

with Annabella's heart upon his dagger. The bleeding heart 'is proud in the spoil / Of love and vengeance' (11-12) and is intended to perform this double service in the eyes of the audience. The audience will have guessed what is happening – Giovanni had earlier offered his sister his own heart as a token – but it is all of a minute before he discloses whose heart it is. 'Be not amazed' (17) is Giovanni's cry, and this constitutes a hidden directive for the stage to remain frozen and the moment protracted. The bleeding heart acquires a symbolic function on the stage verbally and visually. When Giovanni recounts to Florio, his horrified father, the story of his children's incestuous love, the old man's heart breaks. At the last, Giovanni stabs Soranzo, and Vasques stabs Giovanni, so that the tragedy itself ends fittingly in a symbolic bloodbath in which all the principals have bled to death.

Arguably, the tragedy of this period pushed and probed further than the comedy. The so-called bourgeois tragedies made modest incursions into the possibilities of a more domestic drama and the speech and behaviour that went with it, but most tragedies in this period, especially with the increasing use of indoor theatres, made use of well-tryed but apparently inexhaustible conventions of sensational disguise, dumb show and masque. Inside the parameters of revenge drama, with its expected tooth-dripping, crowd-pleasing sensations of blood and the supernatural, the tragedy of the early seventeenth century enjoyed to the maximum the illusionistic freedom of the playhouse it had inherited, both public and private. Because of the proximity of the house to the stage, the actors of the day were totally at home addressing and handling their audience in the moment by moment traffic of the asides and soliloquies that were the mainstay of the dialogue. However, this pales beside the ever-increasing demand for spectacle and sensation. There is a distinct sense that one playhouse was trying to outstrip another in 'special effects', as science fiction films tend to do today. Under these circumstances, the stage of Marston and Tourneur became the occasion for a spirited carnival of evil, and that of Webster and Middleton for excursions into the dark country of psychological chimera and nightmare.

## The Restoration stage

### Radical changes in the playhouse

The interregnum between the deposition of Charles I in 1642 and the restoration of Charles II in 1660 so accelerated the changes in the conditions of performance, some of which had been only hinted at before, that the next fifty years saw extraordinary innovation in almost all departments of the drama; in particular the audience and the playhouse changed completely. The reason is not far to seek: in 1642 Cromwell and his Puritan parliament passed an edict closing all of London's public and private theatres 'to appease and avert the wrath of God' and by 1649 had gutted and demolished them; the actors, meanwhile, were classed with rogues and vagabonds, risking their lives if they performed. The drama, however, is irrepressible, and during the Commonwealth period had not been wholly dormant. Private rooms, inns and even tennis courts had been pressed into service as playhouses; boys, as before, were used as actors; and new forms were devised to escape the law: 'drolls' like *Bottom the Weaver* were short farcical entertainments, and 'plays with music' were rudimentary operas imitating the Italian and drawing on the Court masque.

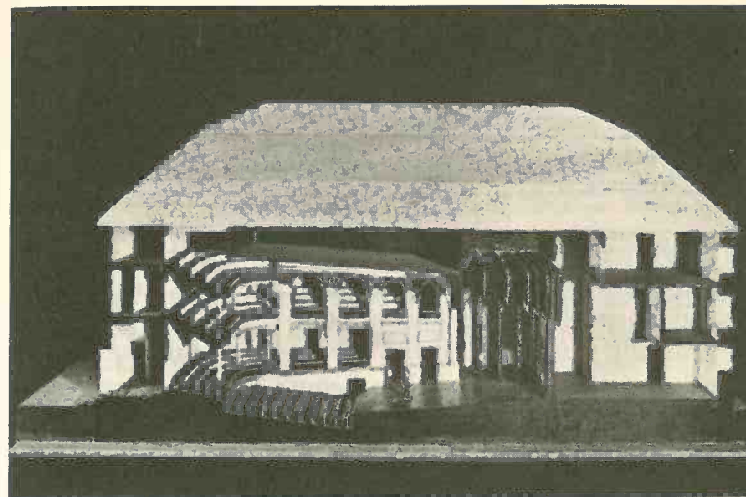
One such musical entertainment is the operatic *The Siege of Rhodes*. William Davenant (1606-68), who had followed Jonson as Court playwright, produced it in Rutland House, before a private, royalist audience in 1656, and again in 1658 in the Cockpit in Drury Lane. Of special importance, he had as his scene designer the man who had been Inigo Jones's assistant, John Webb (1611-72), and it is he who supplies the link between the scenic arrangements of the Jacobean masque and the changeable perspective scenery developed in the

Restoration playhouse. He adopted the Italian system of painted backgrounds and movable flats, making use of shutters set against fixed wings and borders to hide and frame them, and open or close on grooves. Designs for this musical drama have survived, and they show how on a tiny stage of 22 feet width and 18 feet depth, three sets of rocky wings passably suggested a spacious scene.

After Charles II returned from exile in France, fresh from experience of new theatrical developments on the Continent, he issued royal patents to Davenant and Thomas Killigrew (1612–83), loyal friends who were products of the pre-Commonwealth theatre, granting them a monopoly of the London stage for drama. It is a matter for debate whether this concentration of the drama was a good thing for the English stage, but at least the target audience was clearly identified, the changes were uncommonly rapid and they worked. For twenty-two years the two companies rivalled one another, until the Duke's Men took over the King's Men and played as the United Company for the next thirteen years.

Davenant assembled the Duke's Men, named for Charles's brother James, Duke of York, and Killigrew the King's Men. Desperately in need of a playhouse, both made temporary use of Tudor tennis courts for theatres: Killigrew working in Gibbons's Tennis Court in Vere Street (1660) and Davenant in Lisle's Tennis Court in Lincoln's Inn Fields (1661), which he opened with an expanded version of *The Siege of Rhodes*. A tennis court had a roof, a surrounding gallery, and had the same sort of intimate dimensions (about 75 by 30 feet overall) the private playhouses had previously enjoyed. If the area was divided at the line of the net, giving half the space to the actors and half to the audience, which would number about four hundred, something of the desirable intimacy of the actor-audience relationship was secured.

Presumably wanting to compete with Davenant's scenic effects, Killigrew soon adapted an old riding school in Bridges Street near Drury Lane as his Theatre Royal (1663), whereupon Davenant commissioned a new purpose-built theatre which became the Duke's Theatre in Dorset Garden, opening with Dryden's *Sir Martin Mar-All* in 1671. Then, following a fire in his Bridges Street theatre in 1672, Killigrew built a



9 A Restoration playhouse, probably the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane as designed by Christopher Wren in 1674. (Model by Edward A. Langhans.)

scenic theatre in Drury Lane and moved there in 1674. This was the father of a line of Theatres Royal in Drury Lane, and it doubled the size of the house and the playing area without losing physical intimacy. Candle-lit overall, the spectator felt himself to be in the same room with the players, and so close to them that he caught their smallest expression of voice or gesture. In the picture is seen a raked stage facing ten benches in a raked pit. Of greatest importance, the stage itself consists of an apron that projects 17 feet in front of the proscenium, and allows for a depth of 15 more feet behind it to provide the space for four wings and three shutters in grooves.

The groove and shutter system of scene changing was as much concerned with enhancing the speed and continuity of the action as augmenting the spectacle. After the curtain had opened at the beginning of a performance, it stayed up and scenes were changed in full view of the audience. The doors, two or four of them, were always set in the proscenium and were the chief means of making an entrance and an exit, after which they became 'invisible' as on the non-illusory stage of the previous century until called into use again as a door or a

hiding-place. When the shutters were slid apart at the start of a scene on certain occasions, an actor was 'discovered', and when the shutters were closed at the end he would on a few occasions 'go within the scene'.

