Restoration Comedy

Introduced by Duncan Wu

with texts taken from
Restoration Drama: An Anthology

edited by David Womersley

Blackwell
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Contents

Series Editor's Preface

The Blackwell Essential Literature series offers readers the chance to possess authoritative texts of key poems (and in one case drama) across the standard periods and movements. Based on correspondent volumes in the Blackwell Anthologies series most of these volumes run to no more than 200 pages. The acknowledged virtues of the Blackwell Anthologies are range and variety; those of the Essential Literature series are authoritative selection, compactness and ease of use. They will be particularly helpful to students hard-pressed for time, who need a digest of the poetry of each historical period.

In selecting the contents of each volume particular attention has been given to major writers whose works are widely taught at most schools and universities. Each volume contains a general introduction designed to introduce the reader to those central works.

Together, these volumes comprise a crucial resource for anyone who reads or studies poetry.

Duncan Wu
St Catherine's College, Oxford

Introduction

Duncan Wu

England's great tradition of theatre-writing and performing came to an abrupt end when in 1642 the Puritans succeeded in making dramatic entertainments illegal. Despite frequent infractions of that ordinance over the years (masques were even performed at Cromwell's behest), it was not until Charles II restored the Stuart succession in 1660 that theatre found a new lease of life. He licensed two new companies: the King's company, managed by Thomas Killigrew, and the Duke's company, managed by William D'Avenant. (They were to join forces in 1682.) As an unashamed affront to Puritan delicacy, women were allowed to play female parts for the first time (as had been customary in France, where D'Avenant and Killigrew had been exiled with the court).

Restoration theatres were more sophisticated affairs than those in which Shakespeare and his contemporaries had worked at the beginning of the century. The new buildings were roofed, with backstage areas, a proscenium arch, areas for musicians (the equivalent of orchestra pits), thrust stages, scenery, and curtains in front of the stage. Proprietors were willing to invest considerable capital, ensuring that theatres had state of the art facilities for audience and actors alike. The first Theatre Royal in Drury Lane opened in 1663, the ancestor of the one that stands on the same site today. Nell Gwynne made her debut there in Dryden's *Indian Queen* in 1665. No less than Sir Christopher Wren designed the Dorset Garden Theatre that fronted the River Thames, which opened in 1671. It cost £9,000 to build – a fortune for those times.

The front of house was in many respects the most important feature of the new theatres. There were three main areas: galleries, boxes and the pit. The pit was the most fashionable place to be seen, as Horner indicates when in *The Country Wife* he remarks: 'I wou'd no more miss seeing a new Play the first day, than I wou'd miss sitting in the wits Row'. Horner's enthusiasm derives partly from the fact that making assignations, drinking and chatting was for many theatregoers the point of being there, and their inattentiveness is sometimes deplored in various prologues and epilogues.

The two plays in this volume span 25 years: *The Country Wife* (1675) and *The Way of the World* (1700). The catch-all handle 'Restoration comedy' is in this context rather misleading. It could be argued that the Restoration came to an end when Charles's brother James, who succeeded him in 1685, fled to France (on the second attempt) three years later. After his abdication parliament brought William of Orange to London from Holland, proclaimed king in what became known as the 'Glorious Revolution'. Thus,

while Wycherley's play dates from the Restoration period proper, Congreve's is from that of the late Stuarts, having been first produced during the reign of William and Mary.[1]

The historical context in which each was written is reflected in their respective characters. There's no doubting that in which Wycherley's play is set, from the very first speech; Wycherley knew that the moment when the curtain went up on his actors offered his one opportunity (perhaps the last) to seize the audience's attention – and he did it, cleverly, with a dirty joke: 'A Quack is as fit for a Pimp, as a Midwife for a Bawd; they are still but in their way, both helpers of Nature'. This isn't just a joke; it contains the essence of what is to follow. The conceit of the play is that Horner's deception – that he claims to be rendered impotent by a cure for venereal disease – will enable him to make jealous husbands pimp their wives to him, even the tyrannical Pinchwife. Horner is the sexually voracious 'Quack' who will lead these husbands (and wives) to their doom. But the joke also alerts us to the milieu in which these characters live and breathe. It is, recognizably, the metropolitan London of Charles II's reign (one scene is even set in Covent Garden piazza), the city described by Rochester, who has a similar clear-sightedness as to its moral character.

