Dialogue and Duelling in Restoration Comedy

by Kathleen Leicht

ALTHOUGH not every duel was fatal, the life-or-death consequences of many actual duels that took place in England during the long eighteenth century may be difficult for twenty-first-century readers to imagine. Restoration and early eighteenth-century comedies make this imagining no easier, for their lighthearted treatment of duelling portrays the often deadly activity as just one of the many hazards and amusements that constitute fashionable life.

This lighthearted treatment in comedy veils the seriousness of the cultural debate surrounding the practice of duelling throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Some English saw duelling as a civilizing practice because it provided gentlemen with a remedy for addressing impolite acts, figured as offenses against honor. For others, duelling was a threat to civilized society because it taught gentlemen to assert their own authority rather than encouraging them to turn to established authorities, like the king and the law. In a recent study, Markku Peltonen traces these views through the conduct books of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries.[1] As British society became increasingly concerned with politeness, duelling became both more prevalent and an increasingly controversial issue. Peltonen situates duelling at the center of the debate about civility that Anna Bryson traces in her study, *From Courtesy to Civility*.[2] The representations of duelling in the plays I examine here, dating from 1664 to 1707, support the assertion that duelling became a central site of England's struggle

[1] Peltonen, *The Duel in Early Modern England: Civility, Politeness and Honour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[2] Bryson, *From Courtesy to Civility: Changing Codes of Conduct in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

to accommodate its own shifting attitudes about civil, as opposed to courteous or courtly, conduct.

In addition, references to duelling in comedy reflect the issues raised by changing class, government, authority, identity, and even rhetorical structures in England following the Civil War. Duelling increased in England during the latter half of the seventeenth century, despite proclamations against it issued by Cromwell and by Charles II.[3] Comic representations of duelling addressed audience anxiety about this increase. Whether the polite society attending the theater was fearful of being affected by the violence or protective of its right to engage in it, the irreverent portrayals of duelling in comedy presented the limits of both positions.

Richard Kroll argues that the turmoil of 1640–1660 changed the structure of English public discourse: "the Restoration marks a multiple discursive reorientation, responding to a series of pressures that focuses and encourages a new constellation of discursive activities."[4] Among these activities are acknowledgments of contingency, metonymic and synecdochic figures, arguments based on probability, and an emphasis on the reader's responsibility "to educe general principles from partial but suggestive signs."[5] Theater audiences, like readers, construct interpretations of plays by responding to a variety of particulate signs, in this case those presented on stage. Although the new plays that we think of as Restoration comedies only constituted a part of the late seventeenth-century theatrical repertoire, they enact the new rhetoric Kroll describes by highlighting the audience's responsibility to interpret the action or, more commonly, the dialogue. When the dialogue in these plays focuses on duelling, it often illustrates ideological conflicts, satirizes the performative nature of living in a civil society, and

[3] V. G. Kiernan, *The Duel in European History: Honor and the Reign of Aristocracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 94–100. See also the *Calendar of State Papers* for June 29 and July 6, 1654 (*The Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, 1649–1660*, ed. Mary Anne Everett Green [London, 1875–76; repr., Vaduz: Kraus Reprint, 1965]) and for August 13, 1660 (*The Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the Reign of Charles II, 1660–[1685]*, ed. Mary Anne Everett Green, Francis Henry Blackburne Daniell, and Francis Lawrance Bickley [London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1860–1939]).

[4] Kroll, *The Material Word: Literate Culture in the Restoration and Early Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 39.

[5] Ibid., 22; for discussion of contingency and probability, see 49–79. Investigations of scientific rhetoric have also shown the role that contingency and probability played in seventeenth-century discourse. See, for example, Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth, Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

draws attention to the abstract qualities of language. These features in turn direct the audience's attention to the need for interpretation.

