

THE REVIVAL OF THE COMEDY OF MANNERS  
IN ENGLAND  
IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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A THESIS  
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH  
IN THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE  
TEXAS STATE COLLEGE FOR WOMEN

DEPARTMENT OF  
ENGLISH

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JENNIE LOUISE HINDMAN, B.S.

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DENTON, TEXAS  
AUGUST, 1937

# TEXAS STATE COLLEGE FOR WOMEN

DENTON, TEXAS

\_\_\_\_\_ AUGUST \_\_\_\_\_ 1937

I hereby recommend that the thesis prepared  
under my supervision by JENNIE LOUISE HINDMAN  
entitled THE REVIVAL OF THE COMEDY OF MANNERS IN  
ENGLAND IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY  
be accepted as fulfilling this part of the requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts.

L. M. Ellison  
In Charge of Thesis

L. M. Ellison  
Director of Department

Accepted:

W. H. Spack  
Director, Graduate Division

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

During the course of an investigation into the development of the comedy of manners in England, one is impressed with the reappearance of this form of drama in the eighteen nineties after an absence from the theatrical world of more than a hundred years. The production of "The Case of Rebellious Susan," by Henry Arthur Jones, in 1894 sounded a note which had not been heard on the island since the days of "The School for Scandal" in 1777. Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest," in 1895, took its audiences into the topsy-turvy realm of Etherege and Congreve. With "The Liars," in 1897, Jones proved himself a rival and even a superior of the older masters. The purpose of this thesis is to show that although on first consideration the reappearance is most surprising, there were definite and unmistakable reasons for the revival of manners comedy in the last decade of the nineteenth century. The causes which the writer believes led to this revival are as follows: first, that economic, social, and dramatic conditions in the eighteen nineties were similar to those existing in the Restoration period when the comedy of manners was born; secondly, that Wilde and Jones were as definitely products of their age as Etherege, Wycherley, and Congreve were of the time in which they lived; and, thirdly, that Oscar Wilde (in all probability) and Henry Arthur Jones (in all certainty) were disgusted with the quagmire into which comedy had sunk, and that they made conscious effort to reattain the

perfection of seventeenth century comedy, which Sheridan also had reattained in the eighteenth century. It is the writer's belief that the facts support the opinion that the rise of sentimentality, responsible in great measure for the decline of pure comedy, left its mark on this very type of drama, and that the new high comedy emerged, holding a more perfect "mirror up to nature" partly because of the sentimentalism which had threatened to destroy it.

The purpose of the Introduction is to state the aims of the thesis and of the various chapters and to define the term, comedy of manners, as it is to be used throughout this study. The purpose of the second chapter will be to analyze characteristics of the Restoration period as elements in the soil upon which the species flourished. The third chapter is to be an examination of the plays of Etherege, Wycherley, and Congreve in relation to their age and in regard to the dramatic technique employed in their construction. The fourth chapter will discuss the rise of sentimentalism in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the resulting decline of pure comedy; it will include a consideration of the work of Richard Brinsley Sheridan as a phenomenon rather than as a natural growth. In Chapter Five conditions in the eighteen nineties will be surveyed, and emphasis placed on the striking parallel with those of the Restoration period; an evaluation will be made of the contributions of Sir William Schwenck Gilbert and Sir Arthur Wing Pinero. Chapter Six will present Oscar Wilde and Henry

Arthur Jones as natural products of the "gay nineties"; it will set forth influences which Wilde and Jones received from Restoration dramatists; and it will substantiate the assertion that sentimentality, in spite of its far-reaching destruction, gave a new and poignant comic element to comedy of manners in the eighteen nineties.

The term, comedy of manners, will be used in this discussion to mean that type of comedy which reached a height in the seventeenth century with the plays of Etherege, Wycherley, and Congreve. This is the connotation which is evidently assumed by the majority of dramatic critics. Most of these critics, however, stay a little shy of making a concise definition. Seventeenth century comedy of manners is, as Nicoll says, "a peculiar, intangible sort of thing."<sup>1</sup> It is realistic in a narrow sense; that is to say, it reflects the life of a very small portion of London society, the people of fashion. It is critical in an immediate, rather than in a universal way; that is, it satirizes not society itself, but those people in society who do not quite fit. It is marked by Jonsonian humours, Spanish intrigue, and a touch of wit and theme from the French stage. The plays are hard to analyze because they depend largely upon atmosphere. Plots are slight; about the only requirement for a story is that it have a pair of witty lovers. Dialogue is quick and graceful; people know what to say. Much of

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<sup>1</sup>Allardyce Nicoll, A History of Restoration Drama (2nd ed.; Cambridge: University Press, 1928), p. 184.

the laughter comes from amusing situations which often follow one another in rapid succession. The plays are almost wholly intellectual; they lack emotion as well as moral tone. The most distinguishing characteristic is the pervading atmosphere of brilliance, of sparkle, of dash. The comedy of manners, then, may be defined as a type of critical, realistic comedy, wholly intellectual and unmoral in tone, and characterized by free, graceful conversation and scintillating brilliance of style.

## CHAPTER II

### CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESTORATION PERIOD

The Restoration period which developed the comedy of manners was a time of social readjustment. The Puritan regime, which had preceded, had tried to turn the whole of life into a narrow path of sober righteousness. It had treated many innocent customs as serious offences. It had closed all places of amusement; it had condemned mirth as ungodly. It had declared that a man committed "a sin to dance round a May-pole, or to eat mince pie at Christmas. Fox-hunting and horse-racing were forbidden, and bear baiting prohibited, 'not because it gave pain to the bear, but because it gave pleasure to the spectators.' "<sup>1</sup> The reign of Charles II was "a time of reaction in manners and morals against the overstrictness of the former Puritan control."<sup>2</sup> The new King was received in England with demonstrations of joy. Bells, flags, and bonfires announced his coming. He brought with him from the French court a love of all that was gay and carefree. His whole aim in life was enjoyment. The noblemen who surrounded him shared his attitude; and his court became, from the first, one of high fashion, of extravagance, of pleasure-seeking, of licentiousness. In style, in wit, and debauchery the courtiers strove to excel. It is

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<sup>1</sup>D. H. Montgomery, The Leading Facts of English History (Boston: Ginn and Co., n.d.), p. 256.

<sup>2</sup>E. P. Cheney, An Introduction to the Industrial and Social History of England (New York: Macmillan Co., 1909), p. 180.

said that on one occasion the king remarked to Lord Shaftesbury, a royal favorite, "Ah! Shaftesbury, I verily believe you are the wickedest dog in my dominions." "Yes, your Majesty," replied Shaftesbury, "for a subject I think perhaps I may be."<sup>3</sup>

But the loose morality of Restoration society and the concentration of that society on style and wit rather than on high seriousness was "something more, perhaps, than a mere reaction to Puritan repression."<sup>4</sup> The latter half of the seventeenth century was the time when rationalism began in England. The Royal Society for investigation of scientific questions was founded in 1662. Sir Isaac Newton announced his theory of light in 1671, and in 1687 he published his Principia with its explanation of the law of gravity. John Locke wrote his Treatises on Government in 1685 and his Essay Concerning the Human Understanding in 1690. This "was the age when religious persecutions and witch-burnings ceased, the age when modernism got a foothold."<sup>5</sup> A new curiosity was taking hold of men's minds. Puritan dogma had failed. Old ideas were being discredited. New values had not been established. But men were beginning to seek the truth from observation of fact, not from acceptance of precept. This is the scientific attitude; and it leads to skepticism. The cynical manner affected by the aristocratic class was simply a result of that

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<sup>3</sup>Montgomery, op. cit., p. 263.

<sup>4</sup>W. P. Eaton, The Drama in English (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930), p. 163.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

skepticism which was causing thinkers to question all precedent. People were interested not in the past nor in the future, but in the actual present. Influential society was ready to live by its own dictates rather than by any tradition or creed.

These people treated sex as a fact rather than as an emotion. If man was a licentious animal, then the pursuit of a mistress was his natural amusement.<sup>6</sup> There was no standard of morality.

".....Charles, indeed, set the fashion, Pepys reporting of Mrs. Stewart that the king 'gets into corners, and will be with her half an hour together, kissing her to the observation of all the world'. Courtiers took the hint so that 'the names of Buckingham and Rochester, of Etherege, Killigrew, and Sedley', as Bishop Wilberforce once wrote, 'still maintain a bad preëminence in the annals of English vice'."<sup>7</sup>

Ladies of the court, also, were not without their escapades. They went about masked, disguising themselves "to visit their lovers in the early morning."<sup>8</sup> Unnatural sex relationships existed in this period, as did incest and disease.<sup>9</sup> Yet underlying all this wickedness (and becoming more evident toward the end of the century) actual sex laws remained rigid. Men may not have wanted the bonds of marriage, but once married they disliked to be cuckolded. Women may have been inconstant, but they did not wish to be found out. Virtue retained its social pres-

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<sup>6</sup>Bonamy Dobrée, Restoration Comedy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), p. 20.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Nicoll, op. cit., pp. 23-24.

tige. The fact that convention still existed while men and women disregarded it led to the growth of drastic sex-antagonism; and sex became a battle of wits rather than a question of emotions.<sup>10</sup>

Since both sexes were participants in the battle, Restoration society gave to its women a mental equality with men which has not been equalled in British history until recent years.<sup>11</sup> It is true that the Restoration woman had none of the rights of citizenship. She was not allowed to own property in her own name, nor to sue or be sued, nor to have equal rights with the father in the control of children.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, she had an independence of mind which she did not hesitate to reveal. She had complete freedom in her conversation with men.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the freedom was encouraged because it amused and stimulated the beaux. Certainly the result was often a skirmish one with another in wit and repartee with a frequent victory for the lady engaging. She was a self-confident little person in all of her undertakings. These were days when women were first coming upon the stage as actresses. A woman, Mrs. Aphra Behn, wrote many of the popular dramas of the period. From all evidences the Restoration woman stood, in social relations, on level footing with

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<sup>10</sup>Dobrée, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>11</sup>Eaton, op. cit., p. 169.

<sup>12</sup>Gilbert Slater, The Growth of Modern England (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., n.d.), p. 169.

<sup>13</sup>Nicoll, op. cit., p. 22.

her male companions.

The social readjustments we have been discussing should be considered most seriously as a direct source of nurture for comedy of the day. George Meredith, in his An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit, asserts that the comedy of manners began, under Charles II, in order to outrage the Puritan.<sup>14</sup> Although we may not agree that Restoration dramatists wrote purposely to shock Puritan modesty, still we know that Restoration comedy was a reflection of the lives of men and women who would thoroughly have enjoyed shocking all Puritans. More important than the reactionary spirit in its influence on the development of comedy was the scientific attitude resulting in change in thought. All great comic periods have been times of rapidly changing values, of the toppling of old ideals, of religious skepticism, and of experiment. For example, note the periods of Menander in Greece and of Louis XIV's reign and the Regency in France. Great comedy "deals with disillusion. It comes when the positive attitude has failed, when doubt is undermining values, and men are turning for comfort to the ruggedness of life."<sup>15</sup> So we find the Restoration playwrights interested in the life around them, not concerned with beginnings or endings but with what their associates were doing and saying and thinking at the time. We see them dealing with current sex-

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<sup>14</sup>George Meredith, An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), p. 5.

<sup>15</sup>Dobrée, op. cit., p. 15.

antagonism as matter for some of their most brilliant scenes. We hear them repeating the conversation of male and female wits in all of its frankness and in all of its grace and charm. As the first requirement for the production of great comedy Meredith lists "a society of cultivated men and women."<sup>16</sup> He goes on to say that absence of the Comic spirit in German literature is partly due to the poor voice allowed to women in domestic life, and that the total silence of Comedy in the Orient is for the same reason. He tells us that where women

"....have no social freedom, Comedy is absent; where they are household drudges, the form of Comedy is primitive; where they are tolerably independent, but uncultivated, exciting melodrama takes its place and a sentimental version of them.....But where women are on the road to an equal footing with men in attainments and in liberty....there, and only in waiting to be transplanted from life to the stage, or the novel, or the poem, pure Comedy flourishes....."<sup>17</sup>

Restoration society, then, provided a very fertile ground for the flowering of brilliant comedy. The free association of men and women, the skeptical attitude of both sexes, and their reaction against all that was narrow and dogmatic furnished rich nourishment for the gay, brittle, unmoral comedy of manners.

Theatrical conditions, also, are significant in their effect on the drama of the period. The playhouses and all that related to them were undergoing changes fully as drastic as those occurring in social and economic life. The rebellion of playwrights and theatre managers against Puritan restriction on drama

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<sup>16</sup>Op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 54-55.

was making itself felt during all the Civil War and Commonwealth regime. In spite of the ordinance of September 2, 1642, commanding the cessation of all stage plays, surreptitious performances continued to be given at the various theatres. This is evident from the statement in the order of 1647/8 that acting had been indulged in "by divers in contempt" of the two earlier ordinances.<sup>18</sup> The second ordinance was issued July 17, 1647, setting the following January 1 as its expiration date. When January came and Parliament had failed to renew its ultimatum, several theatres opened to full houses. The irate Parliament immediately passed a final ordinance (February 11, 1648), commanding the actors "never to act or play any plays or interludes any more, on pain of being dealt with as incorrigible rogues." Even so, some interventions were still necessary to suppress the insistent vitality of the dramatic spirit. Under various pretenses masques, comic scenes, and adapted episodes survived. In 1656 Sir William D'Avenant obtained permission to present, at Rutland House, an entertainment of declamation and music "after the manner of the ancients." The performance took place; and later in the same year, at the same place, he produced his "The Seige of Rhodes."<sup>19</sup> All this theatrical activity, in the face of stringent rules against it, is proof of the undercurrent of reaction in the

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<sup>18</sup>Nicoll, op. cit., p. 269, n. 5.

<sup>19</sup>A. W. Ward, A History of English Dramatic Literature (New and Revised Edition; London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1899), III, pp. 278-282.

theatre which asserted itself at once upon the arrival of Charles II. Several theatres opened in 1659 and 1660, and during the latter year grants of monopoly were given to two of them.<sup>20</sup> The two patent companies, thriving under royal favor, reveled in their new freedom. Surely they were happy to play for audiences which delighted, also, in throwing off shackles. It might appear that the troubles of the actors were now over, so far as restriction was concerned. The patent had stated that the patentees should "peruse all the plays before acting and cut out the offensive passages."<sup>21</sup> In other words, the managers were to be their own censors. Nevertheless, the old office of Master of Revels was revived, and it was sometimes used as an attempt at restraint. The Puritan element in English society had not been annihilated. A middle class horror at the licentiousness of the English stage remained under the surface and sometimes came uppermost for actors and managers and dramatists to reckon with. Sir Henry Herbert, Master of Revels, had made a complaint before August, 1660, although D'Avenant disregarded it.<sup>22</sup> In 1663 "The Cheats," a play by John Wilson, was forbidden because the character of Mr. Scruple, a Presbyterian minister, was too exact a replica for the approval of his brethren.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Nicoll, op. cit., p. 269, n. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 270-271, n. 6.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 270-271.

<sup>23</sup> Montagu Summers, The Restoration Theatre (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1934), p. 16.

Collier's attack in 1698 was a summing up of all the grievances the Puritans had against the theatre. The London Gazette of Monday, February 27, 1698/9, stated that the Master of Revels had declared that "the Actors do often neglect to leave out such profane and indecent expressions as he thought proper to be omitted." They were charged to be more careful as they should answer at their utmost peril.<sup>24</sup> On March 4 a few days later, Dryden, writing to Mrs. Stewart, said:

This day was play'd a reviv'd comedy of Mr. Congreve's, call'd The Double Dealer, which was never very taking. In the play-bill was printed-----'Written by Mr. Congreve; with several expressions omitted.' What kind of expressions those were,<sup>25</sup> you may easily guess, if you have seen the Monday's Gazette....

It may readily be seen that dramatists were not unhampered even in this gay, easy age. They had won out over the Puritan in the earlier battle, but through the period there is evidence that they still had to struggle against the preacher and the pedant.

The aim of the comic dramatist was to show people in his audience a sort of photograph of themselves and to make them laugh at the picture. It must be remembered that the Restoration audience consisted of a mere section of the population of one town in Great Britain. Provincial theatres had not been established until a much later date. In Ireland, only Dublin had a playhouse during the Restoration period, and its productions were mainly plays which had already been accepted on the London

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 27, n. 29.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

stage. The fact that for about twenty years two theatres, and for twelve years one theatre, served the London play-going public shows that only a small portion of contemporary London society was play-minded. The middle classes had no interest in drama.<sup>26</sup> The patrons of the theatre were the courtiers and the people who imitated them. There were the noblemen and the beaux, the fops and the wits, and the vizard-masks, who might be either women of quality or courtesans.<sup>27</sup> The attitudes and manners of these people have already been discussed. That the drama always becomes a product of the demands of its audiences has been the cry of producers even to our present age. The Restoration aristocrats went to the theatre to be amused. They could enjoy the old, impossible heroic tragedy, far-removed from their present life, because it made them feel superior; they could chuckle at the coarseness of humours comedy; and with a supercilious air, they could smile at the comedy of manners and its reflection of their own gay, immoral lives. These people gave to Restoration comedy a sometimes unutterable frankness and also a grace and facility of verbal expression which was something new to the English stage. The presence of gifted writers who could take actual speech and transfer it to the stage made possible the development of the brilliant drama of the period. Since these authors were appealing only to a select few, they were enabled to

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<sup>26</sup>Nicoll, op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

employ an elegance and precision of style that would have been unattainable had they been writing for the large, popular audience of former years.