The chief features of the Restoration stage may be summarized as follows:

- A *covered stage and auditorium* lit by windows above the stage, the light supplemented by candles. Light brackets and chandeliers illuminating the actors and spectators generally remained alight throughout, but, as in the masque, rare effects of light behind gauzes and transparencies were possible. The candles, made from mutton fat, added to the special atmosphere of the Restoration theatre – thick with the haze of the open flames, obnoxious with the smell of unwashed bodies and the latrines in the passageways.
- An *apron stage* that encouraged the actor to work in close proximity with the audience, rather than retreat into the dimly lit scenery of the upper area. As in earlier times, the apron remained unlocalized until a location was identified by an actor's lines or a scene change.
- The *proscenium arch* with *one or two doors* on each side. One of these doors sometimes provided a 'closet' to conceal an actor, but they chiefly served as entrances into the acting area. They were so situated that he entered immediately on to the apron and, as it were, into the house. The downstage position of the stage doors encouraged a downstage pattern of movement across the acting area, and explains the aside to the audience an actor commonly uttered on entrance.
- *Balconies* over the doors were made possible by their position in the proscenium arch and provided a second level, if a limited one compared with that of the Elizabethan playhouse. They served as a place for eavesdropping on the action taking place on the stage proper, and also as a chamber window for amorous scenes.
- A *music gallery* was provided above the proscenium for 'a consort of musicians' (usually a few strings and woodwinds) who always played in full view of the audience.

This feature indicates that music was usual in every kind of Restoration play.

Above all, the new stages established a system of *changeable scenery* that was to become a mainstay of the theatre for the future. At this time it was changed in full view of the audience and made no attempt at realistic illusion. In modern revivals of Restoration plays, a pretty pictorial setting like that of a toy theatre is sometimes to be seen graced with flunkeys carrying candelabras and striking attitudes, intended to evoke the spirit of Good King Charles's golden days.

It is easy to recognize how the conventions of Restoration drama emerged from these features. In spite of the new scenery and lighting, the playhouse was still one of non-illusion where prologue and epilogue, soliloquy and aside flourished, and the unities of place and time were disregarded. Actor and spectator were never more physically close, nor the drama more of a shared activity. Rarely had the house been more homogeneous, being made up of nobles and gentlemen of the Court and their ladies, together with some country gentry and their wives, a few civil officials like Samuel Pepys and some aspirant businessmen and professionals – altogether a narrow and sophisticated, if noisy, audience. It even found the playwrights from its own number and shared with them a common ground of privilege and social attitude. Intrusive playhouse humour was therefore legion, especially in the comedies. Only a Restoration actress like Elizabeth Barry (1658–1713), who probably played Mrs Loveit in Etherege's *The Man of Mode* (1676), could have accused her lover Dorimant of going behind the scenes and fawning upon 'those little insignificant creatures, the players' (2.2), when she herself was a player who had doubtlessly enjoyed similar attentions.

### The players and the style of performance

Because of the King's approval and the Court's support, the actors eventually acquired new status and gained a small

degree of respect – although the moral stigma of rascality and vagrancy remained until this century. With the establishment of regular companies again, and as the business of acting took on professional characteristics, individual players attracted admiration and gained a reputation for the stirring delivery of tragic verse or witty timing and comportment in comedy. Thomas Betterton (c. 1635–1710) was the leading actor in the Duke's company, and he is known to have taught his art in later years to others. A company numbered over twenty and performed six days a week every afternoon all year, except in the summer when audiences dwindled. A play did not expect to run for much above three days, so that repertories were large, and an actor was expected to recall his part with a quick rehearsal for up to a year. Each repertory was made up of plays new and old (Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher were the popular choices from Jacobean times), as well as some pieces freely 'borrowed' and 'Englished' from France and Spain. When Lewis Hallam took a small company to America in 1752, his repertory consisted of no fewer than twenty-four plays 'and their attendant farces'. The players were always in the throes of learning and rehearsing when not on the stage, and probably had frequent recourse to making up their lines as they went along.

The actor's costume for tragedy did not aim at period authenticity – this was a development that took hold a century later. But the genre itself dictated that a tragic hero or heroine should be immediately recognizable, always by being dressed colourfully and especially by wearing heroic feathers. The Prologue to Sir John Vanbrugh's *The Mistake* (1705) reports,

With audiences composed of belles and beaux,  
The first dramatic rule is, Have good clothes ...  
In lace and feather tragedy's expressed,  
And heroes die unpitied, if ill-dressed.

(*Revels History of Drama* (1976), p. 146)

And in *The Spectator* for 18 April 1711 we may read again that 'The ordinary method of making an hero, is to clap a huge plume of feathers upon his head.' The feathered head-dress persisted until Garrick's day.



*M. SMITH in the Character of ALEXANDER.*

*When Glory like the dazzling Eagle stood  
Perch'd on my Beaver in the Branch Hood.*

10 William Smith as Alexander in Nathaniel Lee's *The Rival Queens* (1677) at Drury Lane in 1778: the tragic hero wore a mixture of eye-catching styles and an obligatory head-dress of feathers.

In comedy, stage costume was always 'modern dress', since the actor had to compete in appearance with the beaux in the audience, often wearing a patron's discarded clothes. His ability to wear his wardrobe well frequently became a source of humour in the lines, and was at the heart of the fop as a character. The principal item was a highly embroidered coat reaching to his knees, with noticeably wide cuffs and pockets low about his legs. Lace and ribbon trimmed his shirt and his shoes displayed a pair of high red heels. He wore or carried a plumed hat at all times, and his hair was as long as he could grow it – by the end of the century it was necessary to wear a full-bottomed wig that tumbled over his shoulders to provide the masses of curls deemed necessary. By that time cheeks of lacquered rouge punctuated with beauty spots were also the fashion for men as well as women. It follows that comedy made the most of 'smoking' [teasing and ridiculing] a country cousin like Sir Wilfull in Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700), who enters a drawing-room in a dirty riding-habit and with mud on his boots. But the best of the jokes surrounded the indecorous behaviour of the beau who boasted French excesses and eccentricities. The Sir Foplings and the Lord Foppingtons carved a unique place for the fop on the English stage for the next two hundred years.

With such clothes and such particularity the Restoration beau's *levée* became a monstrous ritual, and in comedy the elaborate business of dressing for the day regularly presented opportunities for scenes of satirical laughter. The introduction of Lord Foppington in Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* (1696), 1.3, is an outstanding example of this ceremony, since in his outrageous vanity this creature first presents himself as if he is milord at an imaginary reception while he is still in a state of extreme and ludicrous *undress* – wearing nightcap, nightgown and bare or slippared feet. Thus the audience sees him as he is, and before he is reconstructed little by little to become a magnificent figure of arrogance and conceit. Here is altogether a brilliant and hilarious case of appearance contrasted with reality, and dramatized by slow degrees before the spectator's eyes.

The actor's props, like those of the beaux in the audience, were extensions of himself, effective instruments to display his

behaviour in society. His hat and sword he wore indoors and out, and it was a test of his social aplomb for him to manage them so that they did not manage *him* – as when his hat disarranged his peruke or his sword plucked at a lady's skirts. He knew how to present himself well and make a conversational point by a graceful flick of his kerchief, or by taking an astute pinch of snuff. As the peruke grew bigger, so it acquired a life of its own: when Colley Cibber played Sir Novelty Fashion in his own comedy *Love's Last Shift* (1696), the audience applauded wildly when footmen carried his wig on stage in a sedan chair. It demanded the nice use of the comb on a curl, and the careful toss of the head to accompany a twist or a bow if the wearer were not to be blinded by his own hair. In Etherege's *She Would If She Could* (1668), 3.3, the pimp Rake-hell actually advises Sir Oliver Cockwood that a gentleman should never make love without wearing his wig, and the audience is left to imagine any problems that might arise.

King Charles II was also responsible for the appearance of *the actress* on the English stage. On his travels abroad he had enjoyed watching actresses perform, and now he cleverly found a reason that overcame the former objection to having the female sex exhibit itself in a play: was it not as offensive for the male sex to wear skirts? His patent of 1662 required women to play female parts, and they wasted no time in attracting audiences by their charm and appeal, not to mention the novelty of their presence. Thereafter a play could not risk its success without them, and theatrical history was never the same again.

