

Review Article

Restoration Comedy Once Again

Restoration Comedy has been the subject of adverse criticism on moral grounds ever since it appeared—so much so that Congreve and Farquhar felt obliged to justify themselves in essays, whereas Wycherley worked his defence into one of his plays. In his *Plain Dealer*, Wycherley has the depraved Olivia express her indignation at the “clandestine obscenity” in *The Country Wife*, and the virtuous Eliza make a contrast between “artificial modesty” and “real virtue”, implying that only those with an already nasty mind will see the bawdiness of the China scene. Even before Jeremy Collier’s bludgeoning of Dryden and his contemporaries for portraying a “fine Gentleman” as “a fine Whoring, Swearing, Smutty, Atheistical Man” and for depicting “Libertinism and Profaneness, Dressing, Idleness, and Gallantry” as the only “valuable Qualities”, there had been attacks on the immorality of the stage. Dryden, one of the offenders, had admitted in 1686 (“To the Pious Memory of the Accomplished Young Lady, Mrs. Anne Killigrew”) that he and his fellow dramatists were guilty of using their poetic gifts in a bad cause:

O Gracious God! How far have we
Prophan'd thy Heav'nly Gift of Poesy!
Made prostitute and profligate the Muse,
Debas'd to each obscene and impious use,
Whose Harmony was first ordain'd Above.
For Tongues of Angels and for Hymns of Love!
Oh wretched We! why were we hurry'd down
This lubrique and adult'rate age
(Nay, added fat Pollutions of our own)
T'increase the steaming Ordures of the Stage?

The Earl of Mulgrave’s attack on Rochester’s *Valentian* as “bawdry barefac’d” drew a reply from Robert Wolseley in 1685 based on the rejection of moral content as the standard by which a work of art was to be judged. He admits that “Bawdry alone, that is, obscene words thrown out at random . . . is as poor a Pretence to Wit as ’tis to good Manners”, but the ethical test is not the true test of art: “It never yet came into any man’s Head who pretended to be a Critick, except this Essayer’s [Mulgrave], that the Wit of a Poet was to be measur’d by the Worth of his Subject The manner of

treating his Subject has been hitherto thought the true Text, for as an ill Poet will depress and disgrace the highest, so a good one will raise and dignify the lowest."

Wolseley's plea went quite unheeded, and Collier's vigorous, indignant, well-documented analysis of the moral abuses of the stage set a pattern for criticism of Restoration comedy, a pattern that succeeding criticism has not escaped. Among the host of writers who objected to the immorality and profaneness of the Restoration stage we find Addison, Macaulay, Thackeray and Meredith, Macaulay's denunciation being perhaps the best known. To him "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 and 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 disgraceful a fault as its singularly inhuman spirit."

Some admirers of the wit and sparkle of the plays justified their tastes by denying the realism of the plays. Charles Lamb, the best-known of such defenders, describes the world of Restoration comedy as a sort of "fairy-land", inhabited by "a chaotic people" with none of the ordinary restraints, none of the ordinary values. Such fairyland characters, immersed in their "undivided pursuit of lawless gallantry", break no laws because in their world there are no laws. The spectators, caught up in the imaginary world in which morality no longer has meaning, can accept the actions of the characters as those of inhabitants of another world and so can enjoy the plays without violating their own moral standards. Other critics can accept the undoubted frankness of the plays by stressing them as realistic portrayals of the audience for which the playwrights wrote—emphasizing the "naturalism, libertinism and skepticism" of Restoration comedy as an unabashed reflection of an essentially cynical age. Others see the plays, especially those of Wycherley and Congreve, as satirical comments on the manners and morals of an age. One critic at least (Montague Summers) refuses to admit that there is any real immorality at all—even defending such a coarse and disgusting play as Thomas Killigrew's *The Parson's Wedding* from the charge of immorality, tolerantly describing it as "broadly humorous, occasionally coarse, and consummately clever".

It is interesting to notice that even Macaulay accepted the best of the plays as being well written; in fact, the very success of the dramatists is for him a cause for alarm: "The question is simply, whether a man of genius, who constantly and systematically endeavours to make this sort of character attractive, by uniting it with beauty, grace, dignity, spirit, a high social position, popularity, literature, wit, taste, knowledge of the world, brilliant success in every undertaking, does or does not make an ill use of his powers". The lack of seriousness of purpose, or even worse the perversion of purpose, that critics found in the Restoration plays was not denied by people like Dobrée, Kathleen Lynch, and John Palmer, who discovered that Congreve and Wycherley, at any rate, were writing their witty, polished, sparkling, effective comedies with some serious purpose: and so the immorality that few dared to deny could be made acceptable.

