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The Vogue of the Restoration Comedy of Manners and George Etherage's The Man of Mode; or, Sir Fopling Flutter

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The Comedy of manners is one of the main staples of the Restoration drama. It flourished side by side with the heroic tragedy, the blank verse tragedy, the opera, the farce and the comedy of humours. Each type has its own features which might be traced back to earlier sources. Thus the comedy of manners is a blend of ingredients whose "source lies in the endeavours of Jonson in the comedy of humours and in those of Fletcher in the comedy of intrigue,"[1] as Allardyce Nicoll remarks. We can also add the influence of James Shirley on the popularity of the comedy of manners, especially in his two plays ***Hyde Park*** (1632) and ***The Lady of Pleasure*** (1635). Yet the influence of these two foregoing plays are as effective on the Restoration

comedy of manners as that of John Fletcher's ***The Wild Goose Chase*** (1621). Besides the national influence the comedy of manners breathes of, it has as well its foreign impact form France especially in its imitation of the plays written by Moliere, master of the French comedy. Thus Allardyce Nicoll stresses this foreign influence by saying: "Yet much of what we know as the comedy of manners would have remained unwritten, or would have been written in a different style, had the English theatre not possessed Moliere for a guide and a model."[2]

The major playwrights who wrote the comedies of manners during the Restoration and a little later than that are William Wycherley, who is famous for his plays ***The Country Wife*** (1675) and ***The Plain Dealer*** (1677); William Congreve, who is famous for ***Love for Love*** (1695) and ***The Way of the World*** (1700); George Etherage, who wrote ***The Man of Mode; or, Sir Fopling Flutter*** (1676); John Vanbrugh, who is famous for ***The Provoked Wife*** (1697) and ***The Relapse*** (1697); and George Farquhar whose best play is ***The Beaux' Stratagem*** (1707).

The comedy of manners was revived in the last quarter of the eighteenth century by Richard Brinsley Sheridan who wrote ***The Rivals*** (1775) and ***The School for Scandal*** (1777). Again its features appeared in the nineteenth century, especially in Dion Boucicault's ***London Assurance*** (1841) and Oscar Wilde's ***The Importance of Being Earnest*** (1895). It was revived as well in the twentieth century by such playwrights as William Somerset Maugham and Noel Coward. The best well-known comedies of manners written by W. Somerset Maugham are: ***Our Betters*** (1917), ***The Circle*** (1922) and ***The Constant Wife*** (1927). Noel Coward's comedies of manners are ***The Young Idea*** (1921), ***The Vortex*** (1924), ***The Rat Trap*** (1924), ***Easy Virtue*** (1925) and ***Blithe Spirit*** (1941).

Generally speaking, most of the characters and spectators of the Restoration comedy of manners are the sophisticated but vicious people of the salons and chocolate houses. They are capable of understanding and making its witty repartees, and also expressing the social manners and follies it depicts. Thus this type of comedy does not appeal to all social slices of society,

and that is why it sometimes looks exaggerated and artificial. It exposes the human follies and unfamiliar manners. It tries to convince the spectator that the characters are rather forced by society in their behviour. Most of the comedies of manners have little to do with romantic themes, and they generally show marriage as debased and humbug. There is a lot of affectation and selfishness in them. Most of the characters are depicted as self-centred, affected and having insatiable appetites for sex and money. Thus the fops, pretenders, self-deceivers and old people thinking they are still youthful are either punished or made the butts of ridicule in these plays.

Accordingly the Restoration comedy of manners shounds in intrigues and humour, but there is no farce or low comedy in it. Its audience does not truly represent the whole society, as it is only pleasure loving devoted to wine, sex, singing, seduction and adultery. Nothing good was expected from such people who busied themselves in these things while their king, Charles II, was himself a libertine. In addition, they found great amusement in the epigrams and short witty

retorts called repartees which they both heard uttered by the characters on stage, if they had not themselves practised where they got together at the salons. Hence "the drama could scarcely fail to be witty under the patronage of the king who 'never said a foolish thing nor did a wise one,'"[3] as Ashely H. Thorndike maintains.