Essentially, the Restoration actress brought sexuality to the theatre in a palpable, though not in any more realistic, way and the content of the drama suffered a calculated and a permanent change. Plays were now written which exploited the actress's sexuality, even to including scenes of flirtation and temptation, coquetry and seduction, and dressing and undressing (the '*toilette*'). As a convenient way of exhibiting those parts of the actress's anatomy that were normally concealed, the comedy developed the expedient of 'breeches scenes' which required her to wear male clothing for a good part of the play in order to exhibit her hips and legs, and place

her in compromising situations. This had nothing in common with the theatrical travestism of the Elizabethan stage, where, of course, the female parts were played by the male sex.

Like the actor who had to rival the gentlemen in the audience, the actress had to compete in her costume and accoutrements to some degree with the ladies. Her dress constituted a riot of colour in a richly decorated *manteau* and train, and the petticoats that buoyed and buttressed them. *Décolletage* was lacy and low, and the bodice was stiff with vicious stays that shaped her appearance and controlled her every movement. Sitting was a critical matter of keeping bolt upright on the edge of the chair without missing it altogether, and walking and turning required the graceful government of her skirts and train.

Of the actress's many personal accessories in this period, two in particular served the comedies well and demanded her strictest attention: her vizard mask and her fan. The mask came into vogue early in the period and soon became the device by which a lady might appear incognito in public; as such it was indispensable, and she would not walk out without it, holding it ready to slip into place with pins; she could also hold it by a button caught between her teeth. The mask furnished the occasion for more flirtatious tricks played on the male sex, and in Thomas Shadwell's *A True Widow* (1678) the girls Isabella and Gartrude delight in visiting the playhouse in their masks in order to spy on their lovers. Sometimes, however, matters were complicated by the fact that prostitutes themselves wore masks when plying their trade in the playhouse or the street (they were, indeed, nicknamed 'vizards'). Naturally, when the mask was in use on the comic stage, the audience always had the pleasure of anticipating the moment when it would be removed.

A lady's use of the fan emerged later in the century, and became so important an extension of herself indoors and out that she would be considered to be 'undressed' if she forgot it. Edith Evans, perhaps the finest Millamant of modern times, believed that 'the only thing you can't do with a fan is fan yourself' (*Plays and Players* (December 1976), 39). At all times it visually signalled a lady's mood and could convey a

whole vocabulary of silent commentary – pleasure or anger, consent or refusal. With its aid an aside could be delivered easily, and it was even possible to conduct an intrigue with two gentlemen at one time, the fan directing attention to one of them while simultaneously excluding the other. Probably because it was always in use, this accessory is rarely mentioned in stage directions, but when it is, the moment is sensational. Such a moment comes in Etherege's *The Man of Mode*, 2.2, when Mrs Loveit does the unthinkable and '*tears her fan in pieces*', signalling that the scene has reached a crisis and that her affair with Dorimant is at an impasse. However, when she has lost control of *herself*, the fan has also lost its magic properties.

As in good society, so on the stage, *the style of performance* was the passport to success and the *sine qua non*. The intimate conditions of the Restoration playhouse made all the more striking the ranting and canting of speech in tragedy and the kind of large, artificial gesture that was normal before Garrick. Betterton set the example, and when Edmund Curll published *The History of the English Stage* in 1741, he recorded the great actor's rules for dramatic speaking: for example, the actor expressed his love

by a gay, soft, charming voice; his hate, by a sharp, sullen and severe one; his joy, by a full flowing and brisk voice; his grief, by a sad, dull and languishing tone; not without sometimes interrupting the continuity of the sound with a sigh or groan, drawn from the very inmost of the bosom.

Along with this kind of ranting went a host of appropriate gestures:

You must lift up or cast down your eyes, according to the nature of the things you speak of; thus if of heaven, your eyes naturally are lifted up; if of earth, or hell, or anything terrestrial, they are naturally cast down . . .

You must never let either of your hands hang down, as if lame or dead; for that is very disagreeable to the eye, and argues no passion in the imagination . . . I am of opinion that the hands in acting ought very seldom to be wholly quiescent.

J. H. Wilson put some of this together to provide an account of the totally conventional and unrealistic behaviour of the heroic lover:

The posture of a dejected lover was like that of a man hanged, with his hands before him and his head on one side. Sometimes the unhappy lover wandered about the stage sighing, with his hand on his heart and his hat pulled down on his brows.

He knelt to plead, stood erect to triumph, shook his fist in anger, beat his breast in sorrow, and flourished a handkerchief to mop up theatrical tears.

(*A Preface to Restoration Drama* (1965), 24-5)

Far from eliciting laughter, the actor who was not master of all this posturing was unacceptable. As with ballet, there is pleasure to be had in witnessing the exquisite execution of movement and gesture, and even if the words were inaudible, the spectator had a fair idea of what was being said by watching these stage gyrations.

It was different in comedy, where prose speech and realistic behaviour perforce followed the norms established by the audience – except that the typical situations and characters of the plays were rather more spicy than real life. A Melantha and a Margery Pinchwife, a Millamant and a Mrs Sullen, were free spirits whose conduct was expected to go beyond the social sanctions of the time. The rakes Horner and Dorimant may have been modelled upon the Earl of Rochester and his like, but their conduct was nevertheless a glorious exaggeration of the truth, an audacious stretching of the possibilities.

Needless to say, the artificial gesticulating of the tragic stage, and its accompanying bombast, gave place in comedy to the range of pantomimic speech and behaviour that composed the ‘manners’ of social intercourse. In a notable passage in Etherege’s *The Man of Mode* Harriet and Young Bellair teach one another how to convince their watching parents that they are courting:

BELLAIR. Will you take your turn and be instructed?

HARRIET. With all my heart!

BELLAIR. At one motion play your fan, roll your eyes, and then settle a kind look upon me.

HARRIET. So.

BELLAIR. Now spread your fan, look down upon it, and tell the sticks with a finger.

HARRIET. Very modish!

BELLAIR. Clap your hand up to your bosom, hold down your gown, shrug a little, draw up your breasts, and let ‘em fall again gently, with a sigh or two.

(3.1)

There is more, and these two exaggerate to emphasize every point in front of their eavesdroppers, but it is clear that Etherege enjoys taking inventory of social behaviour and drawing attention to it. The provocations of the beau and the teasing glances of the coquette were at the heart of Restoration comic entertainment, and when in addition the actor displayed his ‘parts’ and the actress her ‘charms’, drama had become a positive exhibition.

### Heroic drama and its conventions: *The Conquest of Granada, The Rehearsal*

There was almost no middle path between the dramatic genres of the Restoration, which consisted of either light-hearted comedy or the oppressively sober drama known as ‘heroic’ (from the rhyming heroic verse in which it was composed). Some early comedy chose to mix the slight and the serious, but without producing the integrated tragi-comedy of the Jacobean years. The Restoration heroic play – not to be called a ‘tragedy’ because a happy end was *de rigueur* – was one of the more short-lived forms in the history of the theatre, lasting for ten or so years, and its popularity in its own time remains something of a puzzle. However, it was born of a troubled period of war and threats of war – at home the Civil War itself and then Monmouth’s rebellion, and abroad the troubles in Ireland and the running maritime conflict with the Dutch. In effect, the Restoration theatre had an audience of self-consciously royalist cavaliers, the loyal ‘Heroicks’ of the Civil War, and this may explain the general approval of the heroic drama and its conspicuously ceremonial elements. The spirit and style of opera was also carried over into the heroic

play in its glorious themes, inflated speech and rhyming couplets.

