

**Chapter 6**  
**“To Make Fools Laugh, and Women Blush, and Wise Men Ashamed”<sup>1</sup>:**  
**Humour in the English Restoration**

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[T]he duty of comedy is to correct men by amusing them.  
 —Molière, “First Petition to the King” (2008, 67)

The return of the Stuart monarchy in May 1660, subsequently referred to as the Restoration, is a definitive episode in English history because of the rapid and distinct changes to political, social, and cultural life which followed. The previous eleven-year experiment with a republic, under the initial leadership of Oliver Cromwell, had ended in ignominy for the parliamentarians. The return of Charles II as the leader of the country heralded a new era of development across the arts and sciences, but the period experienced religious unease, class tensions, and gender disharmony.

The official re-opening of the theatres by Charles II signalled a new wave of writing with a distinctive style that was characterised by domestic drama replete with bawdy display.

Restoration comedy in particular celebrated the new era through the inclusion of new theatrical practices and techniques which playwrights used to respond to the problem of residual tensions caused by the social schism of the previous decades. Reading Restoration comedy through the framework of humour enables us to better understand the complex ways in which what has often been misunderstood as trivial comedy addresses the important issues of the day. As Joy Wiltenburg (2016) has put it, “[k]nowing who laughs—why, with whom, and at whom—can give us a revealing window into social dynamics” (22). This chapter will first explore how the return of the monarchy in the seventeenth century shaped the humorous and comedic outputs of the theatre in the period. It will then analyse how Joseph Addison (1672-1719), a prominent

early eighteenth-century commentator and co-editor of *The Spectator*, reacted to these theatrical changes in his short essay “True and False Humour” (1711), thereby illuminating the wider influences and developments of Restoration theatrical humour.

### **1. The Restoration and the Theatre**

During the Interregnum, theatrical activity had been suppressed under Puritan governance, driving whatever theatrical activity persisted largely into private households: e.g. “*The First Day’s Entertainment at Rutland House by Declamation and Musick; after the Manner of the Ancients*” (Davenant 1656). Some innovative performances in the form of drolls, or short comedy sketches that included singing and dancing, persisted in public spaces such as the Red Bull, because of their perceived difference from plays. This was still a problematic venture with theatres being raided as late as 1659.<sup>2</sup> Following the return of Charles II as the ruling monarch, Puritan legislation was overturned, and William Davenant and Thomas Killigrew, close allies of the King, were granted concessions to create new theatre companies referred to as “The Duke’s Company” and “The King’s Company.” The issue of these patents by Charles granted Davenant and Killigrew the sole right to stage and produce new and adapted “serious” plays, creating a theatrical monopoly in London. Whilst a third concession was also granted to George Jolly, Davenant and Killigrew quickly worked to disband this company, giving them a complete theatrical monopoly (Roberts 2014, 92). This concession from the King gave them the sole permission to begin public performances again. The official patents were finally granted on 25 April 1662 for Killigrew (King’s Company) and 15 January 1663 for Davenant (Duke’s Company). Competition between the two companies was extensive, and finding the best-selling, most popular mode of performance, became the primary driver of theatrical activity.

In granting the patents, Charles II promoted the generation of a new kind of English theatre which incorporated and adopted European practices and adaptations in such a way as to require new large scale theatres.<sup>3</sup> With the drive to make English theatre ever more appealing, Charles II warned the two company managers to avoid “profanation and scurrility” in their offerings but specifically advised Davenant to build a theatre in order to stage “tragedies, comedies, plays, operas, musick, scenes and all other entertainments of the stage” (P.R.O, C66/3009, no. 3), thereby marking a distinct development in theatrical genres of the period. Davenant’s theatrical patent contained a contentiously liberal desire in its request relating to women: “We do likewise permit and give leave that all the women’s parts to be acting in either of the said two companies for the time to come may be performed by women” (Donohue 2005, 3). The promotion of a more elaborate, experimental, and inclusive theatrical environment, stemmed from Charles II’s exposure to innovative and elaborate productions during his exile in France and The Hague. During the Restoration period, both comedies and tragedies were staged in large numbers. Operatic and musical entertainments were subsequently introduced as spectator demands and tastes were developing. However, surprisingly, the popularity of comedies in this period was short lived, having enjoyed great success in the periods from 1660-1680 and during the 1690s (Corman 2013, xi).

