

**Jorge Blanco-Vacas, ed. 2020. *Mr. Turbulent*.
A Critical Edition. Bern: Peter Lang**

Jorge Figueroa Dorrego
Universidade de Vigo, Spain

This critical edition of the anonymous comedy originally entitled *Mr. Turbulent: Or, The Melancholics*, very scholarly prepared by Jorge Blanco-Vacas, is the first volume of the series “Restoration Drama: Texts and Contexts,” coordinated by Manuel Gómez-Lara and María José Mora and published by Peter Lang in 2020. The aim of the collection is to illustrate the richness and diversity of late Stuart drama by bringing to light plays of interest that so far have attracted little critical attention, in fully annotated, modernized editions, which are prefaced by an extensive analysis of each text and the context in which it was produced. I welcome the series and this first volume in particular because *Mr. Turbulent* is a highly original play indeed that proves that Restoration comedy may provide more than apparently frivolous romantic—or at times rather sexual—intrigues and witty repartee, daring to delve into harsh social and political satire. The play does include the typical love story in which the main young couple (Mr. Fairlove and Lucia Wellbred) manage to outwit the blocking agent (Mr. Turbulent) and this leads to a happy ending symbolized by their marriage and the convivial celebration thereof. However, the most interesting part of the play is its characterization of the title character and his bigoted Puritan relatives and friends, and how that makes this comedy a biting satire of fanaticism. As these zealots are presented as “melancholics” who end up interned in Bedlam Hospital, the piece addresses the motif of madness—the only one to do so in the Restoration period, according to the editor (47)—, obviously from a comic perspective.

In his lengthy, scholarly introduction (11–56), Blanco-Vacas deals with five engaging aspects of the text: 1) its anonymous authorship, 2) its stage history, 3) the context of comedy in the late Carolean period, 4) London topography and madness as political tropes, and 5) the text used for the edition and other basic editorial decisions. Then comes a thoroughly annotated edition of the play, in a remarkably neat and

readable format (57–250); two appendices, one with a bibliographical description of all the copies examined (251–257), and another explaining the monetary units alluded to in the play (259). Finally there is an extensive list of works cited (261–281) that demonstrates the well-documented, erudite nature of this first-ever critical edition of *Mr. Turbulent*.

This play was probably premiered at the Duke's Theatre (Dorset Garden) in late November of 1681 and published anonymously by Simon Neal the following year. It was reissued in 1685 as *The Factious Citizen; Or, The Melancholy Visioner*. Both titles clearly point at the play's political intentions, which is part of the Tory offensive between 1680 and 1683 in the tense climate of the Exclusion Crisis. *Mr. Turbulent* is a satire of the Whigs, caricatured here as fanatical religious and political dissenters that live in the City, and whose radical Puritanism, inflamed condemnation of the government, and extreme aversion to reason, intellectualism, and entertainment are presented as symptomatic of a degree of insanity that requires reclusion and correction. Blanco-Vacas, like the few scholars who have commented on this play, dwells on this political aspect of the comedy at length. Allardyce Nicoll describes it as a "vivid, if somewhat coarse, satire of the Whigs" (1921, 235). For Derek Hughes, the play is "fiercely hierarchical, condemning the fanatics as social upstarts, enemies of universities (one character wishes to abolish reason and logic [...]), and subverters of male supremacy (they include a learned lady). Appropriately, these foes of rational social order are consigned to Bedlam" (1996, 231–232). And, according to Douglas Canfield, *Mr. Turbulent* has the greatest collection of fanatical Puritans in a single play: it closes "in Tory wish-fulfilment," with the Town gallant and his witty lady triumphant, the Quaker daughter of the eponymous character married to a foppish poet and joining the final hedonistic celebration, and the mad fanatics sealed off in the asylum (1997, 116; 119).

