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THE AMERICAN SOCIAL COMEDY

Thesis for the Degree of M. A.  
MICHIGAN STATE COLLEGE  
Katherine J. Zierleyn  
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**THE AMERICAN SOCIAL COMEDY**

**by**

**KATHERINE J. ZIEBLEIN**



**A THESIS**

**Submitted to the Graduate School of Michigan  
State College of Agriculture and Applied  
Science in partial fulfilment of the  
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**MASTER OF ARTS**

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**1942**

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## CHAPTER I

### THE THEORY OF COMEDY

In any study of a given literary form it is well to inquire first--if only in a cursory fashion--into the ethics and the tenets of criticism that supply standards by which the form is measured. The reason for such an inquiry is obvious: every author has some purpose back of his work. The significance of his purpose and the skill with which he accomplishes it are the determining factors of his literary rank. The more significant his purpose and the more proficient his skill, the greater his rank. Probably there are few media in which an author's purpose is as vividly expressed as in the drama. With all the varying tools of the literary craft at his command, the dramatist has the added advantage of actual enactment to strengthen the impression he desires to make. For this reason, the ethics of the drama are significant and it seems wise for the purposes of this study to go briefly into the body of ethical commentary which has developed around the social comedy.

Since that immortal day in antiquity when Aristotle announced with such obvious logic that drama must have a beginning, a middle, and an end, it has become almost traditional to go back to the sage himself for the beginnings of nearly all critical study. And so, here, tracing the genealogy of American literature back through its English ancestry, we necessarily go to the venerable Greek as the fountain head of criticism.

Aristotle held the position that the ethical basis of comedy was the fact that in ordinary life mankind fell far short of perfection.

Comedy exaggerated these imperfections by picturing men as worse than in actual life. He saw two possible causes for laughter: (a) in the Poetics,<sup>1</sup> he observed that comedy "consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive"; (b) in his Rhetoric,<sup>2</sup> he set forth the theory that laughter also arose from deceived expectations. A direct application of these causes to their use in drama indicates that the first would provoke humor arising out of a character, while the second would provoke humor arising out of a situation. Because Aristotle saw only those of high rank as heroes of tragedy, he supported the position that men of low rank were comic figures: "Comedy is ... an imitation of characters of a lower type ..."<sup>3</sup> It is important to call attention to Professor S. H. Butcher's significant comment that "In various places Aristotle indicates the distinction between comedy proper, which playfully touches the faults and foibles of humanity, and personal satire or invective."<sup>4</sup> The first he approved of; the second he frowned upon when it was made the purpose of the piece.

Plato, before Aristotle, seems to have seen some degree of moral issue in comedy; in the Philebus he remarks of a comedy "that there a mixture of pain and pleasure is found."<sup>5</sup> More definite here, however, is the idea that the essence of comic mirth is the malicious pleasure afforded by the discomfiture of another. It is noteworthy, moreover,

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<sup>1</sup> Poetics, trans. by S. H. Butcher (London, 1902), p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Rhetoric, trans. by J. E. C. Welldon (London, 188 ), p. 163.

<sup>3</sup> Poetics, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art (London, 1902), pp. 378-9.

<sup>5</sup> The Works of Plato, trans. by George Burges (London, 1895), Philebus, III, p. 74.

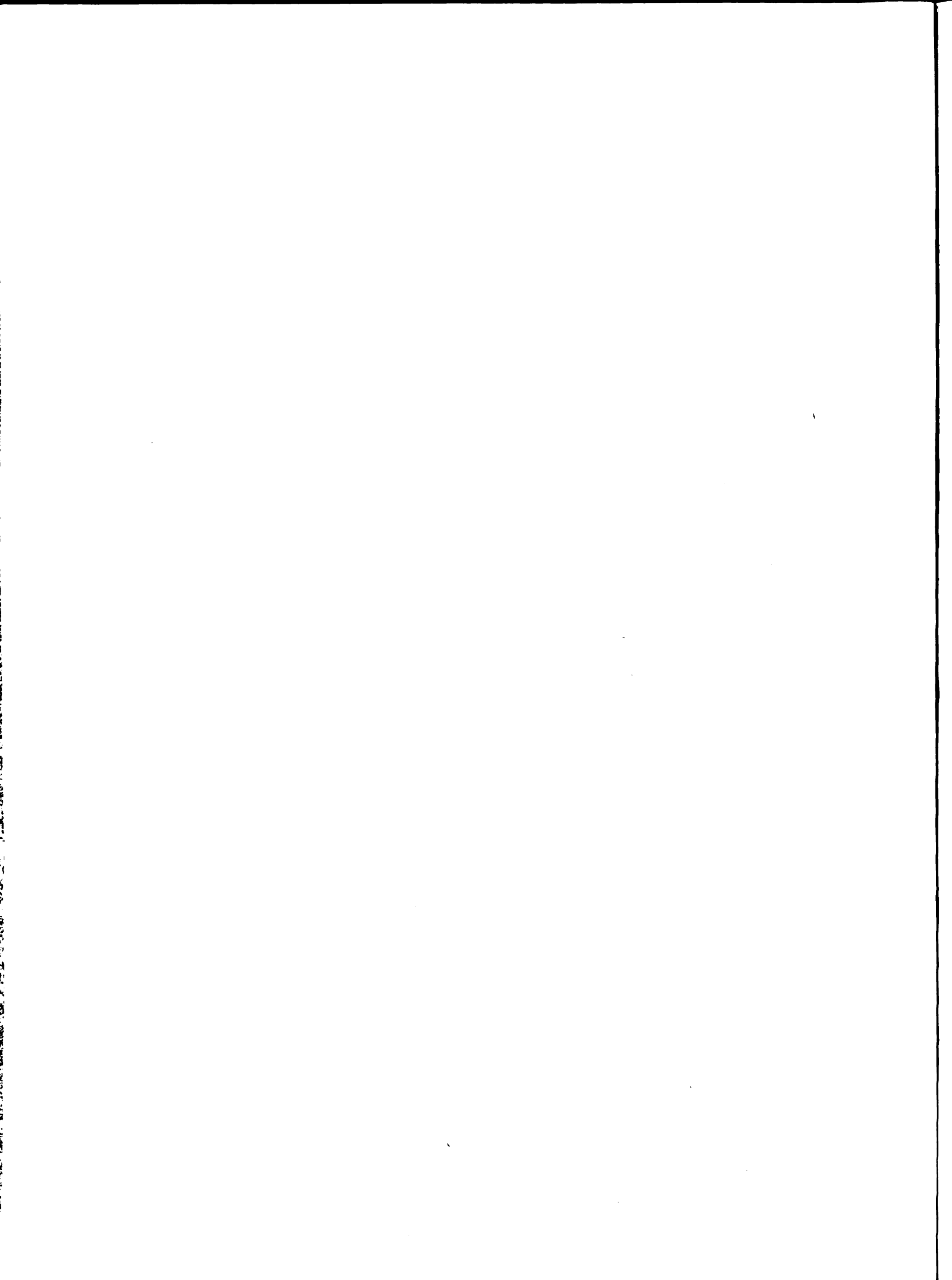
that while Plato gave to poetry only the position of a subsidiary to moral and political education, the definite moral benefaction which Aristotle held that tragedy gave to the audience was apparently not expected of comedy by either of the ancient thinkers.

The Old Comedy of the Greeks grew out of a religious festival of a revel nature. The chief commendable quality of this early form was its critical commentary upon contemporary life. The satirical element of which Aristotle did not entirely approve gained prominence during the period under the masterful touch of Aristophanes. A law passed in 414 B. C. checked this open comment, and Old Comedy merged gradually into the Middle Comedy. Conspicuous during this middle period was the development of the conventional types.

The period of Middle Comedy grew so uneventfully into that called New Comedy that some authorities see no distinction between the two. The most famous Greek author of the New Comedy was Menander, whose plays were devoted largely to more generalized subjects. The satire of individuals, which had lost popularity during the middle period, was abandoned in the New Comedy. From the ethical standpoint, the elemental position that comedy arose out of imperfection and that its portrayal was for the sake of pure comedy alone continued to be the dominant one.

The Latin masters of comedy, Plautus and Terence, on the whole, exemplified the theory of comedy for laughter only. Plautus, more particularly, with his Romanized adaptations of Greek originals followed in the Greek way. Indeed, in such of his Romanizing, his boisterous humor over-ran the conventional restrictions that time had developed among the





writers of Greek comedy. In Terence, however, with his love of refinements of phrasing and general elevation of taste, the way was laid for the developments of other forms of comedy, although, generally, the traditional comedy continued in popularity.

The purely ethical interpretation of the comic was also supported by the later thinkers, Hobbes and Kant. Hobbes, in the Discourse on Human Nature, makes the oft-cited statement: "The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly."<sup>6</sup> Kant, still later, also recognized the personal element in the comic, although he saw a different source. Not superiority, but disappointment was his cause for laughter. In the Kritik of Judgment he wrote, "Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing."<sup>7</sup>

However, with the development of comedies during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, additional theories of ethics were added to the theory of the comic as it should be portrayed in the drama. The old element of moral teaching, hinted at by the Greeks, but never by them made a definite requirement for comedy, came now to the foreground. As might be expected, the gentle Sidney held that comedy was poetry which mingled moral profit with delight. In the beautiful prose of The Defense of Poesie, he wrote, "... that all the ends of the Comickall part, bee not upon suche scornfull matters as stirre laughter onlie, but mixe with

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The English Works of Thomas Hobbes (London, 1845), IV, p. 46.

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Kritik of Judgment, trans. by J. H. Bernard (London and New York, 1892), p. 223.

it, that delightful teaching which is the end of Poesia.<sup>8</sup> Jonson's Every Man in His Humour further strengthened the demand for the moral quality in comedy. While the "humours" were too singly developed and were only types which brought about the conflict between characters, but never within a single character, they did secure a stress upon character that was valuable.<sup>9</sup> Dryden, in his definition of comedy, given in the Preface to An Evening's Love, includes his qualification of moral judgment: "Comedy presents us with the imperfections of human nature, ... [it] causes laughter in those who can judge men and manners, by the lively representation of their folly and corruption."<sup>10</sup> Dryden's contemporary, the master of the comedy of manners, William Congreve, also saw moral purpose in the brilliant and frothy type of the drama which he used as his medium. In the preface to The Double Dealer, he states, "I designed the moral first, and to that moral I invented the fable ...",<sup>11</sup> therein expressing his support of the teaching element in comedy. It should be noted in passing, however, that in Congreve, as in most of the Restoration dramatists, the purpose of the piece was subordinated to the brilliance of its form.

In France, in the seventeenth century, René Rapin also believed in the moral worth of comedy. "Comedy, which is an image of common con-

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<sup>8</sup>The Complete Works of Sir Philip Sidney (London, 1923), III, p. 41.

<sup>9</sup>Of this play Willard Smith remarks, "Generally, it elevated the comic from the lowly position of an antithesis to tragedy, to her proper place as an ethical art-form, sharing with her sterner sister, the function of moral catharsis." (The Nature of Comedy [Boston, 1930], p. 140.)

<sup>10</sup>The Essays of John Dryden, by W. P. Ker (Oxford, 1900), I, p. 136.

<sup>11</sup>The Comedies of William Congreve, ed. by Joseph Wood Krutch (New York, 1927), p. 91.

versation, corrects the public vices, by letting us see how ridiculous they are in particular."<sup>12</sup> A century later, the great Moliere in explaining the purpose he saw in comedy wrote, "The duty of comedy being to correct men while amusing them, I was of the opinion that in my position I could do no better than to attack by means of ridiculous portrayal the vices of my age."<sup>13</sup>

It is interesting to note that with the development of the plays that followed these theories a new genre of the comic developed. The more rigidly classic of the writers held to the comic as being the sphere of the low in station. In the relegation of comedy to the lower ranks, Dryden was in perfect agreement with Aristotle: "For the persons in Comedy are of a lower quality ..."<sup>14</sup> He agreed also that the imitation of which Aristotle spoke should be exaggerated in the case of comedy; for he wrote, "In Comedy there is somewhat more of the worse likeness to be taken, because it is often to produce laughter, which is occasioned by the sight of some deformity."<sup>15</sup> However, the classicist Corneille did believe that persons of rank could be introduced into romantic comedies. He emphasized that it was the nature of the action, not the rank of the personages that determined the quality of the genre.<sup>16</sup> The Restoration in England saw the flowering of the comedy of manners which had had its seeding in the realistic comedies of manners of Dekker and

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<sup>12</sup>Cited by Ernest Bernbaum, The Drama of Sensibility (Cambridge, 1925), p. 8.

<sup>13</sup>Moliere, Premier Placet au roi sur la Comédie du Tartuffe (1664).

<sup>14</sup>Dryden, op. cit., p. 143.

<sup>15</sup>Dryden, op. cit., II, p. 126.

<sup>16</sup>Cited by Ernest Bernbaum, op. cit., p. 60.

Shirley. With the development of the Restoration writers, there came the growth of the comedy which specifically must deal with those of high position. As Henry Ten Eyk Perry writes that the Restoration dramatists "ceased to be interested in the comic as it pertained to human life in general and tended to occupy themselves with the comic as it appeared upon the surface of a highly polished and fundamentally insecure civilization."<sup>17</sup>

Innumerable opinions of condemnation have been expressed against the weaknesses of Restoration comedy: its superficiality, its brilliance of language and its paucity of ideas, its narrowness of scope, and, by later standards, its vulgarity. Without going into a discussion of these comments, it is still possible to acknowledge that Restoration comedy represents the best of pure comedy in English. The very criticisms that are made verify the truth of the statement that in all cases in Restoration comedy, the ethical requirement of a moral quality in comedy was held only as a critical standard and did not function as a censor of dialogue or action. The ancient spirit of the comic for laughter still prevailed. To quote once more from Professor Perry: "The Comedy of Manners is, prior to the modern Comedy of Ideas, the last and most brilliant effort of the laughing muse to resist the intrusions of the more serious concerns of existence."<sup>18</sup>

Dr. Perry's comment indicates the fate of the comedy for laughter. In March of 1698, one Jeremy Collier sounded the death knell for pure comedy in the publication of his A Short View of the Immorality and Pro-

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<sup>17</sup> The Comic Spirit in Restoration Drama (New Haven, 1925), p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

Janeness of the English Stage. Being of conservative schools of theology and literary criticism, Collier attacked the superficiality of the Restoration stage and declared that the chief purpose of comedy was to expose knavery and make wickedness ridiculous. Collier found an active supporter in Richard Steele who charged Restoration comedy with having "gratified a loose age with a scandalous representation of what is reputable among men, not to say what is sacred."<sup>19</sup> Little change was noted in actual comic practice until 1709, during which year Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, published The Moralists. With this enunciation of the philosophy of sentimentalism and the added support it gave to Steele's adamant theory (which was not completely applied in practice), the moral element of comedy rapidly became "that which ended happily and had a moral."