## **2. Theory and Comedy in the Restoration**

Comedy writing and performance in this period drew upon a wealth of past knowledge to develop a range of comedic genres and devices as a means of entertaining the new Restoration audience.<sup>4</sup> Restoration playwrights were probably familiar with the superiority theory of humour

as it was promulgated by Plato and Aristotle and later refined by Thomas Hobbes in his major work *Leviathan* (1651, and revised 1668). Hobbes encouraged readers to learn from “the most able” and “free others from scorn” instead of laughing at the deformities of others, “a sign of Pusillanimity,” whereas his view of humour permeated the theatre and plays of the period.

The Restoration is perhaps best known for its inclination to mock and laugh at others through “comedy of manners.” As Paul Kuritz (1988) has noted,

Each play juxtaposes the social appearance of purity and innocence with the personal truth of impropriety and promiscuity; apparent intelligence, with real ignorance; and seeming wealth, with actual poverty. City life is presented as fashionable; country life, as crude. Urban wit always outsmarts rural naivety. City people are civil, country people are naturally rude. (226)

At the centre of such comic plays lay the ludicrous violation of social norms and cultural codes, along with sexually explicit and inappropriate behaviour. Notably, with the introduction of women to the stage, such acts became ever saucier. During his time in France, Charles II and his followers had unlimited access to French tragicomedy, then a dominant genre (Maguire 2000, 88), and presumably would have enjoyed the works of European playwrights and musicians—such as Molière (the pen name of Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, 1622-1673), Pierre Corneille, and Louis Grabu—who would understandably become a major influence on English playwrights and the theatrical genres of the 1600s. Amongst them, Molière stood out, a man who, through his comedy of manners plays, particularly questioned the older theories of comedy by portraying characters who failed to conform to the rules set out by the likes of Aristotle and Horace (Calder 1993, 2-3). Writing comedies to explicitly reflect rather than merely assimilate real life, Molière

attacked the upper classes specifically. His impact on English playwrights was deep and wide: “a stock of translations/adaptations [of Molière’s works]” as Robert D. Hume (2005) notes, “reached the stage, most of them decidedly farcical,” demonstrating a growing trend for farce in popular performance. (61) A good example is William Wycheley’s *The Country Wife* (1675), a comedy based on several plays by Molière, to which we shall return later.

A sense of the reception of Restoration comedies is attainable through a range of extant first-hand materials on the theatrical practices of the period. Diarist and Naval officer Samuel Pepys, a regular theatre spectator, and John Downes, a Restoration stage manager, enhance our understanding of the intricate and embedded elements of comedy and humour in performance. John Downes’s records, for example, demonstrate the success and popularity of staged comedies and their authors. He wrote: “*The Humourous Lieutenant . . . was Acted Twelve Days successively*” (Downes 1708, 3); “*The Woman Made A Justice . . . The Comedy being so Perfect and Justly Acted, so well pleas’d the Audience, it continu’d Acting 14 days together*” (30); and “*The Man of Mode . . . this Comedy being so well Cloath’d and well Acted, got a great deal of money*” (36).<sup>5</sup> Likewise, in a slightly later account (1782) in *Biographica Dramatic*, David Erskine Baker described the popularity and success of a particular plays, providing lasting details of what elements marked a play as successful. In his account we find William Congreve’s *Love for Love*, which was staged at the Lincoln-Inn Fields in 1695 and “acted with extraordinary success during the remainder of the season,” perhaps due to its use of a softer kind of comedy which employed marriage, faked madness, and love to both entangle and detangle the plot (xxvii-xxxix). For Erskine Baker, Congreve’s play in its 1733 and 1763 performances catered “to an elegant crowded audience,” suggesting that the reputation of comedy was re-established

through adaptation in the eighteenth century (xxxix). Whilst accounts like these highlight the success and audience delight at comic productions, further records from the period show a more divided response to the genre. One particularly prominent voice in this regard belongs to Joseph Addison.

