UNIT 8

Poetry and drama 1660–1780

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Introduction

The present unit describes the main political and cultural developments of the period between the Restoration of the monarchy (1660) and the revolutionary changes that brought the eighteenth century to a close, laying emphasis on the ways in which public events influenced creative writing. At the same time it offers a critical survey of the literature of the period. Attention focuses, in poetry, on the transition from epic to satiric poetry, as seen in Milton, Dryden and Pope, and on the slightly later development of descriptive and topographical poetry, in Thomson, Gray and Goldsmith; and on the increasing concern with emotional states in the poetry of some writers later in the eighteenth century. In drama, the development of the new comedy after 1660 is illustrated in the work of Wycherley, Dryden and Congreve. Later changes, including sentimentalism and moralism, are discussed as they affect the work of Farquhar, Lillo and Sheridan.

In 1660 Charles Stuart, eldest son of the executed Charles I, returned to England from French exile to be crowned King Charles II. In restoring its monarchy, England formally returned to the political system which had been disrupted by two decades of war and republican rule. As a modern historian has phrased it, somewhat tendentiously, in the 1660 settlement the natural rulers of England returned to power.

Yet the monarchy was never to be the same again. The person of the king may have been restored, but the old kingly (or aristocratic) ideal was unrestorable. Few people saw the charming but imperfect Charles II (1660–85) as a ruler vested with divine authority, and fewer still those of his distinctly uncharming successors James II (1685–8), William III (1689–1702), Queen Anne (1702–14), and the first four Hanoverian Georges (1714–27; 1727–60; 1760–1820; 1820–30). The traditional perception of the king as God's representative on earth had carried with it an absolutist but also an idealistic view of political authority. Both had been destroyed with the execution of Charles I. The actual monarchs who reigned after him could never recover that charisma. It has been suggested that in the person of Robert Walpole, who ruled as prime minister from 1721 to 1742 by a mixture of skill and patronage (that is, skill and bribery), a 'new, invisible monarch' came to replace the old one, with an unofficial control over public life no less complete than that available to regal power before. We may link these changes in society with new directions in drama and poetry between 1615 and 1715, and especially after 1660. Different as they are from one another, Restoration dramatists like George Etherege (1634?–91?), William Wycherley (1640–1716), William Congreve (1670–1729) and George Farquhar (1678–1707) share a prime interest in social interaction, habits and behaviour. They are less excited by themes like kingship, authority, social and political responsibility and moral justice – the obsessive concerns of their Jacobean predecessors. Poetry became more public, commercial and argumentative; less metaphysical.

After the accession of Charles II in 1660 monarchy increasingly came to resemble a negotiated settlement, not a divinely authorized fact. Charles II kept himself on the throne for a quarter of a century by a series of stratagems, at which he proved to be very clever. One of these was to attract to his side the most brilliant writer of the day, John Dryden, who dealt some devastating blows at the Whig opposition in a series of poetic satires in the 1670s and 1680s. Charles's brother James, by contrast, who proved less adept at political dealing, lasted a mere four years on the throne (1685–8). What English men and women made of the sudden termination of James's kingship depended on their political attitudes. He was either forced off his throne by a usurping son-in-law (the Jacobite view), or he voluntarily gave it up and William III nobly stepped into the breach (the Williamite interpretation). At any event most of the English ruling class had lost patience with James's combination of Catholic inclinations and authoritarian style. In 1688–9 William III was offered the English throne, partly because he had some claim to it, being married to James's daughter Mary, but more important because he was a Protestant.

William accepted the offer, came over from Holland, summarily defeated James in a few battles, and ruled for a dozen years (1690–1702). His arrival signalled a fall from favour for John Dryden (1631–1700), but in Dryden's place as poetic champion of the court appeared other writers, this time Whiggish rather than Tory. They included Daniel Defoe (1660?–1731), who early in his writing life cherished pretensions to poetry. Defoe sprang to the side of the Dutch Protestant monarch against xenophobic English mockery in *The True-Born Englishman* (1701), a poem of enormous influence in its day, but since dead. Literature, in this period, by involving itself with political in-fighting so much, can be described as a distinctly public art form. (Compare earlier, especially pre-Civil War writers, with their cult of privacy and seclusion.) In 1702 the Stuart line returned briefly, when Queen Anne succeeded William. But Anne was a staunch Church of England woman, not a Catholic. After her death in 1714 the throne was again offered to a foreigner, this time George, the Elector of Hanover, who, it has been said, was only fifty-seventh in line of succession: as with King William, the point was that George was Protestant.

The Hanoverian dynasty, in short, was established in power by a manipulative politics designed to keep England out of the hands of Catholic Europe. Writers continued and intensified a tradition of public discussion. Journalism appeared on the scene, and soon expanded massively under Richard Steele (1672–1729) and Joseph Addison (1672–1719), Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift (1667–1745), and many others. Alexander Pope (1688–1744), Dryden's great successor, and, like the late Dryden, a Catholic outsider to a Protestant court, conducted a lifelong campaign against the Hanoverians, victorious Whiggery and modern manners in general. What we see happening here is more than the concern of some individual writers with the public topics of their day. Public issues and literary endeavour were inter-involved. Literature was more political than before. The writers fought out the sociopolitical and cultural issues of the day. Pat Rogers discusses this development in more detail in his book *The Augustan Vision* (1974), to which the reader is referred (see especially Chapters 1 and 2).

The Hanoverian line lasted from 1715 until's the first quarter of the next century. This takes us well beyond the present unit's period.

The dynastic compromises described above achieved their end. True, there were Jacobite rebellions in 1715 and 1745. But England did not return to Catholic or Stuart rule. Nevertheless the compromises also tarnished the kingly ideal. When powerful Whigs and Tories combined, for example, to ensure that William III successfully assumed power the contention might have been ideologically trouble-free, so to speak, for the Whigs; but not for all the Tories. For some of them, to invite William to replace James meant putting aside their belief that the origin of the king's authority lay with God. Arguably, the Tory party never recovered from this self-inflicted damage. In terms of raw power, the subsequent century belonged to the Whigs and Tories were largely consigned to opposition. Perhaps as a consequence, much of the greatest satire in the period was written by Tories out of power, or by Opposition writers. Pope's *To Augustus* (1737) lambasts the Hanoverian monarch George II; contrast it with Dryden's handling of the theme of monarchy. In his play *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) John Gay (1685–1732) satirizes Robert Walpole, the Whig prime minister, for a mode of government relying on systematic bribery and corruption. Gay got away with his attack because of his engaging tone. Not so Henry Fielding (1707–54). His anti-government plays of the 1730s provoked an irate Walpole to close down his and many other London theatres in 1737. Samuel Johnson (1709–84), in his first published poem *London* (1738), also attacks Walpole, this time for failing to stand up for British interests against Spain. On the inter-involvement of politics and literature during the first half of the eighteenth century, with good detail on anti-Walpolian satire, see Downie (1994).

Johnson's poem incidentally exemplifies the way in which eighteenth-century writers often preferred to make their point by innuendo rather than direct attack. *London* can seem innocuous until you realize that it is an updated imitation of Juvenal's third satire, turning the Roman poet's references with stinging effect onto the contemporary scene. Juvenal, for English writers, typified the angry satirist, but he was not the only model available. Pope preferred adapting the sly poems of the other chief Roman model in satire, Horace, which gave him a double effect: apparent friendliness, wounding power. The writers' willingness to hark back to earlier ages was a character mark of the age. They chose their models chiefly from the early days of imperial Rome, when Augustus was emperor (27 BC to AD 14), and Virgil and Horace were among his poets. The period of Dryden, Pope and Johnson has come to be known as the 'Augustan' age in English literature.

Two other decisive influences on English literature after 1660, and particularly after 1690, were the rise of a scientific, moneyed and commercial interest in the national life; and secondly, the expansion of London's power as the economic and cultural centre of society. The Royal Society was founded in the 1670s. The Bank of England was founded in the 1690s, as were the original Lloyd's of London and other insurance offices and commercial companies. Economic growth, an expanding commerce and money market, in the shires an agrarian revolution and continuous agricultural improvement, overseas an increasing British presence, and sense of power, characterized the national life throughout the eighteenth century, at least until the 1770s and the loss of America. This awareness of increasing business, and of the spread of business ideas, was noted and described by many writers, praised by many, lamented by some. In drama from Congreve to Goldsmith a shift took place from the concerns of aristocratic to those of middle class. The shift is obvious in plays of mercantile propaganda like Steele's *The Conscious Lovers* (1722) and *The London Merchant* (1731) by George Lillo (1693–1739); less obvious ones in the interest shown by dramatists from Farquhar to Goldsmith (1730–74) in exploring the life of provincial town and country. In poetry? Pope laments the growth of business and business attitudes in *The Dunciad* (I–III, 1728; IV, 1742) and elsewhere – a theme later developed and intensified in some of Goldsmith's poems. One of the aims of James Thomson (1700–48) in writing *The Seasons* (1726–30) was to fuse the imaginative with the scientific way of looking at the world, to see science and poetry as one. Such writings illustrate the public aspect of early and middle-period Augustan literature – the outcome of a culture highly antagonistic, perhaps, but sharing certain values. Later in the century, as the consensus dwindles, poetry becomes more diverse as well as more inward. We can see this tendency in Goldsmith, compared with Pope; in William Cowper (1731–1800), compared with Thomson.

