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'Restoration Comedy' and its Audiences, 1660-1776

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The nature of the audience in 'Restoration' theatres has been much disputed. Scholars hostile to risqué comedy have tended to follow Macaulay in supposing that debauched courtiers feasted upon fictionalized accounts of their own misdeeds. Believers in a genteel 'comedy of manners' have propagated the myth of a courtly coterie audience. Recent scholarship has demolished both suppositions and left us new hypotheses in their place. John Harrington Smith points to a 'change' in comedy in the 1680s and 1690s which he attributes to the influence of 'the Ladies' in opposition to 'the Gallants' who had the ascendance in the 1670s. John Loftis has traced the growth of bourgeois and mercantilist ideology in the drama from 1690 to 1737 as a gradual response to changes in audience composition. Both of these studies are, broadly speaking, 'correct', and yet some knotty problems still await our attention.

How uniform were the tastes or beliefs of the 'original' Restoration audience at any given time between 1660 and 1700? How significantly did audience outlook shift between 1675 and 1695, or, in other words, between the heyday of Wycherley and that of Congreve? What happened in the critical years around 1700 when the shift to 'sentimental' comedy allegedly took place? If the new bourgeois audience rejected all the 'Restoration stereotypes' after 1700, why did the work not only of Congreve but of his contemporaries and predecessors remain enormously popular for more than half a century?

These are large and complicated subjects, and we cannot pretend to offer more than tentative answers. We hope, however, to call some common assumptions into doubt and to suggest that the relationship between 'Restoration comedy' and its changing audience is more complicated than critics have wanted to admit. For a long time people made assumptions about the 'Restoration audience' based on hostile readings of the bawdier comedies. Modern research has demolished those assumptions. But how did the heterogeneous audience we now know to have filled the theatres view the comedies served up for their delectation or instruction? And contrariwise, our view of the audience has changed: what does our new sense of the audience imply about the plays?

1 *Carolean Plays and Their Original Audience*

For an astonishingly long time, most accounts of 'Restoration comedy' and its original audience were derived from readings of a very few plays. In the last quarter-century we have come to see that we must not uncritically lump

the plays of the 1670s with those of the 1690s. We have likewise come to recognize the very considerable diversity of play-types popular at any given time during the late seventeenth century.[1] The whole notion of a dominant 'comedy of manners' turns out to be a critics' chimera. Anyone surveying the popular comedies from the years 1662 to 1678 with something like an impartial eye would find it difficult indeed to deduce a set of social or ethical views which transcend the thumpingly commonplace: approval of wit and young lovers, disapproval of forced marriage and avarice, and so forth.[2] Only a tiny handful of plays present (let alone support) the sort of libertinism for which 'Restoration comedy' was long notorious.[3] If we were to look even just at the first years of the 1660s, when the audience was as homogeneous as it ever was to be in London, we would find little evidence for ideological uniformity in the popular new plays. In 1663 audiences flocked to see both John Wilson's crude coarse *The Cheats* and Samuel Tuke's chaste high-flown *The Adventures of Five Hours*. We might imagine that different groups patronized these plays, had not Etherege contrived to combine everything from smutty farce to pseudo-heroic verse melodrama in a single play, the tremendously popular *The Comical Revenge* (1664). Indeed only a methodological simpleton would seriously suppose that you can construct a precise characterization of an audience by extrapolation from popular texts. Delight in Noel Coward and Neil Simon does not preclude delight in Pinter. Likewise we have ample testimony that the same audiences supported both *The Conquest of Granada* and *The Rehearsal* in the 1670s. In short, the plays are extremely disparate in type, tone, and outlook, and we cannot even assume that different parts of the audience supported different sorts of plays.

The whole theory of a coterie audience, long dominant, seems to have no better foundation than the limited knowledge and moral prejudices of later commentators. The many critics whose views are summed up in K. M. P. Burton's peculiar assertion that the audiences consisted principally of 'courtiers, hangers-on, and prostitutes'[4] cannot have read Pepys with any attention, and cannot have read the prologues and epilogues from the period. We may agree with Marion Jones that the longstanding Cavalier attitudes of the comedies reflect the political and social values of what was soon a 'small . . . minority' of the audience,[5] but we must not neglect the crucial implication in this statement: that there must have been a lot of non-courtiers

[1] See particularly A. H. Scouten, 'Notes Toward a History of Restoration Comedy', *PQ*, 45 (1966), 62–70; Robert D. Hume, *The Development of English Drama in the Late Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, 1976), Chapters 2 and 3; John Loftis, Richard Southern, Marion Jones, and A. H. Scouten, *The Revels History of Drama in English*, Volume v, *1660–1750* (London, 1976), Part 3.

[2] For a systematic (and in our opinion methodologically unsound) attempt to deduce 'values' for comedies from 1662 to 1722 see Ben Ross Schneider, Jr, *The Ethos of Restoration Comedy* (Urbana, Illinois, 1971).

[3] See Robert D. Hume, 'The Myth of the Rake in "Restoration" Comedy', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 10 (Spring 1977), 25–55.

[4] *Restoration Literature* (London, 1958), p. 63.

[5] *Revels History*, v, 131.

in that audience. A moment's reflection on financial reality tells us why this would have to be so. Two theatres operated on most days of the week in the 1660s and 1670s. At a rough approximation we may say that 200 spectators were needed at each theatre just to make 'house charges' (about £25 per day in this period). And to make the profits which would pay 'sharing actors' an income, the two theatres would need to attract well over 500 people per day between them.[1] The population of London was about 400,000 at this time, making the percentage of theatre attenders each day quite small. But 500 is a considerable number of people. Would even 250 courtiers, hangers-on (whoever they may be), and prostitutes have patronized the theatre daily? This seems extremely improbable. We need to ask, in short, both 'who were the Restoration audience?' and 'what did they expect or demand of a play?'.

The social and political heterogeneity of the audience even in the 1660s has been convincingly demonstrated by Emmett L. Avery.[2] Avery's case is made even more impressive by the limitations in his methodology: working from Pepys, he was of course restricted to information about people Pepys recognized, which naturally gives undue prominence to celebrated persons and those in Pepys's own circle. Considered more broadly, the composition of the audience must appear even more diverse, as the work of Harold Love has amply proved.[3] If we try to look for identifiable sub-groups within the audience we find some, but whether we are greatly the wiser for doing so is to be doubted. One obvious source of such distinctions is prologues and epilogues. Working from them Pierre Danchin offers a breakdown: royalty, quality, gallants, citizens, whores.[4] Fair enough, but of course the rhetoric of addresses to the audience must be taken into account, and allowances made for the possibilities of deliberate distortion for effect. Fops, for example, make an inviting target for raillery — but how many fops went to the theatres on an average day, and by whose definition were they fops? So broad a category as 'quality' must encompass both the roistering Duke of Buckingham and the grumpy moral John Evelyn. 'Citizens' must include everything from wealthy merchants to petty tradesmen to apprentices. Servants evidently found the theatre excessively expensive, but towards the end of the seventeenth century Christopher Rich hit on the bright idea of allowing footmen free entry into the second gallery, making them an acknowledged bloc, and a force in favour of crude entertainments.[5]

[1] For figures underlying these estimates see Judith Milhous, 'The Duke's Company's Profits, 1675–1677', *Theatre Notebook*, 32 (1978), 76–88; and Robert D. Hume, 'The Dorset Garden Theatre: A Review of Facts and Problems', *Theatre Notebook*, 33 (1979), 4–17.

[2] See 'The Restoration Audience', *PQ*, 45 (1966), 54–61.

[3] Love's earlier studies are summed up and extended in his admirable essay, 'Who were the Restoration audience?' in the present collection, pp. 21–44.

[4] 'Le Public des théatres londoniens à l'époque de la Restauration d'après les prologues et les épilogues', in *Dramaturgie et Société*, edited by Jean Jacquot, 2 vols (Paris, 1968), II, 847–88.

[5] See Cibber's complaint, *An Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley Cibber*, edited by Robert W. Lowe, 2 vols (1889; reprinted New York, 1966), I, 233.

We cannot, however, assume that given groups responded in simple and direct ways to dramatic representation of themselves. John Wain, for example, would have it that courtiers delighted in put-downs of pushy cits.[1] No doubt there is some truth in this, but let us consider a test case: Ravenscroft's *The Citizen Turn'd Gentleman*, a vastly successful play which does an especially thorough job of ridiculing the pretensions of a 'cit'. It received its première in the spring of 1672, at just the time when the Third Dutch War was taking quality and gallants out of town and (according to a string of prologues and epilogues) leaving the theatres much more dependent than usual on citizens for patronage. The play was performed, moreover, at Dorset Garden, the theatre more associated with citizens than gallants and men of quality, for whom Bridges Street and Drury Lane were easier to get to. A similar puzzle attaches to *The London Cuckolds* (1681), a play performed for some seventy years and long a favourite with cits. Unless we suppose the citizens to be masochists or self-hating dupes of courtiers' values (no doubt some were), we must grant the group some sophistication in its response to what is technically a hostile picture of itself.