The size of the theatres, together with other physical characteristics, had (in the writer's opinion) much to do with the type of plays which evolved. There is, according to Summers, no scientific method of determining the capacity of Restoration playhouses.<sup>28</sup> We know, however, that the earlier houses were converted tennis-courts and that these tennis-courts were small. Julian Marshall, in his Annals of Tennis, mentions the length of a certain type of court as one hundred feet. The Theatre Royal in Vere Street occupied Gibbon's Tennis-Court, and the Duke's Playhouse in Lincoln's Inn Fields was a conversion of Lisle's Tennis-Court. Cibber refers to the Duke's house as "small and poorly fitted up."<sup>29</sup> It has been estimated that the first Duke's Theatre, in Portugal Street, was approximately seventy-five feet long and about thirty feet wide. The dimensions of the first Theatre Royal, in Bridges Street, are supposed to have been one hundred twelve by fifty-eight or fifty-nine feet. The new Duke's Theatre, in Dorset Garden, was probably one hundred forty by fifty-seven feet. The size of this house, though, must have been unusual, for it was considered to be of sumptuous magnificence.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Op. cit., p. 62.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 62-63.

Vanbrugh's theatre in the Haymarket was larger than the average one. But the tendency to build houses of increasing size was not felt till the middle of the following century.<sup>31</sup> A small theatre inevitably gives to audience and actors a more intimate relation than is possible in a larger house. Any actor knows that the presentation of sophisticated comedy is easier in a small house, where his slightest intonation can be heard, than in a larger place, where he may have to "pump from his diaphragm" in order to make his voice carry. It seems only natural that in the little Restoration theatres a subtle, intellectual comedy should develop.

Inside the playhouses one finds other significant points of interest. The interior of the Restoration theatre was a merging of the old Elizabethan type with the modern structure as we know it. The old playhouses had been fashioned after the inn yard, with three tiers of balconies, or boxes, extending around three sides. The main floor had been the pit, with a platform stage projecting far out into the center. At the back of this platform or fore stage, was a small rear stage with a curtain. As is well known, there was practically no scenery employed upon the Elizabethan stage. When D'Avenant began the use of scenes, he found it necessary to move the fore stage halfway back from its former position. The stage that resulted was a cross be-

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<sup>31</sup>Allardyce Nicoll, British Drama, an Historical Survey from the Beginnings to the Present Time (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1925), p. 259.

tween the modern "picture-frame" and the old platform.<sup>32</sup> There was a considerable area of rear stage, which was used for scenic background and for the beginning of scenes; and there was also a long "apron," which advanced well beyond the proscenium arch and became the field of the main action of the play.<sup>33</sup> In the second Theatre Royal, in Bridges Street, the apron projected seventeen feet into the pit.<sup>34</sup> Other aprons were evidently in proportion to the size of the houses. Summers quotes Dr. W. J. Lawrence in a comment of the advantages of the apron:

By this original Form, the usual Station of the Actors, in almost every Scene, was advanc'd at least ten Foot nearer to the Audience, than they now be; because, not only from the Stage's being shorten'd, in front, but likewise from the additional Interposition of those Stage-boxes, the Actors (in respect to the Spectators that fill them) are kept much more backward from the main Audience, than they us'd to be; But when the Actors were in Possession of that forwarder Space, to advance upon, the Voice was then more in the Center of the House, so that the most distant Ear had scarce the least Doubt, or Difficulty in hearing what fell from the weakest Utterance. All Objects were thus drawn nearer to the Sense; every painted Scene was stronger.... Nor was the minutest Motion of a Feature (properly changing with the Passion, or Humour it suited) ever lost, as they frequently must be in the Obscurity of too great a Distance; And how valuable an Advantage the Facility of hearing distinctly is to every well-acted Scene, every common Spectator is a Judge.<sup>35</sup>

The players, it may be seen, spoke most of their lines from a vantage point very close to the spectators. Thus, the intimacy afforded by the small house was increased by the use of the long

<sup>32</sup>Nicoll, A History of Restoration Drama, p. 31.

<sup>33</sup>Summers, op. cit., pp. 94, 97.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., pp. 96, 97.

"apron," and the production of subtle comedy was again facilitated.

The rear stage served principally as a scenic background for the main action which took place "down front." The new scenery employed here had, between the time of its introduction in 1656 and the close of the century, a marked effect on the structure not only of comedy, but of all drama. Elizabethan and post-Elizabethan plays had contained a multiplicity of scenes, made possible by the fact that instantaneous changes of scene could be accomplished in the imagination. Restoration playwrights inherited the tendency from their antecedents; and early Restoration drama follows, in the main, the pattern already established. The curtain in the Restoration theatre rose after the Prologue and did not fall, except in a few instances, until after the Epilogue. The end of an act was shown by a clear stage. As scenery came into prominence, conventions were developed to adapt the new background to the old dramatic form. Changes of scene were effected by the drawing together of two portions of a flat. The two flats might be drawn off, parting in the center, to begin another scene in a new setting. Sometimes a command would be given to open a door, or a character would knock, and the flats would draw to reveal a different scene.<sup>36</sup> Such devices were attempts to make possible the quick changes in scene of established dramatic form. By slow degrees, however, dramatists began to feel the influence

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., pp. 97-100.

of these very flats and curtains; and their plays gradually became less scattered in subject-matter and more coördinate in structure than older plays.<sup>37</sup>

These dramatists, in the intimate theatre of 1660 to 1700, were sensitive to all influences which affected the stage. They were closely in touch with actors and actresses of the day, and wrote many parts especially for certain ones of them. Betterton is partly responsible for the development in Restoration comedy of the contemporary, debonair gallant. He it was who first played Fainall, in Congreve's "The Way of the World," and Beaufort, in Etherege's "Love in a Tub." Charles Hart played the gay gentleman, such as Dorimant, in "Sir Fopling Flutter." James Noke excelled as a comedian, and many comic roles must have been written for him. The same is true of Cave Underhill, his companion in low comedy. Mountfort gave life to the various Sparkishes of the comedy of manners. The women of the theatre exerted, perhaps a greater influence upon comedy than did the men. We do not know exactly when the first actress appeared in England, nor who she was; but from the time of the erection of D'Avenant's and Killigrew's first houses, the actresses were fully established. The introduction of woman upon the stage led to a dominant sex element in drama. As dramatists wrote especially for the actors, so they wrote for the actresses. It is almost certain that Dryden wrote his light, airy parts for Nell Gwyn, who was his original Florimel. Mrs. Anne Bracegirdle was the inspiration

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<sup>37</sup> Nicoll, British Drama, p. 220.

for Congreve's Millamant and also for his Angelica. Mrs. Leigh impersonated specimens of wasted age, such as Lady Wishfort.<sup>38</sup> The actors and actresses, then, gave to comedy of manners a series of stock types which became an integral factor of the species.

In review, the theatrical status combines with the social aspect in stimulating the growth of intellectual comedy. The reaction against Puritanism found direct expression on the comic stage. Members of the select audience, with their blasé attitudes, were amused by viewing realistic presentations of themselves. If the vizard-masks did not have the charming "air" of Millamant, they enjoyed believing that they had; and if the beaux were not so dashing in their worldliness as Dorimant, they liked to imagine that they were. The small theatres and the close intimacy of actors and spectators furnished a perfect setting for manners comedy. The use of scenery gradually resulted in some improvement in the structure of plays. And the vital personalities of actors and actresses gave new life and originality to old humours types. The presence of writers gifted enough to take material spread before them and pattern from its warp and woof a drama, perhaps accenting here and polishing there, gave to the Restoration period its comedy of manners.

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<sup>38</sup> Nicoll, A History of Restoration Drama, pp. 64-73.

CHAPTER III  
AN EXAMINATION  
OF THE PLAYS OF ETHEREGE, WYCHERLEY, AND CONGREVE

It will be recalled that the object of this study is to trace the relation between the high comedy of the last decade of the nineteenth century and the comedy of manners as it developed in the Restoration period. In order fully to understand this vital relation, it will be advisable, at this point, to give some attention to the work of the three leading dramatists of the seventeenth century who produced comedies of manners. With Sir George Etherege, William Wycherley, and William Congreve the Restoration comedy of manners came into being and reached its perfection. Comic, realistic drama had raised its head a few times previously in the history of English dramatic literature, especially in the "humours" of Ben Jonson. But Etherege was the first to write plays about the life he saw in London, and he laughed at his handiwork in a sort of joyous abandon. Wycherley was struck with the horrid incongruities which manifested themselves to him; and as he cast them into bold relief, his laughter became satirical and even fiendish at the deformity he revealed. Congreve was a natural heir of the two earlier dramatists. It must be stated here that, chronologically, he was not of the Restoration period at all. His first play did not appear until 1693, eight years after the death of Charles II. But his work was typically and unmistakably in the Restoration spirit. His plays were a summation of the gay spontaneity of Etherege and the pointed wit

and satire of Wycherley. He added a brilliance of style that was individually Congrevian. Oscar Wilde and Henry Arthur Jones, in the eighteen nineties, sounded notes surprisingly reminiscent of Etherege, Wycherley, and Congreve. Let us, therefore, examine the work of these three men in some detail.

When Sir George Etherege's comedy, "The Comical Revenge; or, Love in a Tub" was presented at the Duke's Theatre, Lincoln's Inn Fields, in March, 1664, the Restoration audience witnessed something new in drama. After the opening of the theatres play-writing had begun again, but the companies were still largely dependent upon pre-civil war drama for repertoire. Jonson and Fletcher were popular; yet both were somewhat out of date. London was waiting, although unconsciously, to see itself upon the stage. Neither Tuke, Cowley, nor Dryden had quite hit the mark. "The Comical Revenge" was the first of the new plays to set upon the stage London's Covent Garden and Pall Mall.<sup>1</sup> The piece is a mixture of heroic rhymed drama, broad farce, and prose comedy. Although Etherege tried to keep the comic and the serious planes separate by using prose for the one and the heroic couplet and blank verse for the other, the lack of unity is objectionable. There is a love story, concerning two couples, which almost becomes a tragedy. There are some farcical episodes built around Dufoy, a French servant, and Betty, a maid; Dufoy

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<sup>1</sup>H. F. B. Brett-Smith (ed.), The Dramatic Works of Sir George Etherege ("The Percy Reprints, No. 6"; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1927), "Introduction," pp. lxx-lxxi.

has falsely blamed Betty for his melancholia, and she confines him in a tub for punishment. There is a comic duel which is reminiscent of Jonson and prophetic of Sheridan. And there is an amusing affair between Sir Frederick Frollick, who refuses to be caught, and the Widow Rich, who tries to hide the fact that she is chasing. The widow finally succeeds in getting her man. The comic scenes of the play were recognized immediately as something different and something real.<sup>2</sup> Here was contemporary London. Action took place in Sir Frederick's bedchamber, Lord Bevill's house, a tavern, Covent Garden. In the second scene Sir Frederick was taken to task by Jenny, a maid, for his misdemeanors of the night before. This was a situation with which the gallants in the pit were familiar. The dialogue had the flavor of every-day talk. When Jenny remonstrated "Unhand me; are you a man to be trusted with a woman's reputation?," Sir Frederick replied, "Not when I am in a reeling condition; men are now and then subject to those infirmities in drink, which women have when th' are sober....."<sup>3</sup> This was the first of a type of epigram which was to amuse audiences for the rest of the century and was to be revived some two hundred years later. Here is the beginning of the comedy of manners. Sir Frederick and the Widow originate a line of witty heroes and heroines who pursue each other and resist each other through Restoration

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<sup>2</sup> Brett-Smith, op. cit., p. lxxiii.

<sup>3</sup> "The Comical Revenge" (The Dramatic Works of Sir George Etherege, ed., H. F. B. Brett-Smith, I), Act I, sc. ii.

comedy. The widow is in love with Sir Frederick; but once she has arranged a meeting, she ridicules him:

Sir Frederick. Whither, whither do you draw me, Widow? What's your design?

Widow. To walk a turn in the Garden, and then repose in a cool Arbour.

Sir Frederick. Widow, I dare not venture myself in those amorous shades; you have a mind to be talking of Love I perceive, and my heart's too tender to be trusted with such conversation.

Widow. I did not imagine you were so foolishly conceited; is it your Wit or your Person, Sir, that is so taking?<sup>4</sup>

Later Sir Frederick scores a point:

Sir Frederick. By those lips, \_\_\_\_\_

Widow. Nay, pray forbear, Sir.

Sir Frederick. Who's conceited now, Widow? Cou'd you imagine I was so fond as to kiss them?<sup>5</sup>

In the end the Widow triumphs, for although Sir Frederick has made her admit her fondness, he succumbs at last to her charms. In such comic dialogues Etherege created a model for realistic comedy which both he and later dramatists improved upon.

"She wou'd if she cou'd" was produced at the Duke's Theatre, Lincoln's Inn Fields, on February 6, 1667/8. At first it was not as successful as the former play, but later its merit was recognized.<sup>6</sup> With this play Etherege gave up the heroic and farcical mixture, and achieved unified comedy. The play has a complicated intrigue which sometimes becomes tiresome, but the ridiculous situations resulting are almost worth the confusion. The settings, again, are realistic. The first act opens in

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., Act II, sc. i.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Brett-Smith, op. cit., xvi, xviii.

Courtall's dining room, with Courtall and Freeman discussing their feminine acquaintances. This type of conversation, it may be noted, is found somewhere near the beginning of most comedies of manners. The two men are interrupted by the announcement that a gentlewoman is below, and Freeman is promptly shuffled into a closet so that the interview may be private. The visitor proves to be Mrs. Sentry, Lady Cockwood's maid, who has come to inform Courtall that her mistress is in town and that he may visit her. The arrival of Sir Oliver Cockwood, the husband, cuts short their conversation; Sentry, therefore, creeps into a wood-hole. Thus the audience sees one person hiding from another, and the second person hiding from a third. This kind of situation, with still more comic effects, was repeated many times in Restoration comedy. Etherege uses it again, to better advantage, in the last scene of the play, when Freeman has answered the lady's transferred invitation by a visit in person. When Courtall is suddenly announced, Freeman is immediately put into a closet; and as soon as Sir Oliver is heard without, Courtall is popped under a table. When Sir Oliver starts to look under the table for an orange he has dropped, Sentry grabs the candle and runs from the room with Sir Oliver after her. While they are gone, Lady Cockwood is forced to move Courtall into the very closet which Freeman is occupying. Such predicaments might be said to add a further touch of realism to comedy, for although highly improbable, they are just within the range of possibility. The Lady Cockwood in question is the person in the play who "wou'd

if she cou'd." She is the first of a "long series of studies in fashionable virtue coquetting with fashionable vice."<sup>7</sup> Since Courtall and Freeman both succeed in evading her, she finally decides, in desperation, to cease her amorous pursuits. Her decision, coming as it does from her utter failure, is as amusing today as it was many years ago. The high comedy scenes of the play, however, are found in the double love affair between Courtall, Freeman, Gatty, and Ariana. These characters do not have a great deal of individuality. As Perry has remarked, "It takes some time to discover whether Courtall is to fall in love with Gatty and Freeman with Ariana, or vice versa, and when one does realize the lay of the land, it seems after all a matter of small importance."<sup>8</sup> The fireworks of wit among the four people, the thrusts and counter-thrusts, the advancements and retreatings are the sources of the charm. With these two couples, Etherege continued and elaborated the pattern he had set with Sir Frederick and the Widow. In this play he improved upon his former work because he stayed with his comic intent and achieved unity. For this reason the play may be called the first English comedy of manners.

His last play, however, so far surpasses the two former ones that it has become for posterity a symbol of manners comedy.

<sup>7</sup> John Palmer, The Comedy of Manners (London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1913), p. 67.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Ten Eyck Perry, The Comic Spirit in Restoration Drama (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1925), pp. 24-25.

"The Man of Mode; or, Sir Fopling Flutter" was a great success from the time of its first presentation at the Duke's House, Dorset Garden, on March 11, 1676. Time had elapsed. Etherege had learned more about this Restoration society of which he was a part. He had acquired more skill in handling his material. "The Man of Mode" is a brilliant achievement. Never once does it falter. It moves along surely and gracefully from opening scene to final curtain. There is plentiful intrigue; there are ridiculous situations; but these elements do not interfere with the simplicity of presentation. Dorimant and Harriet are the culmination of Etherege's lovers. Dorimant represents the acme of Restoration gallantry. If he appears too promiscuous and faithless and heartless for our modern taste, we must bear in mind that the Restoration gentleman was a licentious creature and the the Restoration woman met him on his own ground. She was supposed to be equipped for the battle. If she relented instead of making him submit to a legal ceremony, then she had no reason to be surprised when he grew weary. So Dorimant could be very "wicked" in his affairs with Mrs. Loveit and Belinda, and still remain the ideal lover for a fresh young girl from the country. Harriet Woodvil is the cleverest and the most charming of Etherege's women. The dramatist varies his pattern here a little. In "Love in a Tub" Sir Frederick pretends to resist the Widow; in "She wou'd if she cou'd" Courtall and Freeman give over their freedom with reluctance; but Dorimant openly pursues Harriet, and she keeps him guessing. She, like the Widow, is the one to

start the game; but once she has it started, she retreats. At their first encounter in the "Mail," when Dorimant begins to pay her compliments, she turns to Harry with "Mr. Bellair! let us walk, 'tis time to leave him, men grow dull when they begin to be particular." Strangely enough, she does not leave. The conversation goes on:

Dorimant. Y'are mistaken, flattery will not ensue, though I know y'are greedy of the praises of the whole Mail.

Harriet. You do me wrong.

Dorimant. I do not; as I follow'd you, I observ'd how you were pleased when the Fops cry'd She's handsome, very handsome, by God she is, and whisper'd aloud your name; the thousand several forms you put your face into; then, to make yourself more agreeable, how wantonly you play'd with your head, flung back your locks, and looked smilingly over your shoulder at 'em.

Harriet. I do not go begging the mens as you do the Ladies Good liking, with a sly softness in your looks, and a gentle slowness in your bows, as you pass by 'em \_\_\_\_\_ as thus, Sir \_\_\_\_\_ [Acts him.  
Is not this like you?<sup>9</sup>

Harriet never lets up in her banter. Later in the same evening, when Dorimant speaks of love, she says to him:

When your Love's grown strong enough to make you bear being laugh'd at, I'll give you leave to trouble me with it. Till when pray forbear, Sir.<sup>10</sup>

Even in the last scene, she maintains her aloofness. Dorimant asks if he may not hope; and her reply is, "That depends on you, and not on me, and 'tis to no purpose to forbid it."<sup>11</sup> By the use of asides Etherege makes the audience certain that

<sup>9</sup>"The Man of Mode," Act III, sc. ii.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., Act IV, sc. i.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., Act V, sc. ii.