The heroic play has been charged with being based on theory and not practice. It was built very much to a formula and was conscious of its own decorum, deriving perhaps from the man who had been tutor to the King, Thomas Hobbes, and his thinking about heroic poetry, which was 'to raise admiration, principally for three virtues, valour, beauty, and love'. Decorum decreed that the feeling to inspire was that of admiration and wonder, which Aristotle had unaccountably neglected in his *Poetics*, emotions usually prompted by the presentation of a heroic figure making a noble choice between love and honour. He nourished an obligatory sense of poetic justice, justifying the axiom that 'None but the brave deserve the fair.' Nor did a hero have to die to be admired or a heroine be miserable to be virtuous. The same propriety required that Dryden in *All for Love* (1678) should see that Antony and Cleopatra were 'famous patterns of unlawful love, and their end accordingly was unfortunate' (the Preface, 9-11), and that in his *Troilus and Cressida* (1679) he should save Troilus from a final ambiguous exit by granting him a tragic death; and, in the most notorious example of all, that Nahum Tate (1652-1715) in his version of *King Lear* (1681) should reinstate Lear on his throne and marry Cordelia to Edgar.

This sort of justice savagely reduced the element of unpredictability in the drama, and when the Aristotelian tragic precepts of pity and fear again became the playwright's target, the heroic formula had nothing to offer and the vein ran dry. Nevertheless, the heroic stage followed its ideals. The characters – the hero a great soldier and lover, the heroine a paragon of purity – were superhuman in the way they thought, spoke and looked, and the events of the play were exalted and sublime. In his essay 'Of Heroic Plays' (1672) Dryden argued that the heroic poet was 'not tied to a bare representation of what is true, or exceeding probable'. To let go of reality gave him 'a freer scope for imagination' and by allowing him to manipulate his material, helped him 'to raise the imagination of the audience'. But in spite of the powerful example of the French neo-classical stage, Dryden in his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668) had already questioned the use of

the Unities to create an illusion of reality, and it was not long before the popular tradition in English drama urged the return of disruptive, non-classical elements including violent action on stage, double plots, comedy and pathos.

The plotting of the heroic play engendered huge emotional conflicts, with the martial hero torn between his love and his duty to his country, and the virtuous heroine torn between her love and her duty to her father. Matters were often painfully complicated by the fact that the lady in question was the daughter of the hero's worst enemy, perhaps a villain who had usurped the throne or a despot of unspeakable evil. After such godlike characters and so sublime a theme, it is possible to identify the regularly supportive characteristics of the heroic drama:

- a romantic *setting* in a faraway country, like mysterious and exotic Spain, Mexico, India, Morocco and Peru.
- a spectacular stage of *painted scenes*: a splendid palace, a frightening forest, an ocean complete with shipping.
- the use of *machines* and sensational effects: thunder and lightning, gunpowder and explosion, ghosts and spirits from the trap or flown in the sky.
- *music and song*, left over from the opera, with drums and trumpets or singing and dancing, as appropriate.
- an elevated *diction* of extravagant, bombastic words, all rant and rave, spoken often in similes and usually in rhyming couplets.

One of the reasons why this genre produced no masterpieces was because of the unnatural style of speech, which consisted of such stilted couplets that no actor who spoke them could make them come alive. Yet the couplet was seen as integral to the form, and was given Dryden's formal blessing in *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, in which 'Neander' argues that a serious play is 'nature wrought up to an higher pitch' and heroic rhyme most suitable for tragedy 'as being the noblest kind of modern verse' (91). This essay is essential reading in the attempt to understand the thinking of Restoration heroic dramatists. The paradox is that the monotonous straitjacket of language, which so paralyzed the drama, was considered to be a kind of stagecraft in itself, an important



part of the show. Perhaps it worked with some of the conventional musical function associated with opera. Nevertheless, when Nathaniel Lee (1653–92) decided to return to blank verse for *The Rival Queens* (1677), Dryden promptly followed suit in *All for Love*. This was his instinctive choice – blank verse had completely proved itself as a versatile vehicle for drama both high and low in the first part of the century.

John Dryden was the most prolific playwright of the age; he knew his audience well and his versatility enabled him to write with equal assurance both heroic plays of the artificial kind and witty social comedy in a more natural vein. He also chose to be at the centre of every critical issue, and after the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, his preface to *The Conquest of Granada* ('Of Heroic Plays', 1672) and his preface to *Troilus and Cressida* on neo-classical tragedy ('The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy', 1679) help document the controversies of the day.

*The Conquest of Granada*, staged by the King's Company at the Theatre Royal, came in two parts and ten acts. Part I was produced in December 1670 and Part II in January 1671, and thereafter played to great applause on successive nights with the dashing Charles Hart as the magnificent Almanzor, and the inimitable Nell Gwyn as his noble Queen Almahide (acted against her natural bent for comedy). While this was not Dryden's best work, it exemplifies all the extravagant features of the heroic play, and to see it was to pass into the world of elegant fantasy its author wanted.

After its length, its excesses were seen in its lavish spectacle. The scene (painted by Robert Streeter) was elaborate and expensive, an image of sumptuous oriental luxury. The stage for the most part represented the red décor of the splendid Alhambra, the Moorish palace and fortress of Granada, the glorious images of *patio* and *sala* no doubt supplemented by the towers and ramparts of the citadels of Alcazaba and Albayzyn; the Vivarambla also appeared as if 'filled with spectators'. Every opportunity was taken to introduce exotic music and dance, like Almahide's Moorish festival of the Zambra in Part I, act 3. Almanzor kneels to his lady and declaims,

A happiness so high I cannot bear;  
My love's too fierce, and you too killing fair.

(4.3.210–11)

The lines convey all the high-flown, knotted sentiments heroic drama could desire, and in the mind's eye it is not difficult to supply the appropriately colourful gestures of tangled anguish to accompany them. The drama's content was a model of heroic correctness, as John Evelyn's wife Mary recorded in a letter: 'Since my last to you I have seen "The Siege of Granada", a play so full of ideas that the most refined romance I ever read is not to compare with it; love is made so pure and valour so nice that one would imagine it destined for an Utopia rather than our stage' (J. H. Wilson, *A Preface to Restoration Drama* (1965), 71).

As could be expected, a successful burlesque of the heroic play appeared immediately after *The Conquest of Granada*. This was *The Rehearsal* (1671) by George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham (1628–87), written some years before, but delayed and awaiting a good target for its attack. In this Buckingham caricatured Dryden as the poet Bayes, and the story goes that he coached the comedian John Lacy in the part, dressed him in Dryden's clothes, and then took the poet to the playhouse to watch him squirm; however, Bayes also represents any heroic playwright of the day. The play's outstandingly useful device is to present itself as a rehearsal, as a play-within-a-play, so that as the action proceeds the author may solemnly explain his intentions to friends – and to the audience. Much of the fun arises from the direct parody of lines from *The Conquest of Granada*, but *The Rehearsal* provides an excellent compendium of the heroic conventions, each one of them ripe for travesty.

The hero, now named Drawcansir, is unmistakably Almanzor: he is described by Bayes as 'a fierce hero, that frights his mistress, snubs up kings, baffles armies, and does what he will without regard to numbers, good manners, or justice' (4.1), and when it comes to it he enters the battlefield 'and kills them all on both sides' (5.1). The exposition of what the spectator needs to know is always a necessary convention,

and here it is mercilessly travestied when it is clumsily executed by underlings such as these:

PHYSICIAN. Sir, by your habit, I should guess you to be the Gentleman-Usher of this sumptuous palace.

GENTLEMAN-USHER. And by your gait and fashion, I should almost suspect you rule the healths of both our noble Kings, under the notion of Physician.

PHYSICIAN. You hit my function right.

GENTLEMAN-USHER. And you mine.

PHYSICIAN. Then let's embrace.

