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# Comedy and the Politics of Memory: Representing the Civil War in Robert Howard's *The Committee* and Thomas Otway's *The Souldiers Fortune*

## Abstract

This article challenges the alleged stability of the discourse on the two decades preceding the 1660 Restoration on the comic stage. It compares two representations (one immediate, one long-term) of the conflicts of the 1640s and 1650s, namely Robert Howard's successful *The Committee* (1662) and Thomas Otway's *The Souldiers Fortune* (1681). Close readings of these two plays demonstrate a previously overlooked variety and instability of tones, which affects their political interpretations. This article more broadly questions the place of comedies in the post-Restoration political and historiographical effort to make sense of past conflicts. It establishes that Howard's strategy in *The Committee* is not, as previously considered, one of unambiguous royalism, where the defeated Puritans are frontally mocked and defied. Rather, the play presents a consensual, reconciliatory vision of the past which more closely aligns with the restored Crown's broader approach. This is accomplished through the use of a scapegoat, which allows the group to present a convenient, albeit counterfeit, consensus. Similarly, emphasising the pervading influence of the satiric genre in *The Souldiers Fortune* shows the lack of stable normative figure during the renewed political turmoil of the Exclusion Crisis, whilst the slippery conclusion of the play allows the playwright to use ambiguity to his advantage, thereby avoiding a defined stance in politically unstable times. Both plays point towards a flexible understanding of the role of comedy and comic representation as key tools in the political games of the late Stuart period.

## Résumé

Cet article reconsidère l'apparente stabilité des représentations des conflits des décennies 1640 et 1650 sur la scène comique de la Restauration, à travers l'analyse détaillée de deux exemples, *The Committee* (1662) de Robert Howard et *The Souldiers Fortune* (1681) de Thomas Otway. Le constat de l'extraordinaire plasticité interprétative des deux pièces amène à les resituer dans l'effort herméneutique et historiographique plus général de l'après-Restauration pour donner sens à la guerre civile et aux années Cromwell. La lecture traditionnelle de *The Committee* comme une provocation agressive visant les Puritains en déroute est déstabilisée, pour faire apparaître une stratégie plus pragmatique : désigner des boucs-émissaires et minimiser les tensions, pour permettre au reste du groupe d'afficher un consensus certes factice, mais commode, en cohérence avec la rhétorique de réconciliation subtile de la couronne. Dans le cas de *The Souldiers Fortune*, l'influence satirique, perceptible à l'absence d'instance normative stable et l'ambiguïté de sa conclusion, met en lumière le pragmatisme prudent du dramaturge, qui évite toute prise de position catégorique alors que l'issue de la Crise de l'Exclusion reste incertaine. Ces deux exemples nous conduisent à considérer les ambiguïtés volontaires du discours et des représentations comiques comme des éléments-clé du jeu politique de la Restauration.

**Keywords :** Restoration, politics, theatre, comedy, Civil War

**Mots-clé:** Restauration, politique, théâtre, comédie, guerre civile

The memory of England's past haunts the pages of so-called "Restoration comedies".<sup>1</sup> Allusions to the legendary Round Table or to the distant Magna Carta are plentiful. Yet it is with the more recent past still fresh past of its own characters (through allusions to a lost estate, a new fortune of dubious origin) that comedy after 1660 is concerned. It is a past that

is deeply embedded in the national, traumatic history of the previous two decades of the Civil Wars, the Commonwealth and the Protectorate years.<sup>2</sup> All people, both on and off the stage, still saw their present shaped by the positions they had chosen during the decades of turmoil (loyalists or exiles, winners or losers, or even opportunists who followed prevailing sentiment)

Historians have already emphasised the importance of managing the memory of the 1640s and 1650s for the restored monarchy, whose first challenge was to frame the immediate past into a stable discourse. It is significant that the position of Historiographer Royal was created as early as 1661.<sup>3</sup> As the most popular form of entertainment in the capital, theatre in general, and comedy specifically, provided key contributions to this effort by creating narratives favourable to the Crown. Rachel Willie convincingly argues in *Staging the Revolution* that this manifested in seemingly binary, clearly defined versions of what was actually a multifactorial conflict: one where religious, political, social, economic and ideological issues were at stake. These dichotomic representations result from the convergence of theatrical stereotypes of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras with the antagonisms (Parliamentarian vs Loyalists) as presented in Civil War pamphlets. Earlier examples of plays showing episodes of the conflicts onstage include *The Committee* by Robert Howard, *The Rump* by John Tatham (1660) or Abraham Cowley's *Cutter of Coleman Street* (1663), as well as plays by John Wilson, George Etherege and John Lacy. This effort remained uninterrupted even after the first phase of the Restoration. Plays referring to the 1640s continued to be written and produced well into the 1680s, with a peak in Civil War themes around the tensions of the Popish Plot, the Exclusion Crisis and the Monmouth rebellion.<sup>4</sup> But the complexity and considerable financial constraints of the theatrical apparatus, the rapidly shifting political power structures and the influence of other genres such as satire, all make the theatre a highly ambiguous crucible for the elaboration of a discourse on the past. Comedies representing the Civil War are key pieces within the broader

