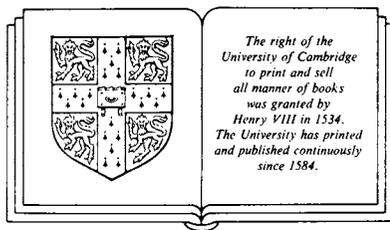


Restoration Comedy in Performance

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Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	page	viii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>		xiii
I INTRODUCTION AND APPROACH		I
A celebration of Restoration comedy		I
The critical reversal		3
The life is in the style		5
The playgoers: a homogeneous audience		7
The behaviour of the audience		8
A self-conscious theatre		II
Recreating the performance		16
2 THE PLAYHOUSE AND THE PERFORMANCE		19
Tennis court into court theatre		19
The stage doors		23
The balconies		25
The scenery		27
Discoveries		28
Familiar locations		29
The music		35
Lighting and effects		36
Restoration setting on the modern stage		38
3 THE ACTOR		43
The primacy of the acting style		43
The actor in costume		45
Dorimant greets the new day		54
His personal props		59
The style is the man		65
The beau assumes his role		70
Sir Fopling introduced		75
The actor shares himself with the audience		79
A bright dance of life		84
4 THE ACTRESS		89
Women on the stage		89

Contents

Exploiting the actress	91
Dress and undress	96
The toilette	102
The fan	107
The mask	112
The style of the actress	118
Departures from acceptability	126
The breeches part	133
5 STAGE AND SEXUAL TACTICS	143
The promenade and the stage space	143
The spacious entrance and exit	147
Patterns for lovers	153
Dorimant suffers the rites of love	160
Lovers play lovers	163
Love in the burlesque vein	167
A stage for dancing	170
6 A MODE OF SPEECH	175
Speech or song?	175
Differences in speech between characters	179
Repartee	182
Whining of love	186
Love on the tongue	189
Contracts and provisos	194
A note on verse, song and non-illusion	198
<i>Double entendre</i>	201
The glories of the aside	204
7 THE SPIRIT OF THE PERFORMANCE	210
Plot or situation?	210
Real or artificial?	212
Town and country matters	214
Chase and capture, seduction and conquest	217
Mismatches and cuckoldry	227
A note on disguising	232
Sex and farce: Aimwell's swoon	234
A temple of pagan delights	238
The spirit, the style and the revivals	243

Contents

APPENDICES

A	A partial list of Restoration comedies revived in the twentieth century	252
B	The comedies in order of popularity	
	1660–1747	
	After 1900	258
	<i>Selected bibliography</i>	259
	<i>Index</i>	264

Illustrations

1	Wren's Drury Lane design redrawn (courtesy Richard Leacroft, <i>The Development of the English Playhouse</i> , Methuen, London)	page 20
2	Wren's Drury Lane theatre imaginatively recreated (courtesy Richard Leacroft, <i>The Development of the English Playhouse</i> , Methuen, London)	21
3	St James's Park, by John Kip, 1713 (The Crace Collection, courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum)	30
4	Vauxhall Gardens, a general prospect by S. Wale (The Crace Collection, courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum)	34
5	Scene design by Rolf Gerard for <i>The Constant Couple</i> , Arts Theatre, 1943 (BBC Hulton Picture Library)	40
6	Scene design by René Allio for <i>The Recruiting Officer</i> , Old Vic, 1963 (photo: Lewis Morley)	41
7	Cavalier en escharpe (N. Bonnart, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	47
8	Les cinq sens (I. Gole, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	48
9	John Gielgud as Mirabell, <i>The Way of the World</i> , Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, 1953 (Angus McBean photograph, Harvard Theatre Collection)	49
10	Colley Cibber as Lord Foppington in <i>The Relapse</i> , 1696 (portrait by G. Grisoni, courtesy the Garrick Club)	52
11	Donald Sinden as Lord Foppington in <i>The Relapse</i> , Royal Shakespeare Company, Aldwych Theatre, 1967 (photo: Douglas Jeffery)	53
12	Homme de qualité en robe de chambre (Berey, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	55
13	<i>The Man of Mode</i> , act I (Etherege, <i>Plays</i> , 1735, courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago)	58
14	Officier du roy: taking snuff (St-Jean, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	61
15	Habit d'espée en esté: combing the peruke (N. Bonnart, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	61

