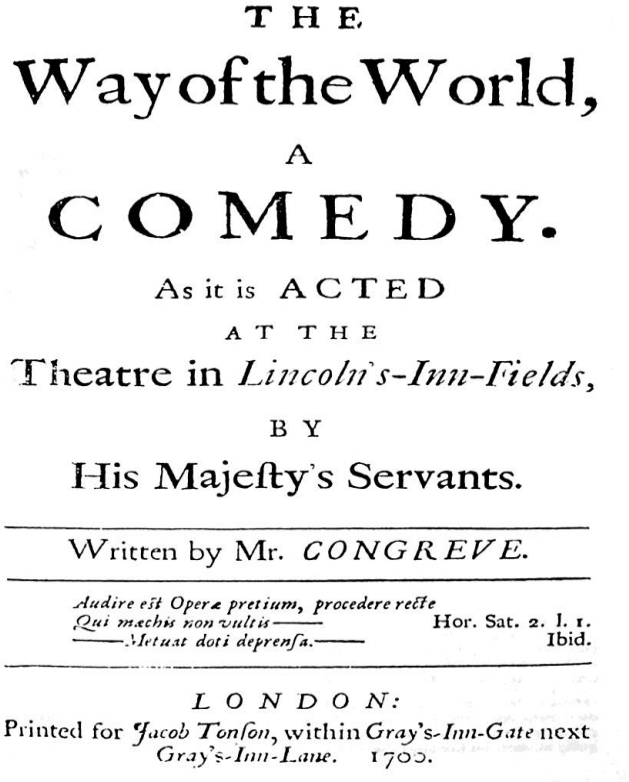
The Department of English

RAJA N.L. KHAN WOMEN'S COLLEGE (AUTONOMOUS)
Midnapore, West Bengal

Course material- 1 on

The Way of the World

(General Introduction)



THE
Way of the World,
A
COMEDY.
As it is ACTED
AT THE
Theatre in *Lincoln's-Inn-Fields*,
BY
His Majesty's Servants.

Written by Mr. *CONGREVE*.

Audire est Opera pretium, procedere recte
Qui mechis non vultis — Hor. Sat. 2. l. 1.
— *Metuat doti deprensa.* — Ibid.

LONDON:
Printed for *Jacob Tonson*, within *Gray's-Inn-Gate* next *Gray's-Inn-Lane*. 1700.

For

English Hons.

Semester- II

Paper- HCC3 (*British Literature: 18th Century*)

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The Way of the World

The socio-political and cultural scene in Restoration England

Monarchy was brought back to England after a tiresome and claustrophobic tenure under the Puritan regime, when Charles II finally ascended the celebrated throne of England after spending not-so-memorable years in exile in France. The term 'Restoration' deals in a very problematic ground, thanks to its multilayered significance in the lives of the English men. On one hand, the term refers to the actual historical event of a king taking his throne back and gifting the country another run of monarchy, on the other hand it is also used as a term to refer to all the years clubbed together that followed under his reign, i.e. from 1660-1685 and often the brief reign of his younger brother James II (1685-1688) afterwards. According to some scholars of Restoration literature, the use of this term is often extended contextually to include the period of the later Stuart monarchy until the death of Queen Anne and the accession of the Hanoverian George I in 1714.

The departure of the orthodox Puritans also meant a re-establishment of religious stability in England, once monarchy was restored in the country. Subsequently, the Church of England emerged as the supreme religious authority and was central to all the religious activities and reforms that ensued thereafter. Moreover, the introduction of the Clarendon Code and the Act of Uniformity in the year 1662 strengthened the establishment of religious stability in England.

There can be no doubt whatsoever that the Restoration was the most significant phenomenon that happened to England in the later part of the seventeenth century, also marking the end of Puritan morality that suffocated the citizens for the last couple of decades. Historian Roger Baker was indeed right in gauging the significance of the event when, to articulate the suddenness of the event, he writes, "the pendulum [of England's

morality] swung from repression to license more or less overnight."(85) Intolerance ran rampant when Cromwell called the cards and whimsically, the Theatre houses that didn't please him, were shut down. Now that the King is having his say, after restoration, Theatre houses started to reopen. Charles II was too eager to provide patronage to the theatre houses, probably because he missed the entertainments he enjoyed in the French court. However, the dearth of newer plays became profound. Old plays by the Elizabethans and Jacobeans were being appropriated or staged on occasions. This gap heralded a specific kind of plays that we came to call "Restoration plays". These were the plays that brought newer dimensions to theatre production as age old morality was flung into the air and mocked. Now, the rakes and the dandies entered the scene who would rule the stage with blatant display of licentiousness which gradually became the code of the day. However, the single most important modification in the Restoration theatre was the incorporation of the female actors in the production of plays.

Progression of Restoration literature

The literature that flourished after restoration has an essence of its own. Representing the unique fervor of the time, the literature of the age catered to the taste of the society. However, categorizing the entire corpus of literary output of the age and branding them under labels would be an offence, considering the fact that the literary works produced during the period boasted to variety and addressed a huge range of issues. It was no wonder, therefore, when we find this age of moral degradation producing brilliant masterpiece like *Paradise Lost*, that went on to become one of the most celebrated works in the world literature. However, this was also the period famous for the production of high spirited comedies that are full of illicit sexual intrigues and trickery at the heart of the play. The empirical philosopher Locke was actively at work while the Earl of Rochester's *Sodom* was published too. This period also had to tackle the hysterical jibes of Jeremy Collier while Dryden blessed the world, at times perplexed it too, with his

brilliant satires and works of criticism. This was also the period that oversaw the rise and growth of the periodicals too.

- **Poetry:** Much like the other ages, Restoration period also proved to be an age where poetry enjoyed a position of respect and has been practiced by brilliant poets. Poems of the period reflected the spirit of the time quite adequately, addressing issues ranging from political concerns to issues dealing with intimate personal space. Various forms of poetry were mastered and practiced abundantly, producing pieces of literature that would be read through centuries to come.

- **Prose:** Political pamphleteering and religious writings dominated the scene of pose during the Restoration period. Fiction and rose journalism cropped up to be crucial medium during this period, and would go on to become the most extensively circulated medium in later years. Economic and philosophical treatise as a medium was also practiced ceremoniously during this period.

- **Theatre:** The most profound change that jarred the post Restoration English literary scene was undoubtedly the reopening of the theatre. Drama started rising form its ashes and came back with a bang to become one of the most popular forms of art and expression. The King's and the Duke's Company, were established in London. The comedy of manners grew in stature through the pen of playwrights like Etherege, Wycherley, Congreve and others.

References and suggestions for further reading

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Note: The following parts of the module will be uploaded soon.

P.S.: I have attached an essay, "Theory of the Comedy in the Restoration" by Robert D. Hume. Hope you find it useful.

Theory of Comedy in the Restoration
Author(s): Robert D. Hume
Source: *Modern Philology*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (May, 1973), pp. 302-318
Published by: The University of Chicago Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/436350
Accessed: 23-04-2020 11:37 UTC

THEORY OF COMEDY IN THE RESTORATION

ROBERT D. HUME

"Comedy must instruct and please by 'holding the glass' to a society in need of satiric correction." Understandably enough, modern critics have found such commonplaces little help in dealing with the best plays of the time. Restoration literary theory appears in scraps, and recent studies of it have tended to consist either of dismal lists of puzzling clichés or of heaps of evidence collected to support preconceptions.[1] If, however, we can get beyond the platitudes and consider more practical issues, we will find information of real value in reading Restoration comedies. And in light of recent disagreements about the very nature of "Restoration comedy" and how we should respond to it, this seems a worthwhile endeavor.

