

The Double-Dealer

by

William Congreve

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Introduction

Interdum tamen et vocem Comoedia tollit.--HOR. Ar. Po. Huic equidem consilio palmam do: hic me magnifice effero, qui vim tantam in me et potestatem habeam tantae astutiae, vera dicendo ut eos ambos fallam.

SYR. in TERENCE. Heaut.

TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE CHARLES MONTAGUE,
ONE OF THE LORDS OF THE TREASURY.

Sir,--I heartily wish this play were as perfect as I intended it, that it might be more worthy your acceptance, and that my dedication of it to you might be more becoming that honour and esteem which I, with everybody who is so fortunate as to know you, have for you. It had your countenance when yet unknown; and now it is made public, it wants your protection.

I would not have anybody imagine that I think this play without its faults, for I am conscious of several. I confess I designed (whatever vanity or ambition occasioned that design) to have written a true and regular comedy, but I found it an undertaking which put me in mind of SUDET MULTUM, FRUSTRAQUE LABORET AUSUS IDEM. And now, to make amends for the vanity of such a design, I do confess both the attempt and the imperfect performance. Yet I must take the boldness to say I have not miscarried in the whole, for the mechanical part of it is regular. That I may say with as little vanity as a builder may say he has built a house according to the model laid down before him, or a gardener that he has set his flowers in a knot of such or such a figure. I designed the moral first, and to that moral I invented the fable, and do not know that I have borrowed one hint of it anywhere. I made the plot as strong as I could because it was single, and I made it single because I would avoid confusion, and was resolved to preserve the three unities of the drama. Sir, this discourse is very impertinent to you, whose judgment much better can discern the faults than I can excuse them; and whose good nature, like that of a lover, will find out those hidden beauties (if there are any such) which it would be great immodesty for me to discover. I think I don't speak improperly when I call you a LOVER of poetry; for it is very well known she has been a very kind mistress to you: she has not denied you the last favour, and she has been fruitful to you in a most beautiful issue. If I break off abruptly here, I hope everybody will understand that it is to avoid a commendation which, as it is your due, would be most easy for me to pay, and too troublesome for you to receive.

I have since the acting of this play harkened after the objections which have been made to it, for I was conscious where a true critic might have put me upon my defence. I was prepared for the attack, and am pretty confident I could have vindicated some parts and excused others; and where there were any plain miscarriages, I would most ingenuously have confessed 'em. But I have not heard anything said sufficient to provoke an answer. That which looks most like an objection does not relate in particular to this play, but to all

or most that ever have been written, and that is soliloquy. Therefore I will answer it, not only for my own sake, but to save others the trouble, to whom it may hereafter be objected.

I grant that for a man to talk to himself appears absurd and unnatural, and indeed it is so in most cases; but the circumstances which may attend the occasion make great alteration. It oftentimes happens to a man to have designs which require him to himself, and in their nature cannot admit of a confidant. Such for certain is all villainy, and other less mischievous intentions may be very improper to be communicated to a second person. In such a case, therefore, the audience must observe whether the person upon the stage takes any notice of them at all or no. For if he supposes any one to be by when he talks to himself, it is monstrous and ridiculous to the last degree. Nay, not only in this case, but in any part of a play, if there is expressed any knowledge of an audience, it is insufferable. But otherwise, when a man in soliloquy reasons with himself, and PRO'S and CON'S, and weighs all his designs, we ought not to imagine that this man either talks to us or to himself; he is only thinking, and thinking such matter as were inexcusable folly in him to speak. But because we are concealed spectators of the plot in agitation, and the poet finds it necessary to let us know the whole mystery of his contrivance, he is willing to inform us of this person's thoughts; and to that end is forced to make use of the expedient of speech, no other better way being yet invented for the communication of thought.

Another very wrong objection has been made by some who have not taken leisure to distinguish the characters. The hero of the play, as they are pleased to call him (meaning Mellefont), is a gull, and made a fool, and cheated. Is every man a gull and a fool that is deceived? At that rate I'm afraid the two classes of men will be reduced to one, and the knaves themselves be at a loss to justify their title. But if an open-hearted honest man, who has an entire confidence in one whom he takes to be his friend, and whom he has obliged to be so, and who, to confirm him in his opinion, in all appearance and upon several trials has been so: if this man be deceived by the treachery of the other, must he of necessity commence fool immediately, only because the other has proved a villain? Ay, but there was caution given to Mellefont in the first act by his friend Careless. Of what nature was that caution? Only to give the audience some light into the character of Maskwell before his appearance, and not to convince Mellefont of his treachery; for that was more than Careless was then able to do: he never knew Maskwell guilty of any villainy; he was only a sort of man which he did not like. As for his suspecting his familiarity with my Lady Touchwood, let 'em examine the answer that Mellefont makes him, and compare it with the conduct of Maskwell's character through the play.