### 3. “True and False Humour”

As a writer and politician, Addison reflected on various aspects of society and frequently expressed his opinion in the periodicals *The Tatler* and later *The Spectator*. Between its first iteration from March 1711 and the last in December 1712, Addison wrote around two hundred and fifty essays for *The Spectator*, which he co-founded with Richard Steele (Rogers 2004). Amongst these essays was one published on 10 April 1711 entitled “True and False Humour.” In this essay, Addison discussed comedic theatrical practices of the Restoration, setting out clearly what he perceived to be true, good humour and false, unacceptable humour.

Addison (1915) employed a Platonic allegory to liken true humour to the child of the happy marriage between “wit” (the child of “good sense” whose father is “truth”) and “mirth,” and ‘False humour’ to the “monstrous infant” born of the grotesque union between “frenzy” (derived from “nonsense” whose mother is “falsehood”) and “folly,” or “laughter” (136). Significantly, he went on to elaborate on false humour to warn playwrights not to produce monstrous infants:

First of all, He [false humour] is exceedingly given to little apish tricks and buffooneries.

Secondly, He so much delights in mimicry, that it is all one to him whether he exposes by it vice and folly, luxury and avarice; or, on the contrary, virtue and wisdom, pain and poverty.

Thirdly, He is wonderfully unlucky, insomuch that he will bite the hand that feeds him, and endeavour to ridicule both friends and foes indifferently. For having but small talents, he must be merry where he can, not where he should.

Fourthly, being entirely void of reason, he pursues no point either of morality or instruction, but is ludicrous only for the sake of being so.

Fifthly, being incapable of anything but mock representations, his ridicule is always personal, and aimed at the vicious man or the writer—not at the vice, or the writing. (138-139)

Here Addison captured a presentation of comedy which relies on laughing maliciously at others, situations, and actions. He foregrounded the use of “False humour” as a negative and denounced as highly unpleasant entertainment some of the comic offerings of the stage, on which characters were presented as corrupt or foolish.

Noticeably, Addison singled out Thomas Shadwell’s rake scenes as exemplary of “wild irregular fancies,” a comedic trope which appears in several of Shadwell’s comedies and which relies on “False humour.” Further examples can be found in *The Sullen Lovers; or, The Impertinents* (1668), for example, which shows how gentlemen behave badly by getting drunk, turning debauched, and smashing windows, high jinxes that they consider fashionable. Shadwell explained the inclusion of such gentlemen in his play in the dedicatory epistle to the readers of his next play *The Royal Shepherdess* (1669):

I find, it pleases most to see Vice encouraged by bringing the Characters of debauch'd people upon the Stage, and making them pass for fine Gentlemen who openly profess Swearing, Drinking, Whoring, breaking Windows, beating Constables, &c. and that is esteem'd among us a Gentile gayety of Humour, which is contrary to the Customs and Laws of all civilized Nations. (2)

He went on to say that this type of character in a play “pleases the people.” Indeed, Shadwell was not shy to use the idea again in *The Royal Shepherdess* (1669) and in *The Miser* (1672), wherein a young man is arrested after drunkenly breaking windows. Such characters reappear in *Epsom-Wells* (1673), *The Woman Captain* (1680), *The Squire of Alsatia* (1688), and *The Scowrers* (1691). Shadwell was not alone in codifying this behaviour as a norm; Aphra Behn, for instance, also used it in *The Town Fopp* (1677) and *The Rover* (1677).