Duels also draw attention to the historical circumstances fuelling their rise during the Restoration. Jonathan Scott identifies "the length and depth of [England's] experience of political instability" as specific to the seventeenth century, and he characterizes the period as one in which "institutions were fragile and ideas powerful."[6] A duel embodies the powerful idea of honor. When represented or referred to on stage, a duel forces examination of institutions positioned to replace such ideas in the movement from courteous to civil society. Following the regicide and the Civil War, what these institutions might be was an open question structuring many of the conflicts portrayed in Restoration comedy.[7]

Most importantly, perhaps, representations of duelling in comedy provided a mechanism for class identification without the bloodshed. V. G. Kiernan argues that the duel was the result of artistocratic gentlemen's need to identify themselves as aristocrats in the face of threats to that identity from a rising middle or trade class.[8] Bryson traces a similar need for class identification in the concept of civility itself. She goes so far as to argue that "[m]ost authors [of conduct books] were insistent that the codes of 'courtesy' and 'civility' which they present were the prerogative, duty, and mark of the upper ranks of society."[9] Her argument about Restoration comedy is that it "offers a ruthlessly cynical view of social and sexual rules as forms of strategy and one-upmanship."[10] The lighthearted treatment of duelling as just another fashionable affectation contributes to this cynical view, but the underlying seriousness of the duelling code also undermines cynicism, suggesting that a gentleman must at some level believe in the duelling code in order to be a gentleman.

The predicament of having to defend one's honor at the possible cost of one's life is, after all, integral to the rules of many social interactions portrayed in comedy. As Robert Hume has written, "the importance of the gentleman's duelling code is seriously maintained everywhere in

[6] Scott, *England's Troubles: Seventeenth-Century English Political Instability in European Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 20–24.

[7] Susan Owen shows how comedy participates in the political discourses most often associated with heroic drama and tragedy in *Perspectives on Restoration Drama* ([Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002], 42–84).

[8] Kiernan, *The Duel in European History*, 1–19.

[9] Bryson, *From Courtesy to Civility*, 7.

[10] Ibid., 18.

Carolean comedy."[11] Peltonen underscores this seriousness by discussing Restoration comedies that highlight the difference between "true" men of honor and fops who just want the appearance of honor.[12] The duellist's predicament—that of having to defend his honor at the cost of his life—contains two contrary impulses. The idealistic impulse to defend at any cost the abstract notion of honor conflicts with the pragmatic impulse of survival: even a gentleman may wish to maintain his life at any cost. The duel represents an imperfect attempt to reconcile these two impulses. It becomes an irresistible device for many comic dramatists because it pits high ideals against common concerns, and this juxtaposition is full of comic potential for any playwright with even a slightly satirical vision.

The duel proves itself an effective device for addressing the ways in which individuals and society fall short of their ideas and ideals. The contradictions inherent in the practice of duelling are glaringly apparent, yet its social purpose is largely to resolve them. When two gentlemen cannot resolve their competing claims, the outcome of a duel forces a resolution by determining who gets to be right. However, the determination may be somewhat arbitrary, as the outcome ultimately depends on the combatants' strength, agility, concentration, or some other factor and not on the question of honor that led them to fight in the first place. Comic dramatists of the Restoration and early eighteenth century see this disparity between the rhetoric of honor and the all-but-arbitrary outcome of the violence demanded by it. They use the duel to show that many of England's ideals were not practical, while some of its practices were not ideal.

In *The Comical Revenge* (1664), Sir George Etherege addresses directly the paradoxical nature of honor and shows how, in the wake of civil war, the question of what to think about honor remains perplexing. About to be forced into a duel, Sir Nicholas Cully contemplates how he could have avoided the confrontation:

> *Sir Nicholas:* Colonel Hewson is my neighbor, and very good friend; I might have acquainted him with the business, and got him with a file of musketeers to secure us all.
>
> *Wheadle:* But this would not secure your honour. What would the world have judged?

[11] Hume, *The Development of English Drama in the Late Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 75.

[12] Peltonen, *The Duel in Early Modern England*, 181–90.