Harriet really dotes upon her lover. Thus the conflict becomes all the more pleasing. The portrait of Sir Fopling is of minor importance. He is, certainly, an exquisite creation. He was recognized as a consummate representation of the follies and eccentricities of the Restoration dandy. The deferring of his entrance until the third act is a masterly stroke. Still, in this play, as in the other two, the spirited sex-battle consumes the interest, and an alluring woman dominates the story. In each instance she begins the chase, retracts, and comes off with the laurels. The comment may be ventured that in this respect the comedies of Etherege are basically moral. In spite of the fact that heroes are loose and profligate, in spite of the courtesans from Jenny to Mrs. Loveit, and regardless of the unanimous verdict of critics that Restoration comedy was "unmoral" or "immoral," Etherege's heroines remain virtuous. The Widow, Gatty, Ariana, and Harriet have the cleverness to call the hands of their passionate lovers and bring them at last into submissiveness to convention. This is not so far from twentieth century practice. The victory is accomplished in "The Man of Mode" with graceful style and skillful construction. Etherege's laughter is unselfconscious. His play is a brilliant comedy of manners.

Wycherley's plays deal with the same real world that those of Etherege joyously portray. Yet Wycherley did not fit so easily into this gay period as did his contemporary. Palmer has stated that he was "a Restoration gentleman, not born, but made," that he usually accepted the pageant of life before him,

but that at times he could not help seeing through the spectacle and shouting forth his disgust.<sup>12</sup> Through his plays runs a current of satire and invective that becomes revolting at its highest pitch. But there is present, also, a pointed wit, a sure intellectuality, and a clear structure that have their place in the comedy of manners. His first play, "Love in a Wood; or, St. James's Park" (The Theatre Royal, Bridges Street, ca., April, 1671) was a mingling of sentimental comedy with satire. It is interesting to note that Etherege, previously, had made a similar mistake, and that both men rectified the error in later works. In the Wycherley play the resulting lack of unity in atmosphere is rather bad. The exposure of vice in the comic scenes is so fierce and scathing that the noble suffering of Christina is out of harmony. Even the supposed comedy lacks joyousness. The comic characters, bordering as they do upon "humours," are only to be despised. A few cynically pointed epigrams are rather good; but these are almost lost in the general hodge-podge.

"The Gentleman Dancing-Master" (The Duke's House, Dorset Garden, ca., January, 1672) is the most charming, though not the most perfect, of Wycherley's plays. Hippolita makes a typical little Restoration heroine. She sets out to have a love affair, and she has it. A small matter such as telling a falsehood to help her plan along does not bother her in the least.

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<sup>12</sup>Op. cit., pp. 93-94. See also pp. 120-121.

Her intrigues are numerous----- and successful. The plot gets well under way in the first scene when she persuades her fiance, Monsieur de Paris, to trick a handsome gentleman into coming to see her. When the gentleman arrives, she is much too wise to throw herself at him. Young and unpracticed as she is, she quickly learns to dissemble. And the dissembling wins Mr. Gerrard. Later she even promises to elope with him; and when the appointed time comes, she refuses. All turns out well in the end. The old Spanish Don of a father, who has been fooled into believing Gerrard a dancing-master, gives the two a handsome settlement. The jilted fiance decides just to keep a mistress, although marriage is somewhat cheaper. The atmosphere of the play is consistently light. Action is condensed into a little over two days' time, with all the scenes, but one, taking place in the same house. There are only eight scenes in the entire play (a marked improvement over the twenty six changes in Etherege's first piece). The funniest situations center around Monsieur de Paris, who thinks he is playing a huge joke on Don Diego and Gerrard, while all the time Hippolita and Gerrard are fooling him. Wycherley's satire on imitators, both of Spanish customs and French manners, is probably a little malicious; but his wit is always pointed and laugh-provoking. Sometimes the wit is delicate, as in the argument between Mrs. Caution and Hippolita:

Hippolita. ....Indeed, aunt, I did not only dream, but I was pleased with my dream when I awaked.

Mrs. Caution. Oh, is that all? \_\_\_\_ Nay, if a dream only will please you, you are a modest young woman still: but have care of a vision.

Hippolita. Ay; but to be delighted when we wake with a naughty dream, is a sin, aunt; and I am so very scrupulous, that I would as soon consent to a naughty man as to a naughty dream.<sup>13</sup>

At other times the points are less subtle, but keener edged, as in Monsieur de Paris's "For you must know, 'tis as ill breeding now to speak good Englis as to write good Englis, good sense, or a good hand."<sup>14</sup> Always Wycherley makes his point and causes us to laugh with him because we have thought with him.

His next play, "The Country Wife," appeared some time between 1672 and 1674/5. In unity and in artistry it surpasses all of his other plays. It has been noisily and justly condemned for its immorality, and the criticism may not be denied. The principal motive is hideous. Our first impulse is to turn away and not to finish reading. But as we go on and reach the conclusion, we see a clean-cut, perfect oneness about the whole thing. We pause in surprised admiration. Horner's revolting plan was to spread the report that he was an eunuch and thus to make his cuckolding of husbands safer. The scheme worked. Men even encouraged his close friendship with their wives. Mr. and Mrs. Pinchwife, just in from the country, had not heard the tale. Thus Horner's flattery of Margery and her naïve interest in him gave Pinchwife many turbulent hours. Finally, with a trick suggested by the maid, Margery inveigled her husband to take her to

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<sup>13</sup>"The Gentleman Dancing-Master" (William Wycherley, ed. W. C. Ward, "The Mermaid Series," London: Vizetelly and Co., 1888), Act I, sc. i.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., Act I, sc. ii.

Horner's lodgings and leave her. When Pinchwife returned and discovered his mistake, he was greatly alarmed; but Horner's physician soon calmed him with the explanation that Horner was utterly harmless. And so the husband took his wife home again. The irony strikes one in the face. The skill with which the various threads are woven into a unit commands applause. The success of Horner's scheme gives Wycherley opportunity for some of his cruelest satire, particularly on the lewdness of women in general. The author's attitude toward Pinchwife, however, is not far from the modern view of a husband who regards his wife as personal property. In this play, one can almost agree with Elia that the whole story is impossible. If Mr. Horner is modeled upon a type of Restoration Gentleman, surely no such project as his ever took place. He and his companions are natives of a sort of "Cloud-Cuckooland," far removed from actuality.<sup>15</sup> The realistic treatment of an impossible situation results in a masterpiece of buffoonery and a classic perfection of structure.

"The Plain Dealer" (produced between 1674 and 1676) is so cruel, so terrible, and so awful that it can hardly be termed a comedy at all. The Comic Spirit becomes an imprisoned Caliban, striking out against the sham and hypocrisy which confine it. Through Manly, Wycherley hurls his invective, sparing nothing that comes in his path. There is one splendidly satirical scene in which the author brings to account the critics of "The Country

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<sup>15</sup>Palmer, op. cit., pp. 128-129.

Wife." But in the rest of the play, laughter is actually painful. If Wycherley had lived in another age he might have become a great tragic writer. Happily, for the Comic Muse, he stayed with realistic comedy. He contributed to this form of drama piercing intellectuality, barbed wit, and improved structure.

William Congreve was, in some respects, closely related to Etherege and Wycherley. He had as keen an intellect as William Wycherley. He saw through life as clearly as ever Wycherley did. But human follies did not bother him personally. His attitude was one of smiling disdain. So he was as happy a man perhaps as Etherege. He borrowed from each of his predecessors, assimilating and carrying to new heights the type of work which they had begun. He was exceedingly fortunate in the moment of the appearance of his first play. Seventeen years had passed since the last production of Etherege, and fifteen since the last play of Wycherley. The type of plays was changing. The town gave eager welcome to this young dramatist who showed promise of continuing the former tradition of manners.<sup>16</sup> In the first scene of Congreve's first play the characters talk as if they had stepped out of the pages of Etherege. "The Old Bachelor" opens with the meeting of Bellmour and Vainlove on the street. Within a few lines Vainlove is making an epigram: "Ay, ay, wisdom's nothing but a

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<sup>16</sup> Joseph Wood Krutch (ed.), The Comedies of William Congreve ("The Modern Readers' Series," ed. Ashley H. Thorndike; New York: Macmillan Co., 1927), "Introduction," p. viii.

pretending to know and believe more than we really do."<sup>17</sup> A dual love story, similar to that in "She wou'd if she cou'd," is introduced. Two pairs of lovers vie with each other in repartee. Although the dialogue between Belinda and Bellmour is much like that of Sir Frederick and the Widow, the manner begins to assert the real Congreve:

Belinda. Prithee hold thy tongue \_\_\_\_\_ lard, he has so pester'd me with flames and stuff \_\_\_\_\_ I think I shan't endure the sight of a fire this twelvemonth.

Bellmour. Yet all can't melt that cruel frozen heart.

Belinda. O gad I hate your hideous fancy \_\_\_\_\_ you said that once before \_\_\_\_\_ if you must talk impertinently, for heavens sake let it be with variety; don't come always, like the devil, wrapt in flames \_\_\_\_\_ I'll not hear a sentence more, that begins with an, I burn \_\_\_\_\_ or an, I beseech you, madam.

Bellmour. But tell me how you would be ador'd \_\_\_\_\_ I am very tractable.

Belinda. Then know, I would be ador'd in silence.

Bellmour. Humph, I thought so, that you might have all the talk to yourself.....<sup>18</sup>

The Fondlewife episodes read very much like Wycherley; only they are more subtle \_\_\_\_\_ and more suggestive. One gets another trace of Wycherley in the character of Heartwell, the old bachelor, who despises the female sex but is drawn to a woman of questionable reputation. The satire, however, is quiet and reserved. Captain Bluffe, the coward, reminds us again of Jonson's Bobadill. He is probably not so well handled as Etherege's Nicholas Cully. Neither is Congreve particularly skillful in drawing the several distinct plots together. Nevertheless, the stories are rather

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<sup>17</sup>"The Old Bachelor" (The Comedies of William Congreve, ed. J. W. Krutch), Act I, sc. i.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., Act II, sc. iii.

easily followed. The play (produced at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, in January, 1693) was a tremendous success. Dryden said "he had never seen such a first play in his life."<sup>19</sup> Congreve had made a place for himself on the theatrical horizon.

His second comedy, "The Double Dealer," produced in November of the same year, was not so fortunate in its reception by the popular audience.<sup>20</sup> Some of the critics, however, recognized its merits.<sup>21</sup> In one respect, the construction of the play is remarkable. It is in one scene throughout, with the exception of the drawing off in Act Four to reveal Lady Touchwood's chamber, and the closing at the end of the act to bring us back to the original scene. This basic scene is a "gallery in the LORD TOUCHWOOD'S house, with chambers adjoining." The drawing off in the middle of Act Four "shews LADY TOUCHWOOD'S Chamber." At the close of the act, the scene "shuts," and the remaining action takes place on the "gallery." This handling of the unity of place is a masterful achievement for the seventeenth century. The atmosphere of the play suffers in comparison. The main plot is a little heavy for a comedy. Maskwell is too black a villain. Lady Touchwood is too diabolical in motive. Congreve probably realized the danger, for he elaborated the lighter scenes. He wove the whole together with considerable skill. Basically, the plot is single.

<sup>19</sup>Palmer, op. cit., p. 146.

<sup>20</sup>Krutch, op. cit., "Introduction," p. ix.

<sup>21</sup>Palmer, op. cit., pp. 179-180.

It concerns the love affair between Cynthia and Mellefont. The villainy is an attempt to prevent the marriage, and the comedy scenes are results of the attempt. In this play Congreve attained a chemical fusion of his borrowings from Etherege and Wycherley.<sup>22</sup> The comic dialogue retains the gay charm of Etherege and the unfailing satire of Wycherley. It has also a finish, a subtle phraseology, that is individually Congreve. Examples are numerous. The discourse between Mellefont and Cynthia on their approaching marriage foreshadows a more brilliant scene that Congreve was to write in the future. On a lower plane, but delightful in its comic effectiveness, is a scene between Lady Froth and Mr. Brisk:

Lady Froth. ....But did you talk of love? O Parnassus! Who would have thought Mr. Brisk could have been in love, ha, ha, ha. O Heav'ns I thought you cou'd have no mistress but the nine Muses.

Brisk. No more I have i' gad, for I adore 'em all in your Ladyship\_\_\_\_\_let me perish, I don't know whether to be splenatick, or airy upon't; the deuce take me if I can tell whether I am glad or sorry that your Ladyship has made the discovery.

Lady Froth. O be merry by all means\_\_\_\_\_Prince Volscius in Love! Ha, Ha, ha.

Brisk. O barbarous, to turn me into ridicule! Yet, ha, ha, ha. The deuce take me, I can't help laughing myself, ha, ha, ha, ah; yet by Heav'ns I have a violent passion for your Ladyship, seriously.

Lady Froth. Ha, ha, ha! What d'ye think I laugh at? Ha, ha, ha,

Brisk. Me i' gad, ha, ha.

Lady Froth. No the deuce take me if I don't laugh at myself; for hang me if I have not a violent passion for Mr. Brisk, ha, ha, ha.

Brisk. Seriously?

Lady Froth. Seriously, ha, ha, ha.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., pp. 180-181.

<sup>23</sup>"The Double Dealer," Act IV, sc. vi.

In such dialogues Congreve had come into his own.

"Love for Love," acted at the new theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields in April, 1695, was Congreve's most successful play. One reason may be that the story is a good one. Although loosely put together, it sustains interest to the last. It centers around Valentine and his love for Angelica. Congreve, varying the usual pattern, lets Valentine do all the pursuing. In fact, he nearly overdoes Angelica's reserve, for one never feels quite sure whether she loves Valentine or not. The hero's father intends to disinherit him and make his sailor son, Ben, his heir. To thwart the plan and to test his lady's indifference, Valentine feigns madness. Angelica outwits him and threatens to marry his old father. Miss Prue Foresight, who is supposed to marry Ben, has a rough and tumble affair with Mr. Tattle. Mrs. Frail sets her cap for Ben, but loses interest when his financial prospects grow dim. She is finally tricked into a masked marriage with Mr. Tattle. At last Valentine, taking Angelica at her word, offers to sign away his inheritance to please her; and she, convinced of his sincerity, tears up the document in her possession and declares that she has loved him all the time. The sudden announcement is not very convincing, but perhaps that did not matter to the Restoration audience. The success of the production may be due, also, to the fact that the dramatis personae include several excellent "character" parts. The crude sailor Ben, the superstitious old Foresight, the hoydenish Miss Prue, the clever (though immoral) Mrs. Frail-----all these delineations make for

"good theatre." Congreve runs on in a careless, easy style. He continues to produce amusing situations, to create witty dialogues. Always he entertains and pleases.

"The Way of the World," produced at the turn of the century, brought the author's career to a brilliant close. It did not have as warm a reception as the former play, probably because it was too finished a creation for the audience. The gradual change in this audience from the time of the Restoration era will be discussed in the next chapter. It is sufficient, here, to say that the spectators in the year 1700 were not entirely of the upper circle as they had previously been. The play concerns an exclusive society. Undoubtedly it would have succeeded if it could have been presented to the select audience of a few years back.<sup>24</sup> "The Way of the World" consummates Restoration comedy of manners. The plot is slight; the atmosphere is artificial; the characters are not flesh and blood; but the whole is clean-cut and polished. Three scenes furnish the setting for the entire play. The slight (though complicated) plot is hardly important compared with the exquisite manners of the people it concerns. Millamant and Mirabell love each other, but their marriage is hindered by the Lady's tyrannical old aunt, Lady Wishfort. The intrigues with which the opposition is got out of the way form the basis of the story. These people breathe a very air of artificiality. Real values do not exist. The purpose of life is to talk, if one can,

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<sup>24</sup>Palmer, op. cit., p. 189.

like Mirabell and Millamant. Although the two lovers have no more reality than most of their prototypes, they have become the essence of what the fine lady and the fine gentleman ought to be. Millamant's affections have already been won. Mirabell has proposed marriage and been accepted. Still Millamant would be pursued to the last. Their discussion of their coming marriage has been quoted many times. Always it retains its charm.

Millamant. ....O, I hate a lover, that can dare to think he draws a moment's air, independent on the bounty of his mistress. There is not so impudent a thing in mature, as the sawcy look of an assured man, confident of success. The pedantick arrogance of a very husband, has not so pragmatistical an air. Ah! I'll never marry, unless I am first made sure of my will and pleasure.

Mirabell. Would you have 'em both before marriage? Or will you be contented with the first now, and stay for the other 'till after grace?

Millamant. Ah don't be impertinent \_\_\_\_\_ my dear liberty, shall I leave thee? My faithful solitude, my darling contemplation, must I bid you then adieu? Ay-h adieu \_\_\_\_\_ my morning thoughts, agreeable wakings, indolent slumbers, all ye douceurs, ve someils du matin, adieu \_\_\_\_\_ I can't do't, 'tis more than impossible \_\_\_\_\_ positively Mirabell, I'll lye a-bed in a morning as long as I please.

Mirabell. Then I'll get up in a morning as early as I please.

Millamant. Ah! Idle creature, get up when you will \_\_\_\_\_ and d'ye hear, I won't be call'd names after I'm marry'd; positively I won't be call'd names.

Mirabell. Names!

Millamant. Ay, as wife, spouse, my dear, joy, jewel, love, sweet-heart, and the rest of that nauseous cant, in which men and their wives are so fulsomly familiar, \_\_\_\_\_ I shall never bear that....<sup>25</sup>

On she goes and lists other requirements. Never does she lose her delightful poise. Never does Mirabell lack the right word at the right time. He is quite as adept in rejoinder with the men as with the women. Take for example his retorts after

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<sup>25</sup> "The Way of the World," Act IV, sc. v.