With the growth of the ideal of sentiment in both the novel and poetry, the comedy of sentiment remained a firmly established dramatic form. It was challenged seriously first by Oliver Goldsmith who believed that comedy should consist of wit and humor for the sole purpose of making people laugh. In She Stoops to Conquer, this purpose is skillfully made evident. In spite of the fact that he wrote in the vein of pure comedy in an age of sentimentalism, Goldsmith saw the justification of his theories of the comic in the enthusiastic reception of She Stoops to Conquer. It should be noted that Goldsmith differed from the Restoration writers in that he used no satire, but created laughter for the sake of laughter alone.

Richard Sheridan epitomizes the everpresent tendency to compromise. Like Goldsmith he believed in the supremacy of the comedy of wit and humor, but like Steele he also endorsed the sentimentalism of the later

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<sup>19</sup>The Spectator, of Beaumont and Fletcher's Scornful Lady.

type. In both The School for Scandal and The Rivals we note his preference, in application at least, for the comedy of sentiment. Dr. Ernest Bernbaum in The Drama of Sensibility pertinently remarks of Sheridan that he "kept within the bounds to which sensibility had confined the Comic Muse. A spirited satirist of manners, he is, as a satirist of morals, hesitant and superficial."<sup>20</sup>

In the work of Goldsmith and Sheridan, the subsequent position of the social comedy is well defined. From their time to the present, the elder comedy of wit and the comedy of sensibility walk side by side across the stage. On the whole, the comedy of sentiment has been seen the more frequently, but the comedy of wit has shown the more brilliantly. In America, social comedy tended to follow the examples of Goldsmith and Sheridan, and the dual aspects of comedy find their expression in the present day farce and social comedy.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Bernbaum, op. cit., p. 257.

<sup>21</sup> Bonamy Dobrée, Restoration Comedy, 1650-1720, (London, 1924), makes a triplicate classification of comedy into (a) Critical Comedy, or that which sets out to correct manners by laughter; (b) Free Comedy, or that which is to be accepted without judgment or rule; and (c) Great Comedy, or that which deals with a genuine problem cloaked in laughter. Following this classification the bulk of all comedy falls into the first division, a fairly sizeable amount into the second, and only a very few qualify for the third group.

## CHAPTER II

### THE AMERICAN TRADITION

In America, social comedy tended, largely, to follow the compromise position represented by Sheridan. That is, it essayed to be a comedy of wit and humor; but, with the persistence of Puritan conservatism which has so permeated general American thought, a strong note of moralizing, or preschment, is to be heard throughout our comedy. Indeed, so strong is this note that, were it necessary arbitrarily to divide our comedy into either the manners or the sensibility genre, we should be forced to classify it almost entirely as drama of sensibility.

The factors contributing to the popularity of the drama of sensibility in America are many. Foremost, of course, is the obvious one of time. George Farquhar, generally thought of as the last of the Restoration dramatists, although Bernbaum calls attention to his joining the vanguard of the movement of sentiment,<sup>22</sup> wrote during the years, 1698-1707. Thomas Godfrey's Prince of Parthia, which has the distinction of being the first natively written American play, did not appear until 1765, although it had been written some six years earlier. The Prince of Parthia was a tragedy; the first efforts that even approached the social comedy were Mrs. Mercy Warren's satirical, pro-Whig farces, The Blockheads and the better known The Group, both of which were written at the time of the Revolutionary War. The first American play that had any real claim to be called social comedy was The Contrast, written by Royall Tyler in 1786. By that year in England, the drama of sensibility had grown to a definite

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<sup>22</sup>Bernbaum, op. cit., p. 95.

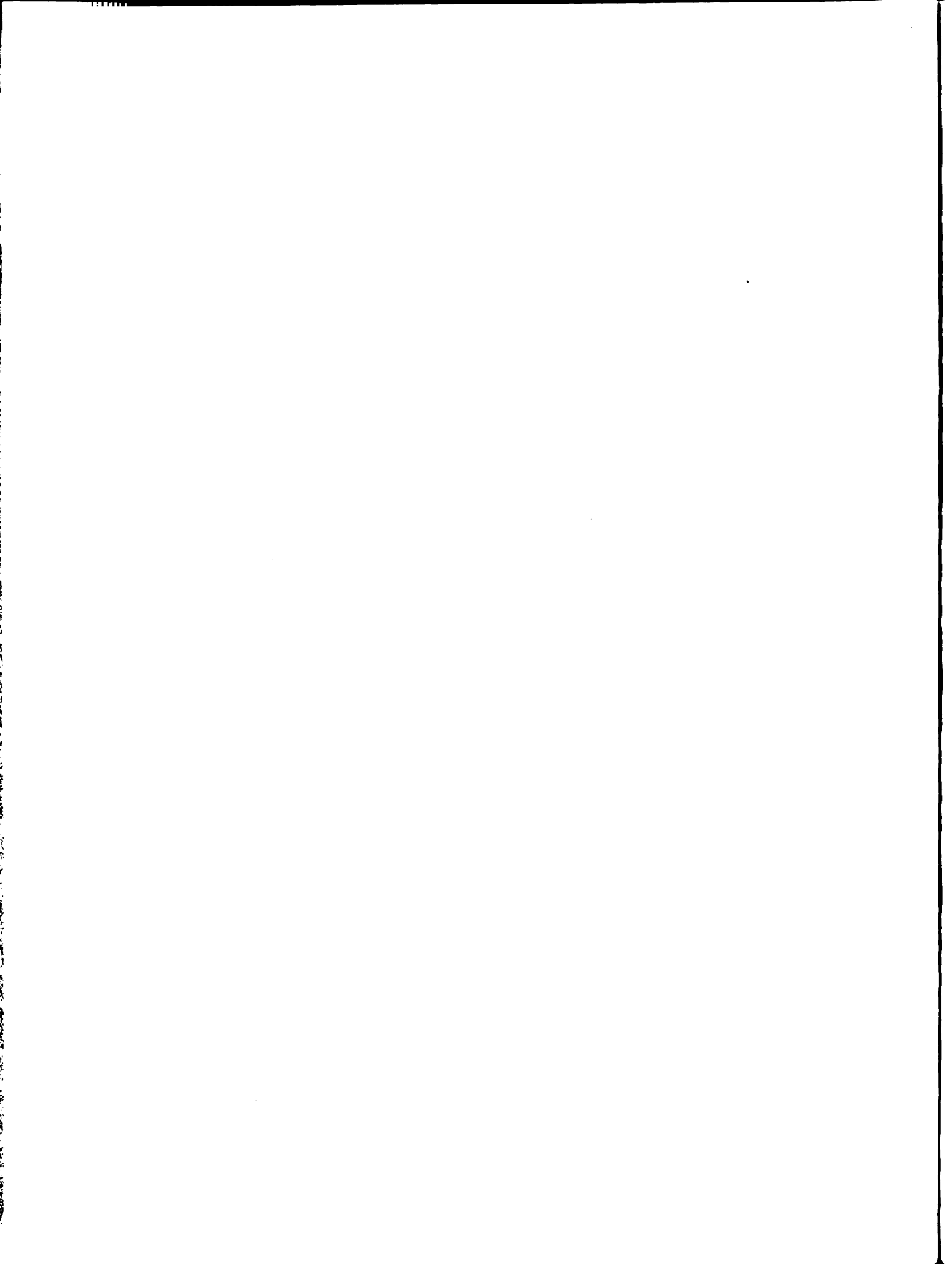


position of favor. Indeed, Goldsmith's first play, The Good Natured Man (1768) had not been successful largely because it attacked the sentimental comedy, while William Whitehead's The School for Lovers (1762) was popular. While, it is true, She Stoops to Conquer was instantly acclaimed in spite of its lack of sentimentality, the play was the exception rather than the rule. Richard Sheridan's The Rivals (1775) and The School for Scandal (1777) were as close to the comedy of sentiment as they were in point of time to Tyler's The Contrast.<sup>23</sup> The close dependence of American letters upon English leadership which prevailed even as late as 1825, further explains the greater popularity of the comedy of sentiment here. Its popularity in England alone sufficed to guarantee its acceptance by American audiences. Likewise, the decline of the manners comedy in England similarly explains the absence of native development of the genre in America.

The fact that our first comedy did not appear until after the Revolutionary War points out another reason for our not developing an independent comedy. The all-important questions of successfully establishing a new nation with peace and security at home and credit and recognition abroad necessarily occupied the attention of American minds until well into the nineteenth century. Indeed, the first comedy worthy of note after The Contrast did not appear until Mrs. Rowatt's Fashion in 1845. One intervening play needs only passing comment here, Joseph Hutton's Fashionable Follies, produced in 1809, had much of the social comedy

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<sup>23</sup> Arthur H. Nethercut points out that on March 21, 1786, three weeks before finishing his play, Royall Tyler witnessed a performance of The School for Scandal. ("The Dramatic Background of Royall Tyler's The Contrast," American Literature, January, 1941.)



elements. It should not be assumed that there was no dramatic activity in America between The Contrast and Fashions; there was activity, with a vengeance; but as was natural, the historical drama, the panorama-pageant spectacle, the tragedy, and a seemingly inexhaustible number of "Yankee" plays dominated the scene. With the ever present closeness of the theater to subjects of popular interest in mind, it is clear that either deliberately or unconsciously the early playwrights of America were fanning the fires of patriotism and national enthusiasm. There was little or no time for social comedy.

That the comedy of sentiment should have persisted in a country where early writers did so little with a social comedy of any kind is due undoubtedly to the dominance of the vogue of sensibility which clung tenaciously to all popular writing and thinking. In America the vestiges of Puritanism persisted long after the movement itself had relinquished its leadership of thought and eventually passed out of existence. Popular American thought—even today—prefers the just rewarding of virtue, the punishing of the villain, and a happy ending for all concerned in its fictional and cinema diet. Truly, the Puritan dominance of New England was never so strong as are these persistent outgrowths that color all of American life. Because of their persistence it goes almost without saying that American drama, especially in its early days, could scarcely have produced plays similar to those of the Restoration which left the moralizing—if there was any—to be done by the individual auditor.

One other factor was active in strengthening the drama of sentiment here: the lateness with which our two leading theatrical cities became geminely cosmopolitan. While Boston very early assumed leadership as a

cultural center, it was in Philadelphia and New York that theatrical production first flourished. The first definitely organized company of actors gave a performance of Addison's Cato in 1749 in Philadelphia. Its reception, however, was a cold one: the actors were arrested and urged to abandon their activity. The company then moved to New York where it was more cordially received. In 1752, the Hallam Company arrived from London and, after playing in the South,<sup>24</sup> appeared in New York and Philadelphia in the seasons of 1753-4. At the close of the Philadelphia engagement, the company was dissolved, its leader, Lewis Hallam, and his family retiring to Jamaica.

Mr. David Douglass a few years later built a theater in New York at Cruger's Wharf. He experienced some difficulty in opening it, but he was undaunted and in June, 1759, he opened a theater at Vernon and Smith Streets in Philadelphia. An act passed by the Pennsylvania assembly closed this theater on January 1, 1760. Six years later, with a persistence that is admirable, Douglass built the famed Southwark Theatre in Philadelphia, the first permanent theater in the colonies. The following year, 1767, he opened the John Street Theatre in New York. Thus at the time of the Revolution there were two permanently established theaters in operation. With the end of the war and the reopening of theaters generally, the Southwark and the John Street playhouses continued to lead the theatrical houses.

The existence of permanent theaters did not, however, guarantee the actors or the playwrights a highly sophisticated audience. Boston,

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<sup>24</sup> It must be remembered, also, that while neither Williamsburg nor Charleston established permanent theaters, they both received theatrical companies with cordiality throughout the entire colonial period. The Cavalier influence dominant in the South somewhat liberalized the recreational outlook of its citizens.

probably the most cultured of our early cities, did not look with enthusiastic favor upon the theater. Philadelphia, while it was the center of many important and far reaching activities and certainly was culturally awake, yet was not sophisticated in that direction which would stimulate, or welcome, the comedy of manners. New York, with its growing seaport activity and its rapidly developing financial leadership soon became the nearest approach to a cosmopolitan center that the United States boasted of in the early decades of its existence.

But even there, a kind of provincial-sophistication--to use contradictory terms--was evident. New Yorkers boasted of their city's leadership on this continent, but they apologized for its provincialism abroad. A superficial glance at writing even as late as 1830 will suffice to indicate how lamented this attitude was among our thoughtful leaders and, by the frequency of the protest, will indicate how prevalent the attitude must have been. Consequently, even our most cosmopolitan city was not cosmopolitan enough to stimulate a growth of a comedy of manners. The leisure, the poise, the somewhat blasé view of life that permits a society to sit back and laugh at itself were long absent from the young republic. Conversely, the youth, the newness, the ideal of equality, the opportunity which made it possible for a young printer to become a nation's ambassador--these encouraged the ideal of sentiment. People were youthful and enthusiastic in their outlook; they took even the problems in a play with dead earnestness and they wanted them to "turn out right."

America, then, did not produce comedy of the pure manners genre because (1) in point of time, she came into existence too late to contribute to the type in its hey day; (2) her early years were occupied with national problems that directed what dramatic activity there was into

patriotic and historical channels; (3) the persistent strain of Puritan restraint was--indeed, is still--felt in the selection of "suitable" materials and treatment; and (4) a truly cosmopolitan audience developed slowly.

## CHAPTER III

### SOCIAL COMEDY AND THE SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

Before going on to a detailed discussion of the social comedy in America, one further comment needs to be made of social comedy in general. The close connection between the type of social comedy recognized by both the dramatist and the critic and the general social conditions of a given period is significant. In ancient Greece with its democracy rooted in a slave system and its "natural" aristocracy of birth and culture, the lowly were objects of comedy—with no moral significance. Likewise in Rome, which lost its republican virtues as it gained in world eminence, the lowly, who had small place in the Roman social picture, were the traditional laughing stock. During the Dark Ages—which might be called the interregnum of drama—the lowly became even more lowly and it is small wonder that in the early religious drama of a re-awakening culture, it was again the simple and humble that served to introduce the secular elements.<sup>25</sup>

With the growth of cities and the development of a merchant class, the problem of rank became more complex. Even the strong classicists began to see the possibility of a noble personage figuring in a comedy, albeit it must needs be romantic.<sup>26</sup> The comedy of manners flourished in a period of gaiety and exuberance following an exile which had taught

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<sup>25</sup>Facetiously, one might remark that, considering the physical direction in which we usually refer to Satan, even the demons which were so popularly used for boisterous humor were "lowly" creatures.

