

## **Farcical innocuousness versus morality and satire in the comedies of Thomas Durfey**

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### ABSTRACT

Durfey's comedies, the early ones in particular, have been often considered farcical, even nonsensical, rather than satirical. This paper explores the hybrid nature of Durfey's work, in which farcical externals often veil a grim view of the ways of his time.

Some Restoration comedies are predominantly farcical, others border on satire, and even those intrinsically comic may be very different, since they may emulate Jonson's humours style or, following Fletcher, focus on love intrigue. I have already written on these generic ambivalences, but focusing on the Restoration playwrights' theoretical views (2001). Now I will deal with their presence in Durfey's comedies. The central issue will be the potential compatibility of farcical implausibility and entertainment with satiric objectives. Can satire, the most punitive of genres, be embedded in a farcical background? Critics of Wycherley and Otway will probably see no problem: a frequent use of asides, implausibility, and clownish behaviour do not undermine the social or political reflections, the complexity of the self, the tension between desire and social norms, etc, all those qualities we tend to identify with maturer genres, comedy and satire, rather than with farce. But Durfey seems a less complex playwright: there has been a tendency to see him as a songwriter and entertainer soaping a court elite, and Charles II leaning on his shoulder and sharing a song. It is not my purpose to vindicate Durfey as one of the best playwrights of the Restoration: he was not. Still, he was very prolific, perhaps excessively so (thirty plays including two operas and a lost comedy), and certainly one of the few professionals (though not always successful) of the theatre, with Dryden, Shadwell and Behn. Some of his plays deserve much more attention than they have received.

Before analyzing the hybrid nature of some of Durfey's plays, an

important key issue, related to farce in particular, must be dealt with: physical violence. There is plenty of slapstick in Durfey's plays. For instance in *The Virtuous Wife* (1679?) Beauford is bullied three times in a row, which deprives the gallant of the necessary glamour to encourage admiration among the audience. In this case, by making the hero the foolish victim of physical aggression, Durfey is demythifying the standards of masculinity, but there are also violent situations in Durfey's work which seem to go beyond sheer farce, especially when the victim of abuse is a woman and not a man; that is, when there is no carnivalesque reversal of real-life situations. Does Durfey share Shadwell's attitude? When Shadwell's Mrs. Gripe, the crossdressed heroine in *The Woman-Captain* (1679), beats her husband, the audience are asked to enjoy the abuse, but when the nasty husband talks of mistreating his wife the situation is not only morally unjustifiable, but also too real, much more serious and probable. A man beaten by his revengeful wife may be naturalized as mere slapstick, a carnivalesque reversal; a woman beaten by her husband may be too verisimilar a situation.

Coming back to Durfey, two instances of violence that make us wonder whether farce or satire predominates are those of Thomas and his servant's attempt to rape Cellida and her cousin Sabina in *Trick for Trick* (1678), and that of Sir Lubberly's striking his wife, the old Lady Beardly, in *The Virtuous Wife* (1679). The first example reminds us of Volpone's frustrated rape of Celia in Jonson's play. In spite of the comic background, Cellida's screaming and her father's cry for mercy underline the tragic component in the frustrated assault. Sir Wilding's encouraging his son to commit the rape enhances the satirical monstrosity. The play closes with a mock-conversion and an underserved pardon, suggesting male predators get away with it. As far as the beating of Lady Beardly is concerned, it would most probably not be seen as sheer slapstick were the role of Lady Beardly played by Mrs. Bracegirdle or any other actress; James Nokes was cast as the old widow to provoke mirth and soften the violent underside. And yet, although in the real world on the stage a man is being beaten by another, a conventional situation found in many plays (especially in farcical scenes like those involving Beauford in act IV), the audience may feel that in the fictional realm no woman, however ugly and vain she may be, deserves such cruelty. We may argue that there are other similar examples of physical violence in Durfey's work in which slapstick predominates over satiric grimness. For instance, when in *The Marriage-Hater Match'd* Bias tells his brother and father that once he marries Lady Subtle he will revenge them by beating her, the truth is that the scene, in which the character played by Mrs. Barry throws things at the courting rustics, is too farcical to consider Bias's threat seriously (III.i,24-25). Still, however innocuous this passage may seem, Bias's attitude reinforces the thesis of Durfey's awareness of male violence in the real-world domestic realm: there