Most of all, this is a world of infidelity and sexual license. When Harcourt tells Horner that 'your Sting is gone', the joke is on him; Horner's unimpaired virility is the secret that underpins the dramatic action. It means that there are two worlds in the play: one in which that secret is known and understood, another in which jealous husbands entrust their wives to someone they mistakenly regard as 'an errant French Capon'.[2] The viewing and buying of china, an innocent enough activity, becomes in this play a code for Horner's rampant cuckolding of other men's wives. (China-houses – specializing in oriental merchandise – were often used for assignations.) For sheer comic invention, Act IV, scene iii must be one of the most impressive things to come out of this phase of English drama. The tension generated from Horner's bedding of Lady Fidget is as tightly plotted, as ingenious and funny as Orton's *What the Butler Saw*. Orton once observed that 'Farce is higher than comedy in that it is very close to tragedy. You've only got to play some of Shakespeare's tragedies plain and they are nearly farcical.'[3] The tension in Wycherley's masterpiece (and kinship with Orton's work) derives from the darker elements in the plot. The most obvious manifestation of this is Jack Pinchwife, a thuggish ex-rake who forces his wife to cross-dress in order (so he believes) to conceal her attractiveness,[4] and then forces her to write a letter to Horner at his dictation, under the threat, 'Write as I bid you, or I

[1] Expert opinion varies, but there is a growing consensus that for academic purposes Restoration drama can be considered as having begun in 1660 and ended in 1714.

[2] A capon is a castrated cock.

[3] As quoted, John Lahr, *Prick Up Your Ears: The Biography of Joe Orton* (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, 1978), p. 225.

[4] This is another irony, of course, because the actress playing Margery Pinchwife, like Elizabeth Boutell, is thereby given an opportunity to display her legs.

will write Whore with this Penknife in your Face'. Pinchwife's view of love and sex is riddled with violence. He says that Cupid 'gave women first their craft, their art of deluding', and he declares his wish to 'strangle that little Monster'. When he comes upon his wife's private correspondence with Horner he draws his sword on her with the intention of making 'an end of you thus, and all my plagues together'. He draws his sword on her again at the end of the play, saying 'I will never hear woman again, but make 'em all silent', and then threatens Horner with the same fate; it is, indeed, at that moment that this farcical 'comedy' most closely approaches tragedy.

Those darker elements arise largely out of male sexual anxiety and the moral emptiness of the city. If men are not motivated by lust, their interest in women stems from money or social gain (as with Sparkish's marriage to Alithea). Sir Jaspar's interest in his wife is little more than proprietorial. They seem to live in a state of constant agitation – 'Making you a Cuckold, 'tis that they all doe, as soon as they can'. Even the more relaxed Sparkish believes that 'if her constitution incline her to't, she'l have it sooner or later by the world'. The dramatic tension arising from this is fully articulated in the furtiveness with which Horner carries out his scheme, arranging to let Mrs Pinchwife out 'the back way'.

But the most telling indicator of the character of this play lies in its ending. In Shakespearean and Jonsonian comedy we measure the success of the drama by its ability to resolve moral ambiguity. *Measure for Measure* remains problematic because the Duke's trustworthiness is in question, and his idea of a satisfactory ending hardly accords with ours. *The Country Wife* is less obviously fraught, but its resolution hardly inspires confidence. Its plot is concluded only by a reassertion of the deception that caused the trouble in the first place, when the Quack doctor returns to abuse his integrity as a man of science, declaring that Horner is 'An Eunuch!' Can this lie be sustained indefinitely? Almost certainly not; it barely survives to the final moments of the play, threatened as it is by Mrs Pinchwife who is anxious to testify to Horner's potency: ''Tis false Sir, you shall not disparage poor Mr Horner, for to my certain knowledge –'. As usual, she is silenced, and the truth suppressed one last time. This is a world built on lies in which people are better off not knowing the truth, especially if it would realize their worst fears. The best that can be hoped for is a continuation of the duplicity that permits its inhabitants to continue fearing their wives' fidelity, while those wives secretly enjoy their lovers. Horner jokingly remarks that

> a silly Mistriss, is like a weak place, soon got, soon lost, a man has scarce time for plunder; she betrays her Husband, first to her Gallant, and then her Gallant, to her Husband.

It is no joke. The men of this play, be they husband or gallant, feel themselves to be the playthings of women, who control their well-being by dint of the power they exert within the relationship.