(2.1)

Great armies wage war and are conveniently represented by eight soldiers with swords drawn, four at one door and four at another; to the sound of music the battle begins on the cry, 'Fall on!' and ends with '*They all kill one another*' (2.5); when the music strikes up again, the soldiers rise from the dead – to dance or kill again, as the case may be. The burlesque is rich in special effects, as when the two legitimate kings of the plot are to ascend their thrones, '*they descend in the clouds, singing, in white garments*' (5.1), and when the final battle '*is fought between foot and great hobby-horses*' (5.1) a stagey attempt at realism grotesquely miscarries.

This is a small sample of the host of theatrical jokes served up in the play, which set the guide-lines for many burlesques written in the next century. The formula of the 'rehearsal play' provided the perfect vehicle for the in-house humour of burlesque drama, because it set author, critic and audience on the same stage in order to subvert them all. In order to succeed, parody and burlesque need bad or overworked drama to begin with, as well as an audience familiar with it. There is always the difficulty that the drama to be sent up is *so bad* that it is already a parody of itself: there are limits to the ridiculous. In the case of Buckingham's play, the chief object of its ridicule, *The Conquest of Granada*, withstood the joke and continued to hold the stage for several years, but *The Rehearsal* itself remained popular in its own right throughout the next century, with its last professional production played as late as 1819.

### The comedy of the sexes: *The Man of Mode, The Country Wife, The Way of the World, The Beaux' Stratagem*

The greatest achievement of the Restoration stage was to lay the foundations of a quintessentially English comic mode, and create a carefully cultivated vehicle of verbal wit intended to exhibit the battle of the sexes. The mode, in its many variations, may be traced through the comedy of Goldsmith and Sheridan, Pinero and Oscar Wilde, Shaw and Noel Coward, to the present day. In his *Lectures on the English Comic Writers* (1819), Hazlitt considered the years following the return of Charles II to be 'the golden period of our comedy' and his verdict, while addressed to a less robust age and somewhat apologetic, made its point:

In turning over the pages of the best comedies, we are almost transported to another world, and escape from this dull age to one that was all life, and whim, and mirth, and humour ... We are admitted behind the scenes like spectators at court, on a levée or birthday.

(70)

It was the comedy of a coterie and an intimate playhouse, and its audience enjoyed sharing the mocking perception of its own social and sexual behaviour with author and actor.

To some extent it may be claimed that in Restoration comedy 'realism' took the stage in earnest for the first time, and this is acceptable provided that it is recognized that it did not reflect the real world with any accuracy – this awaited the naturalistic movement inspired by the drama of Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov. Firstly, speech and behaviour on the comic stage of the Restoration was guided by a strongly satirical impulse and cast a necessarily distorting eye over what it saw. Secondly, for many years its subjects were limited to those affecting a homogeneous minority of the Court and the upper classes.

Nevertheless, the social decorum on the comic stage reflected that of the audience, and since speech and behaviour are indivisible and the players' lines must match their manners, Restoration comic stagecraft had much to do with

domestic and social conduct. If stage and conventional innovations were therefore few in the comedy of the period, novel developments are found in the style of speech and performance. Points of growth may be identified:

- (1) The Restoration stage invented a scintillating prose 'reparty' [repartee] with its appropriate gesture and movement to suit the range of sexual situations and love-games newly open to it.
- (2) In the traditional relationship of comedy the actors had the special task of satisfying a critical audience which was already intimately associated with the life-style it was witnessing on the stage.
- (3) The presence of real women as actresses to replace the beardless boys of earlier years cried out for devices of plotting and performance to make the most of their physical presence.

The plays of the courtier and diplomat Sir George Etherege (c. 1634–91) set a standard of comic prose dialogue that was elegantly witty and delicately civil. It was always a calculated speech that was much more than any 'language really used by men' such as Wordsworth wanted for his *Lyrical Ballads*. According to Richard Steele in *The Spectator*, no. 65 of 1711, it was the received opinion that Etherege's *The Man of Mode* was 'the pattern of genteel comedy'. First produced in Dorset Garden Theatre with the two best-known actors of the day, Betterton as the rake Dorimant and Elizabeth Barry as the original Mrs Loveit, this play was a firm success and continued so through most of the next century. After 1766 it was not thought possible for so *risqué* a piece to find a new audience, but in 1971 the Royal Shakespeare Company daringly up-dated it in jet-set style with Alan Howard as a new version of the languid and carefree lecher.

If the play lacks much of the tension expected of drama, from start to finish it persistently worked on the spectator's *non-dramatic* interests. This began by modelling the manner and style of Dorimant on London's most notorious profligate, the Earl of Rochester – who no doubt was a happy member of the audience himself. More importantly, the action, such as it

is, traces some four of Dorimant's amorous affairs, each differing from the last and presented almost like a guide to the range of possible amorous intrigues. The passionate but possessive Mrs Loveit and the complaisant and submissive Bellinda supply examples of how not to behave towards the opposite sex, and the innocent and virtuous Emilia and the shrewd and clever Harriet of how to outwit it. There are other women thrown in for good measure – Molly the whore, the superannuated Lady Woodvill, and other intrigues are glanced at in the elderly lust of Old Bellair and the sexual vanity of Sir Fopling, but each is marked by its emphasis on the etiquette and decorum called for by the occasion.

Key encounters therefore come across as exhibitions of polite speech and behaviour and Etherege seizes every opportunity to offer advice and make points to his self-interested audience. Act 1 is devoted to Dorimant's *levée* with much of the care appropriate to that of the fair sex. Then when the audience meets Mrs Loveit in act 2, she is already dressed, but still studying herself in a pocket glass with obsessive *amour propre*. When in act 3 the audience meets Harriet, however, and has a first sight of the one who is destined to master him, she is preparing to meet the day with a refreshing difference:

- BUSY. Dear madam, let me set that curl in order.  
 HARRIET. Let me alone, I will shake 'em all out of order! ...  
 BUSY. Look, there's a knot falling off.  
 HARRIET. Let it drop.

The demonstration complete, the explanation is not far to seek:

- BUSY. Ah, the difference that is between you and my Lady Dapper! How uneasy she is if the least thing be amiss about her! ...  
 HARRIET. Her powdering, painting, and her patching never fail in public to draw the tongues and eyes of all the men upon her.

This lady will evidently not be a 'slave to convention, or to the other sex, and the petulance in all those 'ps' immediately alerts the audience to the fact that to catch Harriet Dorimant will have to play his cards in some other way.

When the two confront each other at Lady Townley's salon in act 4, Etherege ironically plays off the visibly polite courtesies against their equivocally polite exchanges. There is more than a touch of mockery in both Dorimant's bow and Harriet's curtsy:

DORIMANT. Where had you all that scorn and coldness in your look?

HARRIET. From nature, sir; pardon my want of art. I have not learnt those softnesses and languishings which now in faces are so much in fashion.

Their flirtation is a fencing-match in which two foils are probing for advantage; but neither party is giving ground and each is parrying with a thrust. The effect is all achieved with the words, which are rich in tone and alive with body language.

*The Man of Mode* is a rare compendium of sexual manners of coquettes and their beaux, but it also embodies an extraordinary guide to the fashions of the day. When Mrs Loveit is raging at Dorimant, his barb is cruelly aimed at the whole of the fair sex:

What unlucky accident puts you out of humour – a point ill-washed, knots spoiled i' the making up, hair shaded awry, or some other little mistake in setting you in order?

(2.2)

Dorimant is countering her attack in terms of a lady's *toilette*, almost as if her appearance and her temper were akin. When in scenes that are irrelevant to the trials of Dorimant, Sir Fopling Flutter comes 'piping hot from Paris', he and his infatuation with the latest French styles steal the show entirely. In 3.2, almost the middle of the play, he makes his first majestic entrance with a page to announce and attend him, and in all his new splendour he circles the stage saluting each astonished guest in turn. He then proceeds without much ado to display and comment on every detail of his dress, the catalogue growing faster and faster until he spins into an ecstatic dance. In 3.3, his second entrance in the Mall (at that date a walk in St James's Park) is embellished by a procession of six immaculate French footmen. For Lady Townley's ball in 4.1, he arrives magnificently masked (in

1971 John Wood as Sir Fopling was carried in as a caricature of the Sun King, no less) and believing himself incognito, although no one can mistake him.