The difficulties must not be minimized. The relevant documents are scattered, occasional, and often partisan. A real case can be made for the charge that Restoration writers pay lip service to inherited moral platitudes which they disregard in practice. Puritan outcry about the reopening of the theaters induced a defensive attitude from the start, and the largest body of Restoration comment on the nature and function of comedy appears at the very end of the century in the form of answers to Jeremy Collier. The resultant piety is certainly suspect. The question of time is equally awkward: we are dealing with a period of nearly half a century and should not uncritically lump the pronouncements of the 1690s with those of the 1660s. Another problem is simply the immense diversity of the works labeled "a comedy" in this period. Anyone who has read more than the few well-known plays is aware that our assumptions about generic distinctions can be very misleading. Sarup Singh's work suffers badly from his assuming that all other sorts of comedy are merely secondary or contributory to the "comedy of manners." His procedure in this respect is a common one, but it supposes that the critic is entitled to isolate what he likes best and then build a theoretical foundation to support it. Such favoritism and oversimplification will not do. Restoration playwrights do not work to a tidy formula, and the modern critic must expect to find a continuing state of confusion and change in both theory and plays. Indeed, it quickly becomes evident that beyond the level of a few clichés there is no such thing as a standard "theory of comedy" in this period. My aim then is merely to map out some of the fundamental disagreements and divergences of opinion about the subjects, structures, component devices, and proper effect of comedy. What will emerge, I believe, is an increased sense of the considerable diversity in the aims and methods of comedy for which there is warrant in contemporary theory.

I

Certain ideas about comedy are so widespread in this period that a minimum of examples will suffice. Thus on the issue of moral utility, Congreve and the despised Blackmore are in perfect accord. "Comedy (says *Aristotle*) is an Imitation of the worse sort of People . . . in respect to their

[1] For an example of each, see Edwin E. Williams, "Dr. James Drake and Restoration Theory of Comedy," *Review of English Studies* 15 (1939): 180–91; and Sarup Singh, *The Theory of Drama in the Restoration Period* (Bombay, 1963), chap. 8.

Manners. . . . They must be exposed after a ridiculous manner: For Men are to be laugh'd out of their Vices in Comedy."[2] "The business of Comedy [is] to render Vice ridiculous, to expose it to publick Derision and Contempt, and to make Men asham'd of Vile and Sordid Actions."[3] Practically everyone says the same thing at one time or another—including Flecknoe, Dryden, Shadwell, Aphra Behn, Farquhar, and Dennis. However, some long-standing moral objections to the plays involved cast doubt on the completeness of their moral uplift. Dryden, for example, insisted indignantly in his preface that *Mr. Limberham* (1678)—a roaring, dirty farce—was "an honest Satyre." We may well wonder just how many other moral claims are of equal sincerity. Unfortunately, claims for the moral effect of comedy possessed an almost sacred status, and whatever writers may have thought of them, they went almost entirely unchallenged. Dryden could say that he aimed primarily to please, secondarily to instruct (though he was attacked for it), and from others there are isolated jibes at "reformers."[4] But only in Mrs. Behn's preface to *The Dutch Lover* (1673), I believe, is there a harsh, reasoned, full-scale denial of moral instruction in comedy:

In my judgement the increasing number of our latter Plays have not done much more towards the amending of men's Morals, or their Wit, than hath the frequent Preaching, which this last age hath been pester'd with, (indeed without all Controversie they have done less harm) nor can I once imagine what temptation anyone can have to expect it from them; for sure I am no Play was ever writ with that design. If you consider Tragedy, you'll find their best of Characters unlikely patterns for a wise man to pursue. . . . And as for Comedie, the finest folks you meet with there are still unfitter for your imitation, for though within a leaf or two of the Prologue, you are told that they are people of Wit, good Humour, good Manners, and all that: yet if the Authors did not kindly add their proper names, you'd never know them by their Characters. . . . Even those persons that were meant to be the ingenious Censors of the Play, have either prov'd the most debauch'd, or most unwittie people in the Company: nor is this error very lamentable, since as I take it Comedie was never meant, either for a converting or a conforming Ordinance: In short, I think a Play the best divertisement that wise men have: but I do also think them nothing so [important as those (?)] who do discourse as formallie about the rules of it, as if 'twere the grand affair of humane life. This being my opinion of Plays, I studied only to make this as entertaining as I could.[5]

Edwin Williams is quite unhappy about this brutal denunciation of claims for the moral utility of drama, and he hastens to dismiss the passage as "ironic."[6] In fairness one must point out that in the dedication of *The Lucky Chance* (1687)—a cheerful farce—Behn states that plays "are secret Instructions to the People, in things that 'tis impossible to insinuate into them any other Way. . . . 'Tis Example alone that inspires Morality, and best establishes Vertue."[7] Nonetheless, Behn's earlier blast at the supposed moral function of comedy seems to describe prevailing practice a good deal better than the moral commonplaces Williams derives from James Drake. The formula runs something like this: "The business of comedy is to recommend virtue and discountenance vice. Its effectiveness depends on a realistic copying of the

[2] William Congreve, *Amendments of Mr. Collier's False and Imperfect Citations* (London, 1698), pp. 7–8.

[3] Sir Richard Blackmore, "Preface to *Prince Arthur*," in *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. J. E. Spingarn (Oxford, 1908–9), 3: 228.

[4] E.g., John Lacy mocks preaching in plays in his prologue to *The Dumb Lady* (pub. 1672)—but he was an actor-farce-wright who announced in the prologue to *The Old Troop* that he wrote "To you that laugh aloud with wide-mouth'd grace, / To see *Jack Pudding*'s Custard thrown in's face."

[5] *The Works of Aphra Behn*, ed. Montague Summers (1915; reprint ed., New York, 1967), 1: 222–23.

[6] Williams, p. 183.

[7] Behn's *Works* (n. 5 above), 3: 183.

characters and manners of the time, though personal satire is not allowable. The characters should be neither vicious nor admirable. The author aims to rouse scorn rather than indignation, and an intellectual rather than an emotional response." I am paraphrasing Drake here, partly because Williams emphasizes his complete "orthodoxy" and urges that we "accept him as a spokesman of the period"[8]—which a number of recent critics have done. Two questions arise: does this theory tell us much about contemporary practice, and does it really represent theoretical orthodoxy? I think the answer to both is No. Are such successes as *The Adventures of Five Hours*, *Sir Martin Mar-all*, *The Citizen Turn'd Gentleman*, *The Spanish Fryar*, *Love for Love*, and *The Recruiting Officer* written to such a formula? Clearly not, and neither are the plays we now rate higher. Even where the Drakean description does fit, it does not seem comfortably to get at the plays' essential nature, much less allow for their differences. Within this supposedly orthodox formula there are actually a number of controversial issues: realism, debauched versus virtuous characters, personal attack, the nature of comic "effect"—all of which will require exploration in the course of this essay. I think it best to start, however, with an examination of an influential attempt at categorization of Restoration comedies.

Although the extent of the diversity of Restoration comic theory has gone almost unrecognized, critics have long been worried by the small number of the "wit" comedies which are generally taken to characterize comedy in this period. Allardyce Nicoll rightly notes that several sorts of comedy coexist. He rather awkwardly identifies them as (1) Jonsonian, (2) intrigue, (3) Dryden, (4) manners, (5) farce, (6) sentiment.[9] Plainly such a division is a counsel of despair: the categories have incongruous bases; Dryden was neither *sui generis* nor consistent; many Jonsonian plays have "intrigue" plots, so do many farces, and so does *The Plain Dealer*—which is a comedy of manners according to most critics, a satire or a wit comedy according to others. Such a system of categorization obscures as much as it clarifies about the playwrights' aims and methods.

The commonest way of differentiating methods has been to extract from contemporary arguments a basic opposition between wit and manners comedy on the one hand, and comedy of humours on the other. The crisp but not unfriendly exchanges between Dryden and Shadwell (1668–71) are often quoted. They are worth examining again, however, because their import is often misunderstood. In his preface to *An Evening's Love* (1671), Dryden speaks of the importance of "our refining the Courtship, Raillery, and Conversation of Playes" and announces his "disgust of low Comedy" and its "ill nature in the observation of . . . follies" of "the vulgar." Dryden finds Jonson strong on judgment but short on wit, and emphasizes his preference for "more of the *Urbana*, *venusta*, *salsa*, *faceta*" in place of "the natural imitation of folly."[10] Shadwell, too, snarls vigorously at farce, but he speaks strongly in favor of the Jonsonian method—what Dryden calls "natural imitation of folly"—which stresses humour and judgment rather than wit or refinement. And Shadwell says bluntly that "my design was . . . to reprehend some of the Vices and Follies of the Age, which I take to be the

[8] Williams, p. 190.