<sup>26</sup>Cornville, see p. 6 above.

the ruling group--and everyone else--that it was fallible to a high degree. By using itself as the victim of its own wit, it could best convince the world of its sophistication and sang-froid. The French Revolution, following upon the heels of the start of the industrial movement brought about the attempted application of theories of class leveling and a humanitarian interest unprecedented in European history. It was no mere accident that Voltaire saw the comedy of sentiment as a vehicle for social radicalism,--a fact he applied with some skill in Nanine wherein he tried consciously to depreciate the value of class distinctions. Indeed, the rapid growth of the whole school of sentimentality may be explained in part in terms of the humanitarian movements and the exultation, socially and politically, of the common man.<sup>27</sup>

In America, with our famous declaration of belief in the principle of the equality of men, it is but natural that our comedy should tend to emphasize the sterling virtues of simplicity and honesty and to rail against pretense and the false assumption of privilege.

So marked, indeed, is this connection between social conditions and social comedy that it might well be possible to trace the history of the enlightening of social conditions in the social comedy of each age. Because of this same connection and the closeness of treatment to the dominant thought in our developing nation, it has seemed best to treat the American social comedy first in terms of its relation to specific periods, and secondly, in terms of frequently recurring thought patterns.

The natural period groupings into which the subject matter seems to

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<sup>27</sup> Newell W. Sawyer has some discussion of these factors in The Comedy of Manners from Sheridan to Mauchan, (Philadelphia, 1931), chaps. I and II.



fall are as follows: The Revolutionary War and the post war period, the period of consolidation and national growth, the Fabulous Forties and the Gilded Age, the Mauve Decade and the period of the muckrakers, the time of pre-World War "progressiveness," the Wild Twenties, and the Sociological Thirties. It is in terms of these groupings that our social comedy will first be treated.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR AND THE POST WAR PERIOD

The first American play of the Revolutionary War period that is of interest in a study of the social comedy was a two-act farce, The Groom, written by Mrs. Mercy Warren in 1775. Avowedly pro-Whig in sentiment, The Groom attacks the Tory leadership of an inner circle in the government of Massachusetts. More political than dramatic, the play nevertheless has one of the earmarks of the social comedy. The choice of names--too broadly sarcastic for good satire--reminds one of Restoration comedy characters: Lord Chief Justice Hazebrod, Judge Meagre, Brigadier Hate-all, Hum Humbug, Sir Sparrow Spendall, Crusty Crowbar, and Scriblierius Fribble are but a few of them. Mrs. Warren ambitiously phrased her play in verse, and while its series of discussions between characters seem dull today, The Groom undoubtedly served its primary purpose of political attack. As was noted, its sole relation to social comedy is in the choice of characters' names.

Much more important was Royall Tyler's The Contrast, written and presented in 1786. As the first American comedy the play has naturally drawn comment, and its author's inexperience in writing has drawn a conspicuous share of that comment. It should be observed, as Arthur H. Ketheroot points out, that Tyler was not only well read in English literature, but he was thoroughly familiar with the principles of play construction. A play of five acts, having a conventional plot with careful foreshadowing and observance of the dramatic unities, The Contrast

<sup>28</sup>  
"The Dramatic Background of Royall Tyler's The Contrast," American Literature (January, 1941), p. 437.

was the work of a novice who was, none the less, no amateur. As is true of all well constructed and well written plays, The Contrast has a number of elements which must necessarily enter into consideration.

In the facility of its language, in the "humours" nature of the names Manly, Dimple, and Van Rough, in the character of Dimple, whom Ketherfoot describes as "a pale imitation of the Restoration Rake,"<sup>29</sup> in the brittle, flippant character of Charlotte, in the charming scene between Jessamy and Jonathan over Dimple's "gamut book,"<sup>30</sup> the play approaches the comedy of manners. In its tendency to moralize through the speeches of Manly,<sup>31</sup> in the slow nature of Maria's wit—particularly in scenes with Dimple—, and in the frank sentimentality in the character of Maria, the play is much nearer to the comedy of sentiment.

However, Manly's last speech does much more than point the moral for the audience; it strikes for the last time the strong note of nationalism which is heard repeatedly throughout the entire play and which is the element tying the play most closely to its period. The speech bears quoting here.

And I have learned that probity, virtue, honor, though they should not have received the polish of Europe, will secure to an honest American the good graces of his fair countrywomen, and, I hope, the applause of The Public.

Appearing as it did, so soon after the establishment of the new government and while people were still very conscious of the leadership which

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<sup>29</sup>"The Dramatic Background of Royall Tyler's The Contrast," American Literature (January, 1941), p. 437.

<sup>30</sup>Royall Tyler, The Contrast, ed. by J. B. Wilbur (Boston and New York, 1920) Act V, scene 1.

<sup>31</sup>Manly's discourse on the evils of luxury as he strolls on the Mall, Act III, scene 2, is illustrative.

security and prestige gave to European custom. The Contrast in its very title and plot is an appeal for the loyalty and open support of American government and developing customs. One needs only to consider the following speeches of Manly to determine the truth of this statement: in talking with Dimple of the amusements of Europe, Manly replies,

Therefore I do not wish to see them; for I can never esteem that knowledge valuable which tends to give me a distant for my native country.<sup>32</sup>

Later in the same conversation, he remarks,

I am proud to say America—I mean the United States—has displayed virtues and achievements which modern nations may admire, but of which they have seldom set us the example.

Manly, of course, is the proponent of the American view in the plot and as such should be expected to utter pro-American sentiments. Dimple, however, eulogizes the charms of the Old World; his views are well set forth in his farewell:

Mighty well! Very fine, indeed! Ladies and gentlemen, I take my leave; and you will please to observe in the case of my deportment the contrast between a gentleman who has read Chesterfield and received the polish of Europe and an unpolished, untraveled American.<sup>33</sup>

However, lest Dimple's exit speech be construed to indicate the superiority of the antagonist the argument of the Prologue should be recalled. There the author appealed to the nationalism of his audiences in such lines as these,

Exult, each patriot heart!--this night is shown  
A piece, which we may fairly call our own.

.....

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<sup>32</sup> Op. cit., Act IV, scene 1.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., Act V, scene 2.

But modern youths, with imitative sense,  
Deem taste in dress the proof of excellence--

.....

Whilst all, which aims at splendor and parade,  
Must come from Europe, and be ready made.

The satire of the last two lines is not so subtle as to lose its point. It should be further noted that throughout the entire play various characters extoll leading personages in the American scene. Obvious esteem for Lafayette and Hamiltonian Federalism is apparent. In the first scene of Act II, Manly has a long speech of patriotism referring to the problem of national credit and praising Washington. In Act III, scene 2, even Dimple is forced to acknowledge--although hollowly--the service of the army.

And indeed, when we reflect how much we owe to those brave men who have suffered so much in the service of their country, and secured to us those inestimable blessings that we now enjoy, our liberty and independence, they demand every attention which gratitude can pay....

The added italics serve to point out the phraseology so reminiscent of the language of the Declaration of Independence, evidently then, as now, strong in its hold upon the public mind.

It is generally agreed that Tyler was deliberate in his preachment of nationalism and consciously constructed his play to that end. Helen Tyler Brown says, "The play was an illustrated lesson in patriotism needed, because, mingling with staunch patriots, were those who aped foreign modes and felt, or feigned to feel, disdain for the New Republic and distrust of its government."<sup>34</sup> Allan Gates Halline also regards nationalism as a vital element of the play. In the introduction to The Contrast he states,

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<sup>34</sup> Helen Tyler Brown, the preface to the Wilbur edition of The Contrast, p. XXXV.

"... there is reason to believe that the significant aspect of the play is the question of nationalism arising from the situation which gives the play its title."<sup>35</sup> Definite it is that in his stressing of the nationalistic note, Tyler strengthened the original and pertinent element in the play and made the one outstanding contribution to social comedy in his period.

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<sup>35</sup> Allan Gates Halline, American Plays (New York, 1935), p. 40.

## CHAPTER V

### THE PERIOD OF CONSOLIDATION AND NATIONAL GROWTH

It is understandable that the war period should have produced little in the way of social dramas: the nation was too intent upon its political well-being to have the time or the interest to analyse its social foibles. For the same reasons much of this political pre-occupation and dramatic dearth carried over into the subsequent era of national development.

During the period of national consolidation, roughly from about 1800 to 1830, the social comedy was exemplified by only one play worthy of note, Fashionable Follies, written by Joseph Hutton and presented in 1809. While the play is mediocre in dramatic construction and lines, it is of interest here because it illustrates again the close connection between social comedy and social trends. Just as the period was a transitional one between war years and economic prosperity, so the comedy of the period is transitional. The patriotic fervor of the earlier period continues; the beginning of an attack upon the sping of French manners, which was to be handled so skillfully in Mrs. Howatt's Fashion, are also evident.

As the title indicates, Fashionable Follies is chiefly an indictment of the attitude that excuses the breakdown of social virtues with a bland, "It is fashionable." In the character of Delany, the smug, self-satisfied fop, is an echo of the fashionable arbiters of manners in the Restoration comedies. Perhaps he was not meant to be more; at any rate, he is the sole claim of relationship to the comedy of manners that Fashionable Follies has, and he is a very poor relation indeed. Miss Charlotte Positive is reminiscent of the ridiculed women of the Restoration plays,

but the humor of her situation is merely hinted; it is not developed for open recognition.

As in The Contrast, the vogue of sentimentalism is reflected. Peregrine Positive and Fanny are the epitome of goodness. In the separation and reunion of the Dorriville family the sound sentiment of good triumphing is well set forth. Ploughby and his Dame are the bulwarks of rustic simplicity. Even Delany in his reformation in the last scene is well clothed in the garments of sentiment. Indeed, sentimentalism plays a big role in Fashionable Follies.

The play's reflection of the social trends of the period are not to be overlooked, however. As was mentioned earlier, the play bridges the nationalism of the preceding period and the satire of the succeeding one. What member of the audience could fail in patriotic response, when Dorriville returns from his undeserved exile and exclaims,

Hail! my country; once more I press my natal soil and  
breathe thy purer air, America, thou sole abode of liberty,  
and peace.<sup>36</sup>

Ploughby, in exhorting his Dame to hospitality, also voices national virtues when he says,

... and I trust, Dame that our country which as the only  
soil where true liberty and peace do grow, will ever cultivate  
that sweet plant which be more fragrant than a rose, charity!<sup>37</sup>

Captain Dorriville expresses his sense of obligation for exemplary conduct while officially representing his country as he speaks scornfully to Delany who has charged him with being in livery,

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<sup>36</sup>Joseph Hutton, Fashionable Follies, in Representative Plays by American Dramatists, 1815-1858, ed. by Montrose J. Moses (New York, 1925), Act II, scene 1.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., Act II, scene 2.



I am, my fashionable gentleman, but it is the livery of my country, and while I wear it, it shall never be sullied by my suffering the brutal violence of a scoundrel towards an unprotected woman.<sup>38</sup>

Even the prison bailiff voices patriotic feeling as he goes to the unpleasant duty of arresting Captain Dorriville,

Because it's disagreeable, even to a bailiff, to tell a man he must go to prison, when he has returned from fighting the battles of his country.<sup>39</sup>

The bailiff's remarks serve to emphasize the earlier, casual reference, many by the Captain, to the fighting of pirates on the Barbary Coast.<sup>40</sup> The spirit of nationalism was still rampant in American comedy.

Less conspicuous, but none the less present is the early satire of French imitation. In Fashionable Follies, it is left to the wine-loving servant, Solomon, to attempt the use of French terms. The following dialogue introduces the error which Solomon makes consistently:

Grenouilles: "... you are always de bon esprit, ..."

Solomon: "Yes, mounseer, bonny sprice is my best friend ..."<sup>41</sup>

The possibilities for humor arising out of Solomon's distorted pronunciation are obvious. It needed a cleverer writer than Hutton to accomplish it with real success, but to Joseph Hutton must go credit for the initiation.

Before leaving the period under discussion, attention must be called to a third play which, although it chronologically falls in the third period, belongs by all other standards in the second. James Kirke Pauld-

<sup>38</sup> Hutton, op. cit., Act III, scene 5.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., Act IV, scene 1.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., Act I, scene 2.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., Act II, scene 3.

ings The Bucktails; or, Americans in England appeared in printed form in 1847, but in its spirit and subject matter, the play is of an earlier time. It is possible to explain the play's spirit partially in terms of the author's vigorous anti-British feeling which probably dates from the Revolutionary War experience of his family. Faulding, born in 1778, could not have had any personal recollections of the war, but he did see its tragic effect in the insanity of his grandfather whose mental condition had been engendered during a British attack. That circumstance added to what must have been a nationalism of the first rank undoubtedly accounts for the spirit of his best play. It is necessary merely to call attention to two other products of his pen to point out that the nationalism of The Bucktails was not incidental. The Diverting History of John Bull and Brother Jonathan, written in 1812, and John Bull in America; or, the New Munchausen, in 1825, are the works in point.

The strongest expression of the nationalistic feeling of The Bucktails is in the plot itself, which centers around the arrival of two young Americans at the home of the eminent authority on antiquity, Obsolete, and the confused ideas of the "aboriginals" which Obsolete and his friends have. After a series of melodramatic experiences in a woods in which a king of beggars appears as a kind of deus ex machina, the play, after nine scenes in the fifth act, ends with each American securing the girl of his dreams and the entire company giving four hay's for the New World, the last one being, "And hey for the New World,--'tis 'the land of the free and the home of the brave!'"

Inverse loyalty to the homeland is expressed in Frank's satirical explanation of the amazed silence with which Obsolete's friends greet the two Americans who actually appear to be civilized--

Pooh, pooh, brother--'tis nothing, but the English hospitality we've heard so much about.<sup>42</sup>

In the same scene the other youth, Henry, expounds the American theory of equality. Speaking of social distinctions, he says,

The law makes none, and that's sufficient. We are taught to consider a king, and the son of a king, as much the subject of our thoughts and judgment, as the beggar that goes in rags. Man can't remove one step from man--his nature fixes him.

The American-born Jane Farfield, like Frank, implies praise of her native land as she criticizes the English court,

Yes, my lord--where kings and queens, to say nothing of knaves, take precedence, and share all the honors.<sup>43</sup>

Frank even places love of country above love of woman when Mary in answer to his proposal accepts him on condition that he remain in England.

Long before I saw you, my country was my darling.<sup>44</sup>

It would be false to give the impression that The Bucktails is purely nationalistic. Sentimentality abounds, especially in the lengthy last act and in the romantic scenes. Something of the comedy of humours is apparent in the typing of characters by names and in the consistency with which the characters hold to their types. Obsolete, Admiral Gunwale, Major Longbow, Threadneedle, the banker, and Miss Obsolete have names that speak their characteristics for them. In the involved sub-plot which brings about the kidnapping of Jane and the subsequent wild racing of the entire cast through the woods in a confused effort to rescue her, the play anticipates the melodrama in its most virulent form. In its

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<sup>42</sup>James Kirke Paulding, The Bucktails, in American Plays, ed. by A. G. Halline (New York, 1935), Act II, scene 3.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., Act III, scene 2.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., Act V, scene 1.

satire upon narrowness of vision and eccentricity the play approaches the much later "problem" social comedy.<sup>45</sup> Possibly it is this hybrid nature that prevents it from fitting decisively into its own chronological period.