I would beg 'em again to look into the character of Maskwell before they accuse Mellefont of weakness for being deceived by him. For upon summing up the enquiry into this objection, it may be found they have mistaken cunning in one character for folly in another.

But there is one thing at which I am more concerned than all the false criticisms that are made upon me, and that is, some of the ladies are offended. I am heartily sorry for it, for I declare I would rather disoblige all the critics in the world than one of the fair sex. They are concerned that I have represented some women vicious and affected. How can I help it? It is the business of a comic poet to paint the vices and follies of humankind; and there are but two sexes, male and female, MEN and WOMEN, which have a title to humanity, and if I leave one half of them out, the work will be imperfect. I should be very glad of an opportunity to make my compliment to those ladies who are offended; but they can no more expect it in a comedy than to be tickled by a surgeon when he's letting 'em blood. They who are virtuous or discreet should not be offended, for such characters as these distinguish THEM, and make their beauties more shining and observed; and they who are of the other kind may nevertheless pass for such, by seeming not to be displeased or touched with the satire of this COMEDY. Thus have they also wrongfully accused me of doing them a prejudice, when I have in reality done them a service.

You will pardon me, sir, for the freedom I take of making answers to other people in an epistle which ought wholly to be sacred to you; but since I intend the play to be so too, I hope I may take the more liberty of justifying it where it is in the right.

I must now, sir, declare to the world how kind you have been to my endeavours; for in regard of what was well meant, you have excused what was ill performed. I beg you would continue the same method in your acceptance of this dedication. I know no other way of making a return to that humanity you shewed, in protecting an infant, but by enrolling it in your service, now that it is of age and come into the world. Therefore be pleased to accept of this as an acknowledgment of the favour you have shewn me, and an earnest of the real service and gratitude of,

Sir, your most obliged, humble servant,

WILLIAM CONGREVE.

TO MY DEAR FRIEND MR. CONGREVE,
ON HIS COMEDY CALLED THE DOUBLE-DEALER.

Well then, the promised hour is come at last;
The present age of wit obscures the past.
Strong were our sires; and as they fought they writ,
Conqu'ring with force of arms and dint of wit.
Theirs was the giant race, before the flood;
And thus, when Charles returned, our empire stood.
Like Janus he the stubborn soil manured,
With rules of husbandry the rankness cured,
Tamed us to manners, when the stage was rude,
And boist'rous English wit with art indued.
Our age was cultivated thus at length;
But what we gained in skill we lost in strength.

Our builders were with want of genius curst;
The second temple was not like the first:
Till you, the best Vitruvius, come at length,
Our beauties equal, but excel our strength.
Firm Doric pillars found your solid base,
The fair Corinthian crowns the higher space;
Thus all below is strength, and all above is grace.
In easy dialogue is Fletcher's praise:
He moved the mind, but had no power to raise.
Great Johnson did by strength of judgment please
Yet doubling Fletcher's force, he wants ease.
In diff'ring talents both adorned their age;
One for the study, t'other for the stage.
But both to Congreve justly shall submit,
One matched in judgment, both o'er-matched in wit.
In him all beauties of this age we see,
Etherege his courtship, Southern's purity,
The satire, wit, and strength of manly Wycherly.
All this in blooming youth you have achieved,
Nor are your foiled contemporaries grieved;
So much the sweetness of your manners move,
We cannot envy you, because we love.
Fabius might joy in Scipio, when he saw
A beardless consul made against the law,
And join his suffrage to the votes of Rome;
Though he with Hannibal was overcome.
Thus old Romano bowed to Raphael's fame,
And scholar to the youth he taught became.

O that your brows my laurel had sustained,
Well had I been deposed if you had reigned!
The father had descended for the son,
For only you are lineal to the throne.
Thus when the state one Edward did depose,
A greater Edward in his room arose.
But now, not I, but poetry is cursed;
For Tom the Second reigns like Tom the First.
But let 'em not mistake my patron's part,
Nor call his charity their own desert.
Yet this I prophesy: Thou shalt be seen
(Though with some short parenthesis between)
High on the throne of wit; and seated there,
Not mine (that's little) but thy laurel wear.
Thy first attempt an early promise made;
That early promise this has more than paid.
So bold, yet so judiciously you dare,

That your least praise is to be regular.
Time, place, and action may with pains be wrought,
But genius must be born, and never can be taught.
This is your portion, this your native store,
Heav'n, that but once was prodigal before,
To Shakespeare gave as much; she could not give him more.

