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## DR. JOHNSON AND THE "INTELLECTUAL GLADIATORS"

IN THE NINTH CHAPTER of their *Theory of Literature*, Professors Wellek and Warren pose some questions about the usefulness and accuracy of literature as a reflection of the life and society from which it has emerged. Focussing particular attention on the English comedy of the Restoration period, they ask:

Was it simply a realm of cuckoldom, a fairy land of adulteries and mock marriage as Lamb believed? Or was it, as Macaulay would have us believe, a faithful picture of decadent, frivolous, and brutal aristocracy? Or should we not rather, rejecting both alternatives, see what particular social group created this art for what audience? And should we not see whether it was a naturalistic or a stylized art? Should we not be mindful of satire and irony, self-ridicule and fantasy?<sup>1</sup>

A recent and quite emphatic "yes" to that last question has been supplied by Mr. C. D. Cecil of McGill University in an article entitled "Libertine and Précieux Elements in Restoration Comedy."<sup>2</sup> The comedies of that period, Mr. Cecil argues, "are in one sense extended definitions of good behaviour couched largely in terms of bad, as all satirical and hortative works apparently must be," and he goes on to say that "every Restoration comedy that still interests us attempts to realize an ideal personality based on some compromise between libertinism and self-control, in which the best manifestations of each — intellectual vitality and physical restraint — are joined."<sup>3</sup> Mr. Cecil goes a step further even than this. While admitting that Wycherley's *The Country Wife* fluctuates between heavy moralizing and farce, he contends that "the absurdity humanises the preaching, while the sententious unclarifies the satirical point of the grotesque action."<sup>4</sup> In effect, then, Mr. Cecil appears to regard the most durable of the Restoration comedies as satirical sermons in dramatic disguise.

That this was far from Dr. Johnson's view of Restoration comedy goes almost without saying. Although he did not endorse the flat condemnations of the plays solemnly pronounced by Jeremy Collier and William Law, Johnson could not see

much of satirical or moral value in any of them. For him they were at best clever displays of wit and raillery, worth quoting from time to time in support of a light-hearted argument with David Garrick, but scarcely to be treated seriously as vehicles of moral instruction.

It is, of course, a well-known fact that Johnson distrusted the drama in general, and comedy in particular, as a satirical instrument. He is careful to define *satire* in his *Dictionary* as "a poem in which wickedness or folly is censured". "Proper satire," he continues, "is distinguished by the generality of the reflections, from a lampoon which is aimed against a particular person; but they are too frequently confounded." And yet, under *satirist*, he quotes, presumably with approval, the opinion of Granville that "Wycherly, in his writings, is the sharpest *satyr*ist of his time."

This is the more surprising when we recall that even the comedies of Shakespeare, in Johnson's view, failed to make full use of their opportunities to censure wickedness or folly. In his notes on *Twelfth Night*, for instance, he complains that "The marriage of Olivia, and the succeeding perplexity, though well enough contrived to divert on the stage, wants credibility, and fails to produce the proper instruction required in the drama, as it exhibits no just picture of life."<sup>6</sup> Again, the great fault of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was, for Johnson, "the frequency of expressions so profane, that no necessity of preserving character can justify them. There are laws of higher authority than those of criticism."<sup>7</sup> As for *As You Like It*, Johnson sternly objects that "by hastening to the end of his work Shakespeare suppressed the dialogue between the usurper and the hermit, and [so] lost an opportunity of exhibiting a moral lesson in which he might have found matter worthy of his highest powers."<sup>7</sup>

If the comic genius of Shakespeare was wanting in these didactic essentials, how much more deficient, in Johnson's eyes, were the comedies of Dryden, Congreve, Etherege, Wycherley, and Vanbrugh. It is significant that, with the exception of Dryden, there is a dearth of comment on these writers, both in Boswell's *Life* and within the canon of Johnson's writings. There is no doubt that Johnson had very little interest in the theory of comedy, and that the prevailing sentimental comedy which flourished on the stage in his day failed to capture his imagination.<sup>8</sup> It is not surprising, then, that he had even less interest in the kind of comedy in which the satire was merely incidental to, and often submerged by, the themes of lividity and intrigue, as in the Restoration plays.<sup>9</sup>