Witwoud has spoken of his own brother as a fool.

Mirabell. A fool, and your brother, Witwoud.

Witwoud. Ay, ay, my half brother. My half brother he is, no nearer upon honour.

<sup>26</sup> Mirabell. Then 'tis possible he may be but half a fool.

Brilliant dialogue sparkles through the piece with no remark that does not fit and no point that does not bring its laugh. The style is consistently fine. The play is a superb conclusion to seventeenth century comedy of manners. Already sources of decadence had begun. The spirit of the piece was not recaptured until Oscar Wilde, one hundred ninety-five years later, realized again "the importance of not being earnest."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., Act I, sc. vi.

<sup>27</sup> Malcolm Elwin, The Playgoer's Handbook to Restoration Drama (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928), p. 175.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE DISAPPEARANCE OF PURE COMEDY UNDER THE RISING TIDE OF SENTIMENTALISM

In order to account for the reappearance of the comedy of manners in the eighteenth century, it will be necessary to go into some of the most apparent reasons for the decline of this form of drama in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As the development of the species can be traced to conditions inherent in the social and dramatic background of the Restoration period, so the decline of comedy in the years following may be explained in the complete change in social and theatrical aspects of the times. During the Restoration period the important people, socially and economically, were the aristocrats. Since land formed the basis of wealth, the landed aristocracy held the reins of power. There came, however, a complete reversal of the social order. The change had begun in the late seventeenth century, though it was hardly perceptible at first. The Act of 1661 had practically abolished the last traces of feudalism. It had "turned all tenures of estates in land, other than copyholds, into 'free and common socage.'" Thus lords of manors, who had been hereditary servants of the State, became "proprietors, continually enriched by the increase of rents."<sup>1</sup> The Revolution of 1688, which deposed James II and brought William of Orange to the throne

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<sup>1</sup>Slater, The Growth of Modern England, p. 2.

of England, had started the nation upon a new era of limited monarchy and parliamentary government.<sup>2</sup> The seventeenth century had seen an amazing growth in foreign trade. Various trading companies had either reorganized or extended their activities. Money was the medium of exchange. It was to become the basis of wealth. When the Bank of England was established in 1694, the commercial system was provided with a central ganglion. These conditions gave opportunity for the man of the middle class to gain equal footing in the economic world with his aristocratic superiors. The change began to make itself felt in the closing years of the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century the rise of the middle class became one of the most outstanding phases of the social history of England. As trading companies flourished, their members amassed huge private fortunes.<sup>3</sup> These members were not necessarily of noble blood. The acquisition of wealth did not require a title, although titles were sometimes conferred upon men who had achieved financial success. The purpose of the entire country in these years appeared to be the getting of money.<sup>4</sup> The whole-hearted pursuit of material aims produced great achievements in industry as well as in commerce. Inventions, which followed one another in rapid succession, led to the discard of the domestic system of manufacturing and the development of the fac-

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<sup>2</sup>A. S. Turbeville, English Men and Manners in the Eighteenth Century (2nd ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), pp. 13-14.

<sup>3</sup>J. S. Shapiro, Modern and Contemporary European History (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1918), pp. 400-401.

<sup>4</sup>Slater, op. cit., p. 3.

tory system. This change, which extended far into the nineteenth century, is sometimes called the industrial revolution. From its beginnings it fostered the rise of a group of wealthy factory owners who, with the prosperous tradesmen, bankers, and other successful men, became the capitalist class. Many of the capitalists were from the group of more prosperous townsmen; some were draftsmen who had applied their ingenuity in the new industrial order.<sup>5</sup> With money came power, not only in economic, but in political and social groups. Some of the townsmen, not quite so fortunate as their capitalist brothers, gained affluence on a smaller scale. In the rapidly growing cities they found places as shopkeepers and professional men with considerable money-making opportunities.<sup>6</sup> The great middle class had come into its own.

These middle class people exerted more and more influence on the world about them. All forms of literature felt their presence. From the closing years of the seventeenth century these people came into the theatres in ever increasing numbers. Since the beginning of the decline of the comedy of manners can be traced to their presence in the audience, it will be well to consider some of their points of view and their ideals. Attitudes of a newly rich middle class are likely to be quite different from those of an old aristocracy. It has been said that

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<sup>5</sup>Schapiro, op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

mankind may be divided into two classes, "tender-minded" people and "tough-minded" people. The tender-minded group is able to imagine itself in the place of a less fortunate division of humanity, to feel what people on lower levels may be feeling. The tough-minded section is apt not to feel, but to think. If there are in the world human beings who are suffering, the reason may be found in the slothfulness or lack of cleverness of those very human beings. At any rate, the tough-minded man cannot bother about the condition. It may be seen that an aristocracy, accustomed to recognized superiority, naturally tends to have a more or less tough-minded attitude, and that even an affluent middle class, which may personally have experienced some deprivation, leans toward the tender-minded view. This tender-mindedness is the basis of sentimentalism; it has connection with an earnest moral viewpoint; and it is, as a general rule, characteristic of the middle class. In a sincere form it is, of course, a noble thing. When it becomes maudlin and self-conscious, it is not only hypocritical, but destructive. Through the eighteenth century, evidences of real sentimentalism, as expressed in genuine humanitarianism, existed side by side with the attitude in its degenerate form. During the early years members of wealthy capitalist families, often intermarrying with the nobility, mimicked the fashions and vices of the aristocracy. With their imitations they retained middle class ideals and moral standards.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Nicoll, British Drama, p. 261.

This condition made for a general hypocrisy and lowering of morale. Affectation took the place of intellectuality. Men became interested not in witty jests and pointed epigrams, but in wigs and shoes and ribbons.<sup>8</sup> Men's attitude toward women changed. They began to look upon members of the opposite sex as playthings, to be flattered, humored, and trifled with. The women, accepting the opinion, centered their minds upon trivialities. They had lost their intellectual power. There were, to be sure, some notable exceptions, such as Lady Mary Montagu, Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu, Fanny Burney, Hannah More, and at the end of the century, Mary Wollstonecraft.<sup>9</sup> The activities of these women, however, with their struggles for intellectual equality, serve only to accentuate the slight value that man placed upon the mind of woman. Toward the latter part of the century men and women became somewhat more decorous in their manners than they had been in the early years.<sup>10</sup> At any rate the cloak of decency appeared to be of slightly thicker material. In these years, also, Rousseauesque theories of humanitarianism came to England from France and had great influence on English thinking.<sup>11</sup> Some private philanthropy became noticeable. Social reforms increased.<sup>12</sup> The nineteenth

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 282.

<sup>9</sup>Turberville, op. cit., pp. 109-110.

<sup>10</sup>Allardyce Nicoll, A History of Late Eighteenth Century Drama 1750-1800 (Cambridge University Press, 1927), p. 5.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>12</sup>Turberville, op. cit., p. 8.

century saw the continuation of these trends. The Reform Bill of 1832 gave supreme political power to the middle classes, and the years following are sometimes called the era of reform in England.<sup>13</sup> The slave trade had been done away with in 1806. In 1833 a law was passed to abolish slavery throughout the empire. The Poor Law was reformed in 1834. By 1861 there were marked improvements in prison conditions as well as in the criminal code. Great advance was made in popular education. Various laws for factory reform were passed. These data simply illustrate the fact that Englishmen had become increasingly conscious of their fellow men. This was an age of great religious zeal. It was the time of the Oxford movement, the Christian Socialist movement, and the reestablishment of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England. The reign of Victoria, beginning in 1837, had a stabilizing effect on the life of the country. The Queen was an able ruler and a determined woman. She had definite ideas of proper conduct, which coincided with current moral and religious views. Her marriage to Prince Albert was one of affection. To the great mass of English people the royal pair became a model of domestic virtue and happiness. The Victorian era, with its passion for propriety and its moral earnestness, was, in part at least, a culmination of middle class standards and ideals.

The complete change in the face of the English social order was a gradual development. Its influence on the theatre

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<sup>13</sup>Schapiro, op. cit., p. 61.

was not outwardly noticeable in the closing years of the seventeenth century, although drama already was beginning to feel its impress. The playhouses still appeared to be filled with the aristocracy. But this aristocracy, as has been noted, was intermarrying with wealthy members of the middle class. Tradesmen, thus, were entering the theatres and were bringing with them their middle-class tenets and precepts, cloaked over by their imitations and affectations. Men's interest in fashion rather than in intellectuality, their patronizing attitude toward women, their general sentimental viewpoints (whether true or false), gave the death blow to the comedy of manners. The fact that playwrights began to spring from the rising class had a positive influence upon developments. There came upon the stage a generation of helpless, delicate heroines and strong, noble heroes. Dialogue became enervated. Gone was the old sparkle of wit in conversation, though some dramatists tried to keep it alive. Wickedness and immorality might exist through a drama, but always there had to be a conclusion which showed beyond a doubt that virtue triumphed in the end. This became an age of fifth-act repentances and reformations. Sentimental drama had stifled intellectual comedy. Toward the close of the century increasing decorum in the audience caused still more excessive sensibility and even prudery in plays.<sup>14</sup> A reaction against mawkish sentimentality flared up in the work of Goldsmith and Sheridan. But moral earnestness be-

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<sup>14</sup>Nicoll, A History of Late Eighteenth Century Drama, pp. 15-17.

came more marked in the early nineteenth century than it had ever been before.<sup>15</sup> In the days of early and mid-Victorian seriousness men almost forgot how to laugh. Comedy did not lift its head until a definite reaction had set in.

Another theatrical condition joined with the change in audience to keep the comedy of manners off the stage for many years. There was a decided tendency after the middle of the eighteenth century to build theatres of increasing size. The tendency, it is true, had started back in the reign of Charles II with the erection of Dorset Garden playhouse, and was continued by Vanbrugh in his theatre in the Haymarket. But in those early years this was countered by the fact that smaller houses continued to spring up and achieve more popularity than the larger theatres. The Licensing Act of 1737, however, silenced the lesser houses (technically, if not actually); and the drama centered in Drury Lane, Covent Garden, and the Haymarket. With increasing audiences these theatres grew in size until they reached vast dimensions. A time came when subtle acting was no longer possible, when actors had to roar to far distant galleries in order to be heard.<sup>16</sup> Melodrama, spectacle, and musical extravaganza flourished in this setting. Delicate comedy, however, does not "go over" in such a situation; and the situation was not corrected until 1843, when the Act "for regulating theatres"

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 15-16.

<sup>16</sup>Nicoll, British Drama, pp. 259-260.

destroyed the monopoly of the two patent houses.<sup>17</sup> Sentimental attitudes drove the comedy of manners from the stage. The increasing size of the theatres, from 1737 to 1843, placed an almost insurmountable difficulty in the way of revival.

Since this study is dealing with the revival of the manners style which came in the eighteen nineties, it will not be necessary to discuss the various authors who tried to keep alive the spirit of comedy in the early eighteenth century, nor to mention those who carried on the sentimental movement in later years. The statement must be made, however, that honest sentimentalism should not be condemned too heartily. While it paralyzed the growth of the comedy of manners for a long period of time, it marked an attempt of dramatists to get inside of the hearts and minds of men and women instead of dealing with them on the surface. The workings of the human mind and the tricks of the human heart can have their comic aspects. But dramatists of these years did not quite see the point. Even in their comedies the sentimental element continued to be serious. Oliver Goldsmith and Richard Brinsley Sheridan, with a few other writers in the seventeen sixties and seventies, took a reactionary stand against over-emphasis on "feeling" in drama. Yet Goldsmith's two plays are themselves permeated with an atmosphere of sentiment. Two of Sheridan's plays, however, are very much in the spirit of the Restoration comedy of manners. They are called by some

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 338.

critics phenomena of their age. Though purged of immorality, they have a continuous sparkle of wit; and though both have definitely sentimental endings, they remain gay and carefree. "The Rivals" (1775) presents a number of delightful, if overdrawn, "humours" characters. Mrs. Malaprop, "with her select words so ingeniously misapplied,"<sup>18</sup> is never to be forgotten when once she is known. Bob Acres is a thoroughly ludicrous specimen of the Bobadill and Nicholas Cully type. "The School for Scandal" (1777) is a better comedy than "The Rivals." Here Sheridan almost beats the Restoration writers at their own game of heaping up intrigue after intrigue until the plot appears hopelessly entangled. The screen scene, in which he adds suspense to suspense and then starts the unwinding process, is one of the most brilliant episodes in English comedy. After the production of this play the comedy of manners in England was silent for over a century. It did not raise its head again until a definite reaction set in and a change in theatrical conditions had been effected.

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<sup>18</sup>"The Rivals," (The Major Dramas of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, ed. G. H. Nettleton, "Athenaeum Press," Boston: Ginn and Co., n. d.), Act I, sc. ii, l. 157.

CHAPTER V

CONDITIONS WHICH LED TO

THE REVIVAL OF MANNERS COMEDY IN THE EIGHTEEN NINETIES

More than a hundred years after the production of "The School for Scandal" the comedy of manners appeared once again on the London stage. None the worse for its long period of silence, it seemed just as gay, just as brilliant, just as accurate a mirror of fashionable town society as the drama of Congreve had ever been. The purpose of this chapter will be to show that the revival of pure comedy in the eighteen nineties was not without a reason, that intellectual and dramatic influences of the times led as certainly to the reawakening of this form of drama as conditions of the Restoration era had led to its birth. Let us review for a moment some of the factors in the social and theatrical background of the Restoration period which stimulated the original growth of manners comedy. First, those were days of rapidly changing values, of joyous reaction against the sour soberness of Puritan repression. Members of court society were exulting in their ability to be gay. Secondly, the aristocrats inclined to view life from a skeptical, disillusioned angle, living by their own desires rather than by precept or example. It will be remembered, also, that the scientific attitude was carried into sex life and that men considered self-gratification their natural privilege. The position of woman was that of a mental equal with man; she met him on his own ground; and she was expected to hold her own with

him in any battle of wit and repartee. In the theatrical world the small size of the theatres and the select, small audience afforded an intimate relation between actors and spectators which facilitated the production of subtle comedy. These were the conditions which led to the former comic development. An investigation of the last decade of the nineteenth century presents strikingly similar characteristics.

In the first place the eighteen nineties followed a long era of sober, self-satisfied righteousness, not far different from that of the Puritan regime in the mid-seventeenth century. "Those earnest Victorians" had never closed the theatres nor forbidden dancing around a Maypole; but they had, from the dignity of family pews and family prayers, solemnly frowned upon pleasure when indulged in for its own sake.<sup>1</sup> A favorite old Victorian text used to be: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."<sup>2</sup> The great mass of Englishmen in early Victorian days were religious. High churchmen still gave adoration to a mystical Deity; but the evangelists preached, as a general rule, a Lord of wrath with a chastening rod; and the influence of evangelism extended from the lowly to the highest in the land. As for inhabitants of small cottages and of great houses, in outward manifestation at least, "they served the Lord."<sup>3</sup> The paternal severity of God

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<sup>1</sup>Esmé Wingfield-Stratford, The Victorian Sunset (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1932), pp. 38-39.

<sup>2</sup>Esmé Wingfield-Stratford, Those Earnest Victorians (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1930), p. 56.

<sup>3</sup>Wingfield-Stratford, The Victorian Sunset, p. 39.

the Father cast a depressing influence over the age.<sup>4</sup> The Victorians concentrated on morality to an extent hardly paralleled before or since. The intensified moral earnestness, however, gave to the age its great literary giants, Tennyson and Browning, Carlyle and Ruskin, with their superb messages of faith. If these were sober years, they were also years of hope and inspiration. Thoughtful men trusted not only in the Divine Spirit, but also in scientific progress to bring order out of whatever chaos that might exist. It is true that the publication of Darwin's The Origin of Species in 1859 aroused a storm of discussion that was to endure for generations. Darwin's theory was warmly espoused by such distinguished scientists as Alfred Russel Wallace, Thomas Huxley, and Herbert Spencer. It was emphatically condemned by other eminent Victorians as a direct attack on the Biblical story of creation. Carlyle called it the "monkey damnification of mankind."<sup>5</sup> But the idea of evolution, together with the other scientific discoveries in geology, chemistry, and physics, had permanent effect on nineteenth century thought. For this reason the period is sometimes called an age of doubt. Old established beliefs were questioned so openly that even the staunchest conservatives must have felt a little puzzled. Some of the Victorians, on a more or less middle ground, tried to rationalize the scientific with the religious attitude. These

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<sup>4</sup>Wingfield-Stratford, Those Earnest Victorians, p. 68.

<sup>5</sup>Philo M. Buck, Jr., The World's Great Age (New York: Macmillan Co., 1936), p. 313.

rationalizations gave to the Deity various names: "a power not ourselves making for righteousness," a "life force," "the spirit of progress," "the world spirit," an "increasing purpose."<sup>6</sup>

Matthew Arnold, though he never broke entirely away from Christianity, sought new interpretations of old religious truths. Yet regardless of the doubt and the questioning and the seeking that was, directly or indirectly, a result of scientific findings, there ran through Victorian literature a steady current of optimism and faith in what science would accomplish. Advances made in the study of biology, chemistry, and physics had already revolutionized the practice of medicine and saved many people from death and pain. New and improved inventions were constantly being put into practical use. The factories grew bigger and more airy and brighter; railroads cut away distances from one huge city to another; on the ocean British steamships carried British goods. Tennyson voiced his faith in the amazing possibilities of the future in his poem, "Locksley Hall." Macaulay spoke in no unmis-taken terms his confidence in the certain progress of mankind. Everywhere men seemed convinced "that great changes were taking place, year by year, the effect of which would be to make the world, and everybody in it, unimaginably better."<sup>7</sup> The optimism was serious and earnest, as were most Victorian attitudes. Toward the end of the century came the realization that all was not so bright as it had seemed. Science had not yet brought about a

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<sup>6</sup>Wingfield-Stratford, Those Earnest Victorians, p. 61.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 113.