With the influential essay of L. C. Knights, "Restoration Comedy: The Reality and the Myth", however, another charge appeared: "The criticism that defenders of Restoration comedy need to answer is not that the comedies are 'immoral', but that they are trivial, gross and dull." The much-admired wit of Congreve, for example, is compared unfavourably with the sinewy, racy urbanity of Lord Halifax. "The attempt to rationalize sexual relationships" that Dobrée had seen in the plays is denied because the plays are "entirely dominated by a narrow set of conventions" too trivial in themselves to lead to any serious re-evaluation of sexual relations.

Norman N. Holland's book¹ is a spirited defence of Congreve, Wycherley, and Etherege from such charges as those made by Knights. To Holland, Restoration comedy is based consistently on a serious examination of the "discrepancy between 'appearance' and 'nature', and the theme is distinctly and specially a Restoration theme" (p. 4). All the mistaken identities, affectations, self-deceptions and disguises that abound in the plays are illustrative of the dramatists' concern with an idea that dominated Restoration life: "The separation of appearance from nature was a central concept in Restoration manners, morals, pranks, politics, science, and literary and linguistic theory. Clothing, cosmetics, manners, social rules, similitudes, disguise, deception, affectation, dissimulations, reputations (the stuff of Restoration comedies) all acquired special meaning in the Restoration, just as clockwork devices did in the eighteenth century, growing things in the nineteenth, or myths and symbols in our own" (p. 57). For an understanding and appreciation of the plays it is essential to keep in mind that the new climate of opinion stressed the separation of primary and secondary qualities, the writers expressing their awareness of the "cosmic disguise" through some form of comic disguise.

The first half of the book stresses the seriousness of purpose of the dramatists, showing that the charge of triviality is quite unwarranted. But the old challenge of immorality does not go unanswered. In the plays there is what Holland calls a "right-way-wrong-way technique": "The playwright puts onstage the wrong way or, in Dryden's phrase, 'the representation of deformity'. The audience laughs at it, and from their own laughter, they infer a right way 'to amend what is ridiculous'" (p. 115). Milton's Adam, "The hero of the greatest of Restoration comedies", experiences an "expansion through redemption on the earthly level" in much the same way as the hero of *The Man of Mode*, who "is redeemed and released [from the limitations of his own senses] by love" (p. 126).

There are individual chapters dealing with each of the eleven comedies, in which the discussion follows the general position taken by the author, as briefly outlined above. Some of the critiques are stimulating and provocative, although the over-enthusiasm for

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1. *The First Modern Comedies: The Significance of Etherege, Wycherley, and Congreve*. By Norman N. Holland. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press [Toronto: S. J. Reginald Saunders], 1959. Pp. iv, 274. \$7.25.

the comedy as essentially serious expressions of the Restoration version of the human predicament often leads to what seem ridiculous interpretations. When the crotchety, tyrannical, self-deceived and selfish Lady Wishfort looks at herself and complains "I look like an old peel'd Wall", the following amplification of the significance of the speech is given: "She is a wall in that she tries to enforce a separation between appearance and nature, not only for herself but for those under her influence. She is a wall, too, in that she stands as an obstacle to the natural progress of passions. The peeling suggests not just the failure of her cosmetics, but that such a wall is bound to decay and crumble. Thus, Lady Wishfort acts as a wall with respect to both the major actions of the play, the unraveling of appearances from nature and the emancipating of the younger group" (p. 186).

It is interesting to note that the comedies of the period are to be taken seriously because "It would be surprising if these comedies did not share in the almost magical energies of the age" (p. 45), whereas heroic drama, "one of the silliest creations of the human mind" (p. 13), remained popular in the Restoration period, "the most depraved period in English social history", because of "the low acumen of the Restoration audience" (p. 19).

Mr. Holland courageously points out in his chapter "The Critical Failure" that "the bibliography in this field is mountainous, but the mountain has brought forth a mouse" (p. 209). If his contribution to the mountain of criticism has produced another mouse, it at least belongs to the species Gully Jimson labels "Ferocissimouse".