political discourse, but the specificity of the comic genre makes its force far from easy to pinpoint and control. Comedy is truly, as we will see, a “double-edged tool.”<sup>5</sup>

How was the Civil War represented, and to what purposes? This study focuses mostly on two exemplary cases, *The Committee* by Robert Howard and *The Souldiers Fortune* by Thomas Otway. These plays are remarkable because of their exceptional popularity, something which makes them more likely both to reflect and to shape contemporary political debates. They are original plays written after 1660, with the usual precautions that the use of the term “original” entails for the period at hand.<sup>6</sup> Not only was the Civil War still a lived experience for many during the 1680s, but the tensions of the period were also presented rhetorically as the continuation of those that had arisen forty years earlier: a parallel which made the need for new narratives more pressing.<sup>7</sup> “Forty-one is come again” was a rallying cry for loyalists, echoed on stage for example in John Crowne's 1685 comedy *Sir Courtly Nice* (“Forty-one is coming in ding dong”, 4.35) and in Aphra Behn's *The City-Heiress*, first published in 1682 (“The sins of Forty One reviv'd again in Eighty One, with Additions and Amendments”, 3.35).<sup>8</sup> The twenty years separating *The Committee* and *The Souldiers Fortune* are thus a period long enough to allow matured, distanced reflection, but short enough still to remain at the articulation between what Mark Stoyale calls a “first-hand memory” and what he describes as belonging to the larger realm of the “politics of memory” (20-22).<sup>9</sup>

### **Robert Howard's *The Committee* and the scapegoating strategy**

One obvious rhetorical impulse to minimise the inherited tensions in the 1660s was to demonise the previous regime (McKeon, 80). Robert Hume goes as far as to say that most plays of the immediate Restoration constitute “a triumphant trampling over the remains of the Commonwealth” (Hume, *Development* 239).<sup>10</sup> *The Committee* is often described as the most unambiguously royalist play of the period. David Bywaters, despite a generally prudent analysis of the ambiguities of the dramatic representations of the period, makes an exception

precisely for *The Committee*, first presented on stage in 1662, which he calls “the royalist comedy that makes the fewest concessions to an anti-royalist or formerly-collaborationist audience,” and calls it “the most polemical play” of the series (7). If we assume that the contemporary theatre-going public was just as divided as the three kingdoms were at large, then the Restoration theatre would be a stage for the winners of the conflicts to revel in the humiliation of the losers—a situation hardly sustainable for theatres to operate as businesses.<sup>11</sup>

But detailed attention to the precise rhetorical strategies employed in the play reveals significant gaps in such a politically monolithic reading. In fact, *The Committee* may, in many ways, be interpreted as the opposite of a politically confrontational text, namely as the result of a careful negotiation to reconcile the unreconcilable. As Mark Stoyle explains, “the immediate post-war years had been supremely uncomfortable ones for most people, forced as they had been to live cheek-by-jowl with neighbours against whom they had recently fought, and whose political and religious views they still found abhorrent. In order to make day-to-day life bearable in the divided communities of post-Civil War England, the enmities of the past had to be brushed over as far as possible” (22). Attuned, as we shall see, to the king's rhetorical strategy of deflating collective blame, the play's strategy is two-fold: it minimises collective responsibilities on the one hand and presents the bitter conflicts of the previous decades as the product of the shortcomings of a handful of individuals on the other. Its goal is not to confront the former enemies of the Crown, but to allow room for the passive collaborators of the former regime to seamlessly identify with the new one. This is accomplished by acknowledging the conflict while carefully avoiding pointing the finger too explicitly at any specific party, institution or ideology.