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<sup>45</sup> Dr. Halline's criticism of the pro-nationalistic interpretation of the play should be given. In his introduction to The Bucktails he writes, "The striking aspect of The Bucktails, however, is that its satire reaches beyond nationalism to types of character found in any civilized country; though these characters happen to be Englishmen in the play; they are satirized for their personal qualities, not for their national idiosyncrasies." op. cit., p. 79. Discerning as this criticism is, it is nevertheless true that The Bucktails has much of the same nationalistic flavor that is found in The Contrast and Fashionable Follies.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE FABULOUS FORTIES AND THE GILDED AGE

By 1830, the eastern seaboard states had arrived at the degree of security and prestige which made it possible for them to look upon the frontier as something quite removed. Consequently, while Easterners were aware of the nation's expansion and, indeed, participated in it, the more sophisticated among them found time and the occasion to look critically upon a society that now had the leisure to develop foibles. The popularity of French books on etiquette and the studied attempts of New York, particularly, to rank with European cities as a center of culture and amusement illustrate the social trend in the "Fabulous Forties" of which Meade Minnigerode has written so entertainingly.<sup>46</sup>

Strangely enough the decade of the Thirties went unrepresented in social comedy. Indeed, it was not until late in the Forties, 1847, that a comedy of any distinction appeared. This dearth of dramatic social commentary may be explained in part by the tremendous popularity of the historical drama which so suited the talents of such actors as Edwin Forrest and William Macready and in part by Minnigerode's penetrating comment, "... the dramatic muse was not a lady in the Forties, but a painted hussy ..."<sup>47</sup> Unfortunate as the lull in the creation of comedy

<sup>46</sup> Meade Minnigerode, The Fabulous Forties (New York and London, 1924).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 150. The unpopularity of the drama on moral grounds is also brought out in Mrs. Nowatt's apology in the Prologue to Fashion:  
"Here! take," he says, "the unclean thing away!  
'Tis tainted with a notice of a play!"

.....

The Stage--what is it, though beneath thy ban,  
But a Daguerreotype of life and man?  
Afsign poor human nature, if you will,  
But let the Drama have her mission still!"

Anna Corwin Nowatt, Fashion, M. J. Moses, op. cit.

was, the silence paid rich dividends when it was broken by the witty satire, Fashion, and in the subsequent plays of the Fifties, Sixties, and Seventies with their indictment of imitated manners and PARVUM ostentation.

In the brilliant Fashion, the ridiculousness of a slavish imitation of European custom is laid bare with skill and finesse. While the play itself centers around Mrs. Tiffany's inordinate desire to be French in all things, the Prologue parries a subtle thrust with those who live by English custom,

'Fashion, A Comedy.' I'll go; but stay--  
Now I read farther, 'tis a native play!  
Bah! Home-made calicoes are well enough  
But home-made dramas must be stupid stuff.  
Had it the London stamp, 'twould do--but then,  
For plays, we lack the manners and the men!

Chief worshipper at the shrine of Parisian mode, and chief victim of Mrs. Mowatt's satire, is Mrs. Tiffany, who prattles emptily about fashion and her social leadership, oblivious to her husband's impending financial ruin--a ruin for which she is greatly responsible since her extravagance has caused him to falsify accounts in an effort to meet her demands for money. Most characteristic of Mrs. Tiffany is her use of French phrases--correctly used, but horribly distorted in pronunciation. A few lines will serve to illustrate:

You have the most ou-tray ideas, Mr. Trueman--quite rustic, and deplorably American ...<sup>48</sup>

.....

There is something about our American words decidedly vulgar. Footool (fauteuil)! how refined. Footool! Arm-chair! what a difference.<sup>49</sup>

.....

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<sup>48</sup> Anna Corwin Mowatt, Fashion, M. J. Moses, op. cit., Act IV, scene 1.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., Act I, scene 1.

Been to the opera, Mr. Fogg? I hear that the beau monde make their debut there every evening.<sup>50</sup>

.....

Bung jura. Comment vous portez vous, Monsieur Snobson?<sup>51</sup>

However, she is not alone as the proponent of the French fashion. Her daughter, Seraphina, is an insignificant echo of her mother's prattling, but the maid, Millinette, and the false Count both cleverly emphasize the play's satire in their capitalising upon Mrs. Tiffany's penchant. Of course, it is but shrewd business for Millinette to praise her mistress, but she none-the-less laughs at her errors,

Madame have one charmente pronunciation. Fowtool!  
(mimicking aside.) Charante, Madame!<sup>52</sup>

In spite of her laughter Millinette enjoys her position of influence through Mrs. Tiffany. She proudly explains her duties to Zeke,

... I am Madame's femme de chambre—her lady's maid, Monsieur Zeke. I teach Madame les modes de Paris, and Madame set de fashion for all New York. You see, Monsieur Zeke, dat it is me, Moi-meme, dat do lead de fashion for all de American beau monde!<sup>53</sup>

The Count is equally effective in his lines. When assured that Americans follow foreign fashions, Jolimaitre replies with fitting insolence,

Excuse me, Madam, our fashions have grown antediluvian before you Americans discover their existence. You lamentably are behind the age--lamentably! 'Fon my honour, a for-  
signer of refinement finds great difficulty in existing in this provincial atmosphere.<sup>54</sup>

Even his suit to Seraphina is tinged with his European preferences,

<sup>50</sup> Anna Corwin Mowatt, Fashion, M. J. Moses, op. cit., Act I, scene 1.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., Act III, scene 1.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., Act I, scene 1.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., Act I, scene 1.

Ah! I find but one redeeming charm in America--the superlative loveliness of the feminine portion of creation...<sup>55</sup>

It was not enough, however, for Mrs. Mowatt to attack the European propensities of Society; in the person of Mrs. Tiffany are ruthlessly pilloried the trends that earned the apt adjective, fabulous, for the decade. Charged by her husband with the necessity of paying bills, Mrs. Tiffany dismisses the obligations with an airy,

I hear the ~~ex-light~~ never condescend to do anything of the kind. The honor of their invaluable patronage is sufficient for the persons they employ!<sup>56</sup>

Speaking of her daughter's elopement, she blandly classifies the President as ranking with a Barmen exhibit--

... is at this moment on her way to--to Washington! Where, after visiting all the fashionable curiosities of the day--including the President--she will return to grace her native city!<sup>57</sup>

To her husband's frenzied question, does she desire to drive him to suicide, Mrs. Tiffany replies, with moving horror,

Good gracious! Mr. Tiffany, how you talk! I beg you won't mention anything of the kind. I consider black the most unbecoming color ...<sup>58</sup>

Least one think that her most effective command of language is the French phrase, she speaks of his name to Zuke in terms appallingly pedantic:

... I consider it too plebian an appellation to be uttered in my presence ...<sup>59</sup>

One further thrust at contemporary society by Mrs. Mowatt should be

<sup>55</sup> Anna Corrin Mowatt, *Fashion*, M. J. Moses, *op. cit.*, Act I, Scene 1.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, Act V, scene 1.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, Act V, scene 1.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, Act III, scene 1.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, Act I, scene 1.



cited here. It explains itself; says Poet T. Tennyson Twinkle,

... And you must take into consideration, ladies, the rapidity with which they were written. Four minutes and a half by the stop watch! The true test of a poet is the velocity with which he composes....<sup>60</sup>

Fashion is true to the school of sentiment in the persons of Trueman, Gertrude, and Mr. Tiffany. Gertrude's repulsing of the Count's advance, made on grounds of her orphaned state, is true to type,

And therefore more entitled to the respect and protection of every true gentleman! Had you been one, you would not have insulted me!<sup>61</sup>

One speech made by Trueman will suffice to illustrate the positions both Trueman and Mr. Tiffany uphold in the play.

Fashion! And pray what is fashion, Madam! An agreement between certain persons to live without using their souls! to substitute etiquette for virtue--decorum for purity--manners for morals! to affect a shame for the works of their Creator! and expend all their rapture upon the works of their tailors and dressmakers!<sup>62</sup>

Sentiment is present, but in Fashion it is used with sufficient finesse to point the satire of the comedy without weighing it down with preaching.

The same quality of discrimination is notable in Mrs. Howatt's choice of type-names and in vestiges of nationalism which persist in the play. Trueman, Jolinaitre, T. Tennyson Twinkle, Snobson subtly reveal their possessors' distinguishing characteristics. In her pride in the play's being a native product, in the bluntness with which Trueman expresses his pride that America didn't produce the Count and in his railing at the livery worn by Zeke, Mrs. Howatt has used the nationalistic factor spar-

<sup>60</sup> Anna Corwin Howatt, Fashion, M. J. Moses, op. cit., Act I, scene I.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., Act II, scene 2.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., Act IV, scene 1.

ingly enough to make it effective, but not burdensome. All things considered—the smooth flowing lines, the sharpness of the satire, the realism of the characters, and the all-pervading lightness of touch—it is easily understandable why Fashion knew such popularity and longevity.

Eleven years later, 1856, Mrs. Sidney Bateman also attacked slavery to fashion in Self. The emptiness of the attitude that having been to Paris made one all-wise as a social arbiter is well exemplified in the character, Cypher Cynosure,—his name is enough to explain him. The financial aspect of the problem was clearly brought out by Mrs. Mowatt, but Mrs. Bateman brings the cost home with a vengeance: bankruptcy, social failure, paternal disowning, and threatened imprisonment for forgery are all seen as following in the wake of financial extravagance.

Before going to a discussion of these specifically period characteristics of the play, it might be well to note one or two more general qualities. In the persistence of type-names—Cypher Cynosure, Mr. Prompt-cash, Mr. Ellwide, Mrs. Corderoy Codliver, Miss Sallie Simper, Miss Ida Indolence, Miss Dorothea Dumpling, Miss Fanny Fortune—the play harks back to seventeenth century comedy. It should be remarked in passing, however, that in Self the more obvious name typing is limited, with the exception of Cynosure, to minor characters. In the characters of Mary Apex and John Unit—their names, as well as those of Apex, Mrs. Apex, and Mrs. Radius, somewhat suggest their function in the plot—sentimentalism has strong exponents: Mary in her saintly forbearance and Unit in his indorsement of the simple life. The reformation of Mrs. Apex and her son are in true form of the comedy of sentiment. In its reference to Barmm, the Empress Eugenie, and the slavery problem, Self is especially timely.

By far the bulk of the emphasis, however, is placed upon the social hollowness which the play attacks. Ellwilde's opening speech reveals the slavish adherence to the money standard which reached ridiculous heights,

It's growing vulgar to wear such high-priced goods,  
since the sporting gentry began buying them for their  
wives ...<sup>63</sup>

Mrs. Apex's question concerning seven hundred dollar material is equally revealing:

You have nothing more expensive!<sup>64</sup>

Both Mrs. Apex and Cypher Cynosure are the champions of Paris supremacy. In the scene just cited, Mrs. Apex remarks,

... Since our European tour, I think American goods  
are so vulgar.

Cynosure, when asked his opinion of material under question testifies to his qualifications with the comment,

Of course, having just left Paris, I am quite able to  
decide what is, or what is not worthy of admiration, and  
this gives my opinion weight ...<sup>65</sup>

Later, Cynosure expresses his preference for Paris as a place of residence.

Paris is the place where a gentleman can live. Am-  
ericans only exist....<sup>66</sup>

He continues, in explanation for his lack of brilliant conversational achievements,

... Never heard witty people talk until I went to  
Paris....<sup>67</sup>

<sup>63</sup>Mrs. Sidney Bateman, Self, M. J. Moss, op. cit., Act I, scene 1.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., Act II, scene 2.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

Just how sincere Mrs. Bateman was in her condemnation of this Paris vogue is open to question in Cynosure's last speech of this category. In accepting some of the simple expressions of sentiment by Unit and others, Cynosure calls to his aid the fact that,

... It is quite fashionable at Paris to laugh at pedigree, and talk about merit, and not money, and all that sort of thing....<sup>68</sup>

Is Mrs. Bateman herself pro-French in her social standards, or is she merely using a two-edge sword in her attack? One is inclined to believe she is following this line of reasoning: to be a slave to Paris fashion is ridiculous; if you fail to see the reasonableness of that, at least recognize that Paris itself is condemning the fashionable world.

The successor of Mrs. Tiffany of Fashion is Mrs. Codliver, but she is cruder, more obvious, much closer to the Solomon of Fashionable Follies. Three of her speeches will suffice to make clear her characterization.

... for Mr. Codliver has been dead eighteen months, and I'm sure it's high time I laid aside my sombre accounts....<sup>69</sup>

.....

... dinner is sure to be put on the table with the punctuation of a railroad conductor.<sup>70</sup>

.....

... and he is notorious for his pattys of four grayes...<sup>71</sup>

To Mr. Promptash is given the most satirical comment upon the insincerity of women in the social world. When Mrs. Radius and Mrs. Apex,

<sup>68</sup>Mrs. Sidney Bateman, Self, W. J. Moses, op. cit., Act II, scene 2.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., Act I, scene 1.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., Act II, scene 2.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., Act III, scene 3.

bitter rivals, kiss in greeting, he remarks,

I knew she would kiss her! What hypocrites these women are!<sup>72</sup>

His speech is one of many that paint the character of Mrs. Apex as unfavorably as possible. When her husband refuses her a paltry fifteen thousand dollars to cover her personal indebtedness, their nearness to bankruptcy is not nearly so impressive to her as her probable loss of face socially. Of her son's woeful extravagance, she blithely says,

... and then, he is so very handsome, and so young, and so fashionable!--I am so proud of him.<sup>73</sup>

The deficiencies of her character are most revealed when, upon her son's objections to forging his step-sister's name on a check, she scoffs,

... These over-nice scruples are ridiculous!<sup>74</sup>

Like Fashion, the play deals with the merchant-prince--though bankrupt--and therein, too, is true to its era. The significance of the title is somewhat obscured by the plot and is emphasized only in Unit's last speech, which serves, as it were, to drag in the moral that "after all, our labours are prompted by that great motive power of human nature--Self!"

The following decade saw the production of Augustin Daly's Under the Gaslight in 1857. A rambling, five-act melodrama, the play lacks compactness and interest. Its sole claim to attention as a social comedy is its attempted realism in the locale of the scenes at Delmonico's and the court room scene. As documents on prevailing social custom, these

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<sup>72</sup>Mrs. Sidney Bateman, Self, M. J. Moses, op. cit., Act I, scene I.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., Act II, scene I.

scenes have value.

Satire is not the dominant note, by any means, but Ray Trafford's bitter comment concerning the shabby treatment Society is giving Laura is biting:

... Laura has mocked it [Society] with a pretense, and society, which is made up of pretences, will bitterly resent the mockery.<sup>75</sup>

Indirect satire on Society's standards of honesty is present in the lines concerning the letters:

Sue Early: Here's one for Laura. It's unsealed and not delivered.