John Loftis in a very different type of book² examines the relationship between drama and society, noting that changes in society preceded a corresponding change in the comic atmosphere, so that characters representing the Restoration writer's satirical view of the merchant continue to appear on stage even after the London merchant had become a highly respected personage. He traces the development of sentimental comedy in terms of social change, relating dramatic criticism to new social patterns: "The criticism assumed two main patterns: one was moralistic, the criticism of Jeremy Collier and his allies, who as a group were sympathetic to the business community; the other was aesthetic, the criticism of Pope in the *Dunciad* and of the many writers in agreement with him on artistic principles, who were largely hostile to the business community and what it represented" (p. 24). As the eighteenth century progressed, the dramatic representatives of the merchants became more sympathetic and rural England lost much of its distastefulness. Steele, for example, in *The Conscious Lovers* (1722) "exploits the theme of social rivalry; he insists on it through repeated allusion; yet he does so with a reversal in satirical intent from that evident in the plays of Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar" (p. 84). Another reason for the change in comedy that Loftis emphasizes is the emerg-

2. *Comedy and Society from Congreve to Fielding*. By John Loftis. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959. Pp. ix, 154. \$4.00.

ence of a number of Whig dramatists with "Whiggish views in the appreciative portrayal of merchants" (p. 86).

Side by side with the rising middle class, and no doubt affected by it, is the new "benevolistic ethical theory" that led to sentimentalism and to a comedy (although Loftis rejects the term "sentimental comedy") in which sentimentalism was an important feature. For his many examples, Loftis draws upon both well-known and now forgotten plays, using the second-class dramatists to point out, among other things, that it is "far easier to be derivative than to be original . . . The great Restoration dramatists had seen businessmen as avaricious, hypocritical, and lecherous fools; for their less imaginative successor this was enough" (p. 82). This book has no startling interpretations, nothing very new to offer in the way of criticism, but it is a thorough, very well-documented examination of the disappearance of the Restoration comic tradition of "wittily ironic social criticism and the interactions of a group of traditional characters, character relationships and plot situations" (p. 3).

These two books undoubtedly add to an appreciation of Restoration comedy as a literary genre closely tied to a society that had a peculiar attitude to life. The frankly aristocratic approach of the dramatists led to an open imitation of the morals and manners of the court of The Merry Monarch. With a new court and a new audience the comedy changed, and not for the better. It is also worthy of note that, with Holland at any rate, the immorality of the plays calls for an explanation and a justification. But this places him with his predecessors. Even those critics who try to use the aesthetic approach, at least to the plays of Wycherley, seem at some pains to explain away the bawdiness either as a satiric slash at the society of which Wycherley was very much a part or as a serious expression of the "philosophy" of that society. It is now no longer true that, as Macaulay said, "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." The China scene is quoted, analysed, and praised for its vigour, its satire, its serious intention, anything to justify the scene in spite of its lewd and leering atmosphere. But perhaps this scene (like other scenes from those plays in which the bawdiness is wittily and skilfully presented) is effective largely because the dramatists boldly used some very old and bawdy jokes. Does Restoration comedy, in fact, still appeal partly *because* of its immorality rather than in spite of it? After all, Swift, Pope, Fielding, Sterne, and Smollett, to name only a few relatively close contemporaries, made good use of sexual situations, verbal innuendo and thinly veiled obscenity for comic purposes, sometimes but not always related to the general theme of the works in which they are found. Is it true to say that "a defence of Restoration comedy must demonstrate that its sex jokes have a serious social function"? Does the comic effect of the sex jokes need to be justified any more than the laughter aroused by any other jokes that have their basis in human behaviour? Does the comic always need to have a serious social function or is there a place for comedy that does little more than arouse laughter—even rather bawdy laughter—at the antics of the

pretentious, often ridiculous animal called man? Charles Lamb, rather apologetically it is true, confessed "I feel the better always for the perusal of one of Congreve's—nay, why should I not add even of Wycherley's—comedies. I am the gayer at least for it." Is there perhaps the fulfilment of some "serious social function" if a Restoration play, boldly bawdy and frankly licentious though it be, has the artistic qualities that could affect Lamb in the way he describes? "I come back to my cage and my restraint the fresher and more healthy for it."

There is no need, of course, to deny the ironic social criticism, of Wycherley and Congreve especially, that gives to *The Country Wife* and *The Way of the World* a level of meaning beneath the witty conversations and amorous intrigues of the sensual heroes; neither, I suggest, is there any need to deny that the bawdiness of the plays has a comic value in itself, not entirely devoid of instruction.

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