are many Thomases, Sir Lubberlys and Biases out there. Similar tendencies in the male members of the audience are more probable than any abuse performed by women emulating Lady Subtle or Shadwell's 'woman-captain'.

Restoration audiences were often asked to laugh at the victims of physical and/or verbal abuse. Who the abused is in the play clearly matters, and he or she may deserve it, but this is not always the case. Certainly, some things are allowed in comedy which would be condemned in the real world; that is part of the spirit of the genre, especially when it moves toward farce or the carnivalesque. In most generic theories (e.g., Bentley's, Hughes' or Holland's), farce is aggressive but conservative and escapist, childish and nonreflective, whereas comedy can reveal a bitter awareness of reality. In practice such generic borderlines are not that evident. Durfey's comedies, many of which border on farce, are a good example. Can satiric objectives and moral judgment coexist with farcical elements? Is laughter nonreflective, mere retaliation? Concerning Durfey, Canfield has no doubts; he states that "[t]he most prolific writer of comical satire in the Restoration is the underrated and insufficiently studied Durfey. Critics have recognized the moralist in Durfey's later comedies but have not known what to do with his earlier ones" (1997:213). According to Nicoll, Durfey evolves from plain farce to a comedy of manners that is even blended in the 1690s with melodramatic sentiment and a consciousness of libertinism as sinful (1967:273-78). Lynch (1930) argues that only a few of Durfey's comedies are serious, but that as early as in *The Virtuous Wife* and especially later in *Love for Money* Durfey creates a typically sentimental heroine, a woman endowed with reforming powers. Instead, in the latest and most comprehensive study on Durfey yet, McVeagh argues that "Durfey has been wrongly described as a proto-sentimentalist" (2000:13), and that his plays in general are much closer to Behn's or Otway's than to those by Cibber or Steele. I agree.

Certainly, there exist two periods in Durfey's dramatic production, but the Durfey of the 1670s and 1680s is more satirical and serious than it seems, while the Durfey of the 1690s, however influenced by the new moral tone of the court circle and the demands of the Societies for the Reformation of Manners, reveals a fondness for the old favorite subjects, cuckolding and less-than-perfect heroes. Although *Love for Money* presents Mirtilla and the Merritons as exemplary and has sentimental elements, four years later Durfey wrote a very vulgar musical low-comedy, *The Comical History of Don Quixote, Part III* (1695?), which Collier considered anticlerical and obscene. Although Durfey's aesthetic priorities may not be clear, although we may wonder to what extent he tried to produce innocuous, nonreflective laughter or rather correct the defects of society and humankind, one thing seems clear. Like other playwrights (for instance, Dennis), he believed that too much heroism was alien to the comic spirit: human frailty existed in the real world,

and even in the improbable case the world were to become so 'reformed' in the 1690s as to exclude human imperfection, at least it would be necessary on the comic stage. That is why Durfey creates few exemplary characters, even in the 1690s. Being both a satirist and a *farceur*, he sees in the world more to correct and/or laugh at, than to admire.

