

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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***The Man of Mode* (1676)**

Sir George Etherege. (1635-1692)

OVERVIEW

The stream of the comic

Wherever the nature of mankind is boosted and admired, in Humanist Ages like that of the European Renaissance or the fifth century B.C. in Athens, the uses of comedy will be accordingly lofty, shedding on mankind a critical light, to be sure, but putting the comic, as is the case with Aristophanes, to work in the high minded effort to improve our condition and nature. In Aristophanes discernible elevating purposes percolate through the fun making at the expense of animal man: a sharp witted recipe for preventing war is advanced; cures for the impertinence of teen agers are invented in the thought hall, where trendy Intellectualism is put in its place; abstract political utopias are preventively derided, to guarantee a sane future for mankind. Humanist ages, ages devoted to a full-throttle exaltation of mankind, are quite capable of treating man to the cold water of comic critique, but they do so without undermining the inherent dignity and value of the human person.

Hellenistic and Roman Comedy

So much cannot be said for the comic enterprise as it is undertaken, say, in the Western comic tradition inaugurated in the Hellenistic period, the period we find in the work of Menander. The Mimes of that creator—cross sections of daily-to- bourgeois-to- vulgar city life. in the age when Greece no longer thought along dangerous cliffs—the cliffs of fifth century philosophy and tragedy—those mimes, mini plays, adopted a comedic stance toward the human condition, not with constructive intent to protect the fragile fortress of humanity, but with a joy in search- lighting our generic follies, the fruits of our inconstancy, the velleities that Montaigne so unkindly reprimands in us and in himself.

Christian and Pagan views of the human person

As we have said, in tracking the Western comedic tradition, we can trace the ancient tradition from Menander through the Roman playwrights Plautus and Terence, and from there into the interior of a master Empire, the Roman, in which any number of writers of the comic, satirists and poets both-- Juvenal, Petronius, Lucan, Ovid, Catullus—exercised their blood dipped pens in the tender underbody of human frailty. It will be this urbane, and minimizing view of our condition, that will lay a ready carpet for the comedic mockeries of the Christian world.

Christian sin and the human condition

In the Middle Ages we meet this comedic put down early, for with those ages we accept an atmosphere in which doctrinal perspectives—emanating from the church's daily practice—gladly embraced the clerical outlook of *Genesis*, that mankind was inherently fallen, and was at all times ready to repeat its familiar sins. An updated version of this kind of theological comedy might be Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, at the end of the fifteenth century, with its detached and sharp witted view of the whole human comedy, the good natured but harsh view of mankind we find later in Jonathan Swift and in our time in Evelyn Waugh.

Restoration comedy

With the Restoration of the Monarchy in England, after the severity of the Puritan Revolution, we find ourselves deep in a social comedy of license, which draws on a collage of traditions—Menander, Plautus, Petronius, Jonson, Shakespeare—for all of which the human scene is preeminently comedic, something

to jest at. In Etheridge's *The Man of Mode* two characters dominate the bemocked scene, though a flock of high class elites courses across the wide proscenium.

The 'humours' perspective on the play

The uniqueness of each personality, deriving from the prominence and balance of the various humours in the individual, underlies Ben Jonson's creative practice in *Every Man in his Humour*. Evidence of this *kind of aesthetic* is all over Shakespeare's plays as well, though the verbiage of criticism is different in Shakespeare's moment. The diversity of Shakespeare's character types—that rich complexity of rustics, country hicks, Roman heroes, over sensitives like Prince Harry or Hamlet, country lasses like Rosalind, driven elders like Lear—this diversity, though diminished, comes out as a trademark in Etherege and in the Restoration dramatists who thrive on bringing back the full flavor of life after the desert of Puritan culture. What we call a comedy of manners, in the present drama, is a rich pageant of types indulging in all the forbidden pleasures—from adultery to jealousy to erotic strategizing—that the Puritans had tabooed.

And the language that accomplishes this?

Sir Fopling Flutter is the ultimate in the social mockery of the play, and more than any other figure draws to himself the extravagant irony of the bird cage of elegants who flutter across the proscenium; For Sir Fopling, who is in fact a perfectly ordinary home bred Englishman, everything of value in the world seems to be French. (His own scorn for the commonplace mimics that of the fine ones surrounding him, who, for all his entourage and his curried cravats, discern his foolishness. Track the tenor of all this in the following dialogue, in which we meet Sir Fopling, who has brought in a low-wheeled vehicle, a *caleche*.)

Sir Fopling: 'Have you taken notice of the galesh I brought over?'

