HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, PhD

Early British Comedy: A Study Guide

Table of contents

INTRODUCTION

In the table of contents you will find a list of sixteen plays by British comic playwrights of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There is no underlying order to the list, except that it is chronological and diverse in its conception of comedy, including broad humor, stark humor, heavy social satire, urban and class comedy of wit, and melodrama. In other words, it is a random sampling of comedies. Don't count on having your sides split, as you read, and read about these comedies, for like much comedy the humors involved here are regularly harsh, scornful, and when high spirited typically intent on criticism, mockery, and contempt. The hilarity typically expected from comedy, by the electronic entertainment machinery of our digital moment, is rare to find in the following selection.

Chronology

Temporal order, year after year, is the only principle of organization in the review of these plays. That is, the only principle of temporal organization is linear. Before and after we can understand, but with sequential the meaning of the analytical technique grows more obscure. To be in a linear row or list implies nothing about a person or a play other than that it comes before or after other items of its kind. To be in a sequential list may well imply being also in a linear list, but it may well imply more than the before and after relation involved in linearity. One event can follow another, but the deeper meaning of that sequence will depend on the quality of the relationship joining the earlier with the later instance.

The sixteen plays analyzed in the following, occupy diverse relations to one another. Each play, in irself, is a byproduct of its own moment, of that moment inflected ty the mind of the writer who transmuted that moment into a play. Between whatever play we have in mind and the play that follows it, in the sequence

we attend to, there is room for vast discrepancies of me Roister aning, implication, and clash. The project of this small book will settle down into an adjudication among various tenors of text and time.

Large purview

We open with a single play, Roister Doister, which strikes roots in the ancient theatrical world of Plautus and Terence, reminding us how clumsy and raucous a start British theatre adopted in its path to richness and confidence. Everywhere in this blend of romance there are the rough edges, simple scams, mere boisterous courting we associate with the folk plays of mediaeval Europe. Characterization is broad, as are innuendos, and motivations are evident and unmistakeable. We are left to conclude that a still agricultural, folk fed set of traditions has been released to the delight of its fictive interior, leaving an audience charmed by the look of its own face in the mirror.

No play which battens off of the Plautian parasite type, or off a country based audience, can fail to evoke guffaws. The audience of the earliest British comedy is rough and ready for courtship on the run and for old fashioned humor at the expense of the rustic male. The line of chronology that brings this formula before a rough outdoor playhouse in sixteenth century London is shaky and twisted, and links us into the before with a graceless fervor, that can make us savor that suddenness of history in which we just find ourselves both lodged and moving.

Given that abruptness of history, which encompasses us and which we become, unpeeling it back in layers until we realize it is unpackaging us, we can ask ourselves what kind of before the present play is, to the second play on our list. From Roister Doister to Every Man in his Humor? What kind of temporal distance is that? Is it sequential or linear? Multiple strands of making separate the two plays with which we begin, Roister Doister and Every Man in his Humor. The separating years are linear, track a continuous time path through the formative stage of British literature, yet we may ask of what they are filled? Would reference to historical developments, the peculiarities of the Elizabethan world view, the interplay of religious values, the back and forth of international trade, would these points of action prove decisive fillers of the space separating our two plays by thirty years.? What, in short, is thirty years when it comes to drawing the map of the history of literature? Though we measure distance between great books by the chronology practised in calculating world history, we have to wonder whether time intervals in the map of literature are comparable to time intervals in historical time—say the time between the advent of the Stuarts and the Restoration monarchy.

The chronological mapping of literary texts is a free zone enterprise, once one leaves the valences usually ascribed to numerical ratios. One literary text is separated from another, surely, but by what units do we measure that separation? And that of course is not the only problem with measurement, for within a given literary text, for example, there are many temporal dimensions—the literary time required to travel by carriage from Minsk to Omsk, the time it took Odysseus to travel from the Phoenicians home to Ithaca. Roister Doister to Every Man in his Humor, therefore, is of a distance dependent on the variables you care to bring into play, and may be great or small. Items 11 to 13 in our table of contents, for example, share production dates hardly greater apart than a year each, while the material within any two of the plays may be more or less distant in time.

Cultural separation

Our initial discussion of before and after, and of meanings of sequential distance, as they apply to development of a body of literary works, has ballooned out around us. We have let our initial mapping procedure, drawing as it did on pragmatic-quantitative measurements, open out into the far wider dimensions of distance in culture. We have stepped onto the moving platform of time, on which we are ourselves both the measurers and the measured.

The Jonson move

The intricacies of linear and sequential succession have been aired, intricacies they remain, philosophic conundrums with their legitimate place in the discourse of time, but depth options tempting us from the

margins of historical alignment. We are in fact blessed, in our present enterprise, by the proliferation of significant comedies gathering around the turn of the sixteenth century. (The ground rule, here, is to exclude Shakespeare, in the hope that a certain refreshment of judgment will derive from a fresh selection.Had we included Shakespeare in the present palette, we would clearly have peppered our pages with a wider selection, and rendered our present selection one of the stellar comic moments of human culture. 'A Comedy of Errors,' 'All's Well that ends Well,' 'A Midsummer Night's Dream': such masterpieces would have been added to our anthology.)

As it happened, however, the perspective of Ben Jonson moved confidently in to build its own genius to rival the Shakespearean. And talk about sequential and linear successions! Roister Doister yields a world of verbal maturing to a cranky and erudite master of the fall. That is Ben Jonson. From the first play we touch, Everyman in his Humor, we are in a true idiosynratic darkness, mulling around among the distinctive personhoods—humors—of shadowy middle class rivals for attention and descending into the joys of observing human nature, listening to:

deeds and language, such as men do use:
And persons, such as comedy would choose;
When she would show an image of the times,
And sport with human follies, not with crimes.

Close we are to the drama which luxuriates in the fulness and intricacy of daily life. (ilbsen? Shaw?) The theatre of humors, which is about to serve as the mot de marche of Jonsonian humor ,is no longer the situational mix up of Shakespereian comedies like A Comedy of Errors. We are now into studies and entanglements of wordplay and intention and misunderstanding. We are now into the comedy of moods.

Volpone and Epicene or The silent Woman inflate the privileges of the comedy of humors. Each of these plays turns around a main figure with an obsession which virtually defines him. Volpone is in love with the sight, texture, and connotation of gold, and watches in rapture as the sun illuminates the brilliance inherent to this precious natural gift. The greed, sensuousness, and egotism implicit in this gold fetish consume Volpone, while in Every Man in his Humor it was a question of widely distributed humors, personality traits like those of Wellbred, Knowell, Clement, and Downright, whose names were their overriding traits, and whose humors aligned along the basis of their names.

The same personification by name builds out the substance of Epicene, where it is a question of Morose, a man noise averse to a desperate degree, as wounded by excess noise as Volpone was fixed on the exquisite brilliance of gold. Once more that humor defines the person, who comes back to life, in the present play, as soon as the quacking noise of ladies dissipates.

The folk thematic

The Jonson move springs us loose from the rustic-mediaeval which pervades Roister Doister. In The Knight of the Burning Pestle, composed 1607, we return to a version of the rustic theme. The boisterous citizen, who demands a part in the play before him, is as comically crudely hewn as Roister Doister or Merrygreek, headfirst plunged into the vulnerabilities of his society. The mockery of the mediaeval—armor, pestle, chivalry—resembles that of Cervantes' Don Quixote (1605) composed at the same moment. It is a mockery transported by the trappings of the mediaseval laughing at the reality of the mediaeval.

The temporal outplay, the before, after, sequential of the textures relating these Renaissance plays vary with the contexts of social practice, administrative and military vagaries, in short of world life in a corner temporarily relinquishing itself to organized language—what we might call art, or literature. Having yielded to some writer's ambition for the sight of a whole, the worded event, the nexus allying itself into a text, becomes part of a glib process. It would be good practice, in consuming reality by spoonsful, to recollect that only the conventions of memorial order have sanctioned the word-wedding announcing itself here.

Bartholomew Fair

Jonson won't die easily.

Bartholomew Fair, still out of the trick box of Ben Jonson the humorist, ventures itself into an epic dimension not previously risked by the dramatic self-narrations of the present humorist. We are looking both in through the language of villagers, magistrates, and gulls, and outward inward from the Tolstoyan mind as the seventeenth century could comprehend it. Good and evil intermix in this rugged drama of a day at the fair.

Life?

The prospect emerges here of a play as life, one in which the sequential, which locks it into an origin, creates out of itself a new promised land, from which unexpected lines of narration emerge. We might say that with 8 and 9, A New Way to Pay Old Debts, and A Maidenhead well lost, we scrape against the edges of pra reality, which responds with a raspingly familiar croak. It is a sound we will come to value in the history of British theatre, perhaps better represented in the present anthology than in the soaring supra reality of Shakespeare—or at his best Marlowe.

Transition?

In the transition plays we finger here we feel the returning pressures of the daily world. We encounter contemporary England as a place where capital breeds power complexes, and grinds underfoot the efforts of the small fry who are the villagers of England, and who, in earlier representations, we likely as not to provide the raw spice of life just when it is needed. In A Maidenhead well lost, Julia and Parma not only show true devotion to one another, a faithful reprise, but survive a deceptive counter plot which drives the bony reality out of them.

Over the hump 1675. The Country Wife

Linear or sequential, the on play of dramatic
history in England is to be described against rapidly changing social backgrounds, particularly, in the stage in question here, against the background of Elizabethan daring, the Stuart and the Jacobean time, Renaissance absorbing out into the Stuart succession, the modern capital world, thr world that gives its muscle to a tough play like A New Way to pay old debts (1625).

Wycherley's The Country Wife (1675) carries us over the hill into any number of themes and new attitudes. In the background of this theater, there is the life of urban London, with the capital accumulation that has created the city folks who laugh and smirk in the theatrical milieu of the big city. There, in the urban London to which the country wife is introduced—and to which she catches on instantly--is the high falutin stagechatter of Broadway, with its style setting fashions and trends, harbingers of the metropolitan life under formation as the theatre world becomes a central event of modern culture. One might also read, from the direct line which leads to the present plays the emergence of 'dubious morals,' threats to family values, self-interested 'dengalings. and the nexus of crime with reckless attitude

The man of mode 1676.

Linear as is the post mid-century trend to high style social tipes and settings, making us look back as though through the Telescope of time at a moment of the cultural past when a rude repeat of the Christian narrative sufficed to entertain an audience. The ages past, the so called 'middle' ages, have anciently disappeared. We are among sophisticates, or would bes whose talk is of Paris and the latest Parisian coiffures. And we are not among such finery without an attitude, the attitude that all this pretentiousnss is a sign of a theater which has lost touch with the realities of daily life

The Rover. Aphra Benn.

Here the fervor of the drama gives the drama room to feed on itself, on the license to fantasize, to establish a new world in language, to grows more strenuous. With Benn's recourse to a swaggering pirate show, in fiery Italy, we realize how bold the British theatrical lceense has become. We are on our way to go into The Way of the World and Love for Love, two classic high spirited elite love stories made up of curried and elegant language.

Congreve

The ultimate in the mature sophistication of the development that leads from, say, Roister Doister to Congreve is reached in the two comedies just mentioned, in which love, greed, rivalry and wit conspire to blend a perfect cocktail of elegance. Should we think of this line of development as a crescendo of increasing technical skills, or as a multi staged sequence of sophistications in which craft and expressiveness vie for first place?

1. **Roister Doister**. 1567 (posthumous publication)
Nicholas Udall 1504-1556

OVERVIEW

The historical setting of the drama

The mediaeval mime, jongleur presentation, or religious morality play present us with a world in which the vibrant classical traditions of tragedy and comedy have lost their traditional roots in a whole culture's imagination. Udall's play, one of or the first proper English comedy, eschews the traditions of the mediaeval drama, though it too creaks and groans with stage conventions that seem hardly to have found their form. (The most fitting format, for a play like the one before us, may be the intimate drawing room setting watchable on the U Tube version of Roister Doister. There is endless to and fro in a limited space, with ample room for the endless whispering of secrets and the rapid cooking up of comic plots.)

The action of the drama

The sources of the working play are diverse, and in their diversity guarantee a jolt of attention. There are countryside characters of bizarre fancy— Mumblecrust, Merygreek, Tibet, Alyface, and of course Roister Doister himself—who, like the sub-Falstaffian figures in Shakespeare, feed into a rustic comic sardonic tone, almost as though they coincided into elements of language—and there are the characters drawn from other traditions, the mediaeval, which lies behind the money bags unscrupulous Old Jew, and the classical---Roister Doister himself, to cite the chief example, being a direct copy of the Miles gloriosus of Plautus (254-184 B.C.E.), the Braggart Military Man, who comes in for the same kind of pillorying, in the Miles Gloriosus, which awaits the mocked macho in Udall's play.

The language of the play

The play presents an inter tuning of rustic presence and rustic talk, at a still unformed stage of modern English, with the seasoned tradition of Latin drama—Plautus' play was itself an adaptation of an earlier Greek play (now lost) , itself structured around an archetypically universal set of themes. This literary genealogy provides training grounds for skillful adaptation, and for who knows how decisive a role in making Ralph Roister Doister a high success on the early English stage. That stage was, after all, itself susceptible to the kinds of slapstick and in you face comedy we know from many of Shakespeare's comedies.

Backgrounding this play

Fully to appreciate this play, as a step in literary history, is to review the conspicuous morality which marks comedy in western literature. It is of the traditional character of comedy that it pillories, from a position of traditional or superior morality, behaviors that travesty good sensr. Comedy is from the start critical and conservative, emerges from a disposition of looking down—and both Merrygreek and Roister

Doister amply fill the bill of the looked down on, mocked. This general point about comedy can unfold a wide net to unfurl around the present play.

Comedy in the west arguably had its start with Homer. Often the comedic in that writer is bold—though it regularly springs from a ‘down looking,’ as we have remarked about the humor in Roister Doister. (Think of the ‘joke’ Odysseus plays on the Cyclops, when he identifies himself as ‘no man.’ Think of Thersites’ ‘painful-amusing’ fall from a roof.) The humor in a situation is likely to stem from one character’s comparatively low level of understanding of the humorous situation he finds himself in. Comedy, in literary practice, has from the earliest occasions involved pain at someone else’s expense.

It might seem closer to probable if we spoke—we can stay with the Greeks for a moment—of tragedy, rather than comedy, as the proper realm of pain. Is it not true that in tragedy we suffer, in comedy we laugh? The reverse will seem to be true, if we look closely at what remains of ancient Greek literature. We have a handful of plays remaining to us from the three major tragedians, Aeschylus. Sophocles, and Euripides. In what we may call the most achieved of those tragedies—the Oresteia, Prometheus Bound, Ajax, Oedipus the King, Medea—the tremendous pain we are obliged to track aligns deeply with the exaltation we feel—at Prometheus’ daring on humans’ behalf, at Oedipus’ daring unwrapping of his own guilt, at Medea’s brutal assertion of individual dignity—an exaltation which far transcends any pleasure in mockery, for which comedy could ready us.
.
Who wrote Roister Doister?

Was it a man who had suffered rebuffs and scorn, and knew how to express disdain for his oppressors? And to indulge a jolly good laugh, at the world’s expense?

Multiple spellings of the author’s name reinforce the difficulty we have, in pinning down this individual to a single identity. Uvedale, Udal, Woodall—all these names give him a toehold on historical existence, and align with his variety of identities. Udall was educated at Winchester College and Corpus Christi, Oxford, and went on from Oxford to teach Latin in a London school, from 1534-1541, when he was found guilty of abusing certain of his pupils, and convicted under the Buggery Act, which carried the death penalty. Thanks to an impassioned letter, begging two friends in high places to intercede, Udall found himself facing a one year sentence, after which, remarkable to say, Udall found himself once more a respected teacher, in which role he lived into the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary 1 (1516-1528). At this point he was appointed Vicar of Braintree, and subsequently returned to teaching at the school where he was educated, Westminster. Through Udall’s life, therefore, we see the passages from significant education through social infraction and back to respectability. Lodged in this cursus vitae nestled sufficient human experience to ballast an awareness of the follies, missteps, and outrages that go to making a comic-ready life.

CHARACTERS

Roister Doister, a braggadoccio blowhard, susceptible to the self-interested suggestions given him by Matthew Merrygreek. This Roister Doister figure will have been familiar, to a Latin educated audience, which will have recognized Doister as a squeeze off of the Miles Gloriosus, the Braggadoccio Soldier from the Latin playwright Plautus. Plautus helped establish that ‘type’ as part of the stock repertoire of later literature.

Dobinet Doughtie, Roister Doister’s boy—one of the omnipresent slaves, maids, or servants who composed the dramatic background of Elizabethan drama—and society. It is he who carries Roister Doister’s gifts to Lady Constance.

Lady Constance: a widow, the object of Roister Doister’s affection, or more properly of his need for cash. She has given no sign of affection to Roister Doister, who has in fact just seen her on the street, fallen head over heels in love, and sent her both love gifts and a romantic letter. She is engaged to be married, and for that and many other reasons has no interest in Roister Doister’s suit.

Madge Mumblecrust, Lady Constance's nurse. One of the little folk who constitute the backgsround opinion—ridicule of Roister—of the play. Though at first impressed by Roister Doister, and willing to carry his love letter to Lady Constance, she becomes an aggressive ally of Constance, in her moves to rid herself of Roister Doister.

Tom Trupenie, servant to Lady Constance. Constance ish a winner in this play, and Trupennie joins the chorus of supporters of Constance.

Merrygreek: a parasite, fashioned after the stock character of Roman or Hellenistic drama—s 'friend' of Roister Doister-- con man trickster, hanger on with Roister Doister, ultimately there to take advantage of Roister Doister who is in turn using him. Merrygreek is always out for number one, though his natural conviviality assures his readiness to play any social game. When he discovers that Roister Doister is close to dying of unrequited love, he performs a mock service for the dead, but when his master calms down, Merrygreek carefully reads his master's love letter to Lady Constance, playing mischievously on the sensibilities of both Constance and Roister. In the end, as Lady Constance and her maids assault Roister Doister, Merrygreek participates, slashing out merrily at both sides.

Gawyn Goodluck: a merchant, engaged to Lady Constance. He is just returning from a business trip, when confronted with the unwelcome suggestion that his wife might be having an affair. An upright fellow, outraged when he learns of Roister Doister's advances to Gawyn's fiancée, he is rapidly reassured, and delighted to be with his fiancée again. In the end he is social enough to join in a country dance and song reconciliation.

Tristram Trustie, friend to Gawyn

Sym Suresby, servant to Goodluck

Tibet Talkapace Constance's maiden, and ally in her combat against Roister Doister

Annot Alyface Constance's maiden and ally; a singer, she initiates the first of the songs that spread throughout the play

Harpax, scrivener, the writer of Roister Doister's love letter to Lady Constance.

PLOT

The plot itself is thin but direct. The setting, the action, the language of the play all speak to the same basic set of emotions that drive much that we call comedy: readiness to mock; a pompous front man, digging his own social grave with his bluster; a jovial or simply self-interested side kick, who is out to get his ten cents worth from the development of dubious affairs. Such well worn and beloved scenarios—Falstaff and those who mock him, Ralph in the Honeymooners, Abbott and Costello trading gaffes and prat falls, Moliere's Bourgeois Gentilhomme—the cocktail mix is diverse, but the comic character, whose faults and follies construct the frame of a good comedy, is consistently at the center of Udall's amusement. He (for the best comic characters—pace Lucille Ball, Mary Tyler Moore, or Carole Burnett—are men, preferable for they are the more likely, of the two genders, to yield to puffy delusions and to setting themselves up as fools.) Given this narrative back-drop there remain few surprises for us in this play.

The moral goal of the present comedy is made clear from the outset. The playwright establishes the beneficial advantages of mirth:

For mirth prolongeth life, and causeth health…

The author offers a play which will ensure laughter with its health, and

Which against the vainglorious doth inveigh…

The narrator, Matthew Merrygreek, proceeds to tell us of his needs, of which food and money and a place to put his head at night are foremost. Fortunately for him he has friends all over town who will keep him off the streets, and invite him to supper; yet he feels that it is time, now, to turn to his 'friend' Roister Doister,

For truly of all men he is my chief banker
Both for meat and money…

And onwards goes the text, pointing out that Royster Doister always follows his own goal, usually associated with wooing a widow, that he plays the macho but is in fact far more apt at 'keeping the Queen's peace.'

With this introduction a play is launched on its mission of expectable, and hilarious, developments. Merrygreek will cozy up to Roister Doister, flatter him and propose lines of strategy for the old letch, and Roister Doister will target in on the Lady Constance, who means to him both money and much needed approbation from the female sex. The interplay which follows this rapid definition, of the quest of the drama, will involve the playing out of the twinned, but oh so different, drives of Merrygreek and Roister Doister, the scorn of Constance for her would be suitor, and the general merry making, of the buddies and jokesters, the sidekicks of Merrygreek, who form a chorus of mockery directed both at Roister Doister and at his deeply self-interested follower.

SCENES

The prologue. A paean to the pleasures of mirth, which brings health and happiness. Udall is at pains to reject any of the scurrility that often accompanies mirth, and to stress modesty and good spirits. At the end we see that he has been true to his intention.

Confabulation joins Roister Doister and Merrygreek, leading to the former's plan to cadge much needed cash from Lady Constance. While the two men plot together, it is Merrygreek who is at the same time trying to undermine, and defraud, his co-conspirator, Roister Doister.

Rustics mutter out the local gossip, as they work busily at sowing and spinning in their master's house. Smart country repartee. A carefully interpolated background accompaniment to the main action.

Lady Constance becomes aware of Roister's suit, has no interest in him, and realizes he is a 'brainsick fool.' She of course is engaged to be married—to Gawyn Goodluck—and is awaiting her fiance's return.

Roister boasts that he will take his lady love by force, one way or the other. His bluster grows more unconvincing by the minute. We know that he is all talk. Merrygreek humors him.