> *Sir Nicholas:* Let the world have judged what it would: have we not had many precedents of late, and the world knows not what to judge?[13]

In this scene, the audience would see Sir Nicholas as cowardly and simply preferring not to fight. Susan Wiseman reads in Sir Nicholas satire of those who supported the Rump during the Civil War, but as she also notes, Etherege's play is not unequivocally satirical.[14]

The duel in which Sir Nicholas participates is a comic precursor to the more serious duel that involves the loyalist characters. Colonel Bruce's refusal to fight is harder to dismiss than Sir Nicholas's. For example, even though he loves Graciana, Bruce refuses to accept Beaufort's challenge because Beaufort has just saved Bruce's life. When Bruce allows Beaufort to disarm him, Lovis, who looks on, is incredulous:

> Before we bleed! Do we here fight a prize,
> Where handsome proffers may for wounds suffice?
> I am amazed! What means this bloodless field?
> (69)

Falling on his sword in an attempt to display courage without sacrificing his honor, Bruce and his actions call into question any simple idea of honor and complicate Lovis's suggestion that bloodshed demonstrates honor. Yet Etherege stops short of making Bruce's action a heroic sacrifice: the wound is not fatal, and in the end Bruce happily marries Aurelia, Graciana's sister.

The play encourages audiences to ask what constitutes honor. Bruce proclaims before the duel that Beaufort and Sir Frederick are worthy opponents precisely because they save Bruce and Lovis from the dishonorable villains that beset them at the beginning of act 4: "this action makes it well appear / 'Tis honour and not envy brings you here" (68). Graciana, too, asks what constitutes honor for her. "Which is the path that doth to honour lead?" she asks, while referring to the decisions before her as a "lab'rinth" (72).

As *The Comical Revenge* shows, the path toward honor is not always clear. When different interpretations of honor collide, a duel determines which combatant's claim to truth will attain hegemony. Paradoxically,

[13] Etherege, *The Comical Revenge; or, Love in a Tub*, in *The Plays of Sir George Etherege*, ed. Michael Cordner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 50. Subsequent quotations are cited parenthetically within the text.

[14] Wiseman, *Drama and Politics in the English Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 212.

of course, for two gentlemen to meet in a duel they must agree on the basic definition of honor that led to the challenge in the first place.

First, then, among the cultural ends specific to the portrayal of duels in comedy is that they illustrate effects on the individual of ideological conflicts inherent in the late seventeenth century's changing structures of authority. As Jessica Munns notes of plays of this period: "one may observe mixed—indeed often mingled—responses: reassertions of traditional authority alongside progressive theories of change, and skeptical doubt over the validity of either or both approaches."[15] The duel is the result of such mingled responses even as it begins to function as a signifier of them. Duelling is a practice reminiscent of older, chivalric orders, and English monarchs were apt to frown on it as a challenge to their ultimate authority. Nonetheless, duelling became increasingly popular and fashionable during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in England precisely because it did enable individuals to take action to guard their own reputations.

Historians have shown that duels, despite being consciously private affairs, also display many elements of performance: the elaborate rituals for issuing or accepting a challenge, the ambiguous status of the seconds as both participants and spectators, even the scars received from an opponent's sword and worn as a sort of jewelry in some cultures point toward the performative nature of any duel.[16] The characters in Sir William Davenant's *The Man's the Master* (1673) illustrate these performative aspects of duels by referring to them in the context of fashion. Ferdinand claims that the challenge he has issued to the disguised, reluctant Jodelet "is the fashion, Sir."[17] In trying to determine a private venue for the duel, Don John also refers to the dictates of fashion:

> Revenge is often interrupted in the Field, because now even all peculiar Fields are turn'd to common Roads about this populous Town. If I could find some House, though 'tis against the fashion us'd in Duels . . . . (371)

Even as he tries to avoid publicity, Don John acknowledges the role that fashion and thus performance or the public display of fashion play in constructing a duel.

[15] Munns, "Change, Skepticism, and Uncertainty," in *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre*, ed. Deborah Payne Fisk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 143.

[16] Kevin McAleer, *Dueling: The Cult of Honor in fin de siècle Germany* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994), 148.