The fact that there was satire, some of it of a very powerful kind, in these "superannuated" comedies (as Mrs. Thrale called them) seems to have escaped the

notice of many of Johnson's contemporaries. If they read the plays at all, they read them with the air of lubricious knowingness that one sometimes finds in students who profess an antiquarian interest in Oscar Wilde or the pre-Raphaelites, and who assume that everyone in the 1890's comported himself like Toulouse-Lautrec. In other words, they saw the Restoration wits as a Lost Generation, and the works of Wycherley and company as documented decadence. But this, as we know, was not the whole story. Several of the Restoration dramatists themselves had complained, at the time of Jeremy Collier's attack in 1698 and later, that their motives had been misunderstood, and that their work had been intended to edify as well as to entertain. Even Vanbrugh, whose sense of moral obligation was never very strong, claimed in his *Short Vindication*, in answer to Collier, that the business of comedy was "to show people what they should do, by representing them on the stage doing what they should not."<sup>10</sup> Though it smacks of rationalization, this statement appears to acknowledge the traditional responsibility of the satirist to measure the aberration of the actual from the ideal. Colley Cibber, going a step further, carried the defence of his art right into the dialogue of his play, *The Careless Husband*, which was presented at Drury Lane in 1704. Here he makes an oblique attack on Collier's *Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage*:

- Lady Betty.* Lampoons and Plays, Madam, are only things to be laughed at.  
*Lord Morelove.* Plays now indeed one need not be so much afraid of, for, since the late short-sighted View of 'em, Vice may go on and prosper, the Sage hardly dare show a Vicious Person speaking like himself, for fear of being call'd Profane for exposing him.  
*Lady Easy.* 'Tis hard indeed, when People won't distinguish between what's meant for Contempt, and what for Example.<sup>11</sup>

The point that Lady Easy makes here is a good one, for much of the energy of the eighteenth-century dramatists had now to be directed at making the distinction between the Contemptible and the Exemplary quite unequivocal. The resultant loss of subtlety and satirical power in English drama is clearly demonstrated in such things as the Prologue to Steele's last play, *The Conscious Lovers*, where the audience is asked to co-operate in the task of reforming the stage:

Your Aid most humbly sought, then Britons lend,  
 And Lib'ral Mirth like Lib'ral Men, defend.  
 No more let Ribaldry, with Licence writ,  
 Usurp the Name of Eloquence or Wit;  
 No more let lawless Farce uncensur'd go,  
 The lewd dull Gleanings of a *Smithfield Show*.

'Tis yours, with Breeding to refine the Age,  
To Chasten Wit, and Moralize the Stage.<sup>12</sup>

In spite of this forbidding injunction, Steele's play was a great success, but the subsequent history of eighteenth-century comedy is a dismal chronicle of the destruction wrought by such self-conscious moralization. As Professor Bonamy Dobrée has said, "to load aesthetics with directly stated morals is to deprive it of its wings. For the method of art is indirect. It produces its ultimate effect by first inducing a mood of detachment."<sup>13</sup> Deprived of its wings, the comic spirit "fled to farce", and the theatre managers, like John Rich of Covent Garden, were forced to revive the plays of Congreve in the 1730's for want of new material. It is not surprising that the rare comic talents of Fielding, so constricted by the farces which the times compelled him to write, were directed, during the following decade, into the high comedy of his novels.

The second wave of Congreve's popularity rose, then, out of the Dead Sea of necessity. It reached its crest during the hey-day of David Garrick and Peg Woffington, and much of its force was later carried into the comedies of Goldsmith and Sheridan. According to Garrick's most recent biographer, Carola Oman, *The Old Bachelor*, *Love for Love* and *The Way of the World* were among the most prominent items in his repertory, and one of his anonymous admirers is recorded as taking him gently to task for overacting the part of Fondlewife on December 3, 1742.<sup>14</sup>

Long before this, however, Johnson had been well acquainted with the plays of Congreve. As a boy of sixteen he had stayed at Pedmore for six months with his spirited cousin, Cornelius Ford, a great admirer of Congreve and a habitué of the London theatres. In many ways Ford, who had a not wholly undeserved reputation as a dissipated man of wit, was the ideal person to introduce the young Johnson to the work of the Restoration dramatist and to regale him with first-hand accounts of the performance of his plays.<sup>15</sup> Whatever impression this made upon him was no doubt reinforced in the 1740's when he acquired an intimate knowledge of the London theatre for himself and attended such performances of Garrick as the one mentioned above. At any rate, his famous Prologue, written for the occasion of the opening of Garrick's first season as manager of Drury Lane (September 15, 1747), contains a criticism of the low morality of the Restoration playwrights, and in much the same vein as the Prologue to Steele's *The Conscious Lovers* written a quarter of a century previously, proceeds to shame the audience into demanding something better:

Ah! let not Censure term our Fate our Choice,  
The Stage but echoes back the publick Voice.