This was an age of great stage fops – Mr Frenchlove in James Howard's *The English Monsieur* (1666), Monsieur de Paris in Wycherley's *The Gentleman Dancing-Master* (1672), the eponymous hero of John Crowne's *Sir Courtly Nice* (1685), Lord Foppington in Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* (1697) – but in Sir Fopling Etherege set the standard. Dryden saw him as the perfect fop and thought him calculated to hit a wide satirical target: 'Legion's his name, a people in a man' (the Epilogue); but Bonamy Dobrée's comment in *Restoration Comedy* (1924), 74, that 'Life would be the duller without him' suggests that satire was not uppermost in the author's mind when he created this fop: he seems to embody the joyful spirit of his play and his innocent vanity is infectious. He and his displays of dress and behaviour in park and drawing-room highlight the London world and its lotus life-style, and Etherege captures it all in his easy and cynical way. There is little criticism, less moralizing: neither Etherege nor his audience have any wish to mend their ways. The result is a delicate balance of humour and sympathy, related more to Chekhov than to Shaw.

What of stagecraft? In his previous play, *She Would If She Could* (1668), Etherege took a professional interest in making use of the stage he was presented with in Lincoln's Inn Fields. In act 2, he made exceptional use of the free space of the stage and its proscenium doors, in order to recreate a sense of the walks in Mulberry Garden and the pursuit by Courtall and Freeman of their willing prey, the girls Ariana and Gatty disguised with their vizards: he arranged the chase to run back and forth through all four entrances and across both upper and lower parts of the platform. In *The Man of Mode* there is none of this. In 2.1 the stage is Lady Townley's house, in 3.3 the Mall, and in each scene virtually all the characters circulate freely, only occasionally coming together in clusters. In this play location is less material, and Etherege successfully executes his design primarily by diverting sexual power-plays expressed in his polite exchanges of wit.

The novelty of seeing women on the stage for the first time prompted a new and unusual development in Restoration comic stagecraft, that of requiring the actress to wear male clothing and reveal more of her figure. Evidently as a stunt Thomas Killigrew put on his earlier *The Parson's Wedding* in 1664 cast only with women, and Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster* and Dryden's *Secret Love* also received this treatment. This play also permitted Nell Gwyn as Florimel to play a 'roaring girl' and swagger in breeches to mock the male sex. Here she is admiring herself in a mirror:

Save you, Monsieur Florimel! Faith, methinks you are a very jaunty fellow, *poudré et ajusté* as well as the best of 'em. I can manage the little comb, set my hat, shake my garniture, toss about my empty noddle, walk with a courant slur, and at every step peck down my head.

(5.1)

The 'breeches scenes', with women in men's clothing, were written for about a quarter of the comedies in the beginning, and plot after plot was devised to exploit the actress's sexuality and put her in titillating situations. These were parts that enabled an ambitious actress to better her lot, like Nell Gwyn and Elizabeth Barry, by finding a wealthy 'keeper' from the audience. Only after the appearance of actresses on the stage became more common and the theatre more respectable did the breeches convention disappear.

*The Country Wife* (1675) by William Wycherley (1640–1716) has one of the best examples of a well-integrated breeches plot. The play borrowed the rudimentary and infallible story of the old husband with a young wife from Molière's *L'Ecole des femmes* and then introduced the libertine Horner, played by the elegant Charles Hart, as the attractive male lead who thinks up the vicious ruse of pretending impotence (the idea possibly borrowed from Terence's *Eunuchus*) in order to outwit gullible husbands and gain access to compliant wives. Horner is soon encouraged to believe that the simple country girl whom jealous old Pinchwife has married has been disguised as her own brother to hide her from the depravity of the Town. The breeches scenes begin when Horner tries to unmask her.

However, the creation of Margery Pinchwife, the supreme achievement of this comedy, owes nothing to any borrowings. She was played by Elizabeth Boutell, and Betterton's *History of the English Stage* (1741) records that this actress 'was low of stature, had very agreeable features, a good complexion, but a childish look ... she generally acted the young innocent lady whom all the heroes are mad in love with' (21). Her three roles in the play – as the unsophisticated wife, as the pretended boy in breeches and peruke, and as herself, the knowing actress – emerge essentially as singular products of the Restoration comic stage. All the elements of a theatrical charade are present in her, and her contribution to the comedy is shot through with innuendo and ambiguity to bewitch her audience.

In 3.2 Horner descends upon Pinchwife and Margery in the New Exchange and 'takes hold' of her:

HORNER. ... Prithee, Pinchwife, who is this pretty young gentleman?

PINCHWIFE. One to whom I'm a guardian. – (*Aside.*) I wish I could keep her out of your hands.

HORNER. Who is he? I never saw anything so pretty in all my life.

PINCHWIFE. Pshaw! do not look upon him so much; he's a poor bashful youth, you'll put him out of countenance. – Come away, brother.

Pinchwife is trying to pull his wife away and Horner to hold her, with Margery the unwilling and willing pawn between them. While this goes on, all three in rivalry appeal for the support of the house through aside or glance or innuendo. During the dispute between the men, Margery's ambivalence is wonderfully conveyed when her attempt to keep a sober expression on her face, and to move and behave like a man is repeatedly betrayed by her blushes and giggles and wriggles of pleasure. For his part Horner is determined to make her reveal her true sex and change back from boy to girl by handling her, flattering her with that reiterated epithet 'pretty' and, finally, making a blatant statement of his love. Meanwhile the furious Pinchwife has trapped himself by his own trickery, and tries not to repossess her lest he reveal her identity. In any case his protestations that she is 'a poor bashful youth' are

utterly betrayed by her obvious eagerness to hear more. All the principals are playing a double game, with Horner increasingly tormenting Pinchwife, teasing Margery and gratifying himself at Pinchwife's expense. However, Margery herself enjoys her predicament every bit, and when in the end Horner and his friends kiss her one after the other, her disguise is forgotten, the truth about her identity is transparent and she is in a dizzy heaven of delight. As Margery moves away from her gaoler towards the friendly audience, it cannot be sure whether her vibrant voice is that of an innocent girl or a knowing actress.

Such pregnant situations are strongly devised for verbal innuendo and improvisational acting and conveyed in a dialogue that for the first time in this period allowed the audience to hear itself speaking. Nevertheless, the world of the play is peopled by Horners and Pinchwives, Fidgets and Squeamishes, and the characters can only be taken as the caricatures their names suggest. For, unlike Etherege's, the play moves at a brisk pace on the level of farce, and its cool tone is wholly unsentimental. Horner's adultery is observed with a dry, comic eye, and when he is finally cornered by the women in the notorious 'china scene' (4.3), even he becomes an object of laughter. The technique of performance in this play is one of unemotional distancing, developing theatre as a social game in order to project a mad vision of wild and licentious sexuality.

In 1675 at Drury Lane *The Country Wife* took London by storm. The text was reprinted five times in twenty years, and the play remained popular on the stage well into the next century. Eventually its explicit subject-matter and outdated manners prompted a bland, expurgated version by David Garrick who renamed it *The Country Girl* (1766), but the evisceration proved to be its undoing. When Montague Summers revived the original to gasps of horror and dismay in 1924, it came up fresh as paint, and the modern London stage saw the first of a long line of modern Margerys played with every interpretation from country bumpkin to sly child bride, and it included some of the best comediennes of this century: Isabel Jeans, Ruth Gordon, Joan Plowright, Maggie Smith. It was also the start of the English stage's general

rediscovery of the comic brilliance of the Restoration, a reassessment of its stageworthiness that has continued to this day with increasing admiration.