London nearly doubled in size during the eighteenth century to 900,000 inhabitants, partly because of natural population growth, partly because of a continued influx into the capital city of men and women from the regions. It expanded physically, but its cultural and artistic influence grew even more. Before Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), before the Romantics, cultural activity was centripetal. Augustan life and letters focused on the capital. Writers and artists gravitated towards the metropolis from the provinces, Scotland, or Ireland. Many of the greatest literary figures in the Augustan period were provincials who had made London their home: James Thomson, Johnson and James Boswell (1740–95), Tobias Smollett (1721–71), Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751–1816) and Oliver Goldsmith are examples. Counter-tendencies, praising the rural life, for example, cultivating retreat or philosophical withdrawal, only emphasize the predominating fashion.

Texts, authors, contexts: poetry 1660–1780

When the English monarchy was restored in 1660, terminating nearly two decades of commonwealth government, political reprisals were immediately put in place against the leaders of the revolutionary party. Some were executed. Others fled. The mood swung between the nastily vengeful, and the compassionate. Although Cromwell had already been dead two years, his body was dug up and hanged in chains in a public place. John Milton (1608–74), however, Cromwell's one-time secretary, had his name taken off the wanted list, it was said, by the influence of a member of the triumphant royalists who happened to have read and liked his early poems. (This discussion of Milton will site him within the political context of the post-Civil War period. For a treatment of his relationship with his Renaissance predecessors, and peers, go to Unit 7, pp. 166–9.)

The basic fact of a deep political fracture in English life needs to be kept in mind while the poetry and drama of the Restoration are being read, for it explains much about them. Milton, for instance, had been a busy public figure at one time – effectively, foreign minister to Oliver Cromwell. Now he would spend the remainder of his life writing poetry. He finished his epic poems *Paradise Lost* (begun before the Restoration, but laid aside) in 1667 and *Paradise Regained* in 1671. As a companion piece to the latter poem, and appearing in the same volume, Milton also published the sacred drama *Samson Agonistes.* All three works owe something to the defeat of Milton's cause. They are theological works trying to make sense of the revolutionaries' failure to recast the world in the image of their God.

This is to call them Puritan poems; but they have a wider significance. In Milton's articulation of loss is expressed a general feeling in English life during the century following the 1660 Restoration. Royalists, no less than anti-royalists, understood and shared this feeling. For though the monarchy was restored institutionally the kingly ideal (after Charles I's execution) could never be recaptured.

That both sides had reason to feel that they had lost out in the national conflict and its aftermath may be a contributory cause of the satirical mood which invades nearly all creative writing for the next hundred years after the Restoration. It is true that *Paradise Lost*, the greatest poem of the age, is not satire. But it was to be the last great poem before *The Prelude* of William Wordsworth (1770–1850) not written in a satiric vein or framework. And even if the satirical tone is lacking, Milton's epic can be said to express in its opening lines the new awareness of imperfection.

> Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
> Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
> Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
> With loss of Eden, till one greater man
> Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
> Sing, heavenly Muse, that on the secret top
> Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
> That shepherd, who first taught the chosen seed,
> In the beginning how the heavens and earth
> Rose out of chaos: or if Sion hill
> Delight thee more, and Siloa's brook that flowed
> Fast by the oracle of God; I thence
> Invoke thy aid to my adventurous song,
> That with no middle flight intends to soar
> Above the Aonian mount, while it pursues
> Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.

(*Paradise Lost*, 1667, 1, 1–16)

There is no space here to extend the quotation further, but the reader may recollect that a few lines further on Milton claims that he is writing in order to 'assert eternal Providence' and 'justify the ways of God to men'. The opening paragraph is written in the shadow of the defeat of the revolution in which the poet had invested so much energy. He will (like the defeated revolutionaries) tackle 'things unattempted', seeks heavenly aid and looks forward (in line five) to a new and different restoration.

The crash of his political hopes may also explain why Milton loads the opening of a poem purporting to offer spiritual consolation with such heavy imagery of loss. 'Disobedience', 'forbidden', 'mortal', 'death', 'woe', 'loss' make up a string of negatives which precede the mention of hope. In them he sounds the keynote of his poem.

To suggest that *Paradise Lost* hovers between affirmation and negation – in this, perhaps, a unique text among epic poems – is not to define a problem with Milton's writing. Rather, it is a way of underlining how truly Milton articulates the experience of the age. Whatever their politics, whatever side they took in the Civil War, the men and women of Milton's generation had to assimilate for the first time in English history the breakdown of a political system. For royalists, failure came in 1649; for revolutionaries, in 1660. After the latter date kingship would seem to many a soiled compromise. All this, Milton responds to in *Paradise Lost* by casting the loss of happiness as the story of God's triumph: a paradox. Perhaps it was inevitable that in such an inverted narrative, as Blake was to point out, the devil came to occupy centre stage. Alastair Fowler (1968) and Helen Gardner (1948) have drawn attention to the dark strain in the poem's texture. Fowler traces it to Milton's original plan to write a tragic drama, which produced 'a tragical epic rather than a pure epic' (Fowler, pp. 5–6). Given Milton's subject, he says, an epic on it cannot but be tragic. A socio-political aspect of this pessimistic strain may be read in the events of book two of the poem. Here Milton deals with the devils' debate on what policy they should adopt after being cast out from Heaven. Factious argumentation, not logical reasoning, is most in evidence. The discussions may reflect parliamentary infighting, as Milton recalled it from the Commonwealth. They also look forward to Whig and Tory dog-fights in the Commons after 1688.

Beside the poem's opening passage, let us set the lines which close it. For in them also a current of melancholy perception troubles the surface of the verse. Adam and Eve, history's first refugees, are *guided* – Milton's word – out of Eden by providence.

> Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon;
> The world was all before them, where to choose
> Their place of rest, and providence their guide;
> They hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,
> Through Eden took their solitary way.
>
> (12, 645–9)

The first humans are solitary, but hand in hand. Under providence, they wander homeless. They are travellers with no destination. It is a perception of division, of contraries characteristic of the neo-classical period.

Notice too the equality of Adam and Eve in this final picture. After much poetic insistence throughout the poem on authority (especially male authority) and on the hierarchies of creation Milton rounds it off with male and female side by side, neither leading the other, neither following, both vulnerable, both silent in the world. The feminist critic Stevie Davies (1993) remarks that in *Paradise Lost* 'sexuality violates autonomy'. She goes on to argue that Milton both 'identified with and disowned something female which was experienced as part of the self'.

The botched and broken seventeenth century, therefore, made available for Milton only enough material to construct an epic of rejection. It might be suggested that the poem's high heroic point is Abdiel's refusal to join the rebel army in Book five. This brand of heroism is non-achieving; the hero defines himself by saying no. Milton alters his source here. In the Bible Abdiel had been one name on a list. Milton plucks him from obscurity and makes of him a heroic denier. Abdiel is the ultimate protestant. He forms a community of one. In the poem's inverted value structure this makes him a hero. Perhaps Milton wrote the short, emphatic, unforgiving *Paradise Regained* as a cold-blooded assertion of what had eluded him in *Paradise Lost.*

As suggested above, Milton's coloration of the epic with a sombre tone, his mixture of affirmation and denial, was no private idiosyncrasy. Rather it was characteristic of Restoration poetry and drama. From his epic, let us move to the next greatest poem of the late seventeenth century, Dryden's mock-epic *Mac Flecknoe*, written just over a dozen years later (first published in 1682). Moving from Milton to Dryden is a significant progression; from the heroic to the post-heroic world view. Dryden's poetic focus is the writer Richard Flecknoe (d. 1678?) of the preceding generation, and Thomas Shadwell (1642?–92) – in Dryden's satiric handling, Flecknoe's successor. But Dryden mythologizes his material. He transforms Flecknoe into a poet so inept as to stand for all bad artists, and all bad art.

This is to say that Dryden's strategy is the opposite of Milton's, who had aspired to an elusive epic affirmation. Dryden first creates an epic effect, then undercuts it by deliberate bathos. It is as if he gives himself the best of both worlds.

> All human things are subject to decay,
> And when fate summons, monarchs must obey.
> This Flecknoe found, who, like Augustus, young
> Was called to empire, and had governed long;
> In prose and verse was owned, without dispute,
> Through all the realms of Nonsense, absolute.
> This aged prince, now flourishing in peace,
> And blest with issue of a large increase,
> Worn out with business, did at length debate
> To settle the succession of the State:
> And, pondering which of all his sons was fit
> To reign, and wage immortal war with wit,
> Cried, 'Tis resolved; for nature pleads that he
> Should only rule, who most resembles me.
> (*Mac Flecknoe* (1682), 1–13)

On their own the first two lines sound completely serious; they could be called 'Miltonic'. But what do we make of line three? Dryden first creates a sublime effect, then shatters it by the bathetic 'This Flecknoe found'. Who, the reader wonders – especially the modern reader – is Flecknoe? Few would know. The result is a new, complex poetry whose special quality comes from the equal presence of epic affirmation and bathetic ridicule. The complexity is the main thing. Mock-heroic as such is not new: see, for example, the short poem *On the Famous Voyage* (1616) by Ben Jonson (1572–1637). But Dryden, unlike Jonson, preserves a dignified tone throughout. He never descends to using 'groan' rhymes, which undercut the poem as much as the poem's victim; his mock-epic sounds epic even when it is mocking. This cannot be said of Jonson's *Famous Voyage*, nor of the celebrated *Hudibras* (1663–78) (which is discussed later) by Dryden's poetic contemporary Samuel Butler (1612–80).