Illustrations

16	Brazen embraces Plume: Laurence Olivier and Robert Stephens in <i>The Recruiting Officer</i> , Old Vic, 1963 (photo: Lewis Morley)	page 69
17	Paul Scofield as Witwoud, <i>The Way of the World</i> , Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, 1953 (Angus McBean photograph, Harvard Theatre Collection)	73
18	Homme de qualité chantant (N. Bonnart, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	83
19	Ernest Thesiger as Sparkish, with Iris Holey as Mrs Dainty Fidget, <i>The Country Wife</i> , Old Vic, 1936 (courtesy Theatre Museum, photo J.W. Debenham)	85
20	Edith Evans as Millamant, <i>The Way of the World</i> , Wyndham's Theatre, 1927 (Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection)	97
21	Pamela Brown as Millamant, <i>The Way of the World</i> , Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, 1953 (Angus McBean photograph, Harvard Theatre Collection)	98
22	Femme de qualité en stenkerke et falbala (St-Jean, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	101
23	Femme de qualité allant incognita par la ville (St-Jean, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	101
24	Femme de qualité en déshabillé reposant sur un lit d'ange (St-Jean, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	102
25	Dame de qualité a son lever (F. Bonnart, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	104
26	Dame se promenant à la campagne: the parasol (St-Jean, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	108
27	Fille de qualité en habit d'esté: with fan and mask (N. Arnoult, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	110
28	Femme de qualité en déshabillé de vestalle: with fan and mask (N. Arnoult, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	110
29	Lady with muff wearing mask (Wenceslas Hollar, <i>Ornatus Mulierbris Anglicanus</i> , 1640, courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum)	113
30	Dame allant à la campagne: holding mask (Jean le Pautre, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	113
31	Un cavalier et une dame beuvant du chocolat (N. Bonnart, courtesy of the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York)	119
32	The curtsy and the bow: <i>The Constant Couple</i> , Arts Theatre, 1943 (BBC Hulton Picture Library)	122

Restoration comedy in performance

33	Dames en conversation aux Tuilleries (N. Bonnard, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	page 124
34	La folie pare la décrépitude des ajustements de la jeunesse (Louis de Surugue de Surgis, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	130
35	Mrs Pitt as Lady Wishfort, <i>The Way of the World</i> , act III (Congreve, <i>Works</i> , 1776, courtesy the Newberry Library, Chicago)	132
36	Edith Evans as Lady Wishfort, <i>The Way of the World</i> , New Theatre, 1948 (John Vickers, London)	135
37	Margaret Rutherford as Lady Wishfort, <i>The Way of the World</i> , Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, 1953 (Angus McBean photograph, Harvard Theatre Collection)	135
38	Helen Cherry in breeches as Silvia, with Edward Byrne (Brazen) and Trevor Howard (Plume), <i>The Recruiting Officer</i> , Arts Theatre, 1943 (BBC Hulton Picture Library)	139
39	Maggie Smith in breeches as Silvia, with Lynn Redgrave (Rose), <i>The Recruiting Officer</i> , National Theatre, 1963 (Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection)	140
40	Ruth Gordon as Margery Pinchwife, <i>The Country Wife</i> , Old Vic, 1936 (Billy Rose Theatre Collection, the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)	142
41	Dame en manteaux et gentilhomme allant par la ville (Jean le Pautre, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	144
42	La femme coquette et le vieux jaloux (Berey, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	150
43	Fille de qualité aprenant à danser (N. Arnoult, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	173
44	Edith Evans as Millamant and Robert Loraine as Mirabell, <i>The Way of the World</i> , Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, 1924 (Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection)	196
45	Sir Wilfull Witwoud and Lady Wishfort, <i>The Way of the World</i> , act III (Congreve, <i>Works</i> , 1753, courtesy Northwestern University Library)	218
46	Loveless and Berinthia, <i>The Relapse</i> , act IV (Vanbrugh, <i>Plays</i> , 1735, courtesy Northwestern University Library)	223
47	Faute de droit a tousjours besoin d'ayde (Pierre le Pautre, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	226
48	Sir John Brute, <i>The Provoked Wife</i> (Vanbrugh, <i>Plays</i> , 1735, courtesy Northwestern University Library)	233
49	Aimwell's swoon, <i>The Beaux' Stratagem</i> , act IV (Farquhar, <i>Plays</i> , 1733, courtesy Northwestern University Library)	235