Contemporaries of Durfey such as Shadwell (a Whiggish enemy in the early 1680s), Langbaine or Gildon considered his work primarily farcical. For Langbaine, Durfey was not only a plagiarist but also a poor playwright. Gildon, who continued Langbaine's critical work, had a better opinion of Durfey's comic production, but he agreed about its farcical nature. What about Durfey's own metaliterary statements? Writers tend to disavow satiric intent, especially when particular people may feel they are being alluded to, and Durfey is no exception. That is to say, the scrutiny of the prefatory material cannot be taken at face value. On the one hand, Durfey often insists on his trying to do no harm, on his alluding to no one in particular; on the other, he often complains that people are easily offended, as if playwrights were not allowed to be as satiric as they would like to be (for instance, in the Prologue to *A Fool's Preferment* [1688]). For Canfield, there is no doubt that Durfey is a satirist. *The Fool Turn'd Critick* (1676), *Squire Oldsapp* (1678) and *Trick for Trick* are "conservative corrective satire, designed to expose libertinism's dangerous threat to civil society and the peaceful transmission of power and property through marriage" (1997:216). If Durfey cannot close these plays in a satisfactory way, with a social regeneration, argues Canfield, it is because the exposed folly and libertinism still remain, and so does the satirist's anger. My point is similar. Even in Durfey's cit-cuckolding stuff of the 1670s the approach is less innocuous than Hume (1976:309-10,334-35) or Rothstein and Kavenik (1988:207-208) have stated. Let us examine first a play that is apparently farcical, *A Fond Husband*, then a political play of the 1680s, *The Royalist*, in which Durfey identifies Toryism with virility and justice and satirizes Whiggery, and afterwards two later plays, *A Fool's Preferment*, and the comedy that seems to represent best the 'serious' Whiggish Durfey of the 1690s, *Love for Money*.

*A Fond Husband* (1677) is primarily a farce, and we should bear in mind that Bubble, the cuckolded husband, was played by the comedian James Nokes, who probably enhanced the unrealistic quality of the script. The stage is crowded with fools, but, in spite of its farcical nature, the play does have potential as an exposure of serious issues, the tyranny of husbands included. Not all critics accept Hume's thesis that the play is too nonsensical to see in it any clear target for satire: Wheatley (1993), Canfield (1997:233-36), and Hughes (1996:199-201) present very different readings but they all insist that there is more than meets the eye. *A Fond Husband* has bitter elements that may remind us of Jonson's, Otway's or Wycherley's ethically responsible

satirical comedy. The cuckold's violent ways place the play beyond cit-cuckolding farce. When Ranger tells Bubble he has seen his wife do "monstrous things" with Rashley, Maria asks the cuckold what he would do if he caught them. His initial calm reaction is surprising:

*Bubble.* Do! – Why, I'd ask him civilly whether his meaning were good or no.  
*Ranger.* His meaning? –  
*Bubble.* Ay. – You know 'tis best to begin mildly, that afterwards, if occasion be, a man may cut his throat with greater assurance. (III.i.213-25)

As the husband's anxiety over adultery is worked up by the two accusers, his plans of revenge show a peculiar "sence of honour" that Ranger praises: the masculine ideals of aggression, competitiveness and defence of property (and patrilinearity) degenerate into sadism: "if I find this true, I'll cut him piece-meal" (III.i.243-52). In the following scene the cuckold realizes he has abused the wrong woman:

*Enter Bubble dragging in Snare.*  
*Bubble.* Strumpet! Whore! Witch! I'll spoil your curls by the Lord *Harry*. O Lord! My wife – and she that I have beaten a stranger.  
*Snare.* Oh Heav'n! Was ever poor sinner so abused? (*Weeps.*)  
*Bubble.* (*Bubble looks amazedly at his wife, then at Snare, then at a lock of black hair in his hand*) Madam, I beg your pardon, and am asham'd of my fault; but I'll make you amends presently. (III.i.496-505)

