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THREE RESTORATION COMEDIES

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Three Restoration Comedies

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY GĀMINI SALGĀDO

ETHEREGE
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TO MY TEACHER

PROFESSOR VIVIAN de SOLA PINTO

in grateful recognition of

twenty years' friendship

Contents

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G. S.

Introduction

I

1650 was a busy year for the Long Parliament. King Charles had been beheaded in the previous year and the theatres had been closed for eight years. In the intervals between passing laws ensuring the better packing of butter, the prohibition of trade with the Barbadoes, and the propagation and preaching of the Gospel in Wales, the triumphant Puritans found time for three Acts which are of special interest from the standpoint of Restoration comedy. The first was 'an Act for suppressing the detestable sins of incest, adultery and fornication'. The penalty for the first two crimes was death, without benefit of clergy. The third was also to be treated as a capital crime on the second offence. A month later, in June 1650, 'an Act for the better prevention of profane swearing and cursing' imposed fines ranging from three shillings to thirty shillings, depending on the social rank of the offender. Less than two months after this there followed the last and in some ways the most interesting of the three Acts. It was directed against 'several atheistical, blasphemous and execrable opinions, derogatory to the honour of God and destructive of human society'. In copious and comprehensive detail it enumerates all those whose opinions are deemed to fall within this category (including those who identify God with his creation and those who identify Him with themselves), swooping down finally on all who profess 'that the acts of adultery, drunkenness, swearing and the like open wickedness, are in their own nature as holy and righteous as the duties of prayer, preaching and giving thanks to God . . . that whatsoever is acted by them (whether whoredom, adultery, drunkenness, or the like open wickedness) may be committed without sin . . . that heaven and all happiness consists in the acting of those things which are sin and wickedness; or that such men and women are most perfect, or like to God or eternity, which do commit the greatest sins with the least

remorse or sense . . .' All those against whom these charges could be proved were liable to six months' imprisonment for the first offence, and, if they persisted in their opinions, to banishment from the realm.

Less than fifteen years later, in 1664, the first Restoration comedy was played before a wildly enthusiastic audience, including many who had returned to the realm from their 'banishment', the most distinguished of whom was the new king himself. *The Comical Revenge* or *Love in a Tub* set the pattern for comic drama till the early years of the new century. And almost without exception these comedies, while on the whole eschewing incest, were distinguished by having adultery and fornication for their subject-matter, a liberal use of 'profane swearing and cursing' as a prominent part of their idiom, and as heroes and heroines young men and women who made no secret of their 'atheistical, blasphemous and execrable opinions' and specifically of their view 'that heaven and all happiness consists in the acting of those things which are sin and wickedness'. So much so that when, two years before the end of the century, the Rev. Jeremy Collier blew his shattering trumpet blast against 'the profaneness and immorality of the stage' (entitled, with misleading modesty, *A Short View* . . .) the language he uses to condemn these plays could almost have been taken from the Acts of Parliament I have just mentioned.

So it is easy, tempting and in a general way justifiable to see Restoration comedy as a Royalist reaction to Puritan rigour. Its outlook on life appears to be that of the bivouac – pitch camp for the night and let joy be unconfined, for who knows what the morrow will bring? – and its strategy that of the hunt applied to the pursuit of women. Behind it lies what is indisputably the golden age of English drama, the age of Shakespeare and Jonson, of Webster, Middleton and Ford; after it comes what is equally indisputably the dullest drama England has produced – the 'sentimental comedy' of Steele and Lillo and Cumberland, as colourless as it is blameless. And we usually account for the tedium of the latter by attributing it to the success of the Puritan counter-attack which was originally inspired by the uninhibited gaiety of the Restora-

tion stage. (Though Collier himself was a High Church parson, not a Puritan.)

But the situation is not quite so neat and simple as this (it seldom is). The first bit of over-simplification has to do with the word 'restoration' itself, as applied to the drama. It is a convenient enough label as long as we do not expect from it the precision it has when used to describe the historical event of Charles II's return to the throne. The first Restoration comedy came four years after this, but comedies on this general pattern were being written and performed well into the reign of Queen Anne. Furthermore, while Restoration comedy is, as we shall see, new in interesting and important ways, it did not spring fully armed from the comic Muse's head, nor was it, as Thackeray and Macaulay among others stoutly maintained, a noxious foreign importation utterly unrelated to the solid and wholesome English dramatic tradition. To take only one point, the English reader or spectator need go no farther afield than Shakespeare's Princess of France (*Love's Labour's Lost*) or Rosalind or Viola or Beatrice to discover the stage ancestry of Angelica in *Love for Love* or Harriet in *The Man of Mode*. The Restoration dramatists occasionally filched their plots from Molière and certainly owed some of their dash and elegance to the French plays they had seen, but the spirit of their comedy is English to the core.

Indeed, the more one looks into it, the clearer it becomes that the closing of the theatres by the Puritans in 1642 does not mark any decisive break in the continuity of the English drama. It is true that the Restoration audience, especially at the beginning, was the most cliquish ever to have patronized the English stage. It consisted of courtiers and their ladies and those who came to gawp at the fine ladies or drum up custom among the young gallants. But the narrowing of the audience to an upper-class *élite* had already gone a long way in the reign of the first King Charles. The only important theatres left to be closed in 1642 were all 'private' theatres catering to those who could afford a shilling or more for admission. The Elizabethan hey-day when the theatre was a truly national pastime had long passed.