[9] Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of English Drama 1660–1900*, vol. 1, 4th ed. (Cambridge, 1952). A more satisfactory, if rough and unpretentious division is offered by John Harold Wilson: farce, burlesque, intrigue, humour, satire, wit, tears (*A Preface to Restoration Drama* [1965; reprint ed., Cambridge, Mass., 1968]).

[10] Preface to *An Evening's Love*, in *The Works of John Dryden*, vol. 10, ed. Maximillian E. Novak and George R. Guffey (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1970), pp. 202–6.

most proper, and most useful way of writing Comedy," going on to object to Dryden's emphasis on "delight" rather than "instruction" in the "Defence of an Essay of Dramatique Poesie" (1668).[11]

Supposedly we can see here the basis of a fundamental division between the low, crudely instructive "comedy of humours," and the gay, witty, refined "comedy of manners." Actually, the issues involved seem a good deal more complicated. For one thing, both men's positions prove temporary. Shadwell's first two original comedies are quite atypical of his work as a whole, and though he talks about Jonson and humours for the rest of his life, one cannot fully trust this terminology, which he happily uses to describe his protoexemplary plays after 1688. Indeed, within a year of the preface to *The Humorists*, he had written *Epsom-Wells*, a play which seems to fall halfway between Wycherley's *Love in a Wood* and *The Country Wife*. And in *Epsom* Shadwell promptly proceeds to employ the witty and "indecent" lead characters of whom he had complained so bitterly in his first two prefaces.[12]

Turning to Dryden's part in the exchange one is faced with an awkward truth: his comments are being pressed into service for lack of any theoretical statement from Etherege or Wycherley. This expedient would seem more satisfactory if Dryden had written or were ever to write the sort of wit or manners comedy he is alleged to be advocating. Actually, *Secret Love* and *Marriage A-la-Mode* are as close as he comes to fulfilling his prescriptions here—a pair of semiheroic, double-plot plays, set abroad, and a far cry from *The Man of Mode* or *The Country Wife*. Dryden does see a fundamental distinction between comedy of wit and comedy of humour: "The chief end of it [comedy] is divertisement and delight. . . . For the business of the Poet is to make you laugh: when he writes humour he makes folly ridiculous; *when wit, he moves you, if not alwayes to laughter, yet to a pleasure that is more noble.*"[13] As I shall suggest in detail later, what Dryden seems to have in mind is not a division between two sorts of satiric correction, but rather a distinction between comedy regarded as the vehicle of corrective satire and comedy conceived as an almost exemplary display of social grace and witty refinement. Some critics have chosen to regard the plays of Etherege, Wycherley, and Congreve in this light, but some impressive contrary evidence has been assembled in recent years.[14] Wycherley is now often regarded as a hard-hitting satirist or a savagely funny skeptic, and—in his reply to Collier at least—Congreve sounds much more like Shadwell than like Dryden.

One is left to conclude that this supposedly neat and tidy debate on wit versus humour leads straight to total confusion. No shortcut is available: to make sense of Restoration pronouncements on the nature of comedy, one must start by looking at areas of debate and disagreement on more practical matters.

II

Perhaps the most crucial issue boils down to this question: Is "Restoration comedy" entirely a comedy of *ridicule?* The answer is No, and herein lies the key to much critical difficulty. For despite the

[11] Preface to *The Humorists*, in *The Works of Thomas Shadwell*, ed. Montague Summers (London, 1927), 1: 183–84.

[12] "In the *Playes* which have been wrote of late, there is no such thing as perfect Character, but the two chief persons are most commonly a Swearing, Drinking, Whoring, Ruffian for a Lover, and an impudent ill-bred *tomrig* for a Mistress, and these are the fine People of the *Play* . . . their chief Subject is bawdy, and profaneness" (preface to *The Sullen Lovers*, in Shadwell's *Works*, 1: 11; cf. the preface to *The Royal Shepherdess*, 1: 100).

[13] Preface to *An Evening's Love*, in Dryden's *Works* (n. 10 above), 10: 209 (italics added).

[14] See, for example, Charles O. McDonald, "Restoration Comedy as Drama of Satire: An Investigation into Seventeenth Century Aesthetics," *Studies in Philology* 61 (1964): 522–44.

widespread acceptance of ridicule as a defining characteristic of comedy among Restoration playwrights, they are very far from practicing what they usually preach, and by no means do they always preach orthodox "classical" doctrine.

A long-standard construct for the development of comedy in this period goes something like this. Restoration comedy proper (i.e., wit or manners comedy) has its basis in Jonsonian low life and satire, but is leavened with Fletcherian wit and refinement to suit the more courtly nature of the age.[15] As the century draws to an end, this witty and satiric comedy is supplanted by sentimental (or more precisely, "exemplary") comedy in which the lead characters are held up for admiration and emulation rather than ridiculed. And although exemplary theory appears even at the outset of the period (note that Behn is busy rejecting it in 1673), while satiric theory is never obliterated, this change is real. Between 1650 and 1750 there is indubitably an overall shift in the dominant concept of humor: Hobbesian ridicule is largely supplanted by benevolent sympathy,[16] and the effect on the drama is obvious. We may note, however, that the "benevolist" creator of Parson Adams was perfectly capable of harsh satire in his plays, and we may wonder whether Congreve, apostle of the satiric function of comedy, did not slip in some almost exemplary characters.[17] At any rate, much seems to turn on a determination of what sort of response or responses a Restoration writer hoped his characters would elicit from the audience.

According to standard critical dogma, the essence of comedy is ridicule. Thus Dryden announces (in 1668, we may notice) that admiration is the essence of tragedy, satire of comedy.[18] To find that this view is the mainstay of the conservative Dennis's view is no surprise. "Comedy . . . must please by the *Ridiculum*"; "Ridicule [is] that which distinguishes Comedy from every other kind of Poetry."[19] Shadwell similarly excuses his including "ill Wives" in a play on the grounds that by exposing them to contempt, he is upholding faithful marriage.[20] An anonymous writer makes the point more generally: "Comedy is a Representation of common Conversation; and its Design is to represent things Natural; to shew the Faults of Particular Men in order to correct the Faults of the Publick, and to amend the People thro' a fear of being expos'd."[21]

In theory then the aim and method of comedy are extremely simple. But what if the audience did not recognize the ridicule? Throughout the whole period there is a persistent unease about the attractiveness of lead characters. Writing in 1694 James Wright repeats in almost the same words Shadwell's 1668 complaint: "The Common Parts and Characters in our Modern Comedies, are two young Debauchees whom the Author calls Men of Wit and Pleasure, and sometimes Men of Wit and Sense . . . these two Sparks are mightily

[15] Such a construct has some support in Restoration criticism. For example, Dryden specifically advocates this combination in his "Defence of the Epilogue" to part 2 of *The Conquest of Granada* (1672).

[16] See Stuart M. Tave, *The Amiable Humorist: A Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Chicago, 1960).

[17] Whether Jean Gagen ("Congreve's Mirabell and the Ideal of the Gentleman," *PMLA* 79 [1964]: 422–27) is correct in believing Mirabell to be an exemplary character has been warmly debated. Personally, I disagree. But the very fact that serious debate is possible shows how blurry the satiric/exemplary division can be.

[18] "A Defence of an Essay of Dramatique Poesie," in *The Works of John Dryden*, vol. 9. ed. John Loftis and Vinton A. Dearing (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1966), p. 11.

[19] Quotations are from *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. Edward Niles Hooker (Baltimore, 1939, 1943): "The Advancement and Reformation of Poetry," 1: 224, and "Remarks on *The Conscious Lovers*," 2: 261, respectively. Criticizing Steele's attempt to elicit "a Joy too exquisite for Laughter," Dennis says angrily that this shows that "he knows nothing of the Nature of Comedy" (2: 259).

[20] Epilogue to *Epsom-Wells*, in Shadwell's *Works*, 2: 182.