Illustrations

- 50 Edith Evans as Mrs Sullen and Nigel Playfair as Gibbet,
The Beaux' Stratagem, Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, 1927
(Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection) *page* 247
- 51 Edith Evans as Lady Fidget and Michael Redgrave as
Horner, *The Country Wife*, Old Vic, 1936 (Mander and
Mitchenson Theatre Collection) 249
- 52 Athene Seyler as Melantha, *Marriage à la Mode*, Lyric
Theatre, Hammersmith, 1920 (photo: Pollard Crowther) 251

I. Introduction and approach

A CELEBRATION OF RESTORATION COMEDY

This might have been the title of the book, chosen in order to indicate the pleasure to be had in getting to know a unique body of plays – and so perhaps calling up the cynic in every reader and critic. However, the role of celebrant does not altogether fit. It has been left to others to recreate the little world of gifted Restoration actors and actresses which gave the theatre of the time its special sense of occasion. Nor is there any pretence of having reviewed all the plays of the age; rather, in the search for examples, of, say, a lively breeches scene, or a brilliant run of repartee, or a glorious moment of knockabout comedy, the same plays have often come to mind. Nor does the book deal with the talents of individual playwrights, and thereby it commits the sin of seeming to treat one writer very like another, when we all know that Wycherley was not Congreve, nor Etherege Farquhar, if only because the theatre changed a great deal in a generation. Only on occasion is the reader invited to dwell on a single scene which may distinguish the qualities in a particular playwright.

If from time to time this study rehearses some familiar material about Restoration staging and acting conditions, it is because the new task is to ask the pertinent questions about those conditions: what properties made the comedy of the Restoration successful in its own day? And the next question may be the other side of the same coin: why do we find it difficult to recapture those properties in ours?

It is a commonplace that the plots and characters of Restoration comedy largely repeated themselves from play to play for some forty years, in a way which may seem to us to be distinctly uninspired. If there is a provisional conclusion to be drawn from this, it is not that we should look to the plotting and characterization for the answers to our questions, but that we should study what made such repetition *unimportant* to the success of the enterprise. The assumption is that the endless stories of seduction and cuckolding, and the repeated stereotypes of wit and coquette, fop and prude, country wife and country cousin, merely provided convenient pegs on which to hang the true elements of drama offered by Restoration comedy. And where might they be found? In the code of speech and behaviour which lay dormant in the lines, and in whose secrets player and spectator could share – but only through the right sort of performance.

Restoration comedy in performance

So we turn for answers, as so often in the study of drama, to performance. Not only the practice of the Restoration stage itself, but also the experience of those who tried to revive the plays after 1915, may supply the solution. It would be a mistake to ignore what the modern theatre has itself learned about the nature of the genre.

In order to reconstruct the peculiar qualities of a *risqué* sexual comedy through its style of performance, we must turn aside from the kind of anachronistic judgments with which it has been long associated. These are both moralistic (as late as 1919 the Phoenix Society was excoriated for its plans to produce 'the Restoration blackguards Wycherley and Shadwell') and literary (L.C. Knights's now classic piece of misplaced censure that the bulk of this comedy was 'insufferably dull'). For it is hard to think of a style of drama which in its intentions and spirit arose more directly from the special circumstances of its original performance. If drama is an imaginative interchange between its participants on stage and off, a true extension of *homo ludens*, then the Restoration offers an example of one of the most rare games in theatrical history. Played at first in a theatre that was little more than a *salon*, and reflecting the behaviour of an unusually homogeneous audience whose preconceptions the author shared, Restoration comedy rapidly developed an intimate style of speech and behaviour whose private signals were to be understood only in playing them.