One of the most curious problems for historians of the Restoration audience is its refusal ever to sort itself out by patronizing different kinds of entertainments at different theatres. Looking at a large number of plays, John Harrington Smith distinguishes 'cynical comedies' from those which embody an 'anti-Restoration spirit in comedy'. These, he suggests, were championed by 'gallants' and 'the Ladies' respectively.[2] The group-designations are from prologues and epilogues of the 1680s when there was definitely a split in taste between bawdy, cynical comedy, and more moral romances. Had this division in taste occurred a decade earlier perhaps we would have seen the King's Company champion one, the Duke's Company the other. The collapse of the King's Company in 1682 made such a neat division impossible until the re-establishment of a second company in 1695. But even then the theatres made no systematic attempt to appeal to separate clienteles.

Consider a list of some of the most successful stock comedies from the Carolean period: *The Committee*, *The Comical Revenge*, *Sir Martin Mar-all*, *An Evening's Love*, *Sir Salomon*, *The Rehearsal*, *The Citizen Turn'd Gentleman*, *Epsom-Wells*, the 1674 *Tempest*, *The Country-Wife*, *The Man of Mode*, *The Plain-Dealer*, Part 1 of *The Rover*, *A Fond Husband*. All of these seem to have been stock plays for a good number of years, many of them for several decades. To look for significant common elements among them is essentially futile. In practice as in theory, 'Restoration' comedies exhibit great variety.[3] We may usefully ask, however, what the audience thought it saw in a comedy

[1] 'Restoration Comedy and its Modern Critics', *Essays in Criticism*, 6 (1956), 367–85, especially p. 370.

[2] See John Harrington Smith, 'Shadwell, the Ladies, and the Change in Comedy', *MP*, 46 (1948), 22–33; and *The Gay Couple in Restoration Comedy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1948).

[3] For a detailed discussion of this point see Hume, *Development of English Drama*, Chapters 2 and 3.

staged in the contemporary Carolean theatre. At least three answers deserve consideration.

(1) A realistic presentation of contemporary society. Both moral zealots and defenders of the plays have taken this position. Brett-Smith and Fujimura both consider major Restoration comedies as exhibiting something very near 'photographic realism'. An appeal to either logic or historical sociology ought, however, to cast grave doubt on such a notion. Are the events of *The Country-Wife* or *The Plain-Dealer* the stuff of daily life in London in the 1670s? *The Man of Mode* was widely thought to be an *à clef* production (though people could not settle on the key), but the whole point is that it purports to be a glimpse of a special aristocratic world by an insider. *An Evening's Love* is a quite unrealistic 'Spanish romance', and so (at one generic remove) is *1 Rover*; *Sir Salomon* and *Sir Martin Mar-all* and *A Fond Husband* are formulaic schemes and intrigues comedies. Quoting Rapin, Dennis can say (in 1722), '*that Comedy is as it ought to be, when an Audience is apt to imagine, that instead of being in the Pit and Boxes, they are in some Assembly of the Neighbourhood, or in some Family Meeting, and that we see nothing done in it, but what is done in the World*'.[1] If so, few if any of the comedies listed above are as they ought to be. They are too formulaic, too obviously exaggerated for effect. We may usefully draw a comparison with the modern detective story. Many writers of such tales rely heavily on 'realistic' details, and there is usually a very clearcut morality, but one cannot safely draw sociological or ethical conclusions from Dorothy Sayers or Rex Stout.

(2) Cloud Cuckooland. This is the opposite extreme. Lamb's defence against moral condemnation is superbly effective, but is it accurate? (And if accurate, at what cost in meaning for the plays?) No doubt we must grant that some comedies come closer to realism, others to Cloud Cuckooland. Equally we must grant that some theatregoers were probably more able than others to see a play as something separate from real life. But to suppose that even a majority of the comedies exist in a separate realm is difficult. Too many of them employ London settings and topical references. To divest them of all ordinary grounds of moral judgement they would have much more clearly to be based upon a fantasy setting and a different society. Very occasionally a writer tries this, as Edward Howard did (without much success, popular or literary) in *The Womens Conquest* (1670) and *The Six days Adventure* (1671). But most comedies visibly adapt the manners and mores of contemporary English society. The amount of serious and semi-serious commentary on contemporary institutions (especially marriage) would make it extremely hard to see *no* relationship between comedy and life.[2]

[1] 'A Defence of Sir Fopling Flutter', in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, edited by Edward Niles Hooker, 2 vols (Baltimore, 1939–43), II, 248.

[2] On the presentation of marriage in the comedies see Robert D. Hume, 'Marital Discord in English Comedy from Dryden to Fielding', *MP*, 74 (1977), 248–72, and Joseph L. Greenberg, 'English Marriage and Restoration Comedy', unpublished dissertation (Princeton University, 1976).

(3) A partially-separate aesthetic reality. That audiences saw *some* relationship between comedy and life seems evident in moral protests from theatregoers (as opposed to rampaging *readers* like Jeremy Collier) as early as the 1660s and 1670s. If the comedies showed Cloud Cuckooland, such protests would be totally misguided. We find it very significant that no contemporary playwright or critic takes this line of defence. Conversely, however, we should note the extremely *un*realistic presentation of clandestine marriage and divorce in a large number of comedies throughout the period.[1] Audiences did not demand conformity to either law or reality, which seems to us another extremely significant point. An audience demanding conformity to the events and standards of real life would certainly have choked on many of these plays, from the flying spirits of *The Lancashire Witches* (1681) to the airy 'divorce' at the end of Farquhar's *The Beaux Stratagem* (1707). Likewise we may say with assurance that no more than a tiny minority of the audience either approved or attempted to practise the bedroom-farce antics of *A Fond Husband* or *The London Cuckolds*.[2]

Logic tells us, indeed, that most members of the audience ought to have been able to make some distinction between life and art. The problem is to determine how and where they did so. What would they tolerate as dramatic convention? What standards did they apply to plays? Professor Aubrey Williams has recently argued that we must take into account 'the one thing that contemporary playwrights and audiences had most in common: a shared upbringing and schooling in the basic doctrines and precepts of the Christian religion'.[3] This reminder is very much to the point: to imagine that late seventeenth-century writers and theatregoers were at heart happy heathens is certainly the height of folly. The number of people in the audience who did not consider themselves good Christians must have been functionally nil.[4] Near unanimous belief in Christianity does not, however, prove that any great number of theatregoers systematically applied the precepts of their religion to the comedies they saw. (Nor does it allow us to deduce religious attitudes from plays. Would we try to infer Victorian religious beliefs from *The Importance of Being Earnest*?) Professor Williams wishes to argue that they would have done so and that they would in particular have looked for signs of 'Providential justice'. This seems to us to force the case beyond its limits. There are, to be sure, a fair number of tragedies which do quite explicitly

[1] See Gellert Spencer Alleman, *Matrimonial Law and the Materials of Restoration Comedy* (Wallingford, Pennsylvania, 1942).

[2] For some account of predominant social attitudes see Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (London, 1977).

[3] 'Of "One Faith": Authors and Auditors in the Restoration Theatre', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 10 (Spring 1977), 57–76.

[4] We should not, however, suppose that audience members could agree on much else about their religion. A generation later, when religious passions had cooled a bit, Jonathan Swift satirizes the 'one faith' argument by having 'a Ball of new-dropt Horse's Dung', floating in the gutter, with apples, in a rainstorm, greet a pippin thus: '*See, Brother, how we Apples swim*', in '*On the Words* — Brother Protestants, and Fellow Christians' (1733), *The Poems of Jonathan Swift*, second edition, edited by Harold Williams, 3 vols (Oxford, 1958), III, 809–13.

preach the doctrine of providential justice. Congreve's *The Mourning Bride* (1697) is a good example. Several critics (most notably Rymer and Dennis) tout this formula. But very few *comedies* make the notion of providential justice explicit, and not many more seem particularly suitable vehicles for this kind of moralization. Only if we take the rewarded protagonist with a fair amount of seriousness is a providential reading very plausible.

A few hints of 'conversion' can perhaps be found in Etherege's Dorimant, but we suspect that most readers prepared to apply serious Christian standards to him would condemn him with Steele rather than rejoice in his transformation. The rhetoric of conversion can, indeed, be read as satiric. Only with a case like Valentine in *Love for Love* (1695) can a strong providential case be made from the terms of the text.[1] We do not altogether accept this case, but we grant its cogency and coherence. The question is whether Congreve so designed the play, and whether it was so taken by his audience. We may note that when Jeremy Collier denounced the play, Congreve defended it in terms far removed from those of the reading proffered by Professor Williams.[2] Perhaps, to be sure, this was merely a matter of rhetorical caution. The key question here is whether, *in performance*, the overt religious terminology of the final pages would make the audience respond to a romance on a religious plane. Our best guess is that it might have done so for some portion of the audience, but that few theatregoers would have looked to a comedy with the dominant tone of this one for serious moral or religious edification. A reader, undistracted by the glitter and bustle of performance, might well reflect on the providential moral which adorns this tale. We see, indeed, a significant difference between performance and reading in this respect.