In this shift from Milton to Dryden we see more than just a difference between individual writers. Short as the period is when measured in years – from 1660 to 1680 – to move from Milton to Dryden is to move from one poetic age to another. First there is a formal change. Rejecting blank verse, whose open-ended line is adaptable to indefinite narrative extension, Dryden champions the heroic couplet, whose form implants in the reader, every two lines, an expectation of syntactical completion because the rhyme sounds as if it should finish the sentence off, even when it does not do so. This expectation, admittedly, Dryden often overrides (see the last four lines above). The heroic couplet tends towards epigram. Blank verse, by contrast, accommodates the discursive, reflective mood of the epic. Dryden opts for the couplet effect so as to constrain the epic, though he can still create an epic effect. Miniaturization is a feature of Augustan poetry.

Dryden both shares and does not share Milton's attitude to epic poetry. Like Milton, he was ambitious to write one. He tried a contemporary, unmythological epic in *Annus Mirabilis* (1667). In his old age he translated Virgil's *Aeneid* into English verse (1697). But in *Mac Flecknoe* and *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), we meet an inverted, ironical treatment of the material. He debunks and satirizes rather than celebrates, and furthermore Dryden's satire is only partly directed against Flecknoe or Shadwell. He belittles kingly installation, which in the society Dryden has seen emerging does not invite epic treatment. (They were on opposite sides in politics; but Milton might have shared this view.) Here is the crowning of Shadwell.

> The hoary prince in majesty appeared,
> High on a throne of his own labours reared.
> At his right hand our young Ascanius sate,
> Rome's other hope, and pillar of the State.
> His brows thick fogs, instead of glories, grace,
> And lambent dullness played around his face.
> As Hannibal did to the altars come,
> Sworn by his sire a mortal foe to Rome;
> So Sh– swore, nor should his vow be vain,
> That he till death true dullness would maintain;
> And in his father's right, and realm's defence,
> Ne'er to have peace with wit, nor truce with sense.

(*Mac Flecknoe* (1782), 106–18)

Pretenders play out a mockery of kingliness, stupidity and disorder turn rampant in lines of faultless poetry – the tone nonchalant, the rhythm assured. The poet, historically in retreat, reconquers the rebels by his wit. Fifty years later, when Pope reran this scenario in *The Dunciad* he placed monarchy itself among the dunces.

Dryden defines this priority – irony is better than abuse – in the *Discourse Concerning ... Satire* (1693) (Conaghan, 1978, pp. 575–606, quotes the relevant bits) with the famous praise of a stroke fine enough to separate the head from the body and leave it standing in its place. In another example, he quotes the boast made by Mrs Jack Ketch, wife of the public hangman, that her husband could execute a man so neatly that even the victim found it pleasing. But rough or angry satire also exerted an appeal. For an example, see *Satyr Against Mankind* (1675) by the Earl of Rochester (1648–80). Here Rochester adopts a highly personalized and passionate voice in place of Dryden's catlike detachment. There is, in fact, a satiric line extending backwards from Rochester in this mood to the cult of abusive satire by the Jacobean poets John Marston (1575?–1634), Richard Middleton (of whose life nothing seems to be known), and others. And the line also extends forwards from Rochester to Pope. For some writers and readers, hard cudgel play was preferred to cool fencing; energetic statement was what mattered; the dignity of art could go hang. Dryden, in cherishing poetic dignity, kept in being a simulacrum – an aesthetic image – of the traditional authority he was defending. David Nokes, in *Raillery and Rage* (1987), discusses the variety of forms and strategies in eighteenth-century satire, with special emphasis on Pope, Gay and Swift.

Equally unimpressed by dignity was Samuel Butler, whose *Hudibras* (1663–78), now little read, but marvelled over in its time, arose from the mixed influences of foreign satirists like Cervantes and English Jacobean originals like Ben Jonson. Of Butler's technique, the following lines will serve as an example. He is describing his anti-hero Sir Hudibras, a Presbyterian fool, and in him the cross-grained spirit of Presbyterianism itself. The Presbyterians, Butler writes, were a sect

> whose chief Devotion lies
> In odd perverse Antipathies;
> In falling out with that or this,
> And finding somewhat still amiss:
> More peevish, cross, and spleenatick,
> Than Dog distract, or Monky sick.
> That with more care keep Holy-day
> The wrong, than others the right way:
> Compound for Sins, they are inclin'd to,
> By damning those they have no mind to;
> Still so perverse and opposite,
> As if they worshipp'd God for spight,
> The self-same thing they will abhor
> One way, and long another for.
> Free-will they one way disavow,
> Another, nothing else allow.
> All Piety consists therein
> In them, in other Men all Sin.
> (*Hudibras*, First Part, Canto 1, 205–22)

Butler's hostility, unlike Dryden's, is uncloaked. Instead this kind of satire scoffs directly. Rhymes look and sound inept ('spleenatick ... Monky sick'); and Butler rejects the heroic couplet for a line of eight syllables which feels cramped and not dignified. Dignity is Butler's target.

Butler and Dryden differ in tone, but both are obsessed with antithesis. When Butler writes of the Presbyterians that 'All Piety consists therein / In them, in other Men all Sin', referring to their habit of taking their own way yet damning others for taking theirs, he constructs the statement so as to heighten to the utmost the sense of opposition it describes. 'All Sin' at the end balances 'All Piety' at the beginning; in the middle 'in them' is opposed by 'in other Men'. Each phrase and clause counterweighs its opposite. Like architects of the period, poets placed a premium on symmetry, on the balance drawn from equal forces opposing each other, on the tension produced by energies held in check.

Pope followed Dryden in championing irony in heroic couplets against Butler's octosyllabic ridicule and the influence of Dryden and Pope prevailed. But Butler was not buried out of sight. Swift preferred the Butlerian mixture, as in his scabrous *The Lady's Dressing Room* (1732). (Compare with Belinda at the dressing table in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1714).) Roger Lonsdale has pointed out (1984, p. xxxiii) that the 'unpoetic' poetry which Swift deliberately writes, with its short lines and rapid rhymes undercutting readerly expectations about literature, was a strategy that not just poets, but writers generally in the English Augustan period, were fond of using. An interesting example of the varied ways in which a Miltonic-epic inheritance fed into the growing interest in satiric statement is the burlesque poem *The Splendid Shilling* (1705) of John Philips (1676–1709). Here, Miltonic learning and grand language are comically deployed in a description of the needy, joyless life of the poverty-stricken poet.

Recalling Dryden's satire against debased kingship, we may consider two passages from Pope. First, in *The Dunciad* (1742), half a century after Dryden, he deepens that poet's mockery of false authority.

> She ceased. Then swells the Chapel-royal throat:
> 'God save King Cibber!' mounts in ev'ry note.
> Familiar White's, 'God save King Colley!' cries;
> 'God save King Colley!' Drury-lane replies:
> To Needham's quick the voice triumphal rode,
> But pious Needham dropt the name of God;
> Back to the Devil the last echoes roll,
> And 'Coll!' each Butcher roars at Hockley-hole.
> So, when Jove's block descended from on high
> (As sings thy great forefather Ogilby)
> Loud thunder to its bottom shook the bog,
> And the hoarse nation croak'd, 'God save King Log!'
>
> (1, 319–30)

The issues may not have changed but they have become cruder and starker. And Pope's epistle to King George II – contemptuously called 'Augustus' (1737) – illustrates how, for the later poet, the moral blight has spread further outwards and upwards. We now have, not a poet mocking at the dunces who want to be literary kings, but a poet praising George II, himself a dunce, as the monarch of dunces, and too kingly to care about poetry and art.

> Oh! could I mount on the Maeonian wing,
> Your Arms, your Actions, your repose to sing!
> What seas you travers'd, and what fields you fought!
> Your Country's Peace, how oft, how dearly bought!
> How barb'rous rage subsided at your word,
> And Nations wonder'd while they dropp'd the sword!
> How, when you nodded, o'er the land and deep,
> Peace stole her wing, and wrapt the world in sleep;
> 'Till earth's extremes your mediation own,
> And Asia's Tyrants tremble at your Throne –
> But Verse, alas! your Majesty disdains;
> And I'm not used to Panegyric strains;
> The Zeal of fools offends at any time,
> But most of all, the Zeal of Fools in rhyme.
> Besides, a fate attends on all I write,
> That when I aim at praise, they say I bite.
>
> (394–409)

These lines convey Pope's view that George II has turned the kingship into something cowardly and stupid. In Pope, Dryden's contrast between kingly values threatened by mob rule has given place to the perception of a single blight embracing king, court and society as a whole. This sense of a wider social context, and of a sharper cultural decline, is one of the differences between Pope and Dryden. (On this, see Howard Erskine-Hill's imaginative study (1975) of Pope's immersion, as satirist, in the social relationships of his time.) On satiric technique, Pope, one might say, prefers accumulative irony; each couplet adds a new element of false grandeur to the one before. There is a delayed reaction before the final explosion. Dryden prefers smaller and more local effects. Sometimes Pope's comments are so cunningly barbed that they could be read, so to speak, straight rather than satirically: line four above, for example, or line six. In fact a reader might get through the whole passage quoted without realizing that it was satire, at least until the phrase, 'when I aim at praise, they say I bite'. Pope goes in for satiric amplification, for an enlargement of the ironic effect. New is Pope's dramatic method, as seen, for example, in his dialogic format – one of his favourite devices. (Dryden never used it.) The technique allows the poet to exploit question-and-answer interplay, to multiply mood opposition, to vary the point of view. As readers, we are kept on our toes. Does Pope's friend here speak for us? Or is the friend a foolish listener, misinterpreting Pope? Pope's diversification of the satirist's role forms a significant part of his poetic development.