A slapstick altercation ensues, in which Roister Doister is routed by Constance and her friends. Our hero is in fact just a cardboard colonel. Constance and her lady allies drive off Doister and Merrygreek.

Lady Constance's husband rejoins her, and they celebrate the defeat of Roister. A general triumph is declared.

Recovering from their conflict, the whole group—Roister Doister included-- sing a merry song in honor of the Queen. Udall is true to his promise, to bring merriment along with mirth; and in fact Roister Doister becomes ultimately a figure of fun, not of scorn; a kind of Falstaff figure, as we know him from the conclusion of The Merry Wives of Windsor.

THEMES

Greed Roister Doister is looking for money, and most of the play involves his search to win the favors of Lady Constance, whom he fancies as a cash cow. His greed for Constance's money is rivalled only by

Merrygreek's need for Roister Doister's money. This tangled interrelation, between the two men, forms the most complex literary perspective of the play. In the end neither man is the richer.

Pride. Not only does Roister Doister represent greed, but he is also a perfect mediaeval example of vainglory. (Udall writes, in the prologue, that his play 'against the vainglorious doth inveigh,' choosing as his example of vainglory and pride the braggard soldier who is his main character. The mediaeval mindset revolved readily around archetypal figures, and Roister Doister is a model for two 'types;' the greed-driven and the vainglorious.

Self-delusion Roister Doister, a character based on the Braggard Soldier of Plautus, is comically self-deceptive. He has minimum self-awareness, even when others are making a fool of him. He is, therefore, easily mocked throughout the play. 'All the day long is he facing and craking/ Of his great acts in /fighting and fraymaking…' 'If any woman cast on him an eye/up is he to the hard ears in love by and bye…'

Exploitation Merrygreek thrives on the handouts he gets from Roister Doister and from many other friends around town; in return, Merrygreek is fulsome in his praise of such as Doister. Merrygreek seems to show no sign of shame at so boldly probing Roister Doister for food or shelter. Nor does he hide his contempt for this man, or his ability to manipulate Roister:

I can with a word make him fain or loath,
I can with as much make him pleased or wroth
I can when I will make him merry and glad
I can when me lust make him sorry and sad…

Scorn Lady Constance feels nothing but scorn for Roister Doister, who is a braggadocio fool. (We might say that Udall himself feels scorn for both Roister Doister and Merrygreek. But Lady Constance is the supreme purveyor of scorn, in the present instance.) She has received a marriage proposal from Roister Doister; she makes it clear that she had 'rather be torn in pieces and slain' than accept such a proposal. She gathers her lady allies, and prepares to batter the adversaries, Merygreek and Roister Doister.

Intrigue The cast of rustics, who play constantly around the chief characters, form a thematic background to the play, pure country talk and gossip. These characters form the core of allies who band together in the end, to drive Roister Doister away from Lady Constance. What follows is slapstick, the Lady and her troops dispelling Roister Doister and Merrygreek. In slapstick the conventional rules of humor, verbal wit, innuendo, and the sardonic are abandoned in favor of overt blows—or other appropriate assaults—which reduce conflict to the simplest gestures of the body.

Reconciiation In the end Roister Doister and Merrygreek attempt to abduct Lady Constance, but fail, and are driven away. Congreve has no bitterness to spread, over the remains of the play. A rural festival of harmony, which includes Roister Doister, bathes the whole show in a warm final light. We are taken back to Shakespeare's Merry Wives of Windsor, at the conclusion of which even the trickster Falstaff, another old fool, is included in the rustic traditional ceremony that brings closure to the formerly conflictual forces opposed to him. No hard feelings, after all. At this point we seem to rejoin the ancient Greek Aristophanes who, at the end of his The Peace, celebrates the rustic and forgiving wonders of simple country life.

2. **Every Man in his Humour** (1598)
Ben Jonson

OVERVIEW

Ancient Comedy

The theatrical comedy of the ancient Greeks reached its deepest achievement in the work of Aristophanes (441-386 B.C.E.). His eleven remaining dramas, created in the last decades of the fifth century, set world standards for their blend of irreverent hilarity, full throttle social and political criticism, and ability to criticize globally as well as locally. Lysistrata offers us an immortal recipe for preventing war, the Wasps anatomizes the vitriol and toxins of the law court business, the Clouds pillories the indulgence of high theory which shows inadequate respect for the way things play out on the ground. All three plays tackle present and pinching reality—regional war and its assault on daily life, preoccupation with the law courts and the personal issues exposed there, trends of philosophical theory for which the cooler of the youth felt, as today, an irresistible and naïve attraction.

Comedy and the local

Each of these critical sallies made its target out of local settings—as we might find the war in Ukraine, the self-interested junkets of member of the American Supreme Court, or the pursuit of the latest tech device—but infused its targeted dialogue with universal understanding, a pervasive sense of the application of the present drama, to mankind in general, wherever and whenever. I reference that 'universal' quality of classical Greek literature which continues, twenty five centuries after its creation, to touch our hearts, minds, and values.

The comic universal

The brilliant blend of universal with sharply local did not vanish from the scope of subsequent ancient playwrights, though it would suffer a sea change with the passage of a century or two after the death of Aristophanes. Menander (342-290 B.C.E.) speaks from a cultural environment which is greatly domesticated after the daring of fifth century Athens. The world of Menander's mimes, a world of slaves, eunuchs, confused masters, ladies of the night, and just plain gossipy middle class housewives, is no longer the 'elevated' world of Aristophanes, who wrestles with the foundational issues of his society—war, women's rights, parental powers, intellectual theory—but is the world of bourgeois conflict, middle class solution, and drubbings of insolent servants. Comedy—still the critique of error from the standpoint of 'values,' is still a conservative medium, delighting an audience delighted to enjoy its own sense of superiority—has begun a long history which in the west is gradually to add mockery-humor to critical superiority, as it assembles its primary characteristics.

Plautus and Terence

In the Roman Republic two comedians—Plautus (259-184 B.C.E.) and Terence (195-158 B.C.E.) made brilliant moves to consolidate the creative gains carved out by Menander, and other of his contemporaries, whose works are now for the most part dust and loss. The contribution of Plautus most applies here. For he particularly excelled at the temperate kind of creation of universal characters, which was to prove formative when it came to the early drama of Renaissance England, and which is the point at which we find ourselves in beginning with Royster Doyster. It will not do, of course, to undertake great leaps of time and synthesis, and to suggest that it is but a breath from the society of Plautus to that of the Renaissance. It may be enough simply to suggest the extraordinary power of Aristophanes, say, who was able to soar with comedy, after a fashion barely emulated since his time, then to descend to culture worlds which have laid less claim to pure comedy than Aristophanes himself could make.

The uniqueness of the individual comic character

With Royster Doyster and Ben Jonson's Every Man in his Humor—here I do leap, to where we are, to two Renaissance playwrights whose lives bracket that of Shakespeare, and who do thrive both on their classical educations and on the ancient theater—and thus we come on what would have been considered, in ancient Rome, creations touching the uniqueness of the individual character, who at the same time bear universally recognizable traits. This formulation—complex and perhaps muddied by time—is what came down to the Renaissance classicist as a lasting paean to the universal, to what Samuel Johnson, in the eighteenth century, was to describe as quod semper quod ubique, what is valid always and everywhere. This motto would unfurl generously throughout the eighteenth century period of classicism.

From Udall to Jonson

We have seen what these literary concepts could mean in the case of Udall's play. This witty dramatist, who trailed high culture scandal around with him, presents one dimensional figures—Royster Doyster, the narrator, Dame Constance—who function as little more than placeholders for the incremental development of the plot. (Think momentarily of Rosalind in As You Like It, or of Helena in All's Well that Ends Well; these characters seethe with multi-level traits, rather than occupying plot space, like Udall's figures. In the case of Ben Jonson's first success, Every Man in his Humour, we also come upon placeholder figures, though in this case they are a multitude, a simulacrum of the world itself, and are in that sense universals, functions in the large geometrical plot of human nature; quod semper quod ubique in that sense.

Dramatis personae of Every Man in his Humour

The dramatis personae of Jonson's play does at times seem built starchily around the notion of the 'universal character.' Dad and son are at loggerheads, after a fashion dear to comedy back to Aristophanes' phrontisterion (idea factory), in which the older and the younger generations vie for bragging rights in a local think tank. Jonson's play opens with a dad who receives a letter intended for his teen age son—same name as dad—and who opens the letter to discover that a trendy young pal of his son is urging the lad to come join the crowd. Dad slips the letter back in its envelope, and asks his servant Brainworm—a stock character to go with the stock of dad and son—to deliver the letter to son. Son, of course, sees that dad has penetrated the message in advance, and makes the necessary moves to travel, secretly, to his buddies.

Plot launch

And so is launched a drama of flight, pursuit, mutual misunderstanding, and subterfuge which by stages moves the play's action over to the community of one Kitely, who has just married, and who is an urban underworldish figure, Wellbred, a guy geared for fun and parties, and a cast of minor figures drawn, as was the comic tradition going back to Menander, from the pullulating city streets of a new bustling London, a cast including a fatherly judge, a slave or two, an old man and his sons, a country gull, an irritable water bearer, that is stock characters, a version of the literary universal, going back to Menander and the Greek New Comedy prominent in the fourth century B.C.E.

Historical backdrop

The title of Jonson's play suggests an amalgam of literary historical factors which conjoin to mark the sensibility of the end of Elizabethan, and the start of Jacobean literary culture. One is here creating in an atmosphere in which distinctive local types set the tone of humor wryness, and wit, targeting the folly of life, but doing so with good humor. Not far in the background of this aesthetic lies a mediaeval culture world in which agriculture, regionalism, and old saws were unselfconscious drivers of daily life. Intertwined with this cultural evolution, Jonson's first drama purports to work the territory of widespread medical perspectives, onto the kinds of persons that make up a society. The pronounced 'individualism'—quirkiness, uniqueness, independence—of literary characters had its roots in the mediaeval medical theory of humors.

Literature and medicine

The belief that each individual was composed of a distinctive blend of the four humors—bile,--yellow and black-- phlegm, and blood—played into the view that character grew from a distinctive balance. The disposition of humors in one's body was what one is—medicine consisted in adjusting that balance to the point where the individual was fully realized—and when one was 'in his humour,' as in the title of the Jonson play—one was in his true nature. By depicting every man 'in his humor,' in the present play, Jonson seems to stress the multiplicity of kinds of men and women in the world more than their medical humors, but even so he takes his medical route toward maximizing diversity, as it were stressing varieties of character DNA.

Contemporary comedy

It may finally be noted, since we have in this entry touched on the evolution of the concept of dramatic comedy, that the comedic traditions we are now tracking await—from the standpoint of the Renaissance, the many turns and twists of humor that lead to our own day, when factors both cultural and technical have reset the practices of comic acting. The pillorying of foibles, as each character plays out its 'humors,' is still arguably the core gesture of the comedian, whether on screen or television or on the page: whether it be Jack Tripper, The Nutty Professor or P.G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster. The pleasure we take in the gaffes and travails of others is still the trigger to our pleasure in comedy.

The concept of Humours

Ancient Greek medicine—and after it Roman and mediaeval medicine—relied heavily on theories of the blood—its movements and effects on different people, effects which went so far as to determine one's personal traits. The dominant imagery, in this medical thought, involves dividing the human body into four separate blood- types: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, black bile. Medical practice, then, involved balancing blood types, seeking for and finding a harmony among the types found in the body.

Ben Jonson (and George Chapman, in his An Humorous Day's Mirth, published a year before Jonson's Every Man in his Humour,) appear almost at the same time to have worked with the idea of creating literature around the notion of humours. In retrospect that idea seems less different than it appears, from the classical theatrical conception of distinctive characters playing off against one another in a simulation of the richness of life, 'holding the mirror up to life,' as Shakespeare put it. In fact Shakespeare himself was a natural genius at equipping country and low class characters with quirky and distinctive life ways—Mrs. Overdone, Andrew Aguecheek, Sir Toby Belch, Doctor Pinch—including speech practices that make them unique. The new importation, in Jonson, is to make this individual distinctiveness into a theme of its own, the humuor of each person aspiring to be the whole person. In the prologue to Every Man in His Humor

Jonson wrote that he will offer

deeds and language, such as men do use:
And persons, such as comedy would choose;
When she would show an image of the times,
And sport with human follies, not with crimes.

The early modern philosophy of man, when not simply exalting humanity, as Ficino's Oration on the Dignity of Man, is likely to choose that view of man for which folly is the most accurate spokesperson, and the guilt of the fall the tone setter for the human enterprise. Erasmus' Praise of Folly is emblematic for this stance in thought.

CHARACTERS

Knowell, the elderly gent whose efforts to reign in his trendy son go the way of all such intentions. This father is benevolent, wants to make youngsters into men, but is only partially able to read his son—like many dads at all times.

Edward Knowell, son to the former, a sulky but erudite youngster, whom we meet, at the beginning of the play, A standard model teen ager, except for the wrinkle of his erudition, for we find him, right at the start if the play, bent over reading a text of Epictetus. He may stand, at the end of the play, as an uplifting opposite to the poetaster Matthew, the town gull.

Brainworm, the senior Knowell's manservant, spy for the younger Knowell. Continuingly subversive throughout the play, though at best a bit player.

Master Stephen, a country gull, easily led by the nose; first seen visiting with Mr. Knowell.

George Downright, a squire. A straight shooter, with a temper. Abstract naming is a regular part of the humour-identification of individuals; Dogood, Downright, Brainworm, Knowell—the list is as long as the naming practices of cultures, which wish to both create and predict the outcomes of their offsprings' lives. Nigerian cultural naming follows the same pattern, confidently prophesying the favors of God which will shower themselves on the growing youth.

Wellbred, half-brother to Downright. Magnet for dubious characters, despite his reassuring name.

Justice Clement, an aging magistrate, ultimately the judge of all the complaints that have accumulated during the play. It is he who summarizes and sums up the faults of the individual figures of the play.

Roger Formal, clerk to Justice Clement.

Thomas Kitely, a merchant. The main figure within the complicated intrigues that constitute the second part of the play. (The part of which Kitely and Downright are central figures.)

Dame Kitely, wife to Kitely. She, the attractive new bride of Kitely, comes under suspicion. Kitely fears that Wellbred's hangers-on may try to cuckold him with Dame Kitely.

Mistress Bridget, Kitely's sister. Attractive but unmarried, thus of additional attraction to the denizens of the Kitely household.

Master Matthew, the town gull, easily fooled, and addicted to poetry, at which his buddies give him very low marks.

Thomas Cash, Kitely's man. His name tells it all, and wherever he appears suspect cash is trading hands.

Oliver Cob, a water-carrier. He accuses his wife of cuckolding him, a garden variety accusation, as we see from this play, and unsubstantiated. The Shakespearean tradition, of scattering 'laboring folk' through his plays, peers vigorously through Restoration comedy.

Tib, Cob's wife. Falsely suspected, by Cob, of making him a cuckold.

Captain Bobadill, a braggadocio soldier, like Ralph Roister Doister in the play by Udall, a half century before. The protoypes of this stock character go back to Plautus and Terence, and even to Menander, in Greek Hellenistic times. To note, here, that even the sleepy old Judge Clement, who presides over the resolution of the play, spots the Captain as a classic coward.

SYNOPSIS

The play opens in Mr. Knowell Sr's house. He has just received a letter which could be for him or his son—same name. He opens it, sees it is from his son's buddies, seals it and sends it to his son via Brainworm, the family servant. Brainworm passes the letter on to Edward Jr., who leaves the house to join his friends. In the next act we see Mr. Knowell in pursuit of his son—who has actually gone to the house of his buddies, Matthew and Cob. From this point we move to another part of the city, to the home of Kitely, a local merchant. Wellbred, who wrote the letter to young Edward Knowell lives in Kitely's house, which brings the two elements of the plot together. Kitely has his own worries, and around him swirl shady dealings, jealousies, and antagonisms. Wellbred, the brother of Squire Downright, who lives with Kitely, has been disrespectful—he is the lad who wrote the letter to Edward. For another thing, Kitely is newly married, jealous of his wife who is surrounded by the young bachelor friends of his brother in law. As the two scenes of action gradually coalesce, jealousy and shady dealings prevailing on all sides, the scene shifts to the home of Justice Clement, who appears as an island of sanity, and whose judgment is needed. He serves as a spokesperson for the view of mankind with which Jonson opened the play, in his prologue. Justice Clement advises the assembled participants, who include figures from both parts of the play, that they should free themselves of the emotions that have put them into conflict, and be their true selves, their humours shaping them. It is at this point that the true unity of the diverse characters, whom the play has brought together, is realized.

SCENES

Mr. Knowell, the authoritarian dad, is eager to keep tabs on his trend enjoying young son, who is equally eager to hide his activities from his dad. The two men have the same name, so that when a letter arrives for the son it is delivered to Dad.

Taking advantage of the identity of his with his son 's name, Dad 'takes the liberty' of opening the letter, in which he finds out that his son's buddies are seeking his company, urging him to get out of the house.

The dad gives the resealed letter to his servant, Brainworm, with the request to deliver the missive to Knowell junior, pretending that the letter has not yet been opened. The servant agrees to this condition, but at once delivers the letter to Knowell junior, with an explanation of what the dad has found out.

Thus opens a full throated generational conflict, in which Dad pursues son with the misguided hope of 'reforming him.'

This ingenious plot opening springs loose into the parallel development, which surrounds a certain Kitely, whose brother in law Wellbred—the chief contact for Knowell Junior—has imported into the Kitely household a band of dubious characters, of whom Kitely fears that they will cuckold him with his lovely new wife.

The man is deeply jealous—an archetype of one of the many humours exemplified in the play—traits like jealousy or cowardice or aggression or fear, which manifest as central characteristics of the individual.

By the time the two component parts of the play have been brought together, grievances and mirth fully expressed, the Magistrate is called in to judge the individual cases, in each instance weighing the individual's fate in relation to his humours: a j8ridical system aligned with basic natures is in the making.

THEMES

Jealousy. Master Kitely can serve as the poster child for humourousness, for he is preternaturally Jealous. He is convinced that Wellbred and his mates, who are encroaching on his house, are a threat to the honor of his new bride. If any figure in Jonson's play has been swallowed up by a single attribute, it is Kitely.

Paternalism. Mr. Knowell is a paternal figure for his son, and pushes the permissible limits, of paternal intervention, when he opens the letter to his son, then demands—though in vain of course—that Brainworm should deliver the letter to Knowell Junior, without revealing that it had already been opened. It is a trait of the comedy of humours that personality is reiatively fixed: such figures as Mr. Knowell and relatively cut in the stone of genetics. But a 'humour' is a far richer notion than an 'obsession,' say. Mr. Knowell, for example, is genuinely preoccupied with guiding his son's ways, and in fact violates his son's letter with good intentions, to understand and guide the young man. In the same spirit Mr. Knowell does his best to give 'life advice' to Master Stephen, who comes to the Knowell home to visit relatives.

Dishonesty. The entire cast of characters, who gather around Kitely and at the tavern they find congenial, breathes an air of dishonesty, which is their collective humor. Shady deals, money under the table, disguises, imputations of infidelity; none of these dubious behaviors reaches the high crime level, but the collective atmosphere is itself a humour generated by each of the participants. (One might think of the malign atmosphere in which Dickens' Oliver Twist is bathed.)

Deception. Brainworm has no compunction about passing on Mr. Knowell's sealed letter, to young Knowell junior, without mentioning that the letter had been opened. It is quite natural to Brainworm, as it is to the traditional comedic 'servant,' to serve his master's interests quite unscrupulously, and not to put a fine point on other relationships. The crowd that follow Mr. Wellbred, and gather at Kitely's house, is a seedbed of deceptive types, and invites company like that of Brainworm, who continues throughout the play, to support young Master Edward Knowell.

Judiciousness. Judge Clement wraps up the loose ends of the drama, by gathering the complaint - filled participants at his house, for a summary judgment. He concerns himself with 'human follies,' not with 'crimes,' as Jonson said of his own dramatic practice, and in the end, after the whole set of actors has been judged in terms of their humours, a lighthearted sense pervades the whole human comedy. Jonson himself stands outside the play rejoicing that no harms deeper than social misdeeds have been perpetrated.

3 **Volpone**. (1605)
Ben Jonson

OVERVIEW

The tenor of the play Jonson creates his own background for the present play:his theory of humours, which has its own roots in mediaeval medicine, and its development in pre modern psychology. The excess of one or another humour—dry, moist, wet—or another strongly inflects one's personality, and establishes what we can think of as our distinctive character. To explain the evolution of the notion of 'character' in English literature will be a winding journey, which takes us from Chaucer to Swift to Dickens, and exposes us to many distinctive visions onto the evolving directions of the character trait in English culture. Jonson, with his Volpone and with Morose (in Epicene), introduces us to two 'grumpy old men' who fall into the pit of Jonson's satire, and never emerge from there. Each of them has said a lifelong no to the communitarian world, and each has developed distorted character traits. They are both in a 'bad humour.'

Each of these retiring figures is given a place to be what he is—a city environment, British or Italian—in which interpersonal actions will be unavoidable, but in which the individual adjustment will be unique—a fixation on silence, a preoccupation with death, power and money, The main figure of Volpone, Volpone himself, is fixed around gold, money and power together, and that crossroads of the two, attractive women, who seem to be part of the power complex of modern societies.

Both Morose and Volpone lack an important ingredient of being in the human condition ingredience, a condition of belonging and participating, and in the play Volpone this missing component is the very electricity of the human. Volpone, the fox, is in myth-imagination-fact not human but a part of the animal world; that part of it which we share with our animal brothers and sisters. For the 'civilized' imagination of Jonson's time, the bestial attributions of Volpone (a fox), Mosca (the fly), Voltore (the vulture), Corbaccio (the raven) Corvino (the carrion crow), do all they can to express the bestiality of their name bearers, in fact to express a particular kind of bestiality, that of species of crow flesh devouring flies, and raven which are noted for their feeding off 'carrion.' Jonson pulls no punches, in characterizing the major figures in the present play. Aristo-phanes, Erasmus, Pope, and Swift move through the same brutal waters of sarcasm and contempt. Jonson excels at employing this heavy symbolism to undergird the comedy of his sarcasm.