We may agree that writers and playgoers were believing Christians without supposing either (1) that many of them looked to comedy as a serious moral vehicle, or (2) that they would have responded with anything like unanimity in cases where most of them did consider moral issues to be seriously involved. Given the great range of contemporary assumptions about the nature of comedy, and the wide variety of types and tones of particular comedies, we are inclined to conclude that there are no simple answers here. The audience was heterogeneous; the plays are heterogeneous. Even within the narrow confines of the Carolean period before the Popish Plot (that is, 1660 to 1678) there is no tidy way to characterize the relationship between audience and plays. The audience obviously demanded lively vigorous action and entertainment from comedies. What beyond entertainment some of its members got from these plays is essentially a matter for conjecture. Ingenious modern critics have found *The Country-Wife*, for example, everything from a nightmare vision of moral chaos and degradation to a

[1] See Aubrey Williams's essay, 'The "Utmost Tryal" of Virtue and Congreve's *Love for Love*', *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, 17 (1972), 1–18.

[2] *Amendments of Mr. Collier's False and Imperfect Citations, &c.* (1698), reprinted in *The Works of William Congreve*, edited by Montague Summers, 4 vols (London, 1923), III, 169–206, especially p. 200.

triumphant celebration of the life force. Critics at both extremes admire the play. We see no reason to suppose that a seventeenth-century audience was any less able to enjoy a play for different reasons from different vantage points. We are, in sum, simply not able to make assured statements about what Carolean comedy meant even to its original audience. This is a chastening state of affairs.

II *The Watershed Years, 1678–1688*

The shift in taste which ultimately was to produce what has been vaguely and misleadingly termed 'sentimental' comedy took place only very gradually over a period of many years. In order to understand the transition to 'Augustan' comedy, we must go back to its origins in the Carolean period. Throughout the 1690s the 'old and 'new' forms of comedy compete, and the 'humane' comedy which is the norm in the early eighteenth century by no means represents a simple triumph of sentimentalism over 'Restoration' cynicism.[1] John Harrington Smith was certainly right in pointing to Shadwell's *The Squire of Alsatia* (1688) and other plays at the end of the eighties as indicative of a new trend, but by no means did that trend spring up suddenly. Without being excessively schematic, we may say that both 1678 and 1688 represent crucial turning points in the history of 'Restoration' play-types as they reflect audience taste.

The boom in sex-comedy which had been escalating through the mid-1670s suffered a severe setback in the spring of 1678. Behn's *Sir Patient Fancy* (January), Dryden's *Mr. Limberham* (early March), and Shadwell's *A True Widow* (late March) all failed to enjoy the success anticipated for them. This does not necessarily mean that the audience had simply had its fill of smut and was now turning away, sated. Bawdy comedies were written in the next fifteen years, and some of them prospered in the theatre: *The Souldiers Fortune*, *City Politiques*, and *The Old Batchelour* spring to mind. Perhaps, indeed, the concatenation of failures in the spring of 1678 is essentially an accident. Behn's play was attacked at least partly on the ground of its female origin; Dryden's was suppressed by government order, perhaps because of personal satire.[2]

We must certainly distinguish between genuine libertine sex-comedy and the kind of farce represented by Durfey's *A Fond Husband* (1677) which continued to be popular. *The London Cuckolds* (1681) is of the latter variety. The distinction is by no means absolute. Dryden said sourly of his *Limberham* while writing it: 'it will be almost such another piece of businesse as the fond Husband, for such the King will have it'.[3] The difference is, however, evident

[1] See Shirley Strum Kenny, 'Humane Comedy', *MP*, 75 (1977), 29–43; and Robert D. Hume, 'The Multifarious Forms of Eighteenth Century Comedy', forthcoming.

[2] We have no conclusive evidence. See Susan Staves, 'Why Was Dryden's *Mr. Limberham* Banned? A Problem in Restoration Theatre History', *Restoration and Eighteenth Century Theatre Research*, 13 (May 1974), 1–11.

[3] *The Letters of John Dryden*, edited by Charles E. Ward (1942; reprinted New York, 1965), No. 5.

enough to a modern reader of the two plays, and it seemed so to Shadwell, who includes quite a brilliant burlesque-travesty of *A Fond Husband* in the playhouse scene in Act IV of *A True Widow*. In his dedication Shadwell complains of 'Poetasters of the fourth rate' who 'hold, that Wit signifies nothing in a Comedy; but the putting out of Candles, kicking down of Tables, falling over Joynt-stools, impossible accidents, and unnatural mistakes'. And in his note to the reader Shadwell adds: 'some, I believe, wish'd all the Play like that part of a Farce in it; others knew not my intention in it, which was to expose the Style and Plot of Farce-Writers, to the utter confusion of damnable Farce, and all its wicked and foolish Adherents'.

Whatever the reasons, playwrights were evidently given pause by the failure of major efforts from top writers. The plays of the next four years show a definite drawing back from the libertine formulas which had flourished briefly in the three years after *The Country-Wife* (January 1675). We have, indeed, good evidence that Wycherley's play generated protests which then snowballed as other plays of its ilk were brought upon the stage. Wycherley acidly reports objections to *The Plain-Dealer* (1676) by 'the Ladies of stricter lives' in his ironic dedication to the procuress Mother Bennet. In Act II of the later play he proceeds to satirize such objections to *The Country-Wife* in a cutting depiction of Olivia. John Harrington Smith calls the apparent boycott of *The Country-Wife* by 'the Ladies' after the first day the first appearance of 'the Ladies' as a moral force in the theatre.[1] Strictly speaking, this is probably not true. As early as 2 January 1667 Richard Legh attended *The Custom of the Country* (1620) and reported that the play 'is so damn'd bawdy that the Ladyes flung their peares and fruites at the Actors'.[2] Probably there were some other instances of moral objections in the sixties and early seventies. Downes says of *The Reformation* (1672?) that 'the Reformation in the Play, being the Reverse to the Laws of Morality and Virtue; it quickly made its Exit, to make way for a Moral one'.[3] Given the content of Arrowsmith's play, we may guess that Downes confused it with something else. There were a few increasingly risqué plays at both houses between 1668 and 1675. One doubts that the Ladies cared for John Dover's *The Mall* (1674), but it quickly failed, and we have no record of protest. Basically, Smith's point holds: *The Country-Wife*, a very successful play, was the first recorded instance of systematic moral protest.

The uproar attendant upon the Popish Plot and the Exclusion Crisis naturally bred a spate of political plays, and there are relatively few comedies to study between 1678 and the collapse of the King's Company in May 1682. Shadwell turned to safer and more romantic play-types in *The Woman-Captain* (1679) and *The Lancashire Witches* (1681). Otway scored a major success with

[1] *The Gay Couple*, p. 132.
[2] Cited in *The London Stage 1660–1800*, Part 1: *1660–1700*, edited by William Van Lennep, Emmett L. Avery, and Arthur H. Scouten (Carbondale, Illinois, 1965), p. 100.
[3] *Roscius Anglicanus* (London, 1708), p. 33.

his bawdy *The Souldiers Fortune* (1680), clear proof that in some guises sex-comedy was still acceptable, as is *The London Cuckolds* a year later. Shadwell's quick move away from cuckolding-comedy does seem significant, though of course it is in line with his longstanding personal preferences. None the less, he had enjoyed great success in *Epsom-Wells* (1672) and *The Virtuoso* (1676), and his principle was always to supply the audience with what it wanted. Another sign of the times is *The Revenge, or A Match in Newgate* (1680), an adaptation of *The Dutch Courtezan*, probably done by Aphra Behn.[1] The serious treatment of a prostitute, and the romantic nobility of the lead-characters, seem unthinkable in a London comedy five years earlier. We do not know how the play fared, and there is no record of a revival until 1704, but evidently Mrs Behn was in search of an inoffensive formula.