The plot is rather simple: a grotesque couple (Mr. and Mrs. Days), dominated by a virile and politically active wife, manages to climb up the social ladder thanks to Mr. Day's opportunistic allegiance to a powerful “Committee,”; the committee is reminiscent of the

Parliamentary Committee for the Sequestration of Delinquent's Estates.<sup>12</sup> This corrupt association gives them the possibility of appropriating the estate of the innocent orphan daughter of a loyal Cavalier.<sup>13</sup> Their dishonest ambition brings them to form marriage projects for their idiotic son with a rich heiress, Arabella. Thankfully, Careless and Blunt, two charming and witty Cavaliers, eventually manage to save the victims and wed them, while also winning back their own sequestered properties.

The anti-Parliamentarian part of the text is no mystery, neither is its highly formulaic structure. Robert Howard's royalist credentials are beyond doubt: a soldier during the Civil War, he was imprisoned under the Commonwealth, a sacrifice for which was granted an office at the Restoration.<sup>14</sup> The Days' political and religious positions are clearly identified by their black costumes, and so are the members of the opportunistic alliance of the "Committee," who eloquently call each other "Brethren." The false solidarity between them is soon exposed as superficial, and the infamy and hypocrisy of the Days are revealed to all at the end. Mr. Days is even accused of having helped his mistress abort his own bastards—an unusually specific condemnation which suggests the height of moral outrage.

Although the Days are presented as religious, it is important to stress that their beliefs themselves are not under attack. In line with the Elizabethan tradition of humours, it is rather personal character flaws, in this case opportunism and greed, that are to blame for the disruption of order, not the core of the belief itself. The convenient figure of the religious hypocrite allows the playwright to attack, exclude and punish the unruly characters ostensibly on moral rather than political or religious grounds, a strategically significant shift. Moreover, the choice to focus the action on the Committee of Sequestration and what constitutes, as we have seen, essentially a property conflict, allows the play to avoid dwelling on the more ideological motivations of the rebels of the 1640s.<sup>15</sup> In a similar twist, the authority of the monarch goes unquestioned in the play. The Days might use a letter signed by the King to serve their despicable cause, but the letter being falsified does not undermine

the King's legitimacy itself in any way. On the contrary, his signature is appropriated by his opponents precisely because his authority is universally recognised. These strategic choices and omissions allow the play to re-establish order almost seamlessly in the conclusion with a general pardon. The Days' personal downfall is enough to re-stabilise the community, even though the threat they represent is not fully eliminated. The ending is not without tensions and ambiguities, but the long-term consequences are thus minimised. Classic comedic resolution functions as an acceptable generic structure and interpretative framework to negotiate the Civil War, Providence eventually restores order, and revolutionary change is presented as essentially reversible.<sup>16</sup>

This forced resolution is heavily reminiscent of Charles II's own strategic moves, first with the Declaration of Breda, then the Act of Oblivion. Despite half of the country having been involved in bitter strife against the other for two decades, the restored King's pardon had been general, except for a small handful of regicides.<sup>17</sup> This move could only work if it went together with a corresponding view of the conflicts—a normative, consensual, “mutually satisfactory” one, however partial it may be. As Paulina Kewes puts it, “both Charles II and the Convention Parliament that met in April 1660 set out to develop a version of the past that, whether or not it was accurate, would be acceptable to the largest possible number of people” while overlooking “the culpability of particular political or religious groups” (“Acts of Remembrance” 105-108).

Coming back to the comedy, the audience, of which at least part must have been involved with the old regime, is encouraged by the comic structure itself to identify and cheer with the victims of the Committee's greed, and shame and exclude the disrupters of order, in an “us” vs “them” structure. In *The Committee*, this shift of responsibility is most visible in the following song, taken from Act IV:

Now the Vail is pull'd off, and this pitiful Nation  
Too late see the gull of a Kirk-Reformation,

How all things that shou'd be  
Are turn'd tupsie turvy;  
The Freedom we have,  
Our Prince made a Slave,  
And the Masters must now turn the Waiters.  
The great ones obey  
While the Rascals do sway  
And the Loyal to Rebels are Traytors.