Nevertheless the Restoration comedies of manners were not totally against the age in which they flourished and whose manners they exposed; otherwise they would have disappeared and not publicaly and widely produced then. "It is probably true," as Oscar G. Brockett remarks, "that these plays waver between accepting and satirizing the age."[4]

It is true that the Puritan abhorred these plays and many middle-class people found them vulgar and immoral. We must always remember that the audience of these plays mainly consists of courtiers, aristocrats, upper classes and the liberal side of the middle class. King Charles II himself favoured and encouraged these plays, whose characters are mostly aristocrats unlike those of Ben Jonson's who were taken from all classes.

It is no wonder that when the Puritan influence revived at the end of the seventeenth century, especially when the rising middle-class people started attending the theatres and Charles II was no longer the king, there were lots of severe attacks on the comedy of manners for being depraved and indecent. Jeremy Collier's *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (1698) is a good example of those attacks. Thus the comedy of manners gave way to the sentimental drama which flourished during most of the eighteenth century. The sentimental drama expresses the principles and ideals of the middle class. This sentimental element is traced even in some of the comedies of manners written a little before or after the eighteenth century, as in the case of George Farquhar's *The Beaux' Stratagem* (1707).

If the Elizabethan comedy is full of romantic incidents, the Restoration comedy of manners teams with watchfulness, intrigues and witty dialogues, or as Ashely H. Thorndike puts it: "Restoration comedy is . . . no longer like the Elizabethan, a story-telling drama; it is still a comedy of incidents, tricks and mistakes, but

coloured by an observation of society."[5] What is more, it is "the reflection of the manners of the new age,"[6] as Thorndike stresses.

The best representative of the Restoration comedy of manners is william Congreve (1670-1729), but it is George Etherage (1634-1691) who is its pioneer. He himself was a libertine who led a gay life and he was also a courtier and politician who knew everything good and bad about his time. It is no wonder why his play ***The Man of Mode; or, Sir Fopling Flutter*** (henceforth ***The Man of Mode***) reflects most of the manners of his age.

The title of the play is rather misleading as it is only concerned with Sir Fopling Flutter, while in fact the main plot of the play has much to do with Dorimant and little with the title hero. Moreover, Sir Fopling is not an influential character in the play. He is a blockhead representing the man of mode. His job is to make people laugh at him, as he is the butt of ridicule.

We might say then that the play contains three plots. The main plot is concerned with Dorimant while the other two plots are subordinate plots, one of which is

concerned with Sir Fopling and the other one has something to do with the affairs and subsequent marriage between Emilia and Young Bellair.

In all these three plots we have a clear-cut picture of the social life during the Restoration period. Etherage preferred to shed a light on the fashionable side of his society, as is the case with all other playwrights of the comedies of manners. His interest here is, as in classical plays, to please and instruct through stripping and ridiculing the fools and their follies. Yet amidst this critical viewpoint he also shows us the way how fashionable people lived and entertained themselves.

One of the aspects that distinguishes the fashionable people from others is concerned with the affairs between men and women and how each sex tries to exploit the other sex. As an example, here we have Dorimant who is the womanizer of the main plot, if not the whole play. Everytime he is tired of a mistress he tries to get another one. When we are first introduced to him in the play, we soon understand that he already had affairs with a woman called Molly. It seems that he has

deserted her and she is little educated , as we can tell from the letter she sent him: "I told a you dud not love me, if you dud, you wou'd have seen again ere now. I have no money and am very Mallicolly. Pray send me Guynie to see the Operies."[7]

We also know at the beginning of the play that Dorimant is tired of his new mistrees, Mrs Loveit, and tries to provoke her in order to make her leave him so that he will be free to seduce another woman, Bellinda. Thus while Molly was the mistress of the past and Mrs. Loveit is the mistress of the present, Bellinda is the mistress for the future.