The reluctance of the United Company to risk money on mounting new plays makes evidence from that source very sparse between 1682 and 1688. The most obvious trend is a boom in farce with increasingly fancy staging: *A Duke and No Duke*, *Sir Hercules Buffoon*, *The Devil of a Wife*, *The Emperor of the Moon*, Mountfort's *Doctor Faustus*. We will find some very light-weight comedies, some a bit smutty (*Cuckolds-Haven*), some not (*Sir Courtly Nice*). Only once, however, do we find a genuine libertine sex-comedy: Sir Charles Sedley's *Bellamira* (1687). We can scarcely be surprised to learn that it roused objections. The source (Terence's *The Eunuch*), Sedley tells us, necessitated

> some expressions or Metaphors, which by persons of a ticklish imagination, or over-quick sense that way, seem'd too lascivious for modest Ears; I confess after the Plays I have seen lately Crowded by that fair Sex: the exception did not a little surprise me; And this suddain change of theirs made me call to mind our English weather, where in the same day a man shall Sweat in Crape, and wish for a Campagn Coat three hours after. I am very unhappy that the Ice that has borne so many Coaches and Carts, shou'd break with my Wheel barrow.[2]

Indeed (though Sedley downplays the bawdiness of the comedy) there is some truth to this. The climate evidently had changed, and had done so a number of years earlier. Not since Nathaniel Lee's *The Princess of Cleve* (1682) had a new play like this been brought to the English stage. And Lee's play — a failure — is at least arguably a sharply negative satire on the behaviour it presents, which Sedley's is not.

Two earlier plays show a clear and deliberate attempt on the author's part to placate the moral element in the audience. John Harrington Smith rightly calls attention to Ravenscroft's prologue for *Dame Dobson* (1683).

[1] For an analysis see Leo Hughes and Arthur H. Scouten, 'Some Theatrical Adaptations of a Picaresque Tale', in *University of Texas Studies in English* (1945–1946), pp. 98–114.

[2] 'The Preface to the Reader', *The Poetical and Dramatic Works of Sir Charles Sedley*, edited by V. de Sola Pinto, 2 vols (1928; reprinted New York, 1969), II, 5.

His *London Cuckolds* did afford you sport.
That pleas'd the Town, and did divert the Court.
But 'cause some squeamish Females of renown
Made visits with design to cry it down,
He swore in's Rage he would their humours fit,
And write the next without one word of Wit.
No Line in this will tempt your minds to Evil,
It's true, 'tis dull, but then 'tis very civil.
No double sense shall now your thoughts beguile,
Make Lady Blush, nor Ogling Gallant Smile.
But mark the Fate of this mis-judging Fool
A Bawdy Play was never counted Dull,
Nor modest Comedy e're pleas'd you much . . .
In you, Chast Ladies, then we hope to day,
This is the Poets *Recantation* Play
Come often to't that he at length may see
'Tis more than a pretended Modesty:
Stick by him now, for if he finds you falter,
He quickly will his way of writing alter;
And every Play shall send you blushing home.

The London Cuckolds had enjoyed great popularity, but evidently it roused enough objections to make Ravenscroft back off. *Dame Dobson*, however, was no success, perhaps because it simply is not a good play. The second instance of authorial self-purification, Durfey's *The Banditti; or A Lady's Distress* (1686) provoked catcalls, despite its appeal in the prologue to the Ladies to support it against the preferences of gallants in the pit. There is an obvious conclusion to be drawn from the new plays of the 1680s: the moral element in the audience (the Ladies, as they are usually called) was effectively crying down what it regarded as smut in new plays, but it was failing to support plays overtly presented for its delectation. Perhaps better plays would have met a kinder fate, but what we see here is *negative* influence.

Authors were not much pleased with this state of affairs. Back in 1678 Aphra Behn admitted that *Sir Patient Fancy* had suffered 'loss of Fame with the Ladies', and angrily protested against the charge that the play '*was Baudy*' and that '*from a Woman it was unnaturall*'. Bawdiness, she complains, is 'the least and most excusable fault in the Men writers'. Eight years later she was considerably more distressed by the uproar attendant upon *The Lucky Chance*. The amount of fuss caused by this slightly gamey sex-farce is made clear by the author's lengthy and indignant 'Preface', rebutting 'the old never failing Scandal — That 'tis not fit for the Ladys'. Ill-natured playgoers, she says, 'wrest a double *Entendre* from every thing'.

When it happens that I challenge any one, to point me out the least Expression of what some have made their Discourse, they cry, *That Mr.* Leigh *opens his Night Gown, when he comes into the Bride-chamber*; if he do, which is a Jest of his own making, and which I never saw, I hope he has his Cloaths on underneath? And if so, where is the Indecency? I have seen in that admirable Play of *Oedipus*, the Gown open'd wide, and the Man shown in his Drawers and Waist coat, and never thought it an

Offence before. Another crys, *Why we know not what they mean, when the Man takes a Woman off the Stage, and another is thereby cuckolded*; is that any more than you see in the most Celebrated of your Plays? as the *City Politicks*, the Lady Mayoress, and the Old Lawyers Wife, who goes with a Man she never saw before, and comes out again the joyfull'st Woman alive, for having made her Husband a Cuckold with such Dexterity, and yet I see nothing unnatural nor obscene: 'tis proper for the Characters. So in that lucky Play of the *London Cuckolds*, not to recite Particulars. And in that good Comedy of *Sir Courtly Nice*, the Taylor to the young Lady — in the fam'd Sir *Fopling* Dorimont and Bellinda.[1]

Very true: *The Lucky Chance* is no bawdier than a host of long-popular plays. But what the audience was evidently willing to tolerate in stock comedies it would not as willingly accept in new productions. We should certainly note, however, an important distinction. A significant part of the objection was to *verbal* indelicacy rather than to sex or cuckolding as such. Objections to copulation in new plays soon developed. Within ten years writers could no longer have a protagonist cuckold someone and then reward him with fortune and heroine.

This rather peculiar distinction between actual sex and double entendre is made plain by Shadwell's *The Squire of Alsatia* (1688), whose appearance signals the rise of the 'new' style in comedy. Shadwell's prologue makes explicit his awareness of changes in the audience ('Our Poet found your gentle Fathers kind'), his moral purpose ('He to correct, and to inform did write'), and his determination not to offend ('Baudy the nicest Ladies need not fear, | The Quickest fancy shall extract none here'). Double entendre Shadwell does indeed avoid, but his hero, Belfond Junior, seduces, abandons, and pays off a basically virtuous girl in the course of the play. We learn also that he has a child by another mistress. And yet Shadwell loudly trumpets the young man's reform, and explicitly holds him up as a model gentleman. The really significant fact about this avowedly moral play is that it was a tremendous success. The earlier plays written as a concession to the moral group in the audience seem to have fared indifferently at best. Standards *were* changing. As Sedley and Behn complain, what had been acceptable would no longer sit with the audience. By no means, however, had prevailing standards become those touted by Steele fifteen years later. Belfond Junior is scarcely a close prototype for Steele's early protagonists, let alone Young Bevil in *The Conscious Lovers* (1722). But the balance has tilted and in *The Squire of Alsatia* we see the rudiments of the 'reform' pattern common after 1700.[1]

[1] *The Works of Aphra Behn*, edited by Montague Summers, 6 vols (1915; reprinted New York, 1967), III, 185–87. We have altered some of the italics for clarity.

[2] Records of revivals are so sketchy in these years that we hesitate to try to draw any conclusions from them. The number of pre-1660 comedies revived by the United Company after 1682 (for example, *Rule a Wife*, *The Jovial Crew*, *The Scornful Lady*, *The Northern Lass*, *The Humorous Lieutenant*, *The Silent Woman*) may suggest a move towards purity in comedy. It might also be taken as a sign that the United Company was seeking variety in its repertory without going to the expense and risk of new plays by taking the cream off the stock of plays formerly belonging to the King's Company. In any case, these plays were very acceptable to the audience, and the decision in 1684 to revive *The Mistaken Beauty* (1661), a chaste play which had evidently dropped out of the repertory in the 1660s, suggests the change in atmosphere.

John Harrington Smith comments that there were two basic 'forces in opposition [to 'cynical' comedy] before 1690'. These he defines as (1) 'the competition of "sympathetic" drama', and (2) the conscious opposition of the moralists led by Shadwell.[1] We cannot entirely accept this description of the situation. Shadwell had little influence in the theatre between 1679 and 1688: indeed, he was more or less exiled from it after 1681. And the number of successful 'sympathetic' dramas written before *The Squire of Alsatia* is close to nil, no matter how you define that term. Smith's examples come very late in the decade: Carlile's *The Fortune Hunters* (no great success), Durfey's *Love for Money*, Shadwell's *Bury-Fair*, all date from 1689. One may see in *Dame Dobson* and *The Banditti* a tentative groping in that direction. In Southerne's *The Disappointment* (1684) we may espy a hint of psychological problem-drama. But as we see the situation, 'sympathetic' comedy evolves as a way of avoiding objections to bawdry, especially of a verbal sort. These objections soon extended to the explicit presentation of sex, and at the same time dramatists began to discover the potentialities of a more positive presentation of character. The 'sympathetic' formula was naturally agreeable to Shadwell, who had favoured something of the sort back in the 1660s and had only grudgingly succumbed to fashion in the early 1670s. But in *The Squire of Alsatia* Shadwell is not exerting pressure on the audience; rather, he is responding to a changing climate of opinion.