The Pulpits are crowded with tongues of their own,  
And the Preachers Spiritual Committee-men grown,  
To denounce Sequestration  
On Souls of old Fashion,  
They Rail and they Pray,  
Till they quite preach away  
The Wealth that was once the wise Cities.  
The Courts in the Hall  
Where the Lawyers did bawl,  
Are turn'd into pious Committees (Howard, *Five News Plays* 4.93).<sup>18</sup>

This song fills a choric function which sums up the historiographical perspective of the play: that of the Civil War and the following years as a shocking, inexplicable, but reversible and ultimately brief carnivalesque episode, reflected in this passage by the coded vocabulary of the world turned upside-down (“tupsie turvy,” etc.) identified by Christopher Hill's seminal study (14). The “Nation,” here a passive agent, has been “gulled” by an alliance between the Presbyterian Kirk and the Lawyers against the vaguer “Souls of old Fashion.” That expression designates the heroes’ cause not as a political project, but as a nostalgic and spiritual mode of being —perhaps slightly idealistic in some ways, but ultimately harmless compared to the Day’s despicable materialism. Strikingly, the agents of the conflicts are personified spaces (“the Pulpits”, “the Courts in the Hall”) rather than people. This does not prevent the singer from distributing either praise or blame. The “wise City” is presented, against all plausibility, not as a “collaborationist” institution, to borrow again David Bywaters’ term, but as a victim—on the same level as the Cavalier heroes of the play. Suddenly the objectively opposing side is presented as having been equally cheated by a third party. The final dichotomy between “we have” and “our Prince” on the one hand, and



“they rail,” “they pray,” “they preach away” on the other, equates the change of sides with a recognition of true allegiance, rather than a betrayal or an opportunistic coat-turning. The use of the term “Freedom” itself can be considered an appropriation by the Royalist rhetoric of an element generally associated with the opposition.

This move to blur responsibilities and cast the blame on a handful of scapegoats echoes precisely the broader rhetorical and political strategy of the restored Crown. The version of events as presented by the declaration of Breda, for example, “brazenly misrepresents the City’s part in the late troubles” according to Paulina Kewes, relying heavily on elegant euphemisms and prudent periphrases to obliterate the capital’s highly seditious past (“Acts of Remembrance” 112). Designating a grotesque scapegoat driven by purely materialistic motivations is a convenient way to avoid collective guilt, and for the supporters and passive followers of the Parliamentary cause to join the “right” side by exposing and eliminating elements designated as disruptive.<sup>19</sup> In his *History of the Rebellion*, the Earl of Clarendon analysed the declaration of Breda as an attempt “to satisfy all interests, and to comply with every man’s humour” (Kewes “Acts of Remembrance” 106). It is perhaps this combination of apparent orthodox royalism with real ideological flexibility that explains the exceptionally durable success of the play.<sup>20</sup>

The continuing triumph of *The Committee* at the Theatre Royal is indeed both an immediate and a long lasting one. Its first production took place in 1662, but it was revived and printed at very regular intervals at least until the end of the century. There are traceable productions in the 1660s, 1670s and 1680s, with special emphasis on the seasons from 1685 to 1687.<sup>21</sup> Such persistent revivals are striking for a play with strongly referential content. What was it about the Civil War that made it still relevant to audiences over twenty years later? The discourse on the war is evidently a concern not limited to the early Restoration. As Mark Stoye puts it, “a pro-Cromwellian counter-tradition survived beneath the surface” and competing interpretations of the events proliferated well into the 1680s, if only because the

spectre of another war returned to haunt the kingdoms shaken by the Popish Plot, the Exclusion Crisis, and the Monmouth rebellion (7).

### **Otway's *The Souldiers Fortune* and later representations of the conflicts**

Not only are early Restoration plays still staged, but the Civil War settings are also recreated in new comedies written in the late 1670s and 1680s by a new generation of playwrights, amongst whom were: Thomas D'Urfey (*The Royalist* and *Sir Barnaby Whigg*), Aphra Behn (*The Round-heads* or *The City-Heiress*) and Thomas Otway, already well-known for his political tragedies, with *The Souldiers Fortune*. Performed at the Theatre Royal until the end of the century, and printed various times over the same period, the comedy was, like *The Committee*, both an immediate and long-term success.<sup>22</sup>

