Disguise: Comic and Cosmic. Restoration Comedy from the Point of View of New Criticism

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The New Criticism as the manner of reading was given its emphasis by English and American critics in the first two thirds of the 20th century. This literary technique presupposes the so-called "close reading" within the process of formalistic analysis.

The New Critics taught the reader to look at the individual work of literary art as an organic form. They articulated the concept that in an organic form there is a consistency and an internal vitality that we should look for and appreciate. In so doing, we would appropriate the work to ourselves and make it part of our consciousness.

Intensive reading begins with a sensitivity to the words of the text and all their denotative and connotative values and implications. But just as we begin to study closely the words and their meanings, we must also begin to look for structural relationships and patterns in larger units. Form becomes much more than sentence patterns: it becomes the tone or mood that the text builds, or the shifting and alternating of moods. It becomes the sequence of plot elements, even episodes, in a narrative, or the juxtaposition of scenes in a play. It becomes the relationship between the teller of the narrative and the hearer, possibly accounting for the ambiguity of the teller's version of the story.

The aim of this method of reading texts was to show how all the parts and aspects of a poem or story fit together into one organic unity. The method consisted in grouping details of the text into thematic clusters, then grouping those clusters into larger themes, and finally, bringing all these themes together in a statement of a single unifying theme for the play .

The New Criticism is the method of interpretation that the American scholar N. Holland uses in his book "The First Modern Comedies" published in 1959. The book deals with eleven comedies by Etherege, Wycherly and Congreve, which belong to the so-called Restoration comedy, English comedy from the restoration of Charles II in 1660 to about 1710.

"That miserable, rouged, tawdry hollow-hearted comedy of the Restoration" as W. M. Thackeray called it, has almost always been the darling of audiences and the point at issue to critics. It disappeared from the stage only during mid-Victorian times. In the 18th century and early 19th and increasingly in the 20th, revival of Restoration comedy has succeeded beyond any expectation. There is scarcely an important actor or actress of our day who has not starred in some Restoration comedy.

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The author of the monograph argues with those critics who contend that these plays simply describe the manners of upper-class life in the late 17th century. To say so means to substitute superficial details for the larger substance of the plays. Manners are the stuff of comedies, but manners are not the whole of them. The main conflict of the comedies is the conflict between "manners" (i.e., social conventions) and anti-social "natural" desires. It is this dialectic between inner desires and outward appearances that informs the comedies with masks, play-acting, disguise, intrigue, and finally, creates their language. This one theme, the discrepancy between "appearance" and "nature" is distinctly and specifically a Restoration theme, states the author.

The 17th century produced Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, the better parts of Shakespeare, Jonson, Donne, Dryden, Hilton, Newton, Cromwell and the gentlemen of the Plymouth plantation. Alfred North Whitehead called it the "century of genius". In these hundred years, England had her greatest periods of prose and comedy. The Restoration itself gave the world "Paradise Lost" and "Pilgrim's Progress", Sir Isaac Newton and the law of gravitation and the greatest of all comedies of "manners", Etherege's, Wycherley's and Congreve's comedies among them.

These comedies share the magical energy of their age. Yet, critics of Restoration comedy have been almost unanimous in referring these plays only to a tiny class, and, therefore, considering them of little significance. The plays are filled with disguises and pretenses, masks and affectations. Disguise is one of the main devices used in these plays. In the 17th century, disguise became a matter of cosmic significance, a fundamental element in ethical and metaphysical thought, largely as a result of the new physics, argues the author of the monograph. The writers of comedies were connected in various ways to the newly formed Royal Society and were thus exposed to this new scientific thought.

Disguise itself was nothing new. In 1635 Queen Henrietta Maria had been pleased "to grace the entertaynment by putting of [f] majesty to putt on a citizens habitt, and to sett upon the scaffold on the right hande amongst her subjects" [2: 35]. A letter of 1670 tells how, "Last week, there being a faire neare Audley-end, the queen, the Dutchess of Richmond, and the Dutchess of Buckingham, had a florick to disguise themselves like country lasses, in red petticoats, wastcotes, &c, and so goe see the faire. Sir Bernard Gascoign, on a cart jade, rode before the queen; another stranger before the Dutchess of Buckingham; and Mr. Roper before Richmond. They had all so overdone it in their disguise, and looked so much more like antiques than country volk, that, as soon as they came to the faire, the people began to go after them; but the queen going to a booth, to buy a pair of yellow stockings for her sweet hart, and Sir Bernard asking for a pair of gloves sticht with blew, for his sweet hart, they were soon, by their gebrish, found to be strangers, which drew a bigger flock about them. One amongst them had seen the queen at dinner, knew her, and was proud of her knowledge. This soon brought all the faire into a crowd to stare at the queen. Being thus discov-

