The Old Bachelor

by

William Congreve

The Old Bachelor

Introduction

Quem tulit ad scenam ventoso Gloria curru,
Exanimat lentus spectator; sedulus inflat:
Sic leve, sic parvum est, animum quod laudis avarum
Subruit, and reficit.

HORAT. Epist. I. lib. ii.

To the Right Honourable Charles, Lord Clifford of Lanesborough, etc.

My Lord,--It is with a great deal of pleasure that I lay hold on this first occasion which the accidents of my life have given me of writing to your lordship: for since at the same time I write to all the world, it will be a means of publishing (what I would have everybody know) the respect and duty which I owe and pay to you. I have so much inclination to be yours that I need no other engagement. But the particular ties by which I am bound to your lordship and family have put it out of my power to make you any compliment, since all offers of myself will amount to no more than an honest acknowledgment, and only shew a willingness in me to be grateful.

I am very near wishing that it were not so much my interest to be your lordship's servant, that it might be more my merit; not that I would avoid being obliged to you, but I would have my own choice to run me into the debt: that I might have it to boast, I had distinguished a man to whom I would be glad to be obliged, even without the hopes of having it in my power ever to make him a return.

It is impossible for me to come near your lordship in any kind and not to receive some favour; and while in appearance I am only making an acknowledgment (with the usual underhand dealing of the world) I am at the same time insinuating my own interest. I cannot give your lordship your due, without tacking a bill of my own privileges. 'Tis true, if a man never committed a folly, he would never stand in need of a protection. But then power would have nothing to do, and good nature no occasion to show itself; and where those qualities are, 'tis pity they should want objects to shine upon. I must confess this is no reason why a man should do an idle thing, nor indeed any good excuse for it when done; yet it reconciles the uses of such authority and goodness to the necessities of our follies, and is a sort of poetical logic, which at this time I would make use of, to argue your lordship into a protection of this play. It is the first offence I have committed in this kind, or indeed, in any kind of poetry, though not the first made public, and therefore I hope will the more easily be pardoned. But had it been acted, when it was first written, more might have been said in its behalf: ignorance of the town and stage would then have been excuses in a young writer, which now almost four years' experience will scarce allow of. Yet I must declare myself sensible of the good nature of the town, in receiving this play so kindly, with all its faults, which I must own were, for the most part, very

industriously covered by the care of the players; for I think scarce a character but received all the advantage it would admit of from the justness of the action.

As for the critics, my lord, I have nothing to say to, or against, any of them of any kind: from those who make just exceptions, to those who find fault in the wrong place. I will only make this general answer in behalf of my play (an answer which Epictetus advises every man to make for himself to his censurers), viz.: 'That if they who find some faults in it, were as intimate with it as I am, they would find a great many more.' This is a confession, which I needed not to have made; but however, I can draw this use from it to my own advantage: that I think there are no faults in it but what I do know; which, as I take it, is the first step to an amendment.

Thus I may live in hopes (sometime or other) of making the town amends; but you, my lord, I never can, though I am ever your lordship's most obedient and most humble servant,

WILL. CONGREVE.

To Mr. Congreve.

When virtue in pursuit of fame appears,
And forward shoots the growth beyond the years.
We timely court the rising hero's cause,
And on his side the poet wisely draws,
Bespeaking him hereafter by applause.
The days will come, when we shall all receive
Returning interest from what now we give,
Instructed and supported by that praise
And reputation which we strive to raise.
Nature so coy, so hardly to be wooed,
Flies, like a mistress, but to be pursued.
O Congreve! boldly follow on the chase:
She looks behind and wants thy strong embrace:
She yields, she yields, surrenders all her charms,
Do you but force her gently to your arms:
Such nerves, such graces, in your lines appear,
As you were made to be her ravisher.
Dryden has long extended his command,
By right divine, quite through the muses' land,
Absolute lord; and holding now from none,
But great Apollo, his undoubted crown.
That empire settled, and grown old in power
Can wish for nothing but a successor:
Not to enlarge his limits, but maintain
Those provinces, which he alone could gain.
His eldest Wycherly, in wise retreat,