[17] Davenant, *The Man's the Master*, in *The Works of Sir William Davenant*, 2 vols. (1673; repr., New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968), 2:368. Subsequent quotations are cited parenthetically within the text.

Duels performed or discussed on stage, therefore, provide playwrights with an easy opportunity to comment on the performative nature of much human interaction and the way that interaction may transform apparently fixed identity. Identity itself is based on an individual's performance in the social arena, just as a duellist's identity may be determined by what happens on the field of honor. A duellist who kills an opponent, for example, may become an outlaw forced to flee the country. Following a duel, either one of the combatant's identities may change as a result of the action.

The subplot of *The Country Wife* (1675) illustrates William Wycherley's use of the comic duel to comment on the ways humans perform for each other all the time. Wycherley focuses particularly on the performative interactions between men and women. Sparkish wishes to appear to advantage before his mistress by participating in a duel. He offers to draw on Harcourt when Alithea mentions that Harcourt has been calling Sparkish "A senseless, driveling idiot."[18] Alithea's contentions that Harcourt has been making love to her and that he is not a friend to Sparkish make no impression on him; only when Harcourt's insults become personal does Sparkish offer to draw. When Sparkish can no longer avoid defending his honor, his comments suggest that the opportunity to appear to advantage is what convinces him to do so. He and Pinchwife outnumber Harcourt, as Sparkish points out:

> How! Did he disparage my parts? Nay, then my honor's concerned; I can't put up that, sir, by the world. Brother, help me to kill him.—(*Aside*) I may draw now, since we have the odds of him. 'Tis a good occasion, too, before my mistress—(*Offers to draw*). (35–36)

Wycherley is showing, of course, that Sparkish's concern for his appearance is what constitutes for him the foundation of his honor; it outweighs the limited interest he has in his mistress's welfare. The audience sees that Sparkish displays no more substantive notion of honor, and therefore he avoids having to wrestle with any of the conflicts that come from attempting to maintain a substantive, idealistic notion of honor in an utterly performative society.

For Alithea, the threat of the duel does evoke these conflicts, and it leads to a transformation: it is the moment where she first acknowledges in an aside that she does not find Harcourt wholly unattractive, despite the challenge this attraction presents to her strict sense of honor.

[18] Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, ed. Thomas H. Fujimura (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 35. Subsequent quotations are cited parenthetically within the text.

In order to prevent violence, she lies about Harcourt's motives for disparaging Sparkish: "Indeed, to tell the truth, the gentleman said after all that what he spoke was but out of friendship to you" (36). Alithea quickly resolves the conflict between pragmatism and idealism: she forfeits the idealistic goals of maintaining strict virtue and never lying for the realistic, practical ends of protecting lives and buying time for sorting out her own amorous inclinations. By relating Alithea's dilemma over honor to Sparkish's inept handling of his affair of honor, Wycherley shows how both sexes have to negotiate the extent to which they will adhere to the gendered ideological demands of honor. Ready to marry the dashing Harcourt rather than the fop Sparkish by the end of the play, Alithea nonetheless maintains a modified sense of honor that enables her to function in the society.[19] Like a duellist, she manages to resolve the conflict between the fallen world in which she lives and her own high ideals.

Similarly, Wycherley himself has to modify his portrayal of the classic duel in order to fit the demands of the theater of his time. Sparkish's challenge hardly fits the parameters of the classic duel: he merely offers to draw right then and there. He issues no formal challenge, makes no formal appointment, and does not wait for any formal reply. Yet the audience cannot dismiss the incident as a mere brawl either. Sparkish refers to the chivalrous concept of honor, and the other characters show no sign that they think Sparkish and Harcourt are behaving as anything but gentlemen. Wycherley appears to be using a shorthand version of the duel. Furthermore, most of the rhetoric of duelling occurs in the second plot of the play: the main plot line involving Margery and Horner does not contain references to duelling, beyond a joke about Horner's willingness to serve as Pinchwife's second (102) and a joke about how surgeons will lie to protect duellists from legal action.[20] However, the violence with which Pinchwife threatens Margery in the scene where he forces her to write to Horner provides a contrast to the mild-mannered, not-particularly-serious challenge of Sparkish:

[19] James Thompson contrasts Alithea's evolving sense of honor with the consistent but shallow sense in which Lady Fidget uses the word. While focusing on the language of the play, Thompson observes that "[t]hroughout the play, Horner and Pinchwife duel in and with metaphors" (*Language in Wycherley's Plays: Seventeenth-Century Language Theory and Drama* [University: University of Alabama Press, 1984], 84).

[20] In the edition of *The Country Wife* reproduced in the second edition of *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, editor Stuart Sherman makes the connection between Pinchwife's joke and the law against duelling (gen. ed. David Damrosch, 2 vols. [New York: Longman, 2003], 1:2354, n. 6).

Pinchwife: Once more write as I'd have you, and question it not, or
I will spoil thy writing with this. (*Holds up the penknife.*)
I will stab out those eyes that cause my mischief.
(102)

The potential for violence within the legal marriage exceeds that of the illegal duel.

The duel's abbreviated and secondary nature in *The Country Wife* complicates its function as a signifier of the contradictions inherent in Restoration society. However, the shorthand portrayal also highlights the metonymic function of the duel by showing how few elements of an actual duel Wycherley had to portray in order to invoke the many cultural associations inherent in the practice of duelling. Audiences would have come to the theater with a whole range of cultural meanings already attached to the practice of duelling.

Generally, the comedies discussed here portray very little action, as the combat is more frequently verbal. Discussion about duelling is far more prevalent than actual scenes of duelling, and the consequences of talk about the duel are almost always more important than any consequences for the characters from the action of the duelling itself. Instead of functioning as an important dramatic action, as we might expect, the duel frequently represents an occasion for discourse. Surprisingly, it enables playwrights to address abstract qualities of language in a concrete signifying event. Peltonen traces the roots of this verbal emphasis to the Italianate ideology of courtesy and civility that, he argues, was the source of many English beliefs about duelling: "Good manners and grace, beauty and attire were important, but speech and words were by far the most crucial in shaping a gentleman's courteous image."[21] A duel can be the central offstage event around which the characters seem to construct themselves through language.

Sir John Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* (1696) shows again how conveniently the duel enables the playwright to comment on the ways in which humans' interactions with each other are highly performative. In this play, more than in *The Country Wife*, though, it is a specifically verbal performance, as Vanbrugh makes the substitution of language for action explicit. The slight scratch Lord Foppington receives in a duel redoubles his tendency to take refuge from human interaction in the affected language for which he is famous. The duel is a fashion Foppington casts off once its flesh and blood consequences threaten to become anything

[21] Peltonen, *The Duel in Early Modern England*, 25.

more than mere rhetoric. Lord Foppington and Loveless draw and fight, and Lord Foppington is wounded, though not seriously, as the surgeon tells the audience in an aside: "A little prick between the skin and the ribs, that's all."[22] Publicly, however, the surgeon is smart enough to pander to Lord Foppington's apparently limitless vanity: "Oons, what a gash is here! Why, sir, a man may drive a coach and six horses into your body" (44). The doctor exaggerates the severity of the wound in order to be able to charge Lord Foppington a high fee for dressing it.

By the next act, Lord Foppington reverts to mere discussion of duels. Action is no longer attractive, and he answers a challenge from his brother with a pious little speech:

> Your paverty makes your life so burdensome to you, you would provoke me to a quarrel, in hopes either to slip through my lungs into my estate or to get yourself run through the guts to put an end to your pain. But I will disappoint you in both your designs, far with the temper of a philasapher and the discretion of a statesman—I will go to the play with my sword in my scabbard. (60)

Lord Foppington takes refuge from the actual consequences of duels in the cavalier tone of his discourse about them. Phrases like "slip through my lungs" and "run through the guts" reduce grim and bloody confrontations to cartoon-like threats and misunderstandings. The fop is content with struggling in the world of witty verbal performances but will have nothing further to do with the deep-seated conflicts that underlie it. The fact that he is going to a play reminds the audience members that they, too, have chosen to avoid other forms of exertion by spending their afternoon in the refuge of dramatic representation.