III *The Cranky Audiences of 1697–1703*

According to longstanding critical dogma, a key transition occurred in the years around 1700, one which saw increasingly bourgeois audiences reject the harsh verities of 'Restoration comedy' in favour of the new 'sentimental' comedy. The facts are quite different. Audiences continued to support stock plays, but for reasons which we do not pretend to understand completely they damned practically all the *new* plays mounted by both companies. This rejection extends to tragedy as well as comedy, to humane and reform comedies as well as satiric ones. If this calamitous rate of failure among new plays were paralleled by rejection of the stock Carolean comedies we might hypothesize that writers were simply reacting too slowly to changes in taste. But since the old plays continued to hold the stage, we cannot draw any such easy conclusion.

Scanty performance records before 1705 are a problem. Until then we cannot be certain how many times any given play was performed, even in its first run, and no doubt we altogether lack records of many revivals. Any assessment of 'success' is usually at least partly subjective, derived from comments in the preface or dedication of a published quarto, or from a scrap of contemporary commentary. The anonymous *A Comparison Between the Two Stages* (1702) is a great help, but the grumpy author is demonstrably too free

[1] *The Gay Couple*, p. 131.

with his usual dismissal: 'Damn'd'. We must also beware of a tidy, uniform formula for 'success'. Scholars sometimes take six nights in the initial run (including two benefits for the author) as proof of 'success'. This is unsound. An expensive opera like Durfey's *The Wonders in the Sun* (1706) ran for six nights but was regarded as a disastrous fiasco: it would probably have had to run three times as long to make back the company's investment. For the purposes of the present investigation, 'success' has been estimated by Mr Scouten. Slight differences of opinion or judgement will be found in Mr Hume's *Development of English Drama*, and in the work of Shirley Strum Kenny. A much more detailed play-by-play survey (in terms of theatrical success) will be found in *Thomas Betterton and the Management of Lincoln's Inn Fields, 1695–1708* by our *London Stage* colleague Judith Milhous, a study to which we are indebted throughout this section.[1]

In the spring of 1702 the author of *A Comparison Between the Two Stages* observed: 'I am sure you can't name me five Plays that have indur'd six Days acting, for fifty that were damn'd in three.'[2] This is no great exaggeration. Our figures show fifty-seven failures for twelve successes in the period alluded to; sixty-nine failures for fifteen successes for the entire six seasons from 1697 to 1703. We should point out right away that this depressing record of failure did not commence in 1698 after Jeremy Collier's blast. His denunciation no doubt hurt the theatres, but the highest rate of failure occurred in the acting season 1697–98, when fifteen out of seventeen new plays failed. The audience revolt was in full swing prior to Collier's attack.

We cannot emphasize too strongly that the audience was not simply rejecting the theatre and the established corpus of English drama. A few new plays were vastly successful (witness Farquhar's *The Constant Couple* in 1699) and had audiences really been deserting the playhouses, one or both of the two acting companies would have closed down. As both companies survived, we know that they attracted large enough audiences to pay the fixed house charges and at least 'reduced' (or partial) salaries to the actors.

Leefing through the pages of *The London Stage* one can observe which older plays were being acted. If we can trust John Dennis, *Coriolanus* (in the Folio text) was played at least twenty times in the 1698–99 season; in the following season *I Henry IV* was a smash hit; and *Julius Caesar* was acted so frequently that both pirated and authorized quartos of the play were being printed.[3] Adaptations were also popular in these years: Tate's *Lear*, Shadwell's reworking of *Timon*, and the 1674 'operatic' *Tempest* were offered frequently, as were older plays from other writers — Jonson's *Volpone* and Fletcher's *Rule a Wife* in particular.

[1] Carbondale, Illinois, 1979.

[2] *A Comparison Between the Two Stages*, edited by Staring B. Wells (Princeton, 1942), p. 2.

[3] See John Velz, ' "Pirate Hills" and the Quartos of *Julius Caesar*', *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 63 (1969), 177–93, and Arthur H. Scouten, '*Julius Caesar* and Restoration Shakespeare', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 29 (1978), 423–27.

From the Carolean period we find *The Comical Revenge*, *The Lancashire Witches*, *Marriage A-la-Mode*, *The Committee*, *The Plain-Dealer*, *The Amorous Widow*, *The Virtuoso*, *The London Cuckolds*, *The Country-Wife*, *Cutter of Colman Street*, and *The Rover*, among other plays. In tragedy we find *The Rival Queens*, *The Orphan*, *Venice Preserv'd*, and the Dryden-Lee *Oedipus* regularly revived.

These then were the chief older plays which were keeping both the young Drury Lane company and the prestigious older group at Lincoln's Inn Fields in business. What can we learn from them? If we were to pretend to be market advisers and study the performance records throughout this period of 1697 to 1703 in order to recommend what works Rich and Betterton should offer to the public at their rival theatres in the next season, we would be led to say that the audiences did not want weepy moralizing plays, but would prefer high comedy. Indeed, one of the most 'sentimental' plays, Richard Steele's *The Lying Lover*, failed in the autumn of 1703 at Drury Lane. However, *The Way of the World* was decidedly not a smash hit at Lincoln's Inn Fields in 1700. We find an audience unwilling to accept either extreme of contemporary comedy.

The failure of so many new plays reflects the authors' inability to find any formula which would please the audience. Had 'reform' comedy been prospering we would surely have seen a flood of such plays. The audience rebellion could hardly have been predicted. The triumph of *Love for Love* at the opening of Lincoln's Inn Fields in April 1695 suggests the possibility of boom times, at least for the older actors. A lot of plays failed in 1695–96 and 1696–97, but then both theatres had enjoyed smash hits as well: *Oroonoko*, *Aesop*, *Love's Last Shift*, and *The Relapse* at Drury Lane; *The Mourning Bride*, *The Provok'd Wife*, and Ravenscroft's *The Anatomist* at Lincoln's Inn Fields. In 1697–98, however, the crash came. All eight new plays at Drury Lane failed, and seven new dramas failed at Lincoln's Inn Fields, leaving only two plays throughout the entire season which definitely achieved six performances. The percentage of failures was unprecedented in late seventeenth-century drama. No single reason can be given to explain the failures. We can note that many of the playwrights were relative novices: there had been a very limited market for new plays during the years of the United Company (1682–1695), and the older generation of professional writers had largely died off or retired. Many of the plays which failed in 1697–98 are poor stuff; consequently it may be more profitable to focus on the following five seasons to learn what sorts of plays the audience was rejecting.

While the failures of the 1697–98 season may possibly be explained by poor plays from inexperienced authors, the longer period contains repeated failures by prominent dramatists, writers who had years of success behind them or, like Farquhar, were to enjoy great success. Mrs Centlivre, Cibber, Crowne, Durfey, Farquhar, Rowe, Settle, Southerne, and Vanbrugh all experienced failures during these years. The range of play-types is striking. Starting with opera, we will find that Settle's *Virgin Prophetess* and Oldmixon's

The Grove were expensive losses, especially since operas cost so much more to mount than plays. Representing the older heroic drama, Boyle's *Altemira* and Hopkins's *Friendship Improved* both failed, together with Southerne's *The Fate of Capua*, which deserved a better reception. Of the newer 'neo-classical' tragedies, Boyer's *Achilles*, Dennis's *Iphigenia*, and Gildon's *The Patriot* all failed. So, too, did the pathetic tragedies, *Fatal Friendship* by Mrs Trotter and *The False Friend* by Mrs Pix. The dramatists were experimenting with a new language for tragedy, as we see in Durfey's two-part *The Famous History of the Rise and Fall of Massaniello*, but like Mrs Pix's *The Czar of Muscovy*, it failed. Tragicomedy was no more successful, as we see in the failures of Higgons's *The Generous Conqueror* and Smith's *The Princess of Parma*. Neither great actresses nor veteran dramatists nor experiments in prose would save tragedy, for English tragedy was very nearly dead. In so far as present records inform us, there was not a truly successful new tragedy between Congreve's *The Mourning Bride* in 1697 and Ambrose Phillips's *The Distrest Mother* in 1712 (with Addison's *Cato* to appear in the following year). Three or four tragedies had reached a second benefit, but never went into repertory. Dr Trapp's *Abra-Mule* was well received in the 1703–04 season, gaining a total of fourteen performances, but like a number of plays to be discussed later, it did not go into stock and was not revived until 1710. Rowe's *Tamerlane* was a moderate success in 1701–02, but years passed before it was picked up for annual performance on King William's birthday. The dismal fate of tragedies in these years helps to explain the tremendous excitement in London over the reception of *Cato*: theatre-goers had not seen so successful a tragedy in many years.