The Drama's Laws the Drama's Patrons give,  
And we that live to please, must please to live.

What follows seems to combine the views of Garrick on the need for greater naturalism in the acting with those of Johnson on the use of drama as a source of moral instruction:

'Tis yours this Night to bid the Reign commence  
Of rescu'd Nature, and reviving Sense;  
To chase the Charms of Sound, the Pomp of Show,  
For useful Mirth, and salutary Woe;  
Bid scenic Virtue form the rising Age,  
And Truth diffuse her Radiance from the Stage.<sup>16</sup>

But Johnson's hopes for the moral improvement of the theatre were never realized. As he grew older, in fact, he became more and more peevish in his criticisms of the stage in general and of the personal failings of actors like Garrick in particular. This querulous attitude was symptomatic of a deep-seated prejudice against the acting profession as a whole, and it should be kept in mind when we consider Johnson's few recorded criticisms of the Restoration plays. For one thing, it accounts in part for the irritable manner he adopts in his discussion of Dryden's dramatic work in the *Lives of the Poets* where he says,

I wish that there were no necessity of following the progress of his theatrical fame, or tracing the meanders of his mind through the whole series of his dramattick performances; it will be fit however to enumerate them, and to take special notice of those that are distinguished by any peculiarity intrinsick or concomitant; for the composition and fate of eight and twenty dramas include too much of a poetical life to be omitted.<sup>17</sup>

His grudge against the tribe of dramatists also accounts in some ways for Johnson's rather mixed verdict on Congreve's comedies in the same work. *The Old Bachelor* was composed, he says, "with great elaborateness of dialogue, and incessant ambition of wit." The dialogue is "one constant reciprocation of conceits, or dash of wit, in which nothing flows necessarily from the occasion, or is dictated by nature." The characters he finds "either fictitious and artificial, as those of *Heartwell* and the Ladies; or easy and common, as *Wittol* a tame idiot, *Bluff* a swaggering coward, and *Fondlewife* a jealous Puritan; and the catastrophe arises from a mistake not very probably produced by marrying a woman in a mask." "Yet," he continues, "his gay comedy, when all these deductions are made, will still remain the work of very powerful and fertile faculties: the dialogue is quick and sparkling, the incidents such as seize the attention, and the wit so exuberant that it o'er-informs its instrument."

He praises *Love for Love* as "a comedy of nearer alliance to life, and exhibiting more real manners" than *The Double Dealer*, which he barely mentions, and *The Old Batchelor*. As for Congreve's final play, *The Way of the World*, Johnson is content to record that it was received with so little favour that Congreve decided to give up writing for the stage.<sup>18</sup>

So far, this *Life of Congreve* bears all the characteristics of one of Johnson's pot-boilers; but he apparently considered it one of the best of his "little lives",<sup>19</sup> as he called them, and the justification for his pride probably lies in the summing-up, in which he makes his most valuable critical remarks:

Congreve has merit of the highest kind; he is an original writer, who borrowed neither the models of his plot, nor the manner of his dialogue. Of his plays I cannot speak distinctly; for since I inspected them many years have passed; but what remains upon my memory is, that his characters are commonly fictitious and artificial, with very little of nature, and not much of life. He formed a peculiar idea of comick excellence, which he supposed to consist in gay remarks and unexpected answers; but that which he endeavoured, he seldom failed of performing. His scenes exhibit not much of humour, imagery, or passion; his personages are a kind of intellectual gladiators; every sentence is to ward or strike; the contest of smartness is never intermitted; his wit is a meteor playing to and fro with alternate coruscations. His comedies have therefore, in some degree, the operation of tragedies; they surprise rather than divert, and raise admiration oftener than merriment. But they are works of a mind replete with images, and quick in combination.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, Johnson gives Congreve full marks for originality and cleverness of repartee, but none at all for naturalness and truth to life. His comedies failed to excite laughter or provide comic pleasure. They are exercises of a particular kind of wit that Johnson considered inappropriate to comedy, a cynical smartness that disturbed without amusing and shocked without pleasing. If he noticed that Congreve himself parodied and satirized this affected wit in many of his characters, particularly in *The Way of the World*, he made no mention of the fact. It is clear that, for him, the Restoration comedy of manners was too remote from real life to make such satire effective.

More significantly, Johnson is criticizing Congreve, by implication, for his confusion of genres: for using comedy as the vehicle for what the critic Dennis had called "Tragick Satire".<sup>21</sup> The intellectual gladiators of the court of Charles II were being given a Juvenalian rather than a Horatian function, and this, in Johnson's view, was stretching the proper limits of comedy, the primary business of which was to please and not to preach, although the truly effective satirist could do both. Once

again, he is expressing his deep-rooted belief that the only firm foundation for critical judgment is not art but nature.

