

PENGUIN BOOKS

Four English Comedies

Jonson's
Volpone

Congreve's
The Way of the World

Goldsmith's
She Stoops to Conquer

Sheridan's
The School for Scandal

Edited by J. M. Morrell



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FOUR ENGLISH COMEDIES OF THE
17TH AND 18TH CENTURIES



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P R E F A C E

English comedy would appear sufficiently rich for a choice of four representative plays to be a fairly easy task. Something by Shakespeare, naturally, Sheridan, Wilde, Shaw, and, warming to the work, a compiler could add name to name. Here the question of accessibility arises. The Importance of Being Earnest is much easier to find than a copy of, say, Congreve's Way of the World. Therefore the aim of this volume is to provide a selection of plays which are established in their own right, and have the measure of universality which will ensure an audience as delighted now as when the play appeared – perhaps even more so – but which have not as yet been collected in a single volume.

This, then, explains the omission alike of Shakespeare and more recent playwrights. Yet even now the choice is varied enough to call, perhaps, for an explanation of this particular selection. Pre-Shakespearian comedy will always be the field of the student of literature rather than the reader of plays. Shakespeare's elder contemporaries, such as Peele or Greene, have enough in common with Shakespeare to incline the general reader to dwell rather on what they lack in comparison with him than on what they possess in their own right. From the glorious summer of the seventeenth-century drama Ben Jonson chooses himself, for originality of subject, strength in treatment and a distinctive and considered view of what he intended his comedy to achieve. Volpone has been chosen as one of Jonson's finest plays; it reads most easily, and the weight of the satirical comedy gives the play a massive dignity and vigour.

Restoration comedy must be represented. It is a remarkably self-contained body of social comedy, springing from the life of an urbane and leisured part of the community. Manners and

attitudes provide the comedy, style and elegance adorn the language. Congreve's Way of the World has been chosen chiefly because the dialogue moves with such exquisite grace: 'Beauty the lover's gift? Lord, what is a lover, that it can give? Why, one makes lovers as fast as one pleases, and they live as long as one pleases, and then if one pleases one makes more.'

Moving on to the eighteenth century, a selection of writers makes itself, Sheridan and Goldsmith. Here also are plays which offer further varieties of comedy. The School for Scandal and She Stoops to Conquer both show the fun that comes from a good comic plot, which includes mistaken identities, disguises, and, when Tony Lumpkin conducts the revels and leads his mother in a circumbendibus, something very near slapstick. Sheridan's School for Scandal has been chosen rather than The Rivals, as, in addition to a good plot, it offers more variety of character and, for example in the conversation of the scandal-mongers, more brilliant dialogue. She Stoops to Conquer is distinguished by something absent in all the other plays, a hearty good humour, an exuberant sense of fun, and characters all of whom are likeable.

Though comedies, all four offer a different view of the comic theme. It is a pity that there is nothing to show English romantic comedy, but for this the reader must go to Shakespeare. The four plays selected are no chamber drama, but plays which have remained in the comic repertory. All have been on the stage within living memory, and, though Congreve or Jonson may be more in tune with our generation than Goldsmith, nevertheless it can safely be assumed that the wheel will come full circle and that each will have his turn.

The texts of all four plays have been carefully compared with the earliest printed editions, and are presented in each case without omissions of any kind, and with the stage directions of the original text. But, although the Prologues and Epilogues have

been added, it has not seemed necessary to include all those minor hors d'œuvres and savouries with which seventeenth and eighteenth century playwrights and their printers rejoiced to deck their literary dishes. Accordingly, Jonson's lengthy prose dedication of Volpone to 'the Two Famous Universities', Steele's prefatory verses to The Way of the World and Congreve's prose dedication of the play to Montague, Goldsmith's dedication to Jonson of She Stoops to Conquer, and Sheridan's 'Portrait' addressed to Mrs Crewe which appeared with the original edition of The School for Scandal, have been omitted.

Spelling and capitalization have in general been adapted to modern practice, but the original punctuation has been followed except where it is likely to cause difficulty to a reader of the present day.

Volpone, first acted in 1606, was first printed in the following year. The Way of the World, produced at the Lincoln's Inn Theatre in 1700, was first printed in the same year. The premier production of She Stoops to Conquer took place at Covent Garden in 1773; that of The School for Scandal at Drury Lane in 1777.

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VOLPONE;

or, The Fox



by BEN JONSON

THE PERSONS OF
THE PLAY

VOLPONE, *a Magnifico*
MOSCA, *his Parasite*
VOLTORE, *an Advocate*
CORBACCIO, *an old Gentleman*
CORVINO, *a Merchant*
BONARIO, *son to Corbaccio*
SIR POLITICK WOULD-BE, *a Knight*
PEREGRINE, *a Gentleman Traveller*
NANO, *a Dwarf*
CASTRONE, *an Eunuch*
ANDROGYNO, *an Hermaphrodite*
GREGE (*or Mob*)
Commandadori, *Officers of Justice*
Mercatori, *three Merchants*
Avocatori, *four Magistrates*
Notario, *the Register*
LADY WOULD-BE, *Sir Politick's Wife*
CELIA, *Corvino's Wife*
Servitori, *Servants, two Waiting-women, &c.*

SCENE - VENICE

punctuation, poetic devices
archaic style - making difficulty
of interpretation

VOLPONE; OR, THE FOX

ARGUMENT

Volpone, childless, rich, feigns sick, despairs,
Offers his state to hopes of several heirs,
Lies languishing; his parasite receives
Presents of all, assures, deludes; then weaves
Other cross-plots, which ope themselves, are told.
New tricks for safety are sought; they thrive; when, bold
Each tempts the other again, and all are sold.