Season by season, the total record looks like this:

Season of 1697–98

LIF Successes: Hopkins, *Boadicea*; Granville, *Heroic Love*
Failures: *The Unnatural Mother*; Ravenscroft, *The Italian Husband*; Pix, *The Deceiver Deceived*; Dilke, *The Pretenders*; Motteux, *Beauty in Distress*; Trotter, *Fatal Friendship*; Pix, *Queen Catharine*

DL Successes: none
Failures: Oldmixon, *Amintas*; Powell, *Imposture Defeated*; *The Fatal Discovery*; Crowne, *Caligula*; Walker, *Victorious Love*; Phillips, *The Revengeful Queen*; Gildon, *Phaeton*; Durfey, *The Campaigners*

Totals: 2 successes; 15 failures

Season of 1698–99

LIF Successes: none
Failures: Crowne, *Justice Busy*; Dennis, *Rinaldo and Armida*; Cibber, *Xerxes*; Harris, *Love's a Lottery*; Smith, *The Princess of Parma*; *Feign'd Friendship*; Pix, *The False Friend*

DL Success: *The Island Princess* (semi-opera)
Failures: Farquhar, *Love and a Bottle*; *Love without Interest*; Durfey, *Massaniello*

Totals: 1 success; 10 failures

Season of 1699–1700

LIF Success: Congreve, *The Way of the World* (marginal)
Failures: Hopkins, *Friendship Improved*; Dennis, *Iphigenia*; Corye, *A Cure for Jealousy*; Manning, *The Generous Choice*; Gildon, *Measure for Measure*; Pix, *The Beau Defeated*; Southerne, *The Fate of Capua*

DL Successes: Farquhar, *The Constant Couple*; Vanbrugh, *The Pilgrim*
Failures: Boyer, *Achilles*; Cibber, *Richard III*; Oldmixon, *The Grove*; Burnaby, *The Reformed Wife*; *The History of Hengist* [probably not a new play]; Craufurd, *Courtship a la Mode*

Totals: 3 successes, 13 failures

Season of 1700–01

LIF Success: Granville, *The Jew of Venice*
Failures: Rowe, *The Ambitious Stepmother*; Burnaby, *The Ladies Visiting Day*; Pix, *The Double Distress*; Pix, *The Czar of Muscovy*; Gildon, *Love's Victim*; Johnson, *The Gentleman Cully*

DL Successes: Cibber, *Love Makes a Man*; Baker, *The Humours of the Age*
Failures: Centlivre, *The Perjured Husband*; Trotter, *Love at a Loss*; Trotter, *The Unhappy Penitent*; Farquhar, *Sir Harry Wildair*; Settle, *The Virgin Prophetess*; Durfey, *The Bath*

Totals: 3 successes, 12 failures

Season of 1701–02

LIF Success: Rowe, *Tamerlane*
Failures: Wiseman, *Antiochus the Great*; Boyle, *Altemira*; Centlivre, *The Beau's Duel*

DL Successes: Steele, *The Funeral*; Farquhar, *The Inconstant*
Failures: Higgons, *The Generous Conqueror*; Burnaby, *The Modish Husband*; Vanbrugh, *The False Friend*; Dennis, *The Comical Gallant*

Totals: 3 successes, 7 failures

Season of 1702–03

LIF Success: Centlivre, *Love's Contrivance*
Failures: Centlivre, *The Heiress*; Oldmixon, *The Governour of Cyprus*; Burnaby, *Love Betrayed*; *The Fickle Shepherdess*; Boyle, *As You Find It*; Rowe, *The Fair Penitent*

DL Successes: Baker, *Tunbridge Walks*; Estcourt, *The Fair Example*
Failures: Manning, *All for the Better*; Cibber, *She Wou'd and Wou'd Not*; Gildon, *The Patriot*; Farquhar, *The Twin-Rivals*; Durfey, *The Old Mode and the New*; Wilkinson, *Vice Reclaim'd*

Totals: 3 successes, 12 failures

The diversity in type of the successes and failures on this list is striking, though on the whole plays were not prospering at either extreme. We may fairly say, however, that the long line of witty plays which gave a hard searching look at English society, from *The Alchemist*, through *The Plain-Dealer*, *The Man of Mode*, and on to Congreve's popular *The Old Batchelour* (1693) was definitely on the wane. The reception met by *The Way of the World* in March 1700 was evidently a great shock to both playwright and theatre

company. Dryden reported it a 'moderate success', from which we would deduce that it achieved at least a sixth night and quite possibly more.[1] Nor did the play immediately disappear from the boards for many years: it was revived at least briefly around January 1702 and again in 1705.[2] Nonetheless, this reception for a play by the author of *Love for Love* and *The Mourning Bride* was taken as a humiliating failure and a deliberate rebuke to the author.

Just before the première of Congreve's last play, William Burnaby, a new dramatist working very much in the tradition of satiric comedy, brought out the first of his three comedies in this mode. All of them proved complete failures. Farquhar's *Love and a Bottle* fared little better. However, those plays which took a softer view of human nature (perhaps best termed 'humane comedy') did no better.[3] Durfey's *The Old Mode and the New* and Mrs Centlivre's *Beau's Duel* failed. Manning's *All for the Better*, in the long-popular mode of Spanish romance, did not succeed. Such plays as Boyle's *As You Find It* and Wilkinson's *Vice Reclaim'd*, which are in the new 'reform' style, experienced the same fate. The audience apparently rejected the soft didactic plays as readily as they renounced the satiric pictures of London life. Even the Shakespearian adaptations were unsuccessful. Gildon's *Measure for Measure* and Burnaby's *Love Betrayed* (a mangled version of *Twelfth Night*) both vanished from the boards immediately. We may not be surprised at these verdicts; more startling is the failure of Colley Cibber's flashy revision of *Richard III*. Cibber tells us that the play did not bring five pounds above the fixed house charges on his benefit night. Yet this famous adaptation went on to become one of the best known renditions of Shakespeare for the next two centuries.[4]

A sceptical reader could, up to this point, argue that most of the failures were mediocre plays, or were perhaps the victims of special circumstances: excessive expectations (*The Way of the World*) or the censor's axe (*Richard III*). Even that pair of cases is surprising. Congreve's play, after a brief revival in 1715, was acted almost every season from 1718 to the end of the century, many times at both patent houses. Cibber's adaptation was revived for the author's benefit in April 1704, but not again until January 1710. For the next century and a half it was the most frequently acted of any 'Shakespearian' play. The tremendous theatricality of Cibber's version has even won it some twentieth-century admirers: indeed, it influenced the Olivier film.

Consider some other striking cases. (1) Rowe's *The Fair Penitent* (1703): From the popularity in these years of Banks's 'She-tragedies', Southerne's *The Fatal Marriage*, and Otway's tragedies, one would suppose that a play

[1] *Letters*, No. 74.
[2] See Robert D. Hume, 'A Revival of *The Way of the World* in December 1701 or January 1702', *Theatre Notebook*, 26 (1971), 30–36.
[3] See Shirley Strum Kenny, 'Humane Comedy'.
[4] We should note that the play did initially labour under a special disadvantage: the censor removed Act 1 in its entirety.

centring on a beautiful heroine in distress, developing into a drama of the passions, would certainly be attractive to the taste of the time. Yet *The Fair Penitent* sank without trace. This pathetic tragedy, so influential on Richardson and the direction of the English novel, was not accepted by its first audience.[1] Twelve years later, Rowe's tear-jerker was revived and promptly became one of the top-drawing cards of the London theatre for the rest of the century. (2) Farquhar's *The Twin-Rivals* (1702): This comedy failed at its première and disappeared until November 1716, when it was revived. It stayed in the repertory until 1780. (3) Vanbrugh, *The False Friend*: This comedy failed at its opening in 1702, and disappeared until March 1710, when it was played twice. It had three performances in 1715. But in 1724 it went into the repertory and was acted regularly until mid-century, with its final performance in March 1767. (4) Cibber, *She Wou'd and She Wou'd Not*: Cibber tells us that his comedy reached six nights on its initial run in 1703, but the audience on the sixth night was so small that it did not meet the fixed house charges. As a result, the play did not go into repertory. It was revived for one performance in April 1707. Finally, it was revived in 1714, and rapidly became very popular. It was acted at both patent houses for the rest of the eighteenth century, and held on in stock until the mid-nineteenth century. It is close to the top of all eighteenth-century comedies in both longevity of performance and total performances.

Cases like these are potent evidence for a strange audience revolt in the period from 1697 to 1703. In at least half a dozen instances we can show from performance records that plays which initially failed to enter the repertory (at best) were revived over several generations for a wide variety of audiences. Indeed, these plays loom large among the small group of 'perennial favourites' (in Shirley Kenny's phrase) from the late seventeenth-century period. Nothing like this pattern of later acceptance can be found in the Carolean period, or in other periods of English drama. None of the neglected or rejected plays from the 'early Restoration' is known to have returned to the repertory in such a manner.