CHARACTERS

Volpone, a magnifico; of Venetian nobility, His personality evolves throughout the play, and finally shipwrecks on its own lack of direction and organization

Mosca, his parasite; bodyguard and collaborator in varied plots. Seemingly a buddy to Volpone Mosca turns out to be a false and dangerous friend, truly a parasite.

Voltore, an advocate; eager for a cut of Volpone's inerhitance; old grasping Venetian nobility Corbaccio , an old gentleman
Corvino, a merchant; a business man, before all interested in money; father of Bonario, husband of Celia.Avocatori, four magistrates

Notario, the register

Nano, a dwarf (with the eunuch and the hermaphrodite, a significantly sterile offspring of Volpone's erotic life)

Castrone, a eunuch

Sir Politic Would be, a knight and would be world traveler
Peregrine, a gentleman traveler; a new type of fake sophisticate
Bonario, young gentleman (son of Corbaccio)

Madame Would be, the knight's wife
Celia, the merchant's wife; easy to look at, but particular who she sleeps with
Commendatori, officers.
Mercatori, three merchants
Androgyno, an hermaphrodite
Servitore, a servant
Crowd
Women

PLOT

An elderly Venetian gentleman, who is deeply in love with his gold, wants more of the beautiful stuff. He devises a plan. He lets it be known that he is on his deathbed. Wealthy friends, hoping to be included in Volpone's will, visit him, one after the other, bearing splendid gifts. Their expectation is that Volpone will reward them by including them in his will. Volpone's plan is abetted by his parasite servant, Mosca (the fly.)

While Volpone's situation is unfolding, he learns from Mosca that Corvino, one of Volpone's ardent inheritance- seeking friends, has a beautiful wife, Cedlia. Volpone gets a look at the lady and is enchanted. Mosca helps to set up a bedside rendez-vous which is taking a promising bedroom direction, when Bonario, Corvino's son, aware that his dad is planning todisinherit him, arrives in time to observe the scene about to transpire between his mother and the rapacious Volpone. Volpone barely gets out of the scrape before being accused of rape.Dirty legal work, and Mosca's unscrupulous interventions, save Volpone's skin. We are by now totally disabused of any of the gentler emotions toward Volpone.

Jonson invigorates his dark tale by introducing a la mode British travelers, Sir and Lady Politic Would be and Peregrine. A great deal of in talk transpires among these three travelers, sitting ducks for the satire made possible by the just commencing pre-modern world of the traveler; figures ripe for mockery on the Restoration stage, as the first glimpses of the travel 'industry' begin to make their appearance.

Volpone extricates himself from the nearly disastrous denouement of the event with Celia, and the ensuing rage of Bonario, the son of Corvino and Cetlia. At this point, however, Volpone gives another turn to his character.(He had surprised us, initially, by the decision to fake a nearly fatal illness, and then to punctuate the pretence by a real lusty attraction to Celia.)

Volpone now decides to proclaim his own death, and to announce that he has willed his fortune to Mosca, a decision which enrages the previous pretenders to the fortunes of Volpone. As it happens, this trick of Volpone ends up badly, for him, thanks to the final refusal of Mosca to play ball with his master's plans. Mosca likes being rich, and refuses to accept the fact that he is not rich. 'Did I inherit or not'? asks Mosca.Court battles follow, in the course of which both Mosca and Volpone are severely punished, and the law prevails. While appropriate retribution is handed out by the justice system, the inward punishment to the vitriolic Volpone is the cruelest. He proves to be an inwardly sequestered individual with a volatile personality which makes him unfit for society. Jonson, like Shakespeare in Hamlet, Lear, or Richard II, is a subtle master of depicting ssocially off centered eccentrics.

SCENES

From the outset, with Volpone rapt in adoration of his coffers of gold in the glistening morning sun, we know that Jonson has once again, as in Epicene or the Alchemist, put his finger on a twisted and quirky psyche. The protagonists of these three plays share a cynical gift for disregarding others, or for interposing uncomfortable restrictions on others. The characters are all egomaniacs with a limited capacity to foresee the consequences of their own behavior. and with an ultimate down fall which they have prepared for themselves. The defining events in the twisted lives accordingly begin square in the midst of their aberrations

From the start we see the complexity of Volpone's character. He is a sensualist for gold, yet at the same time an accumulator, concerned not just with the brilliance of this sunny character, but with the power his gold enables him to exercise over others.There is a close relation between his sense of the power of gold and of the power gold gives him.

It is a small step from this power complex of Volpone to his sudden desire to make love to the wife of Corvino, fired up as he is by the mere description of this beauty, whom he has never met. So far is Volpone from the moribund condition in which he portrays himself, that he is immediately wired for action, upon learning of this lady, who will, as we can well understand, have no feeling but repugnance for Volpone.

Volpone is, therefore, a rapidly self-modifying personality. The next dramatic move, that springs from his propensity to alter himself, is what he makes of himself after having been humiliated at law in the aftermath of his assault on Corvino's wife. He decides to remake himself, once again, by creating a false identity for himself. Through his parasite, Mosca, he lets the rumor be circulated that he, Volpone, has passed away. Here he is drawn back, again, to the temptation to play with his existence, in order to manipulate others. Is it an inherent drive for revenge that triggers this strong interest in self-play that marks Volpone's behavior? Is the resentment of others, on Volpone's part, simply a desire to possess all the gold in the world?

We return to the classical notion of the comic, that kind of rustic spoof which we feel able to track back into some of its originals in pre fifth century Greek culture, and find cropping up in Elizabethan Mid-summer Night's Dream country plays, or long ago in the bloody comedies of Ishtar in Sumeria.

THEMES

Lust Jonson's sorn for public vices turns especially around greed and lust, two of the cardinal sins of orthodox Christian tradition. Lust tends to mean exaggerated longing, frequently sexual. We know that Volpone has faked his debility, but may be surprised that he has given full rein to his sexual desires, after having been told, by Mosca, of the beautiful wife of Corvino, one of the suppliants for Volpone's will. Mosca is called on to facilitate a rendez vous. Etc. All is well ezcept that nothing works out for Volpone. Our point, however, is different. It is the perennial power of sexual desire, which once more, here, folds back destructively onto itself, crippling itself. Sexuality, greed, and power turn out be bedfellows.

Greed Greed is a pervasive theme in world literature. It is one of the cardinal sins in Christian tradition, and is hotly assaulted in all the major religions, where it is correctly chastised as a manifestation of love aborted, the worth of the other scorned, and the priority of the self crudely prioritized. Volpone himself is inverted onto himself. He wants above all to continue receiving precious gifts, from the leeches haunting him on what they assume is his death bed. To maintain this gift flow, he needs to sustain the impression that he is in fact dying, thus in the process of deserving final rites of respect and attention.

Deception Volpone's governing ruse is deception. Except for Mosca, his parasite, Volpone has no one in whom to confide, except his parasite-servant, who only to a certain extent has the same interests as Volpone. Thus Volpone is open to deception by all his visitors, about whose motives he is himself completely in the dark. Are lust and greed, these two trigger passions of Volpone, related to his readiness to deceive? Deception is the pathway through which to satisfy lust and greed while all three states of being are intertwined, one is a platform for the realization of the other two. Thus are the elements of our universal consideration powerful underpinnings of one another, for good or evil.

Power Volpone's longing for power is closely interrelated with his desire for sexual control and satisfaction, as well as with his drive for money. From the flirst lines of the play we realize that Volpone is obsessed by the passion to control his gold. He views it as a precious lover might, wandering around his bedroom caressing the golden brilliance of the metal piled provocatively around his room. Wealthy though he is, he would never be satisfied until he replaced himself by gold.

Old Age Volpone is all desire, greed, and longing, and yet even if his power is increased he has no power to combat the old age which is encroaching on his desires and on his capacity to satisfy them. The theme of the inevitability of death pervades great literature and art—and not infrequently takes us down paths of insight: into rooms ‘sans eyes sans teeth sans everything,’ as Shakespeare brutally expressed it, into the everyday but amazing last day of Tolstoy’s Death of Ivan Ilyitch; into the sassy face of Mr. Death mocking his ‘blue eyed boy,’ in W.C. Williams’ poem addressed to our fragility.
‘

4. **The Knight of the Burning Pestle** 1607
Francis Beaumont

OVERVIEW

Literary background

The present play is the first whole parody play to be performed in England, and as such, obviously, marks a sharp contrast with the far more straightforwardly dramatic theater, to which the London audience was accustomed. (We are, in other words, approaching a time when theater will have frankly and exclusively adopted the function of entertainment.) The heart of the present play is a satire on chivalric culture, that late mediaeval culture style which hung on after the High Middle Ages, well into the English Renaissance. In the course of this depiction, however, Beaumont adds unexpected twists to the development of modern stagecraft. Our attention is alerted, at every point here, to the parallels between this play—its general attitude—and Cervantes' Don Quixote (1605/1615) These works of cultural satire stand out in their time as bold efforts both to demarcate their own time, to define the time they no longer are, and to herald in, with subtle care, an era future to them. Satire is the name of the genre of writing in which we are working when we undertake these efforts to place our cultural selves in our unique moment.

PLOT

The ground level

The remarkable opening of the play arouses our question, to what kind of genre does the present play belong? The play seems to bear traces of the city comedy, spoofs on class in the Renaissance culture world. There is also the satire on trendiness, like the preoccupation with a chivalric age which was long past, except as a relic. At the same time we scent, here, that kind of ancient Greek comedy which opens with a citizenry taking its early morning seats in the theatre of Athens, clamoring for the play to start, and airing its opinions in advance of any action.

Watching a play in a play

The setting is in London, and we are gathered to watch a performance of The London Merchant.
At this point pop up, from within the audience, a Citizen and his wife, complaining, in advance, that the play they are about to watch will not be relevant to the middle class life which they live, and is which demanding representation in the present play. They of theirs. Rafe recites some Shakespeare, as proof of his dramatic ability, and is taken on into the play as a Grocer Errant, bearing on his shield the heraldic device of a burning pestle. The reference to Quixote is perfect. A second reference, of a burning pestle to a penis afflicted with syphilis, further widens the scope of artistic audacity which trademarks this work.

Development and details

The intricacy, and the modernity, of the play are hereby announced. The key to the melding, of the two plot lines, will be turned when the merchant's apprentice falls in love with the merchant's daughter, Luce. That move of heart coincides with a decision of Mrs. Merrythought to leave her husband Merrythought—the merchant of the primary play. In essence, the following stage can be summarized: Mrs. Merrythought finds herself preoccupied with the safety of her daughter, whom in her own ladylike distress she is anxiously eager to protect from the advances of an unwanted suitor. Rafe enters the picture strongly ere, eager to be of service to a damsel in distress. Is he bringing to bear, on the tangled situation before him, the very romantic attitude against which Madame Citizen spoke in the first place, when she asked for a play which would reflect middle class values?

The grocer errant

The progress of the play is assured by the peripeties of Mme. Merrythought, who, having left her drinking and gambling husband, is in flight with her son—whom she has reassured by telling him of the valuable

jewels she is carrying with her, and which will sustain them in their light. At this point of flight and anxiety the grocer errant comes upon the fleeing Merrythoughts—mother and son—in whom he sees an opportunity to display his own chivalric skills, the motivational launch, after all, for his own dramatic entrance into the play. The development of Rafe's chivalric mission, which seems infused in him by the faith of the citizens, meets with a mercantile—not a chivalric -- response from an innkeeper, whom Rafe has helped lodge at a local hostelry, and who wants to be paid for lodging the Merrythoughts overnight. The inn keeper suggests an alternate work of charity to which the grocer might direct his chivalric attentions. This time it is a question of a certain barber. This evil practitioner is devoted to treating venereal diseases.It seems that Rafe intervenes by rescuing several of Barbarosso's patients. The satire—of the chivalric, the medical nostrum, and the mercantile spirit are wrapped into one bundle here

The satire

Many ploys of satire dominate here. The play opens on the outburst of Mme. Citizen, clamoring for a theater which will represent the kind of life she and her family live. Rafe will be her representative, a Grocer errant, who will both hark back to the mediaeval days—with his burning pestle halberd—and who will thus confuse the end statement of the ultimate desires of the little man in the society. The telos of all this audience longing is perplexing enough to remind us of the complex and formative view points of the still very present Shakes- pearian theatrical cachet. The classical is still an ideal, but the indwelling spirit is far too volatile to be captured by commonplaces. The audience is a true participant in the play, this time, as perhaps it was in the present author's youth.

The denouement

At this point the citizen and his wife, who had voiced the request for theater close to daily life, find themselves votaries of the chivalric, and chafe that the narrative unfolding around them is too commonplace; they demand more romantic adventures for their theatric representative, Rafe. It is, of course, the responsibility of the directors of the play, like the merchant Venturewell, to see to the tastes of the straightforward merchant tranche of the audience.

5 Epicoene or The Silent Woman 1609
Ben Jonson

OVERVIEW

Background Jonson's Epicene, or The Silent Woman, was first performed in 1609, but was from its origins a failure. It was not until many years later that the play was brought to enthusiastic attention, by John Dryden, who called it 'the pattern of a perfect play.' It was revived after the Restoration, and began to attract large audiences; Samuel Pepys enjoyed a performance of the play in July of 1660 and notes that it was one of the first plays performed after the restoration of Charles II to the throne. It was at that time performed in the Whitefriars Theater in London, a sound sensitive indoor venue, required by the frequent silences or crescendos of voice in Jonson's play. (Shakespeare's plays, performed at the outdoor Globe Theater fitted the urban soundscape unfolding on all sides of the audience.) The popularity of the play waxed and waned throughout the following centuries, proving in general to be a play for the intelligentsia rather than a shaggier Shakespearian play, with its feet on commonplace soil, or in the heaven of Shakespeare's imagination.

CHARACTERS

Morose A gentleman addicted to silence, and nelly upset by any loud noise. We have to wonder whether Morose is maintaining his condition as a way of keeping his nephew Dauphine from coming in contact with him.
Sir Dauphine Eugenie. A knight. Nephew of Morose. A wit and a rascal, who has been unkind to his uncle, but who now wishes to secure his own rightful inheritance, which is under the control of Morose.
Ned Clerimont. A gentleman; friend of Dauphine.
Truewit. Dauphine's other good friend; an articulate foe of mariage.
Epicoene. A young gentleman; In actuality a young man dressed in women's clothes
Sir John Daws A knight, Epicoene's servant.Sir Amorous La Foole, A Knight.
Thomas Otter, A land and sea captain
Cutbeard, A barber, who aids in tricking Morose.
Mute. One of Morose's servants
Madame Haughty. Ladies Collegiate
Madame Centaure. Ladies Collegiate
Mistress Mavis, Ladies Collegiate
Mistress Trusty. The Lady Haughty's woman
Mistress Otter. The captain's wife. A loud and sharp spoken lady, the power center of her family.
Parson
Pages
Servants

PLOT

What the play is about

The play takes place in the home of a wealthy old gent by the name of Morose. This man is so pathologically noise-averse that he must live in a lane so narrow that no cart traffic can pass along it. It is the world of this neurotic that establishes the tone of the entire play. Morose, as the man is named, in the fashion of Johnson, has suffered a good many abuses and scorns from his nephew Dauphine, to whom his inheritance would normally pass, and has decided to marry, sin part so as to keep the money from going to Dauphine's hands.

A Marriage prospect

The play takes an unexpected turn. Dauphine has decided to work with Cutbeard, Morose's barber, to counter the decision of Morose to marry and prevent his inheritance from going to Dauphine. Cutbeard finds a suitable marriage prospect for Morose—where suitable is to mean silent—and notes with delight

that Epicoene, the lady in question—though actually a young man dressed as a lady—speaks in a low murmur, if at all. (To the delight of the noise averse morose, who believes he has found his dream woman.) Pleased as punch, Morose proceeds to arrange his marriage.

The attack on marriage

Dauphine's friend, Truewit, is delighted with the seeming course of events, which looks like it may lead to Dauphine recovering his inheritance. He foresees that the actual 'silent woman' is going to be nothing but woe for Morose, and that the poor man will rapidly abjure the idea of marriage .To bolster these persuasions Truewit unpackages a list of disadvantages to marriage, including women's inabilities to shut up. (Morose has already satisfied himself on this score, having discovered that Epicoene speaks, or seems to speak, 'only in whispers.') As it is, the marriage takes place. Morose is hitched, and then all hell breaks loose. Morose's house is inundated with house guests: Dauphine, Clerimont, and Truewit, Captain Otter, two foolish knights, LaFoole and Daw, loud Collegiates, eager to criticize the new bride for her failure to invite them to the wedding. The worst thing of all, for Morose, is yet to come: Epicoene turns out to be a loud nagging partner, whose roaring voice resonates through the house.

Epicoene herself/himself

As it turns out the new bride has a totally dominant personality and so rapidly drives Morose crazy that all he can think about is divorce which will of course free his inheritance up for Dauphine. Morose consults two lawyers—two friends of Dauphine in disguise—but they can not find grounds for divorce. Finally Dauphine tells Morose that he will arrange for the divorce, 'if Morose will agree to give him (Dauphine) his inheritance. Having an agreement from Morose, Dauphine turns to Epicoene and strips off his disguise to reveal that Epicoene is after all a male, and the marriage could in no case have been validated. Among the ludicrous consequences of this resolution, which restores Dauphine's inheritance, is the revelation that the two big fools of the play, LaFoole and Daw, admit to having slept with the new 'bride.'

The point of the play

One might say that the play ends where it ends, with the Inheritance promised to Dauphine, the ladies collegiate hurrying to their next rendez-vous, Dauphine once more Intestate, Morose….well, presumably in his study thrashing out what has happened. Has anything changed? For all we can imagine, Morose is as noise-averse as ever. The fools are still fools. Truewit is still an articulate foe of marriage. Rather like Bartholomew Fair, or Everyman in his Humor, the present play is not one in which there is something to happen, and the challenge of making that something happen, but there is something like a circular universality to the present play. It ends more or less where it starts.

SCENES

The depictions of Morose, closed off in his noise proof chamber, talking to others only in a whisper, is a brilliant take on Jonson's theory of humours. What an extraordinary addictive humour, a character trait that eats up the whole person.

Impetuosity regulates Morose's behavior. Rather than inquire into Epicoene's identity, or to wonder why she appears in disguise, Morose hurries ahead to plan his wedding. Does he understand how deeply he has been hurt by Dauphine's tricks, and how much he longs for vengeance? Of is he just wallowing in emotional self-dislike?

Who are the collegiates, these women who appear as antagonists to Morose, and as proto feminists who control their husbands by controlling their husbands' sex lives? Does their viewpoint intersect with the perspective of the entire play? What is that perspective? Is it that exaggerated humour is itself a disease, and comes onto other people harmfully from all directions? Are the women too addicts, if happy ones, of revenge?

Truewit, eager to support Dauphine, his friend, launches into an extensive anti-marriage peroration, aimed at Morose, and with the intention of dissuading Morose from his plan to marry Epicoene. The peroration concentrates especially on the chief annoyance of Morose, the noise that accompanies a spouse, her friends, and the commotion of a full household.

The new bride for Morose, the silent woman, turns out to be loud and nagging, and part of the endless commotion which dominates Morose's house. He has paid his nephew's inheritance and lost his tranquility. What was his actual trouble? Was it a language difficulty? Or a psycho neurotic defect driven by the desire for revenge?

Has Morose come out of this drama with any honor? Or has not His neurotic retreat disqualified him for any effective social concourse? Is his problem not measured by ordinary language, which he has voluntarily withdrawn from? Is language not the measure of social health? But if so, what is Jonson telling us about the horrors of totally unregulated language, like that of the collegiates, who babble Morose to death, or of Dauphine and his friends, for that matter, who conspire like schoolchildren, without regard to the character of their language.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Power Patriarchy combines power and parenthood, and even the extremely retiring Morose embodies both power and male parenthood. Hence the power Morose has over his nephew, Dauphine. It may be said that Dauphine brought this state of affairs on himself—his exclusion from inheritance—by his bad treatment of his uncle. The fact is, though, that the uncle had absolute discretion over the handling of Dauphine's inheritance—and would have had equal possession of any female inheritance in the family. The tradition behind Morose, of course, reverts as far back as Roman antiquity, where the pater familias rules the family's financial destiny.

Middle class world view By contrast with certain 'high class' comedies of Etherege or Wycherley—The Man of Mode or The Country Wife, for example—Jonson's Epicoene deals with what we can call the lower gentry of London. Figures like Morose or Dauphine or the fools like LaFoole are drawn from the upper middle trades classes, and operate within traditional limits of financial power transmission. We are within shooting distance of the bourgeois comedy of the mid seventeenth century, like Dryden's Marriage a la Mode or The Kind Keeper. In other words the age of chivalry in literaturre—already fading away in, say, Ralph Roister Doister—is slowly giving way to the appearances of the bourgeois onstage, the very bourgeois whom Moliere is pillorying in Le bourgeois gentilhomme (1670).

Gender Equality The Ladies Collegiate remind us of the ladies of Aristophanes' Lysistrata, who express their power just like Jonson's ladies' crew. In Aristophanes the women were searching for a way to bring the endless Peloponnesian War to a close. Their method was to shut down on sex until the men decided for peace, The collegiate ladies of Jonson have left their husbands, whom they control by periodic consents to sexuality, and live apart, socially active and at the top of their social game. They make it plain, in the present play, that they will not be excluded from social events like marriages.

Oppressiveness The present work belongs to that category of drama in which a culture world is depicted—a certain milieu of London at a certain time— but in which there is little change from beginning to end of the piece. In the present play the situation at the end is similar to that at the beginning. No one is married, but the oppressiveness of Morose's character has remained intact. He may have found his way back to granting Dauphine his rightful inheritance, but the personality he brings to the final state of affairs is exactly the same as the personality—domineering, tight, and inflexible—he brings to the play in the beginning. This would be an example of a man fixed in his humour, unchangeably what he is.

