoyed a comparatively long life on the stage. It seems rather dull in its reading today, but its contemporary success has been attributed to the popularity of the low comic character of Teague, an Irish servant.<sup>5</sup>

A far more important playwright is John Crowne, whose first play was performed in 1671 and whose first comedy, The Country Wit, was acted in 1675. Crowne is better known as a tragedian, but his comedies were quite successful. The

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4. The Surprisal, IV, 1.

5. Thorndike, p. 279.

Country Wit was a favorite play of Charles II, and the best of Crowne's comedies, Sir Courtly Nice, was most popular with Restoration audiences. Crowne is a typical representative of the period. He lacks the wit of his contemporaries who achieved greater fame, and he displays a bitterness that is matched only by Wycherley and Nathaniel Lee, but his plays are fashioned in the strict conventional mold of the age. The Puritans came in for particularly heavy attacks by Crowne, especially in Sir Courtly Nice and in The Married Beau. Crowne also interested himself in political affairs and expressed his attitudes in City Politics and The English Friar, the latter being a venomous attack on the followers of James II.

On the score of morality, Crowne comes out slightly ahead of most of his fellows. There are the usual intrigues and suggestive conversations, but Crowne did not make a fetish of indecency. He seems always to have been aware of the vices of his age, and, although no moral reformer, he was always pointing a critical finger at its foibles. Thus in his first comedy he cynically attacked the town wits:

Oh, Sirs, this is a monstrous witty age,  
 Wit, grown a drug, has quite undone the stage.  
 The mighty wits now come to a new play,  
 Only to taste the scraps they flung away.  
 City and country is with wit o'erflown,  
 Weeds grow not faster there, than wits in Town.<sup>6</sup>

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6. The Country Wit, prologue.

Fifteen years later he made a more vituperative attack:

It has been our misfortune to live in a vicious, degenerate age, where men were thought great Wits, that had no more wit than what would serve vicious pleasures; where men were thought great politicians, that had no more policy than what serv'd the Court's ambition or their own: where men were thought able lawyers, whose best skill was in confounding and overthrowing law...virtue has been so strange and unknown among us, vice has pass'd for virtue.<sup>7</sup>

Crowne saw the evils of the period as few of his brother playwrights were able to see them. In his portrayal of characters on the stage, he has them speak with a bitterness that is in contrast to the expected stage dialogue of the time. For instance, there is the following scene between Lord Drybones and Lady Frisque:

Lord D. Since you are so humoursome, gentlewoman, take your choice; your trunké shall go and you shall stay, or you shall go and the trunks shall stay. If I have not paid dear enough for you to have you be mine, I am sure I have bought and paid enough for all that is in the trunks to dispose of them.

Betty. Well, and I think I have paid dear enough for those things in enduring all your cross jealous peevish humours.

Lord D. What jealous humours? I love you to well, that's my fault.

Betty. Yes, indeed, you love me very well, not to let me breathe so much as a mouthful of fresh air once in a month, and at home not to enjoy an hour of quiet.

Lord D. Yes, indeed, I shou'd do wisely to let you take the fresh air, as you call it. You never go to a play, but you fall in love with some young fellow;

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7. Dedication to The English Friar.

you never go to Hyde Park, but you are enamour'd with some rich gilt coach; you never go to the Exchange, but you have a violent passion for some rich point of forty or fifty pounds value; so that the air is a dear element to me. Your fresh air costs me all my earth almost.<sup>8</sup>

There are many scenes depicting similar quarrels in Restoration comedy; few, if any, have a realistic air of a heated exchange equal to Crowne's.

John Caryl was a courtier, who authored only one comedy, Sir Salomon, or The Cautious Coxcomb, which was a great favorite of the King's. Written in 1669 or 1670, it helped set the traditional mode for Restoration comedy. Although not in itself an immoral play, it follows the conventional pattern set by the professional playwrights. The plot, taken from Moliere, is the common one dealing with the husband who has married an "innocent" country girl and is cuckolded despite all his efforts to prevent such a fate. The play is filled with the usual Restoration cynicism:

Search the records of Time, and by all examples, old and modern, you shall still find it true, that wit in woman is the Bawd of Vice:  
Who of the Sex had ever fame of wit,  
That was not famous to the other way?<sup>9</sup>

Sir Salomon contains some clever satire directed against the French, and there was a notable performance given before the whole Court at Dover in 1670 with the French ambassadors

8. The Country Wit, III, 11.

9. Sir Salomon, I, 11.

present, at which:

the Duke of Monmouth gave Mr. Nokes his sword and belt from his side, and Buckled it on himself, on purpose to Ape the French: That Mr. Nokes lookt more like a drest up Ape, than a Sir Arthur: Which upon his first Entrance on the Stage, put the King and Court to an excessive Laughter; at which the French look'd very Shaggrin, to see themselves Ap'd by such a Buffoon as Sir Arthur.<sup>10</sup>

Sir Charles Sedley, one of the greatest rakes of the time, was a frequent collaborator with Shadwell and also tried his own hand at comic production. Although regarded as a great wit, he gives little evidence of being so in his plays, and they are undistinguished. His most important comedy is *Bellamira*, which is morally indefensible. Two of the leading characters, Eustice and Dangerfield, are among the most unsavory lechers on the Restoration stage. The heroine, *Bellamira*, is hopelessly dissolute, and the other leading character, Merriman, willingly cuckold his best friend.

The most prolific of all the comic writers was Thomas D'Urfey, who has twenty comedies to his credit. Although his plays were successful at first, they had no enduring popularity, and D'Urfey is the only notable playwright of the time whose works have never been reprinted. A representative reading of his plays shows D'Urfey to be dramatically com-

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10. Downes, Roscius Anglicanus, p. 29.

petent, but totally undistinguished. There is some clever repartee in his plays, and the works are reasonably funny, but they are hackneyed and trite. D'Urfey was singled out by Collier for an especially heavy attack, but the overall moral quality of his plays is not quite as low as one would be led to believe from secondary accounts. He does not descend to the level sometimes reached by Dryden or Wycherley. Langbaine sums him up fairly accurately:

He is accounted by some for an admirable poet, but it is by those who are not acquainted much with Authors, and therefore are deceiv'd by Appearances, taking that for his own Wit, which he only borrows from Others: for Mr. Durfey like the Cuckow, makes it his business to suck other Birds Eggs.<sup>11</sup>

The particular object of Collier's tirade was D'Urfey's dramatic rendition of Don Quixote. This is an interesting play because it does not follow the ordinary patterns of Restoration comedy. There is nothing original in the play, however, for it sticks closely to the reproduction of scenes from Cervantes. The piece is actually written in the style of tragicomedy, but the sub-plot, although more serious than the farcical scenes depicting the woeful knight and the ignorant Sancho, is hardly suited to this type of presentation. The farcical episodes are coarse and crude and have little to commend them. The lowest point of morality is

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<sup>11</sup>. Langbaine, An Account of the English Dramatic Poets, p. 179.



reached in that scene where Don Quixote comes upon the prisoners who have been assigned to the galleys. They recite the various crimes for which they have been siezed, and this recital is a catalogue of offenses that were subjects of jests among Restoration audiences.<sup>12</sup>

The dialogue found in Don Quixote is no different from that found in the other plays of the period. There is, for example, the following conversation between Dorothea and Perez:

Perez. Had you no contract from this false Fernando? Dorothea. In Vows and Oaths a thousand; I was too Artless to desire him more: Heavens! He would swear till he was black in the Face; Dissemble six long hours by the Clock; and when he Vow'd the Truth of his Affection, the Protestations came so fast and thick, so feirce withall and eager in Expressing, that I've been fain to let him kiss and breathe for fear the thronging Lies wou'd suffocate him.<sup>13</sup>

While Don Quixote represents a departure from the conventional in its plot outline, the rest of D'Urfey's plays do not. One slight exception may be found in The Bath, or The Western Lass, wherein the action takes place outside of London. The personages of the play, however, are Londoners and are typical characters of the comedy of manners. This play reaches a very low level of morality, with the dialogue filled with indecent references, particularly in the conver-

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12. The Comical History of Don Quixote, III, 11.