PROLOGUE

Now, luck yet send us, and a little wit
Will serve to make our play hit;
(According to the palates of the season.)
Here is rhyme, not empty of reason.
This we were bid to credit, from our poet,
Whose true scope, if you would know it,
In all his poems still have been this measure,
To mix profit with your pleasure;
And not as some, whose throats their envy failing,
Cry hoarsely, all he writes is railing:
And when his plays come forth, think they can flout them,
With saying, he was a year about them.
To this there needs no lie, but this his creature,
Which was, two months since, no feature;
And though he dares give them five lives to mend it,
'Tis known, five weeks fully penn'd it,
From his own hand, without a co-adjutor,
Novince, journey-man, or tutor.

Yet thus much I can give you as a token
Of his play's worth, no eggs are broken,
Nor quaking custards with fierce teeth affrighted
Wherewith your rout are so delighted;
Nor hailes he in a gull, old ends reciting,
To stop gaps in his loose writing;
With such a deal of monstrous and forced action,
As might make Bethlem a faction:
Nor made he his play for jests stolen from each table,
But makes jests to fit his fable;
And so presents quick comedy, refined,
As best critics have designed;
The laws of time, place, persons he observeth,
From no needful rule he swerveth.
All gall and copperas from his ink he draineth,
Only a little salt remaineth,
Wherewith he'll rub your cheeks, till, red with laughter,
They shall look fresh a week after.

ACT I, SCENE I

VOLPONE, MOSCA

Volp. Good morning to the day; and next, my gold:
Open the shrine, that I may see my saint.
Hail the world's soul, and mine. More glad than is
The teeming earth to see the longed-for sun
Peep through the horns of the celestial Ram,
Am I, to view thy splendour darkening his;
That lying here, amongst my other hoards,
Showest like a flame by night; or like the day
Struck out of chaos, when all darkness fled
Unto the centre. O, thou son of Sol,
But brighter than thy father, let me kiss,
With adoration, thee, and every relic
Of sacred treasure in this blessed room.
Well did wise poets, by thy glorious name,

Title that age, which they would have the best;
 Thou being the best of things, and far transcending
 All style of joy, in children, parents, friends,
 Or any other waking dream on earth.
 Thy looks when they to Venus did ascribe,
 They should have given her twenty thousand Cupids;
 Such are thy beauties and our loves! Dear saint,
 Riches, the dumb god, that givest all men tongues,
 Thou canst do nought, and yet makest men do all
 things;

The price of souls; even hell, with thee to boot,
 Is made worth heaven! Thou art virtue, fame,
 Honour, and all things else! Who can get thee,
 He shall be noble, valiant, honest, wise –
Mos. And what he will, sir. Riches are in fortune
 A greater good, than wisdom is in nature.

Volp. True, my beloved Mosca. Yet I glory
 More in the cunning purchase of my wealth,
 Than in the glad possession, since I gain
 No common way: I use no trade, no venture;
 I wound no earth with plough-shares; fat no beasts,
 To feed the shambles; have no mills for iron,
 Oil, corn, or men, to grind them into powder;
 I blow no subtle glass; expose no ships
 To threatening of the furrow-faced sea;
 I turn no monies in the public bank,
 Nor usure private –

Mos. No, sir, nor devour
 Soft prodigals. You shall have some will swallow
 A melting heir as glibly as your Dutch
 Will pills of butter, and ne'er purge for it;
 Tear forth the fathers of poor families
 Out of their beds, and coffin them, alive,
 In some kind, clasping prison, where their bones
 May be forthcoming, when the flesh is rotten;
 But your sweet nature doth abhor these courses;
 You loathe the widow's or the orphan's tears

*suggests to
 an something
 ear TH*

*referring to new mode
 merchant's
 day*

Should wash your pavements, or their piteous cries
Ring in your roofs, and beat the air for vengeance.
Volp. Right, Mosca, I do loathe it.

Mos. And besides, sir,

You are not like the thresher that doth stand
With a huge flail, watching a heap of corn,
And, hungry, dares not taste the smallest grain,
But feeds on mallows, and such bitter herbs;
Nor like the merchant, who hath filled his vaults
With Romagna, and rich Candian wines,
Yet drinks the lees of Lombard's vinegar:
You will lie not in straw, whilst moths and worms
Feed on your sumptuous hangings and soft beds.
You know the use of riches, and dare give now
From that bright heap, to me, your poor observer,
Or to your dwarf, or your hermaphrodite,
Your eunuch, or what other household trifle
Your pleasure allows maintenance -

Volp. Hold thee, Mosca, *[Gives him money.]*

Take of my hand; thou strik'st on truth in all,
And they are envious term thee parasite.
Call forth my dwarf, my eunuch, and my fool,
And let them make me sport.

[Exit Mos.] What should I do,

But cocker up my genius, and live free
To all delights my fortune calls me to?
I have no wife, no parent, child, ally,
To give my substance to; but whom I make
Must be my heir: and this makes men observe me.
This draws new clients, daily, to my house,
Women and men of every sex and age,
That bring me presents, send me plate, coin, jewels,
With hope that when I die (which they expect
Each greedy minute) it shall then return,
Tenfold, upon them; whilst some, covetous
Above the rest, seek to engross me whole,
And counter-work the one unto the other,