Mrs. Van Dam: A fair prize! Let's see it--(they open it)<sup>76</sup>

Only one other factor of any importance to this study is touched on in the play. Feminism, which was to develop into a dominant issue in the Nineties and the early part of the twentieth century, is the gist of the curtain line of Act IV. As Laura, in a hair-breadth rescue, saves Snorky from death under a train, Snorky cries out--

Victory! Saved! Hooray! And these are the women who ain't to have a vote!

More important was Bronson Howard's The Banker's Daughter which was first produced in 1873 as Lillian's Lost Love. A fair play, although lacking the finesse of the author's later plays, The Banker's Daughter satirizes a growing weakness of the American of the Gilded Age who acquired vast wealth and little else. The plot itself is melodramatic: a daughter marries a man, whom she respects, but does not love, to save her father from financial ruin; after years of devoted wifehood, though

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<sup>75</sup>Augustin Daly, Under the Gaslight (New York, 1895), Act I.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid.

which she nevertheless has cherished the dream of her rejected lover, she learns that she really loves her husband and--the preachment--first love is not always a lasting one. It is in a relatively minor character and in the secondary satire that the play gains zest. G. Washington Phipps is the prototype of the future, much-to-be-satirized, Baedeker-clutching, American tourist in Europe. The high pressure nature of his whirlwind touring is illustrated in the question the critic Montvillais puts to him:

Your pardon, Mr. Phipps. I owe you an apology for having interrupted your remarks. Pardon, but you have been to the Grand Opera; and to the Palais Royal, and to the Comedie Francaise, and the Opera Comique, and you arrived in the city of Paris at half-past seven this evening?<sup>77</sup>

Later in the same act Phipps condemns himself as he unwittingly, and boastingly, reveals his superficiality--

I like pictures. I spent nearly twenty minutes in the gallery at Dresden.

In the person of G. Washington Phipps, Bronson Howard sketched the comic aspect of what Lewis Mumford called "The Pillage of the Past."<sup>78</sup>

The Banker's Daughter is probably most significant for its timeliness in reflecting social decline in the wealth grabbing, culturally empty years of the then tarnishing Gilded Age and for its foreshadowing of the inquiry and spirit of reform which characterized the turn of the century. It is significant also that its author continued, with increasing skill, to record social trends in the social comedy.

<sup>77</sup>Bronson Howard, The Banker's Daughter in The Banker's Daughter and Other Plays, ed. by A. G. Halline (Princeton, 1941), Act III.

<sup>78</sup>Lewis Mumford, The Golden Age (New York, 1926), chap. V: "For the dominant generation of the seventies, ... art and culture meant the past: it meant Europe: it meant over the seas and far away.", p. 204.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE MALVE DECADE AND THE PERIOD OF THE MUCKRAKERS

While Howard did not particularly stress the growing big-business, high-pressure attitude toward culture, he did comment extensively in his plays on the far reaching evils of money and the American tendency to glorify business. Most of his plays fall chronologically, as well as in spirit, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They serve well as emphasis for the position that social comedy keeps pace with social trends and is an effective commentary. With his apprenticeship, so to speak, served during the Gilded Age, Howard's maturer plays written during the Nineties and the subsequent era of muckraking, subtly point the evils toward which American social trends were leading. Three of his comedies will serve to illustrate the growth of his condemnation of the evils of wealth: Young Mrs. Winthrop, The Henrietta, and Kate—naming them chronologically.

Young Mrs. Winthrop is least important of the three. It does, however, plainly attack the superficial, empty kind of living pursued by those of means. The threatened wrecking of the formerly idyllic marriage of Douglas and Constance Winthrop, the infrequency with which Mrs. Chetwyn and her husbands, successive, see one another, the insistence with which Scott points out the dangers of the social butterfly existence, and his reminiscence in the last act of the simplicity of childhood, all heighten the pointing of the argument.

While the play shows definite technical improvement in more integrated speeches and in plot development, the thrust of the play is some-



what obscured by the sentimentalism attendant upon the blind Edith and her romance with Herbert and on the death of Rosie. Only rarely do the lines themselves point the thought. In the reply of Scott to Mrs. Chetwyn's announcement of her divorce, the indictment against too much wealth and leisure is satirically made:

Ah! Then you and Dick will see something of each other.  
I congratulate you both ...<sup>79</sup>

Mrs. Chetwyn, in her part, is a later version of Mrs. Apex in Self and of Mrs. Tiffany in Fashion. With typical frivolity she recounts the divorce proceedings:

Mrs. Ruth: It must have been very sad.

Mrs. Chetwyn: Yes, it was: I had on a brocade lavender and old gold-lace to match the lavender--and sleeves puffed above the elbows. The evidence was so comical.<sup>80</sup>

It is important to recall, however, that both Mrs. Apex and Mrs. Tiffany knew some chagrin over their follies and were saddened at the thought of the consequences. Not so is Mrs. Chetwyn! In her flippancy, Howard emphasizes the changed social attitude; her sins of superficiality do not appall her. In her consistency of characterization, the indictment of the age is made strong.

Howard's second play of the period carried a more powerful charge. By 1887, the year which saw The Henrietta produced, Howard had attained a sharp technical skill and had developed a plot that in every way reflected the age of expansion--and in many respects foreshadowed the future muck-rake. In The Henrietta, Howard is merciless in his satire; no phase

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<sup>79</sup> Bronson Howard, The Young Mrs. Winteron (New York, 1899), Act III.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

of society escapes: business, politics, the church--all are shown as infected by the same virus.

The play is a well blended potpourri of the play of sentiment and the comedy of manners with a dash of penetrating satire that rescues it from the limbo of other hybrid social comedies. Howard has skillfully avoided the pitfall which often comes with the typing of characters. Bertie Vanalstyne is charming in his attempts to appear the fop and the gay dog; he is admirable in his quiet acceptance of his brother's false accusations; he is most funny--and most pointed satirically--as the Wall Street "genius." His father, Nicholas, likewise is a composite of many moods. A ruthless manipulator of the stock market, he is remarkably gentle with the mild, sweet Agnes; condemning Bertie's early superficiality, he is later inordinately proud of his young Napoleon; cruel in the ruin of a rival, he takes pains to protect the small investor. Nicholas, Junior, shows less change of character, but his weaknesses are successively revealed and he remains a vital factor in the plot. Dr. Wainright is the most stable of the major characters. It is he who represents the conservative mind; his speeches invariably are of the preachment category; he is the judge within the play. Nor are the other characters, important as they are to the comedy as a whole, conspicuous for their changes of mood.

As might be expected, Vanalstyne, Sr., best illustrates the equivocal position of the financier who accepts one code of ethics for his private life and another for his business. In his advice to his son, he is a far cry from the oft-quoted Polonius--

... Never gamble, my son; it isn't right. Squeeze  
the shorts, that's business....<sup>81</sup>

<sup>81</sup>Bronson Howard, The Henrietta, A. G. Halline, op. cit., Act I.

And later--

... I only lie between times. 'Truth crushed to earth will rise again.' I know exactly when to let her rise; that's all ...<sup>82</sup>

The magnitude of business as it was carried on in its heyday is illustrated in the younger Nicholas's answer to his secretary's inquiry concerning ninety-five thousand dollars. "I don't care to be worried about trifles like that this morning ..."<sup>83</sup> The scale and the effrontery of big business are best satirized in the following conversation between the elder and the younger Nicholas Vanalstyne. After the father has ordered the purchase of a railroad and other incidental properties, the son says tentatively:

Jr.: The Legislature of Nevada--

Sr.: Buy that, too.

Jr.: The new Constitution of the State--

Sr.: Tell our agents to have it amended at once--  
same as Missouri.<sup>84</sup>

Inherent in the same conversation is Howard's indictment of the political laxity that permitted big business so to corrupt it.

Probably the most cruel satire is that directed against the church. Even the listing of the character of the pastor Hilton is pointed: "The Rev. Dr. Murray Hilton, a Shepherd." Following the listing is the apropos quotation from Vanity Fair, "It was to combat and expose such as these, no doubt, that laughter was made." The Rev. Dr. Hilton is char-

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<sup>82</sup>Bronson Howard, The Henrietta, A. G. Halline, op. cit., Act I.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid.

acterized as a pious, finger-tips-adjusting sort of clergyman who is none the less not averse to taking a flyer on the market--or a tip at the race track. He is distressed when his wealthy parishioners are upset over finances; he is totally incompetent when faced with a moral issue. He is made to appear avaricious and ridiculous in his interest in the widow, Mrs. Cornelia Updyke. His incompetency is hurled in his teeth by the dying Nicholas, Jr..

You teach a man how to die! Have you ever shown me how to live? You have robbed me of my hope ...<sup>85</sup>

He calls to mind the blind self-righteousness so vividly discussed by Thomas Beer in The Mauve Decade.<sup>86</sup>

Minor satirical notes should be mentioned. The elder Vanalstyne interrupts his proposal to the lovely Cornelia to dash hastily to study the ticker tape. Bertie, in his innocence, believes that "playing the market" is a game. The insipid English lord whom Mary Vanalstyne marries fails to understand his father-in-law's attitude:

My American father-in-law hasn't got over being surprised every time he meets me, yet.<sup>87</sup>

The confusing existence of three Henriettas--a mine, a race horse, and a popular dancer--complicate everyone's activity. In passing it should be observed that the play on these Henriettas grows more tiresome and does not seem to be as vital to the plot as the author evidently felt in his choice of title.

The supreme irony of the play is Bertie's revealing to his father

<sup>85</sup>Bronson Howard, The Henrietta, A. G. Halline, op. cit., Act III.

<sup>86</sup>Thomas Beer, The Mauve Decade (New York, 1926), Section III: "Depravity."

<sup>87</sup>Bronson Howard, The Henrietta, Act III.

that his buying or selling on the market is dependent upon the indication of a flipped coin. By this method, he has become the Young Napoleon of Wall Street! Of it, he says,

That is the intellectual process, father. It takes brains to deal at the Stock Exchange.<sup>88</sup>

What price the nervous prostrations of other financiers!

It seems impossible that anyone could miss the thrust of The Henrietta. Lest anyone should, however, the moralizing Dr. Wainwright closes the play by saying:

The business interests of the country, these money transactions, these speculations in life and death, there are more sacred interests than those, and they lie deeper in our hearts.<sup>89</sup>

In Kate, a four-act play which appeared in 1906, Howard approaches the evils of wealth in a much more involved manner. More complicated in plot and with less skill in character development, Kate is the inferior of The Henrietta in every way. The attack upon the social evil is a two-directional one: in the arranged marriage between Kate and Earl Catherst, and in the rectorship of the Lord John Verner.

In the first instance, Howard's attitude almost has to be read into the play. Indirectly he is pointing out the folly of the marriage of wealthy American girls to European titles; and directly, through the person of Rector Lord John Verner, he emphasizes the ideal of honesty in matrimony. Indeed, so prominent is the emphasis upon the matrimonial question that one is forced to the conclusion that it was Howard's major problem here. A conversation between Kate and Archibald must be cited.

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<sup>88</sup> Bronson Howard, The Henrietta, Act IV..

<sup>89</sup> ibid.

Kate: These business matters are sometimes very irritating; and this marriage of ours is—business—of course.

Archibald: Business?

Kate: No; we'll call it art, dear; a comedy. Does it still interest you?

Archibald: Is it beginning to bore you, Kate? I'm afraid I'm not playing my own part in the comedy well.<sup>90</sup>

The striking scene between John and Archibald during which John pleads with Archibald to have the courage of honesty and which ends with John's powerful prayer on marriage is also an illustration in point:

... Let not our marriage service be made a fantastic mockery; nor let the ministers at thy altar pander to those who insult Thee and laugh. Amen.<sup>91</sup>

In the second instance, the dissatisfaction in the taking of a position for financial reasons only is made clear. The Lord John Verner wanted to be an army man; he accepted the rectorship in his diocese because the living was good and "it was expected of him." Here, the attack on wealth is an inverse one: money and position were so attractive that taking the rectorship was easier than being truthful. In reading the play, one feels that The Rev. Lord Verner and Kate Hardenbeck both grow in spirit as they depart from their society-imposed positions.

Indirectly, also, are other social weaknesses attacked. The church, again, is a victim—here, in the persons of the Rev. Edward Lyell and The Hon. Dorothea Cathart. Both are developed as self-righteous, duty-bound individuals whose sincerity rings a bit hollow when really struck a testing blow. The description of Lyell given at the outset of the play is

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<sup>90</sup> Bronson Howard, *Kate* (New York, 1906), Act II.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, Act III.

unmistakable—"He belongs to that class of truly religious men whose intellectual power, firmness of purpose and absolute honesty have encouraged other men to martyrdom in all ages; they remain on earth themselves and in good health to look after the interests of the Church." Lady St. John's comment in the Hon. Dorothea is equally enlightening--

... In my own opinion, Dorothea has long intended to marry the Rector of Fenegrus--Catherat; who he happens to be as a man is a mere incident and it doesn't interest her....<sup>92</sup>

American reverence for Europe is pointed out chiefly in the proposed marriage, of course; but a sly dig is taken, even at the heroine's weakness, in Archibald's description of Kate,

... Wherever we go she is a devotee of the highest artistic taste--to say nothing of Parisian costumes--and of one sacred volume, Baedeker; her Bible, her Prayer Book, and her Hymnal!<sup>93</sup>

Howard merely touches the divorce problem which Langdon Mitchell handled with consummate skill in The New York Idea, but the one speech is biting enough to be worth quoting. Fittingly enough, it comes from the lips of DeFeyster Wolfe, a 1906 version of the fop,

... All the composers have omitted the third great wedding march--to the divorce court....<sup>94</sup>

As was stated earlier, Kate is an inferior play. The typing of characters is so definite that the plot outcome appears obvious at the end of the first act. While one central idea is emphasized, the argument of the play seems to be indirect and obscure. As a social commentary it is not so effective as The Henrietta.

<sup>92</sup> Bronson Howard, Kate (New York, 1906), Act IV.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., Act I.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., Act IV.

Kate was, however, indicative of a change in the materials being used by writers of social comedy. With the turn of the century, the Arms was in the vanguard of the crusading publications exposing corruption, profiteering, and inordinate expansion of big business. Ida Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens, Upton Sinclair, and Frank Norris were becoming the terror of the unscrupulous politician and the profit-crazed employer. No longer were business and a William-Randolph-Hearst type of culture social foibles; they had become problems for the reformer. Inasmuch as Kate, through the problem of honesty in marriage, approaches character weaknesses as its point of departure, it indicates the changing interests of the social comedy. No longer was a trend itself the major issue; rather, were the component weaknesses of the trend of outstanding importance. Society's foibles were being broken up into individual character faults.

