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Thoughts on Comedy

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THOUGHTS ON COMEDY;

Written in 1775 and 1776.

OUR old comedies are very valuable from their variety of characters, and for preserving customs and manners; but they are more defective in plans and conduct than excellent in particular parts. Some are very pedantic, the greater part gross in language and humour, the latter of which is seldom true. Ben Jonson was more correct, but still more pedantic. *Volpone* is faulty in the moral, and too elevated in the dialogue: *The Alchymist* is his best play: *The Silent Woman*, formed on an improbable plan, is unnaturally loaded with learning. Beaumont and Fletcher are easier than Jonson, but less happy in executing a plan than in conceiving it.

The next age dealt in the intricacies of Spanish plots, enlivened by the most licentious indecency. Dryden and the fair sex rivalled each other in violating all decorum. Wycherley naturalized French comedy, but prostituted it too. That chaste stage blushed at our translations of its best pieces. Yet Wycherley was not incapable of easy dialogue. The same age produced almost the best comedy we have, though liable to the same reprehension: *The Man of Mode* shines as our first genteel comedy; the touches are natural and delicate, and never overcharged. Unfortunately the tone of the most fashionable people was extremely indelicate; and when Addison, in the *Spectator*, anathematized this play, he forgot that it was rather a satire on the manners of the court, than an apology for them. Less licentious conversation would not have painted the age. Vanbrugh, the best writer of dialogue we have seen, is more

blameless in his language, than in his images. His expressions are sterling, and yet unstudied: his wit is not owing to description or caricature; neither sought nor too abundant. We are pleased both with the duration of his scenes and with the result of them. We are entertained, not surprised or struck. We are in good company while with him; and have neither adventures nor bons mots to repeat afterwards. It is the proof of consummate art in a comic writer, when you seem to have passed your time at the theatre as you might have done out of it—it proves he has exactly hit the style, manners, and character of his cotemporaries. Plot, the vital principle of Spanish and female plays, ought to be little laboured; nor is scarcely more necessary than to put the personages into action and to release them. Vanbrugh's plays, *The Man of Mode*, and *The Careless Husband*, have no more intrigue than accounts for the meeting of the characters, as a passion or an intended marriage may do. *The Double Dealer*, the ground-work of which is almost serious enough for tragedy in private life, perplexes the attention; and the wit of the subordinate characters is necessary to enliven the darkness of the back ground.

Congreve is undoubtedly the most witty author that ever existed. Though sometimes his wit seems the effort of intention, and, though an effort, never failed; it was so natural, that, if he split it into ever so many characters, it was a polypus that soon grew perfect in each individual. We may blame the universality of wit in all his personages, but nobody can say which ought to have less. It assimilated with whatever character it was poured into: and, as Congreve would certainly have had wit in whatever station of life he had been born; as he would have made as witty a footman or old lady, as a fine gentleman; his gentlemen, ladies old or young, his footmen, nay his coxcombs (for they are not fools but puppies) have as much wit, and wit as much their own, as his men of most parts and best understandings. No character drops a sentence that would be proper in any other mouth. Not only *Lady Wishfort* and *Ben* are characteristically marked, but *Scandal*, *Mrs. Frail*, and every fainter personage, are peculiarly distinct from each other. *Sir Wilful Witwoud* is unlike *Sir Joseph Wittol*. *Witwoud* is different from *Tattle*, *Valentine* from *Mellefont*, and *Cynthia* from *Angelica*. That still each play is unnatural, is only because four assemblages of different persons could never have so much wit as Congreve has bestowed on them. We want breath or attention to follow their repartees; and are so charmed with what every body
says,

says, that we have not leisure to be interested in what any body does. We are so pleased with each person, that we wish success to all; and our approbation is so occupied, that our passions cannot be engaged. We even do not believe that a company who seem to meet only to show their wit, can have any other object in view. Their very vices seem affected, only to furnish subject for gaiety: thus the intrigue of Careless and Lady Pliant does not strike us more than a story that we know is invented to set off the talents of the relator. For these reasons, though they are something more, I can scarce allow Congreve's to be true comedies. No man would be corrected, if sure that his wit would make his vices or ridicules overlooked.