It is noteworthy that, as poet, Pope, like Milton, makes a great deal of personal feeling, contrasting with Dryden's assumed nonchalance (or sneering indifference) towards other people's opinions. Yet Pope formed one of a tightly-knit band of poets, novelists and playwrights who in 1713 grouped themselves together as the

Scriblerus Club, first as a Tory opposition group to the Whig Kit-Cat Club (which included Congreve, Addison and Steele) and then more widely as a self-styled centre of literary excellence in an age given over, as they saw it, to the praise of mediocrity. The Scriblerus Club included Swift, John Arbuthnot (1667–1735), John Gay and Thomas Parnell (1679–1718). Some account of Gay's most important work, *The Beggar's Opera*, is given elsewhere in this unit. Arbuthnot was an active contributor to the Scriblerian literature, chiefly, however, in prose rather than in poetry. Parnell's poetic interests spanned both satiric and religious writing, of which the latter is perhaps the more interesting. His meditative-descriptive *A Night-Piece on Death* (1722) foreshadows some later eighteenth-century poetry in its assimilation of the poet's emotional mood changes and delineation of the outer scene into the same creative utterance. In Samuel Johnson's view, it was a defect of Swift and Pope that their writings were unnecessarily obsessed with indecencies. But as poetic subject matter, filth and dirt appealed to many Augustan (and pre-Augustan) poets. They form an aspect of the satiric vision – the obverse side of panegyric. Examples are the descriptions of urban and personal squalor in Gay's *Trivia* (1716), Johnson's *London* (1738), Swift's *The Lady's Dressing Room* (1732), and other pieces.

As the eighteenth century proceeded, other satiric styles than Pope's were tried, and found favour. Meditative melancholy lightened by occasional humour characterizes Johnson's *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749). Johnson deliberately cultivates the rhetorical grandeur and heavy moralism of Juvenal's style (as interpreted by the eighteenth century), in contrast to the livelier interplay of Pope. A good example is found in the opening four lines:

> Let Observation with extensive view
> Survey mankind from China to Peru;
> Remark each anxious toil, each eager strife,
> And watch the busy scenes of crowded life;

Coleridge read this, unsympathetically, as meaning: 'Let observation, with extensive observation, observe extensively'. But 'observe', 'survey', 'remark', and 'watch' carry different nuances, and Johnson is a writer interested in fine distinctions. Compare with these distinctive styles the uncertain voice of Charles Churchill (1731–64), whose *Rosciad* (1761) betrays a great desire to be satirical, little perception of what to say, or how. Verse satire after the death of Pope hardens rhythmically in Churchill's couplets, turns grand but abstract with Johnson, or softens into the emotional rhetoric of Goldsmith.

But the couplet can be adapted to other modes equally well. Pope shows this in the reasoned argument of *An Essay on Man* (1732–4), the tragicomic narratives of the third and fourth books of *The Dunciad*, and, from his early years, the nature description of *Windsor Forest* (1704–13). Often though, in descriptive poetry of the eighteenth century, blank verse might be preferred over the couplet to reinvoke the sublime Miltonic mode. James Thomson, for instance, in *The Seasons* (1726–30), seems to wish to combine elements from descriptive and epic poetry in order to celebrate British landscape, climate and political culture all together. In

'Autumn', for instance,

Attempered suns arise
Sweet-beamed, and shedding oft through lucid clouds
A pleasing calm; while broad and brown, below,
Extensive harvests hang the heavy head.
Rich, silent, deep they stand; for not a gale
Rolls its light billows o'er the bending plain;
A calm of plenty! till the ruffled air
Falls from its poise, and gives the breeze to blow.
Rent is the fleecy mantle of the sky;
The clouds fly different; and the sudden sun
By fits effulgent gilds the illumined field,
And black by fits the shadows sweep along –
A gaily chequered, heart-expanding view,
Far as the circling eye can shoot around
Unbounded tossing in a flood of corn.

These are thy blessings, Industry, rough power!
Whom labour still attends, and sweat, and pain;
Yet the kind source of every gentle art
And all the soft civility of life:

(28–46)

Thomson's adjectives in 'Attempered suns', that is suns made temperate or toned down from scorching midsummer, and 'lucid' or pearly white clouds suggest one source of the pleasing nature of his diction: its etymological precision. This can have the shock effect of a new coinage. Clouds, for instance, here 'lucid' or a source of light, are usually thought of as darkeners. This Latinate exactness recalls Milton's style, and an aim of Thomson was to recreate the Miltonic sublime in the context of natural, later national description. Though *The Seasons* continually addresses the deity, he seeks to bring the sublime down from the heavens and locate it on earth.

But Thomson was a poet of the eighteenth century, not a mere imitator of Milton. For example his phrase 'fleecy mantle of the sky' (line 9 above) – which means clouds again – illustrates Thomson's willing adoption of another eighteenth-century poetic technique, the generalizing epithet. This device, usually referred to as 'poetic diction', Wordsworth was to scoff at as poetic impoverishment but Thomson uses it to enrich his verse by making it verbally more dense. Connotations drawn from other contexts are assimilated into the poem by the unexpected – and at first sight the unspecific – figures used. Thus, to call the cloud layer a mantle is to irradiate the greyness overhead with warmer, reassuring associations; it is seen as a prophetic cloak ('mantle'), hence as the reminder of biblical covenants, of providence, and of protection. To call the clouds 'fleecy' reminds us of sheep, suggesting in a half-conceit that flocks of clouds, like sheep in an English field, are at pasture in the sky. Thomson evokes for his reader a picture of the autumn sky as intimately bound up with the familiar English countryside, even mirroring its appearance, and so as an element in its agriculture, out of which arises the woollen industry, and, out of that, English prosperity and power. The clouds have become benign objects, and Thomson's ideological aim of describing the universe as a friendly place receives a boost. Thomson and Pope prefer to use a different formal idiom, but in the work of both (in Pope's case, the early work, such as *Windsor Forest* (1713)) we see a description of England which is also a harmonious disposition of its society into an image of peace.

The reason for the chief formal difference between Thomson and Pope – Thomson's preference for blank verse, Pope's for the couplet – becomes obvious if we glance at Thomson's paragraphing; here, once again, a Miltonic influence might be in evidence. Thomson plays off against each other the base rhythm running through the reader's head and the actual rhythm of the lines as written. By the base rhythm is meant the normal metre of the iambic pentameter: ten syllables to each line, the syllables stressed alternately, as in the line 'And black by fits the shadows sweep along'. (Even here 'shadows' upsets things, dislodging absolute metrical regularity.) Above this metrical pattern, and sometimes against it, like a melody playing off the beat in music, Thomson sets an alternative rhythm in motion, that of the sentence structure itself. And this, as may be seen from the passage quoted above, runs across formal divisions like line breaks without a pause, or inserts an important division where the metre does not (as in the case of full stops in the middle of a line), or a mixture of the two.

Why does the poet manipulate the rhythms in this way? One of the functions of *The Seasons* is to refresh the reader's perceptions of the English scene, indeed of the material creation at large (for *The Seasons*, despite its title, constantly ranges beyond the temperate zone). It seeks to re-evoke wonder. Thomson's opening out of the verse form, coupled with his elevated style and the scientific precision of his diction, noticed earlier, all combine to keep the reader guessing, to evoke wonder, to make familiar things vivid and eye-catching, to render the known new. They signalize that the Miltonic sublime is being sought in a descriptive account of the English scene.

This mixture, in Thomson's verse, of wonder at the beauties of nature with an insistence on cosmic providentiality and pride in the English scene could, in less imaginative hands, degenerate into nationalistic boasting. In the passage quoted Thomson ends on a characteristic appreciation of 'Industry's' benefits. 'Industry' here means productive effort, not mechanized labour; but the word was soon to change its meaning. Industry, Thomson says, supports the cheerful scene which he witnesses. Industry gladdens his heart. Evident in this praise of toil is the expectation that the happy arrangement should continue, that toilers will keep at it, and that poets may continue to give thanks for it. How easily the theme could sink into imperial boasting, 'Rule, Britannia!' (1740) may illustrate. Thomson wrote six stanzas; here are the final three:

> Thee haughty tyrants ne'er shall tame;
>   All their attempts to bend thee down
> Will but arouse thy generous flame,
>   But work their woe and thy renown.
> 'Rule, Britannia, rule the waves;
> Britons never will be slaves.'

To thee belongs the rural reign;
    Thy cities shall with commerce shine;
All thine shall be the subject main,
    And every shore it circles thine.
'Rule, Britannia, rule the waves;
Britons never will be slaves.'

The Muses, still with freedom found,
    Shall to thy happy coast repair:
Blest isle! with matchless beauty crowned,
    And manly hearts to guard the fair.
'Rule, Britannia, rule the waves;
Britons never will be slaves.'

Kingsley Amis once pointed out that this is not a boast but a call to duty, a hymn. True; but the dividing line between praying and boasting is getting thin. Glancing away from Thomson, one could recognize as a subgenre of Augustan poetry, with a surprisingly strong following among readers and writers, a type of blank-verse celebratory description of nature, existing social arrangements and healthy spirits in *Pleasures of the Imagination* (1744) by Mark Akenside (1721–70), *The Art of Preserving Health* (1744) by John Armstrong (1709–79), *The Fleece* (1757) by John Dyer (1699–1758), and others.