Again, though the theatres were closed, dramatic performances continued to take place. Wealthy patrons put on private performances and even, particularly in the provinces, clandestine public entertainments, while the poorer people had one-act farces and other such 'drolls' for their diversion.

Finally, there is the difference in theatrical presentation and technique. Here the changes are more significant, though the threads of continuity are not completely broken. The most obvious change is in the physical appearance of the theatre. Just as the action of an Elizabethan or Jacobean play does not reveal its full significance except when performed on the sort of stage for which it was intended – basically an 'apron' jutting out on three sides into the auditorium, no curtains or painted scenery, a balcony and an inner stage at the back – so Restoration comedy is obviously intended for the kind of stage with which we today are most familiar – the 'picture frame' stage with a proscenium arch cutting off the area of darkness in which the audience sits from the brightly lit stage action and 'perspective' scenery. But this kind of stage was often used for the performance of masques in the 'private' theatres, and there is evidence to suggest that the reason why the public theatres did not use painted scenery in the early years of the seventeenth century was that they could not afford it. And as for the most celebrated (or notorious) innovation of the Restoration stage, the introduction of women as performers, this was also common in masques, as well as in the public practice of visiting French theatrical groups. It was ten years before the closing of the theatres (to go no further back), that Henrietta Maria, Charles I's queen, appeared in a masque and so outraged the Puritan William Prynne that he published an attack on theatrical entertainment (*Histriomastix*) which cost him his ears. All in all it is true to say that the theatre of Charles II shows us in a heightened form the characteristics which are already apparent in that of Charles I. And as if to provide final confirmation of this, we may note that the most popular plays in the early years of the Restoration were just those Jacobean and Caroline dramas which held the stage immediately before the theatres were closed.

But if the line of English comic drama continued unbroken

into the Restoration it did not do so unchanged. Indeed, the change initiated by Etherege's first play, *Love in a Tub*, is so great that one critic has called it 'rather a revolution than a development'.[1] This may be true, but it is still worth insisting that it is a revolution which has its roots in the conventions it overthrows. Etherege's contemporaries certainly sensed that something new had appeared on the stage, for almost overnight the dramatist rose from obscurity to the height of fame. That he himself was aware of his innovation is indicated by the prologue in which, disclaiming comparison with 'Fletcher's nature or the art of Ben (Jonson)',

> Our author therefore begs you would forget,
> Most reverend judges, the records of wit;
> And only think upon the modern way
> Of writing, while you're censuring his play.

But exactly what is 'this modern way of writing' which the audience is invited to respond to? In the first place it was the presentation of a new world, gay, bright and brittle, a world where grace and style are all-important, where elegance of dress and deportment is matched by polished epigram and lively repartee. The new comedy was distinguished, in Dryden's words, by 'the improvement of our wit, language and conversation', the older writers being unfortunate because 'they wanted the benefit of converse'. In an age when conversation was the distinguishing mark of the gentleman, the stage provided the wittiest conversation to be heard. In comedy polite society saw a glittering image of itself, an image it was delighted to recognize and applaud. The point is vividly if somewhat rhapsodically made by Hazlitt:

> We are admitted behind the scenes like spectators at court, on a levee or birthday; but it is the court, the gala day of wit and pleasure, of gallantry and Charles II! What an air breathes from the name! what a rustling of silks and waving of plumes! what a sparkling of diamond ear-rings and shoe-buckles! What bright eyes, (ah, those were Waller's Sacharissa's as she passed!) what killing looks and graceful motions! How the faces of the whole ring are dressed in smiles! how the repartee goes round! how wit

1. John Palmer, *The Comedy of Manners*, Bell, 1913.

and folly, elegance and awkward imitation of it, set one another off! Happy, thoughtless age, when kings and nobles led purely ornamental lives; when the utmost stretch of a morning's study went no farther than the choice of a sword-knot, or the adjustment of a side-curl; when the soul spoke out in all the pleasing eloquence of dress; and beaux and belles, enamoured of themselves in one another's follies, fluttered like gilded butterflies, in giddy mazes, through the walks of St James' Park![1]

Dowries and legacies were at least as important to the gallants of Restoration comedy and their ladies as sword-knots and side-curls, but there is no doubt that part of its attraction, as well as its novelty, lies in this revelation of a world which at least on the surface is gay, brilliant and charming.

Comedy had traditionally dealt, according to one version of Aristotle's dictum, with low life. (Even Shakespeare – certainly no Aristotelian – is only a partial exception; the rude mechanicals are never very far from the central action in his romantic comedies.) In elevating comedy socially, the Restoration dramatists created a new kind of comedy where, to quote Dryden again, 'Gentlemen will now be entertained with the follies of each other', and Aristotle was reinterpreted to mean by low characters not those of humble birth or fortune, but those deficient in the manners and accomplishments of a gentleman, whose efforts to make up for this deficiency made them ridiculous. Thus was born a character who becomes a staple type in Restoration comedy, the would-be gallant or fop. When Ben Jonson asserted that the true object of comedy was 'to sport with human follies, not with crimes', he showed by his practice that the follies he had in mind were basic human weaknesses, lust, avarice, vanity and so on, and he scourged them with all the fury of his satiric wit. But the follies which the Restoration dramatists laugh at are, generally speaking, those which concern manners rather than morals, which is why Charles Lamb's phrase 'comedy of manners', in spite of the criticism it has recently received, is still a fairly apt description of one aspect of this comedy. Sir Fopling Flutter in Etherege's *Man of Mode*, for example, is only a slightly distorted mirror-image of the hero, Dorimant, and Sparkish and

1. William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, IV.