Maintain your post: that's all the fame you need;
For 'tis impossible you should proceed.
Already I am worn with cares and age,
And just abandoning th' ungrateful stage:
Unprofitably kept at heav'n's expense,
I live a rent-charge on his providence.
But you, whom every muse and grace adorn,
Whom I foresee to better fortune born,
Be kind to my remains; and oh, defend,
Against your judgment, your departed friend!
Let not th' insulting foe my fame pursue;
But shade those laurels which descend to you:
And take for tribute what these lines express:
You merit more; nor could my love do less.

JOHN DRYDEN.

Prologue

(Spoken by Mrs. Bracegirdle).

Moors have this way (as story tells) to know
Whether their brats are truly got or no;
Into the sea the new-born babe is thrown,
There, as instinct directs, to swim or drown.
A barbarous device, to try if spouse
Has kept religiously her nuptial vows.

Such are the trials poets make of plays,
Only they trust to more inconstant seas;
So does our author, this his child commit
To the tempestuous mercy of the pit,
To know if it be truly born of wit.

Critics avaunt, for you are fish of prey,
And feed, like sharks, upon an infant play.
Be ev'ry monster of the deep away;
Let's have a fair trial and a clear sea.

Let nature work, and do not damn too soon,
For life will struggle long e'er it sink down:
And will at least rise thrice before it drown.
Let us consider, had it been our fate,
Thus hardly to be proved legitimate:
I will not say, we'd all in danger been,
Were each to suffer for his mother's sin:
But by my troth I cannot avoid thinking,
How nearly some good men might have 'scaped sinking.
But, heav'n be praised, this custom is confined
Alone to th' offspring of the muses kind:
Our Christian cuckolds are more bent to pity;
I know not one Moor-husband in the city.
I' th' good man's arms the chopping bastard thrives,
For he thinks all his own that is his wives'.

Whatever fate is for this play designed,
The poet's sure he shall some comfort find:
For if his muse has played him false, the worst
That can befall him, is, to be divorced:
You husbands judge, if that be to be cursed.

Dramatis Personae

MEN.

MASKWELL, a villain; pretended friend to Mellefont, gallant to Lady Touchwood, and in love with Cynthia,--Mr. Betterton

LORD TOUCHWOOD, uncle to Mellefont,--Mr. Kynaston

MELLEFONT, promised to, and in love with Cynthia,--Mr. Williams

CARELESS, his friend,--Mr. Verbruggen

LORD FROTH, a solemn coxcomb,--Mr. Bowman

BRISK, a pert coxcomb,--Mr. Powell

SIR PAUL PLYANT, an uxorious, foolish old knight; brother to Lady Touchwood, and father to Cynthia,--Mr. Dogget

WOMEN.

LADY TOUCHWOOD, in love with Mellefont,--Mrs. Barry

CYNTHIA, daughter to Sir Paul by a former wife, promised to Mellefont,--Mrs. Bracegirdle

LADY FROTH, a great coquette; pretender to poetry, wit, and learning,--Mrs. Mountfort

LADY PLYANT, insolent to her husband, and easy to any pretender,-- Mrs. Leigh

CHAPLAIN, BOY, FOOTMEN, AND ATTENDANTS.

THE SCENE: A gallery in the Lord Touchwood's house, with chambers adjoining.

ACT I

SCENE I.

A gallery in the Lord Touchwood's home, with chambers adjoining.

Enter CARELESS, crossing the stage, with his hat, gloves, and sword in his hands; as just risen from table: MELLEFONT following him.

MEL. Ned, Ned, whither so fast? What, turned flincher! Why, you wo' not leave us?

CARE. Where are the women? I'm weary of guzzling, and begin to think them the better company.

MEL. Then thy reason staggers, and thou'rt almost drunk.

CARE. No, faith, but your fools grow noisy; and if a man must endure the noise of words without sense, I think the women have more musical voices, and become nonsense better.

MEL. Why, they are at the end of the gallery; retired to their tea and scandal, according to their ancient custom, after dinner. But I made a pretence to follow you, because I had something to say to you in private, and I am not like to have many opportunities this evening.

CARE. And here's this coxcomb most critically come to interrupt you.

SCENE II.

[To them] **BRISK.**

BRISK. Boys, boys, lads, where are you? What, do you give ground? Mortgage for a bottle, ha? Careless, this is your trick; you're always spoiling company by leaving it.

CARE. And thou art always spoiling company by coming in o't.

BRISK. Pooh, ha, ha, ha, I know you envy me. Spite, proud spite, by the gods! and burning envy. I'll be judged by Mellefont here, who gives and takes raillery better than you or I. Pshaw, man, when I say you spoil company by leaving it, I mean you leave nobody for the company to laugh at. I think there I was with you. Ha, Mellefont?

MEL. O' my word, Brisk, that was a home thrust; you have silenced him.

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