[21] *A Letter to A. H. Esq; concerning the Stage*, introduction by H. T. Swedenberg, Jr. (1698; reprint ed., n.p.: Augustan Reprint Society Series 3, no. 1, 1946), p. 15. "Particular Men" here means single instances, not recognizable individuals from London society. Restoration critics are unanimous in denouncing "personal" satire. Nonetheless, there was plenty of it, *The Rehearsal* and Shadwell's *The Sullen Lovers* being particularly notorious instances. In the light of *Mr. Limberham*, Dryden's denunciations of personal satire sound about as convincing as his many pious condemnations of smut.

addicted to Whoring and Drinking. The Bottle and the Miss . . . make their *Summum Bonum*."[22] Replying to Collier's like charge, the author of *A Letter to A. H.* loads his examples: "After all, my Lord *Foppington* was never design'd to teach People to speak or act like him; nor was it intended that the Ladies shou'd be byass'd by the Example of *Berinthia* to turn Coquetts. These and the like Characters in other Plays, are not propos'd as a Direction for the *Gallant Man*, or the *Vertuous Lady*; but that seeing how such Persons behave themselves on the Stage, that they may not make the like Figure in the World: but if any body shou'd rather be in love than terrified by these Examples, 'tis their Fault, and not the Poets."[23] Foppington is a safe enough instance, as Sir Fopling Flutter would be. But what about, say, Dorimant and Harriet? A very distinguished modern critic states unequivocally that they are "admirable from the point of view of Restoration Society,"[24] and if he does not see ridicule here, perhaps Collier and others can be forgiven the same view.

The Man of Mode is a convenient illustrative case. In *Spectator*, no. 65 (1711), Steele angrily attacks this supposed "pattern of genteel comedy" on the grounds that "a fine gentleman should be honest in his actions, and refined in his language. Instead of this, our hero, in this piece, is a direct knave in his designs, and a clown in his language. . . . This whole celebrated piece is a perfect contradiction to good manners, good sense, and common honesty . . . there is nothing in it but what is built upon the ruin of virtue and innocence. . . . I allow it to be nature, but it is nature in its utmost corruption and degeneracy." Dennis replies a decade later: "How little do they know of the Nature of true Comedy, who believe that its proper Business is to set us Patterns for Imitation: For all such Patterns are serious Things, and Laughter is the Life, and the very Soul of Comedy. 'Tis its proper Business to expose Persons to our View, whose Views we may shun, and whose Follies we may despise; and by shewing us what is done upon the Comick Stage, to shew us what ought never to be done upon the Stage of the World."[25] And Dorimant, he maintains, was neither meant nor taken as an admirable figure.

Here we see very clearly the difference between the traditional, ridicule-oriented view of comedy, and the newer, "exemplary" notion. According to Dennis, Steele misunderstands the nature of comedy and so responds inappropriately to a comic character. But the confusion is not solely in the eye of the beholder. Dorimant may be mildly satirized, but he remains a glamorous and successful character, and to find him actually instructive would not be easy. Using Dennis as his principal source, Charles McDonald argues forcefully that there are *no* heroes in Restoration comedy; that even "Truewits" are not sympathetic; that Restoration comedy concerns "low" characters and teaches by negative example. For him, Steele is simply ahistorical, and Dennis gives us a true picture of comedy as it was understood in the court of Charles II. Unfortunately, it is easy to show that similar moral charges were being made very early. Thus in 1671 Dryden complains:

'Tis charg'd upon me that I make debauch'd persons . . . my Protagonists, or the chief persons of the *Drama*; and that I make them happy in the conclusion of my Play; against the Law of Comedy, which is to reward virtue and punish vice. I answer first, that I know no such law to have been constantly

[22] James Wright, *Country Conversations* (London, 1694), pp. 4–5. For Shadwell's comment, see n. 12 above.
[23] *A Letter to A. H.*, pp. 11–12.
[24] John Harold Wilson, *The Court Wits of the Restoration* (1948; reprint ed., New York, 1967), p. 164.
[25] Dennis, *Critical Works* (n. 19 above), 2: 245.

observ'd in Comedy. . . . But, lest any man should think that I write this to make libertinism amiable . . . I must farther declare . . . that we make not vicious persons happy, but only as heaven makes sinners so: that is by reclaiming them first from vice. For so 'tis to be suppos'd they are, when they resolve to marry.[26]

Unconvincing fifth-act repentances were old hat by the time of *Love's Last Shift*. But plainly *someone* was complaining strenuously enough about the appearance of "debauched" protagonists that even in 1671 Dryden felt compelled to defend himself—and he does *not* do so, we should note, on satiric grounds.

To suppose that any clear divide can be established between satiric and exemplary comedy is plainly erroneous. Attitudes toward protagonists vary widely. Dennis, a real reactionary, supposes them all ridiculed. Steele, the other extreme, wants them to be exemplary. Dryden believes that imperfect characters can properly be made happy and prosperous. Over the period as a whole, there is clearly an increased tendency to see the lead character as the "hero." We find Congreve objecting to the terminology and the idea behind it in his preface to *The Double Dealer* (1694). By no means though is the "hero" notion a late development. Consider Cowley's defense of his *Cutter of Coleman-Street* (pub. 1663):

Others . . . were angry that the person whom I made a true Gentleman, and one both of considerable Quality and Sufferings in the Royal party, should not have a fair and noble Character throughout. . . . This is a refined exception, such as I little foresaw. . . . The truth is, I did not intend the Character of a *Hero*, one of exemplary virtue, and as *Homer* often terms such men, Unblameable, but an ordinary jovial Gentleman. . . . If you be to choose parts for a Comedy out of any noble or elevated rank of persons, the most proper for that work are the worst of that kind. Comedy is humble of her Nature. . . . If I had designed here the celebration of the Virtues of our Friends, I would have made the Scene nobler. . . . They should have stood in Odes, and Tragedies, and Epique Poems.[27]

Here at the very outset of the period Cowley is arguing that heroes are not proper to comedy. But if there were not objections to imperfect characters, why bother? The objection in this instance is more political than aesthetic, but the claim is that a cavalier should be *admirable*, not that he has no place in a comedy. Similarly John Wilson, writing in 1663, states that "Comedy, either is, or should be, the true Picture of Vertue, or Vice; yet so drawn, as to shew a man how to follow the one, and avoid the other."[28] What emerges from this brief survey is the conclusion that even in the reign of Charles II there is no clear-cut agreement on the nature of characters in comedy—and to posit a uniform response, as McDonald does, is dangerously reductive.

Thus far I have been concerned with contradictions in the case for a uniformly satiric theory of comedy. I think, however, it can be shown that other sorts of comedy entirely are actively championed. If one stops to think about the orthodox theory upheld by Dennis, it should be obvious that the formula works pretty well for Jonsonian comedy, but can have little applicability to Shakespearean romance. Equally, this limitation must hold good for much Restoration comedy as well, for "love" is one of the major interests of all sorts of drama in the period. Dryden says of Jonson: "Let us not think him a perfect pattern of imitation; except it be in his humour: for love, which is the foundation

[26] Dryden's *Works*, 10: 208–10.

[27] Abraham Cowley, *Essays, Plays, and Sundry Verses*, ed. A. R. Waller (Cambridge, 1906), pp. 262–63.

[28] "The Author, to The Reader," in *The Cheats*, ed. Milton C. Nahm (Oxford, 1935), p. 237.

of all comedies in other languages, is scarcely mentioned in any of his plays. . . . The poets of this age will be more wary than to imitate the meanness of his persons. Gentlemen will now be entertained with the follies of each other."[29] Here Dryden does suggest that the "follies" of gentlemen are the subject of comedy, but in the same essay we can see clear evidence that he is not thinking primarily of ridiculing gentlemen. He argues at length the advantages of contemporary over Elizabethan comedy, basing his stand on the "gallantry," "civility," and polished "conversation" which the Restoration playwright derives from court and king, noting that "the desire of imitating so great a pattern" has profoundly affected English high society. Obviously Dryden does not mean to ridicule this "refined" society in comedy. He never entirely abandons his conviction, expressed late in life, that "the characters of comedy and tragedy . . . are never to be made perfect,"[30] but in both his heroic dramas and in several of the comedies he wrote at about the same time, the principal characters seem to be largely admirable, if not actually patterns for imitation.[31]