Pope and Thomson share the same attitude to the poetic craft, the same strategy. Poetry is seen as a public utterance, and though Pope may lash the negative side of his age and Thomson celebrate its positive one both of them handle general characteristics and general truths. To an extent the same might be said of the following passage taken from *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* (1751) by Thomas Gray (1716–71), in which the poet laments the anonymous passing away of labouring rustics; notice particularly its reliance on personification and moral commonplace. But there is a difference.

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
Or busy housewife ply her evening care:
No children run to lisp their sire's return,
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,
Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke;
How jocund did they drive their team afield!
How bowed the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys and destiny obscure;
Nor Grandeur hear, with a disdainful smile,
The short and simple annals of the poor.

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Awaits alike the inevitable hour.
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

(21–36)

How, we might ask, does the speaker of these lines compare with the Pope of satiric attack, the Thomson of public celebration? What relationship does he negotiate with the reader? What is his tone? Despite the explicitness of the moral he wants to enforce Gray adopts a disengaged position. He stands back. He addresses, not the reader, but a series of abstract concepts – 'Ambition', or 'Grandeur'. Matching the disengaged stance is his brooding, watchful attitude. As Goldsmith noted, Gray partly achieves this slow, dragging, melancholy tone by lengthening out the eight-syllable line to ten syllables with an interpolated 'non-essential' epithet such as the adjectives 'blazing', 'busy', 'envied', or the verb 'run to' in the opening stanza quoted above:

> For them no more the *blazing* hearth shall burn,
> Or *busy* housewife ply her evening care:
> No children *run to* lisp their sire's return,
> Or climb his knees the *envied* kiss to share.

How can a hearth burn but by blazing, a housewife ply her evening care but by being busy, a kiss be struggled for but by being envied? Are the italicized words then unnecessary? Not exactly. To leave them out would result in a different kind of poem – flatter and more banal (they are words of energy). What Gray draws on here is the poetic resources of personal emotion, moody feelings in the poet disengaged from active involvement with men and women, sombre and philosophical meditation. It has been suggested by Weinfeld (quoted in *The Year's Work in English Studies* 72, p. 259) that in this poem the pastoral form is symbolically dissolved; in its unexpected close Gray takes a step away from Augustan towards Romantic poetics.

Such verse, certainly, like nearly all eighteenth-century poetry, is generalized writing with a clear social dimension. But the direction of its gaze is mainly inward, giving it the appeal of private poetry, tuned in most of all to the individual's feelings, curious about mood. It is one of the characteristics of English poetry after the death of Pope in the 1740s. For example, William Collins (1721–59) wrote poems to feelings, as in his *Ode to Fear* (1747). Gray himself, in *The Bard* (1757), in which an ancient Welsh prophet-poet curses the conquering Edward I, strikes an eerie, intense note of foreboding and doom. Goldsmith gives us another example of this emotional intensification of mid-eighteenth-century poetry, or in his case, possibly, emotional softening. Consider these lines from *The Deserted Village* (1770):

> Yes! let the rich deride, the proud disdain,
> These simple blessings of the lowly train;
> To me more dear, congenial to my heart,
> One native charm than all the gloss of art;
> Spontaneous joys, where nature has its play,
> The soul adopts and owns their firstborn sway;
> Lightly they frolic o'er the vacant mind,
> Unenvied, unmolested, unconfined:
>
> (251–8)

And in a glance at Thomsonian patriotism, Goldsmith adds:

> Ye friends to truth, ye statesmen, who survey
> The rich man's joys increase, the poor's decay,
> 'Tis yours to judge how wide the limits stand
> Between a splendid and an happy land.
> Proud swells the tide with loads of freighted ore,
> And shouting Folly hails them from her shore;
>
> (265–70)

This ability to view Whiggish England from a less assured standpoint than that of James Thomson (though the Scottish-born Thomson was himself an outsider in Augustan London) may owe something to Goldsmith's upbringing in a different culture and country.

Goldsmith in 1770 though, in the last analysis, sustains in his own emotionally loaded idiom that critical analysis of public life begun by Andrew Marvell (1621–78) and continued by Dryden and Pope, with vigorous insistence, to the end of their lives. One might rather see some of the other poets of the middle years of the eighteenth century – Collins, Thomas Warton (1728–90), Christopher Smart (1722–71) – as turning away from an engagement with the life of their times into a world of pastoral fancy, or fantasy, or private meditation. Placing these later eighteenth-century poets in clear relation to 'Augustan' literature is not always an easy task. There is something to be said for resurrecting the older critical concept of 'pre-Romantic' writing, for example, for such a figure as Goldsmith, who carries onward the public poem but also anticipates the unease regarding some social developments (like urbanization, enclosures, spreading commerce) which were to surface in Blake and Wordsworth. In Collins's odes, or in Smart's songs, something of the subjective Romantic poem is also anticipated. In this connection, William Cowper (1731–1800) might be seen as a genuinely transitional figure. His *The Task* (1784), a poem in six books, begins as a mock-Miltonic address to the sofa (reminding us of the burlesque satire of John Philip's *The Splendid Shilling*, published eighty years earlier) but soon turns into an exploration of the poet's own feelings coupled with a description of natural sights, scenes and activities in a peaceful domestic setting in the English countryside.

Yet this emphasis on the inward-directed gaze, on privacy, and on poetic evasion in some middle and later eighteenth-century poetry could itself be overstated. In a recent anthology, part of whose appeal, to a modern reader, will lie in its author's willingness to trawl through the original sources of publication, Roger Lonsdale offers plenty of evidence of poets writing 'graphically if naively' (1984, p. xxxvii) throughout the period here covered about the utterly normal stuff of life: cricket and other sports, marriage and its problems, life in the various professions, travel and tours, visits and holidays, jobs or unemployment, war, suffering and poverty. Margaret Ann Doody (1985) also stresses the strangeness of eighteenth-century poetry, its experimentation, its concern with new forms and new subjects.

Texts, authors, contexts: drama 1660–1780

Although Restoration drama and Restoration poetry share common concerns they differ in that poetry remained (as always) a private and continuous activity. But drama, necessarily, was public. Banned during the Commonwealth, drama reappeared as a vigorous expression of triumphant royalism in 1660. For years thereafter its associations remained with its patrons, the royalist and courtly party. Hence, in addition to its obsessive interest in modern issues, and modern material – it bristles with the here and now – Restoration drama adopted a strong political and ideological coloration.

Their involvement with new courtly values marks off Restoration dramatists from their Jacobean predecessors. But the disconnection can be overstressed. Public performances were banned during the period of godly rule, but drama did not die out. Plays could be and were staged in private, and they were also staged in the form of opera, as in *The Siege of Rhodes* (1656) by William Davenant (1606–68). The latter device had much influence on later writing. Nevertheless, 1660 saw as clean a new start in dramatic writing as can be found in the whole English tradition.

Two contrasting styles swiftly emerged on the London stage: ranting tragedy and comic, often bawdy, satire. Something was taken from Racine and Molière, whose plays had influenced the court in exile, though the Molière influence can be exaggerated. Norman Suckling suggests (1965, pp. 93ff., 107) that English writers had fewer illusions than Molière as to what should be, hence Restoration comedy leaves less room for 'the assumptions of romance'. This is well said, and might be lengthily illustrated if there were room here (which there is not) by considering the full significance of what Wycherley does to Molière in *The Country Wife* (1675): takes from him the Pinchwife story, adds to it from Terence, the Roman dramatist, the pretended-eunuch story, and makes out of the combination an intensely funny yet also disturbing study of the destructive nature of unchecked appetite.

Besides their knowledge of French drama, playwrights in 1660 were also influenced (unsurprisingly) by Jacobean dramatic satire and by Elizabethan tragedy and romance. They were conscious of this connection, and cherished it. Thus when Dryden in 1667 updated Shakespeare's fifty-odd year old play *The Tempest* – note the Restoration obsession with modernity – he used the prologue as a means of holding hands, metaphorically, with his great predecessor. He dwells on the image of a tree cut to the ground yet continuing to send out buds and shoots of later growth. It is typical of Dryden that the imagery in these lines – a felled tree, new branches – also carries a contemporary political reference which his audience could not have missed:

> As, when a tree's cut down, the secret root
> Lives under ground, and thence new branches shoot;
> So, from old Shakespeare's honoured dust, this day
> Springs up and buds a new reviving play:
>
> (Prologue, *The Tempest* (1667), 1–4)

But admitting French influence, and influence from Roman drama, and from earlier English drama, what Restoration dramatists produced was new. The concern with newness, including new critical attitudes to drama as well as new dramatic techniques, informs Dryden's prose essay *Of Dramatic Poesie* (1668), in which he compares old and new forms, and defends the use of rhyme in dramatic writing. The primary interest of Restoration dramatists in general lay in their own society, by which they meant chiefly, but not exclusively, its upper ranks. These the writers reflected and reflected on in blistering satire or elevated tragedy depending on whether they or their audiences happened to be in a mood of comic destruction or – equally likely – of romantic identification with the daredevil passions of kings and military leaders. Here, then, in its divided drama, is another instance of that schizophrenic strain in the literary personality of the Restoration period.