Moreover, Dorimant's plans to win women have no limits as when Young Bellair tells him he loves Emilia and they will soon get married. Dorimant encourages him to do so, because as long as Emilia is a virgin Dorimant cannot seduce her. Thus he tells Medley after Young Bellair leaves:

Dorimant. She's a discreet maid, and I believe nothing can corrupt her but a husband.
Medley. A husband?
Dorimant. Yes, a husband. I have known many a woman make a difficulty of losing a maidenhead,

who have afterwards made none of making a cuckold.

(I.i.,p.102)

We are even told that women admire Dorimant especially when the Orange-Woman, who is a tale-teller, tells Dorimant that Marriet, a young woman from the country, is attracted to him: "Well, on my conscience, there never was the like of you!—God's my life, I had almost forgot to tell you there is a young gentlewoman lately come to town with her mother, that is so taken with you" (I.i.,p.93).

Dorimant's attraction to women plus their attraction to him have created a contradictory reputation to him. Lady Woodvill, Harriet's mother, finds Dorimant's affairs with women as devilish, because they have been victimized by him. Thus the Orange-Women tells Dorimant what kind of assessment he got from Lady Woodvill after she was aware of his outrageous involvement with women:

Orange-Woman. As for your part, she thinks you an arrant devil; should she see you, on my

conscience she would look if you had not a cloven foot.

Dorimant. Does she know?

Orange-Woman. Only by hearsay; a thousand horrid stories have been told her of you, and she believes 'em all.

(I.i.,p.94-95)

Lady Woodvill even goes further in her abhorrence of Dorimant's behaviour with women when she warns both Young Bellair and her daughter of him:

Harriet. I would fain see that Dorimant, mother, you so cry out of for a monster: he's in the Mall, I hear.

Lady Woodvill. Come away then! The plague is here and you should dread the infection.

Young Bellair. You may be misinformed of the gentleman.

Lady Woodvill. Oh, no! I hope you do not know him. He is the prince of all the devils in the town—delights in nothing but in rapes and riots!

(III.iii.,p.128)

Moreover when Lady Woodvill speaks to Dorimant, of whose identity she is not aware, she tells him that Dorimant "has a tongue, they say, would tempt the angels to a second fall" (III.iii.,p.128). Her attitudes

towards Dorimant is known by her daughter and the people around her mother. The following quotation clarifies this situation:

> Harriet. If your friend Mr. Dorimant were but here now, that she might find me talking with him!
> Young Bellair. She does not know him, but dreads him, I hear, of all mankind.
> Harriet. She concludes if he does but speak to a woman, she's undone—is on her kness every day to pray Heaven defend me from him.
>
> (III.iii.,p.126)

The record of Dorimant's affairs with women proves the accusations of Lady Woodvill against him. When Mrs Loveit discovers his new affairs with Bellinda for having taken her to the play the previous day, she tells him that he is a "dissembler, damned dissembler! . . . False man" (III.ii.,p.112). She accuses him of inconstancy, but he shamelessly replies: "Constancy at my years? 'Tis not a virtue in season; you might as well expect the fruit the autumn ripens i 'the spring" (II.ii.,p.112).

Even the new mistress, Bellinda, is not quite sure that she will be justly treated by Dorimant who has just

turned away from Mrs Loveit to her. She expects that her end with him will be just like his end with Mrs Loveit for whom she shows sympathy:

> He's given me the proof which I desired of his love, but 'tis a proof of his ill-nature too. I wish I had not seen him use her so.
>
> I sigh to think that Dorimant may be
> One day as faithless and unkind to me.
> (II.ii.,p.114)

She repeats he is nothing but a man "strangely ill-natured, . . . of no principles" (III.ii.,p.119).

Nevertheless Dorimant knows how to manipulate women and free himself from all entanglements. He calms Bellinda down when she chides him for having done Mrs Loveit harm by telling her it is because of her he did that intending to please her: "Nothing is cruel to a man who could kill himself to please you" (III.ii.,p.120).