Much of what Johnson had to say about the metaphysical poets in his celebrated *Life of Cowley* has a certain relevance here. These poets, he complained, do not move the passions, because they are concerned with the remoter feelings and with superficialities. Their wit is a tissue of "slender conceits and laboured particularities," in which "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together."<sup>22</sup> Being "wholly employed on something unexpected and surprising, they had no regard to that uniformity of sentiment which enables us to conceive and to excite the pains and the pleasures of other minds: they never enquired what, on any occasion, they should have said or done; but wrote rather as beholders than partakers of human nature. . . ."<sup>23</sup> Congreve's faults are catalogued in similar terms. His wit is described as "a meteor playing to and fro with alternate coruscations." Here Johnson is using *wit* in the ninth sense which he gives in the *Dictionary*—"contrivance, stratagem, invention, ingenuity," rather than in the second sense of "imagination, quickness of fancy," although it incorporates some of that too. It has something in common also with his much-discussed definition of wit in the *Life of Cowley* as the combining and associative power of the imagination, the lightning ability to achieve the *discordia concors*, the perception of similitude in dissimilar.<sup>24</sup> Like the metaphysical poets, Congreve "had more than enough" of this kind of wit, which he paraded by making his characters intellectual gladiators, using their witticisms and far-fetched conceits as weapons both to ward and strike in an incessant battle for superiority in dialogue that frequently degenerated into pointless foolery or epigrammatic debate.

This complaint about the overloading of wit is, of course, only one symptom of Johnson's discomfort with the work of the Restoration playwrights as a whole. Moreover, as Mrs. Thrale tells us, for all his aggressiveness and asperity in common conversation, "nobody had a more just aversion to general satire" than Johnson.<sup>25</sup> The truth of this observation is borne out by the fact that he rarely applauds satire, as such, in his critical writings. He admires Pope's *Rape of the Lock* as "the most exquisite example of ludicrous poetry",<sup>26</sup> not primarily as a satire, and, while admitting that "satirical criticism may be considered as useful when it rectifies error and improves judgement", he expresses serious doubts about the morality of Pope's intentions in writing the *Dunciad*.<sup>27</sup> Of the satires of Swift he has little to say in approval, either in writing or in conversation, and when Boswell attempts to defend the author of *Gulliver's Travels* Johnson dismisses his arguments with characteris-

vehemence.<sup>28</sup> By the same token, his comments on the satirical aspects of Dryden's work are quite unenthusiastic.<sup>29</sup>

There is some justification for the view, then, that Johnson was averse to comic satire in general as a method of moral criticism, and quite openly critical of drama that was used either as a vehicle for such satire or as a platform for the exhibition of wit, however brilliant. In this, as in many other respects, he was anticipating the reaction of the Romantic critics to the satirical mode. There is, for instance, in Leigh Hunt's verdict on Congreve a certain Johnsonian emphasis:

The plays of Congreve will not help [human] advancement except inasmuch as their narrow views contradict worse bigotries, and serve to neutralize both. His love is spare and sorry; his belief in nothing, abundant; the whole set but a mass of wit, and sarcasm, and fine writing; — of brilliant exposures of hollowness, and of plots so over-ingenious as to become perplexing and tiresome.<sup>30</sup>

And Lamb, writing on "The Artificial Comedy of the Last Century", points out that

the Fainalls and the Mirabels, the Dorimants and the Lady Touchwoods, in their own sphere do not offend any moral sense; in fact, they do not appeal to it at all . . . . The great art of Congreve is especially shown in this, that he has entirely excluded from his scenes . . . not only anything like a faultless character, but any pretensions to goodness or good feelings whatsoever . . . . He has spread a privation of moral light, I will call it, rather than by the ugly name of palpable darkness, over his creations; and his shadows lie before you without distinction or preference.<sup>31</sup>

Of these shortcomings of Congreve, Johnson was less censorious and more tolerant than either Hunt or Lamb, although he would have agreed with them both in the essential core of their judgment. His whole view of the matter is epitomized in a great passage from another context, in which he observes that "Literature is a kind of intellectual light, which, like the light of the sun, may sometimes enable us to see what we do not like; but who would wish to escape unpleasing objects, by condemning himself to perpetual darkness?"<sup>32</sup>

#### NOTES

1. R. Wellek and A. Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1956), p. 93.
2. *Essays in Criticism*, Vol. IX, No. 3 (July, 1959), pp. 239-253.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 240-243.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 253.
5. W. Raleigh, *Johnson on Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1908), p. 93.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