The most obvious character mark of Restoration comedy is its concern with sex. To understand this, it is worth keeping in mind, as a recent study makes clear (Hunt, 1965, pp. 179ff.) that the patents granted to Thomas Killigrew (1612–83) and William Davenant in 1660 stipulated that actresses should act women's parts, ostensibly in order that the plays could become 'useful and instructive representations of human life'. This was not a historically original development, as it happened; before the Commonwealth, French actresses had appeared on the London stage. But the actresses had been hooted off. After 1660 their presence on stage became the norm. Not unconnectedly, female dramatists appeared on the scene. Never as numerous as their male counterparts, they made their influence felt nevertheless. Though ignored by critics for a long time their work has recently begun to attract a growing interest in scholarly circles. The theatre critics Schofield and Macheski, for example, in a recent book (1991), have surveyed this twentieth-century rediscovery of the body of dramatic writing produced by female writers of the Restoration.

Such a development changed the drama by lifting the constraints imposed, for instance, on Shakespeare's representation of sex by having to use boys to play women's parts: a constraint, needless to argue, which Shakespeare turned to advantage. When actresses took over female roles Restoration dramatists found the realistic depiction of sexuality possible, indeed unavoidable. How this affected dramatic writing may be seen from a famous scene in Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675). Horner, the libertine-hero, pretends to the town that he is impotent. As a result of this women can visit him with impunity, indeed husbands encourage their wives to do so, and also come along themselves to mock at his supposed affliction. But what they don't realize is that Horner is cuckolding them in the back bedroom while they are laughing at him in the parlour. The joke backfires on Horner when several women come looking for their host's attentions at the same time.

> *Mrs. Squeamish.* Oh, are you here, grandmother? [to Old Lady Squeamish] I followed, you must know, my Lady Fidget hither; 'tis the prettiest lodging, and I have been staring on the prettiest pictures –
>
> [*Re-enter Lady Fidget with a piece of china in her hand, and Horner following.*]
>
> *L. Fid.* And I have been toiling and moiling for the prettiest piece of china, my dear.
>
> *Horn.* Nay, she has been too hard for me, do what I could.

Mrs. Squeam. Oh, lord, I'll have some china too. Good Mr. Horner, don't think to give other people china, and me none; come in with me too.
Horn. Upon my honour, I have none left now.
Mrs. Squeam. Nay, nay, I have known you deny your china before now, but you shan't put me off so. Come.
Horn. This lady had the last there.
L. Fid. Yes indeed, madam, to my certain knowledge, he has no more left.
Mrs. Squeam. O, but it may be he may have some you could not find.
L. Fid. What, d'ye think if he had had any left, I would not have had it too? for we women of quality never think we have china enough.
Horn. Do not take it ill, I cannot make china for you all, but I will have a roll-waggon for you too, another time.
Mrs. Squeam. Thank you, dear toad.
L. Fid. What do you mean by that promise?

(4, iii)

At a glance the scene appears more flauntingly sexual, the dialogue more suggestive, than anything in English drama before, but, looking again, we find nothing unchaste is required of the actors and actresses. Wycherley keeps the scene decorous throughout. It's all (to quote a cliché) in the mind. Yet he is portraying sexual desire on the stage with unprecedented freedom.

We have seen this strategy of combining opposites – here, euphemistic language with indelicate meaning – in the poetry of the period. The reader may observe a similar use of innuendo in Pope's poem *The Rape of the Lock.* (Pope as a young writer knew Wycherley well.) Drama gains from the indefiniteness of application of Wycherley's metaphor. What exactly does he mean by 'china'? Does he mean fucking, as in Mrs Squeamish's 'Oh, lord, I'll have some china too'? Does he mean semen, as in Horner's 'This lady had the last there'? Does he mean sexual gratification, as in Lady Fidget's 'toiling and moiling for the prettiest piece of china'? Does fragile china stand for female reputation, as when Lady Fidget carries hers in? Or is china, a receiving vessel, an image of female longing? In a sense you know exactly what the scene is about; in another Wycherley, by keeping it unspecific, generalizes his moral point.

Side by side with this satirical reduction of sexual relationships to physical intercourse (a comic theme here satirized by Wycherley) we might set the following speech from Dryden's *All For Love* (1678). This play was a reworking of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606–7) into the heroic tragedy form beloved of the early Dryden. In seeking to build up the character of Antony, as the genre required, into a charismatic superman, Dryden writes for him a style so intensely dignified that Antony can naturally assert to Cleopatra, in the following extract, that if the two of them were actually caught in the act of love-making, their heroic authority would silence laughter and quell all lookers-on into submission.

Suppose me come from the Phleagraean plains,
Where gasping giants lay, cleft by my sword,
And mountain-tops pared off each other blow,
To bury those I slew. Receive me, goddess!

> Let Caesar spread his subtle nets; like Vulcan,
> In thy embraces I would be beheld
> By heav'n and earth at once
> And make them envy what they meant their sport.
> Let those who took us blush; I would love on
> With awful state, regardless of their frowns,
> As their superior god.
>
> (III, i)

Restoration dramatists were themselves well aware of this double view of human nature which they were advancing: cynical in the comedies, idealistic in the tragedies. Indeed they exploited the tension between them. The same writer might turn out satirical comedy and heroic tragedy for the same audiences, sometimes in the same play. They appeal on both levels at the same time. In such writing the modes are not being confused; they are being mixed on purpose, like shot silk.

Marriage à la Mode (1672) can be used to exemplify this. In this piece Dryden knits together a satirical comedy and a heroic drama and lets them run their separate courses side by side. The scenes of witty intrigue between Rhodophil and Doralice (married), and Palamede and Melantha (soon to be married) constitute a typical satire of the period about lustful desire provoking adulterous chaos before being brought under control. That forms one strand of the plot. But in the other strand (which is not comic) king Leonidas struggles to the death against the usurper Polydamas.

Dryden mixes the comic and heroic stories in such a way as to make them one story. He invites his audience, that is, to respond to the characters both on a comic level and on a heroic level at the same time. Rhodophil's shaky marriage provides much satirical entertainment, yet Rhodophil, being captain of the guards, is liable to be executed if Polydamas beats Leonidas in the political struggle. The other characters also have this double function – heroic and comic side by side. Dryden has written in the same work a serious drama and a burlesque on serious drama. Of the resulting mixture it would be hard to say which is the main plot and which the minor plot. His point may be to highlight the arbitrary nature of dramatic typecasting and literary conventions, or, less pompously, to get some fun out of them.

Consider the following exchange between three of the four lovers in Act five. Rhodophil has just found Palamede, his friend, making advances to Doralice (Rhodophil's wife), so he challenges Palamede to a duel. Palamede, for his part, has previously suspected Rhodophil of tampering with Melantha (Palamede's mistress). So he accepts the challenge. Rhodophil has already admitted that he no longer loves Doralice. And Palamede, likewise, has admitted to himself that he has become tired of Melantha. So the duel, as far as romantic feelings go, could be dispensed with. But the men feel they are duty bound to fight. (Now read on.)

> *Rhodophil.* Further arguments are needless; draw off; I shall speak to you now by the way of bilbo. [*Claps his hands to his sword*].
>
> *Palamede.* And I shall answer you by the way of Dangerfield. [*Claps his hands on his*].
>
> *Doralice.* Hold, hold; are not you two a couple of mad fighting fools, to cut one another's throats for nothing?

> *Palamede.* How for nothing? He courts the woman I must marry.
> *Rhodophil.* And he courts you whom I have married.
> *Doralice.* But you can neither of you be jealous of what you love not.
> *Rhodophil.* Faith, I am jealous, and that makes me partly suspect that I love you better than I thought.
> *Doralice.* Pish! A mere jealousy of honour.
> *Rhodophil.* Gad, I am afraid there's something else in't; for Palamede has wit, and, if he loves you, there's something more in ye than I have found: some rich mine, for aught I know, that I have not yet discovered.
> *Palamede.* 'S life, what's this? Here's an argument for me to love Melantha; for he has loved her, and he has wit too, and, for aught I know, there may be a mine; but if there be, I am resolved I'll dig for 't.
> *Doralice* [*to Rhodophil*]. Then I have found my account in raising your jealousy. O! 'tis the most delicate sharp sauce to a cloyed stomach; it will give you a new edge, Rhodophil.
> *Rhodophil.* And a new point too, Doralice, if I could be sure thou art honest.
> *Doralice.* If you are wise believe me for your own sake, etc.
>
> (V, i)

Dryden has created a scene of honour struggling with affection, a scene so common to heroic drama as to be almost a cliché. Then he gives it the comic treatment. The result is an ironic mixture. The serious leads into the satirical, and the satirical leads back into the serious, posing a question for the audience. Is the play's tragic tendency the important action here? Or is the recoil from tragedy into comedy more important?

Restoration and eighteenth-century audiences liked this sophisticated recipe. Although not a sensational triumph, *Marriage à la Mode* was sufficiently popular to earn itself half a dozen revivals between 1672 and 1700, the year of Dryden's death.

On the subject of dramatic language, we can make a connection between this Dryden play about orgiastic sex with Wycherley's euphemistic dialogue, noted above. Dryden too, it will be noted, avoids any coarse expression while audaciously hinting at the most intimate of actions. (Consider what Palamede and Rhodophil are actually saying in the passage quoted above.)