The delicate and almost insensible touches of The Careless Husband are the reverse of Congreve's ungovernable wit. The affected characters of Lady Betty Modish and Lord Foppington are marked with the pencil of nature as much as Sir Charles, Lady Easy, and Lady Graveairs. It is in drawing *refined* or *affected nature* that consists the extreme difficulty of painting what is called *high life*, where affectation, politeness, fashion, art, interest, and the attentions exacted by society, restrain the sallies of passion, colour over vice, disguise crimes, and confine man to an uniformity of behaviour, that is composed to the standard of not shocking, alarming, or offending those who profess the same rule of exterior conduct. Good breeding conceals their sensations, interest their crimes, and fashion legitimates their follies. Good sense forms the plan, education ripens it, conversation gives the varnish, and wit the excuse. Yet under all these disguises nature lets out its symptoms. Protestations are so generally the marks of falsehood, that the more liberally they are dealt, the more they indicate what they mean to conceal. Ceremonious behaviour is the substitute for pride, and equally demands return of respect. A fashionable man banter those whom in a state of nature he would affront. Thus good company have the same passions with low life, and have only changed the terms and moderated the display. The first instance of good breeding in the world was complimenting the fair sex with substituting the word *love* for *lust*. Courts and society have changed all the other denominations of our passions, and regulated their appearance. The feuds of great barons are now marked by not bowing to each other, or not visiting. The rancour is not decreased, but society could not subsist if they fought whenever they met. In former days fields of battle were the only public places; but since wealth and luxury and elegance, and unrestrained conversation with the other sex, have softened our manners,

manners, nature finds its account in less turbulent gratification of the passions; and good-breeding, which seems the current coin of humanity, is no more than bank bills real treasure: but it increases the national fund of politeness, and is taken as current money; though the acceptor knows it is no more addressed to him than the bill to the first person to whom it was made payable; but he can pay it away, and knows it will always be accepted.

The comic writer's art consists in seizing and distinguishing these shades, which have rendered man a fictitious animal, without destroying his original composition. The French, who have carried the *man of society* farther than other nations, no longer exhibit the naked passions. Their characters are all graduated. The *misantrophe* and the *avare* are exploded personages. *L'homme du jour ou les dehors trompeurs*, *Le Glorieux*, *Le Méchant*, are the beings of artificial habitude, not the entities that would exist in a state of nature*. If any vice predominates, it acts according to the rules within which it is circumscribed by the laws of society. Ambition circumvents, not invades; lust tempts, but does not ravish. Ill-nature whispers, rather than accuses. Husbands and wives can hate, without scolding. A duel is transacted as civilly

* This is so true, that the French, observing how much general passions are exhausted, have of late written pieces on compound characters, as the *Bourru bienfaisant*, *L'Avare fastueux*, &c. Such characters must arise in the advanced state of society, and may even be natural; but it requires great address and delicacy to manage them: and though it may not be universally true that there is a *ruling passion* in every man, it is still very improbable that two predominant passions should be so equally balanced as to produce such a contrast or opposition as the business of comedy may require: and yet unless the two contending passions are nearly equal in force, the superior or predominant one will relapse into the old comedy, which exhibited such a single passion or vice. The difficulty will be increased by these reflections; one of the passions in the compounded character may be, and probably is, an affected one; especially if the latter is at war with the ruling passion: for instance, an ostentatious miser can only *affect* generosity; for a generous man is not likely

to *affect* avarice, because, generosity being a quality esteemed, and covetousness held in aversion, the latter may be glad to conceal a vice; but few men are such good Christians as to disguise the beauty of their minds beneath an ugly mask. The parsimony then of the miser will certainly preponderate; and the poet's art must distinguish between his natural fordidness and adopted liberality, and must take care not to make the opposition farcical. Another difficulty will be, that compound characters cannot be general; and, therefore, when an author blends two passions, he will seem to draw a portrait rather than a character. Yet such compound of passions may open a new field, and enrich the province of comedy. The extensive mischiefs of ambition have appropriated that passion to tragedy; but might not very comic scenes be produced by representing an *ambitious miser* perpetually destroying his own views by grudging and saving the money, which, if expended, would promote his ambition? H. W.

as a visit. Kings, instead of challenging, mourn for each other, though in open war.