PSYCHOLOGY

Obsession Jonson's portrayal, of Morose' obsessive antipathy to noise, is both comic and interestingly 'modern,' as, in fact, is Jonson's use of the traditional medical concept of humours, for literary manalysis. On stage, a humour can easily play out as an obsession, not only an inbuilt state of mind, but also as a neurosis which controls the person. The medical theory underlying this essentially aesthetic concept of the humour seems to dictate that health is envisaged as the end of indulgence in one's humours. Does Morose find a way to cure his neurosis? Or does he in fact remain incarcerated in the same mindset at the end of the play? Has he come out onto any new level of understanding? Have any of the characters?

APPEARANCE vs. REALITY

Hypocrisy and Fake learnedness Amorous LaFoole and John Daw cite Latin poorly—by contrast to the 'lawyer' who later arranges for Morose's divorce, and who uses Latin in the stiffly formal style of the Academies—correctly. Jonson is always ready to mock pretenses of learning, for where better to exercise the comic perspective than on individuals whose trademark is to seem what they are not. Moliere might be said to be the master mocker of such pretence.

6. **A Chaste Maid in Cheapside** (1613)
Thomas Middleton (1580-1627)

OVERVIEW

Middleton: the man and his writing world

Middleton was the son of a London bricklayer, yet by dint of hard work, and numerous successful plays, as well as prose works and poems, masques and pageants he managed, in the course of his life, to raise himself to the status of a gentleman, and to own valuable property in London. One reason for his financial success was his position as a free lance dramatist, working as he could for any theatrical company he liked—and that liked his work. And he was versatile. Among Elizabethan dramatists he was almost unique in being equally successful in tragedy and comedy, which opened his work to a large and diverse audience. He remained a popular theatrical presence, and in 1620 was appointed official Chronologist of the City of London, a position of influence in which he was followed by Ben Jonson.

It is worth restating that the label 'city comedy' regularly attaches to the kind of popular work Middleton creates here. The new life of the pre modern city is all over the plot that Middleton traces. Marriage, bearing with it the rewards of inherited monies, is at the same time a vehicle for jealousies and conflicts in Middleton's plays. Desire, which triggers the move toward marriage, sets individual (and sometimes group) interests against one another, while fertility, sprung loose by desire, generates new patterns of work inside the increasingly complex networks of supply, demand, and distribution, which provide the energy routes of the early modern city. Congreve and Etherege, as well as Middleton, sit squarely in the middle of this new dramatic sensibility, drawing the texture of their upper middle lives directly onto the page.

CHARACTERS

Mr. Yellowhammer, a prosperous London goldsmith.
Maudlin, his wife.
Tim, their son. Naïve and out of it.
Moll, their daughter, and the principal, the 'chaste maid,' who comes out of the play mock deified at the end.
Tutor, to Tim, from Cambridge
Sir Walter Whorehound, a suitor to Moll, who likes the looks of her dowry. Also a gallant, who likes the look of the ladies in general, and procreates voluminously with the wife of Allwit.
Sir Oliver Kix, and his wife, Lady Kix. Relatives of Sir Walter. An elderly couple having great trouble making a child.
Allwit and his wife, Mistress Allwit, whom Sir Walter keeps as his mistress, while Allwit, indifferent morally, reaps the benefits.
A Welsh gentlewoman, Sir Walter's whore.
Wat and Nick, bastard sons, by Mistress Allwit.
Touchwood Senior and wife, elderly and failing pair.
Touchwood Junior, another suitor to Moll, and her own favorite from among her suitors. Eventually marries Moll.
A porter
A gentleman
A wench
Two Puritans
Five gossips
Moll's maid

PLOT

The plot of Middleton's most popular comedy, A Chaste Maid in Cheapside, is loose, episodic, part almost of an epic fertility of action, interaction, intrusion, invention.

The play opens with a marital deal cooking. Dad, a prosperous goldsmith, wants a suitable marriage for his daughter, Moll, and turns to a Sir Walter Whorehound, who has just arrived in town, accompanied by his 'landed niece' from Wales, who is intended as a bride for Tim—but is in fact a prostitute.

The most fascinating and erotic—of this powerfully erotic play—involves the marriage of Allwit and his Wife. They live on the Estate of Sir Walter Whorehound, who provides them mansion style living, all the luxuries of maintenance, in return for which Allwit makes his wife available, on the property, whenever Sir Whorehound Is around. This situation is perfectly agreeable to Allwit, for he has excellent living and no responsibility, a voluntary cuckold as he is; the situation also satisfies Sir Walter, who can screw without restriction, and always has a place to stay when he's in town.

There follows, and we see already the episodic of this drama, the tale of the senior Touchwood. (Moll, you remember, has the hots for the younger Touchwood, but not for the lecherous Sir Walter her parents design her for.) The senior Touchwoods have the problem thaht Sir Walter has with Mistress Allwit, that whenever they get together a baby is quickly made. The senior Touchwoods can no longer put up with, or pay for, this fertility. Of necessity they separate, ploughing their story back into the epic of fertility and high fuck which this amazing play makes of itself. It is at this point that the bond between sex and money asserts itself forcefully.

-

We have arrived at the Kixes—'middle class nobility' as are all of these factored in characters, in this con summate city drama—an elderly couple who have been unable to procreate. If they die without offspring Sir Walter, a family relative, will inherit Lady Kixes will, which would be anathema for the Touchwoods. It is thus of importance to the Touchwoods that Lady Kix should procreate. Touchstone senior, the exemplar of fertility, takes on this problem, finds his way into Lady Kix's bed, and solves the problem, excluding Sir Walter from the inheritance."A wave of the magic wand' takes care of the matter.

The bulk of Middleton's play is invested in the co- ordinate scenes unrolled above, but there remains, in the tale and the watcher's mind, the initial love, between Moll Yellowhammer and the junior Touchwood with whom she is truly in love. The resolution of this love match will pull at no heart strings, lest we be tempted to anticipate an entrance of Romeo and Juliet. (No play which highlights the tale of the voluntary cuckold, Mr. Allwit, is about to turn romantic on us.) But even without heart strings, we can still be amazed.

On the day before her anticipated wedding to Sir Walter Whorehound, Moll manages to escape from her parents' house, where she has been confined. As she is approaching a small boat, to cross the water to a meeting with Touchwood junior, she is captured, and dragged on stage by Mistress Yellowhammer, furious at the escape; the girl falls into a fit of cold and illness; Touchwood senior appears to remove her to another room in the Yellowhammer house, providing an occasion for a new plan: the maid will pretend that Moll has expired, and arrange for her to be brought on stage in her coffin, in the last scene of the play.

En route to the conclusion, however, Sir Walter and Touchwood Junior come to swords points and each is wounded, Whorehound to the point that he feels he is dying, and expresses himself penitently in powerful language—a reminder of another register available to Middleton. Whorehound is hereupon kicked out of the mansion he 'shares' with the Allwits; his world begins to crumble.The world of the youngsters, Moll and Touchwood junior, is just beginning to soar. The coffins filled with the supposed corpses of the two young lovers are brought on stage, and, at the command of Touchwood senior the 'deceased are ordered to rise from their tombs.' They do so, and the drama is triumphantly wrapped up.

THEMES

Sexuality From the first scene on, when Mr. Yellowhammer asks his daughter whether she has been studying her virginals, this play is packed with sexual innuendo and graphic insinuation. Openings, cracks, entrances, tunnels, monuments, hollows, exits, and entrances; you name it, Middleton rubs your attention In it. Same with the characters. Only Moll and junior Touchstone seem to have any touch with their romantic feelings; the rest—the Kixes, Sir Walter, Touchstone senior, Allwit, Mistress Allwit---are constantly concerned or involved with the sexual. On occasion, as in Allwit's obsession with the pleasures of voluntary cuckoldry, the sexual takes a perverse turn, if only to make the keenness of the sexual other exceptionally intense.

Guilt Sir Walter reaches a low point when he is evicted from Allwit's domestic scene, and forced to leave the cozy arrangement he has long enjoyed with Mistress Allwit. In the beginning of the fifth act, this loss descends like a ton of bricks on the uninhibited lecher, and he feels as though he has lost everything. At the onset of the last act he lets himself go into a powerful—and unique, for this play—expression of remorse for his bad behavior in the past; he grows penitent:

Still my adulterous guilt hovers aloft,
And with her black wings beats down all my prayers,
Ere they be half way up…

Deep remorse, readiness for penance swamps Sir
Walter, in the play's unique tussle with this universal sense of irremediable guilt…

SCENES

In a sense the plot is the events of the present play. And yet the plot, for it is out there as the plain narrative of events, wants being expressed neutrally, without regard to developments which are in fact salient, at least for the observer who is informing himself for the first time; the plot is different from the relation of 'events,' which is more like an account of salient developments, than like a record of what happened. That was truly an event, one might say of a startling or game changing twist in the line of the plot.

The mutual love between Moll and Touchwood junior, though not romantically colored, tinges the remainder of the play. It is in view of such positive and persistent love that we experience the gross of Sir Whorehound's love, which is essentially lust, at least until his repentance.

Deception in love triggers another formative event, when Touchwood senior intervenes to save the Kixes from the curse of childlessness. Sir and Lady Kix have been unable to create a child, with the looming consequence that if the couple were to have a a child their fortune would not go to Whorehound, a relative of theirs, but to the newborn child. Touchstone senior would come in for a tidy sum. Touchstone's necessity, therefore, is to deceive the Kixes, so that he can infiltrate into Lady Kix's bed, and impregnate her, depriving Whorehound of a juicy source of inheritance.

Many of the formative events of the present play revolve around marriage and the benefits it can confer, usually monetary. In the episode above, concerning the impregnation of Lady Kix by the magic wand of Touchstone senior, we observe that this one simple success of a creative act, impregnation, can ricochet out onto the plans and hopes of other characters. This is an instance of unpredictable fall out, when Whorehound learns that he will not reap rewards from the dowry of Lady Kix. This is a major blow to Sir Walter, who has been counting on the Lady's dowry to help feather his own nest.

THOUGHTS

Just as early modern culture was itself not one of passion and heart, but rather of a wakening to the total complexity of the social world, to the blinding interest of historical being. The present small masterpiece of comedy does little to draw us into the humanity of its characters and sub themes, but

much to involve us in a network of gradually assembling social pieces. For one thing, the drama before us is made up of five different small dramas, involving first the family of Yellowhammer and his search for a suitable mate for Moll, then the tale of Allwit, his wife, and Sir Walter, then the tale of the Touchwoods, and their separation in order to prevent further pregnancies, and then ultimately the tale of the marriage of Moll and Touchwood junior, and their triumphant comic opera city ascent from the coffin. Is the final motif a celebration of true love? Or is it a mockery of the love and marriage industry as it found itself in the city world of Middleton?

The joint burial and ascension scene, with which the play ends, cannot fail to have aroused complex feelings In the audience. It was their world they were watching played with, their hopes for the possibility of chastity and joy in the midst of corruption, filthy language, devotion to fucking, and mandatory withdrawals from sex. Amusing all this can surely have been, but in the end a little chillingly familiar, and to the keenest of observers a foresight into the malaise of industrialized social relations.

7 **Bartholomew Fair** (1614)
Ben Jonson

OVERVIEW

Background

From 1133 until 1855 Bartholomew's was one of the preeminent London summer fairs. It opened on August 24 each year at Smithfield in the northwest part of London –in an area of slaughterhouses and executions. One must think of such fairs as conglomerations of business, small trades, money lenders, shysters with dirty deals, plus of course entertainment, everything from bear baiting to hobbyhorse selling, and often a play or puppet show built in. These were venues, of course, at which every kind of mischief was carried out, from cut pursing to murder, in which whores wandered prolifically, grand thefts were sketched out, and political crimes negotiated in the dark lanes filled with taverns. One might think of a Breughel scene, erupting with color, raw emotions, jollity and booze. The play which Jonson created, around this tumultuous scene, is daring and experimental, and a vivid testimony both to an historical moment and to Jonson's capacity to transform history.

The Prologue to the play

The stage keeper enters complaining about the play, for its lack of romantic or fabulous qualities. It is too prosaic. This man is in turn pushed aside by the book keeper, who appears to explain the contract which the author has drawn up between himself and the audience. That contract is echt Jonson, doing away with chivalry and swords, knights and ladies, fabulous realms and concentrating on the reality of the fair itself. The innuendoes: the audience is requested to forget political plots or innuendos and to use their own judgments and common sense. We are at a crossroads between an ancient and a contemporary aesthetic.

CHARACTERS

Adam Overdo. Is a justice of the peace, who believes that he can best do his job, of scoping out evil, by adopting disguises and observing behaviors up close. One of his disguises is that of a mad preacher—at which he proves a poor detective. Next, he disguises himself as a porter, to attend the puppet play. At the end, having survived many jokes, having found his wife dead drunk, he invites everyone to his house for a celebration. This is the classic comedic resolution.

The Author of the play is the one who wrote it, but is accused by the stage-keeper of presenting a pale image of the actual fair. A rough and tumble argument ensues, in which very contemporary (to us) issues of art and reality and imagination are aired. The author urges the audience to be comfortable with the fact that art is different from reality. He does insist, though, that he brings onto the stage a 'real' Justice of the peace, hog, 'a civil cutpurse, a singer of ballads.'

Book holder; a character and a prompter in the introduction. He claims to have been sent by the Author to describe the new contract which the author wishes to make with them.

Bristle is a watchman at the Fair. He is a law and order figure, preoccupied with any number of efforts to commit people to or keep them in the stocks.

Master Brome, a servant in the play,Is also a playwright.

Busy, Zeal of the Land, is a Puritan from Banbury, and a suitor of Dame Purecraft. Busy speaks openly about the evils of the pleasures of the world, but enjoys his share of them under cover. At the Fair, for instance, Busy is inseparable from the Littlewit family, preaches against the pleasures of the flesh, but is the most conspicuous devourer of pork—an item religiously forbidden to the Puritans.

Batholomew Cokes, a gentleman from Harrow, is soon to be married to Grace Wellborn in the beginning Cokes comes to Littlewit's house to retrieve his wedding license. Cokes is a perfect victim of robbery at the Fair, and in general a country gull who fills in the background.

Coster monger, in this instance a pear seller. He is the victim of a dirty Fair game, by which he is tripped, loses his tray of pears, and has his sword and cape stolen, all in one swoop. Cokes and Nightingale run away from the booty taken from Coster monger.

Cunning man is a fortune teller, who predicted Dame Purecrafts's future. He said she would marry a madman within the week, and in fact she ended up with Quarlous, who wooed her under the disguise of the mad man, Trouble all.

Val Cutting, a rascal and madcap deeply involved with the puppet play. He comes on as a 'roarer,' a thief's bully or decoy. Boozing and brawling is his milieu.

Dame Purecraft is a rich widow, mother of Win Littlewit, and the object of much money hungry amorous attention. She takes her daughter to all the ins and outs of the Fair, and comes out of it, not too surprisingly, married, to Quarlous.

Davy, a hallowed figure of Fair lore. He is famed for his presence as a bouncer, a scatterer of bawds.

Ezekiel Edgeworth, is a con man and a cutpurse. His ingenuity as a pickpocket brings him, of course, into contact with everybody, honest or crooked, in the fair.

Filcher, a doorkeeper at the theater. When the author of the play arrives at the theater, to watch the puppet play, Filcher lets him in free.

Grace Wellborn is Adam Overdo's ward. Engaged to be married to Bartholomew Cokes, she is disgusted by the prospect of marriage to such a fool. (The alternative is the loss of all her land.) As it plays out, Grace avoids becoming the wedded wife of Quarlous, and is given away by the Justice of the Peace, whose ward she is.

Toby Haggis is one of the Fair watchmen, With the responsibility of putting suspects or criminals in the stocks. When one of his colleagues fails to close the gate to the stocks Haggis fears that ut us a question if witchcraft. He runs away.

James I King of England. The king is referred to both at the outset of the play, and at the conclusion. The King was in the audience of the first performance of the play.

Jordan Knockem, a horsetrader and cutpurse.

Leatherhead, a hobby horse dealer.

Madman. Master Overdo, the Justice of the Peace, disguises himself as a madman so that he can move secretly around the Fair and observe any improper behavior.

Nightingale is a singer of ballads who offers up songs throughout the Fair. He works closely with the purse snatcher, Edgeworth, with whom he collects stolen goods which he packs away in Ursula's booth.

Troubleall, in the end the lucky husband of Dame Purcraft, but who is otherwise a clumsy looser, who knows both sides of the underworld.

PLOT

The play opens onto a proctor and amateur dramatist, Littlewit, and some of their friends: they are plotting to free Dame Purecraft from marriage tp Zeal-of-the-land Busy, an extremely loud mouthed

Puritan. We are aware of the presence of intense religious conflict. The group, which have gathered to collect a marriage license then decides to go on to the Fair. It will be a chance for Littlewit—who has written a puppet play for the occasion-- to see his play performed. It comes out, as they prepare to leave, that Busy—the mocked Puritan hypocrite can't wait to get to the stand where roast pork is being sold.

Once inside the Fairgrounds, all bets are off. Two of the visitors get robbed, beaten, and are thrown in the stocks, which, along with the puppet theater and a few stands, becomes a kind of verbal landmark for the ongoing events. (Those events are retailed in small chunks, as we pass from one dark booth to another, through one alley into the next. Everywhere, on all sides, we follow snatches of conversation from the main participants in the play as well as from the little guys heard in passing). Justice Overdo circulates in disguise; Wasp steals the much coveted marriage license; Win Littlewit and Mistress Overdo are recruited as prostitutes by the pimp Whit and he is put n the stocks; all the prisoners escape from the stocks, when Trouble All, gone mad or faking it, fights with the guards and throws open the gates.

The puppet show, which brings about the grand finale, is itself baised on two classic but folk reinterpreted, literary pastiches: Hero and Leander, always a tear jerker for the way it joins love and death, and Damon and Pythias, a timeless celebration osf friendship. It can be imagined that the show ends in several kinds of drunken brawl, very little attention to fine points of literature, and in fact addressed at the very end to the now trendy topic of cross dressing. Justice Overdo, still dressed ih this own disguise, surveys the scene and describes it as a moral abomination. Busy, the loud Puritan, interrupts declaring the the supreme outrage of the play is the cross-dressing of the actors. (A long story: after a tradition of many decades at just his time being, women were being allowed to perform on stage as women, as their own selves; in the present instance the puppets refute Overdo, raising their gowns and showing no sex but wood.)

SCENES

The prologue The prologue is opened on a note of frank congeniality with the audience. The prologuer gives his frank opinions about the weaknesses of the play you are about to see. He is then pushed aside by the book keeper of the theater, who explains what kind pf contract he has made with the audience. He explains that Jonson intends—as he had in Everyman in his Humor—to speak as people do on the streets, and about ordinary things that happen on the streets. One prehears rumors of a distant Wordsworth, anxious as he was to speak the speech of common men.

Intervention The action proper begins with the guests who have stopped in at Littlaewit's house, to get a marriage license. The generally agreed on hot collar issue is how to keep Mrs. Purecraft from falling into a marriage with the ultra Puritan Busy. They succeed fpr Dame Purecraft ultimately marries Quarlous.

Justice Overdo In his zeal to 'clean up City Hall' this important magistrate is forever getting himself into trouble—beaten by Wasp, falsely accused by Edgeworth, the cutpurse, then thrown into the stocks. Rough and tumble anough to survive all this, the Justice reacquires freedom when the gate to the stocks Is left opens. He seems no much the worse for wear.

Purecraft and Troubleall Jonson shows us the unpredictable in romance and marriage by bringing together Dame Purecraft, the wealthy widow, with the wild card Troubleall, who is forever disruptive and quarrelsome, who regularly feigns madness, and who of all performers is perhaps not interested in Purecraft's money.

THEMES

Hypocrisy hIn an age of religious tensions, when two opposing sides are bent on proving their\ moral superiority, it is no surprise that partisans of both sides—Catholics and Protestants, fans of war, fans of peace--should aspire to display their particular faith and to provide convincing models of that expression .faith at its highest level of development. Busy, zeal of the Land, is a fine example of that kind of hypocrisy, decrying the evils of the world, but inseparably passionate for a good hunk of pork.

Disguise Disguise and hypocrisy go together, for hypocrisy is a disguising of one's nature In order to seem to be someone else. Disguise too is an effort at playing someone else; the two moves in psyche are closely interrelated. Bartholomew Fair teems with instances of disguise, in each case to serve private purposes. Justice Overdo regularly conceals his judicial role in order to snoop unseen, and detect crimes. Quarlous disguises himself so that he can check out women and deals.

Religion Religious conflict breathes at the Fair. The Puritans have fallen out of favor, the era of King James has restored the monarchy, and the good old life of robust styles and free expression has reasserted itself. The Puritans are comfortably held up to mockery, and In this play we see this broad ridicule directed at Dame Purecraft and at Busy zeal of the Land, who are not only Puritans but hypocrites, in this instance. Busy particularly stands out for the conflict between his condemnation of the lewd vulgarity of the Fair, but for his delight in the roast pork—a forbidden food item—with which he is gorged at the fair. Dame Purecraft comes out of the fair married to Quarlous, the lucky one who buys into her substantial fortune.

Class Class is always an element in the composition of the early modern drama. (The same was true in ancient theater, although it was only after the Hellenistic period, with the Mimes of Herondas, that we are made keenly aware of the class differences among the participants of the play. The pimp, the whore, the whoremaster, the bailiff all become stock stand ins for universal types and class representatives. In classical Greek drama, especially when we return to Aeschyius, the characters appear divested of a social setting, or at most part of the mythical family setting, as in the Oresteia.) At Bartholomew Fair there is a communion of all classes, furiously themselves, each one, but melded in the rich brew of diversity.