#### **4. The Visual Spectacle of Comedy**

In this section, we will consider Addison's insistence that “False humour” denotes an “imagination that teems with monsters” and “a head that is filled with extravagant conceptions” (Addison 1915, 136) to explore how Restoration comedy—which was shaped by the tastes of the King and the practices of Europe—might have been considered false. Critics have argued that spectacle in Restoration theatre pertained to any form of entertainment designed to delight and entertain an audience—including puppetry, performers, scenography, and machinery.<sup>6</sup> By considering some of the play texts from the period through Addison's ideas of humour and the development of spectacle, we can better understand how humour in the period was used to attract audiences.



In Restoration comedy, the Fop was a stock character. In Addison's essay, a Fop's true humour was predicated on him being "airy in his behaviour and fantastic in his dress," demonstrating a comfort in forms of comedy which had been passed down from theatrical pasts (137). Like all other aspects of the stage, though, these characters shifted with the developments in theatrical production. For the Fop, this was achieved through the increased elaborateness of costume and dress and the growing exaggeration of the courtly characters he represented. For Addison, the Fop's visual appearance and physical behaviour encapsulated the trueness of humour. In distinguishing between "True and False humour," one should understand that whilst the Fop was elaborate in terms of visual appearance, he was designed to reflect an exaggerated version of the aristocratic society which gathered to watch the play.

One cannot discuss character performance in Restoration comedy without mentioning *Commedia dell'arte*, a form of professional theatre that grew from the practices of Italy, France, and Spain and was a performance technique for actors and playwrights to add comic value, spectacle, and recognisable characteristics to their performances (Fischer-Lichte 2002, 131). Characters of the traditional Italian *Commedia dell'arte* were adapted for an English audience, bringing with them a new form of physical performance. Perhaps the most comic of these was Harlequin, or the representation of the comic servant. The Harlequin of the Restoration stage, recognisable for his physical skill and role as a servant, acquired characteristics from both Arlecchino and Zanni. The former refers to a character who was developed in Italy in around 1595 by the famous performer Tristano Martinelli. Martinelli instilled in Arlecchino's character his own great skill in acrobatics, comic timing, a recognisable posture, and behaviour in line with *Commedia* traditions. The latter refers to a character whose main role was to be a servant and who "performed as a verbal and

gestural virtuoso” and as comically “oppressed and degraded figure” (Henke 2002, 23). As such, mimicry in terms of setting and character became a pronounced feature of Restoration plays of all genres. As it was employed in the English theatre during the Restoration period, the *Commedia* genre exemplified some of the most overtly humorous characters in terms of visual appeal with costume and cosmetics, and of the most physically demanding characters in terms of dexterity and stance.

The Restoration theatre re-worked the conventions and characters of the *Commedia dell'arte*, and offered significant insights into the development and uses of visual comedy in the period. Many characters which populated the *Commedia* genre relied on “masks, broad physical gestures, improvised dialogue and clowning, represent[ing] the very theatricality of the theatre” (Gordon 1983, 3). Alongside elaborate costumes and stock props, each character stereotypically represented a certain class, age, or occupation of a person. With its characters ranging from maids to lovers, masters to servants, the *Commedia* genre became successful largely due to its ability to capsule varying members of the English classes in a spectacularly performative and funny manner. Whilst Addison might contend that the mimicry of *Commedia* was false in its production of humour, the exciting combination of both physical and visual wonder figured itself conspicuously in Restoration performance.

Visual wonder was also enhanced by tricks and buffoonery, a staple part of Harlequin’s repertoire that used early slapstick humour to exploit the comedy of the physical form through staged mock beatings or circus-like acrobatics. Edward Ravenscroft (1677), for instance, utilised the acrobatic and slapstick characteristics of Harlequin and Scaramouche to create a humorous

and visually impressive comedy called *Scaramouch a Philosopher, Harlequin a School-Boy, Bravo, Merchant, and A Magician. A Comedy after the Italian Manner*. In this play, one scene demonstrated the use of humour and physical dexterity and was set in a classroom where the stage directions read: “*Harlequin puts his head through the back of the chair, lifts it up, runs about the room with it hanging on his neck; all the children take rods, and, with the mistress, run about the stage whipping him. He runs out, the scene shuts*” (36). Ravenscroft drew upon the physical and visual comedy of *Commedia* to in presenting scenes that depicted buffoonish, childlike behaviour.