Blanco-Vacas speculates that fear of a negative reception of such a severe attack on the Whigs might be one of the reasons for its anonymity, although the author was swimming with the political tide of the moment, because Tory-oriented productions dominated the stage between 1681 and 1682 (15–16). Another possible fear would be of commercial failure, especially if the author was a gentleman and a novice writer. The editor points out that anonymity was common at the

time, particularly in drama, either the author or the publisher's choice, so it should not be seen as remarkable. He does not suggest any names but assumes that it must be someone from Yorkshire but familiar with London and the stage, or else several writers in collaboration.

As regard stage history, no one knows for sure when the play was first performed. Scholars have proposed different dates, mostly ranging from October 1681 to January 1682. Blanco-Vacas gathers that late November 1681 would be the most likely. It seems though that the Duke's Company believed in the production and backed it up with a strong cast, with some of the most popular performers of the time in the premiere, e.g., Cave Underhill as the title role, James Nokes as Finical Cringe (a pretentious, plagiarizing poet), Anthony Leigh as Abednego Suckthumb (a gloomy visionary), Thomas Jevon as Furnish (a witty trickster), and Elizabeth Currer as Lady Medler (a matchmaker and patents intermediary). The play does not seem to have been very popular, possibly for thematic reasons, but the performance must have been masterly and full of comic moments.

In the third section of his introduction, Blanco-Vacas frames the play in the context of the production of comedy in the last years of Charles II's reign. After the Popish Plot in 1678 and during the period of the Exclusion Crisis, theatre attendance fell, and some dramatists tried to revive it by providing topical, political plays. The anti-Catholic hysteria caused by Titus Oates's fictitious conspiracy is reflected in three comedies premiered in 1680 or 1681: John Dryden's *The Spanish Fryar*, the anonymous *Rome's Follies*, and Thomas Shadwell's *The Lancashire Witches*. This offensive led to a reaction from Tory writers, who produced several comedies that satirize the Interregnum, Puritans, and Whigs in 1681 and 1682, such as Edward Ravenscroft's *The London Cuckolds*, Thomas Durfey's *Sir Barnaby Whigg* and *The Royalist*, Aphra Behn's *The Roundheads* and *The City Heiress*, and this anonymous *Mr. Turbulent* (cf. Nicoll 1921; Whiting 1930; and Owen 2000). Susan Owen even suggests that the play "may be intended as a satire of Shadwell, who is much given to moral indictment of the times" (1996, 184), using the very weapon of Jonsonian humors he used to brandish.

Another appealing point that Blanco-Vacas deals with is the setting of the action, Moorfields, a green space north of the city walls, associated with the Whiggish middle classes and therefore seen in

contempt by the Toryish inhabitants of the town. This prejudice is evident in the conversation between Mr. Fairlove and his acquaintance Friendly at the beginning of the play. Moorfields was also the site of the Bedlam Hospital for the insane, where Mr. Turbulent and his fanatical friends end up confined, which amplifies the otherness of the area—seen from a Tory perspective—and the setting’s symbolism. As the editor points out, “the play puts forward a derisive notion of insanity which accommodates the Tory conception of their political rivals as potentially, if not essentially, harmful” (41). The Tories identified the Whigs as nonconformist subversives, whose fanaticism was a mental deviation that might and should be corrected.

Blanco-Vacas closes by explaining his editorial practice: he used the quartos of 1682 and 1685 as copy texts, modernized the spelling, punctuation, and other typographical features, and added footnotes about quarto variants, archaisms, colloquialisms, and historical and cultural issues. All in all, this is an excellent critical edition of *Mr. Turbulent*, an unduly disregarded comedy that offers a pungent taste of the Tory political satire produced during the Exclusion Crisis, and a harshly derisive critique of fanaticism that may appeal to present-day readers, as we are also living in times of extreme ideological polarization, dogmatic intolerance, and irrational negationism.

References

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Author's contact: jdorrego@uvigo.es

Postal address: Facultade de Filoloxía e Traducción. Universidade de Vigo. Campus Universitario, 36310, Vigo, Spain.