To say that the audience had turned against 'Restoration' stereotypes and that the writers failed to adapt to changed taste simply will not do. Let us look at the plays revived during the season of 1703–04, when the audience revolt began to slacken. The number of known performances is given in parentheses.

Crowne, *Sir Courtly Nice* (3); Crowne, *The Country Wit* (2); Shadwell, *The Sullen Lovers* (first revival in 25 years); Jonson, *The Silent Woman* (3); Congreve, *The Old Batchelour*; Behn, *The Rover* (4); Behn, *The Emperor of the Moon* (7); Shadwell, *The Woman-Captain* (2; second revival in 16 years); Shadwell, *The Lancashire Witches* (6); Jonson, *Volpone* (4); Wycherley, *The Plain-Dealer*; Fletcher, *Rule a Wife*; Congreve, *The Double-Dealer* (2); 1674 *Tempest* (2); Shadwell, *The Squire of Alsatia* (12; first revival in 12 years); Etherege, *The Comical Revenge* (3); Fletcher-

[1] See the *Revels History*, v, 282–83.

Buckingham, *The Chances*; Fletcher, *The Scornful Lady*; Tate, *A Duke and no Duke* (3); Betterton, *The Amorous Widow* (3); Caryll, *Sir Salomon* (6); Fletcher, *The Humorous Lieutenant* (2); Brome, *The Jovial Crew* (3); Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair* (3); Etherege, *The Man of Mode*; Mountfort, *Greenwich-Park* (2); Etherege, *She wou'd if she cou'd*; Congreve, *Love for Love* (2); Howard, *The Committee* (2); Shadwell, *The Miser* (2); Durfey, *A Fond Husband* (2; first revival in 5 years); Jevon, *The Devil of a Wife* (2); Lacy, *Sauny the Scot* (first revival in 4 years); Dryden, *Secret-Love*; Durfey, *Madam Fickle*; Behn, *A Match in Newgate*; Ravenscroft, *The London Cuckolds*; Newcastle-Dryden, *Sir Martin Mar-all*

We see very clearly here that the theatres were staying in business by performing classic English comedies, the majority of them leading examples of the 'Restoration stereotypes'.

Why audiences were so difficult in the years around 1700 we frankly do not know. Authors were baffled: in prologue after prologue they lament the fickleness of the audience, and in prefaces and dedications they tend to blame actors and managers for their misfortunes. If authors were puzzled and indignant, managers were frantic. They imported foreign singers at inflated prices, tried entr'acte dancers, animal acts, acrobats, and vaudeville turns. They cannibalized favourite scenes from plays and popular operas. They kept changing the starting time of performance (most unusual in an institution as conservative as the theatre). Competition from concerts was severe: this they met with a flood of interpolated songs and instrumental entr'actes.[1]

Established professionals simply did not know what to do. Betterton's management of Lincoln's Inn Fields has been criticized,[2] but he can scarcely be blamed for a situation in which the audience was rejecting almost all of the new plays at *both* theatres. Congreve's decision to withdraw from the theatre at the age of thirty has been lamented: but what could he do? He had seen the audience turn away from Southerne's comedies in the 1690s, and reject the talented William Burnaby outright in the first years of the new century. Congreve had responded to a cool reception for his second play, *The Double-Dealer* (1693), by trying again and altering his formula. But when *The Way of the World* met a similar fate he evidently could see nowhere to turn next. It is scarcely an accident that his principal ventures after 1700 were in musical forms: *The Judgment of Paris* and *Semele* (the latter unhappily remaining unperformed). Plays of all types were failing outright with dismal regularity, and Congreve evidently felt no inclination to subject himself to further rejections by a sour and captious audience.

We are left with a rather disturbing paradox. 'Restoration comedy' shows no signs of losing its popular appeal in the theatre in the years around 1700, but the new plays descended from it were having a very bad time

[1] For a fine study of the encroachment of music on the theatres in this period see Curtis A. Price, 'The Critical Decade for English Music Drama, 1700–1710', *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 26 (1978), 38–76.

[2] For example, by Shirley Strum Kenny in 'Theatrical Warfare, 1695–1710', *Theatre Notebook*, 27 (1973), 130–45.

indeed. To some observers (Vanbrugh chief among them) the growing craze for music suggested that opera might be the salvation of the theatre. As Vanbrugh was soon to discover to his great cost, however, Italian opera was a sinkhole rather than a goldmine.

IV *The Judgement of Posterity, 1700–1776*

Underlying most studies of late seventeenth-century drama are two assumptions, implicit or explicit. (1) 'Restoration comedy' was written to appeal to a coterie audience; (2) the disappearance of that coterie forced the theatres to turn to a new more bourgeois audience which demanded more 'sentimental' comedy after 1700. Neither assumption is wholly without foundation, but neither is even close to 'true'. The coterie audience is a myth; 'sentimental comedy' is an ill-defined monster of modern critics' manufacture; and the longstanding popularity of late seventeenth-century comedy on the eighteenth-century stage is a well-nigh unanswerable rejoinder to those critics who imagine that 'laughing comedy' was swept away by a rising tide of sentimentalism after 1700.

The point of this brief concluding section is simply to ask what we can deduce from the history of late seventeenth-century plays on the eighteenth-century stage. To do justice to the subject would require a book-length study based on detailed statistical analysis of the records available in *The London Stage*. Here we hope merely to indicate some suggestive patterns of evidence, drawing on the admittedly tentative work of pioneers in the field.

The crucial fact is glaringly obvious: many seventeenth-century plays *were* popular on the eighteenth-century stage. We can scarcely present this as a fresh discovery, and yet its importance must not be missed. Reading most of the half-century's-worth of critics descended from the schools of Bernbaum and Nicoll, one would suppose that so drastic a change in audience taste and standards as allegedly occurred around 1700 would quickly have driven the older plays from the boards. To be sure, the types of new plays did shift in the period 1688 to 1708, and the audience quirkiness we analysed in the last section certainly contributed to the impression that audiences were turning away from 'Restoration' play-types. The supposed 'failure' of *The Way of the World* in 1700 has been cited many dozens of times as a symptom of a move towards 'sentimental' comedy. The readiness of critics to seize upon this 'fact' is evidence principally of their lack of interest in studying revivals. Since 1832 we have had Genest at hand, from whose pages any interested party can calculate that *The Way of the World* was performed well over 200 times in London during the eighteenth century. Let us consider some evidence of this sort, long available, but not much used in the past twenty-five years.

Congreve, so often cited as an example of what the 'new bourgeois audience' rejected, is (happily) the subject of the fullest and most meticulously careful

study yet done of any playwright save Shakespeare whose work was revived on the eighteenth-century stage.[1] In this study Professor Avery reached a number of conclusions. Principally these are (1) that Congreve's plays were flourishing until the Garrick era; (2) that Garrick's indifference to Congreve significantly diminished the number of performances of his plays in the 1740s and 1750s; (3) that none the less they continued to be successful (in part at Covent Garden) until the 1760s; (4) that after a brief flurry of performances around 1776 in revisions mounted by Sheridan at Drury Lane, the plays largely disappeared from the boards. The following table is adapted from Avery's figures. It shows the total share held by Congreve's plays in the year-round repertory at all London theatres.

1700–01 to 1704–05	2.1%
1705–06 to 1709–10	2.7%
1710–11 to 1713–14	4.0%
1714–15 to 1719–20	4.7%
1720–21 to 1728–29	5.1%
1729–30 to 1736–37	5.5%
1737–38 to 1740–41	6.2%
1741–42 to 1746–47	5.0%
1747–48 to 1755–56	5.2%
1756–57 to 1765–66	3.6%
1766–67 to 1775–76	1.3%
1776–77 to 1783–84	3.4%
1784–85 to 1791–92	2.4%
1792–93 to 1799–1800	1.0%

Several notes and observations are in order. Avery subdivided unequally to reflect events affecting the theatres: for example, the Licensing Act, and Garrick's assuming the management of Drury Lane. Performances of *The Mourning Bride* are included, which accounts for a significant part of the performances of Congreve's plays in the 1780s and 1790s.[2] The figure for the first five years of the century must be regarded as meaningless; the records are too incomplete to generate significant statistics.

This table very clearly tells us, however, that Congreve *gained* popularity steadily over a period of some forty years, achieving his greatest share in the repertory around 1740, a quite astonishing 6.2 per cent of all performances in London (excluding operas and foreign-language productions). In fairness we must add the qualification that the abrupt falling off in new play productions following the Licensing Act in 1737 probably helps to account for Congreve's reaching a peak in the years immediately after it, but he had been above five per cent for the preceding fifteen years, and stayed there twenty years afterwards. John Loftis is perfectly correct in saying that during the

[1] Emmett L. Avery, *Congreve's Plays on the Eighteenth-Century Stage* (New York, 1951).