Utopia upon earth, nor was there any rosy prospect that such a thing would be accomplished in the future. Inventions and discoveries were still being put into use; but men, also, were still being born into the world and living and suffering and dying, just about as they had always done. The world was probably no more "right" a place than it had ever been. Tennyson, again reflecting on the state of the world in his poem, "Locksley Hall Sixty Years After," expressed his disappointment over the way affairs had gone. The disillusion, accompanied as it was by a natural reaction against the intense moral earnestness of the period, brought the Victorian age to a close a number of years before the death of Victoria, the Queen.

Wingfield-Stratford sets the year 1870 as the beginning of the passing of the real Victorian age.<sup>8</sup> It was not that any startling change took place in 1870 or in the years immediately following. But by this time it was becoming obvious that staid old Victorian attitudes were changing. The theory of evolution had given a definite jolt to English theological teaching. The understanding that science was not a panacea for all ills had begun to dawn. And people were beginning to grow a little tired of being led by their noses into the paths of righteousness. The reaction against Victorian prudery took form in a quickening of the tempo of life which, when it reached its maddest pace in the nineties, was very much like the aftermath of wild gaiety

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<sup>8</sup>The Victorian Sunset, p. 59.

which followed the overthrow of the Puritan regime in the seventeenth century. The main difference in the two periods is that the opportunity for Restoration society to live its own life came suddenly, whereas the outburst in the nineties had been working under the surface for some time. One of the most concrete evidences of the breach with tradition was the widespread popularity, through the seventies and eighties and nineties, of the Prince of Wales and his beautiful young wife, Alexandra. At Marlborough House the Prince and Princess entertained a wealthy, fashionable set composed of aristocrats and wealthy commoners; and they gave their sanction to the pursuit of pleasure to an extent which, in the eyes of the stolid Victorians, amounted to the same thing as sin. Certainly there was marked contrast between the goings-on at Marlborough House and the stately conduct at the home of the Queen. Prince Albert Edward was, first and last, a man of pleasure. He was frequently bored, and he desired constantly to be amused. If he cared little about books, he knew much about life. He had many friends. Like Charles II he was always able to find exactly the right thing to say at the right time. Like Charles II, also, he was decidedly Parisian in everything but birth. Yet with all his pleasure-loving characteristics the Prince of Wales stood as the first gentleman of the nation.<sup>9</sup> The fact that he was accepted by society to be admired and emulated shows clearly the beginning of a change in the old

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 19-25.

set viewpoints. By the eighties the Victorian era was fast slipping away, though Victoria was still on the throne; and a new world was coming into existence. The aesthetic movement, inspired by Walter Pater in 1868, had got into full swing by 1875. In the eighteen eighties it swept the country, with Oscar Wilde as its apostle. Originally the movement had been connected with the Pre-Raphaelite school. As it expressed itself in the eighties it was a deliberate attempt to break away from the stodginess and ugliness of mid-Victorian surroundings. It inculcated itself in the drawing room as a craze for musical parties and for Chinese and Japanese art products. By the early nineties William S. Gilbert had laughed the new fad almost to death. Yet the fact that men and women were able to laugh at themselves was significant. In the last decade of the century the fashionable world of England could no longer be called Victorian in any sense of the word. The elders may have been shocked at the activities of the rising generation, but the "youngsters" (even if they were mature in age) took continual delight in kicking over one convention after the other. These were years of the snapping of apron-strings, of the "free" young man and the "independent" young woman.<sup>10</sup> The unrest was more than a traditional sowing of wild oats. It was not merely a letting off of steam in order to settle down; it was a letting off of steam and a refusal to settle

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<sup>10</sup> Holbrook Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties, a Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, n. d.), p. 30.

down and a defense of outrageous conduct by impassioned argument.<sup>11</sup> People were acutely conscious of the decade in which they were living; they felt that they were passing from one culture to another.<sup>12</sup> The term, fin de siecle, was on the tip of many tongues. Men were proud to be a part of this age of many possibilities. The adjective, "new," was almost as popular as the fin de siecle phrase. Grant Allen wrote about "The New Hedonism." H. D. Traill, in his essay on "The New Fiction," said, "Not to be new is, in these days, to be nothing." William Sharp advocated the "New Paganism." There were references to "The New Voluptuousness," the "New Spirit," the "New Humour," the "New Realism," the "New Drama," the "New Woman." Everywhere people were seeking novelty and originality.<sup>13</sup> The art of posing came into fashion. "The first duty of life," Oscar Wilde said, was "to be as artificial as possible." And he added, "What the second duty is no one has as yet discovered."<sup>14</sup> A new spirit of pleasure chased rampant through the years. It found expression in the nonsense chorus of Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay, which "spread like a dancing flame through the land, obsessing the minds of young and old....." From 1892 to 1896 the song "affected the country like an epidemic; and during those years it would seem to have been the absurd ga ira of a generation bent upon kicking over the

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 19-22.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

traces."<sup>15</sup> All authority was under fire. One young poet of the times remarked that he was quite happy that day because he had just got tangled up with a married woman.<sup>16</sup> People of the nineties were bored with convention; and they, like their Restoration antecedents, expressed their boredom in wild abandonment to their own desires.

The fashionable ennui led to a mad search for new sensations, mental, spiritual, and physical. Much has been written about the decadence in the eighteen nineties. Arthur Symonds defined it as an endeavor "to fix the last fine shade, the quintessence of things; to fix it fleetingly; to be a disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul; that is the ideal of Decadence."<sup>17</sup> The movement was, in a way, a heightened form of the aesthetic tendency. Jackson says that Walter Pater became a decadent influence because of a misapprehension of the precise meaning of the "Conclusion" to his The Renaissance.<sup>18</sup> Pater omitted the "Conclusion" from the second edition of the volume and revised it for the third. Even the revised version, however, could well have acted as a spark for this susceptible generation. A part of the "Conclusion" reads:

The service of philosophy, of speculative culture, to-

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 31-32.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Le Gallienne, The Romantic '90's (1st ed.; New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1923), pp. 221-222.

<sup>17</sup> Jackson, op. cit., p. 57.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

wards the human spirit is to rouse, to startle it into sharp and eager observation. Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone of the hill or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real or attractive for us, \_\_\_\_\_ for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy? To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.....<sup>19</sup>

To find and "maintain this ecstasy" became the fervid aim of the decadents. An insistent curiosity obsessed them. The age was skeptical, tired, and blasé; but it had an unbounded energy to reach out for sensation. There was believed to be a kind of mystical joining of physical excess with spiritual desire. The Victorians had demonstrated the folly of seeking salvation by morality. The rationalists had failed to achieve salvation by reason. The decadents, in a fit of desperation, set about to attain respite in salvation by sin.<sup>20</sup> It became fashionable in "artistic" circles to drink absinthe and other exotic drugs as means to extend sensation beyond the range of ordinary consciousness. The age was unusually sensitive to the suggestiveness of sex. The subject was discussed with a new frankness, and sex-inquisitiveness led to the rumor that perverse practices were associated with the "advanced" movement.<sup>21</sup> Some of the writers of the times sentimentalized about such things as alcoholic poi-

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

soning and promiscuous sexuality. The decadence is, of course, only one aspect of the period; and it should not be considered as representative. It does, nevertheless, spring from a disillusion, a cynicism, and an abandonment to desire that are on a close parallel with the skepticism, the pleasure-seeking, and the immorality of the Restoration period.

One of the most interesting phases of a comparison between the two eras is the consideration of the place that woman held in the social world. Investigation shows that woman, in the eighteen nineties, enjoyed more personal freedom and more social recognition than she had known since the Restoration period. The rise of sentimentalism in the eighteenth century had transformed the witty, self-assured Restoration woman into a modest and delicate maiden. So she had remained through the most of the Victorian age. Before the eighteen nineties she had begun to join her headstrong brothers in breaking away from time-worn custom, and by the last decade of the century she was talking about living her own life. She was, perhaps, a more important person in the drawing room or on her bicycle or on the tennis court than she was in political circles. Still her definite and steady gains in legal rights showed that she was coming more and more to be recognized as the mental equal of man. In 1867, during the debates on the Reform Bill of that year, John Stuart Mill had introduced an amendment for the enfranchisement of women, but it was defeated by a vote of a hundred ninety-six to

seventy-three.<sup>22</sup> In 1869, however, woman suffrage in municipal elections was granted to women householders (single women and widows). An act was passed in 1870 enabling women to vote at school-board elections and to become members of such boards.<sup>23</sup> The Married Women's Property Act of 1882 established the right of the married woman to hold property in her own name. A law of 1886 gave the mother equal rights with the father in the control of their children.<sup>24</sup> The Parish Councils Bill of 1894 gave to every man and woman who had resided in the parish for a twelve-month the right not only to vote for members of the Parish Council, but to run as candidate for election to that body.<sup>25</sup> Thus we see that woman was, slowly but quite surely, achieving a political status, and that by 1894 she had become a distinct legal personality. In social life she was even more a person to be reckoned with. The very fashions in clothing of the eighteen seventies point to a reversion from priggish romanticism to a rather frank sensuousness. There was not at this time any marked decrease in prudery. As late as the eighties "a man was left to drown in a lake because some ladies in a boat were too modest to fish him out naked."<sup>26</sup> But change in fashion often

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<sup>22</sup>Schapiro, Modern and Contemporary European History, p. 607.

<sup>23</sup>Montgomery, The Leading Facts of English History, p. 384, n. 2.

<sup>24</sup>Schapiro, op. cit., p. 609.

<sup>25</sup>Montgomery, op. cit., pp. 394-395.

<sup>26</sup>Wingfield-Stratford, The Victorian Sunset, p. 84.

indicates or foretells change in manner. Punch, in 1874, talks of the "loudness, fastness, and slang of the girl of the period." It was certainly a rather mild slang, including such expressions as "awfully jolly sad." Yet Punch introduced a new type of young woman, Miss Sharpleigh or Miss Sinical, who specialized in cutting repartee. There are other evidences that men and women, during these years, attempted to inject a sort of competitive smartness into their conversation, to find pertinent answers and to hold their own with each other in verbal combat. There was a little book called Society Small Talk current in the seventies which gave examples of the kind of conversation to aim at. A gentleman might say to his fair partner, "I envy that butterfly perched so daintily on your hair close to that shell-like ear. What secrets would I not whisper were I so near! Happy butterfly!" The lady would not, like her mother before her, blush and cover her face with her fan. She would probably counter with some such remark as, "The butterfly is not so happy as you think; I shut it up in a velvet case when I go home for fear of losing it. Now one could not shut you up...."<sup>27</sup> and so on. The specimens may sound a little inane to modern ears, but they reveal an interest in a kind of feminine wit and a breaking away from old-fashioned demureness. The fashionable woman of the nineties was no longer coy and shy. She asserted her freedom in her words and in her actions. She looked man in the face, and in her charm-

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., pp. 85-87.

ing way, she said what she pleased to him. The pose of both men and women was to be serious about nothing and vivaciously brilliant about everything. Flirtations often consisted in endless smart inuendos without ever coming quite to the point.<sup>28</sup> The capricious young woman cannot be taken as entirely representative of the whole of English womanhood. Mrs. Grundy was still alive, and the "new" woman of the nineties kept one eye on the old lady just as Restoration misses had done. The boldest members of both fashionable worlds had no desire to be found out in their naughtiness. Perhaps their audacity and their evasion made them the charming creatures that they were. Certainly it is true that in the gay nineties, as in the days of Charles II, woman's mental alertness gave an added point to conversation, which waited only to be caught and idealized by some clever dramatist.

In the theatres, as well as in the society of the late nineteenth century, the way was gradually being opened for the comic dramatist to make his appearance. The preparation was a slow process, for sentimental drama, burlesque, extravaganza, farce, and melodrama had a firm hold on the Victorian stage. The monopoly which the two large patent houses and the Haymarket retained until 1843 limited any work the smaller theatres did to the summer months or to surreptitious performances or to musical shows. Even after the monopoly was broken, new theatres did

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 299.

not spring up for a number of years. Yet one of the minor houses, as early as 1831, had begun a trend away from excess and vulgarity into the direction of simplicity and reality. In this year Madame Vestris, the first woman manager London had seen, began her tenure of the Olympic Theatre.<sup>29</sup> She and her second husband, Charles Matthews, made the house a comfortable and intimate place. J. R. Planché wrote for them; and though his work often took the form of extravaganza, he had a more definite purpose than mere exploitation of scene. He tried to link spectacle and fantasy with a rational libretto, and he did much to prepare the way for W. S. Gilbert.<sup>30</sup> The acting of Charles Matthews was casual and easy.<sup>31</sup> It had its influence in the later break away from rant and bombast. In 1839 Vestris and Matthews took over Covent Garden, where in 1841 they presented Dion Boucicault's "London Assurance." They acted it in contemporary clothes, speech, and manners. The play has a sort of illusion of genuine comedy; the dialogue has a certain sparkle; but the lustre is rather false and theatrical. In 1865 Marie Wilton-Bancroft and her husband, Squire Bancroft, set out to continue the tradition of common sense which Vestris and Matthews had begun. They joined H. J. Byron in the management of the little theatre in Tottenham Court Road, which they called the Prince of Wales Theatre. The small size of the house

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<sup>29</sup>Earnest Reynolds, Early Victorian Drama (1830-1870) (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons Ltd., 1936), pp. 147-148.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., pp. 69-70.

<sup>31</sup>Eaton, The Drama in English, p. 222.

adapted itself to the Bancrofts' standards of natural technique. The place was made homelike and comfortable, and a code of tasteful realism was inaugurated upon the stage. The production of T. W. Robertson's Society at this theatre on November 11, 1865, was a positive revolt against saccharine love scenes and excessive sentimentality. As Robertson continued to write for the Bancrofts, his ideas combined with theirs for improvement of theatrical conditions. Actors were drilled into naturalness of speech and action with instructions to avoid stagey effects. Dialogue between heroes and heroines was brusque and unemotional, though often suggestive of feeling. Robertson's plays are chiefly melodramas. They have not held their own upon the stage. Yet as pioneer work in the direction of restraint and realism they are important even in the development of comedy.

After the opening of the Prince of Wales Theatre in 1865, other small theatres and companies began to spring up. Mr. and Mrs. Kendal, for a time, associated themselves with Gilbert in the same way that the Bancrofts had attached themselves to Robertson.<sup>32</sup> They presented "The Palace of Truth" at the Haymarket in 1870, and "Broken Hearts" at the Court Theatre in 1875. Their most brilliant period began in 1879 when they joined John Hare in the management of the St. James. Here they produced other plays by Gilbert, and the work of this group became famous for

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas H. Dickinson, The Contemporary Drama of England ("The Contemporary Drama Series," ed. Richard Burton, Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1925), pp. 53-54.

exquisite judgment and discrimination.<sup>33</sup> Though Gilbert's earlier comedies have made no lasting impression, they denote a strain of irony that was to find its place in the delightful Savoy operas. These ridiculous musical plays, with their charming Sullivan tunes, sang their way into the hearts of the London populace. The stories are pure nonsense. But the lilt of Gilbert's verses combined with his good-natured satire to make English people laugh at themselves. Gilbert was careful not to offend Victorian prudishness. He made his heroines always conventional in their observance of the obligations of marriage or engagements. Still he poked fun at the best-established Victorian institutions. In "Trial by Jury" (1875) he laughed at British courts and the jury system in general and at breach of promise suits in particular. "H. M. S. Pinafore; or, The Lass That Loved a Sailor" (1878) treated fantastically of England's pride in her navy. The jingles of "The Pirates of Penzance" (1879) touched the national awe of the nobility and the pomposity of English officers. The rhymes with which the Major-General introduces himself are quite delicious. They close with the following words:

For my military knowledge, though I'm plucky and adventury,  
Has only been brought down to the beginning of the century;  
But still in matters vegetable, animal, and mineral  
I am the very model of a modern major-gineral!<sup>34</sup>

"Patience; or Bunthorne's Bride" (1884) held up to scorn the aes-

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 54-55.

<sup>34</sup> "The Pirates of Penzance" (The Mikado and Other Plays by W. S. Gilbert, ed. Clarence Day, Jr., New York: The Modern Library, n. d.), Act I, 79.

thetic craze, mentioned earlier in this chapter, and had to do with the death of the fad. "The Mikado; or, The Town of Titipu" (1885) satirized the current Japanese influence, and it also included subtle laughter in other directions. Avarice and bribery and even emotion over the death of loved ones came in for mild ridicule. These are probably the most outstanding of the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. Their importance lies in the fact that they got away from spectacle, that they improved the artistic taste of audiences and producers, and that they introduced a note of topsy-turvy satire which the English people liked. Gilbert might be called a forerunner of the revival of the English comedy of manners. Another personality of the late nineteenth century contributed much to the revival. Sir Arthur Wing Pinero, following the lead of Robertson, began in the seventies to write plays that were based on real, every-day life. In subject-matter he sometimes felt the influence of Ibsen. In form he made use of the pattern of the French "well-made" play. Pinero's plays have various moods. He goes from melodrama and serious drama to farce. One of his comedies, "The Gay Lord Quex," approaches the comedy of manners. His clarification of structure, however, is his chief contribution to modern drama. When Wilde and Jones came to write their comedies they had Pinero to thank for examples of well-built plots with a minimum number of scenes. As the nineties came on, the work of the Bancrofts and Robertson, of the Kendals and Gilbert, and of Sir Arthur Pinero had borne fruit. Various smaller theatres were prospering: the Criterion, the St. James, the

Comedy, His Majesty's.<sup>35</sup> Dramatists were demanding smaller stages for action, and their improved dramatic technique was drawing a more select audience than the extravaganza had attracted. The apron of the old fore stage had gradually receded until the stage had become the picture-frame of modern times. But an intimate relation between actors and audience had been accomplished in the decrease in the size of the houses. This, it will be remembered, was one of the factors which made the production of Restoration comedy of manners easy. In the small theatres of the nineties intimate drama could be presented; with naturalness of action it could be interpreted; and by the more discerning audiences it could be appreciated. The theatre of the nineties, as well as the men and women in the fashionable world, had prepared the way for the appearance of comedy.