Of the two modes here married in Dryden's play, tragedy soon faded from popularity, whereas satirical comedy remained longer in vogue. It was tragedy's extreme stylization which shortened its appeal. To later audiences the poetry of Thomas Otway (1652–85) and Nathaniel Lee (1653?–92) came to sound like bombast – rather unfairly; even Dryden fell out of love with the ranting style of his early years. A sympathetic formulation might be that heroic drama emigrated from literary into musical expression, first English dramatic opera, then after 1710, when George Frederic Handel (1685–1759) arrived in London, into Italian opera. Handel vigorously championed the latter form for twenty years after which Handelian opera had itself become a target for satire, as in John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728). From the 1730s onwards dramatic opera in England came under increasing challenge from dramatic oratorio. But that story would take another book.

Comedy was also changing. For example, in Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700) plot and attitudes seem cut out of the familiar stuff of the comedy of manners – cosmopolitanism, witty rivalry, sex obsession, pleasure seeking. But Congreve redeploys the material. The dark Hobbesian psychology which may underlie the libertine heroes of Wycherley, Etherege and the young Dryden has been replaced by a gentler ideal. Take the following exchange, in which Mirabell and Millamant, who are about to marry, stipulate what they will and will not put up with after marriage. Congreve can be seen as maintaining the genre's satire on marriage. Marriage, however, remains the lovers' goal.

> *Mirabell.* Have you any more conditions to offer? Hitherto your demands are pretty reasonable.
>
> *Millamant.* Trifles. – As liberty to pay and receive visits to and from whom I please; to write and receive letters, without interrogatories or wry faces on your part. To wear what I please, and choose conversation with regard only to my own taste; to have no obligation upon me to converse with wits that I don't like, or to be intimate with fools because they may be your relations. Come to dinner when I please, dine in my dressing-room when I'm out of humour, without giving a reason. To have my closet inviolate; to be sole empress of my tea-table, which you must never presume to approach without first asking leave. And lastly, wherever I am, you shall always knock at the door before you come in. These articles subscribed, if I continue to endure you a little longer, I may by degrees dwindle into a wife.
>
> (4, i)

Mirabell requires Millamant to banish sworn confidants, make-up, tight lacing and strong waters. Congreve prioritizes honest feeling, always valued in the comedy of wit, but here incorporated within marriage.

Noteworthy too is Millamant's plainness. She speaks a simple prose. Congreve's preference for a vivid, witty, straightforward style is another sign of the new priorities of Restoration literature. All comic drama after 1660 is written in prose though tragedy remained poetic. The preference is part of a general literary shift towards simpler speech and plainness in the arts.

John Palmer and Bonamy Dobrée, among modern critics of Restoration drama, have extended and deepened the appreciation of Congreve's comedy. L.C. Knights, in a 1937 essay reprinted in 1964 (pp. 139–57) put the contrary view. Knight's disparagement of the drama, based on both moral and stylistic grounds, has tended to provide the starting-point for later critics' efforts to rescue its reputation. Against Knights, for example, Kenneth Muir discusses (1965, pp. 231–5) *The Way of the World*'s 'beautifully varied' style. He summarizes: 'No dramatist has equalled Congreve in the creation of character by diction and rhythm.' And challenging the assertion that Restoration comedy is narrow, he comments that Congreve's true subject is not manners but false relationships and false ideas – perennial targets of comic writing.

In a half dozen plays overlapping with those of Congreve, George Farquhar popularized an open, inclusive comedy with the emphasis on action rather than wit. This, in the opinion of some, sounded the death knell of the Restoration style, but Farquhar's influence helped to establish comedy as the dominant eighteenth-century mode.

Farquhar made another significant change. He took the style as far as it could go towards explicit morality without sacrificing entertainment. Beside Wycherley's china scene or Congreve's proviso scene, both discussed above, place the following exchange between Aimwell and Dorinda from Act five of *The Beaux' Stratagem*, Farquhar's last play of 1707. For four acts Aimwell has wooed Dorinda for her £10,000, and is now about to gain her hand in marriage. But she warns him against marrying for the wrong reasons and offers him a chance to pull out of the engagement. This suddenly overwhelms Aimwell with remorse. He had entered the scene as a representative of the old-style libertine, or rake, but he exits from it as a man of feeling:

> *Aimwell [aside]* Such goodness who could injure; I find myself unequal to the task of villain; she has gained my soul, and made it honest like her own; – I cannot, cannot hurt her. [To Foigard] Doctor, retire. [Exit Foigard] Madam, behold your lover and your proselyte, and judge of my passion by my conversion. – I'm all a lie, nor dare I give fiction to your arms; I'm all counterfeit except my passion.
>
> *Dorinda.* Forbid it heaven! A counterfeit!
>
> *Aimwell.* I am no lord, but a poor needy man, come with a mean, a scandalous design to prey upon your fortune: – but the beauties of your mind and person have so won me from myself, that like a trusty servant, I prefer the interest of my mistress to my own.
>
> (4)

Farquhar turns on its head what the comedy of manners had always taken for granted about human motivation: namely, that relationships were ego-driven. *The Country Wife* shows us the overloaded Horner, the lustful women and their smug husbands learning the difference between selfish fantasy and reality. A kind of self-interest, even Mirabell and Millamant seek to protect in their famous contract. However, in Aimwell's change of heart in *The Beaux' Stratagem*, selfish appetite melts before the warmth of generous feeling. More accurately, perhaps, spiritual self-interest has replaced material gratification.

While Farquhar brings the comedy of manners, in this way, nearer to ordinary experience – for did Horner, the pure rake, ever exist? – he takes care not to let the moral note sound too loud. He limits Aimwell's reformation to a few lines. He keeps much of the old comic material. If Aimwell has reformed, Archer has not, and havoc results when he finds out what sentiment has done to his financial scheming. But Archer belongs in the past, and Aimwell signals the drama of the century ahead.

Drama historians tend to interpret this ideological change as evidence that seventeenth-century comic categories no longer fitted eighteenth-century audiences. The business-minded, middle-class and moralistic theatre patrons of Georgian London demanded a more middle-class drama. (For a more detailed discussion, see Loftis's two books on early Georgian drama.) But we know little about the make-up of eighteenth-century audiences beyond the fact that they were a minute fraction of the population: 1.7 per cent of Londoners, it has been calculated, attended theatre performances. (See Pedicord's painstaking account of the make-up of eighteenth-century audiences (1954).)

Whatever the reasons may have been, drama in the eighteenth century began calling upon its audiences to be virtuously respectable, not wittily interesting. As Pope put it in his preface to Addison's *Cato* (1713):

> Britons, attend; be worth like this approved,
> And show you have the virtue to be moved.
>
> (37–8)

John Palmer suggests that in Farquhar's writing we may see the manners tradition of comedy going into decline. But this is to pronounce judgement with hindsight. Farquhar himself was looking ahead, not back; more than anything else he was looking around him, and pushing comic drama closer to real life. His *Essay on Comedy* (1702) points out that people are mixed creatures, not monsters of vice or virtue, and also that theatre audiences, being diverse, would find a variety of entertainment more satisfying than one single dramatic offering. To this it could be replied that the new comedy of sentiment, not the old comedy of wit, would produce the real moral monsters.

After 1700 English drama tended towards ever greater generic variety, ever greater experiment. This lasted until 1737, when stage censorship was reintroduced. Editing a recent anthology of eighteenth-century drama, David W. Lindsay comments (1993, p. xxi) that he has included 'a neo-classical tragedy, a sentimental comedy, a ballad-opera, a dramatic burlesque, a bourgeois tragedy, a laughing comedy and a satirical comedy'. The references are to Addison's *Cato* (1713), Steele's *The Conscious Lovers* (1722), Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, Fielding's *The Tragedy of Tragedies, or Tom Thumb* (1730), Lillo's *The London Merchant* (1731), Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773) and Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* (1777). This list is varied enough, but even this leaves out Handelian opera sung in Italian, which after 1710 carried all before it for twenty years, and was replaced in popularity by its musical successor the oratorio, a form of still-life opera which Handel invented in the 1730s when public desire for the Italian variety was on the wane. Most popular of all, in the view of the audiences (though not of the critics), was the English pantomime devised in the 1720s by John Rich, theatre manager of Lincoln's Inn Fields. Rich was an extraordinary mime artist in his own right, and in his new entertainment mime and dance-drama were placed at the centre of attention, song and scenic display each supplied an essential element and dialogue found no place. His new miscellaneous comic-operatic form continued to attract crowded houses throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth. English pantomime, in fact, was the despised money spinner of the eighteenth-century stage. Its profits paid for bigger theatres. It helped to finance the productions of legitimate drama, new and revived. It made possible the reinterpretations of Shakespeare for which Macklin, Garrick and Kean received such acclaim. Theatre historians, however, have ignored it as a worthless form.

By Farquhar's death in 1707 Richard Steele was already drafting *The Conscious Lovers* (1722), which became the new model for sentimental-reforming comedy. It is hard to know whether the notorious 1698 attack on libertine drama by Jeremy Collier (1650–1726), or a sea change in British life under Queen Anne, or evolutionary pressures within drama, or a mixture of all three, was responsible for this emphasis on sentimental morality. But there can be no mistaking the new tone. Steele's first audience in 1722, listening to the prologue written by Leonard Welsted (1688–1747), were encouraged to give their backing to the new cult of bourgeois decency and to discard the old rakish style.

> 'Tis yours, with Breeding to refine the Age,
> To Chasten Wit, and Moralize the Stage.
> Ye Modest, Wise and Good, ye Fair, ye Brave,

> To-night the Champion of your Virtues save,
> Redeem from long Contempt the comic Name,
> And Judge Politely for your Country's Name.
> (Prologue, *The Conscious Lovers*, 27–32)

Welsted's first auditors would know perfectly well what he meant by refining the age, chastening wit and moralizing the stage. He meant two things. He meant no longer sympathizing with the charismatic libertines Dorimant, Horner and Palamede. Secondly, he meant admiring Bevil Junior, Steele's new hero, a paragon of cheerfulness, sensitivity and stiff speech.