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ered, they, as soon as they could, got to their horses; but as many of the faire as had horses got up, with their wives, children, sweet harts, or neighbours behind them to get as much gape as they could, till they brought them to the court gate. Thus, by ill conduct, was a merry frolick turned into a penance." [3: 39].

In pre-Revolutionary times it was a charming gesture on the part of the queen to express her sense of participation in the amusements of her subjects. With the Merry Monarch (Charles II), however, the purpose and frequency of disguise were somewhat different. One of Charles's biographers describes him in more serious, political circumstances as "full of *Dissimulation* and very *adroit* at it"; another says, "He had so ill an opinion of mankind, that he thought the great art of living and governing was to manage all things and all persons with a depth of craft and dissimulation." [1: 50].

While the court's behavior is enough to explain the dramatists' interest in and use of disguise, it should be taken into account that both the court and the dramatists were responding to a larger trend. Attitudes toward disguise, dissimulation, and affectation had changed across the century. First, there was an increasing belief that the personality is hard to know under the appearances it puts on; second, affectation (semi-conscious pretense) was uniformly condemned; third, dissimulation (conscious pretense) tended increasingly to be accepted as a necessity. The total attitude toward human conduct is the subject-matter of the early plays of Etherege and Wycherley: dissimulation is the rake-hero's way to success; affectation is a folly because one becomes unable to stop acting. Perhaps, there is nothing new in recognizing a difference between appearance and nature in human conduct. Man has always thought and joked about the difference between what is and what shows. The crucial change is that formerly men had felt that what shows either *was* or *should be* a true reflection of what is; now, at the end of the 17th century, men came increasingly to feel that what shows not only was not but often *ought not to be* a true reflection of what is. The intrigue of William Wycherley's play "Love in a Wood; or St. James's Park" grows out of the men's confusion of appearance and nature. Each of the heroes mistakes his own pretenses and those of others for reality. The foolish Dapperwit, for example, thinks that because he affects to be a wit he is actually charming, witty and clever enough to deserve an heiress. Sir Simon thinks that because he wears a disguise he is clever, and that he is a gallant man because he uses "the words in fashion, though I never have any luck with 'em" [1: 63]. Gripe, a Puritan, pretends piety: he disguises his attempted seduction of Lucy as redeeming her from someone else.

Each of the men tricks himself by confusing his pretended self with his real self or by failing to look beneath the surface of the woman he pursues. Dapperwit is unaware of his own limitations or hers he is duped into fathering Martha's unborn bastard. Gripe, because he will not let his lechery appear as what it is, disguises it by marrying a wench. Sir Simon marries Lady Flippant only because he never finds out whether she was rich or not. Each of the three men

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confuses the appearance or pretense of the woman he seeks with her real nature through his own system of confusions: vanity (Dapperwit), hypocrisy (Gripe) or folly (Sir Simon).

In the play "The Man of Mode; or Sir Fopling Flutter" by Etherege all the principal characters are ranged on a scale. For the men, affectation is the negative value, and the worst offender is Sir Fopling, who absurdly incarnates the idea. He has no inner personality, only externals clothes, attendants, and mannerisms. For example, he criticizes Dorimant for not having a mirror in his drawing room, for "In a glass a man may entertain himself". "The shadow of himself," remarks Dorimant. Sir Fopling's self is totally outside: there is neither inner man nor inner desires.

Human conduct, politics, and comedies were not the only areas in which the difference between outside and inside was accepted. The same notion also applied to language, states the critic.

Language itself was regarded as an outside-clothing ornament within which the real substance, thought, lay hidden. In the 17th century this idea came to be more and more frequently expressed and to have more and more effect on literary style.

