The Man of Mode: Comedy and the Masquerade

Eight years after the less-than-stellar reception of She Would If She Could, Etherege’s last play, The Man of Mode; or, Sir Fopling Flutter, revived his reputation among contemporaries as the finest dramatist of manners comedy. First performed by the Duke’s Company on 11 March 1676, this play appealed particularly to the court, who reportedly attended numerous performances, and it was immediately hailed by audiences at large as not only Etherege’s best comedy but also the best to date on the Carolean stage. Until the end of the century it continued to enjoy a number of revivals, including a production in Brussels on 3 October 1679 specially staged for the Duke of York, and a revival performed at Whitehall in 1685 for the newly enthroned James II.¹ The enormous contemporary success of this comedy has been attributed in part to its purported verisimilitude, in particular its alleged naturalistic portrayal of lifelike characters whose manners, motives, and behaviour reflected the temperament of the significant number of court-based spectators and their acolytes who relished seeing their lifestyle enacted on the London stage. The play’s realism proved so noteworthy that its topical lifeliness sparked particular mention from commentators, such as
Langbaine, who lauded Etherege’s ‘art and judgment’ and reported the play as ‘acknowledg’d by all, to be as true Comedy, and the Characters as well drawn to Life, as any Play that has been Acted since the Restauration of the English stage’. In fact, so pervasive was this opinion of the play as a mirror of Carolean life and personages that it generated speculation among contemporaries as to whom Etherege used as models for his characters, and general consensus had it that Etherege based Dorimant on the infamous rake Lord Rochester, Sir Fopling on the well-known fop Beau Hewit, and Medley on himself.

The assessment by Etherege’s contemporaries of *The Man of Mode* as a naturalistic representation of London life in the 1670s has significantly affected critical evaluations of the play, for it has led to an ongoing debate – one that began in the early eighteenth century and continues today – as to the comedy’s dramatic impact and thematic import. Some 35 years after the première of the comedy, Richard Steele penned an indictment of it in *The Spectator* (No. 65, 15 May 1711), denouncing it as ‘a perfect Contradiction to good Manners, good Sense, and common Honesty’ and censuring Dorimant as ‘a Knave in his designs’, particularly for his ‘falsehood to Mrs Loveit, and the barbarity of triumphing over her anguish’. Responding a decade later to Steele’s more middle-class reading of the play – a reading that reflects a bias against Carolean comedy in favour of the early eighteenth century’s changing critical attitudes about exemplary heroes, stage decorum and character propriety – John Dennis, also reading the play as a simulacrum of Carolean life, defended it against claims of immorality, asserting that Etherege wrote a didactic satire that worked by negative example, drawing a portrait of a realistic ‘young Courtier, haughty, vain, and prone to anger, amorous, false, and inconstant’, and thus by ‘shewing us what is done upon the Comick Stage, to shew us what ought never to be done upon the stage of the World’. These two polar views of *The Man of Mode* as either an amoral and naturalistic comedy or a corrective satire continue to dominate critical evaluations of the play, leaving many to question, as does Norman Holland, ‘what, if anything, Etherege wants us to take seriously’.

Clearly the crux of this debate over the play’s merits hinges, of course, on Dorimant, for in Restoration comedy the curve of dramatic action is most typically plotted by the central male charac-