With this point in mind, the dangers of preconceived generic distinctions should be evident, but they are worth spelling out further. Modern critics have generally conceived Restoration comedy and heroic drama as contradictory extremes, but to study their connections as well as their differences can be instructive. The immediate antecedents of Dryden's famous heroic plays (*The Indian Emperour*, 1665; *Tyrannick Love*, 1669; *The Conquest of Granada*, 1670–71) are disparate, but they include Orrery's plays (a crossbreed between French drama and Caroline romantic tragicomedy) and Spanish romance. The latter form—before it is debased with comic additions—is called comedy or tragicomedy and presents rigidly decorous lead characters who are plainly meant to be models of exemplary propriety. Dryden's *The Rival Ladies* (1664) is an imitation of the generic prototype, Tuke's *Adventures of Five Hours* (1663). The pattern makes a clear appearance in the top plot of Etherege's *The Comical Revenge* (1664), which takes place in heroic couplets and revolves on moral dilemmas of love and honor; a clear echo appears in Wycherley's imitative *Love in a Wood* (1670), though no longer in verse. What all this tells us is simply that *in the 1660s it was perfectly possible to have exemplary, even heroic, characters in a work regarded as a comedy.* Writing around January 1671, Mrs. Evelyn praises *The Conquest of Granada* as "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 image it designed for an Utopia rather than our stage." Though delighted by Dryden's ability "to feign such exact virtue," Mrs. Evelyn is dubious about his departure from "the strict law of comedy"—the unities. But plainly *she* did not think of comedy solely in terms of ridicule of low or foolish characters. Neither did James Wright, who (writing nearly a quarter of a century later) says angrily that "we seldom or never see a Character of True Worth, Integrity, and Honour, in any of these Comedies. . . . The Debauchee is always the fine Gentleman." He goes on to say that in older plays—the most recent he names are those of Davenant and Dryden—there *are*

[29] Dryden, "Defence of the Epilogue," in *Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays*, ed. George Watson (London, 1962), 1: 182. Shadwell disagrees (Shadwell's *Works*, 1: 185–89); Dennis says that "*Shakespear* had little Love in the very best of his Plays, and *Johnson* less in his . . . he was so sensible, that the *Ridiculum* was the chief thing in Comedy, that he has always in his chief Comedies joyn'd his Love with Humour, and so made it ridiculous" (*Critical Works*, 1: 285).

[30] Dryden, "A Parallel of Poetry and Painting" (1695), in Watson, 2: 184.

[31] For a solid account of Dryden's preference for admiration over ridicule in comedy, see Frank Harper Moore, *The Nobler Pleasure: Dryden's Comedy in Theory and Practice* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1963).

virtuous characters who are true gentlemen, witty rather than lewd, but "now . . . the *Utile* seems wholly lost and forgotten, and the *Dulce* is become Pall'd, Corrupted, and Sowr."[32]

Exemplary characters are not a post-Restoration development; rather, they belong largely in the province of heroic and pseudoheroic drama. By no means though is the pseudoheroic excluded from the province of comedy. We have noted its presence in early Etherege and Wycherley, and we find it in the mature Dryden. *Marriage A-la-Mode* is called simply "A Comedy" on the title page, although the principal plot is heroic in kind. This is no accident: Dryden is making a deliberate attempt to "raise" comedy by emphasizing the "admiration" he had once considered proper to tragedy. Ironic as we must find the dedication to Rochester, Dryden was plainly proud of the courtly air of his play: "If there be any thing in this Play, wherein I have rais'd my self beyond the ordinary lowness of my Comedies, I ought wholly to acknowledge it to the favour, of being admitted into your Lordship's Conversation. . . . The best Comick Writers of our Age, will joyn with me to acknowledge, that they have copy'd the Gallantries of Courts, the Delicacy of Expression, and the Decencies of Behaviour from your Lordship."[33] In the epilogue Dryden argues that he leads the audience "to Reformation," but differentiates his method from both "dull Morals, gravely writ," and from the procedure of "Some stabbing Wits, to bloudy Satyr bent," who "Would lay the Scene at home, of Husbands tell, / For Wenches, taking up their Wives i' th' Mell."

Dryden's play can be seen as part of a deliberate attempt to raise the social tone of comedy, an attempt which is a conscious reaction against the increasing incursions of farce after 1670. The bitter protests of both Dryden and Shadwell in 1671 against this "French" invasion have already been noted, but Dryden is worth quoting further: "Most of those Comedies, which have been lately written, have been ally'd too much to Farce: and this must of necessity fall out till we forbear the translation of *French Plays*: for their Poets wanting judgement to make, or to maintain true characters, strive to cover their defects with ridiculous Figures and Grimaces. While I say this I accuse my self as well as others: and this very play would rise up in judgment against me."[34] Here Dryden is plainly proposing the sort of "heightened" comedy he was soon to attempt in *Marriage A-la-Mode* and *The Assignation* (1672). A very similar case is advanced in a much-neglected but important pair of prefaces by his brother-in-law, Edward Howard, who argues at length for a strong heroic admixture in comedy. He says that "mixt Plays" are "sutable to the English Stage," and defends the ascription tragi-comedy on the grounds that it is "somewhat below the denomination of their Heroicks to call them simply Comedies (which as they are corruptly understood, imply, little more then scurrility and laughter, though of far greater dignity, if rightly apply'd)." He aims at a "Heroick mixture." "As the chief end of Comedy is improvement of manners, so the mirth arising thence, is to entertain our passions, and affections with delight proper thereunto; wherefore to make laughter the chiefest end of Comedy, is to impair its more superior esteem, since what is ridiculous, is not therefore Comedy." Howard says that "a Clown . . . shewn in a Ladies Gown, or a Scaramuchio" are merely instances of "vulgar

[32] Wright, pp. 8, 16–17. The quotation from Mrs. Evelyn is from *The Diary and Correspondence of John Evelyn*, ed. William Bray (London, 1881), 4: 25.

[33] *Dryden: The Dramatic Works*, ed. Montague Summers (1931–32; reprint ed., New York, 1968), 3: 189.

[34] Preface to *An Evening's Love*, in Dryden's *Works*, 10: 204.

folly." Farce he detests, though he finds "no reason to call Comedy low, though consisting of mean characters . . . if by the skill and wit of the Writer, the characters of vulgar men are made worth the observation of the greatest. . . . Notwithstanding *I would not be thought averse from such a choice of persons in Comedy, as are most fit to character the most generous instruction of manners.*"[35] In short, Howard is prepared to put exemplary characters in a "comedy."

Surveying the whole question of response to characters in Restoration "comedies," a number of conclusions emerge. First, the bulk of Restoration critical theory is postulated on the traditional view that comedy works by ridiculing low characters. Second, as "love" becomes a central interest, and the social level of the characters rises, a confusion of different responses is the natural result. "Romantic" comedy does not work by ridicule; rather, the audience is encouraged to sympathize with the lead characters and rejoice in their success. Certainly Restoration comedy *does* very often employ a romantic plot formula, and though it can be used without eliciting much sympathy (in the Plautine fashion), satiric impact does tend to be blurred if we are following the progress of young lovers to a happy resolution—just as the presentation of upper-class characters *tends* to yield a confusion of response, especially when stress is laid on their genuine gentility. Collier objects to any satire on the gentry; Dennis replies vigorously that a foolish or corrupted lord is a fair and useful satiric target.[36] Members of the nobility are indeed often satirized. Nonetheless, as the social level of the lead characters rises from the low life of orthodox comic theory to the social level of the bulk of the audience, the old sense of innate superiority obviously diminishes.

The structural formula common to an enormous number of Restoration comedies involves a young man winning lady (and often fortune) against the wishes of parents and other suitors. But vastly different responses to "hero" and "heroine" may be evoked in this stock plot. We may despise them; or take a casual interest from a superior vantage point; or identify strongly with the interests of characters who are "like us"; or be made to look up to the characters as exemplary models. The resulting plays—all based on the same formula—will be as different as Ionesco's *Jack; or The Submission*, Plautus's *Rudens*, Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, and Steele's *The Conscious Lovers*.[37] The diversity of characters in some Restoration plays covers the full range of this spectrum, and very many cover a good deal of it. In theory and in practice early Restoration playwrights uphold exemplary characters, and to assume with McDonald that there are no "heroes" in Restoration comedy is simply erroneous.[38] But to suppose with Fujimura that there is a sharp dividing line between satirized Witwouds and admirable Truewits is almost equally mistaken,[39] for as McDonald does show, many a Truewit is made fun of. Horner is a witty,

[35] Edward Howard, *The Womens Conquest* (London, 1671). Quotations are from the unpaginated preface; italics added.