The closing years of the century, then, provided as fertile a ground for the development of comedy as the Restoration period had furnished. The bubbling up of witty, intellectual drama in such a setting was a most natural result. The earlier comedy of manners, it will be recalled, sprang from a reactionary spirit in society which expressed itself in a mad search for pleasure. The later high comedy emerged from a similar and even a more concentrated attempt to throw off the shackles of old conventions and to find new excitement in life. Bonamy Dobrée, in a statement quoted in Chapter II of this thesis, said that

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<sup>35</sup>Dickinson, op. cit., p. 137.

great comedy "deals with disillusion," that it comes at a time "when the positive attitude has failed, when doubt is undermining values, and men are turning for comfort to the ruggedness of life."<sup>36</sup> If one word had to be chosen to describe the basic spirit of the eighteen nineties, the spirit from which various manifestations arose, that word might well be "disillusion." These years, no less than those of the reign of Charles II, were "times of rapidly changing values, of the toppling of old ideals, of religious skepticism, and of experiment."<sup>37</sup> It is small wonder that this age produced a brittle, somewhat cynical comedy reflecting its own gaiety and disillusion. Women in these new comedies have complete freedom of speech and action. We are reminded of Meredith's first requirement for the production of great comedy, "a society of cultivated men and women;"<sup>38</sup> and we remember his further statement that where women

"....have no social freedom, Comedy is absent; where they are household drudges, the form of Comedy is primitive; where they are tolerably independent, but uncultivated, exciting melodrama takes its place and a sentimental version of them.....But where women are on the road to an equal footing with men in attainments and in liberty....there, and only waiting to be transplanted from life to the stage, or the novel, or the poem, pure Comedy flourishes....."<sup>39</sup>

And so pure comedy flourished again in the eighteen nineties. The theatres of the period had returned to dimensions in which

<sup>36</sup> Restoration Comedy, p. 15.

<sup>37</sup> Supra., p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> An Essay on Comedy, p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 52-55.

subtle, witty drama could be produced. Dramatists were trying to attain a reflection of actual life about them. The reaction against Victorian prudery, the changing ideals and attitudes, and the flash of wit between man and woman brought back to the stage the comedy of manners, because for the first time since the Restoration period appropriate stimuli were joined together for comic development.

## CHAPTER VI

OSCAR WILDE AND HENRY ARTHUR JONES:

THE REVIVAL OF THE COMEDY OF MANNERS

By the eighteen nineties the smart set of English society had become a perfect group for reflection in a contemporary comedy of manners. Fashionable people had the love of gaiety, the blasè attitudes, and the appreciation of wit to be combined and accentuated upon the stage in a subtle, comic drama. Pioneers in the theatre had accomplished much in making the playhouse a more intimate place, in encouraging naturalness of action, and in attracting a discerning audience. This chapter will deal with Oscar Wilde and Henry Arthur Jones, the two playwrights of the eighteen nineties who caught the spirit of the fashionable group and presented it upon the stage in comedies of manners. These two dramatists will be presented as products of their own time, just as Etherege, Wycherley, and Congreve were products of the seventeenth century. The chapter will make use of Wilde's plays to suggest that Wilde, in all probability, felt the influence of Restoration dramatists; and it will reveal the fact that Jones was positively conscious of the excellence of certain Restoration comedies, and that he aimed directly at a similar achievement. Jones's comedies will be analyzed in regard to their relation to Restoration drama and in regard to their contribution to the English stage. The writer will call attention to those facts which support the opinion that there is present in these comedies a cleverness in the evolution of comic plot and a qual-

ity of dialogue from comic character which may be due to the influence of sentimentalism upon the playwright.

Oscar Wilde was, "beyond comparison, the incarnation of the spirit of the '90s."<sup>1</sup> In the preceding decade he had been a leader of the aesthetic cult, which was an outstanding "movement" of that time. Though he had incurred ridicule in many quarters (partly because of the satire of Gilbert's "Patience"), he was generally looked upon as a being of pure sunshine, an intellectual buffoon, who talked his brilliant nonsense with the sole object of giving pleasure, and thereby of achieving distinction. It was not until the nineties that Wilde attained literary recognition. But in the few short years of acclaim that were granted to him in that decade, he became, as a personality and as a literary genius, the ultimate expression of that decade. He conquered the social world without seeming to try. "The man who can dominate a London dinner-table can dominate the world," he had said.<sup>2</sup> And during these years he dominated many a London dinner-table. He was a brilliant conversationalist; and he charmed his listeners by his joyous attitude, his good humor, his fine scholarship, and his ready wit. Men admired him because he could say what they would like to have said but had never thought of. In speaking of the Holy Bible, he could declare "that when he thought of the harm that book had done, he

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<sup>1</sup>Le Gallienne, The Romantic '90s, p. 269.

<sup>2</sup>Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties, p. 76.

despaired of doing anything to equal it."<sup>3</sup> He could pass judgment on the Atlantic Ocean with the words, "I am not exactly pleased with the Atlantic. It is not so majestic as I expected."<sup>4</sup> If he sometimes indulged in appropriating the ideas of other people, as he was accused of doing, he expressed those ideas in a phraseology that was his own. He had a genius for catching the spirit of the time and for saying the "right" thing in a "new" way, for turning old thoughts upside down and making them poignant. He achieved his first dramatic success with the production of "Lady Windermere's Fan" in 1892; and in the three short years that followed, he attained even greater popularity with his three other comedies. At the beginning of his trial in 1895, "The Importance of Being Earnest" and "An Ideal Husband" were running simultaneously at the St. James and at the Haymarket. During these three years Wilde's prestige in the theatre and in society had no bounds. He was "looked up to as a master by the younger generation, courted by the fashionable world, loaded with commissions by theatrical managers, interviewed, paragraphed, and pictured by the Press, and envied by the envious and the incompetent."<sup>5</sup> Dickinson has analyzed the unstinted applause that was accorded Wilde, and has discerned the reason underlying it:

What, then, made Wilde's popularity? It was his "tact" for discovering the passing mood of the time and expressing it

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<sup>3</sup>Wingfield-Stratford, The Victorian Sunset, p. 242.

<sup>4</sup>Jackson, op. cit., p. 73.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

gracefully. No writer who has written in English has floated upon his age as has Wilde. He carried the art of superficiality up to genius. He was nothing apart from his time, and when his time repudiated him he had no life left. His repute for the daring and original came from his ability to surprise men at themselves. His plays are the work of a quick and brilliant talker who anticipates the ideas of his fellows and gives them back adorned with crisp words.<sup>6</sup>

This ability of Wilde's to reflect the spirit of his age enabled him to write comedies of contemporary London manners. He understood this society about which he was writing. He knew that fashionable men and women wanted to live idle, carefree lives, and to spice a monotonous existence with an occasional flirtation. He knew how these men and women wished to talk, to excel each other in witty jests. Because he knew, he created upon his stage the kind of world in which these people liked to live. Into the mouths of his cleverest characters he placed epigrams and paradoxes which people in the audience would have liked to originate, and which he could coin with ease. His plays are artificial in the way that Restoration comedies are artificial; that is, they reproduce and idealize and accentuate an artificial society.

One can easily imagine the pleasure which the first production of "Lady Windermere's Fan" afforded its audience at the St. James Theatre on February 20, 1892. The nearest approaches to sophisticated comedy that these people had been witnessing were the musical plays of Gilbert and Sullivan. In the field of legitimate drama Pinero and Jones had been striving, for some

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<sup>6</sup>Dickinson, The Contemporary Drama of England, pp. 147-148.

time, to write plays that were better than the shoddy products of preceding years. But Pinero's work had taken the form of serious drama, melodrama, and farce; and Jones, up to this time, had been devoting his efforts to melodrama. "Lady Windermere's Fan" held the mirror up to London drawing rooms as "The Comical Revenge," years before, had held it to Covent Garden and Pall Mall. The St. James audience was delighted with what it saw. It was "a picked audience of the best heads in London," and its judgment was that the play was brilliant and interesting.<sup>7</sup> If some of the critics were annoyed at the trite conventionality of the plot and the mixture of satire with sentiment, the audience did not care. People were quite accustomed to viewing sentiment upon the stage. What they liked was the representation of the leisurely, fashionable world, the steady sparkle of witty epigram and paradox, the delicious caricature of types of men and women whom they knew. The play was "a seven days' wonder in London. People talked of nothing but 'Lady Windermere's Fan.' The witty words in it ran from lip to lip like a tidbit of scandal."<sup>8</sup> Oscar Wilde had brought the essence of the comedy of manners back to London, though he had woven that comedy around a sentimental plot. It is interesting to remember that Etherege used a similar mixture in his first play, and that

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<sup>7</sup> Frank Harris, Oscar Wilde, His Life and Confessions (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., 1930), p. 99.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Wycherley, in his initial attempt at drama, committed the same error. In "Lady Windermere's Fan" the fault, somehow, does not appear so grave as it seems in "The Comical Revenge" or in "Love in a Wood." The merging of the two elements is rather easy and convincing. Even modern audiences respond to the brilliant dialogue and, it must be admitted, to the melodramatic plot.

Whether or not Wilde had Restoration comedy in mind when he wrote this and his three following plays is a point on which no concrete evidence has been found. His chief aim was unquestionably to reflect and accentuate contemporary society. But there are in his plays so many reminders of the older comedy of manners that one is inclined to think he sometimes went directly to the old plays for suggestions. In "Lady Windermere's Fan" we find typical Restoration settings, the morning room and the drawing-room of an aristocratic London house and, in the third act, a gentleman's apartment. The structure of the play is, of course, a great improvement upon the Restoration models. Here, as in his next two comedies, Wilde was influenced by the French school.

The play is in four acts of one scene each, and from the beginning speeches the action builds steadily up to the climax in the third act. The plot is essentially melodramatic and theatrical. Lord Windermere has married a beautiful but rather Puritanic young woman who is, although she is ignorant of the fact, the daughter of the notorious Mrs. Erlynne. Mrs. Erlynne is a woman with "a past before her"; and because of her poise, cleverness, and charm, she may also have a future. She has been

blackmailing Windermere and has forced him to invite her to his house to a party. Lady Windermere threatens to strike the woman with her fan if she comes. When the moment arrives, she lacks courage and lets her fan drop to the floor. Stung by what she considers her husband's villainy, she slips away to the rooms of Lord Darlington, who has declared his love for her. The young wife leaves her husband a note. Mrs. Erlynne finds it and is startled by a feeling of awakened mother love. She rushes off, finds her daughter alone in the bachelor's rooms, and persuades her to return to her husband and child. Before they can leave, they hear Darlington, Windermere, and a group of friends entering. Lady Windermere steps behind a curtain, and at last is able to get away. Mrs. Erlynne goes to an adjoining room; but when the men discover Lady Windermere's fan, and are forming their own conclusions about her, the mother faces them. She claims that she took the fan by mistake from the Windermere house, and she makes no excuse for being in Darlington's apartment. It is a great sacrifice. With it she gives up her last chance of getting back into London society and of marrying Lord Augustus, who is one of the party. Next day, Lady Windermere plans to tell her husband the truth of the whole affair; but Mrs. Erlynne, paying a last visit, forbids her to do so. After Mrs. Erlynne has received the fan and a picture of her daughter and grandchild as gifts, she leaves. We learn from old Lord Augustus, to whom she has "explained everything," that she has promised to marry him and that they are going to live abroad.

This is the plot through which Wilde sprinkles his brilliant repartee. His letting the audience in on the identity of Mrs. Erlynne and withholding the knowledge from everyone in the play but Lord Windermere, makes us think of old tricks and disguises. Wilde makes use, also, of the convention of hiding characters from other characters, as Etherege, Wycherley, Congreve, and Sheridan had done. The purpose of the hiding in this play, however, is for dramatic tension rather than for comic effect. The comedy lies in the brilliant dialogue that ripples through every act, in the insolent caricature of old people and young people, in the surprising paradoxes which are merely Wilde's startling ideas, but which seem to come easily to the lips of the people who utter them. Wilde's best phrases, to modern ears at least, have as subtle a turn as those of Congreve and as pointed a satire as those of Wycherley. Lord Darlington pays his compliments to Lady Windermere as gracefully as ever a Restoration gallant spoke to his fair lady:

Lord Darlington. Vileness is a terrible word, Lady Windermere.

Lady Windermere. It is a terrible thing, Lord Darlington.

Lord Darlington. Do you know I am afraid that good people do a great deal of harm in this world. Certainly the greatest harm they do is that they make badness of such extraordinary importance. It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious. I take the side of the charming, and you, Lady Windermere, can't help belonging to them.<sup>9</sup>

Wilde delights in epigram and paradox; and always he startles his audience by making his point:

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<sup>9</sup>"Lady Windermere's Fan" (The Comedies of Oscar Wilde, New York: Grosset and Dunlap, n. d.), Act I.

Lady Windermere. Lord Darlington is trivial.

Lord Darlington. Ah, don't say that, Lady Windermere.

Lady Windermere. Why do you talk so trivially about life, then?

Lord Darlington. Because I think that life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it.....<sup>10</sup>

A few years later Oscar Wilde was to combine his flair for saying witty things with as great a talent for creating amusing situations. He had already, however, given his public a taste of a new type of conversation upon the stage. His next two plays were to continue the combination of wit and melodrama.

"A Woman of No Importance," produced by Beerbohm Tree as the Haymarket on April 19, 1893, was received with continued enthusiasm. The theme of the play is most pathetic and heavily sentimental. It is the story of a woman who has been wronged by a man. The woman has paid, and the man has gone free. At the end of the first act Lord Illingworth, the man, refers to his former mistress with the words, "Oh! no one. No one in particular. A woman of no importance."<sup>11</sup> At the close of the play the woman, Mrs. Arbuthnot, dismisses the thought of her former lover in similar phrases, "Oh! no one. No one in particular. A man of no importance."<sup>12</sup> There is a complication about the illegitimate son who does not know that Lord Illingworth is his father, and about the son's American sweetheart who rallies to

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> "A Woman of No Importance" (Comedies of Oscar Wilde, Grosset and Dunlap), Act I.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., Act IV.

the forsaken mother. Wilde's main interest, however, is in the dramatic effect he achieves with the repetition of the "no importance" phrase, and in the steady repartee he keeps up through the first act. This act is untainted with any note of sentiment. The curiosity which Lord Illingworth arouses about the "woman of no importance" is, at this time, only mild and pleasant. That very dull young woman, Hester Worsley, gives a hint or two that she may indulge in some very fine emotion at a later hour. But through the first act we feel that we have returned to the cold, clear air of Restoration comedy. From Lord Illingworth's first speeches we recognize him as a charmingly cynical and "wicked" gentleman, not unlike Etherege's Dorimant. He is introduced to us in the following manner:

Lady Stutfield. The world says that Lord Illingworth is very, very wicked.

Lord Illingworth. But what world says that, Lady Stutfield? It must be the next world. This world and I are on excellent terms. (Sits down beside Mrs. Allonby.)

Lady Stutfield. Every one I know says you are very, very wicked.

Lord Illingworth. It is perfectly monstrous the way people go about, nowadays, saying things behind one's back that are absolutely and entirely true.<sup>13</sup>

Wilde holds this sort of pace consistently. A speech of Mrs. Allonby's is typical not only of the entire act, but of the age it represents.

Lady Caroline. As far as I can make out, the young women of the present day seem to make it the sole object of their lives to be always playing with fire.

Mrs. Allonby. The one advantage of playing with fire,

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., Act I.

Lady Caroline, is that one never gets even singed. It is the people who don't know how to play with it who get burned up.<sup>14</sup>

We are reminded of how some of Etherege's and Wycherley's ladies, also, loved to play with fire. This Mrs. Allonby, herself, is just such a lady. One feels almost sorry that Wilde did not build his main plot around the affair that he suggests she is having with Lord Illingworth. These two people furnish some of the most entertaining conversation in the play. On the subject of America they express the following opinion:

Mrs. Allonby. They say, Lady Hunstanton, that when good Americans die they go to Paris.

Lady Hunstanton. Indeed? And when bad Americans die, where do they go to?

Lord Illingworth. Oh, they go to America.<sup>15</sup>

When the two are alone, their verbal fencing sounds decidedly reminiscent of Sir Frederick and the Widow:

Mrs. Allonby. What a thoroughly bad man you must be!

Lord Illingworth. What do you call a bad man?

Mrs. Allonby. The sort of man who admires innocence.

Lord Illingworth. And a bad woman?

Mrs. Allonby. Oh! the sort of woman a man never gets tired of.

Lord Illingworth. You are severe--on yourself.

Mrs. Allonby. Define us as a sex.

Lord Illingworth. Sphinxes without secrets.

Mrs. Allonby. Does that include the Puritan women?

Lord Illingworth. Do you know, I don't believe in the existence of Puritan women? I don't think there is a woman in the world who would not be a little flattered if one made love to her. It is that which makes women so irresistibly adorable.

Mrs. Allonby. You think there is no woman in the world who would object to being kissed?

Lord Illingworth. Very few.

Mrs. Allonby. Miss Worsley would not let you kiss her.

Lord Illingworth. Are you sure?

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Mrs. Allonby. Quite.

Lord Illingworth. What do you think she'd do if I kissed her?

Mrs. Allonby. Either marry you, or strike you across the face with her glove. What would you do if she struck you across the face with her glove?

Lord Illingworth. I'd fall in love with her probably.

Mrs. Allonby. Then it is lucky you are not going to kiss her!

Lord Illingworth. Is that a challenge?

Mrs. Allonby. It is an arrow shot in the air.<sup>16</sup>

Such dialogues give an idea of the general flavor of Act One.