Culture It is significant that the climax of the Fair days is the puppet show, which Littlewit has written for the occasion. The drama is there to support the audience taste for sentimentality—both of the thematic shows embrace tear jerking events and mixtures of love and friendship—but for more than that. Busy, for one, is converted into a 'beholder of plays,' after his brief encounter with the arts, and the artistic experience seems to have spread out into a culture wide redemptive conclusion. After the play's end a rough and tumble kind of transcendence settles onto the audience. There is a kind of high spirited resolution generated by Justice Overdo's desire to punish the many miscreants we have been observing at the play. A reverse English seems to settle down over the fair going folk, and the old thrill of joy, resonating back to the spring festivals of ancient rural Greece, is felt in the community. Marriages occur as if spontaneously: Winwife marries Grace; Quarlous marries Purecraft, and of course everyone is invited over to Overdo's house for supper. Jonson leaves us with the sense that the world of Bartholomew Fair is but a moment in historical Time, and will pass quickly, benignly.

8 **A New Way to Pay Old Debts** 1625
Philip Massinger 1583-1640

OVERVIEW

Massinger the person

Philip Massinger was born a commoner, but was able to manage a serious education at Oxford, where his father, too, had received his Master's degree, and remained a vigorous presence throughout his life. The son took his own direction, upon graduation from Oxford. But what was that direction? From 1606-13 Massinger effectively disappears from sight, reappearing finally in the London theatrical milieu, collaborating with his friend and frequent collaborator, John Fletcher. (He worked his way into the inner circle of the theatrical world, rising to the position of chief playwright to the King's Men theatrical company.) Throughout his professional career he remained immersed in the theatrical world--though few details are known of him. His death perplexes us as do the details of his life. He died in his home, on March 18 1640, alone and having enjoyed, apparently, quite good health to the end. He was buried in St. Saviour's churchyard, alongside his friend and frequent collaborator, John Fletcher. Both men were deeply embedded forces in the London theater.

CHARACTERS

Lovel, an English lord. Supple, friendly, self-confident but opposed to any intermarriage from within his family with the 'common people, even with Margaret the pure and beautiful.

Sir Giles Overreach, a 'cruel extortioner' as the original playbill put it, and indeed without redeeming characteristics. Scrooge he is not exactly, but a stepchild of the new cutthroat money hunger of London capitalism.

Wellborn, a prodigal nephew of Sir Giles. Careless on an everyday basis, but a charmer to Lady Allworth, and a former befriender of her husband, a keepsake he plays to his advantage.

Allworth, a young gentleman, page of Sir Lovel. Of high birth, deeply resentful of the new commercial society, in which he is consigned to a subordinate role.

Marrall, a creature of Sir Giles Overreach. An all purpose lawyer-servant, useful for dirty jobs of any sort.

Willdo, a parson

Lady Allworth, a rich widow and object of widespread attention in the village. Eventually marries Lovel, with whom she shares out Sir Giles' assets to the villagers whom he has long abused.

Margaret, Sir Giles' daughter. Beautiful, virtuous, self-effacing, ultimately marries Tom Allworth. Lovel, the noble, did not want such a commoner as this in his own family line, despite her attractiveness, but his son Tom wins the prize.

PLOT

Background

The story of the play that brought high fame to Massinger, A New Way to Pay Old Debts, went to the heart of the social changes rocking England in the early Stuart period, the early seventeenth century, a moment when both progressive and regressive trends were intersecting. The progress in British society, from the sixteenth to the seventeenth centuries, will have developed around the growth of parliamentarianism, free speech, conscious attention to the legal foundation of state governance, all hinging on the gradual trend toward the beginnings of urbanism, and the gradual accumulation of pockets of capital accumulated through international trade. The ordinary citizen will have known these changes in his bones, as they

played out in his daily life—like say, inflation as the guy on the street experiences it today, stage by stage. At the same time, there was, at the time of the present play, a counterpull toward traditional values in Britain. The monarchy was in full charge of national policy, and the power of the class system, which was the British link to its hoariest mediaeval past, was being heard and at least covertly respected. If there was ever a moment of class conflict in Britain this was itt, when the great elements of British culture, proud freedom and industrial growth, joined forces.

The plot itself

The present play is set in the middle of this state of affairs in 'a county in Englaone appears. nd.' The setting immerses us in the play and conflict of social classes, which are on vivid display in the small rural community where the action occurs. There are the expected representatives of the landed gentry, headed by Lord Lovel, who represents the social old guard, living on accumulated wealth; there is the rich widow, Land Allworth, cloistered in her noble dignity, but ready to find a new husband, if the right appears. One and not about to descend to a commoner like Sir Giles. Lord Lovel, in particular, represents the dignity and flexibility of the upper classes—as the conservative Catholic Massinger tended to see things. The author and these characters were friends of the old culture. On the other side, but equally wealthy for different reasons, are such as the 'cruel extortioner,' the moneyed 'villain' Sir Giles Overreach, with his attractive and modest daughter, Margaret. (Sir Giles will come on, in this play, both as a comic figure and as a genuine moneybags. Then there is Sir Giles' nephew, Wellborn, along as the stock prodigal. The cast is therefore small, but large enough to represent the dominant issues current in British society. The extortioner Sir Giles is not a 'merchant of Venice,' eager to take interest on loaned money,' but in fact, yes, an extortioner who will wreak havoc on the finances of, say, Frank Wellborn, a prodigal nephew of Sir Giles, as well as on the pocketbooks of the small fry who constitute the bulk of the British agricultural community in question.

From the start, we meet Wellborn and Allworth, members of the local gentry who have lost their moneys to the financial dealings of Sir Giles—and to, we understand, the larger world of heartless finance, to which Sir Giles owes his own training. (Masssinger loses no opportunity to take a swipe at the commercialization of society as it takes over in Stuart England). Shortly after, Sir Giles is declaiming, to Marrall his sidekick, that he is determined to elevate his daughter, Margaret, into the noble family of Lovel; to adorn her with the appellation 'honourable.' The classic drive for upward social movement will define the play. We see that Sir Giles has left a trail of financial wreckage wherever he turns, and that he is doing so now in the interest of helping his family break into the nobility.

For Sir Giles the path forward for Margaret will lie through Wellborn, a family member--Giles' nephew---- who will insinuate himself into the romantic life of Lady Allworth. They will fall in love, as they do, and the family connection, of Sir Giles to nobility, will be established. That is the way Sir Giles sees the future. Margaret however, as it turns out, falls in love with Allworth, page to Lord Lovel, and her father the villain, Sir Giles, is exposed and humiliated for his irresponsible financial extortion of Wellborn and other villagers. So severe is Sir Giles' fall from villainy that he suffers what we might call a psychotic episode, and is taken away under mental custody. Lovel and Lady Allworth agree to marry. Margaret and Allworth take control pf Sir Giles' properties and turn them over to Lord Lovel, to make reparations to all the villagers whom Sir Giles has abused. That, we might say, is the moral conclusion of the tale.

SCENES

With the first scene we are plunged into the conflict of the nobility with commoners, as it plays out in a small British village. Frank Wellborn, a rowdy member of the local landed gentry, has just been thrown out of a tavern, and is being supported by another landed gent, Tom, who, like him, has been victimized by the malevolence of Sir Giles, a city type, flush with money and evil plans. This fluent opening introduces us to central characters and the cultural landscape. The clash of the city villain with the landed gentry is harsh.

Tom Allworth's mother, Lady Allworth, urges her son to avoid the dissolute Tom. Both young men visit and interact with Lady Allworth.

Sir Giles Overreach talks with his servant Marall, about his plans to wed his daughter Margaret to Lovel. Sir Giles expresses contempt for Wellborn, until he sees Lady Allworth plant a kiss on his cheek. Maybe, thinks Sir Giles, his own best move is to get control of Lady Allwood's properties.

Romance springs up between Margaret and Lovel's son, Tom. Sir Giles at first thinks that the romance in question is between Margaret and Lovel, but learning it is a romance between the youngsters, his exuberance fades. Tricked by appearances, realizing that Margaret is not leading him into the center of the Lovel fortune, Sir Giles begins to realize that he has miscalculated in his devious plans for village exploitation. Under extreme pressure he falls victim to a psychotic episode, and is conveyed n to a mental institution.

Once Sir Giles has been quieted, the finale of the play can proceed. Lovel and Lady Allworth agree to marry, and the properties of the now sidelined Sir Giles are devoted to recompensing village residents who have suffered the cynical machinations of Sir Giles

A Note on the play

What genre is this play? It has been treated as a tragedy, a melodrama, and as a comedy, for which we take it here. Why?

Is it that Sir Giles is so irredeemably evil and negative that he makes himself seem improbable? Like the television character, Svengoolie, the image cloaked in the figure of Sir Giles is present both to spoof and simulate a horror film man of evil. Is

THEMES

Love Love is of course the universal theme for literature (philosophy and theology too) because, from Lucretius through Faust, from Dante through the Gospels, love is the most ubiquitous driver of human emotions. It can drive men in prison or on the battlefield, in rages of folly or outbursts of insight. In the case of the present play only the love of Margaret for Tom Allworth –or perhaps that of Lovel for Lady Allworth—reaches to anything like a transcendent condition. In world literature, love which passes understanding, as Saint Paul puts it, qualifies as a point of access to god. We are not talking ascent of that character, but of a bonded fidelity which provides ample escape from the iron clad strictures of the money economy.

Class conflict We are still two centuries away from the time when Marxism would stamp its print on a new socio-economic movement, which was destined to shake the world for another century and a half, and leave its traces even today in many parts of the world. Yet even in these first decades of the Stuart monarchy, not more than a stone's throw from the end of the middle ages, Massinger (a strong conservative) writes with great disparagement of the inequalities wreaked by the new wave of government investment, and of social evaluation on the basis of capital.

Greed Sir Giles has a history of exploiting the villagers in his small country town, though indeed we do not face the evidence for this state of affairs. We do, though see the way he threatens his nephew Wellborn. In so doing he forces his own plans—for marriage into nobility—on his nephew, whom he desperately wants to have marry Lady Allworth, the eligible but 'cloistered away' widow of the village. Sir Giles rejoices at the evidence—an exchanged kiss—that something is cooking between Wellborn and Lady Allworth. What he wants, of course, is a marriage that will enable him to get a foot in the door of a noble family, and the Alworth family will do just fine. What strikes us is that Sir Giles is literally consumed with greed for the ripe harvest of the envisioned marriage. He encourages Wellborn's suit by lending him money, for he believes that if Wellborn can insinuate himself inside the noble Allworth line he will acquire rights over the family property. From that point on Sir Giles will reap huge benefits, as a member of the landed gentry.

9 **A Maidenhead Well Lost** 1634
Thomas Heywood (1570-1641)

OVERVIEW

Antecedents

Scouring early British comedy, we come on a wide variety of comic perspectives, finally perhaps giving up on the search for a single type. And no wonder! The comedies we call Elizabethan or Jacobean have their roots in traditions which appear deeply different From them. And yet for all that appearance, the comic tradition suggests that a single if loose continuity binds together comedies from a bast historical period.

The historical background: Greece

The Greco Roman and the mediaeval traditions of comedy form a very bumpy continuity with each other. The Hellenic tradition, which comes down to a long but broken continuum, ranges from archaic rural rituals, grounded in earth and nature cults, and deriving from still older rites coequal with the Dorian invasion, the northern racial intrusion which took its impulses from the same stock from which the Homeric epics derived. This was only the beginning of the lusty and experimental Greek comic tradition, which reached a high point in the second half of the fifth century B.C., with Aristophanes. We are here, already, with,a version of comedy which does not directly align with the modern sense of the comic. Aristophanes, and fellow Greek comedians—almost all of whose work is missing—drove for the social jugular, mocking corrupt politicians and social practices—like addiction to the law courts, or fancy empty pedagogical theories—or exposed the disastrous politics of war, always with a turn toward the mocked and grotesque. A century or more later than Aristophanes, in the Hellenistic culture which succeeded the great age of democracy, a playwright like Menander brought onto the Greek stage a new domesticity, bourgeois settings and tight sharp mimes which invited the 'middle class' to turn inward on itself, self-mocking but self-amusing.

The historical background: Rome

Plautus and Terence work the territory of Menander, slighting large themes, going for the domestic, or the personal-private. On the side of human nature, they tend to share our pathos and hopes, leaving the satiric comic to the hard biters, like Petronius, who in the Satyricon treats us as a special kind of beast, in no way morally directed, or driven by affection, let alone by love. With this kind of saeva indignatio, or comic anger, Petronius joins the Aristophanic bitter in a sharp revenge on the growth of the middle class into history. He also takes his place beside a fellow Roman sharp tooth, Juvenal, who equalled him in his comic fury at the imbecility of the human.

The historical background: mediaeval

Why this rapid tour of names from the history of' western comedy? Simply to hint at a stage from which modernity can begin to formulate new modes of expression. Little more than the above notes will have sufficed to set a direction through the formative stages of the thought movement we are tracking. With the middle ages the comic spirit adopts many and new forms. Gargoyle art, to pick a familiar plastic example, steers us in the direction of the new spirit, the comic as the contentious, the wry and awry.

What could better simulate this twist than the mediaeval drinking song—think of the Carmina Burana—which joke destiny into its argument, or of those morality plays in which the comedy, as in the sense of Dante's Commedia, lay in the 'happy ending' of making your way to the door of paradise.

Approaching today's play: Heywood the ingenious Thomas Heywood is a small but prolific individual In the long flow of comic writers, whose common bond is that peculiar weave of scorn for the human and fascination for the unexpected which the comic figure can generate. A middle class country boy, Heywood took his privileged University education at Cambridge, then gravitated to the London stage, where, like Shakespeare, he plunged into the total life afforded by a bustling, amusement-loving commercial city.

Heywood was a much sought after actor, and the author of more than one hundred plays, not to mention his work as feuilletonist , in which he wrote prolifically on most of the hot issues of the day, coming down firmly, whenever it was relevant, on freedom of expression.

CHARACTERS

Julia. Daughter of the Duke of Milan, in love with the Prince of Parma, to whom she has surrendered her virginity. The play as a whole concerns her fidelity to Parma, to whom she reports, immediately she finds it out, that she is pregnant. She endures Parma's equally rapid decision, that he must break their engagement. Little does either Julia or Parma realize that the malcon- tent Stroza, secretary to the Duke of Milan has from the play's outset spread false information about both herself and Parma, whispering that they have both been untrue to one another. It takes but a word for this destructive news to spread through the community

Parma. Having been falsely accused of infidelity to Julia, the prince breaks off their engagement, but nonetheless remains close to the pregnant mother, and when Julia gives birth, Parma gives the infant to the Duke of Florence, reporting that Julia is no longer a Virgin, but that Florence—if he cares to guarantee his reputation-- should test Parma's claim. The test Itself –a night bringing together Lauretta and the Duke of Florence--leads to the dramatic finale of the play which includes a complete exoneration of Julia.

Lauretta. Banished from Milan by Julia, this daughter of General Sforsa is rescued, in her impoverished flight, by the Duke of Florence, with whom she falls in love and whom she ultimately weds. It is her sacrifice of Her virginity that enables Florence to realize that Julia Is truly betrothed to Parma; the slander caused by Sforza has met its match. Lauretta will go on to marry the Prince of Florence, in the play's second happy turn.

Duke of Milan. Julia's father, who reluctantly agrees to the banishment of Lauretta and her mother. At the end he is delighted when Parma makes his daughter an honest woman.

Stroza. Frustrated in his military ambitions, he determines to take revenge on the General involved, and his daughter Lauretta. After Julia's illegitimate baby is born, Stroza abandons the infant by the roadside. In the end, after having confessed his misbehavior, he is defeated in a duel, and forgiven by the Duke of Milan.

Prince of Florence. It is the Prince who finds Lauretta wandering in the woods with her mother, and gives her shelter. Gradually he falls in love with Lauretta. An anonymous letter from the Prince of Parma indicates that Julia has been deflowered, but the Princie of Florence refuses to believe this, and steps forward I into the bed trick which will eventually exonerate Julia and prepare

PLOT

The narratively and morally complex play before us turns around two axes. First there is the tale of the damages done by Stroza, secretary to the Duke of Milan, who comes on as a strong malcontent, bringing with him a baggage of hostility toward General Sforsa and his daughter Lauretta. He will satisfy his hostility by breaking up the intended marriage between Julia, the daughter of the Duke of Milan, and her beloved Prince of Parma, by spreading the false report that each of these lovers has been unfaithful to the other.

The trajectory of the play will involve clearing Julia's name, convincing Parma that Julia has been true to him, and getting Julia and Parma married, as had been their intention from the outset of the play. The chief obstacle, to clearing Julia's name, is the slander made against her by the malcontent Sforza. How will it be possible to clear Julia's name? The answer is not simple, in this complex play. The trick will be to convince the Duke of Parma that Julia is a virgin—which she is-- a proper candidate for marriage to him, and an ingenious means is found, involving Lauretta, to justify Julia, to get her married to Parma, and to find an appropriate husband for Lauretta. The trick is to induce Lauretta to replace Julia, so that she can sleep with Florence, under the guise of Julia.

So it happens. Lauretta sleeps with Florence, who thinks he is sleeping with Julia, as a test of her virginity. At the conclusion of their night together, but before the light of sunrise, the Duke of Florence presents a ring and marriage documents to Lauretta. When Julia, who is falsely assumed to have slept that night with the Duke of Florence, is asked for the documents, the following day, she will be unable to produce them. She, after all, was not the one who slept with the Duke of Florence. She is not able to hand over these proofs, later in the day, when she is asked to present them to the Prince. The evil planning of Sforza is at once intuited, Julia's innocence is made apparent, and the ground is cleared for a clean and straightforward pair of marriages, between Julia and Parma—who had never broken fidelity with one another-- and Florence and Lauretta who had maintained their mutual trust. Out of a chaos of evil manoeuvring, a bundle of sleeping around, the virtues of chastity, fidelity, and marriage are sustained.

SCENES

The first attention-enforcer is our awareness of the the vicious mind of Sforza. This permanent malcontent is determined to undermine the romance of Parma and Julia, who are engaged. He lets it be known, on all sides, that Julia and Parma have been unfaithful to one another. This is pure disinformation.

Julia writes to Parma with the news that she is pregnant. Parma assumes, incorrectly, that Julia has been unfaithful to him with another man. He\ descends into a deep depression, and breaks off his engagement. Julia decides that Lauretta is the one who slept with Parma, and has Lauretta and her mother banished from the country.

Lauretta and her mother flee to the woods, where she Is rescued by the Duke of Florence, who puts up the two women in a hunting lodge. The Duke falls in love with Lauretta. However the Duke knows that he cannot marry Lauretta, because she is not of noble birth. Consequently he decides to follow his own father's desire, and to marry Julia. Parma, however, grows desperate at the idea that Julia should marry another—the love bond is unbreakable between Julia and Parma—and he informs Florence that Juiia is not a virgin. At this Stroza and the Duke of Milan, eager to rescue Julia's reputation, work out a plan—discussed above under plot—by which the virginity of Julia can be confirmed, the mutual availability of Parma and Julia be assured, and the wedding of Julia to Parma at last be finalized.

***

Reflections on the play.

The present play lies modestly along the long line of comedies which reaches us from such ancient geniuses as Aristophanes and Plautus. Each of these masters of comedy finds a way both to mock humanity, and the human condition, and to exalt it. (Not to crush it, for such a Puritanical devastation could do no good to the community, or to the individual soul, a truth borne in on the Jacobean citizenry in its recent past, by the Puritanical regimen of Cromwell). The exaltation in question, in the present drama. Is the part of comedy hardest to understandas throughout the long comic tradition, the human survives and continues, and classically—as in the Odyssey, the Divine Comedy, Don Quixote—becomes the residue of endurance in the most deeply grasped figure of the narration. It is in the present play, as in many more deep diving contemporary works, ultimately clear that true love, like that between Julia and Parma, will prevail, and that because of the tenacity of the indivduals involved. An elaborate narrative invention, the trick of the bed, brings the whole tale to fruition, and enables the thwarted ones to realize their dreams.

,

10. **The Alchemist. 1640**
Ben Jonson

The Alchemist was first produced thirty four years after the establishment of the first legitimate public theater in London, and with its great and lasting success canbe said to mark the genuine arrival of theater at the heart of London life.

OVERVIEW

BACKGROUND of religious censure, the entertainment seeking public had sufficient cash in pocket, and a stable of well known actors were proving to be reliable billboard draws, widely known and appreciated even outside London.In the present play Jonson follows a pattern congenial to the London audience, sticking to his version of faith in the three dramatic unities, presenting a tight construct of events opening and closing around the departure and return of a central but often not present figure, a bevy of recurrent visitors to a single locale— the fraudulent business of Subtle, Face, and Dol—a return of those same visitors, Intent on cashing in on promises made to them—a dissolution of those promises, as reality catches up with the fraudsters—the return of the master of the house, after his flight from the plague, and a restoration of order in the London house; at which point the housekeeper Jeremy , who confesses to Lovewit, and is pardoned on the understanding that he will find a suitable bride (Dame Pliant) for the master, while the other miscreants achieve pardon or the opportunity to vanish into the background. The final effect, to repeat, is a drama built around the classical unities of time and place, a truly wrap around achievement, leaving the spectators with a sense that malfeasance has been put in its place, but enjoyed to the degree appropriate to a comedy, and that some kind of stasis has been restored to the chaotic and bubbling-over profusion of moral confusions, around which the play develops.

CHARACTERS

Subtle, the Alchemist
Face, the Housekeeper
Dol Common, a prostitute, their colleague
Dapper, a Clerk
Drugger, a tobaccoman
Lovewit, Master of the House
Epicure Mammon, a Knight
Surly, a gamester
Tribulation, a pastor of Amsterdam
Ananias, a deacon there
Kastril, the angry boy
Dame Pliant, his sister: a widow

PLOT

A gentleman, Lovewit, finds himself caught in London during a year of plague in the city, and is
Forced to flee to the countryside, leaving his City house under the care of his manservant Jeremy. Jeremy takes the opportunity to turn His master's dwelling into a den for fraudulent deeds, and dirty deceptions. Calling himself Captain Face, and enlisting the aid of a fellow conman, to be called Subtle, he adds a third conspirator, a prostitute named Dol Common,to round ouf the unscrupulous trio.