[36] Dennis, *The Usefulness of the Stage* (1698), in *Critical Works*, 1: 181–82.

[37] For a fuller discussion of differentiation by type of response to character, see my essay, "Some Problems in the Theory of Comedy," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 31 (1972): 87–100.

[38] McDonald (n. 14 above) dismisses Shadwell, Steele, and Collier together as "naively moralistic," and suggests that their emphasis on positive example "indicates a major confusion of epic and comic theories made by no discriminating writer on comedy in the period. . . . All the major writers insist . . . following the classical line, that comedy deals with 'low characters,' and, hence, no contamination of theories was possible" (p. 534). One has only to look at Dryden, in theory and practice, to see that this is nonsense. Congreve preached satire in response to Collier, but whether he consistently practiced it is open to question. The first plays of both Etherege and Wycherley contain pseudoheroic characters who are taken seriously. What "major writers" are left?

[39] Thomas H. Fujimura, *The Restoration Comedy of Wit* (Princeton, N.J., 1952). A recent writer, Virginia Ogden Birdsall, in *Wild Civility: The English Comic Spirit on the Restoration Stage* (Bloomington, Ind., 1970), goes so far as to say that Horner is "a wholly positive and creative comic hero . . . squarely on the side of health, freedom, and . . . honesty" (p. 136).

successful figure whose schemes we support, but he is scarcely admirable.

The characters of Restoration comedy run the gamut from contemptible to admirable. This diversity is utterly obvious in practice, and despite the preponderance of emphasis on satire of "low" characters, warrant for it in contemporary theory is easy to find, as I have shown. One cannot, therefore, rely on platitudes about exposing the follies of the age as an accurate index to the nature of the comedies actually produced—the platitudes rest, after all, on assumptions about audience response to character which are demonstrably false in practice.

III

The first part of this essay was devoted to demolishing some platitudes. The part just concluded was addressed to recent debates about the *nature* of Restoration comedy and the audience response it was designed to elicit. The results of the survey involved tell strongly against any theory which claims consistent or monolithic purposes for this drama. Hence we must turn from lip service about moral aims and the "object" of comedy to more specific commentary on how a comedy is to be put together. We have already asked *what* is to be imitated in comedy: The answer is any kind of character from the contemptible to the admirable. We have now to ask *how* the characters are to be imitated, and what kind of structure is to be erected for their presentation. Two major issues are involved: (1) realism, and (2) emphasis on "action" versus emphasis on "character" or "discourse"—which involves a concomitant squabble about the "parts" of a comic work. Both are crucial questions, but the first is the proper starting point. Most contemporary commentary on comedy turns on a prescriptive realism; in investigating claims and counterclaims the further problem of differentiating comedy from tragedy and farce necessarily arises.

The claims for realism are both ubiquitous and misleading. The apparent suggestion that Restoration playwrights put the real life of the time on stage has been accepted by an astonishing number of later critics and has given rise to moral blasts at both theater and audience. In point of fact though, realism is a hotly debated subject, and it does not mean quite what one would think.

The commonplaces are entirely familiar. Wycherley's Plain Dealer announces to the audience in a prologue that the author "Displays you, as you are." References to mirrors are legion—as in Sir Car Scroope's prologue for *The Man of Mode*, or Burnaby's painting metaphor in the prologue to *The Modish Husband* (1702):

> Thus for your Pictures while you gravely sit,
> Like Ill-bred Painters, we our Colours fit,
> To make you scorn the Native lines that strike ye,
> And justly hate the Piece for being like ye.

In similar terms John Stafford writes:

> In Comedy, your Little Selves you meet;
> 'Tis *Covent-Garden*, drawn in *Bridges-street*.
> Smile on our Author then, if he has shown,
> A jolly Nut-brown Bastard of your own.
> Ah! Happy you, with Ease and with Delight,
> Who act those Follies, Poets toil to write!
> [Epilogue to Southerne's *The Disappointment*, 1684]

The prologue to Vanbrugh's *Provok'd Wife* (1697) announces that

> 'tis the Intent and Business of the Stage
> To Copy out the Follies of the Age,
> To hold to every Man a Faithful Glass
> And shew him of what Species he's an Ass.

Dennis is a veritable catalog of demands for realism and probability in comedy.

"Comedy is drawing after the Life . . . a Comick Poet is obliged to Copy the Age to which he writes." "*Rapin* tells us with a great deal of Judgment, *That Comedy is as it ought to be, when an Audience is apt to imagine, that instead of being in the Pit and Boxes, they are in some Assembly of the Neighbourhood.*" "All our true Comedies are but Copies of the foolish or vicious Originals of the Age."[40]

Despite the number and weight of such pronouncements, they are extremely suspect. That people would be entertained (or instructed) by a reproduction of their own daily life seems highly improbable. Still less may we suppose that *The Country Wife*, *The Plain Dealer*, *The Man of Mode*, or *The Way of the World* would have been taken as such by the audience. To do so would be as silly as to suppose that a modern television audience finds its daily life mirrored in situation comedies and soap operas. One obvious index to the antirealistic nature of Restoration comedy is the freedom authors have to make their plots turn on legal impossibilities. Marriage is one of the commonest themes and plot centers in this drama, yet a huge number of tricked or faked marriages (and occasional divorces) are perfectly impossible according to the law of the time.[41] This is true throughout the period. A few of the many plays which rely on legal impossibilities are *Cutter of Coleman-Street* (1661), *Sir Martin Mar-all* (1667), *Epsom-Wells* (1672), *The Virtuoso* (1676), *Sir Courtly Nice* (1685), *Sir Anthony Love* (1690), *The Old Batchelour* (1693), *Love for Love* (1695), and *The Beaux' Stratagem* (1707). If Restoration comedy were realistic in most other respects, one might expect some outcry about legal impossibilities, but I am aware of none. Personally I suspect that the "displays you as you are" rhetoric—a specialty of prologues and epilogues—is a roundabout flattery of an audience which liked to imagine that it was a little more rakish than it actually was. Real rakes were presumably indifferent to dramatic satire, but there seems ample evidence that, then as now, an audience could enjoy being a bit shocked—hence the rapid rise of sex-comedy during the 1670s.[42]

Probably "realism" has been overstressed partly as a result of confusion about "natural imitation." According to the most common view, tragedy exalts nature while comedy leaves it as it is.[43] Dryden describes tragedy as "nature wrought up to an higher pitch . . . exalted above the level of common converse."[44] According to the traditional view maintained by Dennis, comedy copies only the low, while Dryden prefers the "mixed way"—but they agree that comedy is to be "like life" while tragedy is lifted to a higher plane. From this perspective, realism often need mean no more than a midpoint between tragedy and farce. Dryden provides a standard differentiation between comedy and farce:

> Comedy consists, though of low persons, yet of natural actions, and characters; I mean such humours, adventures, and designes, as are to be found and met with in the world. Farce, on the other side, consists of forc'd humours, and unnatural events. Comedy presents us with the imperfections of humane nature: Farce entertains us with what is monstruous and chimerical. The one causes laughter in those who can judge of men and manners, by the lively representation of their folly or corruption; the other produces the

[40] Dennis, *Critical Works*, 1: 290; 2: 248, 312. Cf. especially, 1: 285, 293; 2: 243, 263, 336–37. For a long list of similar pronouncements from other critics, see Hooker's notes in 1: 477–78.

[41] For lists of such instances, see Gellert Spencer Alleman, *Matrimonial Law and the Materials of Restoration Comedy* (Wallingford, Pa.: privately printed, 1942).

[42] On which see John Harrington Smith, *The Gay Couple in Restoration Comedy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), chap. 4.

[43] E.g., "The Spirit of Tragedy shou'd always soar; Nature is not to be directly copy'd as in Comedy" (*A Comparison between the Two Stages* [anon., 1702], ed. Staring B. Wells [Princeton, N.J., 1942], p. 60).