13. Ibid., III, 1.

sations between Lord Lovelace and Sophronia.

Another writer of some significance is Edward Ravenscroft, who wrote half a dozen comedies. Despite the low critical opinion held by Langbaine, who dismissed Ravenscroft as "One, who with the Vulgar passes for a Writer,"<sup>14</sup> or of Genest, who concedes only that Ravenscroft was a "dexterous plagiarist,"<sup>15</sup> there is displayed in his comedies a real flair for amusing farce.

The play which gained Ravenscroft his greatest contemporary fame was The London Cuckolds. This piece must certainly take its place in the roll of indecent comedies, but it contains some highly readable and ridiculous moments as we follow Ramble in his attempts to consummate an illicit liaison with Arabella. Ravenscroft's only other comedy worthy of attention is his last one, The Anatomist. This is a short farce, neither bawdy nor indecent, dealing with the attempt of an elderly man to marry a doctor's daughter with whom his son is in love. The scenes of confusion in the doctor's office are highly amusing, and the French physician offers us an excellent satirical picture.

Like his fellow playwrights, Ravenscroft made fun of the foibles of the day, using the expected language to do so.

14. Langbaine, p. 417.

15. Genest, Some Account of the English Stage, I, 126.

Thus Engine comments:

I would sooner choose to be some rich Ladies woman, than marry a poor Lord's wife. This Imployment was formerly stil'd Bawding and Pimping--but our Age is more civiliz'd--and our language more refin'd--it is now a modish piece of service only, and said, being complaisant, or doing a Friend a kind Office. Whore--(Oh filthy broad Word!) is now prettily called Mistress; --Pimp, Friend; Cuckold-Maker, Gallant: thus the terms being civiliz'd the things become more practicable,--what Clowns they were in former Ages.<sup>16</sup>

One of the greatest of the Restoration playwrights was Thomas Otway, whose tragedies, The Orphan and Venice Preserved, have become a permanent part of English dramatic literature. Otway also tried writing comedy, and his Soldier's Fortune was well received. A versatile man, he once attempted to be an actor in one of Aphra Behn's plays, but as such he was a miserable failure.<sup>17</sup> His first attempt at writing comedy was a translation from Moliere, The Cheats of Scapin. Since the work is mostly translation, it cannot be called Otway's own play, but he made the piece typical of the Restoration in its dialogue and attitudes. Otway's rendition is not indecent, although there is a repeated earthiness of language, an earthiness which was probably only slightly off-color to its audience. We find the customary cynicism of the times throughout the play in such

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16. The London Cuckolds, III, 1.

17. Downes, p. 39.

remarks as Thrifty's "A Man may be as frail and as wicked as he please, if it cost him nothing,"<sup>18</sup> or Scapin's "Are ye mad to venture yourself among Lawyers? Do ye not see every day how the Spunges suck poor Clyents, and with a company of foolish, non-sensical terms, and knavish tricks, undo the Nation?"<sup>19</sup>

The first of three comedies that can truly be called Otway's own was Friendship in Fashion, described as "a comedy as steel-hard as any produced during the Restoration," a play that is "a testament of cynicism and poverty."<sup>20</sup> In spite of the author's protestation that "there's no bawdy in't, no, not so much as one well-meaning hint,"<sup>21</sup> the play does contain quite a bit of objectionable material. It contains a great deal of earthy language, and its characters are thoroughly disreputable. It provides us with a good sampling of Restoration characterization in the personage of Valentine, the typical town gentleman; Goodvile, the potential cuckold; Sir Noble Clumsy, the drunken old lecher; Malagene, the hypocrite and coward; and Lady Squeamish, the pretended lady of virtue, who is a notorious bawd. The best scene in the comedy gives us a discussion of a play to be written by

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18. The Cheats of Scapin, I, 1.

19. Ibid., II, 1.

20. Ham, Otway and Lee, p. 98.

21. Friendship in Fashion, prologue.

Sir Noble:

Lady S. Oh, Cousin, if you undertake to write a tragedy, take my Counsel: Be sure to say soft melting tender things in it, that may be moving, and make your Ladies Characters vertuous, whatever you do.

Sir Noble. Moving! Why I can never read it my self but it makes me laugh: Well, 'tis the pretty'st plot, and so full of Wagery.

Lady S. Oh, ridiculous!

Malagene. But, Knight, the Title; Knight, the Title.

Sir Noble. Why let me see; 'tis to be call'd, The Merry Conceits of Love; or the Life and Death of the Emperour Charles the Fifth, with the humours of his Dog Bobadillo.

Valentine. But, Sir Noble, this sounds more like a Comedy.

Sir Noble. Oh, but I have resolv'd it shall be a Tragedy, because Bobadillo's to be kill'd in the Play. Comedy! No, I scorn to write Comedy. I know several that can squirt Comedy.<sup>22</sup>

The best of Otway's comedies is The Soldier's Fortune, which in the portrayal of the lecherous Sir Jolly Jumble reaches a depth of depravity seldom approached on the stage, even in the late seventeenth century. Sir Jolly is intended as a comic character, but his moral reprehensibility makes him unpalatable today, and it is little wonder that the play was hissed off the stage in the eighteenth century. In Sir Jolly the breed of panders has reached its nadir. This is not to deny, however, the overall dramatic merit of the play, for it is well constructed, and it was widely acclaimed by the audience for which it was written. Once again we find a scene of courtship arrangement that disparages the idea of marriage and romantic love:

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22. Ibid., III, 1.

Sylvia. Nay, then, let's bargain.

Courtine. With all my heart; what?

Syl. Not to fall in love with each other; I assure you, Monsieur Captain.

Cour. But to hate one another constantly and cordially.

Syl. Always when you are drunk, I desire you to talk scandalously of me.

Cour. Ay, and when I am sober too; in return whereof, whene'er you see a coquette of your acquaintance, and I chance to be named, be sure you spit at the filthy remembrance, and rail at me as if you lov'd me.

Syl. In the next place, whene'er we meet in the Mall, I desire you to 'Humph!' put out your tongue, make ugly mouths, laugh aloud, and look back at me.

Cour. Which, if I chance to do, be sure at next turning to pick up some tawdry fluttering fop or other.

Syl. That I made acquaintance withal at the music meeting?

Cour. Right, just such another spark to saunter by your side, with his hat under his arm.

Syl. Harkening to all bitter things I can say to be reveng'd.

Cour. Whilst the poor rogue dare not so much as grin to oblige you, for fear of being beaten for it, when he is out of his waiting.

Syl. Counterfeit your letters from me.

Cour. And you, to be even with me for the scandal, publish to all the world I offered to marry you.

Syl. O hideous marriage!