What was special about the 17th-seventeenth century's reaction to metaphor was (1) treating the discrepancy between thought and language as a discrepancy between plain prose and ornament, and, therefore, (2) relegating figures of speech to the passions and poetry and dismissing them in reason and prose as "affectation".

"Solid" became a "plus" word because it suggested realness, the mass and volume the new physics could measure, as opposed to other illusory and immeasurable qualities such as color, taste, or smell. In effect, the new physics established a scientific basis for the operation of figures of speech. "The Ornaments of speaking", wrote Bishop Sprat in telling of the Royal Society's program for improving the English language, "were at first, no doubt, an admirable Instrument in the hands of Wise Men ... to represent Truth, cloth'd with Bodies; and to bring knowledg back again to our very senses from whence it was at first deriv'd to our understandings." In other words, an image or metaphor appeals to the senses, as nature does; it makes things "real" to us. "Ornaments", Sprat complained, had become ends in themselves, and therefore the Royal Society took it upon themselves to try to correct prose style: "to return back to the primitive purity and shortness when men deliver'd so many things almost in an equal number of words"; "a close, naked, natural way of speaking, positive expressions, clear senses, a native easiness, bringing all things as near to the Mathematical plainness as they can.".

It was probably through this scientific source that the dramatists were influenced, the author thinks. There were, of course, other bases for linguistic reform, the Puritan interest in a "plain style" for sermons, for example, but the Puritans had little influence on the playwrights. There can be little doubt that the

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playwrights acquired their distrust of metaphor through literary connections with the scientific Royal Society. Some of them, Dryden for example, and George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, the belle-lettrist John Evelyn, and the poets Walter and Cowley were associated with the Society's committee "for improving the English language."

Through the Royal Society, literary men and even Charles's Court had been brought face to face with the ultimate disguise, the disguise of reality itself that the new science had revealed. It was impossible to describe a certain object, for the "true" description was billions of colorless atoms, themselves only bundles of differential equations.

The unreliability of the senses and the separation of appearance from nature became axiom to the great 17th-century philosophers. The separation of appearance from nature was a central concept in Restoration manners, morals, pranks, politics, science, and literary and linguistic theory. Clothing, cosmetics, manners, social rules, similitude, disguise, deception, affectation, dissimulation, reputation (the stuff of Restoration comedy) all acquired special meaning. The language of drama changed; it became thin and spare: "similitudes" replaced metaphors.

Etherege's early plays developed a very special kind of comic language which later dramatists followed. First, the language is built primarily out of nouns. Second, these nouns tend to play down sensory experience in favor of "generalized classes and categories". Third, the language is primarily engaged in setting up logical and schematic relations among these categories. The similitudes at the hands of a skilled writer become a trope of surprising subtlety and flexibility. In Etherege's play "The Man of Mode" we read: "Women then (when they are ugly) ought to be no more fond of dressing than fools should be of talking." The sentence is a simple proportion: ugly women/dressing = fools/talking. But as in any proportion, the terms can be transposed: ugly women / fools = dressing / talking. The dressing becomes a kind of talking, the talking as a kind of dressing: and the fools and women are brought together in a way that enlarges and particularizes the general relationship.

The subject matter of drama changed too. The lines of choice and conflict in Restoration plays are far more clearly drawn than in Shakespeare (though it does not make them better): characters do far more reasoning about their own states of mind than Elizabethan characters do. The Restoration character is much more clearly divided into a nucleus of inner self or nature and a peripheral shell of appearances which may be the product of that inner self or may be a product of dissimulation, affectation, or disguise. The central problem in each of the eleven comedies under analysis is how the nucleus of personality shows itself through the shell of appearances and how it gets to know others through their shells. Clearly, these Restoration comedies, no matter how frivolous they seem to us, are probing some of the most basic assumptions of their century and our own.

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17th-century metaphysics separated appearance from nature; 17th-century political theorists separated the "natural" man from the social man. Both these ideas have enormous dramatic possibilities, and Etherege, Wycherley, and Congreve realized them. Disguise, affectation, dissimulation, pretense, and hypocrisy on their stage grow from a sense of cosmic disguise. Their 17th-century metaphysics gave them a stage beyond their stage. And if Restoration comedy is merely "a passionate dance-figure, or an arabesque of words and repartees", as some critics say, the pattern of the dance is the metaphysic of the science of that day.

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