[44] Dryden, *Of Dramatic Poesy*, in Watson, 1: 87.

same effect in those who can judge of neither, and that only by its extravagances.[45]

To take this distinction too seriously would be unwise, for there is plenty of farce to be found in the plays of Dryden, Shadwell, Wycherley, Etherege, and Congreve. But the idea is basically plain: tragedy inflates its characters above life; comedy presents both high and low characters in semiprobable situations; farce entertains with knockabout and improbable buffoons.

Edward Howard makes a good point though when he says that "extravagancies" are not merely the province of farce, but appear in the inflated characters of tragedy and can properly be employed in comedy. With a good deal of insight, Howard argues that satire does not consist simply in realistic portrayal, but "must be highly Hyperbolical"—noting that Ben Jonson presents "very many characters of no being amongst men, as in his *Devil's an Ass*, *Cinthio's Revels*, and others," and he goes on to cite Morose as a clear instance of hyperbole.[46] The more common view is clearly put by Lawrence Echard, who criticizes Plautus for "extravagant characters," adding that "With these sort of *Characters* many of our modern *Comedies* abound, which makes 'em too much degenerate into *Farce*."[47] But as far as practice goes, Edward Howard is right: such characters as Sir Fopling Flutter are plainly hyperbolical.

Farquhar offers an interesting commentary on the whole problem of realism. He heatedly condemns "unnaturalness" in contemporary comedy, but he does not believe in "verisimilitude" or the "rules" commonly adduced in its support.

> The Poet does not impose Contradictions upon you, because he has told you no Lie; for that only is a Lie which is related with some fallacious Intention that you should believe it for a Truth; now the Poet expects no more that you should believe the Plot of his Play, than old *Aesop* design'd the World shou'd think his *Eagle* and *Lyon* talk'd like you and I. . . . If you are so inveterate against improbabilities, you must never come near the Play-House at all; for there are several Improbabilities, nay, Impossibilities, that all the Criticisms in Nature cannot correct; as for instance; In the part of *Alexander* the Great . . . we must suppose that we see that great Conquerour. . . . Yet the whole Audience at the same time knows that this is Mr. *Betterton*, who is strutting upon the Stage, and tearing his Lungs for a Livelihood. And that the same Person shou'd be Mr. *Betterton*, and *Alexander* the Great, at the same time, is somewhat like an Impossibility, in my Mind.[48]

Farquhar goes still further in arguing that comedy instructs not by verisimilitude, but in the fashion of a beast fable.

> The Nature of Comedy . . . bears so great a Resemblance to the Philosophical *Mythology* of the Ancients, that old *Aesop* must wear the Bays as the first and original Author. . . . Comedy is no more at present than a *well-fram'd Tale handsomly told, as an agreeable Vehicle for Counsel or Reproof*. . . . Where shou'd we seek for a Foundation, but in *Aesop's* symbolical way of moralizing upon Tales and Fables, with this difference, That his Stories were shorter than ours: He had his Tyrant *Lyon*, his Statesman *Fox*, his Beau *Magpy*, his Coward *Hare*, his Bravo *Ass*, and his Buffoon *Ape*, with all the Characters that crowd our Stages every Day. . . . *Utile Dulci* was his Motto . . . and as he would improve Men by the Policy of Beasts, so we endeavour to reform Brutes with the Examples of Men.[49]

[45] Preface to *An Evening's Love*, in Dryden's *Works*, 10: 203. Dryden is referring here only to what he calls "low comedy."

[46] Prefaces to Howard, *The Womens Conquest*, and *The Six Days Adventure* (London, 1671).

[47] Preface to Lawrence Echard, *Plautus' Comedies* (1694; reprint ed., Los Angeles, 1968).

[48] "Discourse upon Comedy," in *The Complete Works of George Farquhar*, ed. Charles Stonehill (1930; reprint ed., New York, 1967), 2: 340–41.

[49] Ibid., 2: 336–37.

Recognizing one's traits in Aesop's beasts seems to me as accurate and meaningful a description of Restoration satiric technique as the usual mirror-metaphor. Interestingly, Farquhar's comparison with Aesop is anticipated in Edward Howard's preface and epilogue to *The Six Days Adventure*. Speaking in favor of hyperbolical characters, Howard points to Ovid and Aesop as parallel ventures, and argues that the plays of the Restoration are really no more realistic. The epilogue adds: "Great *Aesop* did by Fools the Wise direct, / Allow our Author's hear the same effect . . . [he] hopes the Moral is above the Jest."

In sum, the common call for realism is in many ways misleading. Not only can counterblasts be found, but in practice realism seems simply to mean a negative middle ground: lead characters are neither exaggeratedly silly (as in farce) nor "heightened" as for tragedy, and the action is to consist neither of mere knockabout nor great events. Obviously writers were very far from limited by such prescriptions, as we can see from Dryden's *Marriage A-la-Mode* on the one hand and his *Limberham* on the other.

Allowing, then, that realism is no reliable common denominator in either theory or practice, one can turn with more confidence to an issue which though related is vastly less discussed—the relative claims of "action" and "discourse." Both are commonly linked with "verisimilitude," and a healthy sense of the elasticity of that concept is useful here.

E. N. Hooker notes, without elaboration, that "there appeared in the criticism of comedy [during the late seventeenth century] certain forces tending to modify, if not to destroy, the traditional pattern of Aristotelian formalism."[50] This seems to me an oversimplification, for Aristotelian formalism was never very securely established before the Restoration, and later in the eighteenth century there was a great boom in the mode Farquhar so resolutely mocks, Indubitably though, there was, during the Restoration, a continuing argument over whether plot should be the preeminent element in a comedy.

Dennis naturally insists that wit and humour should be subordinated to design.[51] In taking plot as the principal element in all drama he is of a mind with Rymer, and both of them with Ben Jonson.[52] This Aristotelian outlook is flatly controverted by Dryden: "Consider what is the work of a Poet, and what the Graces of a Poem: The Story is the least part of either: I mean the foundation of it, before it is modell'd by the art of him who writes it; who formes it with more care, by exposing only the beautiful parts of it to view, than a skilful Lapidary sets a Jewel. On this foundation of the Story the Characters are rais'd."[53] This division is more than semantic: it helps clarify, for example, the considerable differences between Shadwell and his idol, Jonson, especially in the former's earlier plays. In his preface to *The Sullen Lovers* (1668) Shadwell says: "the want of design in the Play has been objected against me: which fault . . . I dare not absolutely deny: I conceive . . . that no man ought to expect such Intrigues in the little actions of Comedy, as are requir'd in Playes of a higher Nature: but in Playes of Humour . . . there is yet less design to be expected."[54] Shadwell later takes more trouble with design and his bustling plots are adequately managed, but character almost always remains preeminent. Farquhar sharply satirizes the champions of plot in his "Discourse on

[50] Dennis, *Critical Works*, 1: 515 nn.

[51] E.g., ibid., 1: 281.

[52] "The parts of a Comedie are the same with a *Tragedie*" (*Timber*, in Spingarn [n. 3 above], 1: 58).

[53] Preface to *An Evening's Love*, in Dryden's *Works*, 10: 212. Cf. Rymer, who announces that "*Fable* or *Plot*" is "the *Soul* of a *Tragedy*," without which "there is no talking of Beauties" (*The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer*, ed. Curt A. Zimansky [New Haven, Conn., 1956], p. 18).

[54] Shadwell's *Works*, 1: 10.

Comedy," and Vanbrugh announces that both "entertainment" and "Moral" rest "much more in the Characters and the Dialogue, than in the Business and the Event."[55] But even late in the period plot has strong defenders. Echard says flatly that "*Comedy* consists more in *Action* than *Discourse*," and gives preference to Plautus over Terence on that basis. Similarly William Burnaby, in an essay on dramatic criticism, states that "In *Comedy*, *Action* is absolutely necessary, as well as in *Tragedy*; and whatever is contrary to that, is to have no Place in either. In Comedy also the chief Thing is the Fable, or Plot; the Excellence of which is to bring in such Characters and Incidents, as may naturally produce *Humour*. There will yet be room enough for *Wit*; but that Comick Poet, that makes *Wit*, and (what we call) *Dialogue*, his chief Aim, ought to write nothing but Dialogues, for he can never obtain the Name of a Dramatick Writer, with the best Judges."[56] This division of opinion may reflect the decline of "instruction" as a primary goal. Though Dennis held in later life that "Tragedy instructs chiefly by its Design, Comedy instructs by its Characters," Hooker is correct in saying that "the function of instruction was generally associated with fable, or plot": thus increasing emphasis on characters *tended* to go along with a primary concern for entertainment.[57] This need not be the case: Steele's *Conscious Lovers* is character oriented, while Mrs. Behn's racy intrigue comedies are not. The association may in part be related to "poetic justice." An instructive play was often reckoned one in which the "design" left good characters rewarded and bad punished. Collier is very insistent about this, and most subsequent critics found it prudent to agree. Thus an anonymous author complains about Sable in Steele's *The Funeral* (1701) because he "goes off unpunish'd, contrary to the Law of *Comedy*."[58] Addison's devastating attack on the whole concept of poetic justice (*Spectator*, no. 40 [1711]) is a complete reversal of widely acknowledged doctrine. As we have seen, even Dryden, a believer in "character" and "discourse" who had the nerve to admit that he wrote principally to delight, had hedged and prevaricated when charged with making "vicious persons happy."