But Etherage does not seem totally against Dorimant despite the immoral life he is living with women. Probably Etherage himself did in his unbridled and licentious youth what Dorimant is doing here in the play. The playwright was a man of pleasure and

fashion, which made him overlook Dorimant's trespasses. This points has been made clear by Henry Ten Eyck Perry when he points out:

> Dormant has been thought to be a picture of the author himself. . . . Again Etherage is drawing his type picture from the life about him, the men of his time whom he personally knew, but this time instead of criticizing, he is holding up a model for his audience to copy. Dorimant is a rake, of course, but he is a rake in the grand manner, a rake of whom Etherage distinctly approves.[8]

Accordingly Dorimant is not always looked upon as abhorring and ignoble. To Lady Townley he is "a very well-bred man" (III.ii.,p.119), to Emilia he is "a very witty man" (III.ii.,p.119), and to Harriet he is wonderful: "I never saw anything in him that was frightful" (III.iii.,p.126). She makes this favourable impression about him when she first saw him at the New Exchange, a fashionable shopping centre, as the Orange-Woman certifies this point while she is talking to Dorinmat: "She saw you yesterday at the *Change*. She told me you came and fooled with the woman at the next shop. . . . Aye; I vow she told me twenty things

you said, too, and acted with her head and with her body so like you" (I.i.,p.93).

To Etherage, Dorimant is the excellent Restoration gentleman and Harriet is the ideal Restoration young lady; and accordingly she is a perfect match for Dorimant who is a young wit while she is not only a wit but also a rich young lady. The playwright's resolution to get Dorimant and Harriet married is in line with many comedies of manners which stipulate that a womanizer sooner or later must settle down with a young and pretty wife, or as Henry Ten Eyck Perry remarks:

> Such a resolution for the plot is in accordance with the conventional comedy ending, which demands that the most hardened philanderer should settle down at last with some pure young girl and live happily ever after—so far as the audience can be expected to know. However, in this case Dorimant is attractive enough to win the heart of any woman, and Harriet . . . is quite a match for him.[9]

Harriet is the only woman among Dorimant's women who does not bend to his desires except through marriage. He is ready to leave town and settle in the countryside for her sake. She *is really a woman of*

honour in a society where honour was satirized and made fun of. It seems she is unlike the other girls in her society. She has watched people court and woo each other, but she preferred not to have affairs with men unless they end in marriage. Yet she and Young Bellair know how to play the role of the two courting lovers before their deceived parents, although she says: "I know not what it is to love, but I have made pretty remarks by being now and then where lovers meet" (III.i.,p.117). John Palmer comments on this situation by saying: "Etherage uses the scene, as nearly every scene of the play, to exhibit the manners and attitude of the society he frequented."[10]

As for the situations, which Etherage is not on good terms with, they are those concerned with Sir Flutter, the title hero. It is through the satire on Sir Fopling, the playwright makes the play teach and please by exposing the title hero's fooleries and fopperies. The insertion of his name in the title is misleading, because he is not the main hero of the play while Dorimant occupies a better place and larger portion than those occupied by Sir Fopling in the play. We can see

Dorimant almost all the time throughout the play, and his appearances on the stage outnumber those of Sir Floping's. Thus if Sir Fopling is the title hero, Dorimmat is the play's hero.

The title hero is first mentioned at the beginning of the play with such derogatory remarks as : "He is indeed the pattern of modern foppery" (I.i.,p.100) and : "He was yesterday at the play, with a pair of gloves up to his elbows, and a periwig more exactly curled than a lady's head newly dressed for a ball" (I.i.,p.100). Moreover he is depicted as lisping and a woman chaser who "affects in imitation of the people of quality of France" (I.i.,p100). His manners are so affected that he looks like "a person of great acquired follies" (I.i.,p.100). As for the qualifications Sir Fopling stes for a gentleman to adore himself with, they are as follows: "A complete gentleman . . . ought to dress well, dance well, fence well, have a genius for love letters, an agreeable voice for a chamber, be very amorous, something discreet, but not overconstant" (I.i.,p.100).