Because of significant changes in the conditions of performance by the end of the seventeenth century, especially in the predisposition of the audience, the Restoration comic style was relatively short-lived. The plays continued in some demand into the eighteenth century, but then virtually dropped from the repertoire for 200 years until a few of them were revived in the early years of this century. At that time Restoration comedy was without a known theatrical tradition, unencrusted with the accretions of the stage; it was a lost art form. Yet it is only recently that our interest in the genre has coincided with attempts to understand drama as a self-conscious form in which a play's style is determined by its own laws of performance, its own 'poetics'. In the seventeenth century the illusion of the action could at any moment be fractured, an actor need not always remain in character, and the activity of the audience as much as that of the actors might hold the key to the play. In sum, its text has to be regarded as a framework and not a formula for performance. Restoration comedy was a kind of improvised charade, and, in John Crowne's words in the preface to his masque *Calisto* (1675), the libretto was the 'cold lean carcass of the entertainment'.

THE CRITICAL REVERSAL

The arguments that surrounded the revival of Restoration comedy in the early twentieth century were about whether it was necessary to see it on the stage before passing a verdict, and the most direct statement on the matter came from the man who most helped it return to the theatre. In the introduction to his book *The Restoration Theatre*, intended to be the first volume of a complete history of the stage conditions, Montague Summers offered the following admonition:

Without some knowledge, some visualization of Restoration stage conditions the reader of a play by Dryden, Congreve, Otway, or any contemporary, must often find himself hopelessly puzzled and at sea, whilst a piece of stagecraft which is in itself singularly delicate and adroit will appear consumedly clumsy and awkwardly contrived. (p. xv)

This has proved to be ridiculously true, but in the first place the warning was prompted by the savage criticism that had been poured on the plays for a hundred years.

When Lamb excused the Restoration stage as a kind of fairyland in which the rules of right and wrong were irrelevant, he was offering a mildly impressionistic reason, albeit an ill-thought-out one, for his own enjoyment of the plays. It is hard to forget Ivor Brown's remark about Lady Wishfort, that she was 'a very curious kind of fairy'. James Agate pointed out that 'That was only Elia's way', and he added, 'Leigh Hunt and Hazlitt were better champions, since they boggled at nothing and enjoyed their author straightforwardly and for all he was worth' (*Red Letter Nights*, p. 24). But the influence of Macaulay's moral position on the plays ('too filthy to handle and too noisome even to approach') was difficult to shake off. In *The Old Drama and the New* (1923), William Archer also dismissed the best drama of the age as 'that fetid fairyland, that insanitary Alsatia'. More surprisingly, Granville Barker described Wycherley's *Love in a Wood* as 'young men and their mistresses chattering their bawdry and chasing each other through scene after scene, till one asks: How could an audience both be clever enough to understand the story and stupid enough to be interested by it when they did?' This was in his Clark Lectures of 1930, *On Dramatic Method* (p. 121), and, responding in a letter, Gilbert Murray 'agreed violently' with the sentiment. More troubling, perhaps, was Barker's failure to appreciate the point of an acting device like the aside, when in reference to *The Plain Dealer* he applied strangely realistic standards to Fidelia's ringing simplicity with the comment, 'Nobody with any sense of the theatre would employ the aside as clumsily' (p. 123). So much for the author of *The Country Wife*.