The action opens with a violent quarrel between Subtle and Face, over the disposition of the riches they plan to accumulate in their dirty enterprises. Dol manages to convince the other two that they need to cooperate, work as a team, and before long they have before them their first victim, a clerk named Dapper, who wants Subtle to use his necromantic skills to help Dapper with his gambling fortunes. It is agreed that Dapper may find special favors from the Queen of Fairy, but only at the price of submitting himself to various sexually degrading experiences. We begin right away therefore, to see what a dirty trio we are dealing with.

As one expects, a sequence of dubious characters, each marked with Jonson's striking care for the eccentric and reckless, follows Dapper onto the stage of impropriety. Sir Epicure Mammon is the next potential customer, an unsatisfied man of wealth, who wants alchemical access to the philosopher's stone, which he trusts will make him richer and immortal. (He is accompanied by his skeptical associate, Surly, who is more than dubious of Subtle's skills—fraudulent alchemy, in Surly' opinion. Among other sordid developments, Subtle and Face catch wind of the arrival, intown, of a certain wealthy widow, Dame Pliant, whom they agree to put under their powers.

At this point we enter the realm of paybacks. The fake alchemists, who have occupied Lovewit's Mansion, have made several false promises, and will have to answer for their fraudulence. Gulled Anabaptists return to reclaim goods which would, they had been promised, by this time have been transmuted into gold, No such luck! Dapper returns, and is told that he will soon meet the Queen of Fairy. A young man, Kastril, arrives to tap Subtle's alleged powers of match making, but is turned away. Face and Subtle, not surprisingly, topple back into a violent argument over which of them is to win Dame Pliant.

The end game of this 'alchemical farce' plays out Into what is in the end truly a farce, involving rival competitors for Dame Pliant's hand, our friend Surly returns as a fierce Spanish nobleman, Anabaptist gulls are given Jonson's scorn— as they had been in Bartholomew Fair—and, then, in the middle of the furor, Dol rushes in with the news that the master of the house, Lovewit, has returned. The hectic party is over.

Jonson has crafted everything, down to the return of Lovewit, so as to bring to a classical close this most praised of the author's dramas. Jeremy returns to his straight faced professional self, assuring his boss that the house has remained closed and quiet during its owner's absence. Events however immediately conspire to make Jeremy the fool and soon the whipping boy —though in the end Lovewit forgives him. Face apologizes to the audience for th e series of tricks that have been played on the master of the house. With that said—remember the play is a comedy—things turn out pretty smoothly for the motley, and in a sense 'otherworldly' characters who have been summoned up before our eyes—like the once missing characters in Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author. Lovewit marries Dame Pliant, and takes Mammon's goods; Kastril accepts his sister's marriage to Lovewit; the lesser bad guys are dismissed, leaving disconsolately, while the ultimate folly of humanity is left in the same aerial space in which Shakespeare leaves it, at the conclusion of AMidsummer Night's Dream or The Tempest.

SCENES

Jonson is at his best. In the present play, In shaping his argument into discrete units. The macro shape of The Alchemist would have the play divided into four of five sections, bookended by the departure of Master Lovewit for the country, and his subsequent return at the end of the plague season.

The coagulation of Subtle, the Captain, and Dol is slow. The three fraudsters and con men find themselves in violent conflict, after Master leaves, and the house is open for exploitation. Dol eventually brings the two co-conspirators to their senses, holding out the promise of gain and satisfied greed.

News spreads fast, that the three shady characters are up for business in Jeremy's master's mansion; a series of self-interested and under the law characters passes through the house, each with his own angle: Dapper, Drugger, Mammon, Dame Pliant become virtual stage properties, flitting in and out of the mansion, scheming to benefit from Subtle's alchemical know how, or hot deals in the crooked markets growing apace with the commercialization of London. Even Jonson's pet whipping boys, the Anabaptists, make their appearance, hoping for an alchemical change of ordinary goods into gold.

Disappointment might well be the name of the Following chapter. Greed, lust, cheap ambition have all put in an appearance at Jeremy's house, and all have left relying on major returns on their investments, their pleas for quick transformation of dross into gold. Jonson has already built his denouement into the fabric of his play. We are awaiting some kind of resolution, and lo it sets in with the return of Master Lovewit.

The rats fly in all directions. Lovewit has been royallydeceived. The neighbors report that any amount of suspicious behavior has been flowing through his mansion, in his absence. Jeremy has to confess all,

but, as we know from the rustic comedic turnin the comic tradition, some kind of reasonablybenign resolution is in the offing. The scatteredfragments of the empire of greed and lust vanishinto thin air, and despite a few happy turns—Lovewit finds a bride in Dame Pliant—caustic but good humored mockery carries the day.

THEMES

Alchemy Transformation was the hard science of the Middle Ages, imagination created, built around a quest for the philosopher's stone , a mythical substance with the ability to transform base metals into precious ones, especially gold, but to confer many collateral benefits, such as long life, good health, and immortality. The background of this belief mounts from antiquity, expresses itself in many of the great religions, east and west, and was in fact attributed to Adam himself, as founder. By the time of Jonson, 'early modernity' in the west, there was still room for genuine belief in the alchemical world view, but the origins of empirical science were gradually squeezing out the alchemical perspective, and leaving just enough wiggle room, inside the perspective, for treatments like Jonson's, wry, sarcastic, but still within the orbit of the archaic tradition.

Folly is the name of the game in this play, and with it greed and conflict. Jonson opens his play masterfully, informing us that Master Lovewit has fled London, in fear of the plague—a not uncommon happening there, and one which in 1665-6 was to prove a huge disaster for the entire city of London, as we know from Pepys' Journal of the Plague Year (1665). The house is left in charge of Jeremy, the housekeeper, who rapidly lets out his darkest self, gathers to him two potential—and soon actual—partners in fraud, with whom he will continue, throughout the play, to give full meaning to the notion of Folly, that human blemish which will prove thematically central, in western literature, showing its shameless face from Menander through Petronius in antiquity, and blossoming into such rich human portraitures as we find in Pepys, Swift, Pope, and Evelyn Waugh in the English tradition.

Fraud, of course, is the other face of folly, for only the gullibility, of the greedy seekers who request Subtle' e 'business,' would support the obvious pie-in-the-sky fraud that Subtle and Face concoct. The disintegration of the alchemical tradition, which in the Middle Ages interacted with medical theory, had reduced the claims of the alchemists to those of easy come easy go magicians, with the result that many clients of the alchemical trade were prepared to invest in pure hearsay nostrums, the seventeenth century's version of the medical promisings of our nightly television channels. The anti Puritan twist is the unique cachet of Jonson's anti fraudulence intensity in the present play—as also in Bartholomew Fair, where mockery of Puritans is a constant plot driver. We are close to the time, in the case either of The Alchemist or of Bartholomew Fair, of closure of the theaters in London (1642), not to mention of the blatant crushing of the free speeches of drama throughout England. Jonson, like John Milton in Areopagitica, was no friend of supervised or clamped dow expression in the arts.

The **urban** becomes a theme in Jonson's work, as, for instance, it was not in Shakespeare. For Shakespeare the city, as a place where commerce concentrated, capital accumulation invited investment on all sides, and international trade affected markets, was not yet a reality. Fifty years after Shakespeare's death, farther into the international, exploration, and market economy, the society of England had developed a major capitol, London, and a rapid growth of the urban spirit in general. As we surmise from the play before us, London will by mid seventeenth century have become a pre modern industrial city, with the complex ills of the modern city buried not far underground.

11 **The Country Wife (1675)**
William Wycherley (1641-1716)

OVERVIEW

The writer

William Wycherley was born in 1641, not long before the restoration of the British Monarchy, and the accession of King Charles II (1660-1685), whose deep admiration for the playwright, who was famed for his wit, was to prove of advantage to Wycherley, resulting in specific emoluments but in particular with a familiarity with the court itself, where Wycherley was to prove his wit among the finest gallants of the Kingdom. The lavish birth of Restoration Comedy, which was bathed in the free and often licentious life style of the royalty, owed much to the view of life congenial to the monarchy, and often readily absorbed by those to whom the monarchy—with its wealth—served as a lodestone for ambitions and hopes.

Theatrical career

To this royal matrix, where Wycherley will in time play a conspicuous role, the future playwright brought a background of no great distinction or wealth. His father was a business agent for a local gentry, the young man was a straightforward Shropshire lad—known throughout life, in fact, for his personal integrity and straightforwardness—and except for three educational years in France, in his teens, Wycherley led an unexceptional middle class youth, enrolling finally in Queen's College, Oxford. In the following years he served as an officer in the British Army, fighting on several occasions in the Anglo-Dutch Wars. He exploded to attention with his first play, Love in a Wood, the first act of which concluded with a song in praise of harlots and their offspring.

Success

To understand why this first play drew uproarious attention is to slip, for a moment, into the gossip texture of the Restoration Monarchy. The mistress of the King, Barbara Villiers, Duchess of Cleveland, spoke loudly for the world of the harlot, and endorsed Wycherley as a fellow wit in the new tell-all world Charles II was making possible. From the occasion when the Duchess of Cleveland and Wycherley passed one another by carriage, and exchanged vulgar witticisms, the playwright felt empowered to introduce himself at court. His wit and daring of speech quickly endeared him to the finer sort, It was not until the theatrical world had seen Wycherley's mature achievements, The Plain Dealer and The Country Wife, that he became a truly establishment figure in London cultural life.

Prominence in London life

There are several reasons to give, for the extraordinary popularity of Wycherley's mature drama. These were plays seizing on aristocratic life, and representing aristocratic values—in which all shared that sense of entitlement the theatre goers hoped to share; plays in which the boundaries of polite conversation were pushed to the limits of innuendo, and in which topics like impotence and cuckoldry, which were dear to the Royalists eager to impute such values to the Puritans, were sources of hilarity, gossipy humiliation, and intrigue. The issue of impotence, and faked impotence, led into the vulnerability of the aspiring housewife, who could find no easier pathway to status than an affair with a gentleman, whose mouth would be sealed by the action.

First Marriage

Wycherley's first marriage proved the undoing of his fruitful relation to the royal court. Married in secret, the playwright thereby lost the favor of the king, who felt abandoned by this congenial wit, and immediately withdrew the stipend on which Wycherley had grown dependent. Wycherley fell accordingly into serious debt and was thrown into prison, until released by the generosity of King James II. The rest of the writer's declining story involves Wycherley's return to Shropshire; ample dispute with his father over

still unpaid debts. In 1715 Wycherley married Ellizabeth Jackson. He died the following year and was buried in the vault of St. Paul's in Covent Garden.

What did Wycherley write about in The Country Wife?

Closing on the text, we hit reality fast. But we need stage history background. The eighteen year Puritan stage ban—the strictest possible rules against immoral speech or behavior; words like adultery or fornication or cuckold were strictly banished from the stage, not to mention the working concepts accompanying those words—ended with the Restoration of the Monarchy, in 1660. At that point the theatre awakened from its moralistic slumber, and gave open passage to one of the freest comedic developments in modern theatre. The Country Wife is a good sample of the kind of liberty freed by change in government—change micro symbolized by the joyful pronunciation, on stage, of the first syllable of the word Country.

Anatomies of The Country Wife

The eunuch

Three sets of events encapsulate the presentation of The Country Wife. The first scenario involves Mr. Horner, a prominent resident of the City of London, who has recently been traveling in France, and who, as he claims, has becomes the victim of a French sexual disease, to cure which it has been necessary to undertake a serious operation on 'his manhood.' The resultant impotence, as he explains to his close friend Harcourt, has left him a freedom of movement, among the many ladies of quality who now believe that they can freely consort with the 'eunuch' Horner. Intricate intrigues, misunderstandings, and exploited opportunities unfold from this state of affairs. Horner makes hay while he can, many ladies get a free ride, and the audience has ample to titillate them.

The Country Wife

A second set of events, which is woven into the first, involves the married life of Mr. Pinchwife, and his wife, a country woman who is innocent of the big city and its charms—and whom Pinchwife would like to keep in just that ignorance. The tricks of Mrs. Pinchwife, to deceive her husband, are for the most part borrowed from Moliere—L'Ecole des Maris; L'Ecole des femmes—though borrowed with a more sexual twist, which was just what his audience wanted. Margery Pinchwife, fresh in from the countryside, is fascinated by the handsome young London men she meets, while Moliere plays this lubricious angle with great subtlety.

Mrs. Alethea

The third scenario involves Me. Pinchwife's sister, Althea, and her affair with Horner's close friend Harcourt. Thanks to her patience with Harcourt, who must endure the lady's affection for her brainless boyfriend Sparkish, and thanks to her own appreciation of true personal value, as it turns out in the end, Althea is able to make of herself a model for that personal integrity none of the other principals seem able to sustain.

The juxtaposition of these three scenarios enables Wycherley to activate a wide-lens portrait of gallant cultural life in the London of his moment. He is also a master of revealing miniatures, as we see in the episode (Act 4, scene 3) in which Horner, entertaining two fine ladies with repartee and innuendo, notices their spouses within hearing distance, and shifts the gallant conversation to Horner's own fine collection of china, to which, as he puts it, he has invited the ladies to 'come have a look.'

Where does this Restoration comedy fit in the long stream of western comedic tradition?

Two different drivers seem to lie behind the comic impulse, in literature and life. There is the driver of contempt, or of scorn for the human condition; the driver motivating Puck to cry out, 'What fools these mortals be!' Is that not the same outcry we hear in Erasmus' In Praise of Folly. or Pope's The Rape of the

Lock These writers are mockers of humanity. Is that not the outcry of Henri Bergson, in Le Rire, which he opens with a vignette of humor--the man walking briskly down the sidewalk, only to slip on a banana peel, and go down on his butt? There is little room, in any of these perspectives, for compassion. Literary compassion 'for mankind' is in fact hardly to be found, unless it would be in some vast novel, like Tolstoy's War and Peace, which tamps down the pain of existence with a global sense of the human condition. It could be argued that Dante's Divina Commedia belongs to this same elevated genre, seeing so broadly that the ridiculous converts itself into the divine?

So much for one driver of the comic. Etheridge and Wycherley, in plays we have considered here, simply turn to the follies of ordinary social life, as thriving grounds for the banal and self-indulgent. The Country Wife packs ample venom, when it comes to the simple hubbub and self-sustenance of unreformed human beings at play on the stage of life. Revenge, innuendo, lust all froth on the surface of this kind of social comedy. George Meredith, a later English critic—An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit (1877)—puts a point on this social theory of the birth of comedy, by stressing the importance of woman, in the mix that breeds comedy from society. The urbanity of a woman-sensitive culture seems to Meredith inseparable from effective social comedy, both in England of the eighteenth century and in the theater of France, where Moliere, like Wycherley, exploits the charms of ladies to disarm the plots of seducers.

CHARACTERS

Harry Horner, notorious London rake, who feigns impotence so he can gain access to the sex starved of the London female elite. Far from the sharpest of the wits who surround him, Horner brings not much more than ingenuity and bedroom-daring to the play.

Jack Pinchwife, a middle aged Londoner, a rake before his marriage, but after it a tyrant ruling over Mrs. Pinchwife, whom he forbids even to speak to other men. He keeps his wife locked in her room, but in the course of imposing tyrrany naturally builds his own downfall.

Margery Pinchwife, wife to Jack, a naïve country women when she comes to London, but on arrival there discovers her libido, and following her husband's advice to admire the 'handsome horse guards at the Palace,' she takes him up on its with a vengeance.

Alethea Pinchwife, the younger sister of Jack Pinchwife. She gradually falls for Harcourt, one of the brainiest and most reliable figures in the cast if characters, Alethea herself is a jewel of honesty and directness.

Frank Harcourt, good friend of Horner from whom he differs by being a straight shooter His good moral sense is confirmed by his growing affection for Alethea.

Mr. Sparkish, a quite witless man about town, who captures the affection of Alethea, until she realizes that he wants her only as a trophy.

Lucy is the clever maidservant of Alethea. She warns against Sparkish, and urges her mistress to stick with Harcourt.

Sir Jasper Fidget, a business man quite willing to let his wife go to Horner, on the grounds of his impotence.

Lady Fidget, much younger wife of Sir Jasper, a friend of virtue in her public speech, but a hypocritical letch, in real life practice.

The Quack, the doctor whom Horner enlists to support his claim of innocence.

Crescendos of voice in Jonson's play.

(Jonson's' plays, performed at the outdoor Globe Theater, fitted the urban soundscape unfolding on all sides of the audience.) The popularity of the given play waxed and waned throughout the following centuries, proving in general to be a play for the intelligentsia rather than a shaggier Shakespearian play, with its feet on commonplace soil, or in the heaven of Shakespeare's imagination.

SYNOPSIS

The plot of The Country Wife falls into three fairly distinct units. There is the ruse of Horner's impotence; the married life of Pinchwife and Margery; and the courtship of Harcourt and Alithes.

Horner is successful in convincing many wives, the aristocratic portion of town, that he is impotent and of o danger to them or their husbands. The fact is, however, that Horner gets the pick of the beauties, who are eager to have six with a gentleman who is, as the rumor goes, beyond reproach. Behind this tale, at a distance, lies the theme of Terence's play The Eunuch. This part of the play rests on the general readiness to believe that high society is full of many women hypocrites, who will abandon their husbands at the twinkle of an eye. Three ladies are especially prominent in this play for their successful assignations .with Mr. Horner; Lady Fidget, Mrs. Dainty Fidget, and Mrs. Squeamish. For a long time Mr. Horner maintains ths pretence of honorable rectitude. Until the advent of Marjery Pinchback Horner is able to maintain the façade of propriety. Margery, who knows from experience, speaks out and refuses to indict Mr. Horner for serious mischief. In the end of this element of the play, Mr. Horner comes out of it largely unscathed and happy.

The Story of The Country Wife, and her fussy husband, Mr. Pinchwife, is taken from Moliere's L'Ecole des Maris. The School for Husbands. This lady is smarter than many, and goes openly into a relation with Mr. Horner, whom she greatly admires and defends. In other words, despite her husband's terror Hof being cuckolded, she briskly submits him to exactly that punishment.

The third major component of The Country Wife involves the relation between Harcourt, Mr. Horner's good friend, and the seriously committed lady, Alethea, the sister of Pinchwife.. Alethea has for some time fallen under the spell of Sparkish, a lecherous fob around town. but she eventually has evidence that Sparkish has no faith in her, while Harcourt turns out faithfully to love her. For Alithea, there is only one conclusion, that Harcourt is her man.

Is that a plot conclusion?

Alethea and the Country Wife herself are the stalwart characters to emerge from this urban social-slice. Pinchwife has made a disaster out of his marriage, by refusing to give his wife freedom, indeed unplanningly promoting her interest in the'handsome horse guards' down by the Palace. The Country Wife takes everything in, voraciously, and manages to sail through the socio-sexual spectrum of London without the hypocrisies and feinted assignations required of the stock married rakes who quickly learn to hate the Country Wife. In fact, by the end of the play The Country Wife has come near to being a symbol, of the lusty, cool sexy lady around town who takes the word Country, as Wycherley apparently intended it in at least two senses.

It is Alethea, though, who wins a prize for moral success. We might say that she is the victim of her own integrity. From the start of the play she finds herself engaged to the nauseating Sparkish, who is clearly her inferior in every way. It is true Alethea, however, that she will not give up her engagement commitment, even when the stakes become high: when she has been caught in a misleadingly compromising relationship with Horner, and has been accused by Sparkish, while Harcourt totally exonerates her and readily gives her the benefit of the doubt. She is a woman of reliable personal commitment, honors that strength in others. Harcourt deserves her love and she gives it over to him.

SCENES

Wycherley is a master of the smaller ironies of events that backfire. Mr. Pinchwife is a perfect example of an individual prone to such ironies. He is, for example, anxious for his wife to separate totally from the company of Mr. Horner, and he wishes her to write Horner a formal letter of dismissal from her company. Pinchwife declares to his wife that 'I will write the word whore with this penknife in your face'. What he achieves is to his downfall, because the letter that Mrs. Pinchwife writes, while seeming to be a valedictory, is in fact a covert love letter, precisely what Nr. Pinchwife does not want. This is the typical result of Nr. Pinchwife's interventions.

The 'virtuous gang'. A band of classy but horny women, who have been enjoying Horner's favors around town, meet at Horner's lodgings to carouse and let out their emotions, which seem mostly to spring from developments in their love lives. It happens that as each lady has her say, about her own emotional life they all have one thing in common, that each of them has thoroughly enjoyed the favors of Mr. Horner. Their only solution, now that their secret is out, is to keep that secret quiet, and above all not to let the broader society know the facts about Mr. Horner.

The 'china scene,' in Act IV, scene 3, involves a double entendre, which is standard Wycherley. The husband of Lady Fidget and the grandmother of Mrs. Squeamish are seated stage front, watching and approving, by nods, what is being said—but not heard-- center stage: Horner appears from that distance to be discussing his fine china collection—a common source of pride in eighteenth century upper class London—which the ladies have asked him to show them-- the fact being that china is a prearranged code word for a good screw, which is being carefully scheduled in the covert conversation taking place center stage. Ever after the widespread presentation of this scene, Wycherley later said, 'china' was a dirty word in London.

THEMES

Deception Horner's deceptive pretence of impotence drives the behaviors of many of the sex starved matrons of London, sharply affects the lives of many cuckolded men, and underlies the corrupt and mendacious social mood of a small sector of British society.

Self-delusion Horner convinces himself falsely, that he is the object of love, which he is not. Sparkish convinces himself that he is God's gift to women, while the gang of 'virtuous women,' who make whoopee at Horner's house, convince themselves, each one separately that she is the only lover of Mr. Horner.