Cour. Horrid, horrid marriage!<sup>23</sup>

As for Sir Jolly, some idea of his feelings towards marriage may be found in the following comments to Beaugard:

I'll have nothing to do in it, I won't be seen in the business of matrimony. Make me a match-maker, a filthy marriage-broker! Sir, I scorn it, I know better things. Look you, friend, to carry her a letter from you or so, upon good terms, though it be in a church, I'll deliver it; as when the business is

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23. Soldier's Fortune, II, 1.

come to an issue; if I may bring you handsomely together and so forth, I'll serve thee with all my soul, and thank thee into the bargain; thank thee heartily, dear rogue; I will, you little cocksparrow, faith and troth I will: but no matrimony, friend, I'll have nothing to do with matrimony; 'tis a damned invention, worse than a monopoly, and a destroyer of civil correspondence.<sup>24</sup>

Otway tried to follow up the success of Soldier's Fortune by writing a sequel, The Atheist, just after the turn of the century. To his credit it can be said that he did try to do away with the gross offensiveness of many parts of Soldier's Fortune, and The Atheist shows an improvement in moral if not in aesthetic tastes. Although Otway was not a distinguished comic writer, his excellence as a dramatic artist can be seen in the way his plays move effectively from one scene to another. Both in his life and in his writings he was creature of the age in which he lived, and he displayed a moral looseness that would be inexcusable in another period, and stretched the limits of dramatic propriety even in his own. In writing his comedies, Otway was trying to follow the style of Wycherley.<sup>25</sup>

Often associated with Otway is Nathaniel Lee, another fine tragic writer who tried his hand at writing comedy. He made the attempt only once, producing The Princess of Cleve in 1680. The play was a failure. Like D'Urfey's Don Quixote,

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24. Ibid., IV, 1.

25. Ham, pp. 103-4.

The Princess of Cleve follows the pattern of tragicomedy, but the serious portion of the drama is not in the proper vein for true tragicomedy. The work is most bitter in its satire against London morals. For example:

Poltrout. I intend to lye with his Wife; a trick I learnt since I went into England, where o' my Conscience Cuckoldom is the Destiny of above half the Nation.

Nemours. Indeed.

Poltrout. O there's not another such Drinking, Scowring, Roaring, Whoring Nation in the World; And for little London, to my knowledge, if a Bill were taken of the weekly Cuckolds, it wou'd amount to more than the number of Christnings and Burials put together.<sup>26</sup>

Lee saw many of the faults of the age, but he was unable to rise above them. Not only is The Princess of Cleve a poor play, it is most objectionable from a moral viewpoint. The various conversations which take place between Elianor and Celia on the one hand and Poltrout and St. Andre on the other rank with the most indecently suggestive lines to be found on the Restoration stage.

There were, of course, many other authors whose plays were represented on the comic stage, among them the Duke of Newcastle and the Earl of Orrery. Most of them followed the set pattern of looseness and immorality. Occasionally there was one which rose above the general moral level such as Edward Revet's Town Shifts, produced in 1671, of which Langbaine wrote:

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26. The Princess of Cleve, I, 11.



Give me leave so far to commend this Comedy, to say that it is Instructive; and that the Author's Protagonist, Lovewel, tho' reduc'd to poverty, yet entertains not only an Innate Principle of Honesty, but advises his two Comrades, Friendly and Faithful, to the practice of it; and it succeeds happily to them. I mention this, because few of our Modern Characters are so nicely drawn.<sup>27</sup>

But Town Shifts was an exception to the rule, and most of the comedies that appeared were molded in the pattern of The She Gallants, which appeared in 1698, a play that was "extremely Witty and well Acted; but offending the Ears of some Ladies who set up for Chastity, it made its exit."<sup>28</sup> The minor writers of the Restoration give us nothing that is not found in the works of the more famous playwrights, whose moral weaknesses they shared, often without the compensating dramatic brilliance that marks the writings of Wycherley and Congreve. It was a conventional age, and all the playwrights were conventional; it was smart to ridicule moral concepts on the stage, and all the playwrights did ridicule moral concepts. Thus a review of the minor writers simply strengthens those opinions gained by studying their more important contemporaries.

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27. Langbaine, pp. 425-6.

28. Downes, p. 45.

CHAPTER SEVEN  
A GENERAL SURVEY OF LATE  
SEVENTEENTH CENTURY SOCIETY

It might be well to consider further the general state of society after the Restoration and the extent to which comedy actually mirrored that society. Certain distinctions must be emphasized. First, London society was not typical of England; second, the Court society was not typical of London; third, the state of social development was in many ways primitive so that conditions which would be utterly shocking now were not shocking then, but were simply a continuation of a traditional pattern.

Again it should be stressed that the stage existed only for that small minority who made up Court society. It was the minority that the playwrights were trying to please, and to please them their comedies had to present life as they saw it or as they would like to have seen it. And the playgoer felt that the playwrights were portraying life:

... 'tis the Representation of Humane Life in a lower class of conversation; we vist the Palace for Tragedy, and range the Town for Comedy, viz. for the Follies, the Vices, the Vanities and the Passions of mankind, which we meet with every Day.<sup>1</sup>

One student of Restoration life says, "...the comic literature of a small, sheltered society is an unreliable guide to the habits and thoughts of a nation,"<sup>2</sup> and he is quite correct. Most Englishmen lived entirely apart from the artificial modes of the city gentry, and Pepys commented as early as 1662 on the popular discontent over the "pride and luxury of the Court."<sup>3</sup> There can be no doubt, however, that for all classes of society it was a period of heightened immorality, and as such it was criticized by many who opposed the excesses which followed the return of Charles, and who were willing to agree with the condemnation that it was an "age given over to all vice--whores and harlots, pimps and panders, bauds and buffoones, lechery and treachery, atheists and papists, rogues and rascals, reason and treason, playmakers and stageplayers, officers debauch and corrupters."<sup>4</sup>

There was still a strong Puritan element in the country that wished to have no part in the licentious conduct which

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1. Filmer, A Defense of Dramatic Poetry, p. 80.

2. Bryant, The England of Charles II, p. 53.

3. Pepys, 15 May, 1662.

4. Wood, The Life and Times of Anthony Wood, II, 125.

became general. At the same time there were many Royallists who held equally firm moral convictions. And outside of London, in the country where the overwhelming majority of Englishmen lived, there was never the desire for the deliberate violation of traditional standards which had engulfed London. Dryden or D'Urfey might lay their scenes in Spain or at Bath, but it is really London and Londoners that they were depicting.

Sexual licentiousness became the great sport of Court society. Extra-marital love affairs were common enough in both town and country, among upper and lower classes, but amorous intrigue became a profession with the town gallants. Thus, on the stage, a lady tells her young friend:

Thou mistakest the use of a husband, Sylvia: they are not meant for bedfellows; heretofore, indeed, 'twas a fulsome fashion, to lie o' nights with a husband; but the world's improved, and customs altered.<sup>5</sup>

Lord Sandwich excused himself for taking a mistress by stating that he was only allowing himself the liberty that everyone else at Court was taking.<sup>6</sup> The cuckolded husband who took his calamity seriously became the butt of many a joke:

Every man who believes that his honor depends upon that of his wife is a fool who torments him-

5. Otway, Soldier's Fortune, I, ii.

6. Pepys, 10 August, 1663.

self, and drives her to despair; but he who, being naturally jealous, has the additional misfortune of loving his wife, and who expects that she should live only for him, is a perfect madman, whom the torrents of hell have actually taken hold of in this world, and whom nobody pities. All reasoning and observation on these unfortunate circumstances attending wedlock concur in this, that precaution is vain and useless before the evil, and revenge odious afterwards.<sup>7</sup>

Because of the Court attitude, many Englishwomen became quite brazen, but they were in the minority. The average woman was advised to restrict herself to domestic and family duties with virtue and modesty praised as the most desirable characteristics of a lady.<sup>8</sup> One does not receive this impression from reading plays, however, for the playhouse reflected life as seen through the eyes of the town gallants, who looked with disdain on virtue and modesty and derided chaste women. "The Stage exposeth Chastity, sometimes as an Impossibility; sometimes as a bare Fancy; and sometimes as a Want of Grace," wrote one of the reformers.<sup>9</sup> It is this derision of chastity along with the "smuttiness of language" so frequently condemned by Jeremy Collier that has, more than anything else, made the comic playwrights so vulnerable to moral criticism.

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7. Hamilton, Memoirs of Count Grammont, p. 212.