This shifting emphasis, approached by Howard, is clearly seen in all the writing of Clyde Fitch, with the one exception of his first play, Beau Brummel, which was produced in 1890. Excellent as the play is as a social comedy, and superior as it is mechanically, it has little significance to this study. With its locale in England, and bridging the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the play both in place and period was far removed from its contemporary scene. In many respects the cleverest of Fitch's social comedies, Beau Brummel is here omitted from any further discussion solely on the ground of its historical subject matter. Of the other plays by Clyde Fitch, three should be considered in the light of the changed interests of the social comedy. The Girl with the Green Eyes, The Climbers, and The Truth are the plays in point.

The first, The Girl with the Green Eyes, deals, as might be expected



from the title, with jealousy. Jinny Austin and her husband, John, have but one obstacle to face in their otherwise happily married estate; Jinny is inordinately jealous. John, having been warned by Jinny's parents, laughs the danger off as absurd. Jinny, conscious of her fault, tries to be fair and impartial in her judgments. A series of incidents involving John and Ruth Chester arouse Jinny's jealousy because John refuses to take her into his confidence. Because Ruth has been the victim of Jinny's brother's cowardice, John is seeking to spare Jinny. Matters are brought to a tragic culmination when Jinny has driven John from her by her jealous rantings; then, upon learning the truth, she attempts suicide, but is rescued, opportunely, by John. As is obvious from this brief plot sketch, the play is a closely knit charge against a specific fault. No attempt to tie Jinny's problem to society in general is made. By inference, of course, such a connection may be drawn: society is faced with the problem of marital instability because of the character fault, jealousy. The main argument of the play, however, is strongly emphasized.

Through one or two minor characters, Fitch manages to touch sore spots in the American social scene. Mrs. Cullingham is a forthright soul who says what she thinks. Her honest remark to Jinny throws light on her social position and her own snobbery as well as that of those of whom she speaks.

... I don't know how to thank you both. You've asked me today to meet the swellest crowd I've ever been in where I was invited, and didn't have to buy tickets, and felt I had a right to say something besides 'excuse me,' and 'I beg your pardon.'<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup>Clyde Fitch, The Girl with the Green Eyes (New York, 1905), Act I.

In its pointing of Mrs. Cullingham's desire to have social entry, the speech anticipates Fitch's later play, The Climbers. To Mrs. Cullingham are also given the humorous lines describing "the Town Committee of Thirteen for the moral improvement of Peoria" which anticipated, by several years, Sinclair Lewis's blast against the small-mindedness of the small town.<sup>96</sup>

In the same scene, which takes place in the Vatican, such humor is aroused at the expense of the American tourist who goes about Europe in great haste gathering information from bored and not too well informed guides. Mr. Phipps of The Young Mrs. Winthrop would have found several kindred souls in the tourist groups Fitch lampoons. These minor characters are definitely of secondary importance; the prime objective of the play is its well defined attack on jealousy.

The second play, The Climbers, is not so clear cut in its thrust. Like Howard's Kate, the more penetrating commentary is somewhat hidden in the surface satire on social climbing. In Mrs. Hunter and her daughter Clara, the petty, vindictive, socially ambitious woman is represented. In the persons of Mrs. Sterling, Ruth Hunter, and Jessica, the more serious comment on society is made.

Mrs. Hunter's superficiality is revealed with klieg-light clearness in the very definite social attitude with which she views her husband's funeral services. It is a source of pride and pleasure that everyone of social importance was there--many, in fact, who had never before recognized her socially. Later, in defending her avid interest in the social nature of the services, she revealingly remarks,

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<sup>96</sup>Clyde Fitch, The Girl with the Green Eyes (New York, 1905), Act II.

... not that I ever acknowledged I was your father's inferior. I consider my family was just as good as his, only we were Presbyterians!<sup>97</sup>

It should be noted that the superficial attaching of social importance to one religious denomination over another must have been prevalent enough, actually, for the author to point it out as a characteristic of a culturally effete society. Clara's pronouncement of her ambitions label her as equally vacuous--

I'd like to be a sort of Anna Held....<sup>98</sup>

The surface living of Mrs. Hunter and Clara and the fundamental moral unsoundness of Richard Sterling present the trends which Fitch desires to point out; Mrs. Sterling's reactions to her numerous tribulations and the elderly Ruth Hunter's insistence upon a retention of idealism emphasize the character faults Fitch sees back of the trends. Probably the most revealing speech of the play is Ruth Hunter's to Mrs. Sterlings:

Oh, my dear, that's just it! The watchword of our age is self! We are all for ourselves; the twentieth century is to be a glorification of selfishness, the Era of Egotism! Forget yourself, and what would you do? The dignified thing....<sup>99</sup>

The speech calls to mind the closing lines of Mrs. Bateman's Self, but there the resemblance ends. What Mrs. Bateman somewhat tentatively suggested, Clyde Fitch made boldly clear in his indictment.

In The Truth, 1906, Fitch returned to the almost single treatment of an individual fault. The title is self-explanatory and the play has

<sup>97</sup> Clyde Fitch, The Climbers (New York, 1905), Act I.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., Act IV.

the same implied social significance as has The Girl with the Green Eyes. When Becky Warder learned the necessity of telling the truth, the major obstacle to her married happiness was removed. The play, however, has a broader application than the earlier one: the "white lie" of social practice is more prevalent than is rampant jealousy.

Becky and her husband are direct antitheses. Where it has become habitual for Becky to use the white lie, Tom holds to the obvious position: "The truth's so simple, so much easier--why not tell it?"<sup>100</sup> Where Tom is mature in his reasoning and thoroughly rational in his acceptance of the consistency of cause and effect, Becky is child-like in her hope for miraculous rescue from consequences:

... Dear God in Heaven, if I ever get out of this,  
I'll never tell another lie so long as I live! ...<sup>101</sup>

Having so prayed, she reverts to habitual practice when, at the end of the act, she breaks an engagement with a friend. The truth is that she and Warder have quarreled, but Becky elaborates,

... Tom has been called to--Chicago suddenly on business--yes, isn't it too bad? And I've had a telegram that father isn't so very well, so I am taking the five-twenty train to Baltimore. Yes, I'll write. No, I don't think he's seriously ill. Goodbye!

The contrast between Becky and Tom disappears, of course, when Becky valiantly tells the shabby truth at the end of the play. Tom's use of the over-worked cliché that love overcomes all obstacles is a weakly sentimental curtain speech which does not measure up to the rest of the play.

Vestiges of Mrs. Tiffany are present in the socially unskilled Mrs.

<sup>100</sup> Clyde Fitch, The Truth (New York, 1907), Act II.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

Crespigny. When corrected on her French pronunciation, she replies with assurance that is bliss:

Masoor! Massoose is plural. The singular is masoor. You forget I was educated in New Orleans.<sup>102</sup>

And later,

Etiquay! You can correct my English when you want to, but my French I've kept pure since school, and I remember perfectly—all words ending in e-t you pronounce A.<sup>103</sup>

As a whole, however, The Truth centers its attention on its major problem and any other satire is negligible.

The period of the nineties and the first decade of the twentieth century definitely saw a shifting of emphasis in social comedy from group foibles to individual weaknesses. It is necessary, however, to call attention to the fact that whereas the elements of the comedy of manners in American social comedy practically disappeared during this period, the factors of the comedy of sentiment appeared as prominently as ever. In the inevitable reform of the guilty character and the repeated avowals for the future, the demands of a sentiment loving public were satisfied. Good always triumphed, and the plays "turned out right."

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<sup>102</sup>Clyde Fitch, The Truth (New York, 1907), Act III.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid.

## CHAPTER VIII

### PRE-WORLD WAR "PROGRESSIVENESS"

In view of the changes just noted, the fast-moving, brittle, social comedies of the pre-World War period are in striking contrast to those of the preceding period. Dialogue was more witty. In The New York Idea it became sparkingly brilliant. Cool, detached satire of a universal social attitude constituted the purposes of the authors. Characters once more became representative of recognizable mind-patterns. The manners genre was revived with a finesse that it had never before claimed in America. The accelerating tempo of twentieth century progressiveness and liberalism necessarily was reflected in the social comedy of the period.

The most brilliant comedy of the period was Langdon Mitchell's The New York Idea. Fairly scintillating as it is, the play is our nearest approach to the European comedy of manners. That the author was perhaps aiming at the High Comedy discussed by Dobree<sup>104</sup> is indicated in the following statement:

What I wanted to satirize was a certain extreme frivolity in the American spirit and in our American life--frivolity in the deep sense--not just a girl's frivolity, but that profound, sterile, amazing frivolity which one observes and meets in our churches, in political life, in literature, in music; in short, in every department of American thought, feeling, and action. The old-fashioned, high-bred family in 'The New York Idea' are solemnly frivolous, and the fast light-minded, highly-intelligent hero and heroine are frivolous in their own delightful way--frivolity, of course, to be used for tragedy or comedy. Our frivolity is, I feel, on the edge of the tragic.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> See footnote 21.

<sup>105</sup> Quoted in the introduction in Montrose J. Moses's Representative Plays by American Authors, 1856-1911 (New York, 1925), p. 600.

While, as the above quotation indicates, Mitchell promulgated the play as a commentary on American life in general, the play is centered in the clash in the problem of marriage and divorce—a problem which appears to have been dominant during the period. The involved problems of the divorce and second marriages of John and Cynthia Karlake produce a series of almost absurd situations. Through the conversations attendant upon these situations Mitchell scores his most telling thrusts at the prevailing American attitude. The self-consciously dignified Philip Phillimore is conservatively "liberal" in his acceptance of divorce—

Yes, the calm—the Halcyon calm of—second choice...<sup>106</sup>

Cynthia is flippant and "progressive" in her attitude—

I'm your first wife once removed!<sup>107</sup>

Earlier in the play, she explains the norm by which she gauges her conduct:

But at least, my dear Karlake, let us have some sort of beauty of behavior! If we cannot be decent, let us endeavor to be graceful. If we can't be moral, at least we can avoid being vulgar.<sup>108</sup>

That divorce might be a social condition through which most people pass, like cutting teeth or getting gray hair, is suggested in John Karlake's explanation to Cynthia,

... I mean that ours was a case of premature divorce, and, ahem, you're in love with me still.<sup>109</sup>

The prevalence of the condition is concisely summed up by the bluff Sir Wilfred.

... New York is bounded on the North, South, East and West by the state of Divorce!<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Langdon Mitchell, The New York Idea. A. C. Halline, op. cit.. Act I.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., Act IV.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., Act II.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., Act I.

Next to the problem of divorce, the languid indifference of some leaders of the church is most effectively satirized. In the punctilious and clerically somnambulant Bishop Mathew Phillimore the clergy are mercilessly portrayed. In the first act, the bishop remarks--with ecstatic joy--of his last service:

... It was an exquisite sermon! All New York was there! And all New York went away happy! Even the sinners--if there were any! I don't often meet sinners--do you?

The place occupied by the church in the lives of the bishop's flock, is designated by Cynthia's pert, but honest, remark,

... Oh, well, the church--the church is a regular quick marriage counter....<sup>111</sup>

As Mitchell stated in his remarks on The New York Idea quoted above, his objective in the satire was a basic attitude pervading all of American life. Using the problem of divorce and the indifference of some church leaders as the focal point in his attack, he nevertheless effectively brought out other social evaluations. Many of these are voiced by the otherwise unimportant character, Grace Phillimore, twenty-year-old sister to Philip. That only the unfashionable spent a summer in New York, that sizeable means and a respectable family were basic requirements in a suitor, and that grace and taste were more desirable qualities than other social virtues are made the chief points in her credo.

In the somewhat unexpected solution of the play through the invalidity of the Karlake divorce and their realization that they no longer desire one, the play leans to the sentimental conclusion. It is saved from such a commitment in the essential conflict of the play. The Phillimores represent the conservative, customary viewpoint; the Karlakes

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<sup>111</sup> Langdon Mitchell, The New York Idea, A.G. Halline, op. cit., Act IV.



voice the new, changing views. In the reunion of the Karolakes they do that which is unorthodox—to the Phillimores—and change custom if they want to. The solution may be sentimental, but it is sentiment clothed in twentieth century smartness.

Much inferior to The New York Idea, but a comedy of the same stamp, was Her Husband's Wife, by A. E. Thomas, produced in 1908. In its fast-topping dialogue and absurd situation, the play is definitely of the manners category. In its twentieth century "advanced" thinking, it is true to its period. The plot itself borders on the farce: a hypochondriac wife, convinced that she has not long to live, selects her husband's second wife, invites her to visit so that her husband and the girl may become acquainted, and becomes so disturbed at the apparent pleasure the new husband takes in the girl's company that she throws off her phobia and announces her determination to live. A romantic sub-plot takes care of the matrimonial future of the other girl.

Uncle John Beldon is the chief commentator upon the meaningless existence the family lives. The following speech is typical:

Yachts, horse-racing, motor cars, five suits of clothes a day! Loafing, loafing, that's what it is, and calling it society doesn't make it anything else.<sup>112</sup>

The semi-invalidism of Irene is a stronger depicting of the fad of sickness which also appeared in Fitch's The Girl with the Green Eyes. There, Peter Cullingham was the character addicted to pills of assorted sizes and colors. Irene goes to absurd lengths in her various medicines and is in strange contrast to the present day vogue of health. Fortunately that was a phase of American life that never became firmly entrenched.

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<sup>112</sup>

A. E. Thomas, Her Husband's Wife (New York, 1908), Act I.

A third play of the same type should be noted: Anti-Matrimony, written in 1910 by Percy MacKaye. Basically an attack on the advocacy of what is legally called common law marriage--in Anti-Matrimony it is called freedom--, the play also stresses once more the pro-European bent of some Americans. Structurally the play is mediocre; the plot, plausible enough and material for witty treatment, at times seems so forced and over-worked that the reader is bored; and necessary as a dull mother is to action, it is difficult to believe that any mother could be as dull as MacKaye makes Mrs. Grey.

Morris Grey is the apostle of European light and liberalism. With fanatical fervor he explains his homecoming to his brother,

... I have come back from Europe, from the places of art and freedom and modernity, to this home churchyard, to rescue you from the ghosts of our Puritan ancestors; to mount beside you into that old pulpit of yours next Sunday, and declare war against all the spectres of convention.<sup>113</sup>

The highest compliment he can pay an effective point in his brother's line of reasoning is,

The prettiest retort I've heard since leaving Paris.  
Quite worthy of a modern and a European.<sup>114</sup>

He explains his endorsement of the non-ceremony marriage with an all-embracing--

... Truth, sir, is my religion.<sup>115</sup>

His uncritical acceptance of platitudinous phrases is illustrated in his response to Mildred's turning his own weapons upon him:

<sup>113</sup>Percy MacKaye, Anti-Matrimony (New York, 1910), Act I.

<sup>114</sup>Ibid.

<sup>115</sup>Ibid., Act II.

Mildred: After all, she is only nineteen. And there is an impassable gulf between the teens and the twenties, isn't there?

Morris: There's a lot to what you say.<sup>116</sup>

In every respect Morris is the perfect prototype of "New Thought" movements that appeared in abundance prior to the World War and, with some frequency, immediately after the war.