Even the lower ranks of people could not be brought on the stage in this age, without softening the outline. A shopkeeper's daughter is a *young lady with a handsome fortune* and necessary *accomplishments*. Her brother *acts plays* for his diversion, is of a club, and games. Footmen have all the graces of their masters; and even highwaymen die genteelly.

One reads that in China even carmen make excuses to one another for stopping up the way. Half the time of the Chinese is passed in ceremony. I conclude their comedies cannot be very striking. Where one kind of politeness runs through a whole nation, the operation of the passions must be less discernible. All common characters are not only exhausted, but concealed. In this nation we have certainly more characters than are seen in any other, owing perhaps to two causes, our liberty and the uncertainty of our climate. But this does not help the comic writer. Though he may every day meet with an original character, he cannot employ it—for, to be tasted, the humour must be common enough to be understood by the generality. Peculiarities in character are commonly affectations, and the affectation of a private or single person is not prey for the stage. I take *Cimberton* in *The Conscious Lovers* to be a portrait; probably a very resembling one—but as nobody knows the original, nobody can be much struck with the copy. Still, while the liberty of our government exists, there will be more originality in our manners than in those of other nations, though an inundation of politeness has softened our features as well as weakened our constitution. Englishmen used to exert their independence by a certain brutality, that was *not* honesty, but often produced it; for a man that piques himself on speaking truth grows to have a pride in not disgracing himself.

As the great outlines of the passions are softened down by urbanity, fashionable follies usurp the place which belonged to criticism on characters; and when fashions are the object of ridicule, comedies soon grow obsolete and cease to be useful. Alchemy was the pursuit in vogue in the age of Ben Jonson; but, being a temporary folly, satire on it is no longer a lesson. Fashions pushed to excess produce a like excess in the reproof; and comedies degenerate into farce and buffoonery, when follies are exaggerated in the representation.

sentation. The traits in *The Miser* that exhibit his extreme avarice are within the operation of the passions: in *The Alchymist* an epidemic folly, grown obsolete, is food for a commentator, not for an audience.

In fact, exaggeration is the fault of the author. If he is master enough of his talent to seize the precise truth of either passion or affectation, he will please more, though perhaps not at the first representation. Falstaff is a fictitious character, and would have been so had it existed in real life: yet his humour and his wit are so just, that they never have failed to charm all who are capable of taking him in his own tongue.

Some lessons of the drama, or at least the shortness of its duration, have reduced even Shakespeare to precipitate his catastrophe. The reformation of the termagant wife in *The Taming of the Shrew* is too sudden. So are those of Margaritta in *Rule a Wife and have a Wife*, and of Lady Townly in *The Provoked Husband*. Time or grace only operates such miracles.

In my own opinion, a good comedy, by the passions being exhausted, is at present the most difficult of all compositions, if it represents either nature or fictitious nature; I mean mankind in its present state of civilised society.

The enemies of *sentimental comedy* (or, as the French, the inventors, called it, *comédie larmoyante*) seem to think that the great business of comedy is to make the audience laugh. *That* may certainly be effected without nature or character. A Scot, an Irishman, a Mrs. Slipslop, can always produce a laugh, at least from half the audience. For my part, I confess I am more disposed to weep than to laugh at such poor artifices. The advocates of merry comedy appeal to Moliere. I appeal to him too. Which is his better comedy, *The Misanthrope*, or the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*? *The Tartuffe*, or *The Etourdi*? In reality, did not Moliere in *The Misanthrope* give a pattern of serious comedy? What is finer than the serious scenes of Maskwell and Lady Touchwood in *The Double Dealer*? I do not take the *comédie larmoyante* to have been so much a deficiency of pleasantry in its authors, as the effect of observation and reflection. Tragedy had been confined to the distresses of kings, princesses, and heroes; and comedy restrained to making us laugh at passions pushed to a degree of ridicule. In the former, as great personages only were concerned, language was elevated to suit their rank, rather than their sentiments; for real
passion