Likewise, Aphra Behn used the characters of Harlequin and Scaramouch in her comedy *The Emperor of the Moon: A Farce* (1687), adapted from Nolant de Fatouville’s *Arlequin Empereur dans la Lune* (1684), as a means of developing visually comic scenes and producing humorous, slapstick interactions between characters (Spencer 2008, xviii). In his 1782 *Bibliographia Dramatica*, David Erskine Baker wrote favourably of the pleasure found in this particular element of Restoration theatre in *The Emperor of the Moon*:

Mrs. Behn, however, has made great alterations, and rendered it extremely full of whimsical and entertaining business. It is indeed, however absurd, many degrees more rational than the dumb shew of pantomimes, without meaning or possibility, which so repeatedly at this time brings crowded houses, to the utter discouragement of dramatic and theatrical genius. (103)

Baker’s account of the “whimsical and entertaining business” represented the enduring influence of *Commedia dell’arte* even in the eighteenth century. Again, in this play the character of Harlequin was employed in a physical and comedic scene where the character was attempting to

tickle himself to death due to the loss of his love. The stage directions read: “[h]e falls to tickle himself, his head, his ears, his arm-pits, hands, sides, and soles of his feet; making ridiculous cries and noises of laughing several ways, with antic leaps and Skips, at last falls down as dead” (Behn 2008, 287). Here Behn sought to use the physical and comic nature of the stock *Commedia* characters to laugh at the flaws of the spectators who might have been exposed to similar experiences. In Behn’s exploration of relationships through the characters of *Commedia*, one can raise questions about her concern with morality as she arguably chose comic delight over morality. Her choice manifested itself in the father figure of Balliardo giving over his child and niece to marry men who, with the help of the comedic servants, have fooled him into believing lavish displays of a mystical world in the moon through scenery and machinery (Spencer 2008, 326-333). Behn adopted these characters into play texts by following Molière, who included similar characters Scapin and Dorine in, respectively, *Les fourberies de Scapin* (1671) and *Tartuffe, ou l’Imposteur* (1664), where *Commedia* humour was used to shape a play’s direction or interpolate comic interludes and sub-plots into more serious narratives.

Restoration comedic playwrights engaged in plots of mistaken identity, sexual scenes of chase, farces, and disguises to amuse the audience. Most notably, the early part of the period, shortly after the restoration of Charles II, saw a flourishing of “sex comedies,” a genre which sought to utilise the female form to encourage audience attendance (Owen 2002, 43). In the broadest term, sex comedies, or plays which applied the physical form of the actress, drew on libertine sexual attitudes, staging them in an arena where observing could be deemed an acceptable part of the experience.<sup>7</sup> Susan J. Owen (2002) states that “[t]he sex comedies appear to be a diversion from

the increasing political tensions of the 1670s . . . [and] most sex comedies also endorsed the values of particular ‘cavalier’ class, upholding the town-based, upper-class wits, at the expense of country dolts, upstart city gentry, tradesmen, and professional classes” (43). A good example is *The Country Wife*, adapted from several plays by Molière. Whilst contrasting the setting of country and city for comic effects, the play focused on sexual conquest, and its use of blunt language turned Wycherley’s exploration of relationships into “False humour.” His public ridicule of Puritanism in this play revealed the vices of aristocrats, offering mimicked versions of their behaviour. For instance, the gentleman Mr Horner frivolously discussed the idea of honourable women with a quack as follows:

**Quack.**

But do civil persons, and women of Honour drink, and sing bawdy Songs?