Congreve's *The Way of the World*, written a generation later, is a less threatened work, and the product of a less fragile environment. No

less a critic than William Hazlitt described it as 'an essence almost too fine; and the sense of pleasure evaporates in an aspiration after something that seems too exquisite ever to have been realized'.[5] By the time it was written in 1700 unease over the Catholicizing tendencies of Charles and James had receded under the Protestant William III; peace had been established between France and Britain in 1697, and the Act of Settlement of 1700 consolidated the shift of power away from the monarch towards parliament. It would all make for a less volatile political regime. None of these events are specifically referred to in Congreve's play, but the greater certainty they generated is part of its character. For instance, where in Wycherley's play it is hard to find any evidence of mutual affection among the characters (and the insecurity of their world stems from that fact), the fundamental assumption of *The Way of the World* is that beneath the sparring, gossip and jockeying for position, its protagonists genuinely care for and even love each other. In his prefatory epistle Congreve states that his aim was to create characters who displayed 'an affected Wit; a Wit, which at the same time that it is affected, is also false'. His point is that beneath the surface relationships blossom and take their course. His characters are more persuasive than Wycherley's, partly because they have greater depth.

This is evident from the outset. In the first scene we encounter Fainall and Mirabell apparently swapping remarks about Mirabell's romantic life, while beneath the surface each attempts to fathom the other's partiality for Mrs Marwood. At the beginning of Act II (in St James's Park), Mrs Fainall and Mrs Marwood exchange a vituperative banter about their mutual hatred of men, while each attempts to work out the other's feelings for Mirabell. 'You change Colour', Mrs Fainall remarks, at the mention of his name. 'Because I hate him', lies Mrs Marwood – which Mrs Fainall compounds with a matching untruth: 'So do I; but I can hear him nam'd'. Congreve describes a world in which the feigning display of wit is preferable to – and more socially acceptable than – emotional disclosure. These characters prefer to baffle, to keep each other guessing, to masquerade, to banter, rather than speak the feelings they truly feel.

The play is full of satire, but Congreve's characters are not one-dimensional; they are at once figures in a comic portrayal of London life, and real people with an emotional and psychological investment in the relationships of which they are part. Like most London gentlemen, Mirabell seeks a secure income, and regards Millamant as a suitable match on that account; Millamant, for her part, treats her encounters with him largely as an ongoing game. But their conversations reveal a relationship in which there is real passion on both sides. The most obvious example of this is the famous proviso episode, Act IV, scene i, in which they barter, in satirical mode, the material circumstances of their marriage – at least, haggling over money and chattels is what we expect. But Mirabell and Millamant prove less concerned with wealth than with their future relationship. Millamant may be attempting to amuse when she speaks of being allowed to 'lie a Bed

[5] William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, Lecture IV.

in a morning as long as I please', but when she argues that they are 'as strange as if we had been married a great while; and as well bred as if we were not marri'd at all', she envisages a union she expects to last. And when Mirabell urges her not to wear a mask, or mix with gentlewomen at court, it is felt not to be a piece of masculine tyranny so much as an expression of genuine attachment to Millamant as she is. Astonishingly, Mirabell goes so far as to express concern for the children he expects her to have in the future. When he has left the room, Millamant reveals her true feelings: 'Well, If Mirabell shou'd not make a good Husband, I am a lost thing; – for I find I love him violently'.

The betrothed lovers provide the standard against which to measure such characters as Fainall and his mistress, Mrs Marwood. In their case the monetary incentive that seems initially to have drawn Mirabell to Millamant has not been displaced by emotion. Material considerations motivate them consistently throughout. 'I never lov'd her', Fainall says of the woman to whom he has long been married, and 'Jealous of her I cannot be'. Significantly, the only real violence in the play is that threatened by Fainall against his mistress when their conspiracy breaks down.