8. Ogg, England in the Reign of Charles II, I, 116.

9. Bedford, The Evil and Danger of Stage Plays, p. 117.

Another moral deficiency was the heavy drinking which was indulged in by all classes of society. In this respect, the courtiers differed from other Englishmen only in the type of beverage they drank. Great quantities of every kind of alcoholic drink then known were consumed. In 1688, twelve millions barrels of beer were sold when the entire population of the country totalled only five million.<sup>10</sup> The gentry drank wine and brandy and drank them freely. Strong wine was an integral part of all meals. A gentleman was not polite if he sipped his wine, he was supposed to down it in a single draught, and the meal was inevitably followed by a number of toasts.<sup>11</sup> The most celebrated scene of drunkenness occurred in 1663 when Sedley, accompanied by Sir Thomas Ogle and Lord Buckhurst, precipitated a riot after Sir Charles stripped naked and abused a crowd of citizens. The incident is mentioned by several contemporaries, and Court records show that Sedley was fined for his behavior. Genest, writing a century after the event, has given a most picturesque account,<sup>12</sup> although the lurid descriptions customarily presented have recently been discounted as being grossly exaggerated.<sup>13</sup>

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10. Bryant, p. 101.

11. Ibid., p. 111.

12. Genest, I, 82.

13. Wilson, The Court Wits of the Restoration, pp. 40-2.

Gambling was another vice of the age, one that was to increase in intensity with the advent of the eighteenth century. Gambling has been called the most fashionable amusement of genteel London society,<sup>14</sup> but it was not restricted to genteel society alone. Stakes were exorbitantly high, and fortunes were recklessly dissipated. Pepys gives us a vivid description of his first visit to a gambling house:

...they begun to play at about eight at night, where to see how differently one man took his losing from another, one cursing and swearing, and another only muttering and grumbling to himself, a third without any apparent discontent at all... to see how easily here, where they play nothing but guinnys, a £100 is won or lost: to see two or three gentlemen come in there drunk, and putting their stock of gold together, one 22 pieces, the second 4, and the third 5 pieces, and there to play with one another, and forget how much each of them brought, but he that brought the 22 thinks he brought no more than the rest...to see how some old gamesters, that have no money to spend now as formerly, do come and sit and look on, as among others, Sir Lewis Dives, who was here, and hath been a great gamester in his time: to hear their cursing and damning to no purpose...to see how persons of the best quality do here sit down... and to see how people in ordinary clothes shall come hither, and play away 100 or 2 or 300 guinnys, without any kind of difficulty...this kind of prophane, mad entertainment they give themselves.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the three great sins of the period, there were any number of minor vices. Anything that was pleasurable

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14. Sidney, Social Life in England From the Restoration to the Revolution, p. 314.

15. Pepys, 1 January, 1668.

was acceptable; if something violated previous social standards, it was apt to prove pleasurable. So went the reasoning of the courtiers. The behavior of the average gentleman became stereotyped. He rose about noon, went to the Mall in St. James' Park or to Hyde Park where he would meet some woman, then go to lunch, then to a play, and then to other social entertainments, ending the evening's fun with cards, dice, dancing, and wine, until he found himself lying at full length under the table.<sup>16</sup> In determining his behavior, he took his cue from the Court where he found

an entire scene of gallantry and amusements, with all the politeness and magnificence which the inclinations of a prince naturally addicted to tenderness and pleasure could suggest: the beauties were desirous of charming, and the men endeavored to please: all studied to set themselves off to the best advantage: some distinguished themselves by dancing; others by show and magnificence; some by their wit, many by their amours, but few by their constancy.<sup>17</sup>

Without meaning to, Jeremy Collier gave a fairly accurate description of a gentleman by describing the stage counterpart:

A fine gentleman, is a fine Whoring, Swearing, Smutty, Atheistical Man. These Qualifications it seems compleat the Idea of Honour. They are the Top-Improvements of Fortune, and the distinguishing Glories of Birth and Breeding!...The Restraints of Conscience and the Pedantry of Virtue, are unbecoming a Cavalier: Future Securities, and Reaching beyond Life, are vulgar Provisions: If he falls a Thinking at this rate, he forfeits his Honour; for his Head

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16. Sidney, pp. 309-14.

17. Hamilton, p. 198.



was only made to run against a Post! Here you have a Man of Breeding and Figure that burlesques the Bible, Swears, and talks Smut to Ladies, speaks ill of his Friend behind his Back, and betraies his Interest. A fine Gentleman, that has neither Honesty, nor Honour, Conscience, nor Manners, Good Nature, nor Civil Hypocrisy. Fine, only in the Insignificance of Life, the Abuse of Religion and the Scandals of Conversation.<sup>18</sup>

One of the signs of the overall social degeneration was the adoption of extravagant and effeminate styles of dress by the gentlemen. The ladies, too, adopted outlandish fashions. Anthony Wood was shocked by the London dress, and he commented as follows:

A strang effeminate age when men strive to imitate women in their apparell, viz. long periwigs, patches in their faces, painting, short wide breeches like petticoates, muffs, and their clothes highly sented bedecked with ribbons of all colours....

On the other side, women would strive to be like men, viz. when they rode on horsback or in coaches weare plush caps like monteros, either full of ribbons or feathers, long periwigs which men use to weare, and riding coats of a red colour all be-daubed with lace which they call vests, and this habit was chiefly used by the ladies and maids of honour belonging to the Queen....<sup>19</sup>

The new fashions were fair game for the playwrights, who frequently satirized them:

Young Fashion. Good God! to what a taste are women fallen, that it shou'd be in the power of a lac'd coat to recommend a gallant to 'em--

Lory. Sir, taylors and perriwig-makers are now become the bawds of the nation, 'tis they debauch all the women.

Young F. Thou sayest true; for there's that fop now,

18. Collier, A Short View, p. 143.

19. Wood, I, 509.

has not by nature wherewithal to move a cookmaid,  
and by that time those fellows have done with him,  
I' gad he shall melt down a countess.<sup>20</sup>

Hypocrisy was another main trait of Restoration society, although Rochester complained that it was the only vice not found, since "few Men here dissemble their being Rascals; and no Woman disowns being a Whore."<sup>21</sup> Hypocrisy was very often the target for ridicule on the stage, and Otway's mockery of those gallants who regularly attended church as a matter of convenient policy is typical:

At Church, in Pews, ye most devoutly snore;  
And here, got dully drunk, ye come to roar;  
Ye go to Church to glout, and ogle there,  
And come to meet more leud Convenient here.  
With equal Zeal ye honour either Place.<sup>22</sup>

Because hypocrisy was so widespread, Restoration gentlemen were always suspicious of anyone's sincerity. That is why Congreve and Vanbrugh accused Collier of deliberately looking for "smut" to further his own enjoyment. The majority of Royallists were convinced that the Puritans had been insincere in their attempts to enforce moral conformity:

They would avoid a taverne and ale-house, but yet send for their commodities to their respective chambers and tiple and smoake till they were overtaken with the creature. And yet of all men, none more than these were ready to censure any boone Royallist

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20. Vanbrugh, The Relapse, I, iii.

21. Letter to Henry Savile, 1679. Reprinted in The Collected Works of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, p. 263.