When the change of attitude came, it was full of contradictions. In his *History of Eighteenth-Century Literature* (1889), Edmund Gosse, the best Restoration scholar of his day, wrote of ‘the drama which is read but not acted’. Not unexpectedly, he found Etherege’s plays ‘marred by a deplorable laxity of tone’ and Aphra Behn’s suffering from a ‘lamentable coarseness’. But in the same book Gosse modified his view of Wycherley’s ‘indelicate’ with a new critical test: his comedies contained ‘very rigorous writing, much genuine wit, and sound satire of the fools and rogues whom the author saw about him’ (p. 53). Unforeseen support came from Swinburne, who by 1895 had decided that Congreve was ‘the greatest English master of pure comedy’ and *The Way of the World* ‘the unequalled and unapproached masterpiece of English comedy’, and he ranked the playwright with Molière (*Miscellanies*, pp. 52–4). Then in his *Seventeenth-Century Studies* of 1897, Gosse declared that ‘the entire neglect of [Etherege’s] three plays is an unworthy return for the singular part he played in the creation of modern English comedy’ (p. 259), but at the same time observed ‘the little graphic touches, the intimate impression, the clear, bright colour of the scenes’ in *She Would If She Could*. And he makes an unusual addition: ‘The two sprightly girls [Ariana and Gatty] must have been particularly delightful and diverting to *witness*’, especially in the party at the Bear (III.3) when the playwright ‘with his singular eye for colour, crowds the stage with damsels in sky-blue, and pink, and flame-coloured taffetas’ (pp. 272–4, my italics). In sum, Gosse showed notable signs of wanting to apply a test of performance, and by 1912, when he edited the *Everyman* collection of Restoration plays, he actually dismissed Macaulay for going ‘much too far in his diatribe’ and gave the palm for the best comedy of the time to *Love for Love*, a play hitherto considered to be among the bawdiest.

The test of performance was still to come, and in Montague Summers the plays found their champion. To Archer’s assertion that with few exceptions the plays were not worth reviving, Summers responded, ‘I don’t believe this personally for one moment, not for one moment,’ and when he staged *Marriage à la Mode* at the Lyric, Hammersmith in 1920, he wrote confidently, ‘For two hundred years everybody has been saying that Dryden’s comedies were impossible. We showed them that they were wrong’ (Joseph Jerome, *Montague Summers*, p. 42). How are we to see the virtues in the Restoration comedies? – ‘This can only be done by producing them.’ It was not the whole answer – the magic would not work unless they were produced in a certain way – but the moral objections began to evaporate as soon as the plays were staged. Laughter dispelled prurience. In Walter Kerr’s words, ‘Nothing that is truly funny can ever be titillating, because the very fact of titillation is being rendered absurd’ (*Tragedy and Comedy*, p. 163).

THE LIFE IS IN THE STYLE

There were more than 400 plays written between 1660 and 1700, and some 180 playwrights wrote them. Quite a prolific period of theatre. So why did their audience enjoy plays of a kind which suffered so mixed a reception in the long years that followed? The repeated quip that no audience bright enough to understand a Restoration plot could possibly be dull enough to like it, calls for an answer.

The dictum that it is the 'how' and not the 'what' that is the cause of drama was never so true as for the Restoration. Neo-classical theory would have conceded as much: in *The Adventures of a Rake* (1759) we may read, 'When the skill of the player is added to that of the poet, and the one gives utterance to the other's conceptions, it is not the actor or the poet that we hear, 'tis the character of the drama that speaks to us.'

It becomes a matter of overriding importance to identify what Ivor Brown, in reviewing *The Old Bachelor* for the *Saturday Review* in 1924, called an appropriate 'convention', in this case one in which to act Congreve. The doll-like Araminta and Bellinda, Sylvia and her spinet, did not mix, he thought, with the rough-and-tumble of Captain Bluffe, on this occasion played by Roy Byford who had enjoyed a recent success as Falstaff, and the broad playing of Fondlewife by Hay Petrie, at that time the 'resident clown' at the Old Vic. 'One would give much', wrote Brown, 'to have a glimpse of Drury Lane in 1693. How bluff was Bluffe? How did the ladies move and speak? Was it all riot and ritual? Or was it, as we saw it this week, a marriage, even a polygamy, of styles?' (7 June). Even those who already find the comedies sufficiently full of laughter and delight, tantalized by flirtatious girls or impertinent men (and many may, like Elia, have made their own peace with the devil), feel a need to reconcile the extremes and excesses of so lively a comedy. The solutions will be found in the conventions of the earlier stage.