Medley: 'Oh yes, 't has quite another air than the English ones.'

Sir Fopling: 'T'is as easily known from an English tumbrel as an Inns of Court man is from one of us.'

Dorimant: 'Truly there is a bell-air in galoshes as well as men.'

Medley: 'But there are few so delicate to observe it.'

Sir Fopling: 'The world is generally very grossier here indeed.'

Lady Townley: 'He's very fine.'

Emilia: 'Extreme proper.'

Sir Fopling: 'A slight suit I made to appear in at my first arrival, not worthy your consideration, ladies.'

Dorimant: 'The pantaloons are very well mounted.'

Sir Fopling: 'The tassels are new and pretty.'

Medley: 'I never saw a coat better cut.'

Sir Fopling: 'It makes me show long waisted, and I think slender.'

Etherege has a fine ear for dialogue, and for its unique capacity to conjure up the ambience and progress of thought. Much he may have wished to suggest, about the character of manners in his time, is implicit in the palpable spaces which separate individuals' remarks. (One can hardly 'read' the text without inner voicing the rhythm break of one statement into another.) The delicate seams between expressions coalesce into the impression of a whole social event, with many concurrent inflections.

THE PLOT

The plot created by this setting and its characters

The two central figures, in the generation of the present plot, are Dorimant and Sir Fopling Flutter—not to mention the high class drawing rooms and park promenades of elite Restoration London, in which there may seem to be no commonplace residents except coach boys or low level traders, like the orange-woman who comes marketing her wares on the fringes of her customers' dandified conversation. Mankind in general is put under the lens, but special attention is paid to the socially privileged, whose wealth enables them to afford follies not within the purview of the man on the street.

Dorimant himself is profoundly at the heart of this milieu, which opens to us as this socially embedded man of mode is discussing, with a fellow man about town, Medley, the prospects for ridding himself of his present lady friend, Mrs. Loveit. The plotting dialogue, involving as it does any amount of innuendo and pauses for correcting servants, turns on ways to make Mrs. Loveit jealous, and to make her wish to be free of Dorimant.

The true motive

In the to and fro of strategy planning, we are made aware that Dorimant has his eyes on a lovely heiress, Harriet, who has just come to town. One thing leads to another; Dorimant circulates the rumor that Mrs. Loveit is soft on a quaint fool, Sir Fopling Flutter, who though English has been living in France, and has just returned from that capital of style with innumerable trendy scarves, shoes, and cravats, and who is the last word in (witless) elegance. In the fashion natural to the comedy of manners, like Etherege's, the tentacles of the play spread outward from this particular achieved state of affairs: Dorimant, not satisfied with his bid for Harriet, also involves himself with a younger woman, Belinda, who in turn shows her fangs to Mrs. Loveit. This is the way the restless and unscrupulous Dorimant sets events in motion.

The social critique—from the exquisite parodying of Sir Fopling Flutter to the cascade of affairs and jealousies unleashed by Dorimant's restless libido—opens and closes, until a full scale mini biopsy of drawing room London is complete. Stages on the completion run like this: Dorimant's young friend, Bellair, is against his will betrothed to the very Harriet Dorimant fancied—betrothed by Bellair's horny father, Old Bellair-- but is at the same time in love with Emilia; Emilia and young Bellair marry; in the end Dorimant, who 'started it all,' wraps up business in London, and retires to the country with his new fiancée, Harriet. And that, ladies and gentlemen, constitutes the play.

CHARACTERS

Dorimant, an unscrupulous bachelor, who leaves his mistresses behind when a new attraction wins his attention. His current flame, Mrs. Loveit, has begun to bore him, but it is not until he meets Harriet, with whom by play's end he will be truly in love, that he truly wakes up. He deserves credit, as a man of wit about town, for seeing the serious faults of an empty fop like Sir Fopling Flutter, who is nothing but pretence. Dorimant is fascinating.

Medley is a good friend to Dorimant and a perceptive intermediary between the audience and the players, whom he frequently addresses. He is a serious critic of Fopling, which helps to establish his credit with the audience.

Old Bellair, father to young Bellair, and a crusty irritable relic of the older generation. He betroths his son to Harriet—who will be the love of Dorimant, in the end—but then falls in love with Emilia, who is his son's true choice. By the end of the play he is reconciled to the reality of events, and good naturedly invites the cast to dine with him. Once again, therefore, we experience to rustic-festive ending style which goes back to Aristophanes and beyond, into the rural ritual backcountry of formative Greece.

Young Bellair, son of Old Bellair, engaged to Emilia, and eventually married to her, against his father's wishes.