After these abusive introductory remarks concerning Sir Fopling in the first act, the playwright

delays his actual appearance until the third act at Lady Townley's drawing room. When he is introduced, he is again the butt of ridicule for aping the French fashion. mixing French words in his speech and displaying French affectations. It would be rather interesting here to quote Thomas H. Fujimura commenting on Sir Fopling's personality which became a target for laughter: "The chief foil to the Truewits is Sir Fopling. . . . He is laughed at principally because he is deficient in wit. His pretension to fashion and taste in clothes reveals the poverty of his mind, and it is this mental defect that exposes him to laughter."[11]

In this case Dorimant is the antithesis of Sir Fopling and the right foil to him. If Etherage tries to cover up, if not atones for, Dorimant's rakish behaviour he finds fault with Sir Fopling 's foolish behaviour. When Dorminat seeks the company of women , he is still young and handsome besides being attractive to them. The playwright does not censure this behaviour, but when the obnoxious Sir Fopling chases young women, utters foolish things and does not behave

himself. Etherage does not hesitate to lash him with the harsh whip of satire and ridicule.

If the play has two heroes—one for the title and one for the play itself, it has also two worlds, the old world and the new world. The new world represents the new generation whose major characters are Dorimant, Harriet, Mrs Loveit, Bellinda, Emilia, Young Bellair and Medley. They include among themselves passionate, libertine and witty people; and they also contain moral and immoral people, honest and dishonest characters. This world is in revolt against the old world represented by Old Bellair and Lady Woodvill who stand for parental authority, aaranged marriage and established institutions. As for Sir Fopling he tries to grope his way between these two worlds, or rather, he wants to align himself with the new world but he does not succeed. It seems he belongs nowhere. Etherage himself is against both Sir Fopling and the old world.

The old world is deceived by appearances as we see when Harriet and Young Bellair deceive their parents in their mock courtship. Lady Woodvill is also cheated by Dorimant when he disguised and played the

role of Mr. Courtage. Thus she paradoxically likes Mr. Courtage and hates Dorimant without knowing that these two characters are one and the same person.

Emilia and Young Bellair, the representatives of the new world, secretly get-married against the wishes and plans of Old Bellair and Lady Woodvill of the old world.

Thus the play sides with the new world and its new generation against the old world with its established principles. The spectator is entertained through the way the playwright satirizes and criticizes the old world and Sir Fopling.

Desides the contrasting situations the play has its parallel situations in which the playwright wants to amuse his audience. In one situation Dorimant wants to belittle Mrs Loveit by asking Sir Folping to make advances to her, but she entrtains Sir Fopling and neither one is humiliated. It is Dorimant who is himself humiliated here, as Mrs Loveit wanted to revenge on him for having betrayed her when he took another woman with him to the theatre the previous day.

Dorimant tries his best to conceal his love for Harriet and she does the same thing. Thus in her first interview with Dorimant she tells herself: "I feel as great a chance within; but he shall never know it" (III.iii.,p.127). Also Dorminat at their second meeting says in an aside: "I love her and dare not let her know it" (IV.i.,p.138).

We have another two situations in each of which somebody wants to get rid of somebody else, as we can see that while Dorimant wants to rid himself of Mrs Loveit, Young Bellair tries hard to get rid of Harriet.

Finally ***The Man of Mode*** is considered one of the best Restoration comedies of manners and has been famous ever since its production. Readers and spectators will keep enjoying it as long as there are libraries and stages.

NOTES

[1]Allardyce Nicoll, ***British Drama: An Historical Survey from the Beginning to the Present Time*** (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1957), p.224.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ashley H. Thorndike, ***English Comedy*** (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1929), p.276.

[4]Oscar G. Brockett, ***The Theatre: An Introduction*** (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p.195.

[5]Thorindike, pp.273-274.

[6]Ibid., p.274.

[7]George Etherage , ***The Man of Mode; or, Sir Fopling Flutter***, in John Harold Wilson, ed., ***Six Restoration Plays*** (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959), I.i.,p.103. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in my text.

[8]Henry Ten Eyck Perry, ***The Comic Spirit in Restoration Drama: Studies in the Comedy of Etherage, Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar*** (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1962), p.19.

[9]Ibid., p.21.

[10]John Palmer, ***The Comedy of Manners*** (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1962), p.85.

[11]Thomas H. Fujimura, ***The Restoration Comedy of Wit*** (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968), p.114.

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