Jealousy Jealousy is the launchpad of all the males who want to make themselves cuckoldry free. Mr. Pinchwife locks his wife in her room. Mr. Fidget, viewing his wife as an asset, does not feel much jealousy if others enjoy his asset. This is his form of jealousy for money, rather than dread of seeing his wife on the marketplace.

Loyalty Loyalty is the trademark of Alethea. She remains true to Sparkish, because she is not the kind of person to break an engagement. For the same reason, though, she recognizes the special virtue of Harcourt, who shares with her a mutual respect for reliability and dignity.

12. Sir George Etherege. 1635-1692
The Man of Mode 1676

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 tbe 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 pf 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 'humors' 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 tumbril 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 pantaloon is 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.

CHARACTERS

Dorimant, an unscrupulous bachelor, who leaves his mistresses behind when a new attraction wins his attention. His current flame, Mrs. Lcveit, has begun to bore him, but it is not until he meets Harriet, with whom by play's end he wil 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 Flopling 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, secretely 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 Bellair. 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 ywoung 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 secretely marries Harriet and Dorimant.

Handy, valet to Dorimant.

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.

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 uf 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.

13. Aphra Benn (1640-1680)
The Rover, or the Banished Cavaliers 1677

OVERVIEW

The writer

Aphra Benn was an English prose writer, dramatist, and poet of the Restoration period. The play before us deals with a fast playing chance taking amorous bunch of Englishmen, who played fast and loose with some amorous ladies in Naples, during carnival time, as well as with the most amorous whore in the city, Angelica, who has just lost her long term support guy, and is on the town. The cutups and flirtatious machinations of this play set a new standard for daring women's writing. Writing under the pen name Astraea, Aphra Benn keeps company, and wit, with such mondains gentlemen as John Wilmore, Earl of Rochester, and rakes iike Blunt and Frederick. There are many and divergent accounts of her birthplace and amours, as well as of her numerous plays. The most successful of her prose narratives was Oroonoko, and of the plays The Rover and the Banished Cavaliers.

CHARACTERS

Women

Florinda: sister to Don Pedro and Hellena. Devotedly In love with Colonel Belville.

Hellena: sister to Florinda, destined to the career of a nun—a destiny she is eager to forget during carnival.

Lucetta, a lusty Spanish woman who sets out to seduce Blunt; a woman who knows her own mind, and represents the Spanish fascination toward the British.

Collis; the governess of Belinda and Hellena.
She is eventually locked in a chest, to prevent her from stopping the marriage of Florinda and Belville.

Valeria; kinswoman to Florinda. Often joins Belinda in the carnival. A sidekick type.

Angelica Bianca; celebrated Spanish whore, whose last great supporter, a Spanish general, has stopped bankrolling her. She offers herself for sale in Naples at a fee of 1000 Spanish crowns. Despite having several suitors, and those of the deepest pockets, her heart goes out to Willmore. Only later, after Willmore has proved to be unfaithful to her, does she threaten to shoot him.

Moretta; lady in waiting to Angelica.

Lucetta; a conniving Spanish whore.

Men

Frederick; a violent and brutal man who agrees to beat and rape Belinda.

Blunt; a naïve and short-sighted English country gentleman.

Don Antonio; the Spanish Viceroy's son. Strongly attracted to Angelica, and prepared to pay for her.

Don Pedro. Brother of Belinda and Hellena, a noble Spaniard and friend of Don Antonio. Gives in to his two sisters marrying Englishmen.

Colonel Belville; British colonial, desperately in love with Belinda. He eventually wins Belinda's hand in marriage.

Don Antonio, the King's son.

Don Belville, an English colonel, deep in love with Florinda. Faithfully true throughout the play,

Willmore; the 'rover' of the play. A roving naval
Captain, shades of Hollywood swashbuckling—The Three Musketeers, Zorro…A charmer and ladies' man, who gives his name to the title, and who ultimately wins the heart (or gonads) of Angelica. Having later two-timed the famous whore, he finds himself at the wrong end of Angelica's pistol, from which he is saved by her graciousness.

Frederick; English gentleman. One of the crowd off to the continent on holiday, as Britishers to this day flock to the same Mediterranean watering holes, for a break from the foggy British winter.

Blunt; a foolish English country gentleman, who gets robbed of all his possessions. One has to imagine, in all such instances, that Aphra Benn is having her chuckle at the ingenuousness of her own male country people.

Philippo; Lucetta's boyfriend.

Sancho; Pimp to Lucetta.

Diego; page to Don Antonio

Officers and Soldiers

PLOT

Aphra Benn's play iThe Rover) is involved, lusty, and flirtatious. Hellena and Florinda are destined to paternally ordered marriages, to men they do not fancy. They are determined to make what fun they can of the high spirits of Carnival, which is approaching. The excitement starts cooking when Hellena, Florinda, and Valeria (their cousin) start arranging rendez vous with the British men they meet at the carnival, and Willmore and Helena start to flirt with one another. Other members of the English party join in. Lucinda starts to seduce Blunt, Florinda sets up a meeting with Belville. Not much later the men catch sight of a picture of Angelica, the most luscious whore in Naples. She is advertising herself. She laments because no one of the men has enough money to take advantage of her services. Willmore ultimately persuades Angelica to sleep with him. That is the breakthrough of the play.

The plot is at this point just getting warmed up, exceeding other Restoration comedies in daring and flirtation, pressing beyond the chance taking of Wycherley and Etherege, who still lie to the comic side of flirtation and downright seduction. By the end of Act III of The Rover there has been a major melee with the English and Spaniard 'gentlemen' beating one another up in their ardor to get a piece of Angelica. Men fight men for primacy over the ladies, and the ladies writhe in their efforts to ward off rape.

In the midst of the melee Florinda is locked in a room, then released onto a scene of mass rape, led by the rowdy English and Spanish gentlemen. She is saved when Valeria arrives, disguised in different costumes, herself having luckily escaped the rape-ready Pedro. Florinda reenters, chased by the incorrigible Willmore. Florinda then ducks into a door to avoid the gentleman; It happens to be Belville's house. Blunt is staying in Belville's house. Upon entering, Florinda asks Blunt for help. Blunt, full of contempt for women, now tries to rape Florinda. Frederick enters, convinced that Florinda is a prostitute. He locks her in a room.

Florinda, in flight, runs out of her room, this time pursued by Don Pedro. She is saved when Pedro relents, and agrees to remove his mask. Florinda removes her mask and is told by Valeria, who tells Belinda and Florinda to get married at once. Frederick and Blunt realize that they have almost raped Belinda, and they beg for forgiveness. Belville, Florinda, Valeria, and Frederick all exit to get married. Willmore stays behind to guard against Don return.

Angelica enters, pointing a gun at Willmore, and ready to kill him. Don Antonio enters, takes the gun from Angelica, then takes the gun from Wilmore, then recognizes Wilmore as the one who stole Angelica's picture. He offers to shoot Willmore. Angelica decides to let Willmore live, and leaves.

Hellena enters, still in boy's clothes, and banters with Willmore; he wants to sleep with her but not to marry her. Hellena finally persuades him to accept marriage. Pedro, Belville, Belinda, Frederick, and Belinda enter the picture. The play concludes with carnivalesque music, and marriage vows between Hellena and Willmore.

The plot is complex, the interplay violently sexual, and full of conflictual intrigue, but there is little construction of character. Willmore and Angelica are the most prominent figures, but apart from them we have little to sustain us. Nor is there any considerable social framework, for instance local color spilloff from the carnival and its exotic-tinny mystique.

SCENES

Two Spanish women, Florinda and Hellena, prepare for Carnival in Naples. Each is raging to have a good time--and to bask in the sun of a Mediterranean holiday venue. They have not much to anticipate, beyond carvnival time. One is destined to become a nun, and one to marry a rich and pompous business man. In other words they are under the thumb of their patriarchal father and their nurse. They will cut up when they are given a chance. Naples and its carnival willgive them their chance.

Upon the meeting of the two women with the English contingent—who don't know the women, and are on their own holiday jaunt--Belville, Blunt, Frederick, and Willmore—the women, and their nursemaids, move into a new social milieu. They set up rendez vous, dates, and assignations of every sort.

The Englishmen view a picture of Angelica, in front of her house, and are stunned by her beauty. But none of the men has enough money to buy her. Finally Don Pedro, a Spanish noble, arrives with enough cash to contract for the lady. This brings forth a major quarrel between Don Pedro and Don Antonio, the Viceroy's son, who quarrel, then duel, over who is to get Angelica, until finally Willmore comes on the scene, and the lady much prefers him to the other men. Classic meeting of fiery Hispanic temper with devil may care James Bondish British sangfroid.

Meanwhile a boisterous cops and robbers type scene bursts forth at Angelica's house. After a long night alone with Wilmore, she discovers that Hellena has also intruded into Willmore's bed, without a word to Angelica. Angelica is enraged, Willmore is forced to promise that he will never see Angelica again.

In the final act—after his further acting out-- Willmore makes a drunken effort to rape Belinda. Belville, Antonio, and Willmore stage a drunken brawl, the confused purpose of which is rape, though the outcome is a madhouse.

After further brouhaha, during which marriages are exchanged, ridiculed, and replaced, Angelica returns to Pedro and the scene of the brawl, points a pistol at Willmore and threatens to kill him. Don Antonio enters, and seizes the gun from Angelica who consents to leave Willmore in freedom. At the end wedding bells ring for Willmore and Hellena.

THEMES

Violence Class. The entire play transports us into the world of European travel, tourism, and exploitation of less wealthy populations. Such could be said for the English upper-classers—Willmore, Blunt, Frederick—who are off for a smashing good holiday in a culture which is commercially inviting them for a mutual, no holds barred holiday. Such could also be said for the Spaniards, who do their best tomilk the British tourists and men of swagger.

The historical moment is relevant here. We are at the end of the seventeenth century. Britain rules the seas, and on its vessels ride the first waves of international travel, plus of course the tonnages of cargo which had for two centuries made of the Mediterranean a closed British lake. From this setting the upper classes of England travelled for their pleasure and profit and established the grounds, may it also be said, for what was to become a colonial Empire. Why turn this into a discussion on violence? The historical situation, to which we barely allude here, was ripe with force majeure, power at work governing little guys' lives. From Colonialism on, with its relaxed appropriation of others' cultural and material wealth, we will be not that far distant from the rough behavior of British football clubs chanting their way across Belgium with foaming lagers streaming on the air.

Sexuality The entire play Angelica gladly participates in her own commodification, restless to sell herself again, after dismissal by her long time sugar daddy.

Loss of inhibition Sexuality freely expressed is already a break- ing of inhibitions, but Benn goes farther than to free up sexuality. As a rare independent woman writer, of her male moment, Aphra wishes to emphasize the lady's personal freedom. Does she make one think of Marguerite de Navarre, Georges Sand, or Simone de Beauvoir? Her much admired poetry, ornate in the fashion of its moment, is meaty and sensuous, but kind to the ear, and fresh. (Her novel, Oroonoko (1688), carries this freshness over into the experience of Suriname, to which Aphra made a life-changing travel as a teen ager.) The reader will have noticed, at once, the headlong energy with which this writer plunges into melodrama, violence, and boundary breaking, in a fashion strikingly different from the tightly constructed 'classical' comedy of her contemporaries, Etherege or Congreve.

\

14. **Love for Love** 1695
William Congreve. 1670-1729

OVERVIEW

Language and dramatic strategy

Oscar Wilde once found occasion to say that 'language is the way we hide our thoughts from one another.' This witticism could apply to the language of Restoration Comedy, which generates itself from situation to situation—a gentleman decides to play eunuch, so he can catch the ladies—and a tale follows; a rake plans his strategies for conquest, and enlists his servant on a mission of investigation; a sulky youngster rebels at his dad's control over him, and sets out to find freedom and free minded friends. In each ground level instance a process of enrichment takes off—characters, conflicts, achievements and failures are added, until by the end of the 'play' a complex language structure has been completed. Language comes into its own as a self-sufficient fabric, which, though of course it also 'holds the mirror up to life,' fabricates more of itself out of each given situation. Language generates language, and in the end we the language users simply trade wondrous castles in the air, without, as Wilde says, leaving the enclosures of our language worlds.

Satire and the Fall

Congreve—like Wycherley in The Country Wife or Etherege in The Man of Mode-- is both serious-satirical and sentimental. Characters like Sir Flopling Flutter, Sparkish, or Mr. Foresight are parodies of the urban dandy, the insensitively aggressive womanizer, or the half-cracked country wise man, swimming in prophecies and predictions. The satire behind the making of such conspicuous figures is not the harsh satire of ancient Roman literature—say of Juvenal, with his vicious ridicule of literati around town-- or the satire we will later see, in Pope's Rape of the Lock (1712), where we read satire of distortion, of eccentricity, or of vanity—rather than scathing portrayals of fallen man. The very reference to the fall, in the case of Congreve, will simply remind us that in Restoration comedy man is rarely worse than absurd, and rarely punished with the wrath of any god.

Wit and comic development

It is hard to imagine a body of literary works more clearly devoted, to the exploitation of pure language that is wit, than Restoration comedy. The characters in Congreve's Love for Love, for example, define themselves first by their habits of speech. Valentine is what we might call 'the main character,' which means that we grow particularly conscious of the way he builds his world in language. In the opening scene, Valentine is bantering sharply with his servant, Jeremy. Valentine is reading Epicurus, and has a stack of Latin tomes on a table beside him.

'And d'ye hear? Go you to breakfast. There's a page doubled down in Epicurus that is a feast for an Emperor.'

(The language tone, erudite but mocking, evokes a soon to be familiar counter -banter from the servant Jeremy)
.
'Was Epicurus a real cook, or did he only write receipts?'

(The sassy interplay of master and man will cast its spell over the play, defining in advance each of the two characters as they appear.)

At the end of the exchange, Valentine sums up the sorry state that has brought him, a ripe young gentleman, to his sorry impecunious state. Joking about Epicurus, who of course was par excellence the proponent of simple poverty, Valentine lays out the simple dilemma in which he finds himself:

‘Well, and now I am poor I have an opportunity to be revenged on ‘em all’—that is, on his former friends who have ditched him now that he is poor. ‘I’ll pursue Angelica with more love than ever and appear more notoriously her admirer in this restraint than when I openly rivalled the rich fops that made court to her…’

With this reply to his man, Valentine ‘generates’ the quest that will govern the play’s development, his own quest to win Angelica—which in the end he does.

Language itself has in deft compass introduced us to the entire play; we and the theater goers are at this point left to fill in the blanks. The whole play spins out from this nucleus.

The scope of the play: what gets filled in

The trick of the play is to get Angelica and Valentine together, within five acts, and on the other side of many obstacles: Sir Sampson, Valentine’s dad, offers to pay his son’s debts, if Valentine will renounce his claim on inheritance—letting it pass to his brother Ben, a sailor; Valentine has to accept the deal; Angelica must, however, be won over, which she has so far refused to do; Valentine must somehow convince Dad to give him some real money, and must convince Angelica, who has a lot of money of her own, to accept him as husband; the solution to his mounting challenge—which all stems from the dilemma made language in the first interchange between Valentine and Jeremy—is for Angela with her funds to accept Valentine—Love for Love—a deft wind up requiring that Valentine fake an extended madness, in order to avoid signing away his inheritance, for Angela to almost marry Valentine’s dad, positioning herself to acquire and tear up Valentine’s bond, and for Angela to emerge as the moral winner of the drama, selfless in acting out the deception of Valentine’s dad, and faithful in her much enduring love for Valentine.

How to write a play: lessons from Congreve

Congreve is a master of buying choice literary real estate—that is, establishing in language the promissory developments which will in the end pay dividends in unity of perspective and jubilance. In the present play the author is amply rewarded by the opportunity to introduce, into the architecture of the play, the loopy man about town, Tattle, who makes all the love imbroglios more twisted; the back-to-the brine sailor, Ben, and above all Angelica’s uncle Foresight, a self-proclaimed astrologer, in touch with the stars and the wisdom of the ages. To the question why the stage might offer unique opportunities, for the exploitation of such strategies, Congreve shows us that the person to person of actor to spectator, the rapidity of scenic counterpoints on stage, and the dexterous changes of visual properties—scene changes, costumes, lighting—provide a Gesamtkunst totality with unique capacity to become the spectator’s world.

Who was this Congreve? What did he offer the theater?

Congreve was born to the middle class; his dad was a military man, and Congreve accordingly found himself in movement as a youngster, finally settling with his parents in Ireland, where he got his primary education. He eventually found his way back to studying Law in London, in the Middle Temple of the Inns of Court. The fact was, that even in his early twenties Congreve could not endure the confinement of legal studies, and felt himself drawn to the fashionable life of London. From his late teens, after his first theatrical publication— Incognita, or Love and Duty--he became a fixture in London theatrical circles, and a much admired protégé of John Dryden. (W’ill’s Coffeehouse, be it mentioned, was the favored London gathering spot of these intellectual wits.)

CHARACTERS

Sir Sampson Legend, father of Valentine and Ben

Valentine, son of Sir Sampson, and in the doghouse for unpaid deta. The play will revolve around his way to solvency and love, two equally distant lodestars.

Scandal, Valentine's friend, and a free speaker, always expresses his opinion.

Tattle, a familiar figure of the Restoration stage; always proud of his love affairs, speaking freely of them, and yet considering himself the model of the secret keeper.

Ben, Sir Sampson's younger son, a home boy and yet, as it turns out, a sailor who makes his living on long mercantile journeys. His father succeeds, eventualiy, in persuading Ben to cozy up to Miss Prue, who like Ben lacks social savvy, but is ready to love, if the right man—her type—talks her into it.

Foresight, Angelica's uncle, an almost Dickensian odd bod, fascinated with the position of the stars, palmistry, omens, prophecies. This will be the kind of eccentric so dear from Homer to Shakespeare—Thersites, Theoclymenos, fool figures in Hamlet or Lear—who provide 'comic relief' or at best unexpected insight.

Jeremy, servant of Valentine.

Buckram, a lawyer. (A stiff board- like fabric. A good eponym for a lawyer?)

Angelica, niece to Foresight, young lady with a considerable inheritance, which in the end she frees up to render Valentine a free man. It is she who devises the trick proposal of Sir Legend, who is himself her gull. She is the one who destroys Valentine's bond and frees him—and who in the end binds him, by becoming his wife.

Mrs. Foresight, second wife to Foresight.

Mrs. Frail, a sister of Mrs. Foresight and a woman of style around town.

Miss Prue, daughter to Foresight, an awkward country girl.

Nurse, to Miss Prue

Jenny, maid to Angelica

Officers, Sailors, a steward

PLOT

Valentine, the unpredictable young son of Sir Sampson Legend, appears on stage reading from a pile of books, like the Greek text of Epicurus. The young men is erudite, but also impetuously anxious to get back to his buddies, and out from under the thumb of his dad, who is on top of him to pay his debts and get his career underway. Dad has in fact just struck a deal—acceptable or not?—with his son, by which he will give the lad 4000 pounds, enough to cover his debts, in return for his son's signing away his inheritance in favor of his younger brother Ben. In young person despair, Valentine signs the bond, and gives up his inheritance.

Valentine is in love with Angelica, who has not yet accepted his proposals. Meanwhile Sir Sampson has arranged a marriage for Ben, who is at sea as a sailor, with a country girl, Miss Prue, who is the daughter of Foresight, a local crackpot who considers himself an astrologer. Valentine, who sees his own world crashing around him, stages a series of mad fits by which he can avoid a final signature to the giving up of his will. (These mad fits, feigned like those of Hamlet, become a trope in Elizabethan and later British literature.) In the end it is Angelica who solves the problem. She talks Sir Sampson into proposing marriage to her, pretends to accept, and in the preliminary stages of it gets hold of the papers involving Valentine's bond. Valentine is desperate when he learns that Angelica is about to marry his father, declares he is ready to sign the papers releasing his inheritance. At this point Angelica unties the Gordian knot, by declaring she is ready to marry Valentine. She declares her love for him—'All for Love'—and solves the lovers' dilemma.

SCENES

Rewarding Ben. Sir Sampson searches for a way to win Valentine over to a respectable middle class life.

Father decides to revoke the son's inheritance, while leaving him only enough to pay his debts.

The son gradually realizes how stripped down his life has become.

He decides to try to interrupt his dad's revocation plan. (The theme, of the suddenly money-deprived elder son of the nobility, is played to the hilt here.)

Valentine falls more deeply in love with Angelica, niece of Foresight, and realizes he is nothing in the relationship without money. A penniless guy will never make it to a girl of her level of style and in fact wealth.

Note: what we largely leave out here, because it is not precisely on the line of events, is the shenanigans which accompany all the wild thoughts, prophecies, and anxieties of Angelica's own uncle, Foresight. This is the kind of fascinating texture that makes the play what it is, in part a slice from the color of its time.

Valentine acts out into a series of mad episodes, through which he hopes to postpone the final revocation of his will. He is trying to prove his incompetence.

Angelica—this is partly what we learn from reading (or watching) between the lines—falls in love with Valentine, and sees that she must act to keep their marriage a possibility.

Angelica persuades Valentine's dad to propose marriage to her, he accepts, and in the preparation she gets her hands on the document concerning the revocation of Valentine's will.

She destroys the document. Valentine and Angelica marry.

THEMES

Coming of adulthood. We might say that Valentine, a love struck privileged child in his twenties, is still on the young side of adulthood. He has brains and learning—after all he is reading Greek and seems comfortable with it, but—but he can not figure out how to make love to his beloved Angelica. His problem is exacerbated by his financial situation; he has little money, and is steeply in debt. He owes 4000 pounds, and will only be able to pay it if he signs away his inheritance. This is his dilemma.

Patriarchy. Valentine's father is a classic paternal figure, willing to bargain with his debt ridden, Greek reading son, but only at the disadvantage of this young man. Not surprisingly he finds himself, at the end, gulled by Angelica, who cozens him into thinking he is ready for a late in life marriage.