Thomas Shadwell's *The Squire of Alsatia* (1688) appears initially to refute the assertion that talk about the duel is more important than action. Act 1 is full of the aptly named Captain Hackum's cant about duelling. He talks about making Sir William Belfond "scamper" and of "whip[ping] thee through the Lungs."[23] When Belfond Senior's so-called friends—Cheatly, Shamwell, and Hackum—decline the opportunity to defend him against his younger brother, their excuses are full of the rhetoric of honor and bravery, but Shadwell exposes them as mere cowards:

[22] Vanbrugh, *The Relapse*, ed. Curt A. Zimansky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 44. Subsequent quotations are cited parenthetically within the text.

[23] Shadwell, *The Squire of Alsatia*, in *The Complete Works of Thomas Shadwell*, ed. Montague Summers, 5 vols. (London: The Fortune Press, 1927), 4:218.

Cheatly: If you were not the Brother to my dearest Friend, I know what my honour would prompt me to. *Walks in a huff.*

Shamwell: . . . My Honour will not let me strike thy Brother. (246)

After similar excuses Hackum even adds: "besides, I am to be second to a dear Friend, and preserve my vigour for his service" (246–47). These comments ring especially hollow in the wake of the actual confrontation between these clownish characters and Sir William, which occurs in act 1. Sir William, a man of action disgusted by town cant, calmly explains to his brother how his enemies "spoke a particular language which such Rogues have made to themselves, called Canting," and how he "made his Bullies go away very tamely at the sight of [his] drawn Sword" (219). These comments clearly suggest that Shadwell is privileging action over language.

However, even as Sir William disposes of canting, another character goes on to dispose of duelling. Sir William himself becomes the object of criticism when opposed to his less strict brother, Sir Edward. To sum up the moral of the play, Sir Edward says in a speech to Belfond Junior that

> I am not streight Lac'd; but when I was Young, I n'er knew any thing gotten by Wenching, but Duels, Claps, and Bastards: And every drunken fit is a short madness, that cuts off a good part of Life. (238)

Duelling, then, becomes lumped along with drinking and wenching as idle activities that cut off a good part of life. While the duelling of Sir William appears to be better than the idle cant of Hackum and his friends, in the end integrity of word and action appears to be more desirable than idle talk or action without refinement. Sir Edward and not Sir William is the representative of the aristocratic ideal because he illustrates the restraint needed to maintain duelling as a signifier of social class: overused, the duel becomes merely the indulgence of a vulgar appetite and not the signifier of social privilege. Derek Hughes contends that Sir Edward also represents, in contrast to Sir William's Stuart absolutism, "an authority that is conditional, potentially contractual."[24] Shadwell's play affirms Kiernan's major point about the duel: it

[24] Hughes, "Restoration and Settlement: 1660 and 1688," in *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre*, ed. Deborah Payne Fisk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 139.

functions as a cultural institution that helps to maintain social class distinctions, particularly "where aristocratic values were defending themselves under pressure from a more modern and encroaching social order."[25]