Witty speeches, continued through the rest of the play, keep up the artificial atmosphere. The caricature in some amusing "humour" characters gives an added comic note. But in the second act the serious theme is taken up, and thereafter the play drips with sentiment. Hester Worsley, the Puritan, makes an impassioned speech on the shallowness of English society:

Hester. ....You rich people in England, you don't know how you are living. How could you know? You shut out from your society the gentle and the good. You laugh at the simple and the pure. Living, as you all do, on others and by them, you sneer at self-sacrifice, and if you throw bread to the poor, it is merely to keep them quiet for a season. With all your pomp and wealth and art you don't know how to live \_\_\_\_\_ you don't even know that. You love the beauty that you can see and touch and handle, the beauty that you can destroy, and do destroy, but of the unseen beauty of life, of the unseen beauty of a higher life, you know nothing. You have lost life's secret. Oh, your English society seems to me shallow, selfish, foolish. It has blinded its eyes and stopped its ears. It lies like a leper in purple. It sits like a dead thing smeared with gold. It is all wrong.<sup>17</sup>

These lines have a tang that calls to mind the spirit of William Wycherley, using his characters as his mouthpiece to cry out against the sham and hypocrisy of his age. Hester's words suggest

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., Act II.

the idea that, perhaps, in Wilde's soul there was a struggle against the superficiality and the cynicism of which he was a typical expression. Hester continues her noble speeches throughout the play. Sometimes she makes us think of that other Puritan, Lady Windermere. In this play, however, the merging of the elements of sentiment and wit is not so skillful as it is in "Lady Windermere's Fan." The comedy portions give the effect of being set apart from the heavy theme. It is really too bad that they were not left apart.

The heavy moralizing tone continues and increases in "An Ideal Husband," presented at the Haymarket on January 3, 1895. Sentiment joins again with wit and caricature to make an entertaining drama. This is a better play than "A Woman of No Importance;" and it is, in some ways, a better comedy of manners than "Lady Windermere's Fan." The thick intrigue of the plot would do justice to the most complicated of Restoration dramas. It evolves around a wealthy man whose fortune is founded on the sale of a cabinet secret in his youth, and his wife, another Puritan, who has idealized her husband into a sort of god. The lives of Sir Robert and Lady Gertrude Chiltern move along smoothly until Mrs. Cheveley begins her plan to blackmail Sir Robert and to force him to support an underhanded canal scheme. It requires all the cleverness of Lord Goring, the blasé dandy, to outwit the adventuress and to catch her in her own net. Even after this is accomplished, the Puritan has to be taught a lesson. Lord Goring finally convinces her that an ideal man is made of

the same clay from which the rest of mankind is molded, and that woman's mission in life is not to judge and condemn, but to pardon and love. Here, again, is that spirit of Wycherley in Oscar Wilde, pointing out just what is wrong with the world. The serious tone of Lord Goring's words on this subject comes as a mild surprise, for he has been presented consistently as a charming man whose sole purpose in life is his own amusement, who talks seriously only on the first Tuesday in every month, and who positively must not have any serious conversation after seven o'clock in the evening. His dialogue with his butler at the beginning of Act Three takes us back to the second scene of "The Comical Revenge," when Sir Frederick indulges in some witty remarks to Dufoxy. Lord Goring makes such observations as these:

You see, Phipps, fashion is what one wears oneself. What is unfashionable is what other people wear.

.....vulgarity is simply the conduct of other people.

Extraordinary thing about the lower classes in England --they are always losing their relations.<sup>18</sup>

Phipps's contribution is in his reply, "Yes, my lord! They are extremely fortunate in that respect."<sup>19</sup> The romance between this debonaire young Arthur Goring and that deliciously fresh young woman, Mabel Chiltern, runs through the play like a faint breath from "The Gentleman Dancing-Master." Mabel's artlessness contrasts with Hippolyta's art in "dissembling;" yet both girls

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<sup>18</sup> "An Ideal Husband," Act III.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

have a naïve charm in their frank pursuit of the male. Mabel's candor is irresistible:

Mabel Chiltern. ....Lord Goring, will you give me some supper?

Lord Goring. With pleasure, Miss Mabel. (Moves away with her.)

Mabel Chiltern. How horrid you have been! You have never talked to me the whole evening!

Lord Goring. How could I? You went away with the child-diplomatist.

Mabel Chiltern. You might have followed us. Pursuit would have been only polite. I don't think I like you at all this evening.

Lord Goring. I like you immensely.

Mabel Chiltern. Well, I wish you'd show it in a more marked way.<sup>20</sup>

When Lord Goring has broken an appointment to ride with the young woman, she is quite furious with him. He bids her good morning three times before he gets any response.

Lord Goring. (With increased emphasis). Good morning, Miss Mabel!

Mabel Chiltern. (Turning round with feigned surprise). Oh, are you here? Of course you understand that after your breaking your appointment I am never going to speak to you again.

Lord Goring. Oh, please don't say such a thing. You are the one person in London I really like to have to listen to me.

Mabel Chiltern. Lord Goring, I never believe a single word that either you or I say to each other.<sup>21</sup>

A few minutes later, Mabel shows a little more guile. When Arthur has admitted that he is about to make a proposal, she is woman enough to say, "I am so glad. That makes the second today." Arthur is immediately annoyed into making a more ardent declaration:

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., Act I.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., Act IV.

Lord Goring. Oh! bother Tommy Trafford. Tommy is a silly little ass. I love you.

Mabel Chiltern. I know. And I think you might have mentioned it before. I am sure I have given you heaps of opportunities.

Lord Goring. Mabel, do be serious. Please be serious.

Mabel Chiltern. Ah! that is the sort of thing a man always says to a girl before he has been married to her. He never says it afterwards.

Lord Goring. (taking hold of her hand). Mabel, I have told you that I love you. Can't you love me a little in return?

Mabel Chiltern. You silly Arthur! If you knew anything about...anything, which you don't, you would know that I adore you. Everyone in London knows it except you. It is a public scandal the way I adore you. I have been going about for the last six months telling the whole of society that I adore you. I wonder you consent to have anything to say to me. I have no character left at all. At least, I feel so happy that I am quite sure I have no character left at all.<sup>22</sup>

This kind of atmosphere, which, in spite of the moralizing, permeates the play, is the real essence of comedy. It is the spirit of Restoration comedy of manners adapted to the last decade of the nineteenth century.

In his last play Wilde dropped his moralizing and went for a journey with sheer nonsense and wit as his companions. "The Importance of Being Earnest" (produced at the St. James Theatre on February 14, 1895) set upon the stage the ridiculous way of that amusing world of the eighteen nineties. The play is even more artificial than Congreve's last play. It presents an artificial society, standing, for a little while, upon its head, and doing amazing and laughable things. The plot itself is a gay paradox. Jack Worthing has, for the sake of convenience, adopted the name of Ernest in town and Jack in the country.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Gwendolen Fairfax, of London, has fallen in love with the Ernest she knows; but her aunt, Lady Bracknell, refuses to consent to their marriage because Mr. Worthing's only ancestry consists of a hand-bag. Cecily, Jack's ward in Woolton, Hartfordshire, has become enamoured of the fictitious Ernest whom she has never seen. Algernon Moncrieff is a friend of Jack and a nephew of Lady Bracknell. He visits Woolton, introduces himself as Jack's brother, Ernest, and is soon as much in love with Cecily as she is with the Ernest she believes him to be. When Cecily and Gwendolen meet, there is much argument about which lover is really Ernest; and the result is a mad scramble for christenings. The confusion is finally terminated by an explanation about the hand-bag, which leads to the discovery that Jack is really a brother of Algernon, and consequently of satisfactory parentage for an alliance with Gwendolen. His name is revealed to be Ernest John, which fact proves that all of his life he "has been speaking nothing but the truth." Here Wilde has achieved pure comedy of manners. No sentimentality disturbs the joy of our laughter. From the moment the curtain rises and Algernon begins his solemn fooling, we know that here is a gay, inconsequential world--a world where nothing matters but quick wit and fun. It is a world in which an amusing conversation can take place even about cucumber sandwiches:

Algernon. ....Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. (Takes one and eats it).  
Jack. Well, you have been eating them all the time.

Algernon. That is quite a different matter. She is my aunt.....<sup>23</sup>

The wit in this play, unlike that in Wilde's other three comedies, is inseparable from the plot. In fact the gay talk actually weaves the story and keeps it going. The weaving process is begun in Act One, and is enhanced in Act Two by the succession of one ridiculous situation after another. Wilde proves himself an equal of Restoration playwrights in this respect. The appearance of Jack, in Act Two, dressed in deep mourning for the non-existent Ernest, while "Ernest" all the time is in the garden making love to Cecily, is one of the most laugh-provoking scenes in English comedy. The entrance of Cecily and "Ernest" heightens the comic effect. The situation gives point to the reconciliation which Cecily achieves between the two "brothers." All this confusion of identity reminds us again of Restoration disguises. The double-entendre, however, is quickly thrown aside when Jack and Algy are alone; and soon the two "brothers" are quarreling.

Jack. Merriman, order the dog-cart at once. Mr. Ernest has been suddenly called back to town.

Merriman. Yes, sir. (Goes back into the house).

Algernon. What a fearful liar you are, Jack. I have not been called back to town at all.

Jack. Yes, you have.

Algernon. I haven't heard any one call me.

Jack. Your duty as a gentleman calls you back.

Algernon. My duty as a gentleman has never interfered with my pleasures in the smallest degree.

Jack. I can quite understand that.

Algernon. Well, Cecily is a darling.

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<sup>23</sup>"The Importance of Being Earnest," Act I.

Jack. You are not to talk of Miss Cardew like that. I don't like it.

Algernon. Well, I don't like your clothes. You look perfectly ridiculous in them. Why on earth don't you go up and change? It is perfectly childish to be in deep mourning for a man who is actually staying for a whole week with you in your house as a guest. I call it grotesque.

Jack. You are certainly not staying with me for a whole week as a guest or anything else. You have got to leave...by the four-five train.

Algernon. I certainly won't leave you so long as you are in mourning. It would be most unfriendly. If I were in mourning you would stay with me, I suppose. I should think it very unkind if you didn't.<sup>24</sup>

This, of course, is absolute nonsense; but surely it is just about as delightful nonsense as anybody ever heard. The play is a pure comedy of manners of the late nineteenth century. It is a recapturing of the artificially brilliant atmosphere of "The Way of the World," an atmosphere in which the only values are quick wit and refined intelligence. Wilde called the play "a trivial comedy for serious people."<sup>25</sup> In its charmingly subtle triviality, he found expression for his genius. There is no way to ascertain whether or not Wilde did any of his work in conscious imitation of the older comic masters. We know that the eighteen nineties were years when people wanted to be familiar with the literature of the past. We know, also, that Wilde attended Oxford, and that he had fine scholarship. There is not much question that he was, at least, acquainted with the Restoration dramatists. His reputation as a plagiarist of ideas might lead one to think that imitation was highly probable. The

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., Act II.

<sup>25</sup>Dickinson, op. cit., p. 149.

continuous presence in his plays of elements which are reminiscent of Restoration drama leads to the opinion that he often went to Restoration comedy for suggestions. It must be remembered, however, that contemporary London society was Wilde's first model, and that the reflection of that society could have called forth many of the evidences which seem to point directly to Restoration comedy. Certainly, there are echoes in all of Wilde's plays from Etherege, Wycherley, and Congreve. The important facts are that with "Lady Windermere's Fan" Wilde brought back to the London stage the spirit of the comedy of manners, that he gave to English drama a brilliant style which is utterly his own, and that with "The Importance of Being Earnest" he achieved pure, joyous comedy.

The comedies of Henry Arthur Jones differ from those of Wilde almost as much as the personality of Jones, the man, differed from that of Oscar Wilde. Henry Arthur Jones was fond of quoting Wilde's three rules for writing plays: "The first rule is not to write like Henry Arthur Jones, the second and third rules are the same!"<sup>26</sup> Yet in their comedies these two men wrote about the same world, the fashionable world of the eighties and nineties. Both wrote pure comedy. The vast difference in their methods lies in their attitudes toward the society which they presented upon the stage. And these attitudes bring us to the men themselves. Oscar Wilde was a part of the society about

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<sup>26</sup>Doris Arthur Jones, Taking the Curtain Call, the Life and Letters of Henry Arthur Jones (New York: Macmillan Co., 1930), p. 156.

which he wrote. For a few years he was an outstanding figure in fashionable and "artistic" circles; and he viewed the people about him with a smile, almost of disdain. Henry Arthur Jones, on the other hand, was "thoroughly representative of that great middle class which is justly regarded as the backbone of the nation."<sup>27</sup> He was born in September, 1851, in an old English farmhouse at Grandborough in Buckinghamshire. His father was a tenant farmer. His mother was a very religious woman, a confirmed Baptist, in fact; and she gave to her son a set of early Victorian standards from which he never got entirely away. Henry Arthur received his only formal education at a local grammar school.<sup>28</sup> At the age of thirteen he was placed with a commercial firm. Later he went into business at Bradford, and for some years he was a commercial traveler.<sup>29</sup> Until he began his dramatic career in 1878 with the sale of "It's Only Round the Corner," he was an ordinary, middle-class, working man of England. Clayton Hamilton comments on the typically English quality of Jones's name:

In the first place, it should be noted that, in birth and breeding, Mr. Jones is more characteristically English than any other of the leading playwrights of his time. He has often said to me and to many of his other friends that his name has been a handicap to him in his career--that it would have been less

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<sup>27</sup> Clayton Hamilton, Representative Plays by Henry Arthur Jones (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1925), I, "Introduction," p. xxvii.

<sup>28</sup> Jones, op. cit., pp. 3-6.

<sup>29</sup> Hamilton, op. cit., p. xxvii.

difficult for him to attain recognition as an artist if his name had not been so commonplace as Jones and his first name had not been so plebeian as Henry. In my opinion, however, his name affords an excellent label for his work, because it indicates that representative English quality which is comparatively lacking in the work of his fellow-dramatists.<sup>30</sup>

Hamilton compares Jones with the patrician, John Galsworthy, who was "philanthropically concerned in his dramatic writings with the plights and problems of the desperate poor." The critic goes on with another important comment on Mr. Jones:

"....but the plebeian, Mr. Jones, accustomed to poverty in his early years, is satirically concerned, in his dramatic writings, with the foibles and frivolities of the aristocracy. Unquestionably, one of the reasons why Mr. Jones has excelled all his contemporaries in the comedy of manners is the fact that, as a representative of the middle class, he was able to consider the aristocracy from an external point of view.<sup>31</sup>

Here, then, is the difference in the attitudes of Wilde and Jones. The latter playwright viewed the goings-on of the fashionable world from an impersonal, disinterested point of view. He was mildly amused to note that, with all their gay escapades, these people were still annoyed by old traditions and standards which they could not quite leave behind them. Jones, himself, could not get entirely away from early Victorian teachings, though he hated narrowness and priggishness. Because of his upbringing, he knew that Mrs. Grundy was still alive. He knew also that "the 'new' woman of the nineties kept one eye on the old lady, just as Restoration misses had done."<sup>32</sup> His heroines, therefore, are, always

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. xxviii.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Supra. p. 65.

very sure to follow the eleventh commandment, "Thou shalt not be found out." The foundation of his comedy lies in the adherence of pretty women to this commandment. It is in this respect that Jones's comedies are most typical of their time, and it is in the same respect that they are most reminiscent of Restoration models.

There is no question that this nineteenth century dramatist was conscious of the charm of seventeenth century comedy, and that, when he turned his hand to comedy of manners, he set about to achieve a similarly charming product for his own age. When Jones sold his first play in 1878, the status of English drama, it will be remembered, was not exceedingly high. As soon as he had achieved financial success with the returns from "The Silver King," in 1892, he devoted an ever-increasing amount of time to a ceaseless campaign by letters, articles in the papers, pamphlets, and lectures on behalf of the renaissance of English drama.

....He contended that the Drama was the highest and most difficult form of literature, and in the first twenty years of his career as a playwright he hammered away unceasingly in his efforts to get the general public to realise that the Drama is a part of literature.<sup>33</sup>

The fact that Jones worked earnestly for the improvement of the national drama shows that he realized the crying need for such improvement. He was sensitive, also, to any steps that were taken forward in the direction of better dramatic conditions.

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<sup>33</sup>Jones, op. cit., p. 51.

In March, 1883, he wrote a reply to a letter published in the Era from Mr. Herman Merivale, in which the latter had said, "Playgoers of today do not care for literature on the stage." A part of Jones's reply follows:

....Have we not had nearly enough of these complaints of the dulness and stupidity and ignorance of the British playgoer? Although the Drama is still in a bad enough plight, are not things gradually improving? Have we not made great advances during the last ten years in plays, in criticisms, and, above all, in audiences? The old type of burlesque has long ago dragged its ribald and putrid body to the spital, and there died of senile gangrene; farcical comedy, getting wilder and wilder, has at length dashed its brainless feather-head against one of the posts of its numberless hide-and-seek entrances; sensation, like some huge porpoise cast upon the shore, lies puffing, and bloated, and sprawling, with nothing left it but to bellow its bad luck, and flounder deeper and deeper into the mud; and, further, it is rumored that at the end of the run of *Iolanthe* Mr. Gilbert will cease to persuade people to nourish their brains by standing on their heads.....<sup>34</sup>

These statements show clearly Jones's understanding of the quagmire into which early nineteenth century drama had sunk, and his hopefulness over whatever progress had already been accomplished. When we read some of his early melodramas, we may wonder at times just how he thought he was helping that renaissance of drama about which he wrote so fervently. Yet when we realize what the state of English drama was when he and Pinero took hold of it, we see that these two men worked under great difficulties. In later years Jones made the statement, "I should never have written melodrama but for the fact that Wilson Barrett was the only manager who would look at my work in those days."<sup>35</sup> In 1924 Jones

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

wrote to his old friend, Brander Matthews:

.....I am pleased that my selected play will come into your hands for review. Looking back at what the drama was in 1884 (Saints and Sinners year), I think I helped to move things. But there was so much to sweep away. I've written in all about ninety plays, and have had great and world-wide successes. But only four or five times in my life have I been able to write the play I should have written if the conditions of the English Theatre had been as easy for the dramatist as they are today. However, I must not blame 'conditions' for the mistakes and failures that are due most likely to my own weakness and cowardice.....<sup>36</sup>

It was not until the nineties that Jones turned to the writing of comedy; and in the early years of that decade "he tried his hand at several different types of drama, as if he were deliberately seeking the logical line for his future development."<sup>37</sup> That line for development was found in "The Case of Rebellious Susan," produced by Charles Wyndham at the Criterion Theatre on October 3, 1894. In regard to Jones's progression into the realm of comedy, Hamilton writes:

Mr. Jones's growth was a gradual development out of melodrama, through romance and satire, to his ultimate goal of comedy; for it was in comedy that he finally found his successful metier. It was only after many experiments that he came to realise that for that earnest social censure which he desired ardently to utter, neither melodrama nor romance nor even fantastic satire offered an appropriate medium. What he needed was to achieve command of the more disinterested medium of high comedy; and this command came to him at last with the composition of "The Case of Rebellious Susan" in 1894.<sup>38</sup>

It would almost seem that Jones had waited, all these years, until he was ready to write comedy. His association with Charles

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>37</sup> Clayton Hamilton, Representative Plays by Henry Arthur Jones, II, "Introduction," p. v.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. v.

