

arise, it seems to me, from the struggle of a great artist to discover and to realize his novel's final form.

Shillingsburg's last sentence is bewildering. I would hope that my essay made it clear that I feel that the problems Thackeray confronted in *Vanity Fair* were almost certainly not anticipated by him when he began it. The problems arise, in part, from Thackeray's changing perceptions of comedy, satire, and laughter; and these changes and their consequences are evident throughout much of the novel. Shillingsburg's letter addresses itself to my essay's introduction; in the other four sections, I speak at more length of the modifications and transformations we see within the novel as Thackeray's vision becomes more complex, his original design more tenuous. And while I do not wish to quibble, the phrase that Shillingsburg cites at the beginning of his final paragraph is quoted somewhat out of context. It originally appeared in this context:

Within the novel, Thackeray's pastoral is always present, although much of the time submerged, and it asserts itself most powerfully only after Thackeray has worked his way through—and beyond—the novel's other major and more traditional motifs or impulses. It is in this respect that *Vanity Fair* ends where it begins, with Thackeray simultaneously aware of this distant pastoral vision and of his exclusion from it. (pp. 256–57)

I am sure that Shillingsburg and I would agree that no work of art, and certainly not one with the breadth and depth of *Vanity Fair*, can literally end where it begins.

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### The Collier/Congreve Controversy

To the Editor:

Aubrey Williams' application of his findings about critical viewpoints in the Collier controversy ("No Cloistered Virtue: Or, Playwright versus Priest in 1698," *PMLA*, 90, 1975, 234–46) is grounded upon some disturbing readings of both play defenses and plays themselves.

To accept, as Williams does, Congreve's assertion of a "moral meaning" in Bellmour's refusal of heaven because he says, "I would do a little more good in my generation first, in order to deserve it" (p. 243) is to ignore Bellmour's actions in the play. The seduction of Sylvia, the adultery with Laetitia, and the mercenary pursuit of Belinda should make us doubt Bellmour's—and Congreve's—sincerity. The very expression he uses has a sexual connotation in the only other plays where I have found it. Thomas Southerne helped prepare *The Old Batchelour* for the stage: in his *The Wives' Excuse* (1691), the rake Wilding claims, "I do

what good I can, in my generation: but injure nobody," before suggesting that the virgin he has seduced and abandoned has been merely taught "a very good trade," prostitution (Act v); in his *The Maid's Last Prayer* (1693), the suggestively named Captain Drydubb complains that his wife "would have me begin to propagate, like a Patriarch, at threescore and try to do good in my Generation" (Act v). In *The Double Dealer* (1693), Congreve's Sir Paul Plyant, denied relations with his wife and longing for a male heir, laments: "What's once a year to an Old Man, who would do good in his generation?" (Act III). We can hardly find the double entendre of these plays to have "a moral meaning" in Bellmour's mouth. Congreve's defense is less candid than Williams would like to believe.

A more serious problem arises from the use of Elkanah Settle's assertion that "Virtue cannot very well be brought up to any *Dramatick* Perfection . . . unless it stands a Temptation, and surmounts it" and that Vanbrugh's Amanda is a model (p. 245). The libertine argument that virtuous beauties should put themselves in the path of temptation is the basis of Settle's claim; as early as Chapman's *An Humourous Day's Mirth* (1599), a libertine asks a Puritan wife, "How can you conquer that against which you never strive, or strive against that which never encounters you?" (sc. iv, ll. 224–25), in order to prove her virtue vulnerable. Vanbrugh himself wrote in *A Short Vindication* (London, 1698) that Loveless' relapse "I design'd for a natural instance of the Frailty of Mankind, even in his most Fixt Determinations, and for a mark upon the defect of the most steady Resolve, without that necessary Guard, of keeping out of Temptation" (p. 212). Amanda may be "sure that [Worthy] can never put her Virtue in Danger, But she might have remembered her Husband was once of the same Opinion; and have taken warning from him, as the Audience, I intended, shou'd do from 'em both" (p. 213). Thus Vanbrugh describes the design of the play as demonstrating the opposite of what Settle praises it for showing. The opening scene reinforces Vanbrugh's assertion: Amanda warns Loveless that "the strongest Vessels, if they put to sea, may possibly be lost." Thus the play seems to prefer a cloistered virtue to none at all.