Durfey's play points to the existence of a violent and immoral underside. It shares with *The Country Wife* an unconventional closure: the transgressing rake (less attractive than Wycherley's Horner) does not reform himself. But it is even more bitter than Wycherley's play, since both the libertine characters and those that protect social norms are much alike. (At least Wycherley creates a gay-couple plot, two charming characters, Harcourt and Alithea.) Duty, honour, truth and justice are empty words, mere discursive mechanisms used by hypocrites. Except for Cordelia in the underplot, even the characters that claim to represent moral authority, Maria and Ranger, are moved by desire and jealousy. To convince her cuckolded brother that he has been cheated, Maria weeps because her sister-in law has taken no notice of her instructions on marital duties (III.i.175-97). She pretends to protect the family from "any spurious offspring," and claims that "truth and honesty" are on her side (V.i.137), but personal revenge is her real motive. Rather than forgive a presumably penitent adulteress, Maria hopes to "tyrannize more than a Turk over his slave" (V.iii.99-100). *A Fond Husband* may have been one of the merry monarch's favorite plays, but the fact that Charles II also enjoyed Durfey's light-hearted songs should not mislead us

into thinking Durfey meant to be merely entertaining: *A Fond Husband* has too much bitterness underneath the farcical externals.

In *The Royalist* (Jan. 1682?), Durfey leans toward political satire, even more clearly than in *Sir Barnaby Whigg* (Oct. 1681?). There is plenty of slapstick; for instance, Slouch and Copyhold, two treacherous fools from the countryside who claim to be supporters of the republic, are beaten by *both* royalist and roundhead soldiers (III.ii). But even this farcical situation has serious political implications: not only that roundheads/Whigs deserve a beating, but also that appearances are unreliable, especially at times of instability. Durfey's program is to defend Toryism through the contrast between the leading character, Sir Charles Kinglove, and all the Commonwealth rascals that want his property (an unscrupulous Committee of Sequestration similar to that of Howard's *The Committee*). Such Whiggish tricksters are ready to make up false accusations or even, in the case of Captain Jonas, to plan murder. The Royalists in the play are not corrupt, but they are certainly libertines. A certain rakishness in male heroism was part of the Tory agenda at the time: the king and his brother had to be justified. Kinglove is certainly attracted to Camilla, Sir Oliver Oldcut's wife, but the major reason to court her is he wishes to get even with Oldcut. Since Camilla will not commit adultery, Kinglove feels some kind of sexual humiliation will do, one more proof that adultery is defined in homosocial terms: Camilla is to pull out two of her husband's teeth, be kissed before his face, and have him beaten up (III.iii), typical stuff in cuckolding farce. These humiliation scenes (IV.i; V.i; V.ii) move the play toward slapstick, although the trial of Jonas combines farce with political satire. The domestic rebellion suffered by Oldcut is justified: the husband, a rebel himself in the public realm, is paid with a similar coin. He deserves it all, not only because he has tried to rob Kinglove of his estate, but also because he is associated with voyeurism, homosexuality and impotence (II.i.12; IV.i; V.ii.60). Instead, the Royalists – Kinglove more than Heartall – represent sexual charm and honour, which for Kinglove “outweighs all interest” (V.i.52). They are the satirist's standard. Eventually, there is justice: providence intervenes through Cromwell himself, and the hero is given back his estate. But Cromwell is no godsend; he is denied the divine status of a royal *deus ex machina*, since his justice is that of a dying man afraid of the immediacy of God's judgment (V.ii.63). Hume thinks this denouement “silly” (1976:360), and certainly Durfey is forced by the expectations associated with the comic genre to reward his hero and jeopardize the verisimilitude of the text. And yet, however contrived the closure is, by making Cromwell reform, Durfey is able to provide an ironic twist that is in line with his satirical approach to the Commonwealth order.

Farce and a certain logical discretion concerning political affairs replace harshness in a *A Fool's Preferment* (1688), but the play is still a satire

on social climbing, a “corrective comical satire” (Canfield 1997:229). Two country gentlemen – the rank-admiring Cocklebrain and his uncle Grub, a Justice of Peace – and the servant Toby are cheated into thinking the King has made them Dukes. Although their preferment is a sham, the fact that Cocklebrain should know that even a “[c]heese-monger” and many cheating citizens have been knighted, or that Phillida – Grub’s wife – should think that the court is crowded with upstarts, including foreign ones, seem to suggest that meritless thriving does take place (II.29; III.34). Cocklebrain’s preferment, the first in the play, is actually a trick to keep the rich man in London so that he will finance the gambling habit of his unfaithful wife: the wordly tricksters and gamblers allied with Aurelia perform the deceit when Cocklebrain, fed up with wasting his time and money to obtain preferment, plans to return to the country and turn the idle Aurelia into “a good Houswife” (II.25).

