

The Spectator

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THE SPECTATOR

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Demetri teque Tigelli/Discipularum inter jubeo plorare cathedras.-Hor,

n001

AFTER having at large explained what Wit is, and described the false Appearances of it, all that Labour seems but an useless Enquiry, without some Time be spent in considering the Application of it. The Seat of Wit, when one speaks as a Man of the Town and the World, is the Play-house; I shall therefore fill this Paper with Reflections upon the Use of it in that Place. The Application of Wit in the Theatre has as strong an Effect upon the Manners of our Gentlemen, as the Taste of it has upon the Writings of our Authors. It may, perhaps, look like a very presumptuous Work, though not Foreign from the Duty of a SPECTATOR, to tax the Writings of such as have long had the general Applause of a Nation; But I shall always make Reason, Truth, and Nature the Measures of Praise and Dispraise; if those are for me, the Generality of Opinion is of no Consequence against me; if they are against me, the general Opinion cannot long support me.

Without further Preface, I am going to look into some of our most applauded Plays, and see whether they deserve the Figure they at present bear in the Imagination of Men, or not.

In reflecting upon these Works, I shall chiefly dwell upon that for which each respective Play is most celebrated. The Present Paper shall be employed upon Sir Fopling Flutter,ⁿ⁰⁰². The received Character of this Play is, That it is the Pattern of Genteel Comedy. Dorimant and Harriot are the Characters of greatest Consequence, and if these are Low and Mean, the Reputation of the Play is very Unjust.

I will take for granted, that a fine Gentleman should be honest in his Actions, and refined in his Language. Instead of this, our Hero in this Piece is a direct Knave in his Designs, and a Clown in his Language. Bellair is his Admirer and Friend; in return for which, because he is forsooth a greater Wit than his said Friend, he thinks it reasonable to persuade him to marry a young Lady, whose Virtue, he thinks, will last no longer than till she is a Wife, and then she cannot but fall to his Share, as he is an irresistible fine Gentleman. The Falshood to Mrs. Loveit, and the Barbarity of Triumphant over her Anguish for losing him, is another Instance of his Honesty, as well as his Good-nature. As to his fine Language; he calls the Orange-Woman,ⁿ⁰⁰³, who, it seems, is inclined to grow Fat, An Over-grown Jade, with a Flasket of Guts before her; and salutes her with a pretty Phrase of How now, Double Tripe? Upon the mention of a Country Gentlewoman, whom he knows nothing of, (no one can imagine why) he will lay his Life she is some awkward ill-fashioned country Toad, who not having above four Dozen of Hairs on her Head, has adorned her Baldness with a large white Friz, that she may look Sparkishly in the Forefront of the King's Box at an old Play. Unnatural Mixture of senseless Common-Place!

As to the Generosity of his Temper, he tells his poor Footman, If he did not wait better--he would turn him away, in the insolent Phrase of, I'll uncase you.

Now for Mrs. Harriot: She laughs at Obedience to an absent Mother, whose Tenderness Busie describes to be very exquisite, for that she is so pleased with finding Harriot again, that she cannot chide her for being out of the way. This Witty Daughter, and fine Lady, has so little Respect for this good Woman, that she Ridicules her Air in taking Leave, and cries, In what Struggle is my poor Mother yonder? See, see, her Head tottering, her Eyes staring, and her under Lip trembling. But all this is atoned for, because she has more Wit than than is usual in her Sex, and as much Malice, tho' she is as Wild as you would wish her and has a Demureness in her Looks that makes it so surprising! Then to recommend her as a fit Spouse for his Hero, the Poet makes her speak her Sense of Marriage very ingeniously: I think, says she, I might be brought to endure him, and that is all a reasonable Woman should expect in an Husband. It is, methinks, unnatural that we are not made to understand how she that was bred under a silly pious old Mother, that would never trust her out of her sight, came to be so Polite.

It cannot be denied, but that the Negligence of every thing, which engages the Attention of the sober and valuable Part of Mankind, appears very well drawn in this Piece: But it is denied, that it is necessary to the Character of a Fine Gentleman, that he should in that manner trample upon all Order and Decency. As for the Character of Dorimant, it is more of a Coxcomb than that of Fopling. He says of one of his Companions, that a good Correspondence between them is their mutual Interest. Speaking of that Friend, he declares, their being much together makes the Women think the better of his Understanding, and judge more favourably of my Reputation. It makes him pass upon some for a Man of very good Sense, and me upon others for a very civil Person.

This whole celebrated Piece is a perfect Contradiction to good Manners, good Sense, and common Honesty; and as there is nothing in it but what is built upon the Ruin of Virtue and Innocence, according to the Notion of Merit in this Comedy, I take the Shoemaker to be, in reality, the Fine Gentleman of the Play: For it seems he is an Atheist, if we may depend upon his Character as given by the Orange-Woman, who is her self far from being the lowest in the Play. She says of a Fine Man who is Dorimant's Companion, There is not such another Heathen in the Town, except the Shoemaker. His Pretension to be the Hero of the Drama appears still more in his own Description of his way of Living with his Lady. There is, says he, never a Man in Town lives more like a Gentleman with his Wife than I do; I never mind her Motions; she never enquires into mine. We speak to one another civilly, hate one another heartily; and because it is Vulgar to Lye and Soak together, we have each of us our several Settle-Bed. That of Soaking together is as good as if Dorimant had spoken it himself; and, I think, since he puts Human Nature in as ugly a Form as the Circumstances will bear, and is a staunch Unbeliever, he is very much Wronged in having no part of the good Fortune bestowed in the last Act.

To speak plainly of this whole Work, I think nothing but being lost to a sense of Innocence and Virtue can make any one see this Comedy, without observing more frequent Occasion to move Sorrow and Indignation, than Mirth and Laughter. At the same time I allow it to be Nature, but it is Nature in its utmost Corruption and Degeneracy.

R.

Footnotes

- n001 From the tenth satire of the first book of the Roman poet Horace: "Demetrius and Tigellus, go and lament among the students in those comfortable chairs." Demetrius and Tigellus were two poets who Horace greatly disliked.
- n002 The Man of Mode, or Sir Fopling Flutter, is a 1676 play by George Etherege, which is still enormously popular at the time of this essay. Dorimant and Harriet are the central characters and lovers in this satirical take on the aristocratic culture of the Restoration period.
- n003 Oranges were a frequent snack-food offered at theaters, and they were sold there by women. Orange-women were also sometimes prostitutes.