[2] During the eighteenth century Avery counts 435 performances of *Love for Love*, 300 of *The Old Batchelour* (all but 50 before 1747), 285 of *The Way of the World*, 150 of *The Double-Dealer*, and 245 of *The Mourning Bride*, whose greatest period of popularity was the fifteen years after 1747.

1730s the 'Restoration stereotypes' disappeared from new plays,[1] but Avery's figures suggest that for some twenty years beyond the Licensing Act those stereotypes remained welcome and popular on the eighteenth-century stage.

In a review of Avery's book Alan Downer questions the suggestion on page 1 that 'the reception of [Congreve's] plays should illuminate the status of Restoration comedy as a whole, especially the work of such comparable authors as Wycherley, Etherege, and Vanbrugh'.[2] To ask the question is reasonable, but we find that with minor qualifications Avery's claim holds up. Consider, for example, the fortunes of *The Rehearsal* (1671). It was performed during most seasons from 1704 (when records become fairly full) to 1778, when it was condensed to a three-act version.[3] Its period of greatest popularity was from 1739 to 1742 (another reflection of the influence of the Licensing Act, in our opinion); the 135 performances in nine seasons from 1739 to 1747 are a result, in part at least, of its serving as a popular vehicle for both Theophilus Cibber and David Garrick as Bayes.[4] We should probably observe at this point that the fortunes of any one play (or even one writer) in a given term of years must inevitably reflect the preferences and predilections of leading actors. A play which made a good vehicle for Garrick (or in earlier years for Colley Cibber) would be performed a lot.

Consider the case of Wycherley's *The Country-Wife* and *The Plain-Dealer*. Both plays enjoyed their greatest popularity on the eighteenth-century stage in the years 1725 to 1742 (averaging about five performances per annum each). Both fell badly out of favour during the later 1740s and 1750s. *The Country-Wife* was reduced to a two-act version by Lee in 1765, and rewritten as *The Country Girl* by Garrick in 1766; *The Plain-Dealer* was revamped by Bickerstaffe in 1765.[5] Surveying eighteenth-century responses to Wycherley, Avery concluded that the falling-off in popularity of his plays after the early 1740s resulted from a slowly-rising tide of moral opinion which became genuinely dominant in the 1760s and 1770s. Wycherley's share of the total repertory was 1.9 per cent in the later 1720s (his peak during the eighteenth century); twenty years later it was down to 0.4 per cent, and by the 1750s his plays had virtually disappeared from the boards.[6] Obviously Wycherley faded earlier than Congreve; we would suppose that in part this reflects the difference between a genuine Carolean playwright and one who came a full generation later. Etherege, we may note, faded out still earlier, and his plays

[1] *Comedy and Society from Congreve to Fielding* (Stanford, California, 1959).

[2] *PQ*, 31 (1952), 258–59.

[3] Competition with *A Peep Behind the Curtain* and later with *The Critic* helped to drive *The Rehearsal* off the stage.

[4] See Emmett L. Avery, 'The Stage Popularity of *The Rehearsal*, 1671–1777', *Research Studies of the State College of Washington*, 7 (1939), 201–04.

[5] For details, see Emmett L. Avery, '*The Country Wife* in the Eighteenth Century', *Research Studies of the State College of Washington*, 10 (1942), 141–72, and '*The Plain Dealer* in the Eighteenth Century', ibid., 11 (1943), 234–56.

[6] Emmett L. Avery, 'The Reputation of Wycherley's Comedies as Stage Plays in the Eighteenth Century', *Research Studies of the State College of Washington*, 12 (1944), 131–54.

were not picked up by eighteenth-century revisers. The pattern which we are seeing here is a simple and consistent one: considerable popularity in the 1720s, 1730s, and early 1740s; followed by a falling-off which is more or less rapid depending on how offensive a particular play or author is to the stiffening moral standards of the mid-eighteenth century; followed by outright chopping or rewriting in the 1760s and 1770s. Vanbrugh presents the same history.

Some strong confirmatory evidence is offered by Shirley Strum Kenny in a study of the fortunes of the works of turn-of-the-century playwrights on the eighteenth-century stage.[1] Her figures (performance totals of works by these writers at five-year intervals) show a major upsurge in popularity between 1715 and 1730; a prolonged peak in popularity between 1730 and 1745; a gradual falling-off by 1760; and greatly diminished significance in the repertory after that. In rough terms, Shirley Kenny is able to say that the twenty-five comedies by these five writers constituted twenty-five per cent of the total London repertory (by performance) in the 1740s and 1750s, and frequently accounted for between forty and sixty per cent of all performances of comedy in London in a given year in that period. We may note, surveying Shirley Kenny's figures, that Congreve's proportion of the total was tending to fall off in the last twenty-five years. By mid-century, Congreve, who had stopped writing earliest, was the most dated of the writers Shirley Kenny surveys.

We are probably safe in suggesting that the continuing popularity of older comedies in the 1740s and 1750s was a side-effect of the Licensing Act: Drury Lane and Covent Garden were mounting few new plays for the simple reason that they did not have to take any risks, being secure in their monopoly. But until 1737 this was not true, and the substantial popularity of the older plays represents genuine theatrical viability. The moral objections of the Collier era had, in fact, very little long-term effect on repertory offerings.[2] Reading criticism as it grew into a major industry in the eighteenth century, one finds that moral objections to older plays *from writers who attended the theatre and supported the drama* became widespread only in the 1750s and 1760s. Edmund Burke's quite hostile view of the older comedy, stated in *The Reformer* (No. 2, 4 February 1748), was the precursor of a flood of such attacks. Significant numbers of critics find the older comedies crude or immoral only after mid-century. This is what Avery found in following the fortunes of Wycherley and Congreve; this is the observation of Charles Harold Gray;[3] and this is what our own reading tells us. That *The London Cuckolds* should

[1] 'Perennial Favorites: Congreve, Vanbrugh, Cibber, Farquhar, and Steele', *MP*, 73, No. 4, Part 2 [Friedman *Festschrift*] (1976), S4–S11.

[2] See Calhoun Winton, 'The London Stage Embattled: 1695–1710', *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, 19 (1974), 9–19.

[3] *Theatrical Criticism in London to 1795* (New York, 1931).

have been dropped by Drury Lane in 1751 is no accident: it fits a pattern which goes beyond any single play or writer.

A significant parallel to the pattern of popularity, disfavour, and adaptation we have noted may be found in the fortunes of Ben Jonson's plays.[1] *Volpone*, *The Alchemist*, and *The Silent Woman* all held the stage into the middle of the century, and then gave way to altered versions in the 1760s and 1770s. *Every Man in His Humour*, revived only once in the first half of the eighteenth century, and then briefly, was altered by Garrick in 1751 and became a popular stock comedy. By 1773, Noyes remarks in surveying 'criticism', 'the plays of Jonson were considered thoroughly obsolete'.[2] Noyes's researches make abundantly plain another most interesting parallel: the kinds of criticism levelled against Jonson's plays in the 1760s and 1770s are substantively identical to those aimed at Congreve and Vanbrugh. Distinctions which seemed very clear indeed to late seventeenth-century critics had largely disappeared: crude old plays were crude old plays to the reformers of the 1760s.[3]

Where does this leave us? We find several implications in this little survey. (1) The audience-revolt against new plays around 1700 was a temporary aberration; it does not in itself signal a basic shift in taste or morals. (2) A much more fundamental shift occurred in the years around 1760, a shift which genuinely did deprive 'Restoration comedy' of its popular audience. (3) 'Restoration comedy' was not simply an embodiment of the ideology of a coterie audience. To some degree it was that, of course, but not to such an extent that very different audiences could not enjoy it. (4) Not until the middle of the eighteenth century were audiences inclined to take the moral implications of old plays very seriously. (5) A concommitant point: what eighteenth-century audiences saw in the older plays was essentially entertainment. Reviewing Avery's study of Congreve's reputation, Alan Downer concluded that it was 'evidence that the eighteenth-century focus was on theater, rather than on drama; . . . plays were considered only as vehicles for what really mattered and was interesting, the actor's performance'. This seems to us no more than a modest exaggeration. The eighteenth-century theatre was a business, and plays were its raw material. The best of the old plays were high art, but they lasted in the theatre only so long as they continued to entertain a heterogeneous audience.

[1] See Robert Gale Noyes, *Ben Jonson on the English Stage 1660–1776* (1935; reprinted New York, 1966).

[2] Noyes, p. 29.

[3] A similar pattern seems to hold true for the plays of Fletcher on the eighteenth-century stage. See Leo Hughes and A. H. Scouten, 'The Penzance Promptbook of *The Pilgrim*', *MP*, 73 (1975), 33–53, and the preface to the 1778 collected edition of the plays of 'Beaumont and Fletcher'.