In spite of the humorous nature associated with country labour, corrective satire is achieved through the presentation of a positive standard of behaviour, a standard endorsed by characters who are themselves subject to the temptation of social climbing. Grub and the nostalgic Toby initially convince Cocklebrain to go back home and take care of his neglected estate, but they too are awed by his unexpected court preferment. They eventually mock their old country lifestyle and their initial defence of the value of land and patrilineal descent. Grub’s pride on his living “godlily” as a Country Justice, which includes taking bribes (III.35), is already a sign of immorality. Like Aurelia, whose idleness he criticized, he too wishes to “trouble [him]self no more with Sowing and Reaping; but laugh and lye at Ease” (III.39). As far as servant Toby is concerned, his new lofty tone once he is made “Secretary”, his mockery of his past “dull Dunghill” life (II.32), his looking down on the authority of a mere Country Justice, his self-congratulatory remarks on his own innate merit, his hope of becoming a Duke himself, and his sudden rejection of country labour are certainly meant to be a rebuke (III.35-38), a foil to his initial worries about his master’s husbanding and protection of the landed property of the family (I.5) or about the wages of employees (II.25). Toby’s astonishment on not being recognized when wearing a blanket points to a basic message in the play: splendour is often meritless, related to appearance only (V.71). Rather than wish to rise above their possibilities, servants should be as practical as Toby initially is. And Grub’s assertion that the noble proprietor of land should be aware of the “Value” of his tenants’ “Sweat and Labour” (I.6) points to the responsibilities of the landed class, who squander wealth. Sheer common sense dominates Toby’s and Grub’s initial warnings, in spite of their laughable rustic simplicity; for instance, Toby’s admiration for his master’s ‘ancestral’ looks in riding habit (II.26)

probably enhanced the laughable quality of the comedian Nokes in unfashionable attire.

Cuckoldry is still a social stigma in this play, as in the cit-cuckolding comedy of the 1680s, but the major reflection is that ambition makes the rustics exhibit or even prostitute their wives, who are turned into commodities. Grub is not miles away from Jonson's Corvino in *Volpone*: both are jealous of their honour till ambition makes all values go down the drain. Both Cocklebrain and Grub are punished, especially the former, whose wife is pregnant (p.74) and therefore genetic patrilinearity may have been subverted. The carnival kings are deposed, but those tricksters that usurped the sovereign's authority to grant titles are also punished. There is a sense of order being restored, of hope that actual preferment is granted to those who really deserve it. And yet, Durfey may have created some doubt: perhaps Cocklebrain's initial hopes were based on facts and not merely on wishful thinking.

In *Love for Money* (Jan 1691) Durfey keeps farce more under control, although there are plenty of asides and absurdities. Actually, the most farcical scenes – namely those associated with the hoydens at the boarding school, Jiltall's overdone manifestations of affection for Amorous, or Old Bragg's dealing with his son – might be defined as low comedy rather than farce. Even Anthony Leigh's playing Lady Addleplot goes beyond farcical masculinization and enters the realm of political satire: she is a Jacobite conspirator and also a domestic tyrant capable of locking up her husband or whipping her daughter. Apart from a partly comic, partly satirical exposure of Jacobitism, Durfey presents a rather grim picture of a society governed by sheer monetary interest. People prostitute themselves: Young Bragg, a fake captain, is kept by Lady Addleplot, and Betty Jiltall, her female equivalent, pretends to love the deluded Amorous. Sir Rowland Rakehell, a vicious, cowardly atheist that kidnapped the girl he was supposed to protect and who often talks of murder and capital punishment, is one of the critical voices in the play:

prithee ask the young Cocking Atheist how he got his rich Widow with 6000 *l.* a year, and see whether he answers Vertue, or the illiterate Dunce that can scarce spell his own name, Whether he got his Place at Court by Vertue; the sweaty splayfoot City Putt, Whether he came to be Lord Mayor by Vertue; ask how the Laundress came to be a Lady, or the lawless Pettifogger a Judge, and see if Vertue be the cause on't, ye old Church Weesel, ha, ha, ha. (II.i.16)