The idealism of Elliott Grey reiterates Ruth Hunter's plea for selflessness in The Climbers. His dream of an ideal community might be construed as a natural outgrowth of the activity of the muckrakers or as a prognostication of a day far in the future:

Here is a map of our city--our city as it might be-- as it will be, if we citizens can learn to care less about our own little souls, and more about the great soul about us--the community.<sup>117</sup>

The placing of a serious ideal in contra-distinction to the cause championed by Morris was effective planning, although the contrast is somewhat ineffective in the play's execution.

Following Anti-Matrimony there was another of those periods of silence which have been noted in the growth of our social comedy. The silence is explainable. Nineteen-twelve and thirteen witnessed the prologue to the World War in the Balkan upheavals; nineteen-fourteen to eighteen saw the attention of the entire world centered upon the, up to then, worst conflict in civilization's history. The mood for social comedy was dispelled. Even the suffragette movement, which normally would have been ideal fare for the social dramatist, passed practically unnoticed except for minor plays. None of the circumstances conducive to the social comedy

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<sup>116</sup>Percy MacKaye, Anti-Matrimony (New York, 1910), Act II.

<sup>117</sup>Ibid., Act I.

were apparent: leisure, lightheartedness, detachment, security, all were dormant. Armies may have danced before Waterloo and the world before nineteen-fourteen, but once the battles were begun, ~~syety~~ was relegated to the background.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE WILD TWENTIES

With the return of peace, the pendulum of emotion started to swing in the opposite direction, to bring with it the reckless Twenties. Man once more became gay; he indulged in follies; and the writers of social comedy came out of hibernation with prolific activity. One of the most outstanding of the writers of this period was Rachel Crothers whose Nice People (1921) sounded at the outset of the decade the note that was to be its tone signal.

One earlier play by Miss Crothers warrants brief mention, if only because it offers a marked contrast to the rest of her work. The highly sentimental 39 East, of 1919, on the surface, is unaccountable on the two points of authorship and of time. Considered as social commentary, as Miss Crothers's later play definitely may be, 39 East falls flatly insignificant; considered as post-war comedy, the play is insipid and vacuous. However, viewed as a kind of nostalgic attempt to recapture a status quo, 39 East becomes explainable, even though it still remains insipid.

The combined Elsie Dinsmore and Pollyanna qualities of Fenselope Penn make her a heroine that must have been difficult for the New York of nineteen-nineteen to grasp. Here, as in some earlier plays, the satirical thrust is all but lost in the mediocre treatment of the point. The development of an overly blasé attitude may be the sign-post warning against social deterioration. If Miss Crothers intended such an interpretation to be made of 39 East, the comedy makes its point in the all

but miraculous way in which Penelope's supreme confidence in her fellow men is rewarded. The success of such supreme optimists as Penelope may be an indication that there is still hope for a jaded, war-weary, society. If that is the interpretation the author intended, the point is made, albeit obscurely.

Whichever is the case, 39 East remains an anachronism in time and spirit. One wonders if Miss Crothers is apologizing for the frank sentimentality of the play in the lines of the Madame de Mally--

I guess you're going to be all right--wherever you are.  
(to Napoleon) Kind of makes you believe in things again,  
don't it?<sup>118</sup>

Or is she, as suggested above, indulging in nostalgia?

Post-war recklessness is probably best illustrated, dramatically, in Nice People. Open defiance of convention, youthful flippancy, and the conflict between the elder and younger generations are clearly shown. Teddy Gloucester becomes the symbol of the Twenties; that she was rescued along her emancipated way illustrates once again comedy's concession of consequence to the cause of a happy ending. At the risk of including too long a quotation from the play, the following excerpts are cited as excellent summations of the play's major point. Teddy is talking with her aunt Margaret, the voice of stability and convention:

Margaret: Do you need me? Haven't you a chaperon?

Teddy: Heavens, Aunt Margaret! We're not babies.

Margaret: You don't mean to say you're going without one?

Teddy: Why, I haven't been any place with a chaperon for a million years.

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<sup>118</sup> Rachel Crothers, 39 East in Three Plays by Rachel Crothers (New York, 1924), Act III.

Margaret: You're twenty, I believe.

Teddy: I believe I am--something like that.

Margaret: You surely don't consider that old enough to go about alone?

Teddy: We won't be alone. We'll all be together. Everybody does it.<sup>119</sup>

And later, as Margaret and Hubert, Teddy's indulgent father, talk, the easy trend of the decade is even more plainly pointed out:

Margaret: The guests didn't even say goodnight. It isn't done, I suppose.

Hubert: Nothing's done that's too much trouble--you can count on that.

Margaret: You think bad manners are amusing then?

Hubert: Not especially--no--just prevalent.

Margaret: It's appalling--simply appalling.

Hubert: What?

Margaret: All of it--everything.

Hubert: Oh, you take it too seriously entirely, Margaret.

Margaret: It's the way things are. The manners of yesterday have nothing to do with the case. This is today.

.....

Margaret: If they were common little upstarts and parvenues it would be easy to understand. But nice people! ...<sup>120</sup>

One feels that Margaret, in her concern, is unaware of the irony of her last statement. Scene 3 of Act II introduces the rural Heyfer and emphasizes that the evil is not local to the big city. Says Heyfer,

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<sup>119</sup> Rachel Crothers, Nice People in op. cit., Act I.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

They're all ridin' round in their Ford automobiles. We live in an infernal age. Why, my grand-daughter Mamie ain't worth the powder to blow her up--runnin' into them ungodly movie shows every night of her life--gittin' home long after ten o'clock--first with one feller an' then with another, till nobody ain't got no notion, nohow, which one she's goin' ter marry--if any. The ungodly lawlessness that young folks is growin' up with now'days is a disgrace to their day an' generation.

Teddy, who has boasted that she "gets by" in her unconventional ways because she is open in her activities, believes in the inevitable following of cause by effect. She has none of the almost miracle-expecting confidence of Penelope Penn; but she is close indeed to Langdon Mitchell's heroine, Cynthia.

Slush! I'm only calling things by their own names. What right have we to expect anything else? We've set our own tune. Now we'll have to dance to it, and for Heaven's sake let's dance well.<sup>121</sup>

The warning and preachment of Nice People are voiced by Margaret who is first bitter and later inspiring. Post-war folly is poignantly attacked in her outburst,

She isn't! She isn't. She's only a child. She's surrounded by everything that can hurt her and nothing that can help her. It's all chaos and waste and degeneracy. And my boy--lying out there in France! And this is all it was for! He went so gladly. He gave himself for something greater than himself--to save civilization. Oh, the farce of it! The hideous, horrible, useless sacrifice!<sup>122</sup>

Fittingly enough, her plea for a return to balanced living is made to youth in the last act. Speaking to Teddy's contemporaries, she points out,

Of course. You have more energy and daring and cleverness and intelligence for your age than any other set of people in the world.... You're an institution--envied and imitated--dramed of and read about. In every city, in every little town, all the way down, there's a set of you--

<sup>121</sup> Rachel Crothers, Nice People in op. cit., Act II, scene 3.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., Act I.



and you might be an absolutely dynamic power for good.<sup>123</sup>

Nice People is frankly a comedy with a moral. The lines of social criticism ring true, but they do not weigh upon the movement of the dialogue. The play moves along, closely knit and well integrated, much superior to 39 East and more outstanding than Miss Crothers's subsequent work of the same decade.

Two of her other plays of this period should be mentioned: Expressing Willie (1924) and Let Us Be Gay (1929). The first is a superficial, rather meaningless depicting of the increasingly popular psychology of self-expression. The point is lightly made and easily forgotten. As a passing comment, the play is successful, but for an effective satire, its touch was almost too light. The second play, Let Us Be Gay, is more significant. The plot itself is semi-serious: a broken marriage that leaves the principals still inwardly retaining their dreams, but outwardly living by the credo of their age: let us be gay! Obviously, they discover it was all a mistake and they are reunited. The significant part of the plot is Miss Crothers's reemphasis of the superficiality of the times. Kitty Brown joins the procession of the Cynthias and Teddys as she announces,

I think it's all a very amusing situation myself. For goodness sake, let's be gay about it.<sup>124</sup>

For Kitty, like Cynthia and Teddy, this gayety was a self-deluding retreat from reality; that is the point of the play.

In 1929, Philip Barry, with Holiday, joined the ranks of the commentators, condemning the refusal to face reality. He selected escape

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<sup>123</sup> Rachel Crothers, Nice People in op. cit., Act III.

<sup>124</sup> Rachel Crothers, Let Us Be Gay (New York, 1929), Act I.

of another type, however; for him, smug complacency was as dangerous as hard-riding gayety. Condemning the criteria of money and position as norms for social acceptance, Barry made clear the tragedy of a self-sufficient social attitude.

Linda, the younger daughter of the household, alone of the Seton menage has the courage to see things honestly. With direct simplicity she defines the family positions:

... I know you wouldn't expect that of a man in father's position, but the fact is, money is our god here.<sup>125</sup>

Of their surroundings she has previously remarked,

... --and the general atmosphere of plenty, with the top riveted down on the cornucopia--<sup>126</sup>

More earnest than is apparent in the surface flippancy is her warning to Johnny when he tells her he has some investments in common stock,

Common? Don't say the word ...<sup>127</sup>

With Ned, who also sees the light but prefers forgetfulness to freedom, she further explains family attitudes to Johnny--

Neds: How are you socially?

Johnny: Nothing there, either.

Linda: You mean to say your mother wasn't even a Whoosis?<sup>128</sup>

With cruel cleverness, Barry satirizes the small talk of the Seton set in the following scene between Linda and Johnny:

Linda: However do you do, Mr. Case?

Johnny: And you, Miss--uh--?

Seton is the name.

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<sup>125</sup> Philip Barry, Holiday (New York, 1929), Act I.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

Not one of the bank Setons!

The same.

Fancy! I hear a shipment of ear-marked gold is due in on Monday.

Have you been to the Opera much lately?

Only in fits and starts, I'm afraid.

But my dear, we must do something for them! They entertained us in Rome.

--And you really saw Mount Everest?

Chit.

Chat.

Chit-chat.

Chit-chat.<sup>129</sup>

The very meaninglessness of the lines is the strongest thrust Barry could have made at the inanity of the rather stuffy small talk Linda abhorred. Linda's father's lack of comprehension of a similar conversation is the most convincing proof Barry could have devised to bring home the truth that a snug society sees, hears, nor speaks no criticism against itself.

An essential difference in the views of Miss Crothers and Mr. Barry on the social foibles of the Twenties must be recognized. Miss Crothers attacked the surface, boisterous, unconventional activities of youth. Mr. Barry aimed his barbs at the deeper, less conspicuous, habitual mindset of established adults. Because the weaknesses Miss Crothers wrote of were surface ones they were capable of remedy; because those Mr. Barry wrote of were fundamental and deeply rooted, they could not be remedied.-- one had to tear oneself away from them as did Linda when she ran to meet Johnny at the end of Holiday.

<sup>129</sup>Philip Barry, Holiday (New York, 1929), Act I.

Although both authors wrote plays that are representative of outstanding social trends of the Twenties, they together illustrate a developing change of purpose in social comedy. Perhaps this fact can best be brought out by comparing Nice People with Holiday. Nice People deals with a prevailing state of conduct; Holiday deals with a prevailing state of mind. Nice People is a comedy of the reckless Twenties; Holiday serves as a bridge from the Twenties to what may be called the "problem" comedy of the early Thirties. Nice People is a play with a single emphasis; Holiday is a play of a hybrid interest. Walter Fritchard Eaton's remark concerning the gradual departure of comedy from a set ~~genre~~ pattern is apt: "It is only natural that the closer the stage comes to life, the better our technique is fitted to create the illusion of reality, the less likely we are to write stage works set in a hard mould."<sup>130</sup> In Nice People, Teddy is saved through work, and hope is held out for her contemporaries; in Holiday, Linda manages to save her own chances for happiness, but the lot of the smug Setons is hopeless. Nice People has vestigial sentimentalism in its happy ending; Holiday has incipient realism in its serio-comic conclusion. It is this realistic approach to strong, and semi-tragic, social mind patterns that is the dominant characteristic of the last period to be considered in this study.

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<sup>130</sup> William Fritchard Eaton in the introduction to Her Husband's Wife, A. E. Thomas, ed., p. ix.

## CHAPTER I

### THE SOCIOLOGICAL THIRTIES

Because of this greater interweaving of the serious with the comic, of social thought with social foible, there are relatively few plays in the early Thirties that are purely social comedy. Two will suffice for mention here: When Ladies Meet by Rachel Crothers (1932) and Animal Kingdom by Philip Barry (1932). As the title of Miss Crothers's play suggests it is a comedy of situation. Mary's unwillingness to carry out her radical ideas after meeting Claire point the humor in the situation. Claire's refusal to accept Mary as merely another of Rogers's "affairs" brings out the undercurrent of tragedy. Bridget Drake furnishes the best comment on the moral instability about which the play is centered. Her analysis of the difficulty would be ridiculous if it were not so appalling.

I tell you this is an awful hard age for a good woman to live in. I mean one who wants to have any fun. If you've still got the instincts for right and wrong that were pounded into you when you were a girl--what are you going to do with 'em? Nobody else seems to have 'em. And they just get you mixed up--and hold you back--so you're neither one thing nor the other. Neither happy--and bad--nor good and contented. You're just discontentedly decent--and it doesn't get you anywhere.<sup>131</sup>

In Animal Kingdom, the plot is again devoted to the problem of marriage, but here the serious aspect much overshadows the humorous. Practically devoid of purely light dialogue, the problem aspect of Tom's final choice of Daisy, his wife without benefit of ceremony, over Cecelia monopolizes the entire play. Cecelia's desire to make money and to

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<sup>131</sup> Rachel Crothers, When Ladies Meet (New York, 1932), Act I.

live fashionably in town as the mistress of Tom's father's mansion is the secondary interest the play has.

As is apparent from the foregoing brief remarks, both Then Ladies Meet and Animal Kingdom were more serious than otherwise, although one thinks of them as comedies. Much more hybrid is S. H. Behrman's Rain from Heaven, written in 1934. Highly discerning in its analysis of world trends and its pointing of the Fascist-Communist-Democracy clash, the play beautifully illustrates the growth of the "problem" in the social comedy. As social comedy always has done, the play comments on social weaknesses; but as only the social comedy of the twentieth century has done, the play emphasizes thought weaknesses rather than conduct weaknesses.

The most philosophical and penetrating observation on world social conditions is made by the Berlin emigré, Hugo Willens, who remarks,

Two weeks ago I was in a land suddenly hostile to me. I thought: if ever I get out of it--I'll live austerely. Now I am out and I find myself dawdling about and being agreeable where agreeableness is indicated. Really human nature is too resilient.<sup>132</sup>

The most internationally significant charge is that implied in Violet's judgment of the American financier:

Hobart's an American and doesn't understand democracy.<sup>133</sup>

Hobart's comment on the English Fascist journalist is equally illuminating:

Abercombie! He's just a newspaper man--not a financier! When the Last Trumpet calls it'll be just another headline to him.<sup>134</sup>

Obviously, these remarks are more than entertaining wit. They are perti-

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<sup>132</sup>S. H. Behrman, Rain from Heaven (New York, 1934; acting edition, 1936), Act II, scene 1.