22. Otway, prologue to Aphra Behn's The City Heiress.

or any person that they saw go in or out of a  
taverne or alehous.<sup>23</sup>

Women especially were considered to be dissembling creatures, and it is seldom that one can find a woman portrayed on the comic stage who is not in some measure hypocritical. Wycherley's Olivia is the most striking example, but the attitude that all women were dishonest was general:

Women may most properly said to be unmasked when they wear vizors; for that secures them from blushing, and being out of countenance; and next to being in the dark, or alone, they are most truly themselves in a vizor-mask.<sup>24</sup>

Another undesirable feature of English society, which was characteristic of all classes, was extreme brutality. Bull-baiting and bear-baiting and cockfights were favorite amusements. A hanging was a great public spectacle; Pepys paid a shilling to attend a hanging and to stand on the wheel of a cart in order to gain a vantage point. The execution was witnessed by "12 or 14,000 people."<sup>25</sup> Physical violence was commonplace, and many a duel was fought over a trifling incident. Assaults were fairly common. Dryden, for example, was badly mauled one night. Sir John Coventry dared to speak disparagingly in Commons of the King's fondness for

23. Wood, I, 298.

24. Congreve, The Double Dealer, III,ii.

25. Pepys, 21 January, 1664.

actresses, and he was rewarded by being viciously assaulted on his way home.<sup>26</sup> Pepys walked at night accompanied by four armed men to protect him from robbery.<sup>27</sup> Noblemen could commit acts of violence with almost no fear of the law; the Earl of Pembroke was generally credited with twenty-six homicides, but his only punishment was to be indicted twice for manslaughter, and both indictments were dismissed.<sup>28</sup> Professional murderers were frequently hired:

Sir Davy. Have you very good trading nowadays in your trade, friend?

Bloody Bones. In peaceable times a man may eat and drink comfortably upon't; a private murder done handsomely is worth money; but now that the nation's unsettled, there are so many general undertakers, that 'tis grown almost a monopoly; you may have a man murdered almost for little or nothing, and nobody e'er know who did it neither.<sup>29</sup>

Charles II was described by one of his subjects as a man who "had great vices, but scarcely any virtues to correct them," a man who "delivered himself up to a most enormous course of vice without any sort of restraint."<sup>30</sup> There is little wonder that the behavior of the the Court was notorious, for it was the King who set the standard of notoriety. Charles was guilty of almost every sort of moral evil imaginable, and he made no effort to conceal his indiscretions.

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26. Burnet, History of his own Time, p. 183.

27. Pepys, 19 September, 1663.

28. Ogg, I, 138.

29. Otway, Soldier's Fortune, IV, 1.

30. Burnet, p. 395.

They were public knowledge. He surrounded himself with men as brazenly dissolute as himself. There was the Earl of Rochester, described by one of his mistresses as follows:

Lord Rochester is, without contradiction, the most witty man in all England; but then he is likewise the most unprincipled, and devoid even of the least tincture of honor; he is dangerous to our sex only; and that to such a degree that there is not a woman who gives ear to him three times but she irretrievably loses her reputation. No woman can escape him, for he has her in his writings, though his other attacks be ineffectual, and in the age we live in, the one is as bad as the other in the eye of the public.<sup>31</sup>

Yes, Rochester, witty, profligate, and cowardly, in and out of favor with the king, set quite an example for his contemporaries. Equally bad was the Duke of Buckingham, who "had no principles of religion, virtue, or friendship. Pleasure, frolic, or extravagant diversion was all that he laid to heart."<sup>32</sup> Others, such as Sedley, Buckhurst, and Savile, joined in the circle of social leaders. Even after their disappearance from the scene and after the death of Charles, the tradition of loose conduct that they had set continued to be followed by many members of genteel society.

Since these men controlled and patronized the theater, it is little wonder that the stage reflected their tastes.

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31. Hamilton, p. 266.

32. Burnet, p. 69.

Both King and courtiers went to the playhouse regularly, and for a while, there was a play performed at Court each week.<sup>33</sup> Artificial as many of these comedies seem to us today, those who saw them when they were first presented felt that they were accurate portrayals of society. Edward Filmer stressed the fact that the playwrights gave an accurate representation of their audience, "not to be obtained but by a great deal of Observation."<sup>34</sup> Filmer was one of those who saw in the comedies of the time moral instruction, and he defended the stage against the charge that all its dissolute heroes were gentlemen by very correctly pointing out:

...there's a necessity of those Characters, and a Vertue in that Choice. For as the greatest and best part of our Audience are Quality, if we would make our Comedies Instructive in the exposing of Vice, we must not lash the Vices at Wapping to mend the faults at Westminster.<sup>35</sup>

The playhouse itself became a place of ill-repute, and Drake's defense was just when he said:

It were much to be wish'd that no body came to this Playhouse for a less innocent diversion, than that of the Stage; to Churches and Conventicles with a less pious intention, than that of Devotion; to the Park for a less wholesome refreshment than that of Air, etc.<sup>36</sup>

33. Boswell, The Restoration Court Stage, p. 85.

34. Filmer, A Defense of Plays, p. 96.

35. Filmer, A Defense of Dramatic Poetry, p. 89.

36. Drake, The Antient and Modern Stages Survey'd, p. 55.

But the fact that Drake's defense was proper in theory still could not prevent the prevailing ill-conduct that was expected daily at the theater.

The playwrights were condemned by critics of the stage as being disreputable persons, one of them saying, "... the Comick Poets are often Men of loose Manners, and therefore unlikely Persons to undertake the Promotion and Encouragement of Vertue...when by doing so, they must expose their own Character to derision."<sup>37</sup> The writers themselves frequently made fun of their personal behavior:

Lyric. ...as the Hero in Tragedy is either a whining cringing fool that's always stabbing himself, or a ranting hectoring Bully that's killing every-body else: so the Hero in Comedy is always the Poet's Character.

Lovewell. What's that?

Lyric. A compound of practical Rake, and speculative Gentleman, who always bears off the great Fortune in the Play, and shams the Beau and 'Squire with a Whore or Chambermaid.<sup>38</sup>

The poets, however, simply were men of their time. They shared the vices of the profligate society of which they were members. Some, like Wycherley, were among the most dissolute personages of that society; others, like Dryden, had private lives fairly free from scandal. To condemn them is to con-

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37. Blackmore, Essays on Several Subjects, p. 220.

38. Farquhar, Love and a Bottle, IV, ii.

damn their generation. They themselves were often aware of the defects of the stage. In their comedies they continually satirize the loose morality of the day. Sometimes they protested most strongly against the vices which they caricatured:

...in the plays which have been wrote of late, there is no such thing as perfect character, but the two chief persons are most commonly a swearing, drinking, whoring ruffian for a lover, and an impudent, ill-bred Tomrig for a mistress, and these are the fine people of the play; and there is that latitude in this, that almost anything is proper for them to say; but their chief subject is bawdy and profaneness, which they call brisk writing, when the most dissolute of men, that relish these things well enough in private, are shocked at 'em in public. And methinks, if there were nothing but the ill manners of it, it should make poets avoid that indecent way of writing.<sup>39</sup>

But even when they saw their own moral faults, they took little action to correct them. They pandered to the tastes of the age, but they did expose the foibles of that age, and the student of Restoration society should make a thorough study of the stage in order to understand that society.

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39. Shadwell, preface to The Sullen Lovers.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF SENTIMENTAL COMEDY AND THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

As the century passed and the pressure for reform increased, there arose a new type of drama, the sentimental comedy. Richard Steele was the great master of sentimental comedy, which became the representative drama of the eighteenth century. The transition from the Restoration comedy of manners came rather suddenly, but the older plays continued to dominate the stage throughout the first half of the century, and the Restoration playwrights were more popular than contemporary writers during the entire period.<sup>1</sup>

It has already been noted that there had been an increasing agitation for reform throughout the latter years of the seventeenth century climaxed by Jeremy Collier's attack on the stage in 1698. Ten years before the end of

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1. Nicoll, A History of the Early Eighteenth Century Drama, pp. 129-38.

the century Evelyn had noted:

The impudence of both sexes was now become so greate and so universal, persons of all ranks keeping their courtezans publickly, that the King had lately directed a letter to the Bishops to order their Cleargy to preach against that sin, swearing, &c., and to put the Ecclesiastical Laws in execution without any indulgence.<sup>2</sup>

Discussing the trend in the theater towards reform and sentimental comedy, Gray says:

In comedy, furthermore, the last years of the seventeenth century saw the approach of change. The comedy of manners was facing terrific attacks from the moralistic critic and was about to succumb. The art of Etherege, Wycherley, and Congreve was sound.... That the life which they portrayed was in fact licentious and degraded did not vitiate their art. But the moralists who found the immorality in both life and the plays attributed it all to the power of the drama over men's manners. They demanded a new kind of playmaking to reform society. For their arguments they turned to the theories of the critics, and more especially to the doctrine of poetic justice. Ridicule was not enough for the foibles and follies which the dramatists anatomized; there must be added discomfiture and either punishment or repentance. Wit must be discarded for fine phrases of good feeling and sensible morality. Those demands were based on a theory of drama incompatible with good comedy the world over; and they made it very difficult for true comedy to lift its voice during the rest of the eighteenth century. The victims of the attack, instead of standing firm and asserting that drama, and especially their drama, had other ends to serve in other ways than the direct inculcation of morals, tried weakly to argue that their works could stand even on the moralists' own premises. Hence comedy became the handmaiden of morality and her tripping tongue slackened its pace to the cadence of pulpit eloquence in the drawing room.<sup>3</sup>

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2. Evelyn, Diary, 19 February, 1690.