The frankness of sexual morality in Restoration comedy no longer shocks and distracts the critic and the playgoer. Today our troubles come, not from licentious behaviour on the stage, but from uncommon distortions of the comic mirror. As an audience we have been living too long in the shadow of Ibsen and Chekhov, Stanislavsky and Freud, exposed to the limited kind of dramatic style which has been unnaturally perpetuated by the proscenium arch and the photographic actuality of film and television. An aside on television is all but ineffective, and a wink at the audience in the theatre is still thought by some to be unforgivable: both 'break the illusion'.

Play implies interplay, and the proper study of drama is a study of the interplay between stage and audience. The Restoration especially enjoyed a comedy of non-illusion. It was replete with stage convention and

practice which deny any idea that the drama sought some kind of realism – conventions which included prologues and epilogues, soliloquies and asides, winks and double-takes, glances and throw-aways. All were at work linking the stage and the audience, so that the drama was less a realistic portrait of Restoration life than a stage image, at best an extension of its self-image. The comic stage held no mirror up to nature, but, to echo Swift, was ‘a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody’s face but their own’. In his *Amusements Serious and Comical* (1700), Tom Brown’s lively assessment was, ‘The playhouse is an enchanted island, where nothing appears in reality what it is, nor what it should be’ (Amusement iv).

We can reconstruct the seventeenth-century playhouse, but we cannot bring back the audience and spirit of the time. When we see a Restoration comedy on the stage today, it is done in circumstances quite alien to the originals. We often see, in fact, a museum piece, a display of colourful costumes, period poses and drama school manners. The interplay between actor and spectator is missing, and with it the experience of the comedy. A play in performance is like an electric circuit in which the vital current flows from the stage to the audience and back again. If in this century the circuit is broken, judgments will go wildly astray, and we may well wonder whether something so narrowly of its own time can have value for us three hundred years later.

In *The Country Wife*, II.1 the charming actress Elizabeth Boutell introduced Margery Pinchwife to the audience with the line, ‘Pray, sister, where are the best fields and woods to walk in, in London?’ The line is addressed to Alithea, Margery’s sister-in-law and a London lady who ‘knows the town’. On a simple level this is an adequate ‘situation’ line for a new character who must convey the idea that she is from the country; innocent Margery believes all the world to be an extension of the country life she knows best. There is a good joke in this suggestion of the disparity between town and country ways, and that is the literary explanation of the line. But there is a far better one just beneath the surface. As Margery provocatively displays her new dress, her audience must also wonder about her reasons for wanting to walk out, and the sight of the knowing surprise in Alithea’s raised eyebrows, together with a glimpse of the outraged face of Pinchwife as he eavesdrops on his wife from the stage door in the proscenium, prompts and guides the delighted response of the audience.

Although it appears that Boutell managed to maintain her independence as an actress more than most, it is not to be forgotten that she was in demand as a person in her own right. Thus the same line takes on new, extra-dramatic dimensions. The intimate conditions of the Restoration

Introduction and approach

playhouse lend her words the implicit qualities of an innuendo or an aside – here a simple matter of a glance of the eyes and an inflection in the voice. So another laugh was intended to follow the first as the actress plays to the pit, her question, now doubly provocative, addressed to every man – and woman – in the audience. Alithea at this moment becomes a go-between, and her quizzical smile in turn a response to the house's roar of approval at the question. At the same time Pinchwife's rage becomes that of every close husband, his gesticulation increasing in its threat the louder the audience laughs at him.

It was all a game, and in ways like this the Restoration comic stage established one of the most extraordinary games in the history of the theatre.