passion rarely talks in heroics. Had tragedy descended to people of subordinate stations, authors found the language would be too pompous. I should therefore think that the first man who gave a *comédie larmoyante*, rather meant to represent a melancholy story in private life, than merely to produce a comedy without mirth. If he had therefore not married two species then reckoned incompatible, that is tragedy and comedy, or, in other words, distress with a cheerful conclusion; and, instead of calling it *comédie larmoyante*, had named his new genus *tragédie mitigée*, or, as the same purpose has since been styled, *tragédie bourgeoise*; he would have given a third species to the stage.

The French, who feel themselves and their genius cramped by the many impertinent shackles they have invented for authors, have taught these to escape, in those pieces which shake off all fetters, and leave genius and imagination at full liberty—I mean in their *comédie Italienne*, where under the *cannon* of Harlequin, and in defiance of all rules, they indulge their gaiety and invention. In short, a man who declares he writes without rules, may say what he pleases. If he invents happily, he succeeds, is indulged, and his piece lasts in spite of Aristotle and Bossu. If he does not compensate by originality, fancy, wit, or nature, for scorning rule, the author is deservedly damned, at the sole expence to the public of having been tired by dulness for one evening.

I will finish this rhapsodical essay with remarking, that comedy is infinitely more difficult to an English than to a French man. Not only their language, so inferior in numbers, harmony and copiousness, to ours for poetry and eloquence, is far better adapted to conversation and dialogue; but all the French, especially of the higher ranks*, pique themselves on speaking their own language correctly and elegantly; the women especially. It was not till of late years with us that the language has been correctly spoken even in both houses of parliament. Before Addison and Swift, style was scarce aimed at even by our best authors. Dryden, whose prose was almost as harmonious and beautiful as his poetry, was not always accurate. Lord Shaftesbury proved that when a man of quality soared above his peers, he wrote bombastly, turgidly,

* I include men of learning in the higher ranks, because in France they are admitted into the best company, who certainly give the tone to the elegance of any language, and in that sense only the highest company are the best company; for the term *best* has been ravished from the lowest ranks of men, who I doubt are the most virtuous of the community, and given to, or usurped by, the richest and most noble. H. W.

poetically. Lord Chatham gave the tone to fine language in oratory. Within these very few years, our young orators are correct in their common conversation. Our ladies have not yet adopted the patronage of our language. Thence correct language in common conversation sounds pedantic or affected. Mr. Gray was so circumspect in his usual language, that it seemed unnatural, though it was only pure English. My inference is, that attention to the style in comedy runs a risk of not appearing easy. Yet I own *The Careless Husband* and *Vanbrugh* are standards—and *The School for Scandal* and *The Heiress* have shewn that difficulties are no impediments to genius; and that, however passions and follies may be civilised, refined, or complicated, subjects for comedy are not wanting, and can be exhibited in the purest language of easy dialogue, without swelling to pedantry, or sinking to incorrectness. The authors of those two comedies have equalled Terence in the graces of style, and excelled him in wit and character: consequently we have better comedies than Greece or Rome enjoyed. It is even remarkable that the Grecians, who perfected poetry and eloquence, and invented tragedy and comedy, should have made so little progress in the last. Terence's plays, copied from Menander, convey little idea of that author's talent; and when so many of the farces of Aristophanes have been preserved, it is difficult to conceive that only a few scraps of Menander would have been transmitted to us, if his merit had been in proportion to the excellence of their tragic writers. Moliere will probably be as immortal as Corneille and Racine.