Thought it not worth his quiet to be great.
Loose, wand'ring Etherege, in wild pleasures tost,
And foreign int'rests, to his hopes long lost:
Poor Lee and Otway dead! Congreve appears,
The darling, and last comfort of his years.
May'st thou live long in thy great master's smiles,
And growing under him, adorn these isles.
But when--when part of him (be that but late)
His body yielding must submit to fate,
Leaving his deathless works and thee behind
(The natural successor of his mind),
Then may'st thou finish what he has begun:
Heir to his merit, be in fame his son.
What thou hast done, shews all is in thy pow'r,
And to write better, only must write more.
'Tis something to be willing to commend;
But my best praise is, that I am your friend,

THO. SOUTHERNE.

To Mr. Congreve.

The danger's great in these censorious days,
When critics are so rife to venture praise:
When the infectious and ill-natured brood
Behold, and damn the work, because 'tis good,
And with a proud, ungenerous spirit, try
To pass an ostracism on poetry.
But you, my friend, your worth does safely bear
Above their spleen; you have no cause for fear;
Like a well-mettled hawk, you took your flight
Quite out of reach, and almost out of sight.
As the strong sun, in a fair summer's day,
You rise, and drive the mists and clouds away,
The owls and bats, and all the birds of prey.
Each line of yours, like polished steel's so hard,
In beauty safe, it wants no other guard.
Nature herself's beholden to your dress,
Which though still like, much fairer you express.
Some vainly striving honour to obtain,
Leave to their heirs the traffic of their brain:
Like China under ground, the ripening ware,
In a long time, perhaps grows worth our care.
But you now reap the fame, so well you've sown;
The planter tastes his fruit to ripeness grown.
As a fair orange-tree at once is seen

Big with what's ripe, yet springing still with green,
So at one time, my worthy friend appears,
With all the sap of youth, and weight of years.
Accept my pious love, as forward zeal,
Which though it ruins me I can't conceal:
Exposed to censure for my weak applause,
I'm pleased to suffer in so just a cause;
And though my offering may unworthy prove,
Take, as a friend, the wishes of my love.

J. MARSH.

To Mr. Congreve, on his play called The Old Bachelor.

Wit, like true gold, refined from all allay,
Immortal is, and never can decay:
'Tis in all times and languages the same,
Nor can an ill translation quench the flame:
For, though the form and fashion don't remain,
The intrinsic value still it will retain.
Then let each studied scene be writ with art,
And judgment sweat to form the laboured part.
Each character be just, and nature seem:
Without th' ingredient, wit, 'tis all but phlegm:
For that's the soul, which all the mass must move,
And wake our passions into grief or love.
But you, too bounteous, sow your wit so thick,
We are surprised, and know not where to pick;
And while with clapping we are just to you,
Ourselves we injure, and lose something new.
What mayn't we then, great youth, of thee presage,
Whose art and wit so much transcend thy age?
How wilt thou shine at thy meridian height,
Who, at thy rising, giv'st so vast a light?
When Dryden dying shall the world deceive,
Whom we immortal, as his works, believe,
Thou shalt succeed, the glory of the stage,
Adorn and entertain the coming age.

BEVIL. HIGGONS.

Prologue

(Written by the Lord Falkland)

Most authors on the stage at first appear
Like widows' bridegrooms, full of doubt and fear:
They judge, from the experience of the dame,
How hard a task it is to quench her flame;
And who falls short of furnishing a course
Up to his brawny predecessor's force,
With utmost rage from her embraces thrown,
Remains convicted as an empty drone.
Thus often, to his shame, a pert beginner
Proves in the end a miserable sinner.
As for our youngster, I am apt to doubt him,
With all the vigour of his youth about him;
But he, more sanguine, trusts in one and twenty,
And impudently hopes he shall content you:
For though his bachelor be worn and cold,
He thinks the young may club to help the old,
And what alone can be achieved by neither,
Is often brought about by both together.
The briskest of you all have felt alarms,
Finding the fair one prostitute her charms
With broken sighs, in her old fumbler's arms:
But for our spark, he swears he'll ne'er be jealous
Of any rivals, but young lusty fellows.
Faith, let him try his chance, and if the slave,
After his bragging, prove a washy knave,
May he be banished to some lonely den
And never more have leave to dip his pen.
But if he be the champion he pretends,
Both sexes sure will join to be his friends,
For all agree, where all can have their ends.
And you must own him for a man of might,
If he holds out to please you the third night.