Fainall is detained from hurting anyone, and it is symptomatic of the play that even parents are in the end toothless, and even become co-operative. A tyrant in the dressing-room, Lady Wishfort could hardly be regarded as a real threat. This is clear from her first appearance, in a state of casual undress at her dressing-table, raging at her hapless servant. She is the forerunner of Lady Bracknell, and her blustering, like that of Wilde's character, is played mainly for laughs. Her fondness for ratifia (a fruit liqueur), her 'mortal Terror at the apprehension of offending against Decorums', her 'Olio of Affairs' – indeed, her entire vocabulary which includes such words as 'tatterdemalion' and 'Rantipole' (placing her one step away from Mrs Malaprop) – mark her out as a comic character, so that when she declares of Mirabell that 'I'll have him murder'd. I'll have him poyson'd', we do not detect the hint of psychological imbalance found in Mr Pinchwife, let alone evidence of serious intent. And who but a comic character would take as a compliment the remark that 'You are all Camphire and Frankincense, all Chastity and Odour'? That is why Congreve can turn her into a victim of others' deceptions; she is, in the end, too sympathetic to be an outright villain. All in all, Congreve's satire is gentler than that of Wycherley or Rochester. In his London, sexual license is not a matter of life and death, nor is it the excuse for psychological imbalance. When Witwoud says of Petulant that the drinks he has ordered are 'for two fasting Strumpets, and a Bawd troubl'd with Wind', we are on traditional British comic territory, where bodily functions are the occasion for laughter.

The way of the world, invoked by Fainall as justification for his misdeeds, is not in the end a likeable thing. The play's subtext is that although money does make the world go round, life is meaningless without an emotional existence, something to be found only by setting baser appetites aside and cultivating one's feelings, however unnatural or awkward it may be. In the final scene Mirabell does not approach Millamant as we might expect, prompting, for the last time, a shred of doubt as to his true intentions.

'Why do's not the man take me? wou'd you have me give my self to you over again.' 'Ay', he responds, 'and over and over again; for I wou'd have you as often as possibly I can.' It is an unabashed declaration of love, innocent of irony or cynicism. His final quip is a salute to the rakish manner he has abandoned: 'Well, heav'n grant I love you not too well, that's all my fear'.

There are many other Restoration comedies which deserve attention: Buckingham's *The Rehearsal* (1671), Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer* (1676), Etherege's *The Man of Mode* (1676), Congreve's *Love for Love* (1695), Cibber's *Love's Last Shift* (1696), Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* (1696), Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* (1706) and *The Beaux' Stratagem* (1707), and Susannah Centlivre's *The Busie Body* (1709). All can be found in David Womersley's exemplary *Restoration Drama: An Anthology*, to which I am deeply indebted as a source for this volume.

Further Reading

Owen, Sue (ed.) (2001) *A Companion to Restoration Drama* (Oxford: Blackwell).

Womersley, David (ed.) (2000) *A Companion to Literature from Milton to Blake* (Oxford: Blackwell).

Womersley, David (ed.) (2000) *Restoration Drama: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell).

William Wycherley (1641–1716)

The Country Wife (1675)

PROLOGUE, SPOKEN BY MR. HART

Poets like Cudgel'd Bullys, never do
At first, or second blow, submit to you;
But will provoke you still, and ne're have done,
Till you are weary first, with laying on:
The late so bafled Scribler of this day,
Though he stands trembling, bids me boldly say,
What we, before most Playes are us'd to do,
For Poets out of fear, first draw on you;
In a fierce Prologue, the still Pit defie,
And e're you speak, like Castril, *give the lye;*
But though our Bayses *Batles oft I've fought,*
And with bruis'd knuckles, their dear Conquests bought;
Nay, never yet fear'd Odds upon the Stage,
In Prologue dare not Hector with the Age,
But wou'd take Quarter from your saving hands,
Though Bayse *within all yielding Countermands,*
Says you Confed'rate Wits no Quarter give,
Ther'fore his Play shan't ask your leave to live:
Well, let the vain rash Fop, by huffing so,
Think to obtain the better terms of you;
But we the Actors humbly will submit,
Now, and at any time, to a full Pit;
Nay, often we anticipate your rage,
And murder Poets for you, on our Stage:
We set no Guards upon our Tyring-Room,
But when with flying Colours, there you come,
We patiently you see, give up to you,
Our Poets, Virgins, nay our Matrons too.

THE PERSONS

Mr. *Horner*,
Mr. *Harcourt*,
Mr. *Dorilant*,
Mr. *Hart*.
Mr. *Kenaston*.
Mr. *Lydal*.

Mr. *Pinchwife*,	Mr. *Mohun*.
Mr. *Sparkish*,	Mr. *Haynes*.
Sir. *Jaspar Fidget*,	Mr. *Cartwright*.
Mrs. *Margery Pinchwife*,	Mrs. *Bowtel*.
Mrs. *Alithea*,	Mrs. *James*.
My Lady *Fidget*,	Mrs. *Knep*.
Mrs. *Dainty Fidget*,	Mrs. *Corbet*.
Mrs. *Squeamish*,	Mrs. *Wyatt*.
Old Lady *Squeamish*,	Mrs. *Rutter*.
Waiters, Servants, *and* Attendants.	
A *Boy*.	
A *Quack*,	Mr. *Schotterel*.
Lucy, Alithea*'s Maid*,	Mrs. *Cory*.