3. Gray, Theatrical Criticism in London to 1795, pp. 16-17.

Reformation of manners never occurs overnight, and because the eighteenth century playwrights did not follow the licentious pattern of writing followed by their predecessors it is not true that theirs was an age of moral propriety. The blatant disregard for all moral standards may have disappeared and the emphasis on sexual libertinism may have lessened, but the morality of eighteenth century London was still fairly low.

Daniel Defoe, always a critic of contemporary behavior, wrote:

It must be confess't there is a great, I had almost said a universall, defficiency among our gentlemen in the government of themselves; their moralls and manners are deprav'd and vitiated in a manner hardly to be described, at least not fully.<sup>4</sup>

Steele also complained:

...survey this town, and you will find rakes and debauchees are your men of pleasure; thoughtless atheists and illiterate drunkards call themselves free thinkers; and gamesters, banterers, biters, swearers, and twenty new-born insects more, are, in their several species, the modern men of wit.<sup>5</sup>

Farquhar, in true Restoration tradition, painted the following satirical portrait:

Sir Harry. Come gentlemen, the news! the news of th' town! for I'm just arrived.

Vizard. Why in the City end of th' town we're playing the knave, to get estates.

Standard. And in the Court end, playing the fool in spending 'em.

Vizard. We are all so reformed, that gallantry is taken for vice.

Standard. And hypocrisy for religion.

4. Defoe, The Compleat English Gentleman, p. 232.

5. Steele, The Tatler, number 12, May, 1709.

Vizard. Not one whore between Ludgate and Aldgate. Standard. But ten times more cuckolds than ever.<sup>6</sup>

How was the theater affected by all the furor for moral reform? The most notable change was the sterility of new comic production. Vanbrugh and Farquhar carried on as Restoration dramatists for the first few years of the new century, but the other playwrights of the new era wrote morally and ineffectively. Only Cibber and Steele deserve more than passing mention, and Cibber's plays seem very weak today, while the best of Steele's four comedies was not written until 1722, after most of the controversy had died down. The theater itself resisted change, and many of the same conditions which had drawn the ire of the reformers continued to exist. Bedford wrote:

...the Stage is now as bad as ever, and hates to be reform'd, that it is obstinate to the highest Degree, and abuseth all such who according to their several Offices, should be a terror to evil doers, and a praise to them that do well....The present Age is frequently derided by the Actors, because... there are great Endeavors for a Reformation of Manners.<sup>7</sup>

In 1714 a clergyman published a tract showing that the plays then on the stage offended against no fewer than 1400 texts in the Bible.<sup>8</sup> Addison added his voice to the chorus of protest:

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6. The Constant Couple, I, 1.

7. Bedford, pp. 177-9.

8. Turberville, Men and Manners in the Eighteenth Century, p. 404.

It is one of the most unaccountable things in our age, that the lewdness of our theatre should be so much complained of, so well exposed, and so little redressed. It is to be hoped, that some time or other we may be at leisure to restrain the licentiousness of the theatre, and make it contribute its assistance to the advancement of morality and to the reformation of the age.<sup>9</sup>

But all the protests could not completely change the audience, on whose approval the theater's life depended. Certain physical changes were made in the playhouses. For one thing the plays were attended by a greater number of patrons, representing a more diversified social strata. No longer was the theater a private preserve for a limited coterie of patrons. Many members of the middle class began to attend as well as some members of the lower class. Efforts were made to reduce the intimacy of contact between spectator and player, but the audience still treated the performers and their fellow patrons impolitely and were often far more concerned with amusements in the theater other than the stage presentation. Clowns, acrobats, and a miscellany of foreign performers were hired to please the audience. Italian opera enjoyed a period of great popularity. Comic productions outnumbered tragedies by three or four to one.<sup>10</sup> And the Restoration playwrights were

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9. Addison, The Spectator, number 446, August, 1712.

10. Nicoll, Eighteenth Century Drama, p. 125.

still the favorites of the crowd:

The age, as is perfectly evident, still delighted in scenes such as had been displayed by Etherege and by Wycherley. Obviously there was but little definite change in the morals of the people at large. There was a consciousness in the hearts of all, sure the most fanatic, that all the Societies for the Reformation of Manners were but hypocrisy writ large.... The gallants and the beaux, in pit and boxes, they knew, had not altered. Cynicism in this connection appears repeatedly in the dramas of the time.<sup>11</sup>

Colley Cibber is generally regarded as the founder of sentimental comedy and one who helped show the playwrights the way towards reform. Even his most sympathetic critic concedes that Cibber's personal character was such that it is difficult to picture him as a reformer of anything,<sup>12</sup> but the fifth act reform of Loveless in Cibber's first comedy, Love's Last Shift, inspired many imitations. The play, produced in 1696, was pronounced success. Loveless is just as much a rake as any Restoration hero, but he gushes forth pious sentimentality at the end of the play and all is forgiven.

Having found the formula for success, Cibber followed it in his later works, and his plays make very sticky reading indeed. When one thinks of the hypocrisy so often found in the early eighteenth century, one is inclined to think of Cibber. He was culpable in following many of the

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11. Ibid., p. 159.

12. Croissant, Studies in the Work of Colley Cibber, p. 30.

vices of the age; for example, he was a heavy gambler, and it was not uncommon for him to lose two-hundred or three hundred pounds a night, and he once lost more than a thousand pounds.<sup>13</sup> His writings frequently convey the impression of hypocrisy as in his criticism of the Restoration playwrights:

It has often given me amazement, that our best authors of that time could think the wit and spirit of their scenes could be an excuse for making the looseness of them publick. The many instances of their talents so abused, are too glaring to need a closer comment, and are sometimes too gross to be recited. If then to have avoided this imputation, or rather to have had the interest and honour of virtue always in view, can give merit to a play; I am contented that my readers should think such merit, the all, that mine have to boast of. Libertines of mere wit and pleasure may laugh at these grave laws, that would limit a lively genius; but every sensible honest man, conscious of their truth, and use, will give these railers smile for smile,<sup>14</sup> and show a due contempt for their merriment.

Just how different Cibber's dialogue is from that of the Restoration playwrights may be gauged by the following sample written in 1701:

Antonio. But can you find amongst all your musty manuscripts, what pleasure he enjoys that lies in the arms of a young, rich, well-shaped, healthy bride? Answer me that, ha, sir?

Carlos. 'Tis frequent, sir, in story; there I read of all kinds of virtuous, and of vicious women; the ancient Spartan dames, the Roman ladies, their beauties, their deformities; and when I light upon a Portia, or a Cornelia, crowned with ever-blooming truth and virtue, with such a feeling I peruse their

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13. Barker, Mr. Cibber of Drury Lane, p. 13.