THE PLAYGOERS: A HOMOGENEOUS AUDIENCE

There is no need to re-open the issue of the composition of the audience, its representativeness, its relationship with a licentious court and its qualities as a coterie. Let us lay the ghosts of Allardyce Nicoll, who in his *History of English Drama* (vol. 1, p. 8) argued for an *élite*, court audience, and Emmett Avery, who in 'The Restoration Audience' thought it was wider. It is sufficient that for a particular social group the playhouses were on a pleasure circuit that included the parks and the brothels, the gaming-houses and the bagnios. For if we accept Avery's argument that the audience also contained a good number of professional men and their wives – administrators, writers, doctors, lawyers, parliamentarians and men of affairs, as well as a few merchants – Nicoll's idea that the nobility and their ladies were at the centre of things is not exploded. Avery's playgoers shared the same privileged background and by no means made the audience more representative of the people of London. In any case, there is no reason to doubt that the playwrights, like the actors, aimed their wit at the highest social level of the house, indeed, at the better-paying part of the audience. John Dennis believed that when a majority of men of taste and culture 'declared themselves upon any new dramatic performance, the town fell immediately in with them' (*Critical Works*, vol. II, p. 277).

Everything points to this extraordinary fact about Restoration drama: that the social attitude of its audience was the narrowest in the history of the public theatre. The Restoration was certainly not going to produce the range of dramatic interest found in the Elizabethan theatre. Nevertheless, its special homogeneity enabled author and audience to create a social comedy in which the performance jokes would be frankly 'in-house'. Just as at a private party the familiarity of one guest with another removes

certain inhibitions which would otherwise spoil the fun, so homogeneity in the theatre encourages a free expression of feeling and opinion. Paradoxically, therefore, the narrow social representatives of the Restoration playgoers made for an excellent audience.

The writers themselves, men of high birth like the Duke of Buckingham, Sir Charles Sedley and Sir George Etherege, or courtiers like Dryden and Wycherley, were members of the same set, and as such they could serve as both its mouthpiece and its critic. This final element of homogeneity produced a drama of unique mutuality, and so in yet another way the conditions were ripe for a drama played as a social game.

THE BEHAVIOUR OF THE AUDIENCE

Dryden's concern in his preface to *The Conquest of Granada* notwithstanding, that the poet should 'endeavour an absolute dominion over the minds of the spectators', much evidence has been collected that by any modern standards Restoration playgoers were uncommonly ill-behaved. Visitors to London, essayists and diarists, authors in prologue, epilogue and scenes from many of the plays themselves, all paint an alarming picture that attests to a rare lack of decorum in the house. It seems that rapport with the actors and actresses extended to the spectator's jumping on the stage itself and visiting the rooms behind the stage, while pit, box and gallery enacted a drama of their own. Here is a small sample of the evidence in order to colour in the picture.

Henri Misson's *Memoirs* give a first impression of the scene in the pit, which he described as an 'amphitheatre' of green cloth-covered benches without backs. It was a place where 'men of quality, particularly the younger sort, some ladies of reputation and virtue, and abundance of damsels that hunt for prey, sit all together . . ., higgledy-piggledy, chatter, toy, play, hear, hear not' (Summers, *Restoration Theatre*, p. 31). Hear and hear not? – continuity of attention is not characteristic or prescriptive at a Restoration comedy, and we may wonder at the unusual challenge to the players.

A variety of more or less cynical reasons have been ascribed to the playgoers for going to the play. In the fourth of his *Amusements* Tom Brown is confident that their behaviour comes of empty heads. His enchanted island of a playhouse is

frequented by persons of all degrees and qualities whatsoever, that have a great deal of idle time lying upon their hands and can't tell how to employ it worse. Here lords come to laugh, and to be laughed at for being there and seeing their qualities ridiculed by every worthless poet. Knights come hither to learn the *à la mode* grin, the antic brow, the new-fashioned cringe, and how to adjust their phiz to make themselves as ridiculous by art as they are by nature.

Introduction and approach

Hither come the country gentlemen to show their shapes, and trouble the pit with irrelevances about hawking, hunting, their handsome wives and their housewifery. There sits a beau like a fool in a frame, that dares not stir his head nor move his body for fear of incommoding his wig, ruffling his cravat, or putting his eyes or mouth out of the order his *maître de danse* set it in; whilst a bully beau comes drunk into the pit, screaming out, 'Damn me, Jack, 'tis a confounded play, let's to a whore, and spend our time better.'

Aping Dekker's *The Gull's Hornbook* of 1609, Samuel Vincent in 1674 offered London *The Young Gallant's Academy*, in which chapter v gives some ironic 'Instructions for a young gallant how to behave himself in the playhouse'.