His cynical discourse is similar to that of Jonson's *Volpone* about money making people as virtuous or heroic as they wish to be: "I have three thousand pounds a year fool"; he tells his nephew Amorous, "– thats reputation" (p.18).



Whereas Rakehell's behaviour ratifies this cynical view of a society governed by pretence, interest, and appearances, another satirical scourger, Young Merriton, as his own name suggests, represents (along with his father) the moral authority in the play. His actions are governed by true love and disinterestedness. Besides, familial respect defines his relationship with his father, whereas Amorous and his uncle only try to cheat each other, and Young Bragg denies both his low origins and the parental authority of Old Bragg. Although Young Merriton's love for a girl he thinks poor borders on the platonic, Durfey avoids sentimentalizing him, since the hero can plot and mock fools as much as his hedonistic but goodnatured friend Amorous. Because of his moral superiority, Merriton's complaint against "[a] cursed Fortune, still to Justice blinde, / Averse to Merit, but to Ideots kinde" (III.i.27) is that of a loser. In this age of meritocracy and political change, many a crook or upstart disguises under military or lordly apparel, but being a poor learned man that has scruples, Merriton feels "[w]it is disgrac'd, the Sciences despis'd, and modest Merrit mourns in Rags it's fortune, 'tis the Epitome of the nauseous world" (p.27). Durfey, as we expect along the comedy, does reward virtue with monetary success and happiness. Rakehell and Jiltall are caught in their own trap and punished in typically comic fashion (married to each other), but the Jacobites are sent to prison and Rakehell faces hanging, which makes the play grimmer. B. Corman (1993:74-79) argues that Durfey's failure to blend Jonson and Fletcher successfully, to mix correction and love intrigue, was caused by the punitive elements in *Love for Money* being still too aggressive, not as softened as they would be in plays written a few years later, when humour had become more benevolent.

Durfey's portrayal of society, the law, politics and domestic matters may be occasionally merry, but his tendency to underline the vulgar side of life also suggests a rather grim view of things. Apparently, in the 1690s Durfey is more serious; for instance, his later rakes are either hardly glamorous like Amorous or plainly monstrous like Rakehell. Still, *A Fond Husband*, *The Virtuous Wife* and *Trick for Trick* show signs of a certain dark outlook, whereas the more "serious" plays of the 1690s still have farcical elements. The denouement of *Trick for Trick* reveals that the Durfey of the 1670s was not too optimistic. The fact that rapists should not be punished reveals, not that society is benevolent, but rather that it is unfair and misogynistic. After the Revolution of 1688 Durfey enhanced the satiric elements, but not necessarily because, like Dryden, he disliked the new regime. On the contrary, at the same time he became more caustic he did create some exemplary characters that do represent the best of the new order, characters like the Merritons that have merit rather than birth, and who have little to do with the royalists Kinglove and Heartall except for the fact that they represent Durfey's moral standard at a given time and that they are rewarded. Because

of this, there is more hope in *Love for Money* than in *Trick for Trick*. The new order rewards merit and punishes perversion, although Durfey is conscious that this is not always the case; for instance, *The Marriage-Hater Match'd* (1692) points out the corruption and deceit associated with legal processes (II.ii; IV.ii), as well as with politics and the army (Callow is a Jacobite infiltrator, and the play gives to understand there are many more). The more we study Durfey, the more we realize how much of a moralist, as well as a political propagandist, he was.

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