The Scene, London.

Act I

Scene I

Enter Horner, *and* Quack *following him at a distance.*

Hor. A Quack is as fit for a Pimp, as a Midwife for a Bawd; they are still but in their way, both helpers of Nature. – [*aside.*] – Well, my dear Doctor, hast thou done what I desired.

Qu. I have undone you for ever with the Women, and reported you throughout the whole Town as bad as an *Eunuch*, with as much trouble as if I had made you one in earnest.

Hor. But have you told all the Midwives you know, the Orange Wenches at the Play-houses, the City Husbands, and old Fumbling Keepers of this end of the Town, for they'l be the readiest to report it.

Qu. I have told all the Chamber-maids, Waiting women, Tyre women, and Old women of my acquaintance; nay, and whisper'd it as a secret to'em, and to the Whisperers of *Whitehal*; so that you need not doubt 'twill spread, and you will be as odious to the handsome young Women, as –

Hor. As the small Pox. – Well –

Qu. And to the married Women of this end of the Town, as –

Hor. As the great ones; nay, as their own Husbands.

Qu. And to the City Dames as Annis-seed *Robin* of filthy and contemptible memory; and they will frighten their Children with your name, especially their Females.

Hor. And cry *Horner's* coming to carry you away: I am only afraid 'twill not be believ'd; you told'em 'twas by an *English-French* disaster, and an *English-French* Chirurgeon, who has given me at once, not only a Cure, but an Antidote for the future, against that damn'd malady, and that worse distemper, love, and all other Womens evils.

Qu. Your late journey into *France* has made it the more credible, and your being here a fortnight before you appear'd in publick, looks as if you apprehended the shame, which I wonder you do not: Well I have been hired by young Gallants to bely'em t'other way; but you are the first wou'd be thought a Man unfit for Women.

Hor. Dear Mr. Doctor, let vain Rogues be contented only to be thought abler Men than they are, generally 'tis all the pleasure they have, but mine lyes another way.

Qu. You take, methinks, a very preposterous way to it, and as ridiculous as if we Operators in Physick, shou'd put forth Bills to disparage our Medicaments, with hopes to gain Customers.

Hor. Doctor, there are Quacks in love, as well as Physick, who get but the fewer and worse Patients, for their boasting; a good name is seldom got by giving it ones self, and Women no more than honour are compass'd by bragging: Come, come Doctor, the wisest Lawyer never discovers the merits of his cause till the tryal; the wealthiest Man conceals his riches, and the cunning Gamster his play; Shy Husbands and Keepers like old Rooks are not to be cheated, but by a new unpractis'd trick; false friendship will pass now no more than false dice upon'em, no, not in the City.

Enter Boy.

Boy. There are two Ladies and a Gentleman coming up.

Hor. A Pox, some unbelieving Sisters of my former acquaintance, who I am afraid, expect their sense shou'd be satisfy'd of the falsity of the report.

Enter Sir Jasp. Fidget, *Lady* Fidget, *and Mrs.* Dainty Fidget.

No – this formal Fool and Women!

Qu. His Wife and Sister.

Sr. Jas. My Coach breaking just now before your door Sir, I look upon as an occasional repremand to me Sir, for not kissing your hands Sir, since your coming out of *France* Sir; and so my disaster Sir, has been my good fortune Sir; and this is my Wife, and Sister Sir.

Hor. What then, Sir?

Sr. Jas. My Lady, and Sister, Sir. – Wife, this is Master *Horner.*

La. Fid. Master *Horner*, Husband!

Sr. Jas. My Lady, my Lady *Fidget*, Sir.

Hor. So, Sir.

Sr. Jas. Won't you be acquainted with her Sir? [So the report is true, I find by his coldness or aversion to the Sex; but I'll play the wag with him.]

Aside.

Pray salute my Wife, my Lady, Sir.

Hor. I will kiss no Mans Wife, Sir, for him, Sir; I have taken my eternal leave, Sir, of the Sex already, Sir.

Sr. Jas. Hah, hah, hah; I'll plague him yet.