14. Cibber, p. 116.

fortunes, as if I then had lived, and tasted of their lawful, envied love. But when I meet a Messalina, tired and unsated in her foul desires; a Clytemnestra, bathed in her husband's blood; an impious Tullia, whirling her chariot over her father's breathless body, horror invades my faculties.<sup>15</sup>

Another selection from the same play shows the sentimentality so typical of Cibber:

Louisa. What is't you start at?

Carlos. Not for your beauty; though I confess you fair to a perfection, but when that beauty fades, (as time leaves none unvisited) what charm shall then secure my love? Your riches? No, an honest mind's above the bribes of fortune: for though distressed, a stranger, and in want, I thus return them thankless. Be modest, and be virtuous, I'll admire you; all good men will adore you, and when your beauty and your fortune are no more, will still deliver down your name revered to ages.

Louisa. Oh, say you will be mine, and make your own conditions; if you suspect my temper, bind me by the most sacred tie, and let my love, my person, and my fortune, lawfully be yours.<sup>16</sup>

One year later Cibber wrote another comedy, She Wou'd and She Wou'd Not. Once again the reader is confronted with a mass of syrupy, cloying sentiment, but there were lapses when Cibber went back to the style of the Restoration. He never backslid all the way, but a scene such as that in which Hypolita, disguised as a man, proposes to Rosara, shows a definite Restoration influence:

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15. Love Makes a Man, I, 1. All selections from Cibber's plays have been taken from texts reprinted in Mrs. Inchbald's The British Theatre and Bell's British Theatre.

16. Ibid., IV, 1.



Hypolita. To be short with ye, madam, I have reason to believe I shall be disinherited if I don't marry you.

Rosara. And what have you reason to believe you shall be, if you do marry me?

Hyp. In the Spanish fashion, I suppose, jealous to a degree.

Rosara. You may be in the English fashion, and something else to a degree.

Hyp. Oh, if I have not enough courage to prevent that, madam, let the world think me in the English city fashion--content to a degree. Now, here in Spain, child, we have such things as back rooms, barred windows, hard fare, poison, daggers, bolts, chains, and so forth.

Rosara. Ay, sir, and there are such things as bribes, plots, shams, letters, lies, walls, ladders, keys, confidants, and so forth.

Hyp. Hey! a very complete regiment indeed!<sup>17</sup>

The best of Cibber's plays is The Careless Husband, written in 1704. This work is written in the purest style of sentimental comedy as we witness the reform of a seemingly hopeless rake in the last act. Once again there are scenes reminiscent of those which were considered conventional only a few years earlier:

Lord Morelove. Pray, my lord, what did you marry for?

Lord Foppington. To pay my debts at play, and disinherit my younger brother.

Lord M. But there are some things due to a wife.

Lord F. And there are some debts I don't care to pay, to both which I plead husband, and my lord.

Lord M. If I should do so, I should expect to have my own coach stopped in the street, and to meet my wife with the windows up in a hackney.

Lord F. Then would I put in bail, and order a separate maintenance.

Lord M. So pay double the sum of the debt, and be married for nothing.

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17. She Wou'd and She Wou'd Not, III, i.

Lord F. Now, I think, deferring a dun, and getting rid of one's wife are two the most agreeable sweets in the liberties of an English subject.<sup>18</sup>

In the scene just cited we can see in Lord Morelove the personification of the theory of the new playwrights that there should be a didactic purpose to comedy.

In contrast to Cibber, whose real interest lay in the commercial rewards of his plays, there is Sir Richard Steele, who felt a definite interest in reforming the manners of his generation. Steele is the real leader of genteel, sentimental comedy. It was his contention that no one ever wrote bawdy language except for a dearth of invention.<sup>19</sup> He firmly believed that a play should provide moral instruction, and he cited The Country Wife as an example of a play in which the author did not conclude his play with the proper stroke of poetic justice.<sup>20</sup> John Dennis, who despite some faults often showed excellent critical judgment, disagreed with Steele:

When Sir Richard says that anything that has its foundation in happiness and success must be the subject of comedy, he confounds comedy with that species of tragedy which has a happy catastrophe. When he says that 'tis an improvement of comedy to introduce a joy too exquisite for laughter,

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18. The Careless Husband, II, 11.

19. The Spectator, 51, April, 1711.

20. The Tatler, 3, April, 1709.

he takes all the care that he can to show that he knows nothing of the nature of comedy.<sup>21</sup>

Steele's first comedy was The Funeral, written in 1701, and we see a definite departure from the fare to which the theater audiences had become accustomed. Only occasionally is there any dialogue suggestive of the conventional comedies. About as close as Steele came to emulating his contemporaries may be seen in the following dialogue between Mademoiselle D'Epingle and Campley:

Campley. But, prithee, mademoiselle, why have you lost your English tongue all of a sudden? Methought when the fellow called us French whores, as we came along, and said we came to starve their own people, you gave him pretty English; he was a dog, a rascal, you'd send him to the stocks.

Mademoiselle. Ha! ha! ha! I was in a passion and betrayed myself, but you're my lover's friend, and a man of honour, therefore you'll do nothing to injure us. Why, Mr. Campley, you must know I can speak as good English as you, but I don't for fear of losing my customers. The English will never give a price for anything they understand. Nay, I've known some of your fools pretend to buy with good breeding, and give any rate rather than not be thought French enough to know what they were doing....<sup>22</sup>

Of his next play, Steele wrote, "The design of it is to banish out of conversation all entertainment which does not proceed from simplicity of mind, good-nature, friendship, and honour."<sup>23</sup> The hero is an insipid creature, who would

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21. Dennis, "Remarks on a Play Called The Conscious Lovers, a Comedy," reprinted in Adams and Hathaway, editors, Dramatic Essays of the Neoclassic Age, p. 208.

22. The Funeral, III, 11.

23. Preface to The Lying Lovers.

have been laughed off the stage twenty years earlier. He flirts with women, but he has absolutely no intention of seduction. His great vice is that he tells lies about his own accomplishments. But in the final act, Bookwit, the hero, is stricken with remorse, and we reach the inevitable denouement of sentimental comedy. Steele never is quite as sickening as Cibber, but much of his sentiment is so overdrawn that it becomes laughable, as may be seen in Love-more's repentance after he has made a jealous tirade against Penelope:

Oh, Penelope! that look, that disdainful look has pierced my soul, and ebb'd my rage to penitence and sorrow. I own my fault; I'm too rash.... Not a fond mother of a long-wished-for only child beholds with such kind terrors her infant offspring as I do her I love.<sup>24</sup>

Steele led the movement towards sentimental reform, and with the introduction of sentimental comedy the period of Restoration comedy came to an end. It had been a brilliant period, and the genius of the playwrights has made their comedies live despite their grossness. No one can deny that there are many offensive scenes, although there might be a just contention that scenes as bad have been produced on the modern American stage. By understanding the conditions under which they were produced, one can understand and excuse many of the faults, just as one can excuse the excessive sentimentality displayed by the eighteenth century writers.

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24. Ibid., II, 1.

## CHAPTER NINE

### LATER CRITICISM OF THE RESTORATION AND FINAL SUMMARY

Restoration comedy, because of its brilliance and wit, has in general been sympathetically treated by its critics, although always condemned for its immorality. John Dennis, himself a product of the age, was a staunch defender of the stage in the early eighteenth century. Dennis conceded that immorality existed, but he tried to claim that a moral purpose was usually involved in the portrayal of immorality, and in this attempt he failed miserably. For despite the fact that such a defense had been used by some of the playwrights themselves, the very nature of their writings refutes their claim.