Adolescence. Ben, the younger brother of Valentine, is on the brink of marriage only because of his Dad's pressure. Having been directed to an ocean going career, from early in his life, Ben is infatuated with the sea going life, with its independence and routine chores. Without further prodding, he seems a candidate for a permanent life on the waves, independent of the constraints of daily life on shore.

Revenge. Sir Sampson Legend is fiercely devoted to the elusive development of his sons, neither of whom seems on target to make big money or occupy a stellar position in society. We can see how sharply he distributes his dissatisfactions between the two young men, rightly spotting Valentine as the recusant and distant one, who needs punishing by means of the inheritance bond.'

Fear. When Valentine actually realizes that his dad is going to remove his inheritance, he is terrified. He has not fully understood, to this moment, how momentous this change will be, for his future. At this point,

before he has signed away the bond, he reconsiders, stalls, and initiates a series of mad behaviors which terrify, and confuse, his father. He plays the fool or idiot, like Hamlet.

Deception. Angelica master plots the supreme deception of the play, by convincing Valentine's dad that she is in love with him. This, of course, is her way of getting her hands on the papers concerning Valentine's inheritance, and she knows that the key to marriage with Valentine, whom she really loves, is to put his inheritance into his hands.

Study guide

While all literature is a creation by social actors, drama appears to occupy a unique role, when contrasted, say, with prose narratives, lyric poetry, or epic poetry. Drama alone, of those genres, uses social beings as its means of expression—the characters in the play are real individuals drawn from society, actors. Drama alone offers back, to society, a replica of its own behavior and attitudes. Imagination, or invention, appears at the center of all literary work, but only the dramatic creation imagines with fellow humans as the means of signification.

What are the consequences of this distinctive procedure that makes the drama? Would you agree that the drama, uniquely, preserves a strong trace of its historical origins in religious rite? (I think here of the origins of western drama in rural Hellenic worship, the kinds of festival and/or sacrifice that the renowned Hellenist Jane Harrison (1850-1928) postulated a century ago.) If you see something in that perspective, would you buy the thought that the theater remains a kind of quasi-religious element in social culture? Would you explain the distrust of theater, in Puritanical cultures, as the fear of a substitute religion making its way into opposition against the established religious cult?

15. **The Way of the World** (1700)
William Congreve (1670-1729)

OVERVIEW

As we watch the potential of Englsh theater unfold from a mid-sixteenth play like Roister Doister 1567, through such aery comedies of Shakespeare as Love's Labors Lost (1594) or A Midsummer Night's Dream (1595-6) to rather dark post comedies like Jonson's The Silent Woman (1609) or The Alchemist (1640) to, finally, the bubbly and urbane and intricate city dramas of Etherege or Congreve--as we watch this parade of dominant styles we have to reflect both on the speed with which in-styles succeed each other in the theater, and on the extreme sensitivity of those styles to events transpiring around them. It is perhaps not surprising, this rapidity of style change, for the theater is the supreme mirror of the inner volatility of social change, and that change is the way the dramatist nourishes himself. Scratch the theater at some point, and you are sure to find intimate traits of society showing through, pressing this or that societal issue to the max. As in Love for Love (1695), which we looked at earlier, the present play encapsulates salient traits of Restoration society—traits, of course, which are partly established by the Restoration playwrights themselves. (Plays also create the life they depict.) It is important, to this point, to specify the level of social interaction a given play represents. Shakespeare thrives on courts and their monarchies; Berthold Brecht establishes a lyrical reconstitution of the voices of workers; Eugene O'Neill moves through a dark mythical language-space full of threats and memory; while Congreve moves through the spaces of language that characterize the capital- based upper classes of early modern England. Wit and cynicism flow from the mouths of such as Petulant and Witwoud, and In their language flowers a palpable scorn for language users for whom speech is above all a simple tool for moving and affecting among daily objects and relationships.

CHARACTERS

Mirabel. A young man-about-town, in love with Millamant, but unable to win permission for the marriage without the consent of Mrs. Wishfort, who greatly dislikes Mirabel, and wants her niece to marry Sir Willful, a wealthy fixture in the city.

Millamant. A young, very charming lady, in love with, and loved by, Mirabell. (Their love is the only unsullied emotional drive in the play.) She is the ward of Lady Wishfort because she is the niece of Lady Wishfort's long-dead husband. Thus she is dependent on the desires of her aunt, for the release of her dowry. She is a first cousin of Mrs. Fainall.

Fainall. A man-about-town. He and Mirabell know each other well, (The play opens with the two of them playing a card game in a fashionable chocolate house.). However, they do not really like each other. Fainall married his wife for her money, and is carrying on an affair with Mrs. Marwood (who is also in love with Mirabel—a typical plot tangle, indicative of the instability of love relationships in this social milieu.)

Mrs. Fainall. Wife of Fainall and daughter of Lady Wishfort. As a wealthy widow she married Fainall, accumulating all the more money in this small corner of London society. She is Millamant's cousin and was once Mirabell's mistress, joining thereby the rats-nest of former wives and mistresses which in this case are part of the way of the world.

Mrs. Marwood. Fainall's mistress, perhaps still in love with Mirabell. This love is not returned, and Mirabel retains his position as faitfhul, to his beloved Millamant.

Young Witwoud. A fop. He came to London from the country to study law but, like other men in this drama, apparently found the life of the fashionable man-about-town more pleasant than the life of the courts He fancies himself a wit, and imagines that social life is where.he is. He courts Millamant, but not seriously; she is merely the fashionable belle of the moment, and is in any case serious about Mirabel.

Petulant. A young fop, a friend of Witwoud's. His name is true to his character, a spoiled child of society, always preferring a bon mot to a thoughtful response. One can imagine the best of his witticisms in the

mouth of an Oscar Wilde character, sharp and empty at the same time. He is behind much of the marital plotting in the play.

Lady Wishfort. A mean spirited fifty five years old dowager type who still thinks of herself as beautiful. She is the mother of Mrs. Fainall and the guardian of Millamant, whose dowry she controls. Lady Wishfort is herself in love with Mirabell, although she is now spiteful because he once repelled her advances.

Sir Wilfull Witwoud .The elder brother of Young Witwoud, but less gifted in the realm of wit. He is forty years old and is planning the grand tour of Europe that was usually made by young men to complete their education. He is the nephew of Lady Wishfort's nephew, and a distant relative of Millamant, in a social milieu where proximity of relationship is of great, often financial, importance. Wilful is Lady Wishfort's choice as a suitor for Millamant's hand.

Waitwell. Mirabell's valet. At the beginning of the play, he has just been married to Foible, Lady Wishfort's maid. He masquerades as Sir Rowland, Mirabell's nonexistent uncle, and woos Lady Wishfort. However he is palpably lower class, and therefore fits the plot to draw Lady Wishfort into an impossible marriage, thereby securing the full dowry for Millamant.

Foible. Lady Wishfort's maid, married to Waitwell.
Mincing. Millamant's maid.
Peg. A maid in Lady Wishfort's house.

PLOT

Mirabel and Fainall complete a round of cards in the chocolate shop, when a footman enters with the news that Waitwell (Mirabel's male servant) and Foible (Lady Wishfort's female servant) have just gotten married. We have no way, as audience, to suspect the import of this marital event, which will play a central role in the development of the play. To avoid being coy as this point in plot narration, let's make clear that the thwarting of Lady Wishfort's own marital plans is the end reason for the marriage of these two servants. In any case Mirabel goes on to tell Fainall about his love of Millamant, and hears Fainall encourage him. Mirabel learns that, if Lady Wishfort is able to marry, he, Mirabel, will lose half of the dowry awaiting him from Millamant. It is of high importance to prevent Lady Wishfort from marrying. The intertwining of wealth and marriage, important throughout Congreve's work—and his social milieu—becomes a play theme at this point.

The second act moves to St. James' Park, where Mrs. Fainall a nd Mrs. Marwood are discussing their scorn for men. We learn by overhearing that the two ladies are planning to trick Mrs. Wishfort into giving her consent to the marriage of Millamant and Mirabel. Mirabel and Millamant are the interested parties, and at the act's end the newly wed servants are reminded of the forth-coming plot In which they will play important roles.

Planned arrangements are made, to induce Lady Wishfort to marry the supposed Sir Rowland, who is in fact Waitwell, who as we know is already married to Foible. The idea is that by marrying Waitwell, Lady Wishfort will be committing bigamy, annulling her own marriage. The underlying idea is that Mirabel will offer to get Lady Wishfort out of her marital predicament, if she consents to his own marriage to Millamant, plus to release the full dowry. Lady Wishfort persists in her desire for Millamant to marry Sir Willful Witwoud, a fop and wit just in from the countryside. M<irabel and Millamant confer on their own preferences as they proceed toward marriage. (Noticeable here, even at this stage the two lovers have their eyes on the cash register; no Romeo and Juliet business here.)

In the end Lady Wishfort understands the trick that has been played on her, and Waitwell, as one of the conspirators, is arrested by Fainall. Adducing a former contract of marriage between Mirabel and Millamant, Fainall jacks up his criticism of Mrs. Wishfort, who offers Mirabel a consent to marry Millamant, and to collect her dowry, if he, Mirabel, will rescue her honor and what remains of her fortune. Mirabel calls on Waitwell to bring forth an old contract, by which Mrs. Fainall gives all her property in trust, to Mirabel. This action nullifies the blackmail action against Lady Wishfort, enables Mirabel to restore Mrs.

Fainall's property to her, and sets himself free to marry Millamant, recover the full dowry owed him, and put Lady Wishfort at ease.

SCENES

Congreve knew the world of his time--first in Ireland, where he was born, then in London—and in the intricacies of his plotting testifies to his ready snse of the materially self-interested human beings who composed his social cruising level. From the first chocolate-house scene we are made aware of the world that defines Mirabel-- and the wealthy coterie of women who make up the background of his existence--working toward a marriage with his love, Millamant, and at the same time trying to stay on the good side of a selfish midlife dowager, Mrs. Wishfort, whom Millamant has the misfortune to have as a guardian.

Every play starts somewhere, and this one opens, with utter naturalness, onto a word scene in which everybody is plotting, under the high tension wires of society, to manipulate his or her world. The way of the world, we come to realize in this master satire, is a highly sublimated form of dog eat dog social life.

The play proceeds to work out the marital brouhaha that surrounds the love of Mirabel and Millamant. The basic problem is not amour, but the assurance to the lovers that Millamant's dowry of 12 000 pounds will reach the marital pair, especially the hands of Mirabel. It becomes necessary, in order to assure this outcome, to put Lady Wishfort in a position in which she has to give her consent to the marital pair, as well as to guarantee the dowry to Mirabel and Millamant. The actual trick, which is to entangle Lady Wishfort in a non-viable marriage, one that would be illegal because bigamous, is intended to force the lady to beg Mirabel's aid in extricating herself from her illegitimate marriage Loosely put, these shreds of events provide the structure of the play, which enriches itself—and complicates itself—by the interplay of Fainall and his wife with the central action around Lady Wishfort. It might be said that this kind of lateral involvement is also at the heart of Restoration drama, which tends toward viewing social life as a game show.

THEMES

Wealth and Love The case of Mirabel and Millamant. What do they want of each other? Love drives them but they are deeply interested in the dowry due Millamant, on which the pair counts. The love they want from one another is different from the love of money—that slavering passion for gold which Ben Jonson embeds in the beginning of Volpone—for the proximity of the two loves is guaranteed, throughout these plays, by the centrality of financial dealings in the formation of a capitalist family central society. The present money-love theme is sure to insert itself on all social levels, in a society where power and value are valued as highly as amorous feeling.

The Fool and the Wit The pairing of the fool and the wit is ubiquitous in World literature, where society thrives on mocking itself, but at the same time, like all of us individuals, enjoys the power of humor to transcend absurdity. The witty fool is of course sharply different from the wise fool, that Falstaffian figure intermittently present in world literature, wherever corruption requires a biting antagonist to keep it in line.

Intrigue: the way of the world The way of the world is the way of deceit. It is not the world in which integrity and reliability are modelled, but the world in which the frank search for one's benefit and power is put before all other drivers, but in which, given the ubiquitous taboos against pure self-interest, that frank search must invariably be cloaked in shining beneficent garments.

16. **The Recruiting Officer** (1706)
G6orge Farquhar (1677-1707)

OVERVIEW

George Farquhar was an Irish dramatist, born in Derry, son of a middle class clergyman, who was found in early youth to be highly gifted with language and poetry. At age l7 he entered Trinity College, Dublin—he had been a restless student, inclined from early on toward acting—and though it was hoped that he would follow in his father's footsteps, he found himself rather drawn toward acting. (The following play will help further to explain that predilection.) For a while he took roles on the Dublin stage, where he was popular, thanks in part to the patronage of the well known Irish actor, Robert Wilks. Shortly after, Farquhar left for England, where in 1698 his first comedy, Love in a Bottle, was produced, successfully. He was at that time a young man, in his early twenties. One might say that he was finding his way on the grand stage at just the moment when he himself wa being conscripted as a recruiting officer. For the first years in London he was both working as a government official, and writing--plays like The Recruiting Officer, about the very occupation in which destiny had placed him. It was though an ironic twist, from one of his plays, had intervened to shape his life.

CHARACTERS

Captain Plume; head recruiting officer for the army, sent to Shrewsbury to whip up new recruits for an impending battle in France. He is also on a personal mission to recruit the love interest of his dear Sylvia, and to do so without letting her know that he wants to marry her.

Captain Brazen; the second recruiting officer.

Sylvia Balance; besought by Captain Plume, she also wishes to win his love, but concludes the best way to do so is in disguise—male disguise—which she does, and as a recruit herself.

Sgt. Kite; aide to Captain Plume, under great pressure to bring in the fresh recruits. Tries offers of money and fame, but failing that turns to astrological predictions.

Melinda; cousin of Sylvia, just come into wealth. She falls under the love attention of Mr. Worthy, but holds him off because she wants marriage and not mistresshood.

Justice Balance; Sylvia's father, magistrate in charge of new recruits. He is in charge of checking vagrancy among recruits. One of the first 'soldiers' brought before him is his daughter Sylvia, disguised as a Mr. Willful. He recognizes her because she is wearing her brother's clothes, and passes on to her the message that he will allow her to marry Mr. Plume.

Mr. Scale; presiding matistrate

Mr. Scruple; presiding magistrate

Sylvia; daughter of Balance, in love with Plume. Forced into recruitment under false name of Mr. Willful.

Lucy; maid of Melinda. Elopes with Brazen.

Rose; a country girl

Constable, recruits

Servants, merchant

PLOT

The Recruiting Officer opens to the drumbeat of a military march. The army is recruiting for a war in France, and two top recruiters have been sent to Shrewsbury to carry out this important action. Captain Plume arrives for the job, in love as he is with Sylvia. He arrives at the same time as Mr. Worthy, who is in love with Melinda, the cousin of Sylvia. (Worthy had wanted Melinda for his mistress, when she was poverty stricken, but now that she has inherited big time he has decided they should get married. This kind of money-before-all philosophy filters through the heart of the whole play. (Would you say that makes this play a satire on the essence of human nature?) Meliinda resents this reversal in Mr. Worthy, and boasts of the glamor of her new found money. Sylvia and Melinda argue violently over the question of Sylvia's allegedly new found haughtiness.

Sylvia leaves her father's house, under pretext that she is going to the Welsh countryside, but in fact she returns to Shropshire, under a male disguise and the false name, Mr. Wilful. Plume and Brazen, the two principal recruiters, compete to recruit Sylvia. Kite abducts Mr. 'Wilful' for Plume; Wilful finds himself in magistrates court for suspected assault, and is taken before the three magistrates, of whom one is Sylvia's father. Wilful, in her disguise, is forced to sign up. Meanwhile Melinda is induced to to go a fortune teller (Kite in disguise) in order to be guided in her choice of a husband, The multiple disguises and false pretences threaten to get out of control, when a staccato sequence of events brings a resolution to this tale of love rivals and subterfuges; Worthy goes to Melinda, to announce that he wishes her hand in marriage, but on sharing the good news with Plume 'he' learns that Melinda has after all eloped with Brazen, one of the three magistrates; Worthy stops Brazen, who is with a disguised woman whom 'he' thinks to be Melinda, but who is in fact Lucy, Melinda's maid--at which discovery 'Worthy' abandons his impulse to challenge Brazen to a duel; Sylvia, as well as the masked lady with Brazen, drops her mask, upon which Plume agrees to leave the army and marry her; Melinda at last agrees to marry Plume, who compensates Brazen, for the loss of a valuable marriage to Melinda, by turning over his own twenty recruits to Brazen. At no point in the play is it more evident that recruits and wives are commodities, that monetary worth is where it all comes down, or that love and money are mutually exclusive. This satire of Farquhar is across the board, battening at the expense of the dearest assumptions of human society. This is a cynically joyful comedy.

SCENES

Plot, you might say, is the organized structure of a literary narrative, while the 'events' of the narrative are looser, provoke more lateral offshoots, and thrive—when it works—on cascades of self-revelation. For instance, the plots of many of the comedies we are addressing are linear, though intricate—like the present play--unlike Shakespeare's Midsummer Night's Dream, or The Tempest, which feed and regenerate themselves on their own substance, and emerge from a place unexpected onto a distant prospect. The linearity of the Restoration comedy, however, is not mechanical—as in a sense an Aristophanic comedy is—like the Birds—with lots of local ingenuity but a straightforward narrative line. The linearity of the Restoration comedy is intricacy, plots and sub plots, as in the case of the love letter to Brazen, which comes to light as part of a hidden amour, and opens out an entirely new dimension of the play.

The brilliance of Farquhar's work—like that Ben Jonson displays in his finest comedies—The Silent Woman or Volpone—shows forth from the loose and easy moving style of the beginning. The fake grand declamation of Kite, pronouncing the nobility of the national cause and the rightness of recruitment, follows with perfection of nature into the rough speech of the costermonger, who can do a conversation redirect with grace, taking advantage of Kite's speech about 'the bed of honour' which is so large that 'ten thousand people can lie in it together and not touch,' to remark that such a bed would be just right for him and his wife. The advent of Kite and Plume, at just this moment, flows comfortably into the military theme, and presses the play organically onward.

The next stage involves the quarrel which emerges, between Melinda and her maid Lucy, who is competing with Melinda for the attention of Captain Brazen, one of the two recruiters. This deftly introduced point of conflict opens the way for Sylvia to adopt a fake identity, that of Mr. Wilful, in which

role she is interviewed by her father, ignorant as he is of who she is, briefly to find herself in trouble with the law, charged with assault. At the same time Melinda continues to evade the advances of Worthy.

Events, as they compose this play, flow from out of each other in the fashion they assume in the course of doings that in the above case lead Sylvia and Melinda to play out their masked love lives—a topic which appears to have superseded the theme of recruitment. Love and recruitment dance subtly in one another's arms.

A break in the events-flow is needed, to interrupt the sterile dissension between Melinda and Sylvia, as between Pike and Brazen, between whom events have established a series of landmines. It might be said that the fortune teller gives the final twist to the sequence of events.

The fortune teller comes out of left field, by a stroke of the playwright's genius. Worthy is behind the convincing of Melinda to visit a fortune teller (Kite in disguise) who convinces Melinda to accept her tireless suitor. Worthy goes to visit Melinda, to conclude matters, but to his amazement finds that she has eloped with Brazen. He naturally challenges Brazen to a duel, but before the action can begin, Melinda drops her disguise, and reveals herself as Lucy. Sylvia does the same. Plume agrees to leave the army and marry Sylvia. The drama ultimately swallows its own tail.

THEMES

Universal names The three magistrates—Messrs. Brazen, Baiance, and Scruple—are in fact fairly down to earth in the present play, though their universal names might seem to qualify them for sanctity. The practice is of naming by abstractions, which was based on classical practice, and dominates writing orthodoxy in the western tradition. The involvement of abstract names with a class society, such as we find in the present play, is deep and subtle. Can it run like this? As roles grow stratified socially—the baker, the magistrate, the candle maker—the names applied to each of those professions grow fixed, represent the activity they cover, 'take its place,' at least in usage. These names come increasingly to empty of local content and to take on the social, and logical, function of the activity covered by them. In the case of the class conscious Restoration, it was a piece of cake to think in terms of stable and static social roles.

Love As we see throughout the play, love is closely allied to money. When Sylvia comes into her inheritance, her value to Mr. Worthy climbs immediately. Whereas previously he had wanted her for his mistress—a fact shat heartily offended her—now he wanted, and eventually got her—as a wife. (In the process, however, Sylvia had a fling at Captain Brazen, one of the magistrates, in order to punish Worthy.)

Military recruitment The play follows the fortunes of two military officers, who are sent on a recruitment mission. We are shown the central differences in the character of the two men. Both officers, despite their differences, are venal to the fingertips; they are portrayed not only as different in character but at the same time as representatives of a type, the type of the person in power, in a given situation, who exercises that power to gain his or her own advantage. This is the kind of thematic that becomes the raw material of Restoration comedy, springing as it does from a post Shakespearian century, in which the Greco Roman classical resurges into the early modern world.

Class The whole play, of course, is a satire (or critical commentary?) on the class system. The humor turns largely around the rival and competing efforts to make the best match, or to do what is advantageous for one's own kin. (Plume eventually gets Sylvia, who complements his ambitions; Worthy eventually marries Melinda, though not without having struggled with her pride and his own insensitivity.) None of the characters involved is drawn by any sympathy for suffering or by any appeals to warm heartedness.

Elite society we do not consider in the present play. (This is not the world of Congreve or Etherege, but rather the middle class world of Troilus and Cressida, say, in which raw emotion is regularly barking at the

shins of pretense.) Farquhar writes as a rebel from society, who is already coopted by the society. Perhaps he did not live long enough—29 years—to mount a full gun rejection of the social framework.

The Folly of War We are aware from the start that a major military conflict with France is at hand for the British, and that it is of top importance to beef up the army. Two senior recruit officers have been sent to Shrewsbury for that purpose. As it turns out, though, the whole emphasis of the present play is on the romantic and power-play, shenanigans that spring up from the hustle and bustle of the recruiters.