As is frequently the case, Aphra Behn's work disrupts easy conclusions, in this case the conclusion that Tory playwrights always defend the aristocracy.[26] *The Luckey Chance* (1686) opens with the hero, Bellmour, returning surreptitiously to England after having left the country following his involvement in a duel. Apparently, Bellmour is as ready as ever to draw his sword; he begins a swordfight with Gayman in the first few moments of the play because he mistakenly assumes that Gayman is Leticia's intended bridegroom. Gayman corrects him, informing him that Leticia is betrothed to Sir Feeble Fainwou'd, partly because of "the improbability of your ever gaining your Pardon for your high Duel."[27] Bellmour acknowledges that his case is hard, "I being the first Transgressor since the Act against Duelling" (226). However, when he finds out that Sir Feeble has already obtained the pardon so that Bellmour himself will not be able to obtain it, he becomes furious. In high comic style, he gets possession of the pardon by resorting to the very tactics Sir Feeble has used against him—deceit and disguise. Behn's play shows the corruption of the established representatives of authority, Sir Feeble and Sir Cautious Fulbanks, and shows that the younger Bellmour will have to match their corruption to be able literally to live in England. The duel makes him an outlaw, but he has no recourse that lies inside the law for the wrongs perpetrated against him. Behn's play encourages the audience to question whether a society governed by law is any different from one governed by outmoded chivalric codes of honor.

Throughout the period covered by the plays discussed here, duelling

[25] Kiernan, *The Duel in European History*, 7. For a taxonomy of additional ways aristocratic values appear in Restoration comedy, see J. Douglas Canfield, *Tricksters and Estates: On the Ideology of Restoration Comedy* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997). Susan Owen, in *Restoration Theatre and Crisis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), shows how aristocratic values were entwined with ongoing political controversy when they appeared or were challenged in the new plays produced during the Exclusion Crisis.

[26] Derek Hughes argues that in *The Luckey Chance*, aristocratic values are "presented with still greater ambivalence than was usual for Behn" (*The Theatre of Aphra Behn* [Basingstroke: Palgrave, 2001], 161).

[27] Behn, *The Luckey Chance*, in *The Works of Aphra Behn*, ed. Janet Todd, 7 vols. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996), 7:223. Subsequent quotations will be cited parenthetically within the text.

was prevalent and increasing at such a rate that one colorful history claims "soon ballrooms, coffee-houses and public walks were all scenes of fighting and bloodshed."[28] One final purpose of comic portrayals of duels, then, may have been to dissipate anxiety about their increasing prevalence. What audiences could not stop, they could laugh at.

In George Farquhar's *The Beaux' Stratagem* (1707), a brief, lighthearted reference to duelling seems to refer to circumstances with which the audience would be familiar. Archer, disguised as servant to Aimwell, tells Scrub that his master

> fought a Duel t'other day in London, wounded his Man so dangerously, that he thinks fit to withdraw till he hears whether the Gentleman's Wounds be mortal or not: He never was in this part of England before, so he chose to retire to this Place, that's all.[29]

Scrub responds by contrasting Archer's desire for secrecy with the practices of "our Masters in the Country here," who tell their wives as soon as they receive a challenge so that the gossip will spread and "hinder two Men from doing what they have no mind for" (192). Thus, the talk about duelling prevents duels, at least in the country. The women gossipers function as regulators of the action, preventing duels rather than provoking them. Both Archer's story and Scrub's response suggest that duels are so prevalent that the audience would be able to recognize a familiar situation in both the alibi itself and in the observation regarding gossip about it. If, in fact, duels occur less frequently in the country, an assumption that seems reasonable in light of Kiernan's contention that urbanization played a role in spreading the practice of duels,[30] Farquhar's joke serves to bring country audience members into the fold of sophisticated theatergoers who understand jokes about duels. Even the relative absence of duels in the country becomes a joke about the prevalence of duels elsewhere.

In addition, the line about hindering two men from doing what they have no mind for, although comic in the extreme, deflates the heroic pretensions and glorious mythology supporting the practice of duelling.

[28] Robert Baldick, *The Duel: A History* (1965; repr., New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1996), 69.

[29] Farquhar, *The Beaux' Stratagem*, in *The Works of George Farquhar*, ed. Shirley Strum Kenny, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 2:192. Subsequent quotations will be cited parenthetically within the text.

[30] Kiernan, *The Duel in European History*, 116.

The scene gets to the heart of the matter: no one wants to have to die to prove his honor, yet the cultural codes surrounding that bugbear honor demand it. This is the paradox of duels that fascinated audiences, and this is the paradox that made duels a prevalent device in the comedies of the paradoxical Restoration stage.

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