Colley Cibber usually seems hypocritical in his own analysis of the stage. As has been previously shown, Cibber shared the faults of early eighteenth century playwrights, who often set a standard of false, hypocritical, and com-

mercial morality. Cibber made many comments on the state of the theater as he found it, most of them to the effect that he had no interest in perpetuating its vices. He wrote of "all the abuses of the stage, all the low, loose, or immoral supplements to wit, whether in making virtue ridiculous, or vice agreeable" as being the common characteristics of the Restoration.<sup>1</sup>

Later eighteenth century critics included Colley's son, Theophilus, who was reasonably sympathetic, and Dr. Samuel Johnson, who in his Lives of the Poets, dismissed the comedies of both Dryden and Congreve as being too low for public reading.

The Romantics investigated the leading comic writers in some detail, and one of the most famous criticisms of Restoration comedy is that of Charles Lamb. Lamb maintained that one could not judge Restoration comedy by any moral standards, that it portrayed a fairyland and was completely artificial, therefore it could not be immoral. Speaking of the characters in Restoration comedy he wrote:

They are a world of themselves almost as much as fairy land. Take one of their characters, male or female (with few exceptions they are alike), and place it in a modern play, and my virtuous indignation shall rise against the profligate wretch as warmly as the Catos of the pit would desire; because in a modern play I am to judge of the right

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1. Cibber, p. 47.

and the wrong....it cannot live here. It has got into a modern world, where it has no business....But in its own world do we feel the creature is so very bad? The (characters) do not offend my moral sense.... They seem engaged in their proper element. They break through no laws or conscientious restraints. They know of none....No good person can be justly offended as a spectator, because no good person suffers on the stage. Judged morally, every character in these plays--the few exceptions only are mistakes--is alike essentially vain and worthless.<sup>2</sup>

It is Lamb's defense which is artificial, for Restoration society, though its portrayal often seems removed from reality today, was a real and vital society; and Restoration comedy was written particularly to appeal to the depraved tastes of that society by presenting to it in comic situation its own vices.

Leigh Hunt published an edition of the major Restoration comic playwrights. Like other Romantics, he too was prone to disregard the realities of the situation. It was Hunt's contention that Restoration characters don't mean what they actually say and do, and that they are not really such hard characters as they appear.<sup>3</sup> Hunt, in summing up the four authors whose works he edited, says:

Of the four dramatists...Wycherley was the most reflective for reflection's sake, the most terse with simplicity in his style, the most original in departing from the comedy in vogue, and adding

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2. Lamb, "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century." From the Essays of Elia, pp. 277-8.

3. Hunt, editor, The Dramatic Works of Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar, Introduction, p. lxiii.

morals to manners, and the least so with regard to plot and character: that Congreve was the wittiest, most scholarly, most highly bred, the most elaborate in his plots and language, and most pungent but least natural in his characters, and that he had the least heart: that Vanbrugh was the readiest and most straightforward, the least superfluous, the least self-referential, mistrusting or morbid, and therefore, with more pardon, the least scrupulous--caring for nothing but truth (as far as he saw it) and a strong effect: and that Farquhar had the highest animal spirits, with fits of the deepest sympathy, the greatest wish to please rather than to strike the most agreeable diversity of character, the best instinct in avoiding revolting extravagances of the time, and the happiest invention in plot and situation; and therefore is to be pronounced, upon the whole, the truest dramatic genius, and the most likely to be of lasting popularity; as indeed he has hitherto been.<sup>4</sup>

Hazlitt also wrote a critical review of the four major comic dramatists. In his review Hazlitt is particularly friendly to Wycherley and to Farquhar, maintaining that their ingenuity compensated for their indecency. He is extremely critical of Vanbrugh, whose morality he considers to be quite low without the compensation of artistic genius.

In the late nineteenth century the accent on conventional morality was so strong that it was impossible for Restoration comedy to find a receptive reading public. Lord Macaulay wrote the most famous and the most scathing criticism. Other leading critics such as A.W. Ward and Richard Garnett tended to follow Macaulay's dictum that the immorality far over-

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4. Ibid., p. lxii.



shadowed the artistic merits. Ward, however, did admit that those artistic values existed and discussed them at some length without, as Macaulay had done, casting continual disparagement on the ethical standards.

In the twentieth century there have been notable criticism and study by such men as Nicoll, Summers, Krutch, and Dobree. Nicoll has done a major job in surveying the period, in studying in detail not only the comedies, but the stage conditions existing; Summers has done a great deal of work in editing the plays; and Krutch has made an excellent study of the moral struggle and particularly of the Collier controversy. In general the twentieth century critics have recognized the artistic value of the comedies as warranting their study by modern readers.

By way of summary, it should be said that Restoration comedy is indecent, completely immoral, and licentious. It was deliberately written that way by its authors to please an audience which craved such entertainment. Yet the comedy contains many intrinsic values. It is funny and entertaining, which is the real purpose of comedy. It is witty and ingenious, and it is carefully contrived. It suffers from a sameness of plot, presentation, and characterization. It is, above all, the product of a great age of comic writers.

There is no real excuse for its immorality, and yet there is extenuation. To deny that immorality exists, or to

assert that the plays provide moral instruction is ridiculous. At the same time one should note that many of the characters are satirical and that they were used to point out some of the flaws of the age. But while they made fun of many of the vices, the playwrights showed no real interest in reforming them, and transgressors are not punished for their wickedness. The callousness of the characters and their utter disregard for moral convention are the keys to Restoration comedy. They are playing a game of deliberate debauchery, and the object of that game is to succeed through wit in accomplishing their goal. Rather than condemn the characters for their conduct, one must accept them for what they are.

As for the playwrights themselves, it should always be remembered that they were successful. Had they written otherwise they probably would not have been. They were writing to entertain their age, and they succeeded. Whether they should be censured for their writings should depend in part on their own attitudes. Dryden seems to have suffered moral qualms about the looseness of his writings. Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Wycherley apparently did not have such feelings toward their own work. Congreve and Vanbrugh convey the impression that what they are writing is good fun, and that the accent is on the situation which produces licentiousness

rather than on licentiousness itself. Wycherley's general disregard for social convention and his pattern of living stamp him as a man whose personal moral code was low, and who for that reason felt no shame about his writing. Yet, more than the others, Wycherley in his plays has references to moral criticism.

Shadwell apparently thought of himself as a moral writer, but with what was perhaps a lack of critical judgment, he often stoops fully as low as the others. Sedley, D'Urfey, and others of their ilk, were the debauched counterparts of their own characters. Aphra Behn seems to have deliberately prostituted her writings to please the tastes of her audience. Farquhar had a more wholesome air of immorality, if such be an apt term of expression. He never reaches the depths that those before him had plumbed, and his comedies are presented in a spirit of rollicking good humor.

There is no moral formula which will satisfy all ages. What is proper today may be improper tomorrow. However, it is incorrect to claim that the immorality of the Restoration stage is relative. Restoration comedy was immoral to its own audience, the behavior of which was deliberately contrived to be immoral, because in their

reaction to Puritanism the members of that audience tried to reach the opposite extreme. In considering the immorality of Restoration comedy, it should be stressed that such immorality is the key. It is a deliberate defiance of moral convention which forms the whole purpose of the comedies of the Restoration playwrights.

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## VITA

Herbert Robinson Blackwell was born August 20, 1927 at Fort Monroe, Virginia. Since his father was an army officer, Herbert travelled widely during his early years and attended schools in New York, California, and the Philippine Islands as well as in Roanoke, Oceana, Phoebus, and Richmond, Virginia, graduating from Thomas Jefferson High School in Richmond in 1944.

After serving in the army, he entered the University of Richmond in 1947, receiving his bachelor's degree in English in June, 1950. The Korean War broke out almost immediately thereafter, and Mr. Blackwell was recalled to active duty in September. He remained in the army until December, 1953. Returning to Richmond, he began work on his master's degree.

It is his intention to pursue further studies at another institution, working towards his doctorate, and he expects to make teaching his profession.