Wyndham, which had begun the year before, may have had something to do with the turn of the playwright's mind, for Wyndham was interested in the comic method.<sup>39</sup> The Criterion Theatre, at which Wyndham was actor-manager, was, for a quarter of a century, the most aristocratic playhouse in London.<sup>40</sup> It may be that Jones conceived the idea of holding up a mirror before the very ladies and gentlemen in the Criterion audience, and showing them how they looked to a representative Englishman of the middle class. Whatever may have been the reason, Henry Arthur Jones wrote, in 1894, a pure comedy of manners. The acquaintance between this middle-class English gentleman and the Restoration dramatists was of long standing. This man, who had been taken out of school at the age of twelve, had the comprehensive education that comes from wide reading. In the early years of his dramatic career he devoted a large proportion of his time to reading the great early dramatists. A passage from one of his letters to Emery Walker shows the range of his investigation:

The following dramatists will be useful to me, if you will kindly look out copies of any or all of them---Marlowe, Webster, Ford, Ben Jonson, Chapman, Tourneur, Dekker, Rowley, Middleton, Shirley, Greene, Peele, Kyd, Beaumont and Fletcher, and perhaps two or three others whom I do not now call to mind.<sup>41</sup> Congreve, Wycherley, Farquhar, and perhaps the two Colmans.....

On one occasion Jones wrote to his daughter:

.....I'm gradually getting my library straight after im-

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<sup>39</sup>Dickinson, op. cit., p. 55.

<sup>40</sup>Hamilton, op. cit., II, "Introduction," p. xvii.

<sup>41</sup>Jones, op. cit., p. 17.

mense pains to sort them out. There are some very grim results too, owing to the exigencies of space, size, binding, and class and quality of literature.....Sophocles....is not quite of the same order of mind as Vanbrugh, the Restoration dramatist, but they are just of the same stature of body, so they have got to hobnob. What will be the result of their collaboration I cannot foretell....<sup>42</sup>

These two letters reveal Jones's interest in the seventeenth century playwrights. His daughter, Doris Arthur, tells us that her father was fond of talking about the Restoration dramatists, and that he knew their works as well as he knew those of Shakespeare. She quotes him as saying, "Congreve at his best was altogether finer and more subtle than Sheridan."<sup>43</sup> This statement from Jones's own lips shows his admiration for the work of Congreve----and (we incline to think) of Sheridan also. When we remember that Jones was constantly working for the improvement of English drama, when we know that he had intimate acquaintance with the Restoration dramatists and that he admired Congreve, and when we read his two comedies of manners which were produced in the eighteen nineties, we become very sure that he was often smiling to himself and thinking of the older dramatists as he set his characters upon their merry way.

When "The Case of Rebellious Susan" was first published, it was dedicated by the author to Mrs. Grundy. That august person was addressed as "Dear and Honoured Madam," and she was told:

If you must have a moral in my comedy, suppose it to be this----"That as women cannot retaliate openly, they may retaliate secretly---and lie!" And truly shocking moral it is,

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 334.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 332.

now that we have got it.<sup>44</sup>

In other words, the play is laid in the amusing world of appearances that Jones saw fashionable society of the eighteen nineties to be. The playwright must have chuckled to himself as he thought of that similar world of Restoration comedy, where people could play with fire and even get singed, just so long as no one found out. It interests us to know that Charles Wyndham believed Lady Susan should be innocent, and that Jones refused to make her so.<sup>45</sup> Both men, however, saw the advantage of leaving the question mark hanging in the air. The tantalizing uncertainty that resulted contributes a large portion of the charm of the play. It calls to mind an old play of Vanbrugh's, "The Provok'd Wife," in which a similar question is left unanswered. "The Case of Rebellious Susan" deals only with the polite surfaces of life. We never know exactly what is underneath. Lady Susan Harabin has decided that "What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander"; and she has determined to pay back her husband's infidelity in his own coin. When she tries applying the gander sauce, however, she runs into difficulties. She is quick to learn that if one ever eats any of this gander sauce, she must lie about it to the world. Susan, however, does not lie to her husband; nor does she tell him the truth. She teases and torments him with uncertainty. She refuses to tell him about any affair she may have had until he makes a full confession to her. This, of course, is impossible

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<sup>44</sup>Hamilton, op. cit., II, "Introduction," pp. xix-xx.

<sup>45</sup>Jones, op. cit., pp. 132-137.

from a gentleman's point of view. At last Sue condescends to return to her husband, provided that they both agree to ask no questions. In her husband's discomfort she has her revenge, though we are never absolutely certain how far she has gone in her attempt at getting even. Here is ridicule for the husband instead of condemnation for the wife. As we laugh at James Harabin, we cannot help remembering Mr. Pinchwife and Sir Oliver Cockwood, those two seventeenth century husbands, who granted themselves every license, but who expected their wives to be models of chastity in return. It appears to this writer that with "The Case of Rebellious Susan," Jones not only recaptured the audacious and evasive air of Restoration comedy, but that he added a new and invaluable comic element to English comedy of manners. In this play (as in "The Liars," which was presented three years later) the action results from the clash of character upon character, and the friction produces high comedy. Jones's dialogue is laughable, not only in itself, but in its relation to the men and women it concerns. There is nothing particularly funny in James Harabin's remark to his wife, "It's extremely cold," nor in Lady Susan's reply, "Extremely."<sup>46</sup> Yet these two remarks, uttered by these two people under the particular circumstances, are incredibly amusing. Harabin's next trite statement is equally comic: "There's every indication of a very heavy snowfall." Such effects are produced without resort to carica-

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<sup>46</sup>"The Case of Rebellious Susan" (Representative Plays of Henry Arthur Jones, ed. Clayton Hamilton, II), Act III.

ture or "humours," except in the case of minor characters. The explanation of this comic achievement appears to be that a long experience with sentimental drama had taught Jones much about the workings of human nature. When, after fourteen years of play-writing, he turned to comedy of manners, he had a well of human understanding to draw from. His handiwork reveals that he had learned what eighteenth and early nineteenth century dramatists had failed to learn; that is, that human character itself (without being exaggerated into caricature) can be indescribably funny. The natural evolution of comic plot and dialogue from comic character was Jones's contribution to high comedy. He carried his technique to greater artistic heights in "The Liars." If an influence from sentimentalism was necessary for the contribution, then the long predominance of sentimental drama through nearly two centuries was not without a happy climax.

By 1897, Jones had polished and improved his comic method; and on October 6 of that year, he presented to the stage a masterpiece of English comedy. "The Liars" was produced by Wyndham at the Criterion Theatre, where it ran for two hundred ninety-one nights.<sup>47</sup> It has held the English stage for nearly a half century, and always it retains its charm. This play is another representation of aristocratic society as that society appeared to the middle-class gentleman, Mr. Henry Arthur Jones.

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<sup>47</sup>Jones, op. cit., p. 154.

The representation was so typical that George Bernard Shaw was moved to say, "In The Liars, the 'smart' group which carries on the action of the piece is hit off to the life, with the result that the originals will probably feel brutally misrepresented."<sup>48</sup> Hamilton expresses the opinion that "The Liars" is as representative of aristocratic English life at the end of the nineteenth century as the comedies of Congreve are representative of aristocratic English life in the Restoration period. He believes "that, as generations pass and time goes on, 'The Liars' will take on more and more an historical importance as a documentary exposition of the manners of its time."<sup>49</sup> As in "The Case of Rebellious Susan," the action of the play is based on an attempt to disregard convention without being discovered. As in the former comedy, laughter arises from the effort to fool the husband of a pretty woman. In these two respects both plays reveal their kinship with "She wou'd if she cou'd," "The Country Wife," and "The School for Scandal." The plot of "The Liars" evolves around a lie, which poor, dear Lady Jessica Nepean has to tell in order to explain her presence at the Star and Garter on a certain Monday evening. Jessica's conduct has been innocent enough, because she has been interrupted, before her dinner with Edward Falkner, by her husband's brother, George Nepean. She tells her friends that her only reason for being at the Star and Garter, in the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>49</sup> Representative Plays by Henry Arthur Jones, III, "Introduction," p. xvi.

first place, was that she "took the wrong turning" on her way to the station, although she had made the same mistake once before. Nevertheless, she and her sister, Lady Rosamund Tatton, feel that a lie is necessary. On the next morning, at Lady Rosamund's house, the lie is hatched; and the two women are prepared to face the accusing brother-in-law. But the entrances of numerous people so confuse matters that, as the lie changes its form, it becomes more and more complicated. At last the truth must be told to the husband, in a passionate declaration by Falkner. On the following day, the husband goes for advice to Sir Christopher Deering, the kindly raisonneur of the piece. Sir Christopher's advice is for Gilbert to go home and take his wife "out to the very best dinner that London can provide." Lady Jessica is persuaded to accept her husband's invitation. When he asks if she will come home and dress and go to the Savoy to supper, she replies, "Delighted."<sup>50</sup> Jones's craftsmanship in the construction of this play reaches the finest art, and goes beyond the technique of the Restoration dramatists. He plans the expository first act with apparent ease. In the second act he builds up the intrigue and stimulates interest in the entanglement. The third, or penultimate, act deals with the cumulative growth of the lie, which increases in size as it passes from mouth to mouth. Here Jones shows his masterful technique at its best. The building up of dramatic suspense in this third act

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<sup>50</sup> "The Liars," (Representative Plays by Henry Arthur Jones, III), Act IV.

has often been compared with Sheridan's method in the screen scene of "The School for Scandal." The third act of "The Liars" begins with only two people on the stage, and it takes on an increasing intensity as each of the other characters makes his entrance. The lie continues to expand until it reaches the breaking point; and as soon as the truth is out, the act is finished. This superb dramatic craftsmanship is an art which conceals itself. In spite of the cumulative construction, the intricacy of plot, and the cleverness of plan, the evolution of the comic plot still appears to come from the inherent comedy of human nature. In regard to Jones's handling of the relation between characters and action, Walter Prichard Eaton makes the following comment:

....Jones, in "The Liars," peopled his play with men and women of 1896. They spoke the language of 1896, not 1696. Behind them you feel the social forces and ideas of 1896. And in developing his plot, his intrigue, Jones works with the utmost care to make every situation plausible, every fresh complication a logical and inevitable outgrowth of the one before, every emotional scene the result of the characters being what they are, not the result of their being placed in a given set of circumstances. Between such an arbitrary plot as that of Congreve's "Love for Love" and the plot of "The Liars" is a wide gulf.....<sup>51</sup>

Max Beerbohm, also, speaks of Jones's technique:

We are not made conscious of it while the play is in progress. From the very outset we are aware merely of ladies and gentlemen behaving with apparent freedom and naturalness. It is only when the play is over that we notice the art of it.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Eaton, The Drama in English, p. 253. (Eaton gives 1896 as the date of this play. Doris Arthur Jones and Clayton Hamilton give 1897).

<sup>52</sup>Hamilton, op. cit., III, "Introduction," pp. xvii-xviii.

Jones's skill in portraying natural, amusing characters and in evolving from them an intricate, comic plot is, again, an unquestionable evidence of his deep understanding of human nature, which he had acquired from working with human emotions in his sentimental plays. In this play he achieves his comedy from the well rounded (though weak and frivolous) characters. Never once does he resort to caricature or "humours." The "ladies and gentlemen behaving with apparent freedom and naturalness" give rise to some of the most amusing and polished dialogue in English comedy. Jones's style, in its reproduction of the wit of the eighteen nineties, rivals anything that Congreve ever wrote. Many of the lines are mirth-provoking because they are uttered by particular people in particular situations. Lady Jessica's explanation about her presence at the Star and Garter falls into this class:

I was going back to town tonight. I thought I'd walk to the station----it's so delightful across the fields. Well, you know the path; I went on all right till I came to those two turnings, and then----I must have taken the wrong one, for instead of finding myself at the station, I found myself here.<sup>53</sup>

The audience knows Lady Jessica, and is sure that she is fibbing. Therefore her excuses bring a laugh. When Jess's explanation is repeated several times in the third act, it becomes more amusing each time it is uttered. Jones shows, here, his mastery of the art of repetition, of knowing when to repeat a line for comic effect. Much of the dialogue in this play is amusing in itself,

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<sup>53</sup> "The Liars," (Representative Plays by Henry Arthur Jones, III), Act II.

but always personalities give point to conversation. When Jessica and Lady Rosamund speak of the latter's husband, Freddie, the audience is amused because it knows what kind of person Freddie is:

Lady Rosamund. (very seriously). Jess, the men are talking about you.

Lady Jessica. (very carelessly). Oh, are they? Who is?

Lady Rosamund. My Freddie says that you----

Lady Jessica. (interrupting on "says"). My dear Rosy, I don't mind what your Freddie says any more than you do.<sup>54</sup>

Jessica's first conversation with her husband on the subject of her flirtation is typical of the charm and triviality of her nature.

Gilbert. What's all this tomfoolery with Falkner?

Lady Jessica. Tomfoolery?

Gilbert. George says you are carrying on some tomfoolery with Falkner.

Lady Jessica. Ah! that's very sweet and elegant of George. But I never carry on any tomfoolery with any one---- because I'm not a tomfool, therefore I can't.

Gilbert. I wish for once in your life you'd give me a plain answer to a plain question.

Lady Jessica. Oh, I did once. You shouldn't remind me of that. But I never bear malice. Ask me another, such as---- if a herring and a half cost three ha' pence, how long will it take one's husband to learn politeness enough to remove his cap in his wife's presence?<sup>55</sup>

The discussions about the lie are perhaps the cleverest lines in the play, both in their intrinsic humor and in their revelation of character. A moment after Lady Jessica has discovered that she will have to change her story a little, Dolly Coke comes in. Lady Jessica is overjoyed:

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., Act I.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

Lady Jessica. (goes affectionately and a little hysterically to her.) Dolly! How good of you! Kissing her.

Dolly. What's the matter?

Lady Jessica. Dolly, you dined with me, or were going to dine with me at the Star and Garter at Shepperford last evening. Don't say you can't and didn't, for you must and did!<sup>56</sup>

Dolly agrees to have dined with Jessica, but she wants to know a few more details.

Dolly. (to Lady Jessica). Very well, dear, I quite understand. After George went away, you were so upset at his suspicions that you came back to town without any dinner. Did I stay and have the dinner?

Sir Christopher. No, no. I wouldn't go so far as that.

Dolly. But what did I do? I must have dined somewhere, didn't I? Not that I mind if I didn't dine anywhere. But won't it seem funny if I didn't dine somewhere?

Lady Jessica. I suppose it will.

Dolly. Very well, then, where did I dine? Do tell me. I know I shall get into an awful muddle if I don't know. Where did I dine?<sup>57</sup>

A little later, Dolly tells the cock-and-bull story to Gilbert. As she feared, Gilbert asks what she did after Lady Jessica had gone home without dinner:

Gilbert. And what did you do?

Dolly. (very nervous). I came up to town too.

Gilbert. Without any dinner?

Dolly. No---- I ----

Gilbert. Where did you dine?

Dolly. I didn't really dine anywhere----not to say dine. I had some cold chicken and a little tongue when I got home----  
(pause)----and a tomato salad.<sup>58</sup>

These quotations illustrate the smooth polish of the dialogue. In this play Jones proved himself to be a master of style, construction, and amusing character portrayal. Turning his hand to

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., Act III.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

the writing of comedy after a long experience in the theatre, he found a successful medium of expression in "The Case of Rebellious Susan." With "The Liars" he gave to the theatrical world a masterpiece of sophisticated comedy. This play was the culmination of nineteenth century comedy of manners, as Congreve's "The Way of the World" was the culmination of seventeenth century comedy. The chief contribution of Henry Arthur Jones to this form of drama was his creation of natural, amusing characters and his building from them a superbly handled plot and a smoothly graceful dialogue.

Jones's representation of the aristocratic society of the eighteenth century was based upon his impersonal, middle class observation of the foibles and follies of that society. Wilde viewed the same fashionable group from the attitude of a blasé member of the circle about which he wrote. In their comedies both men are as representative of the fin de siècle age as Etherege, Wycherley, and Congreve, in their dramatic writings, are representative of the Restoration era. A blasé, cynical, pleasure-mad society nourished the first growth of the comedy of manners in England in the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century a similarly tired, disillusioned, fin de siècle world stimulated a second development of pure comedy. A long era of sentimentalism, in life and in literature, intervened between the two periods; and for a time it choked out comic achievement. The revival of the comedy of manners in England in the last decade of the nineteenth century was due to the repetition, in these

years, of the same kinds of stimuli which had led to the development of comedy in the seventeenth century. The presence of two gifted dramatists, Oscar Wilde and Henry Arthur Jones, who (like Etherege, Wycherley, and Congreve) could take the material of life before them " and pattern from its warp and woof a drama,"<sup>59</sup> made possible, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, the revival of the comedy of manners in England.

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<sup>59</sup>Supra. p. 20.

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