### A note on the women playwrights: *The Rover*

It is a surprising consequence of the advent of women on the public stage in this period that a number of women also took to playwriting. Mary Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle had published plays after 1662 with no intention of having them produced, and Katherine Philips had her tragedy *Pompey* produced in Dublin in 1663. It was altogether different with Aphra Behn (1640–89), who was 'forced to write for bread and not ashamed to own it', overcoming the immense social difficulties facing a woman writer. She wrote a prolific sixteen or eighteen plays (in 1677 no fewer than four comedies including *The Town-Fopp* and *The Rover*), boldly exploiting the new sexual licence, and before the end of the century her example had encouraged her more shadowy contemporaries Mary Pix, Mary De La Riviere Manley and Catherine Trotter to invade the stage chiefly with heroic tragedy. In the next century and contemporary with Farquhar, Susannah Centlivre (*A Bold Stroke for a Wife*, 1718) successfully continued the tradition in a less profane, sentimental style, and before the end of the century Elizabeth Inchbald (*Every One Has His Fault*, 1793) was writing a bitter-sweet comedy of domestic life. These writers brought with them a certain interest in familial issues and a more subtle psychological insight into married life.

Behn's themes are, however, of less interest than her craft. To draw an audience her comic situations were as bawdy as those of her male rivals. Her female characters were less passive and more witty, even more scandalous, than before, but she managed to bring a sly female perspective to the characterization of her men, whose sexual libidos usually revealed them as bullies, buffoons and foppish poseurs. In *The Rover*, the cavalier Willmore is 'the Rover' (first played by Betterton, possibly as a lusty travesty of the rakish Earl of

Rochester) who meets his match in verbal duels with Mrs Elizabeth Barry as the vivacious Hellena:

WILLMORE. But hark'ee: the bargain is now made, but is it not fit we should know each other's names, that when we have reason to curse one another hereafter, and people ask me who 'tis I give to the devil, I may at least be able to tell what family you came of?

HELLENA. Good reason, captain; and where I have cause, as I doubt not but I shall have plentiful, that I may know at whom to throw my – blessings, I beseech ye your name.

WILLMORE. I am called Robert the Constant.

HELLENA. A very fine name! Pray was it your faulkner [hawker] or butler that christened you? Do they not use to whistle when they call you?

WILLMORE. I hope you have a better, that a man may name without crossing himself – you are so merry with mine.

HELLENA. I am called Hellena the Inconstant.

(act 5)

Such sparring of the sexes is in the impudent English tradition of Shakespeare's Beatrice and Benedick and Congreve's Mirabel and Millamant, and it here touches with its mockery, not only sex, but also society.

This is far from the 'woful' play expected of a woman: her scenes are spiced with wit and they sparkle with high-spirited slapstick and sword-play, as well as masquerades, disguises and breeches parts, for she is just as interested to expose the female anatomy to view as are her male counterparts, and to contrive immodest scenes that will ensure the success of her play. In one notorious scene (3.3) the 'jilting wench' Lucetta manages to have the puritanical Ned Blunt, a foolish country squire, strip to '*his shirt and drawers*' before he is unceremoniously dropped through a trap into a common 'shore' [sewer]. Florinda (played by Mary Betterton) is seen at night '*in an undress*', with a line to Willmore rich in its implicit direction, 'Wicked man, unhand me!' (3.5). In 4.2 the previously prospective nun Hellena pursues her man provocatively, if conventionally, dressed as a boy in breeches. In

4.5 Blunt is still in his drawers and offering Florinda violent rape:

I will kiss and beat thee all over, kiss and see thee all over; thou shalt lie with me too, not that I care for the enjoyment, but to let thee see I have ta'en deliberate malice to thee, and will be revenged on one whore for the sins of another . . .

In another audacious scene (act 5) which at first hints at the gang-rape of a well-born lady, the gentlemen draw swords to choose who shall have Florinda, at the time unknown to them because she is naughtily wearing the customary vizard-mask; however, the lucky man is none other than her brother Don Pedro, whose action when he gives chase thereby caps everything by suggesting the final outrage – incest.

It may be argued that Behn has appropriately placed her play and her predatory men in a world of Neapolitan carnival, one of courtesans and gipsies, masquing and dancing, but Linda LaBranche pointed out to me that the basic structure of the action in *The Rover*, for all its bristling intrigue and mistaken identity, has little to do with the subtlety of plotting and everything to do with a progressively physical 'towsing' of the actresses. The play advances from an anonymous, impersonal presentation of masked courtesans in the first act to the more particular and individualized licentiousness at the end – working out increasingly shocking scenes in which ladies of varying degrees of virtue are exposed to more and more sexual violence. Whether this is an instance of a certain shrewd feminism emerging on a militant Restoration stage is a question.

### The comedy of the sexes tempered: *The Way of the World*, *The Beaux' Stratagem*

The 1690s were as theatrically animated, and as brazen, as the 1660s. The triplet of earlier comedies by William Congreve (1670–1729), *The Old Bachelor* (1693), *The Double Dealer*

(1694) and the lively *Love for Love* (1695), were written and well received in the best farcical and amoral spirit of the day, as were the racy and vivacious comedies of Thomas Shadwell (?1642–1692) with *The Squire of Alsatia* (1688) and *Bury Fair* (1689), and Sir John Vanbrugh (1664–1726) with *The Relapse* (1696) and *The Provoked Wife* (1697). However, it is thought that Congreve's next comedy, *The Way of the World* (1700), suffered at the box office because of the almost inevitable attack on the increasingly unbridled content of the London stage, although its failure in its own day may well have been due less to the new moralism than to its impossibly muddled plot. The attack came from the Rev. Jeremy Collier in his *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (1698), and had the immediate effect of driving the Restoration jokes about sex and marriage into other channels.

Today, however, the reputation for being the most exquisite of all Restoration comedies and having the most subtle characterization rests with this same *The Way of the World*, which is nowadays often presented as something of a show-piece, a measure of an actor's accomplishment as a period stylist. It was played at Lincoln's Inn Fields with an all-star cast that included Elinor Leigh, an actress who delighted Colley Cibber with 'her very droll way of dressing the pretty foibles of superannuated beauties . . . and modest stale maids that had missed their market' (*An Apology*, ch. 5); she had played the avid Lady Plyant in *The Double Dealer* and here she played her lusty successor, the doyenne Lady Wishfort. The cast also included the impeccable Anne Bracegirdle, who had inherited Elizabeth Boutell's parts and here played the radiant and sophisticated young Millamant. This comedy is a generation after *The Country Wife*, and Congreve is the contemporary of Addison and Steele, but it has the virtue of having notably re-created on stage a likeness of the way of life, if not of the way of the world, that its author perceived. He did it through a verbal control of tone and attitude, and the play provides a superb example of what a fastidious choice of words, a dancing style of speech and a confident pace and rhythm, could do to chisel out a character and animate it in performance.



11 William Congreve, *The Way of the World*, 1700. Mrs Pitt as Lady Wishfort, act 3, in a print from Congreve's *Works*, 1776.



It is said that Congreve wrote the part of Millamant for Anne Bracegirdle (?1673–1748), whose admirer he was. If so, he flattered the character with lines that exhibit the actress's grace and charm, and direct her delicate coquetry, and some of her sparkle is captured in everything she says and does. Her first entrance in act 2 with the fop Witwoud in tow is announced unforgettably by her admirer Mirabell as if she were a ship at sea ('Here she comes, i'faith, full sail, with her fan spread and her streamers out, and a shoal of fools for tenders'), and when he asks why there is no 'flock of fine perukes' hovering round her, her languid dismissal of the question is heard in the brief witticism of 'Oh, I have denied myself airs today' as she slips away from him. Witwoud tries to get her attention with one or two quips, only to receive similar rebuffs: 'Dear Mr Witwoud, truce with your similitudes' and 'Mincing, stand between me and his wit', and again she spins away. When she finally accedes to Mincing's supposed reason for her tardiness, that she 'stayed to peruse a pecquet of letters', song and dance are in her celebrated lines:

Oh, aye, letters; I had letters. I am persecuted with letters. I hate letters. Nobody knows how to write letters; and yet one has 'em, one does not know why. They serve one to pin up one's hair.