**Hor.**

O amongst Friends, amongst Friends; for your Bigots in Honour, are just like those in Religion; they fear the eye of the world, more than the eye of Heaven, and think there is no virtue, but railing at vice; and no sin, but giving scandal:

They rail at a poor, little, kept Player, and keep themselves some young, modest Pulpit Comedian to be privy to their sins in their Closets, not to tell ’em of them in their Chappels.

**Quack.**

Nay, the truth on’t is, Priests amongst the women now, have quite got the better of us Lay Confessors, Physicians. (Wycherley 1675, 65)

Here Wycherley did not shy away from pillorying both ladies and priests for their lechery and hypocrisy to entertain the audience.

Perhaps the most outlandish use of “False humour” in *The Country Wife* is Wycherley’s presentation of female characters as much outside the societal expectations and actively engaging in humorous acts for the paying audience. Actresses were introduced in 1660, and were possibly the most contentiously false form of humour added to the performance space; their introduction onto the stage divided opinions between those who found them appealing and those who regarded them as a detestable addition which challenged religion, social conduct, and the acceptability of performance.<sup>8</sup> Such a controversy contributed to the spectacle of actresses and to the success of plays. As women became an integrated part of theatrical performance, so did a fascination with their visual images and physical attractiveness. Admittedly, the introduction of actresses delighted spectators so much that many plays were written and designed to bring in female characters as the object of visual desire –particularly in the crossed-dressed “breeched roles” humorous sub-plots, and contempt— that in some quarters actresses were believed to be “sinful” (Collier 1698). Wycherley portrayed female characters in *The Country Wife* as sexually aggressive and ready to lie and betray, in contrast to the expected conduct of ladies of the period.<sup>9</sup> Whilst he presented the male characters equally as highly sexually driven, it is the lack of morals in the female characters, contextualised within the genre of “comedy of manners,” that, albeit falling under “False humour,” might very well make the play popular amongst the Restoration audience.

Moreover, central to comedic humour of this time was the use of ambiguous punning, where the sexual interplay between male and female characters was at its humorous height in such a way as to further feed into the dismay Addison felt at the use of “False humour.” *The Country Wife*, for

example, contained a famous “china scene” in which Mrs Squeamish insinuated to the rake Horner that “Oh Lord I’ll have some china too, good Mr. Horner, / don’t think to give other people china, and me none, / come in with me too” (Wycherley 1675, 70). In his annotations to this scene, James Ogden has argued that the noun “china” was synonymous with virginity, drawing attention once more to the female form and morals (Ogden 2014, 78, OE 2016, n. 78). The sexual innuendo, used here as a trip to buy porcelain, is made clear when Lady Fidget returned to the stage breathless, carrying a vase and announcing that Horner had, for the moment, no more china left (Dixon 1978, xv). The contents of this scene featured in Wycherley’s another play *The Plain Dealer* (first performed in December 1676), when two female characters Olivia and Eliza discussed *The Country Wife*, and the former stressed that “china,” now no longer a suitable ornament for a young lady’s bedroom, was on a par with Italian nude paintings (Act 2.1). Wycherley continued to play with the word in the same play: expecting that the audience would have seen *The Country Wife*, he turned the joke on himself when Eliza announced her intension to watch another play by the same “beastly author”; this author had debauched china ornaments, and she would never forgive him as he had “quite taken away the reputation of poor china itself, and sullied the most pretty and innocent ornaments of a lady’s chamber” (Wycherley 1978, 319). This scene, as Peter Dixon (1998) states, owes much to Molière’s *Critique de l’école des femmes* (xiii), a play thought to be a key example of Molière’s own form of humour in relation to comedy of manners.