More important, the kind of play Settle lauds was a late development of "reforming comedy," which inverted the values and ethical assumptions of earlier Restoration comedy. Even if the events of *The Relapse* might lead such an auditor as Settle, or Williams, to glory in Amanda's triumph, she can hardly be considered typical: compare her to Shadwell's, Otway's, or Behn's wives, or to Southerne's Mrs. Friendall, Vanbrugh's Lady Brute, or Farquhar's Mrs. Sullen. The "trials" in later Restoration comedy are not equiv-

alent to the “testing pattern” Williams sees in the love games of the earlier plays. He ignores distinctions between earlier and later comedy to claim “the majority of plays were written not merely to divert but also out of good intention and for instruction in virtuous living” (p. 244). Of the authors he cites, Congreve, Vanbrugh, Farquhar, and Rowe all wrote in and after a decade of rising exemplary comedy, the last two not even beginning their work until after Collier’s *Short View* appeared. The “good intention” and “instruction in virtuous living” in the majority of Dryden’s plays and in Otway’s, particularly the comedies, is certainly suspect. Wycherley’s plays, only two of which are important satires, are hardly typical of “the majority of Restoration plays.” None of these three earlier writers evidence a “testing pattern” equivalent to that that Settle sees in *The Relapse*. Settle’s remarks, we must conclude, are not “the best statement of the way most Restoration plays were composed, in a ‘testing pattern’ intended for both delight and instruction” (p. 245); rather, they reflect a view of comedy that began as early as Shadwell’s *The Squire of Alsatia* (1688) and became increasingly dominant by the turn of the century, as evidenced by the proliferation of repentant rakes, coquettes, philanthropers, and adulteresses in nineties comedy.

Essentially, the Collier controversy involved critical theory, not dramatic practice. Williams’ article provides a valuable survey of critical viewpoints at the close of the century, but it is rather unsatisfying in its application to the drama itself. Proving Congreve’s defense to be sound is difficult enough; using arguments against Collier to claim high moral intention for forty years of drama is a critically unsupportable leap of faith.

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*Mr. Williams replies:*

Robert L. Root says, in his second paragraph, that I “accept” Congreve’s “assertion of a ‘moral meaning’ in Bellmour’s refusal of heaven,” and that I thereby “ignore Bellmour’s actions” (those, that is, of a sexual nature) “in the play.” Root greatly misstates my words (p. 243) which I repeat here:

As an example of the outrageous wickedness to be met with in plays, Collier cited Congreve’s *The Old Batchelour*, where Vainlove asks Bellmour, “Could you be content to go to Heaven?” and the latter replies, “Hum, not immediately, in my conscience not heartily.” On this exchange Collier comments: “This is playing I take it with Edge-Tools. To go to Heaven in jest, is the way to go to Hell in earnest” (*A Short View*, p. 62). But as Congreve pointed out, “Mr. Collier concludes this quotation with a dash, as if both the Sense and the Words of the whole Sentence, were at an

end. But the remainder of it in the Play . . . is in these words —*I would do a little more good in my generation first, in order to deserve it.*” And then he went on: “I think the meaning of the whole is very different from the meaning of the first half of this Expression. ’Tis one thing for a Man to say positively, he will not go to Heaven; and another to say, that he does not think himself worthy, till he is better prepared. But Mr. Collier undoubtedly was in the right, to take just as much as would serve his own turn. The Stile of this Expression is Light, and suitable to Comedy, and the Character of a wild Debauchee of the Town; but there is a Moral meaning contain’d in it, when it is not represented by halves” (*Amendments*, pp. 37–38). But Collier would not be appeased, and came back to insist that the real meaning of the passage was that Bellmour “would gladly be a Libertine somewhat longer, and merit Heaven by a more finish’d course of Debauchery” (*Defence of the Short View*, p. 41).

My aim in this paragraph was illustration of the way Collier proceeds by way of half-quotation or worse, by neglect of dramatic context, and by imputation of the worst possible meaning to dramatic utterance. I nowhere say that I “accept” Congreve’s explanation, though I certainly think his testimony should be set against Collier’s charges. The fact that I included Congreve’s statement that Bellmour’s expression is suitable to the “Character of a wild Debauchee of the Town” scarcely suggests that I in any way would wish, in any full-scale exegesis of the play, to ignore Bellmour’s sexual misdeeds. Root’s assertion, moreover, that Bellmour’s words are a “refusal of heaven” is a downright perversion of the text: Bellmour does not “refuse” Heaven; he merely says, as Congreve was at pains to point out, that he is “not immediately” prepared for it “in [his] conscience.” No doubt the word “generation” is equivocal (I never suggested it was not), but against Root’s attempt to restrict the word to the merely lewd (to reduce, that is, Congreve’s double entendre to a single entendre) I would set this contemporary retort to Collier’s attempt to restrict the word to the merely profane: “Away with that . . . I beseech you, we’ll have no more of Mr. Collier’s Interpretations; who knows but *Bellmour* might mean he would live and grow better; this is nearest the original, and if [Collier] had not come in with his helps, it might not have been hit off into Profaneness” (John Oldmixon, *Reflections on the Stage*, 1699). Root upon Williams seems to me of the same stripe as Collier upon Congreve.

The rest of Root’s letter turns upon matters of exegesis not only in *The Relapse* but in scores of other individual plays, no one of which could even begin to be argued in a letter to the Forum. I will say of *The Relapse* that I see no contradiction between Settle’s and Vanbrugh’s statements about the trial of virtue in the play. Loveless is presented as too confident in his virtue and as actually seeking out what clergymen would call the “occasion of sin,” something neither