There is more here than the indifference of idleness. As she displays herself she finds time to change the subject twice, passing a comment on the epistolary art as well as putting down her questioner with the impertinent conceit of the throw-away coda. Such dialogue constitutes the notation for a ballet and is a stagecraft in itself.

Congreve's verbal wit and agility are used to mark the qualities in his comic characters in a variety of ways. In particular, his choice of words helps the actor to distinguish one character from another – a Witwoud, say, from a Mirabell:

WITWOD. My dear, I ask ten thousand pardons. Gad,  
I have forgot what I was going to say to you!  
MIRABELL. I thank you heartily, heartily.

The decorum of speech is 'to frame each person so / That by his common talk you may his nature rightly know' (Richard Edwards, *Damon and Pithias*, (1571)). Congreve's choice of words permits his audience to anatomize a character and to know him by his speech.

The energy of wit also stoked the fire of innuendo and *double entendre*, the jokes and puns shared with the audience. They were always addressed to the house and thrived in the Restoration playhouse, since the intimate scale of performance and the homogeneity of speaker and spectator made such quips possible. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the one convention of speech which especially flourished at this time was that of the *aside*. Since the actor entered downstage through a proscenium door, and played on the apron under chandeliers that also illuminated the audience, the aside, explicit and implicit (i.e., marked and unmarked), became ubiquitous, with some scenes alive with the consequent double-talk and the audience made forcibly aware of two views of the scene simultaneously.

Wycherley used the device more explicitly, and with particular gusto in contests between the Pinchwives: 'O jemy! Is this he that was in love with me?' – 'How she gazes on him! the devil!' Congreve's *The Way of the World*, by contrast, bristles with more implicit asides, especially in scenes in which the audience is to perceive the ironic levels of comedy more slyly. When, for example, Lady Wishfort prepares to meet her supposed lover Sir Rowland, she practises her postures and attitudes, explaining that 'A little scorn is alluring', her woman Foible's smooth response is, 'A little scorn becomes your ladyship' (act 3).

The new element emerging strongly in Congreve is one of *verbal humour*, in which wit results because of a discrepancy between a character's situation and what he says, the incongruity producing laughter. This effect upon an audience in the theatre has recently been named 'discrepant awareness'. In the mock courtship of Lady Wishfort and Sir Rowland, for example, the hoax forces a spirit of parody, verging on burlesque, upon the performance and colours everything said

by the two of them, so that the audience is acutely conscious of their hypocrisy:

LADY WISHFORT. If you think the least scruple of carnality was an ingredient –

WAITWELL. Dear madam, no. You are all camphire and frankincense, all chastity and odour.

It is possible that a witty obliqueness was prompted by the need to evade Collier's censoriousness. In any event, this style of parody and verbal humour becomes a powerful tool in the comedy of Farquhar.

George Farquhar (1678–1707) was among the first of the Restoration comedians who were 'professionals'. He had had some experience as an actor in Dublin's Smock Alley Theatre and had there found a friend in the outstanding actor Robert Wilks (1665–1732). All this was before Farquhar wrote a series of effective comedies for the London stage; these included *Sir Harry Wildair* (1701), which compromised with Collier by making its hero a rake when he was drunk and a moralist when he was sober. His last two comedies broke with the urban tradition and were set in the country. *The Recruiting Officer* (1706) profited from Farquhar's short experience of a commission in the army, and had Shrewsbury as its setting. Its hero, the recruiting officer, was Captain Plume (played by Wilks), who did his recruiting in the bedroom, and it invented a brilliant variation on the fop in the regimental and uniformed Captain Brazen (played by Colley Cibber (1671–1757), an actor who had a gift for playing fops: Sir Novelty Fashion in his own *Love's Last Shift* (1696), and Lord Foppington in Vanbrugh's *The Relapse*, among others). Farquhar's play also created an exceptional breeches part for his heroine, Silvia (Anne Oldfield): she joined the army as an ensign to follow her lover and consequently found herself the victim of some strange military rites of passage. It can be said that in plotting, at least, Farquhar had a good sense of the stage.

*The Beaux' Stratagem* (1707), played at the Haymarket, was again set in the country, this time in Lichfield. The

provincial life it depicted was full of characters who suggest the wider range of interest in the play: a French prisoner of war and an Irish priest, an innkeeper and his daughter (Cherry the barmaid), a familiar country lady of good works and a highwayman – something of the Hogarthian world view is here, and the play smacks of the alehouse more than the boudoir. The young male lead has been multiplied to become Aimwell and Archer, a pair of rakes with their eye to the main chance, the first more principled than the second – retaining the best of both worlds, but essentially making another concession to the new morality. Their female objects of interest are two inviting prospects trapped in the country and observed with some sympathy: the young heiress Dorinda and the beautiful young wife of the repulsive Squire Sullen. The comedy consists in the efforts of the men to gain access to these ladies.

Farquhar's style of writing, however, is yet another kind of stagecraft. It has been characterized by some critics as romantic and sentimental, but in performance its parodistic language comes across with burlesque exuberance. Even the thinking about marital problems and divorce that surprisingly occurs in the last act is expressed with playful nonchalance. This verbal technique keeps reality at arm's length, diminishes an audience's resistance and ensures its freedom to laugh. The function is seen most clearly in the scenes of Archer's seduction of Mrs Sullen, where the sexuality is strong and the comic tension high; but it is all a trick.

Archer sees her portrait and promptly '*looks at the picture and Mrs Sullen three or four times, by turns*'.

ARCHER. Pray, madam, who drew it?

MRS SULLEN. A famous hand, sir.

ARCHER. A famous hand, madam! Your eyes, indeed, are featured there, but where's the sparkling moisture, shining fluid, in which they swim? The picture indeed has your dimples, but where's the swarm of killing Cupids that should ambush there? ...

With the clever rake's repeated pausing, turning and staring at Mrs Sullen, his acting is marvellously overdone, like his words. The speech continues in this style of saccharine parody to a point of disbelief – at least for the audience, if not for the lady. Besides, in act 1 he had spoken to Cherry in much the same way. The next time Archer meets Mrs Sullen, the scene is her bedchamber, no less; provocatively, she is '*undressed*', a bed has been pushed out and Archer is hiding in a 'closet', i.e., behind one of the proscenium doors. He leaps out and '*takes her hand*'.

MRS SULLEN. What, sir, do you intend to be rude?

ARCHER. Yes, madam, if you please.

MRS SULLEN. In the name of wonder, whence came ye?

ARCHER. From the skies, madam. I'm a Jupiter in love,  
and you shall be my Alcmena.

(5.2)

The rhythms and allusions are more ridiculous than ever. Archer is quickly on his knees to her and Mrs Sullen is soon running from him with a shriek that is too faint to be believed. The chase that ensues is round the formidable object that is her bed, until consummation is interrupted by the comic entrance of the servant Scrub '*in his breeches, and one shoe*'. The audience may decide whether this is romantic love or all an entertaining sham; at all events, Restoration comic form is bursting at the seams.

The last decades of the seventeenth century saw extreme differences of stage practice. If it is a matter for wonder that the wildly polarized genres since known as the heroic drama and the comedy of manners could share the same stage, it is no less strange that extremes of difference in stage setting and acting style could go with them. However, the solemn plays died and left only their structural engineering behind, whereas the conventions of the comedy lived on as an indestructible dramatic force. The former perpetuated a proscenium arch which could magically conceal a new spectacle that flourished and developed and became part of the concept of 'theatre' a wider public understood. The latter used the proscenium frame as a mirror to reflect a common humanity. Restoration

comedy, whatever the moral verdict upon it, supported an enduring satire, a comfortable humour and a technique of sexual comedy that provided the basis for English drawing-room comedy to this day.