Likewise, in John Vanbrugh’s *The Provoked Wife* (1697), sexual puns were made for the entertainment of the audience. Declaring that he was so “wounded” by love that he questioned if he would have the “courage to draw my sword,” Vanbrugh played for laughs in his reference to

Heartfree's penis (50). Scenes like this drew upon the satirical attack on vice and profanity, against which Addison repeatedly railed as the "False humour" of the English stage. John Dryden's *An Evening Love* (1671) is a particularly effective example of how humour was appropriated in sexual and false terms; its sexual focus and *double entendres*, often delivered by Wildblood, earned itself a reputation for being "prophane" and "smutty" (Bray 1901, 302; Pepys 20 June 1668, 247). Dryden began the prologue by comparing a poet writing to "a young bridegroom on his wedding night" and then went on to puncture the prologue with sexual connotations—with recourse to, say, the sixteenth-century slang use of "tool" for "penis" (Hammond 1995, 218)—to incite laughter from its audience:

Your several Poets work with several tools,  
 One gets you wits, another gets you fools:  
 This pleases you with some by-stroke of wit,  
 This finds some cranny, that was never hit. (Prologue)

In addition, sexually charged sentences like this, "Such as at first came on with pomp and glory, But, overstraining, soon fell flat before yee," offer images of sexual conquests and lost erections for the audience to conjure and laugh at the misfortune of the character (Dryden 1671, 10).

Of course, no society is entirely homogenous in its tastes: not everyone in the Restoration was expected to find this sort of sexual innuendo amusing. David Roberts (2014), for instance, describes how plays such as Wycherley's drew abuse from a group of young women, "identifiable as the court maids of honour" (171). These women took a box in the new theatres in what Roberts describes as a "theatre-going club," and vocally protested against scenes which they considered indecent. Indeed, it was these groups of women who, Roberts argues, "prepared



the ground for the bitter assault on the theatre mounted by Jeremy Collier” (2014, 172). In his 1698 book *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, Collier (1698) conceived of Dryden’s *An Evening Love* as licentious as it also “made women, single women, and women of quality talk smuttily” (165). Towards the end of the century, comedy marked by “the aggressive, discredited ideology of the Stuarts, [was] to be replaced in the Enlightenment by a reformed comedy of ‘sentimental sociability’,” presumably an answer to the protests like those of Collier and Addison (Roberts 2014, 172).

The competition between the two theatre companies Killigrew and Davenant also contributed to the spectacle of theatre, with Davenant’s company being the more successful in this regard. In the early years of the Restoration, their theatrical competition did more to shape the practices of theatre than just to produce a range of commercially successful plays. Situational devices were particularly useful in the fight for audience numbers between the two competing companies, where “False humour” was engendered through overtly mocking and buffoon ridden plays. For example, in an important situation in Behn’s 1677 comedy, *The Rover*, the bumbling cavalier rake Blunt, characterised by his absurd catchphrase “Adsheartlikins,” was seduced by the prostitute Lucetta. In Act 3, Scene 3, as Blunt imagined himself to be climbing into bed, with his candle extinguished, the stage directions made it clear that the bed was descending through a trap door; as he groped to find the bed, Blunt fell through the trap to begin the next scene out on the street and in the gutter, a scene described in the stage directions as “a common shore” or sewer (Behn 2008, 41). Humour in these scenes works on several levels, with not just the buffoonery (which Addison detested) of the lead character in this section, but with the physical space of the stage, to boost the play’s comic effects.

For these burlesque, satirical versions to be successful, a reliance on stage spectacle, such as the bed falling through a trap, became paramount. Thomas Duffett became known in the period for his burlesque versions of popular plays, using their success to pull out all the spectacular devices to create a more comical version of the original. His play *Psyche Debauch'd* (published in 1678) is a prime example. Duffett's play was a mocking version of Thomas Shadwell and Matthew Locke's *Psyche* (1671), adapted from Molière's play of the same name. For Duffett, the primary purpose for this play seemed to produce a larger-than-life re-creation which utilised as many forms of spectacle as possible. Excelling in its depiction of situational comedy in every scene, this play contains over thirty major stage directions as well as applies elaborate and costly forms of performance such as machinery, puppetry, slap-stick, and singing. Scholars have contended that the widespread use of machinery, in many forms, in Restoration theatre marked its advancement from the simpler Renaissance stage; in this case of *Psyche Debauch'd*, though, Duffett employed the spectacular devices to increase not only the complexity of the storytelling but also the humorous pleasure of the plot. For Duffett, humour directed the action and style of the performance. With chairs coming alive and holding actors in place, rocks beating people, and heads flying off whilst singing, Duffett ensured that the new advances in theatrical presentation were used to the advantage of burlesques, creating situations that did not shrink from any impossibility. For Addison, Duffett's play with all of its fancy and spectacle would surely encapsulate a mind replete with monsters.