In the remainder of the essay, I shall try to show why the plot versus discourse distinction is important in practice. It pertains, plainly, to the Aristotelian concept of the "parts" of a poem. Dryden defines the parts of a "tragic or heroic" poem as (1) *fable*, (2) *order* of plot elements, (3) *manners* of the characters, (4) *thoughts* expressing the manners, and (5) *words* expressing the thoughts.[59] A plot-oriented writer like Dennis would consider this hierarchical construct equally applicable to comedy. Dryden (who is character and discourse oriented even in tragedy and epic) would certainly not. We see on the one hand a concept of comedy whose key element is a plot contrived to serve the ends of poetical justice. On the other, we have more of a problem.

Supposing that character or discourse is to be the prime element (as in Molière, whose routine romantic plots are usually entirely secondary), how would Restoration writers conceive the potentialities of the form? Evidence is skimpy, but highly suggestive. Dryden says in an essay published in 1677 that "comedy is both excellently instructive, and extremely pleasant: satire lashes vice into reformation,

[55] Sir John Vanbrugh, *A Short Vindication of "The Relapse"* (London, 1698), p. 57.
[56] *The Dramatic Works of William Burnaby*, ed. F. E. Budd (London, 1931), appendix B, p. 459.
[57] Dennis, *Critical Works*, 2: 245; cf. 1: 486 and 515 nn.
[58] *A Comparison between the Two Stages*, p. 83.
[59] Dryden, "Heads of an Answer to Rymer" (1677), in Watson, 1: 217.

and humour represents folly so as to render it ridiculous. Many of our present writers are eminent in both these kinds; and particularly the author of the *Plain Dealer*, whom I am proud to call my friend, has obliged all honest and virtuous men by one of the most bold, most general, and most useful satires which has ever been presented on the English theatre."[60] Note especially the phrase "in both these kinds." Here Dryden suggests that *a distinction must be made between real satire and the humorous representation of folly*. The one involves a more serious moral aim; the other is essentially good humored, even if satiric. McDonald's often impressive argument is severely vitiated, I believe, by his failure to allow sufficiently for this distinction—one which appears clearly enough in practice in the obvious differences of tone between *The Plain Dealer* and *The Man of Mode*.

Shadwell offers an even more helpful observation in his dedication of *The Virtuoso* (1676): "I have endeavoured, in this Play, at Humour, Wit, and Satyr, which are the three things (however I may have fallen short in my attempt) which your Grace has often told me are the life of a Comedy." Two years later, in the dedication of *A True Widow*, he repeats this suggestion that "Wit, Humour, and Satyr" are the basic elements comprised by comedy.[61] Humour, Shadwell argues in the former dedication, does not consist of "fantastick, extravagant Dress," or "affectation of some *French* words," or "unnatural Farce Fools," or natural imperfections; rather, it is the "Artificial folly" of those who "with great Art and Industry" make themselves cranks or coxcombs. In the prologue Shadwell adds:

> In the last Comedy some Wits were shown;
> In this are Fools that much infest the Town.
> . . . . . .
> He's sure in Wit he cann't excel the rest,
> He'd but be thought to write a Fool the best.

Again, the distinction between humour and satire is worth noting, since the two are often equated. The separation of humour and wit is more expected. "The last Comedy," I believe, refers to *The Man of Mode*, which was the last new comedy staged by the Duke's Company. If so, Shadwell is surely right: Etherege's play does emphasize wit and conversation more than humour or satire, while *The Virtuoso*, which emphasizes the latter two elements, is less heavily weighted toward serious satire than, say, *The Plain Dealer*.

These three plays have a good deal in common. Staged the same year, they are all part of the mid-1670s boom in sex-comedy; all have often been treated as comedy of manners; all concern relatively upper-class characters; all have a considerable satiric element; all are praised by such later critics as Dennis as true, moral comedy. Nonetheless, the three leave very different impressions, for in tone they differ markedly. To suggest that one is comedy of wit, one a comedy of humour, and one a comedy of satire would be a ridiculous exaggeration. As Shadwell recognizes, each play is a combination of the three elements: what changes is the relative *emphasis* each play reflects.

Writing in 1695 Congreve makes some of the same points. "*Wit is often mistaken for Humour*. . . . There is a great difference between a Comedy wherein there are many things *Humourously*, as they call it, which is *Pleasantly* spoken; and one, where there are several characters of *Humour* . . . [which] arise from the different Constitutions, Complexions, and Dispositions of Men. . . . As *Wit*, so, its opposite, *Folly*, *is*

[60] Dryden, "Apology for Heroic Poetry and Poetic Licence," in ibid., 1: 199.

[61] Shadwell's *Works*, 3: 101, 283. Shadwell makes plain his personal prejudice against "slight Plays . . . that represent a little tattle sort of Conversation" and little more (3: 102).

sometimes mistaken for Humour. . . . Is any thing more common . . . [in] pretended Comedy?"[62] Sounding very much like Shadwell, Congreve goes on to object to "Farce fools," ridiculous dress, and satire on "Natural Deformities"; he differs in feeling that affectation (though usable) is not really humour, but he had apparently altered his opinion by the time of the dedication of *The Way of the World*. There he stresses both ridicule of affectation and the virtues of genteel conversation, thanking the Earl of Mountague for "the Honour of your Lordship's Conversation" —which should recall Dryden's thanks to Rochester. In the following prologue he announces that the play has some plot, some humour, no farce, and "Satire, he thinks, you ought not to expect, / For so Reform'd a Town, who dares Correct?" As Congreve thus announces, the play rather evenly balances the elements Restoration playwrights juggle. It is discourse rather than plot oriented, but not as lacking in plot as *The Man of Mode*; genteel, witty conversation is stressed, but several humours characters are prominent; satire (though ironically denied) is an important part of the play, though not as obtrusively so as in *The Double Dealer*.

As I set out to prove no single point, I feel no need to arrive at a resounding conclusion. Surveying the ground covered in this essay, I think one must acknowledge the considerable variety of possibilities open to the writer of "Restoration comedies." He could evoke anything between contempt and admiration for the characters, emphasize plot or discourse, and work with radically different balances of wit, humour, and satire. The results in practice are a collection of works whose radical diversity has given modern readers a good deal of trouble. Not the most capacious of pigeonholes will accommodate more than a limited selection of "Restoration comedies." Looking back, there is always a great temptation to codify, clarify, and organize; our predilection for Etherege, Wycherley, Congreve, and a few others has made us lump them together, both isolating them and ignoring their differences to an unhealthy degree. The "aesthetics of wit comedy" deduced by Fujimura, and the "drama of satire" postulated by McDonald are drastically partial views of a complicated whole. That two such well-argued constructs should be so contradictory should remind us to beware of all-inclusive statements about this drama. Spanish romance, intrigue comedy of Aphra Behn's sort, the high comedy championed by Dryden, comedy variously emphasizing wit, humour, and satire—all find ample warrant in Restoration critical theory. An awareness of the immense variety of options open to the writers of Restoration comedy should make us more sympathetic and sensitive to both their subtle differences and their drastic divergencies.

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[62] "Concerning Humour in Comedy" (a letter to Dennis), in *The Complete Works of William Congreve*, ed. Montague Summers (London, 1923), 3: 162.