8. On this point, see R. Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism* (New Haven, 1955), Vol. I, pp. 119-120.
9. For a modern endorsement of this view, see J. Sutherland, *English Satire* (Cambridge, 1958), p. 142.
10. See B. Dobrée, *English Literature in the Early Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1959), p. 227.
11. Cf. Congreve, *The Way of the World*, Act III, Sc. iv. ll. 25-27.
12. *Eighteenth Century Comedy*, ed. W. D. Taylor (Everyman ed., Oxford, 1929), p. 107.
13. Dobrée, p. 229.
14. C. Oman, *David Garrick* (London, 1958), p. 61.
15. For an account of Ford's influence on Johnson, see J. L. Clifford, *The Young Sam Johnson* (New York, 1955), pp. 80-93.
16. *The Poems of Samuel Johnson*, ed. D. N. Smith and E. L. McAdam, Jr. (Oxford, 1941), p. 49.
17. *Lives of the English Poets*, World's Classics ed., Vol. I, p. 246.
18. *Lives*, Vol. II, p. 23 ff.
19. *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford, 1952), Vol. II, p. 362 (No. 672). See also *Thraliana*, ed. K. C. Balderston (Oxford, 1951), Vol. I, p. 436 n. 5.
20. *Lives*, Vol. II, p. 31.
21. See discussion of this in I. Jack, *Augustan Satire* (Oxford, 1952), p. 137.
22. *Lives*, Vol. I, p. 14.
23. *Lives*, Vol. I, p. 15.
24. *Lives*, Vol. I, p. 14. Two interesting discussions of Johnson's definitions of wit are to be found in J. Hagstrum, *Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism* (Minneapolis, 1952), Ch. VIII, and in W. R. Keast, "Johnson's Criticism of the Metaphysical Poets," *Journal of English Literary History* (March, 1950), pp. 59-70, reprinted in *Eighteenth Century Literature*, ed. J. L. Clifford (New York, 1959), pp. 300-310. The following are a few examples, which I have selected at random, of "metaphysical" wit in the plays of Congreve:

*Sir Joseph Wittol* . . . Sir, I most submissively implore your Pardon for my Transgression of Ingratitude and Omission; having my intire Dependance, Sit upon the superfluity of your Goodness, which, like an Inundation will, I hope, totally immerge the Recollection of my Error, and leave me floating in your Sight, upon the full blown Bladders of Repentance — by the help of which, I shall once more hope to swim into your favour. (*The Old Batchelor*, II, i).

*Vainlove* . . . As Love is a Deity, he must be serv'd by Prayer.

*Belinda*. O Gad, would you would all pray to Love then, and let us alone.

*Vainlove*. You are the Temples of Love, and 'tis through you, our Devotion must be convey'd. (*Ibid.*, II, vii).

*Heartwell* . . . Is not this Silvia's House, the cave of that Enchantress, and which consequently I ought to shun as I would infection? To enter here, is to put on the envenom'd Shirt, to run into the Embraces of a Fever, and in some raving

Fit, be led to plunge my self into that more consuming Fire, a Woman's Arms. . . . (Later). Well, why do you not move? Feet do your Office — not one Inch; no, foregad I'm caught — There stands my North, and thither my Needle points. . . . (*Ibid.*, III, ii).

*Valentine*. We are the Twin-Stars [i.e. Valentine and his brother Ben], and cannot shine in one Sphere; when he rises I must set. . . . (*Love for Love*, III, iv).

*Foresight* (looking in the mirror). I do not see any Revolution here; — Me-thinks I look with a serene and benign aspect — pale, a little pale — but the Roses of these Checks have been gather'd many Years. . . . (*Ibid.*, III, xii).

25. *Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson by Hesther Lynch Piozzi*, ed. S. C. Roberts (Cambridge, 1932), p. 73.
26. *Lives*, Vol. II, p. 246.
27. *Lives*, Vol. II, pp. 337-338.
28. *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. G. B. Hill and L. F. Powell (Oxford, 1934), Vol. II, p. 319.
29. *Lives*, Vol. I, p. 320 ff.
30. Preface to *The Dramatic Works of Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh and Farquhar* (London, 1860), p. xxviii.
31. *Essays of Elia*, First Series (London, 1889), p. 184.
32. "A Project for the Employment of Authors", *The Works of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (Oxford, 1825), Vol. V, p. 356. For the philosophical implications of this statement, see W. J. Bate, *The Achievement of Samuel Johnson* (New York, 1955), pp. 232-233.