To conclude, as we have shown, there are many facets of what was considered humorous in the Restoration. Many of the comedic influences came from the Continent, with comedies being

developed and adapted to the tastes of the English audience and the developments of the performing space. Notably, the mimicry of *Commedia dell'arte* joined forces with comedies of manners or sex comedies to satirise Puritan ethics and the vices of aristocrats in such a way as to breed a spectacle of laughter that spoke to Hobbesian superiority theory of humour and that Addison would later frown upon. Addison of course was not the first person who disapproved of Restoration comedy; its critical reception in Restoration England already diverged. Nonetheless, (sex) comedies continued to be restaged in the period, and so did *Commedia* characters and plays with spectacular attributes. This situation demonstrates the overall lasting popularity and success of what Addison called “False humour.” If a cultural analysis of humour can provide us, to use again Wiltenburg’s terms, “a revealing window into social dynamics,” we can say then that (sex) comedies in the Restoration—in which women were portrayed as sexually aggressive and unfaithful and men as jealous and easily cheated on—evidenced gender tensions at the time, along with a strong sense of insecurity about the Protestant succession in a country which had just undergone a series of political and religious upheavals.

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<sup>1</sup> This sentence is taken from *The Lucky Chance: or, An Alderman’s Bargain* (1686), featuring infidelity, by Aphra Behn (2008, 191).

<sup>2</sup> The arrest of performers was not new in this period, and the closure of the theatres and the subsequent punishment for continuing to perform was a complex and multifaceted issue when broader challenges of a Civil War contributed to the treatment of the theatre and its performers. For a detailed overview of the closure of the theatres and the impact this had on theatrical production during the Civil War, see Gabriel Egan 2014.

<sup>3</sup> For copies of the theatre patents see: P.R.O., C66/3013, no. 20 (Killigrew’s) and P.R.O, C66/3009, no. 3 (Davenant’s).

<sup>4</sup> For a broad overview of comedy in the period see: J. L. Styan 1986.

<sup>5</sup> As Catherine Gallagher (1994) has suggested, keeping up with the current trend in theatre ensured that playwrights got their money, as “Restoration playwrights were paid the receipts (above the house charges) for the third day’s performance of their plays” (10). Robert Hume (1976) has additionally concluded that the “[f]ickle breezes of fashion and sudden gusts of fad were of enormous importance to any Restoration playwright who wanted to eat,” dictating the artistic decisions they made (17). Spectators held critical sway over the success of a particular play, and “[e]ven the well-to-do writers,” Hume continues, “tried for hits, and almost all of the professional writers were

exquisitely sensitive to what was currently successful. Hence, they imitated each other, plagiarized, adapted, and burlesqued each other's works" (17).

<sup>6</sup> For a full-length discussion of a revised notion of "spectacle" in Restoration theatre, see Lyndsey Bakewell 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Owen (202) further suggests that the "comedies may appear to endorse libertinism whilst actually depicting it with a satirical edge; or, more commonly perhaps, they may appear to condemn whilst actually titillating in the same way that violence against women may be ostensibly condemned but actually relished or fostered in Hollywood movies today" (43).

<sup>10</sup> See Jeremy Collier's *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*.

<sup>11</sup> For the conduct of women during this period see Ruth Kelso 1956 and Elaine Hobby 1989.

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