Sir Fopling Flutter. A local man, recently resident in Paris, who returns to London society addicted to the finer Parisian way, dressed to the nines—but exaggeratedly—and self-deluded into imagining himself god's gift to the ladies. Despite his exaggerated foppery, he comes off as harmless and friendly, and for the audience displays the traits of the social pretender to perfection.

Emilia a beautiful young woman, recently arrived on the scene, secretly married to young Bellair.

Harriet, a free spirited and totally independent young lady, long attracted to Dorimant, but hard to convince, and not easily trusting of this wit and man around town. It is a tribute to both Dorimant and Harriet that they are in the end able to discern one another, and marry.

Mrs. Loveit, from the outset a passionate lover of Dorimant, who will of course soon tire of her. Old fashioned enough, she cannot reconcile herself to the modern sophistication, virtually romantic sadism, to which Dorimant abandons her.

Belinda, mistress of Dorimant, at first delighted to cause pain to Mrs. Loveit, but later repentant, and unforgiving toward her former lover.

Mrs. Woodvil, Harriet's old fashioned mother, who wants her daughter to marry young Bellair; she has heard rumors (on the grapevine) that Dorimant is worthless. She is a woman who blows in the wind of public opinion.

Lady Townley, wealthy sister of Old Bella ir.

She is a friend to Emilia, and supports the secret marriage of Emilia to young Bellair. A sympathetic figure, in the eyes of the author.

Pert, Mrs. Loveit's waiting woman, and ardent supporter of her mistress.

Busy, Harriet's waiting woman, blames her for loving Dorimant.

Shoemaker, mocked by Dorimant and Medley at the beginning.

Orange-woman, a fruit seller who suggest to Dorimant that she knows a yyoung woman who has the hots for him. This play, like most English comedy of the Restoration period, is open to the presentation of daily life—as in fact was comedy already in the time of Aristophanes. It is in the nature of comedy, which mocks flaws, to enjoy all classes of targets, and to inject affection in its portrayal of the 'already fallen,' the losers in society.

Mr. Smirk, the parson who secretly marries Harriet and Dorimant.

Handy, valet to Dorimant.

THEMES.

Disloyalty. Dorimant is a rich character, in many ways good natured and merry, especially in his romantic life, but so fascinated by women that he cannot be trusted to stay in any one relationship. His relationship to Mrs. Loveit is just breaking up, as we open the play, and is being replaced by a fascination for the attractive Belinda, who has just come on the scene, and with whom Dorimant collaborates in making Mrs. Loveit outrageously jealous.

Love. By play's end, Dorimant and Harriett have discovered one another's underlying virtues—under the facades of social flirtation and congenital scepticism. They have been married in secret, moved to the country—that is, away from the seductive brouhaha of society, and seemingly belong to one another. In terms of the present play, in which relationships are mobile and changeable, this culmination in unity seems as much of true love as we can expect to find.

Self-delusion. Sir Flopling Flutter is an exemplary instance of a self-deluded fool, who though regularly mocked persists in presenting himself—wonderful suits, scarves, shoes—to what he believes is an admiring audience. He is to be contrasted, in this respect, to Diamant, who makes fewer unrealistic demands on his friends, but presses ahead, cynically and erotically, to draw substantial catches of lovelis into his net.

Secrecy. The entire upper crust society, in which these Restoration plays are fixed, is built on the secrecy of hidden amours, hidden cuckolds, deceitful affairs, and yet there is room for the intimacy of secrecy, on rare occasions. Conspicuous in the present play is the secret marriage of Harriett with Dorimant, at the end of the drama. Each of these two sceptical lovers, still trying to be sure of one another, needs room in which to discover the other, and reveal his or her true nature. The entire play is brought to a satisfying close, by the tucking away in the countryside of two of its most wired characters.

Jealousy. Mrs. Loveit's jealousy strikes us prominently in the first lines of the play. Dorimant has tired of her, and is not the type to explain himself patiently out of a failed relationship. His solution, then, is simply to move on to his own next amour, and to free himself from Mrs. Loveit by deluging her with news of his own new affair—with Emilia. Mrs. Loveit is crushed and wounded, a victim of the wreckage worked by an imprudent affection to a man whose interests do not essentially involve one.

Patriarchy (and matriarchy). For the most part this play concerns trendy younger lovers and haters, but there is an instructive example of the behaviors of the older generation. Lady Townley is the sister of Old Bellair, but, as a fellow elder—rich, upper class, and superior—she is mellow and supportive to the younger generation—Emilia—while her brother is crusty, insensitive, and too lusty for his age.