(Spoken by Mrs. Bracegirdle)

How this vile world is changed! In former days
Prologues were serious speeches before plays,
Grave, solemn things, as graces are to feasts,
Where poets begged a blessing from their guests.
But now no more like suppliants we come;
A play makes war, and prologue is the drum.

Armed with keen satire and with pointed wit,
We threaten you who do for judges sit,
To save our plays, or else we'll damn your pit.
But for your comfort, it falls out to-day,
We've a young author and his first-born play;
So, standing only on his good behaviour,
He's very civil, and entreats your favour.
Not but the man has malice, would he show it,
But on my conscience he's a bashful poet;
You think that strange--no matter, he'll outgrow it.
Well, I'm his advocate: by me he prays you
(I don't know whether I shall speak to please you),
He prays--O bless me! what shall I do now?
Hang me if I know what he prays, or how!
And 'twas the prettiest prologue as he wrote it!
Well, the deuce take me, if I han't forgot it.
O Lord, for heav'n's sake excuse the play,
Because, you know, if it be damned to-day,
I shall be hanged for wanting what to say.
For my sake then--but I'm in such confusion,
I cannot stay to hear your resolution.
  [Runs off]

Dramatis Personae

MEN.

HEARTWELL, a surly old bachelor, pretending to slight women, secretly in love with Silvia--Mr. Betterton.
BELLMOUR, in love with Belinda--Mr. Powell
VAINLOVE, capricious in his love; in love with Araminta--Mr. Williams
SHARPER--Mr. Verbruggen
SIR JOSEPH WITTOL--Mr. Bowen
CAPTAIN BLUFFE--Mr. Haines.
FONDLEWIFE, a banker--Mr. Dogget
SETTER, a pimp--Mr Underhill
SERVANT to Fondlewife.

WOMEN.

ARAMINTA, in love with Vainlove--Mrs. Bracegirdle
BELINDA, her cousin, an affected lady, in love with Bellmour--Mrs. Mountfort
LAETITIA, wife to Fondlewife--Mrs. Barry
SYLVIA, Vainlove's forsaken mistress--Mrs. Bowman
LUCY, her maid--Mrs. Leigh
BETTY
BOY and FOOTMEN.

SCENE: London.

ACT I

SCENE I.

SCENE: The Street.

BELLMOUR and VAINLOVE meeting.

BELL. Vainlove, and abroad so early! Good-morrow; I thought a contemplative lover could no more have parted with his bed in a morning than he could have slept in't.

VAIN. Bellmour, good-morrow. Why, truth on't is, these early sallies are not usual to me; but business, as you see, sir-- [Showing Letters.] And business must be followed, or be lost.

BELL. Business! And so must time, my friend, be close pursued, or lost. Business is the rub of life, perverts our aim, casts off the bias, and leaves us wide and short of the intended mark.

VAIN. Pleasure, I guess you mean.

BELL. Ay; what else has meaning?

VAIN. Oh, the wise will tell you -

BELL. More than they believe--or understand.

VAIN. How, how, Ned! A wise man say more than he understands?

BELL. Ay, ay! Wisdom's nothing but a pretending to know and believe more than we really do. You read of but one wise man, and all that he knew was, that he knew nothing. Come, come, leave business to idlers and wisdom to fools; they have need of 'em. Wit be my faculty, and pleasure my occupation; and let Father Time shake his glass. Let low and earthly souls grovel till they have worked themselves six foot deep into a grave. Business is not my element--I roll in a higher orb, and dwell -

VAIN. In castles i' th' air of thy own building. That's thy element, Ned. Well, as high a flier as you are, I have a lure may make you stoop. [Flings a Letter.]

BELL. I, marry, sir, I have a hawk's eye at a woman's hand. There's more elegancy in the false spelling of this superscription [takes up the Letter] than in all Cicero. Let me see.-- How now!-- Dear PERFIDIOUS VAINLOVE. [Reads.]

VAIN. Hold, hold, 'slife, that's the wrong.