Let our gallant (having paid his half-crown, and given the door-keeper his ticket) presently advance himself into the middle of the pit, where having made his honour to the rest of the company, but especially to the vizard-masks, let him pull out his comb, and manage his flaxen wig with all the grace he can. Having so done, the next step is to give a hum to the China orange-wench, and give her her own rate for her oranges (for 'tis below a gentleman to stand haggling like a citizen's wife) and then to present the fairest to the next vizard-mask . . . Let him but consider what large comings-in are pursed up sitting in the pit.

1. First, a conspicuous eminence is gotten, by which means the best and most essential parts of a gentleman, as his fine clothes and peruke, are perfectly revealed.

2. By sitting in the pit, if you be a knight, you may happily get you a mistress. (Summers, p. 322)

In all this the plays themselves are scarcely mentioned; at best the reason to go to the play is 'to hoard up the finest play-scraps' he can find, 'upon which his lean wit may most savourily feed for want of other stuff'.

In a multitude of references to the gentleman playgoers, the plays themselves seem to join in a common joke. This is Lansdowne's *The She-Gallants*:

They spread themselves in parties all over the house; some in the pit, some in the boxes, others in the galleries, but principally on the stage; they cough, sneeze, talk loud, and break silly jests; sometimes laughing, sometimes singing, sometimes whistling, till the house is in uproar; some laugh and clap; some hiss and are angry; swords are drawn, the actors interrupted, the scene broken off, and so the play's sent to the devil. (III.1)

And Cibber's *Love's Last Shift*:

SIR NOVELTY FASHION. Then you must know, my coach and equipage are as well known as myself; and since the conveniency of two playhouses, I have a better opportunity of showing them; for between every act – whisk – I am gone from one to th'other: – Oh! what pleasure 'tis, at a good play, to go out before half an act's done!

Restoration comedy in performance

NARCISSA. Why at a good play?

SIR NOVELTY FASHION. O! madam, it looks particular, and gives the whole audience an opportunity of turning upon me at once: then do they conclude I have some extraordinary business, or a fine woman to go to at least: and then again, it shows my contempt of what the dull town think their chiefest diversion . . . (II.I)

The shaft of satire in such accounts is not to be ignored, but their chief suggestion is of a drama which is serving more than a dramatic end. More, that playwright, actor and audience alike implicitly acknowledge this wider role.

The playbills often carried a useless warning, 'No person to stand on the stage'; but any beau might take it upon himself to use the stage for self-display. Here Berenice describes the behaviour of Lord Brainless in D'Urfey's *The Marriage-Hater Matched*:

From the box, whip he's in the pit, from the pit, hop he's in the gallery, from thence hey pass between the scenes in a moment, when I have seen him spoil many a comedy, by baulking the actors' entrance, for when I have eagerly expected some buffoon to divert, the first nauseous appearance has been my Lord. (II.I)

Nor would such a gentleman, pursuing his ends as patron of the arts, hesitate to make free also with the tiring-rooms. Selfish enters '*bawling*' in Shadwell's *A True Widow*, 'I have enjoyed the prettiest creature, just now, in a room behind the scenes' (act IV). Colley Cibber complained bitterly of the difficulty of acting if the players had no privacy.

If they wished, amateur critics in the pit would quite disregard the efforts of the actors on the stage. The Prologue to Etherege's *The Comical Revenge* complains,

And gallants, as for you, talk loud i'th'pit,
Divert yourselves and friends with your own wit.

Such playgoers could, according to the Prologue to Cartwright's *The Ordinary*,

sit out a play of three hours long,
Minding no part of't but the dance or song.

It comes as no surprise to learn that when such an audience was actually displeased with a production, there was no restraining its hissing and clapping.

Life in the auditorium was much enlivened by the presence of women who had no intention of watching the play, for in the pit the orange-girls and ladies of the town had a free run. Again, there is an abundance of evidence in the plays for this rival activity. Thus the Prologue to D'Urfey's *Don Quixote* reported,