<sup>133</sup>Ibid., Act III.

<sup>134</sup>Ibid.

nant statements of a universal centering of interest without the mercy that "droppeth as the rain from heaven."

The more specific problem of Fascism is deftly treated. Its propaganda skill is touched upon lightly in Hobart's almost rapturous description to Rand--

You at the stick--in a Crusader's costume--driving a plane over a sea of chaos--Communism--decadence--into the New Order ...<sup>135</sup>

It should be remarked in passing that in the light of world events in 1941 these lines have a more brilliant emphasis for the casual reader than they had in 1934. The tragic practice of Jew baiting and its almost epidemic characteristics are seen in the involuntary reaction of the modest, unassuming Rand; upon learning of Violet's interest in Hugo, he bitterly exclaims,

So that's what you were going to tell me. That's why you kept putting me off! You were wondering where he was. Well, here he is.

Hugo: Captain Eldridge--

Rand: You dirty Jew!<sup>136</sup>

Hobart's explanation of the Fascist attitude toward the Jew should also be noted. Volumes of unintentional self-condemnation of certain representatives of capitalism are spoken in the lines:

... You think it's because you killed Christ that we fear and hate you--No! It's because you give birth to Lenin.<sup>137</sup>

In a comedy of any other period the solution of the play could be

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<sup>135</sup>S. N. Behrman, Rain from Heaven (New York, 1934; acting edition, 1936), Act I.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid., Act II, scene 2.

<sup>137</sup>Ibid., Act III.

said to border on sentiment. Because of the dominance of the serious—perhaps the tragic—in the play, the ending must be accepted as a statement of faith. Violet's speech becomes a credo of idealism

... I believe in gradualness. I believe in muddling through. I believe a poor foolish illusion, I suppose—I believe that in the main people are reasonable and corrigible and sweet—fragments of God.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>138</sup>S. N. Behrman, Rain from Heaven (New York, 1934; acting edition, 1936), Act III.



## CHAPTER XI

### CONCLUSION

It is necessary to recapitulate only a little. The thesis posited by this study is that in any given period of history, the social comedy will adjust its form and content to the dominant social attitude. Where the period is a secure, leisurely, frivolous one, the social comedy will necessarily stay closer to its original genre and deal with the surface foibles. Where the period is fraught with the insecurity and tragic implications of the present, the comedy will tend to become hybrid and to deal with the deeper undercurrents. Approaching social comedy from this point of view necessitates that exception be taken to the interpretation of one aspect of the social comedy made by Mr. John Hartman in his study, The Development of American Social Comedy From 1787 to 1916.<sup>139</sup> Consistently, Mr. Hartman implies that social comedy is that which stresses the characteristics of Society—with a capital S. Granted that since the time of the English Restoration, social comedy traditionally has dealt with persons of the so-called upper class, there is no satisfactory reason for making the poise and breeding of a play's characters the chief basis for its classification as social comedy. The very use of the common adjective, social, carries the broader connotation which is attached to the word; society, mankind, and its weaknesses are the subject matter of this branch of the drama.<sup>140</sup> To try to make clear the broader impli-

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<sup>139</sup>John G. Hartman, The Development of American Social Comedy From 1787 to 1916, Doctoral dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, 1939).

<sup>140</sup>In justice to Mr. Hartman's scholarship, it should be noted that (continued on next page)

cations of the scope of social comedy--implications which this writer believes authors intend to be paramount--has been the objective of this main section of this study.

One further consideration of interest remains to be made. Throughout this brief survey of American social comedy, it has been evident that certain qualities in American life have been consistently treated. The persistence of these qualities is noteworthy.

It is a maxim of the study of literature that each nation's literary activity will exhibit a two-fold significance: a universality that transcends borders and political systems and a uniqueness that marks it forever as the product of its origins. American literature--more specifically, American social comedy--is no exception. It is with these unique qualities that this section will treat briefly.

The insistence of that first Jonathan that he was Manly's "waiter," but not his man, and his stubborn distinction in terms during his conversation with Jessamy represents one of these persistent and uniquely American ideas.<sup>141</sup> The Jonathan of The Bucktails is a weak compatriot of his earlier namesake, but he has one characteristic in common. He

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(Footnote 140 continued)

in a summary statement he gives broader scope to the social comedy than he appears to throughout the greater share of his dissertation. On pages 125-6, he writes, "It is interesting to note how the social comedies which reflect the interrelations between business and public life, with society, follow closely the development of American life. The very early comedies do not deal with this phase because life in the early years of the United States was not nearly so complicated as it is today. When the industrial revolution spread over this country during the middle of the nineteenth century, we have seen how the plays of that period immediately reflected the rush for money; how people spent more than they made in order to keep up with someone else, or to break into circles from which they were previously barred."

<sup>141</sup>The Contrast, Act II, scene 2.

too is not the servant, but the helper of his employer and he insists upon his personal equality.<sup>142</sup> This insistence on the "gentleman's gentleman" does not reappear conspicuously until Clyde Fitch's Bean Brummel. There, strangely enough, this typically American way of thinking is put into the mind of the English valet, Mortimer. In response to Abraham's demand, "Where's your master?" Mortimer points out,

Excuse me, where's my gentleman, you mean, Mr. Abraham.  
[rising] I am a gentleman's gentleman; I have no master.<sup>143</sup>

It is to be noted that in each of the three instances just cited it was the individual in question who insisted upon his independence. That the idea, as such, should be supported by other characters in the plays is necessary in order to posit it as a national characteristic. Captain Morrville so speaks, with double purpose, as he meets Delany:

Delany: ... Sir, I have the honour of being your servant.

Captain: Thank you sir, it's the first time I ever had the honour of having one....<sup>144</sup>

With the passing of the customary "your servant" as a form of respectful greeting or leave taking, the best tool for a deliberate play upon the word was lost. And with the passing of the servant as an integral part of the plot and with his relegation to the position of a kind of a prop-man in character, opportunity for reiterating the idea was also lost. The "gentleman's gentleman" does not appear in twentieth century American social comedy.

A second definitely recurring idea is not uniquely American, but

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<sup>142</sup>The Bucktails, Act III, scene 1.

<sup>143</sup>Clyde Fitch, Bean Brummel (New York, 1903), Act I, scene 1.

<sup>144</sup>Fashionable Follies, Act I, scene 2.

its treatment from the American point of view warrants attention. Rural charms and virtues have known seasonal popularity as far back as Virgil's Eclogica. Further, the vogue for sentiment and romanticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries naturally stimulated an interest in rural simplicity. It follows that American ruralism should have found a place in American comedy. However, the reverence for the rural in our social comedy appears to be more than a literary vogue: it serves to emphasize the essential differences between the independent American farmer and the European peasant agriculturist. Whether the type was used to satirize urban frivolity through contrast or to satirize its own naïveté or to moralize for needs of sentiment, its use was extensive.

The first Jonathan was the soul of naïveté. His amusement upon visiting the theater where "they lifted up a great green cloth and let us look right into the next neighbor's house"<sup>145</sup> is a delightful illustration of the simplicity of large numbers of our early citizens. Equally typical, probably, are his impatience with the involved mannerisms of the city and his preference for customary practices:

If this is the way with your city ladies, give me the twenty acres of rock, the Bible, the cow, and Tabitha, and a little peaceable bundling.<sup>146</sup>

The Jonathan of The Bucktails exemplifies the simple resourcefulness of the unsophisticate as he "chalks" the corners of the streets in London lest he lose his way,<sup>147</sup>—the ways of the American frontier in the greatest metropolis of the world!

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<sup>145</sup>The Contrast, Act III, scene 1.

<sup>146</sup>Ibid.

<sup>147</sup>The Bucktails, Act II, scene 2.

More frequent than this satire of rural simplicity has been the extolling of rural virtues. The keynote is sounded by the elder Dorri-ville who speaks with admiration of Floughby--

... His language is the mirror to his soul, from which sincerity rises, and the heart's dictates issue from the lips. Heavenly simplicity, 'tix with thee alone that true and honesty reside....<sup>148</sup>

Later he further praises this child of nature--

... Education may varnish hypocrisy; but nature only could mould a heart like this! simple, God-like virtue!<sup>149</sup>

The entire action of 30 East is centered about the small town naiveté of Penelope and weak as the play is, it does illustrate the persistence of the idea of rural goodness. The same point is made more important by Miss Crothers in Nice People where it is the beneficent rural influences that make it possible for Teddy to work out her salvation. Says Margaret of the country,

Yes, it certainly upsets some things and sets up others. All the important things get more important and the worthless ones more and more worthless....<sup>150</sup>

It should be noted that in that polite, but ruthless, gold rush of the Gilded Age, rural charm was entirely forgotten; it is significant that the praise of the simple reappeared in our social comedy after the World War.

Before passing to another persistent thought in American comedy, it should be pointed out that the varying characterizations of the brusque American from the rough frontiersman to the successful man of Wall Street

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<sup>148</sup> Fashionable Follies, Act II, scene 1.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., Act III, scene 1.

<sup>150</sup> Nice People, Act III.

is an offshoot of the rural plant. Probably nowhere in American comedy is the diamond-in-the-rough idea so well brought out as in Daly's Horizon.<sup>151</sup> Snorky in Under the Gaslight was woefully short on social graces, but heart beats never rang truer than did his. Timothy O'Brien of 39 East is his twentieth century compatriot. Billy Wade of Nice People and Johnny Case of Holiday are the stream-lined, youthful versions of the same qualities. At the opposite pole, but equally rough diamonds of varying degrees of polish, are the bluff business men in the persons of Nicholas Vanaelstyne, Sir, in The Henrietta, Erastus Hardenbeck in Kate, and Willie Smith in Expressing Willie.<sup>152</sup> Midway between the two are the simple, sterling souls who are typified by John Unit in Self, Dabbage in The Banker's Daughter, Scott in The Young Mrs. Winthrop, and Dr. Wainwright in The Henrietta.

A third idea which recurs frequently in American social comedy is that of parent-child relationships. For the most part filial duty has been set up as the ideal. This thought occurs first in The Contrast where Maria soliloquizes upon her filial duty to marry Dimple, her father's choice, although she herself disapproves.<sup>153</sup> The ideal is also upheld in The Bucktails where Mary refuses Frank because of her father's wishes and Frank replies, nobly,

She that forgets her duty to a parent will never learn it  
for a husband.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Augustin Daly, Horizon, A. G. Halline, op. cit.

<sup>152</sup> Rachel Crothers, Expressing Willie in Three Plays by Rachel Crothers (New York, 19--).

<sup>153</sup> The Contrast, Act I, scene 2.

<sup>154</sup> The Bucktails, Act V, scene 1.

Even the melodramatic Under the Gaslight, in the decision of the court, posits the theory that a daughter's place is with her father even though he be a member of the criminal world.<sup>155</sup> And the sentimental Penelope's semi-worshipful quoting of her father's teachings is but another aspect of the same idea.<sup>156</sup>

Sharply contrasting the traditional ideal of duty is the revolt of youth in the plays of the Twenties. And in proportion as the contrast is great are the plays true to the prevailing social thinking of the decade of Flaming Youth. Teddy's comment on her father, "I thought I had him too well trained for that,"<sup>157</sup> is typical of the reversed attitude displayed in the plays of that decade. Linda is no more disrespectful than the rest of her generation when she says:

... and if Father starts the usual--where is Big Business, anyhow?<sup>158</sup>

In The Youngest, Richard's poignant insistence upon his right to be himself is merely a more serious side of the revolt:

Nobody's got any right to make anything of anyone! My future's my job. If I fail at it, all right. I'd rather fail in my own way than hit the sky in someone else's.<sup>159</sup>

In Tom Collier, in Animal Kingdom, the compromise position is represented. Tom's father is treated with respect, but Tom determinedly lives his own life regardless of his father's wishes. The pendulum is

<sup>155</sup>Under the Gaslight, Act II.

<sup>156</sup>19 East.

<sup>157</sup>Nice People, Act II, scene 1.

<sup>158</sup>Holiday, Act I.

<sup>159</sup>Philip Barry, The Youngest (New York, 1925), Act II.

swinging back from the extreme revolt of the twenties to a middle place position.

One further persistent characteristic must be mentioned and it, like the vogue of the rural, is not uniquely American. But, again, because it occupies such a conspicuous position in American social comedy it must be considered. The social ambitions and insincerities of women have been consistently satirized. Charlotte's flippant comment on friendship is to the point:

Scandal, you know, is but amusing ourselves with the faults, foibles, follies, and reputations of our friends; indeed, I don't know why we should have friends, if we are not at liberty to make use of them.<sup>160</sup>

The most vivid satire of the type has been done in the characters of Mrs. Apex in Self, Mrs. Tiffany in Fashion, Mrs. Hunter in The Climbers, and Mrs. Crespien in The Truth. Cecelia in the Animal Kingdom is a more subtle version of the same kind of woman. Under pretense of helping Tom she does all that she can to drive him into living in town where she will preside over a large and fashionable household. Further satire of women's insincerity is made by Mrs. Bateman in Self in the gossipy character Mrs. Radius who only thinly veils her curiosity under the guise of friendly interest. Bronson Howard pokes fun at women's empty observance of social custom in his description of the meeting of Kate and Lady St. John: "The two women meet, embrace and kiss each other with as much ardor as if they had met yesterday for the first time instead of being old friends."<sup>161</sup> Howells makes a similar point in the little one-act play, Five O'Clock Tea.<sup>162</sup>

<sup>160</sup> The Contrast, Act II, scene 1.

<sup>161</sup> Kate, Act II.

<sup>162</sup> William Dean Howells, Five O'Clock Tea (New York, 1894).



Mrs. Somers. And you knew how much I disliked her.

Campbell. Yes, I saw by the way you kissed each other.<sup>162</sup>

The amusing scene in Act I of The Climbers where Mrs. Hunter sells some of her Parisian dresses to Miss Godesby and Miss Sillerton is one of the best in point. The forthright bluntness of Linda toward the Crams is an indirect satire of the same insincerity.<sup>163</sup> The indirect method of more recent use is not so pointed, nor so effective, but the foibles of women have given the playwrights consistent subject matter. Although in point of time the play is outside the limits of this study, Clare Booth's The Women is the most masterful satire on this subject matter.<sup>164</sup> It brings to a delightful, and biting, climax the traditional use of women's foibles as comedy material.

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<sup>162</sup>William Dean Howells, Five O'Clock Tea (New York, 1894).

<sup>163</sup>Holiday, Act II.

<sup>164</sup>Clare Booth, The Women (New York, 1937).

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