Welsted's prologue extends this moral point into a patriotic one by suggesting that the audience, by reconsidering these values, would uphold British honour. This political emphasis, too, Steele would have agreed with. He writes into the play the positive figure Mr Sealand, an international trader, whom it is not an exaggeration to see as a new British hero for the times. In the society depicted in the old comedy, Sealand might have been a fool or miser. Now, he is society's ruler.

> *Mr Sealand.* Sir, as much a cit as you take me for – I know the town, and the world – and give me leave to say, that we merchants are a species of gentry, that have grown into the world this last century, and are as honourable, and almost as useful, as you landed folks, that have always thought your selves so much above us. (*The Conscious Lovers*, 4, ii)

Against this moralizing tendency in English drama (and against much besides), John Gay in 1728 directed the scattershot satire of *The Beggar's Opera*. In Gay's play it would be difficult to say who or what is not being ridiculed. Even Polly, the heroine, reveals wretched judgement in doting on Macheath. The cult of sentiment was certainly in Gay's sights, as when the Peachums' reduction of all motivation to self-interest mocks the prudential morality encouraged by Richard Steele. Italian opera was a major target. Others were pantomime, realistic drama, criminal biography and ballad romance. Gay could include almost anything in *The Beggar's Opera* because, during his lifetime, drama itself was generically fluid. Yet his unified tone, easy manner and light touch on the page, or the stage, give the play its unique appeal, and these are less easy to explain. Consider the graceful way in which he rounds things off. The player and beggar watch Macheath being led to execution:

> *Player.* But, honest friend, I hope you don't intend that Macheath shall be really executed.
>
> *Beggar.* Most certainly, sir. To make the piece perfect, I was for doing strict poetical justice. Macheath is to be hanged; and for the other personages of the drama, the audience must have supposed they were all either hanged or transported.
>
> *Player.* Why then, friend, this is a downright deep tragedy. The catastrophe is manifestly wrong, for an opera must end happily.
>
> *Beggar.* Your objection, sir, is very just; and is easily removed. For you must allow that, in this kind of drama, 'tis no matter how absurdly things are brought about – so – you rabble there – run and cry a reprieve – let the prisoner be brought back to his wives in triumph.
> (3, xvi)

Gay here offers his audience entertainment on two levels: there is the plot, and secondly there is the plot stood on its head. Such fooling with convention was a habit of Gay's – his first play was a generic medley called *The What D'Ye Call It?* (1715). But it is also a form of self-referencing which can be described as peculiarly characteristic of eighteenth-century literature in general. Gay is writing a play about writing plays. Elsewhere, Pope writes poems about poetry. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) uses, and mocks, the conventions of travel writing. Later in the century Henry Fielding, partly drawing on Scriblerian influences, shows the same self-referencing tendency as dramatist in his 1730s plays. (See, for example, *Tom Thumb the Great* (1730).)

Gay's light entertainment raises the questions: what governs literature; and how should it relate to life? In a recent study John Donaldson has pointed out that his ability to be at once 'ironical and sentimental, risible and grave' challenges neo-classical ideas on the division of kinds (1970, p. 161). (Farquhar's 1702 prose essay on dramatic comedy also threw out the rules.) A little later Donaldson writes (p. 163) that 'heroic tragedy, Italian opera, pastoral, popular ballads and sentimental comedy merge bizarrely together'. But, as has been suggested, Augustan theatrical experiment is even more varied than this implies.

Though some new tendencies in contemporary theatre come together in Gay's writing, the priority he gives to wit might be judged a throwback to an earlier style. More characteristic of the dramatic writing of the 1720s is Mr Sealand's declamatory speech in Steele's *The Conscious Lovers*: assertive rather than urbane. A decade later in *The London Merchant* (1731) George Lillo brought the same sententious style out of comedy into tragedy, in fact into bourgeois melodrama. In place of the neo-classical tragic restraint, of which Addison's *Cato* (1713) is a good example, *The London Merchant* offers melodramatic excess. This we may see in the lurid language given to Barnwell, the bad apprentice, when he addresses his seducer as he meets her on his way to the gallows:

> O turn your eyes from earth, and me, to Heaven, where virtue, like yours, is ever heard. Pray for the peace of my departing soul! Early my race of wickedness began, and soon has reached the summit. Ere Nature has finished her work, and stamped one man – just at the time that others begin to stray – my course is finished. Though short my span of life, and few my days, yet, count my crimes for years, and I have lived whole ages. Justice and mercy are in Heaven the same: its utmost severity is mercy to the whole, thereby to cure man's folly and presumption, which else would render even infinite mercy vain and ineffectual. Thus justice, in compassion to mankind, cuts off a wretch like me, by one such example to secure thousands from future ruin. (*The London Merchant*, 5, ii)

This scene (though not its language) may recall the close of Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, in which the devil demands Faustus's soul. Lillo's hero is indeed a bourgeois Faustus.

In *The London Merchant* raw feeling and ranting morality combine to produce that sensationalism which is the soft underbelly of Augustan suavity. The blank verse lines buried within Barnewell's speech (knowingly or not, who can tell?) gesture towards rhythmic elevation, and hint at poetry within the prose: 'O turn your eyes from earth, and me, to Heaven'; 'Though short my span of life, and few my days' – or, perhaps, in the latter case, 'and few my days, yet count my crimes for years'. It may go too far to suggest, with Norman Holland, that sentimental drama can already be seen in the writings of Congreve. But the popularity of Steele and Lillo with theatre audiences tells us that melodrama was alive and flourishing long before the nineteenth century.

Sheridan and Goldsmith in the 1760s launched a counter-attack against the lachrymose morality of these depictions. Their handful of witty pieces, harking back to an earlier period, were termed by Goldsmith 'laughing comedies' in an attempt to rescue the vivacity throttled by sentiment. There are differences between the two: Sheridan brings Congreve and Vanbrugh to mind, Goldsmith may be thought closer to Farquhar. Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* (1777) attacks the 'serious comedy' school by depicting a man of sentiment, in Joseph Surface, indistinguishable from the hypocrite. Goldsmith in *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773) had earlier championed honest feeling against pretentiousness of any kind. Both writers, however, invoke rather than reinvent the Restoration style. They echo it, but theirs is a tamed and toned-down version. Contrast, for example, with the depths of depravity explored by Wycherley in *The Country Wife* the superficiality of the evil dealt with by Sheridan in the following characteristic scene from *The School for Scandal.*

> *Mrs Candour.* Now, I'll die, but you are so scandalous, I'll forswear your society.
> *Lady Teazle.* What's the matter, Mrs Candour?
> *Mrs Candour.* They'll not allow our friend Miss Vermillion to be handsome.
> *Lady Sneerwell.* Oh, surely she's a pretty woman.
> *Crabtree.* I am very glad you think so, madam.
> *Mrs Candour.* She has a charming fresh colour.
> *Lady Teazle.* Yes, when it is fresh put on.
> *Mrs Candour.* Oh, fie! I'll swear her colour is natural: I have seen it come and go!
> *Lady Teazle.* I dare swear you have, ma'am: it goes off at night, and comes again in the morning.
> *Sir Benjamin.* True, ma'am, it not only comes and goes, but, what's more – egad, her maid can fetch and carry it!
> *Mrs Candour.* Ha! ha! ha! how I hate to hear you talk so!
>
> (2, ii)

Evil – raw vice – would hardly be the term for the activity depicted here: it is mild bad manners. To place Wycherley's world of destructive appetite beside such chit chat is to register how the comic vision has thinned in a hundred years. Sheridan aims for wit, but in restricting himself to a cast of shallow gossips – a dramatized *Rape of the Lock* – he also keeps within safe boundaries, and falls in with his age.

By Sheridan's time Shaftesburian psychology, stressing innate virtue, had replaced the pessimistic theories of Hobbes. (For a more expansive discussion of the thought and literary influence of these two philosophers, see Basil Willey's two volumes listed in the bibliography.) We may phrase the difference in the following way. For Wycherley, to give way to instinct, as Horner does, is to take the first step on the road to chaos; for Sheridan, to give way to instinct, as Charles Surface does, is to move towards generous fellowship. Such is the reappraisal that English drama makes about human nature between 1660 and 1760. None of this is intended to underrate Sheridan or Goldsmith. One could argue that they are the more serious writers. Backbiting might do more damage than lust.

That Goldsmith felt the need to reinvent 'laughing comedy' in this fashion underlines his conviction that drama at mid-century had taken a wrong turn. But critics may differ over his analysis. To some it may seem that Goldsmith and Sheridan register an effective protest against the sentimental drama of Cumberland and Kelly. Against this one could argue that even in Sheridan benevolence has left its mark; despite his barbed style he does not revolt against the priorities of his age.

Let us end on Goldsmith. Although in his plays and poems sympathy is extended to the lowly, heart-wisdom is preferred over the wisdom of the head, and sentiment reigns, what makes him most interesting in the present context is his tension. Neo-classical restraint and the pressure of feeling counter-balance each other in his work. Such balance is a rare achievement. Meanwhile, around Goldsmith, sentimentalizing and democratizing tendencies growing ever stronger imply for creative writing a wholly different future direction. To begin discussing this would be out of place in the present unit.

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