*The Souldiers Fortune* is also, in many ways, a very formulaic play. Courtine and Beaugard (acted by stage-star Thomas Betterton) are two demobilised loyal soldiers, younger sons of aristocrats, both penniless but charming. They cuckold a naive Justice of Peace (aptly named Dunce) with the help of his own wife, who used to be Beaugard's lover and is only too happy to finally have a "real man" in her bed. Like in many other plays, the old "sedition" and "disloyalty" is rhetorically connected with the new Whig opposition using comparable stock characters to embody the former and the latter. The continuity between Mr. Day and Sir David Dunce is obvious. Like Day, Dunce is a Dissenter. On entering his bedroom, Courtine exclaims "What a Smell of Sin is here! Let me look about, if there is a Geneva Bible or a Practice of Piety in the Room" (5.50). Both are hypocrites, and Dunce only repents of his sins when he is threatened to be hanged: "I'll repent and be sav'd, I'll say my Prayers, I'll go to Church [...] I never found I have any Conscience till now" (5.54). Otway's play insists, on many occasions, upon Dunce's absence of sexual interest for his wife. On the contrary, he seems fascinated by the dashing Captain Beaugard. Like Mr. Days, his incapacity to perform heteronormative sexuality is presented as a deficiency and

inferiority. Finally, Dunce's political situation is connected to the other characteristics previously mentioned, especially in the passage where Lady Dunce describes her husband as physically repulsive before adding: "he is one of those Fools forsooth, that are led by the Nose by Knaves to rail against the King and the Government, and is mightily fond of being thought of a Party" (1.9). Again, the topical association between civic function, religious zeal, hypocrisy and defective masculinity is actualised, as well as the stereotypical conflict between loyalty to the King and economic interest, with the only difference that the Committee is now an organised party.<sup>23</sup>

Most critics agree that the play is a pessimistic one. Michael Cordner sees the old Cavaliers as "the bottom of the heap" in the Whig/Tory struggle of the play (xvi), and Simon Morgan-Russell concurs when he writes that "if it is a Tory play, it is a defeatist one" (348). While it is true that the traditional cuckolding of the Whig by the dashing Tory does take place, and that Beaugard and Lady Dunce even have the means to continue their extramarital relationship after the end of the play, the ending is not a joyful one for the lovers. Robert Hume agrees that the final Tory victory is an unsatisfactory one, given the impossibility for the main couple to marry. He writes that "the conclusions of Otway's plays establish no moral order, afford no cathartic purgation, provide no satisfying sense of an ending (Hume 1976, "Otway and the Comic Muse," 100). " Kate Loveman describes the same unease by calling the play a "vengeful Tory fantasy," while underlining the disturbing lack of triumphalism and the meagre rewards for loyal characters (85, 94). All agree that the plot presents the audience with a petty revenge in the middle of a generally unchanged situation, a conclusion therefore radically different in its structure from that of *The Committee*.<sup>24</sup>

The play's pessimism peaks in Act II, with a long and unusual scene with no specific connection to the plot. Beaugard and Courtine, the two protagonists, look at a series of passers-by and comment on the past of each of these unnamed, voiceless characters:

*A Clumsie fellow marches over the Stage drest like an Officer.*

*Courtine* – Curse on him for a Rogue, I know him. The Rascal was a Retailer of Ale but yesterday, and now he is an Officer and be hang'd; 'tis a dainty fight in a morning to see him with his Toes turn'd in, drawing his Legs after him, at the head of a hundred lusty Fellows; some honest Gentleman or other stays now, because that Dog had mony to bribe some corrupt Colonel withall.

*Enter another gravely drest.*

*Beaugard* – There, there's another of my acquaintance, he was my Fathers Footman not long since, and has pimpt oftner for me than he has pray'd for himself; that good quality recommended him to a Noble-man's service, which together with flattering, fawning, lying, spying and informing, has rais'd him to an employment of trust and reputation [...]

*Courtine* – 'Tis as unreasonable to expect a man of Sense should be prefer'd, as 'tis to think a Hector can be stout, a Priest religious, a fair woman chaste, or a pardon'd Rebel loyal.

*Enter two more seeming earnestly in discourse.*

*Beaugard* – That's seasonably thought on, look there, observe but that Fellow on the right hand, the Rogue with the busiest Face of the two, I'll tell thee his History. [...] He was born a Vagabond, and no Parish own'd him; his Father was as obscure as his Mother publick.

*Courtine* – He comes from a very good Family, heaven be prais'd.

*Beaugard* – The first thing he chose to rise by, was Rebellion, so a Rebel he grew, and flourish't a Rebel, fought against the King, and helpt to bring him to the Block.

*Courtine* – And was he not Religious too?

*Beaugard* – Most devoutly! He would pray till he cry'd, and preach till he foam'd, which excellent Talent made him popular, and at last prefer'd him to be a worthy Member of that never to be forgotten Rump Parliament.

*Courtine* – Pray Sir be uncovered at that, and remember it with Reverence.

*Beaugard* – In short, he was a Committee-man, Sequestrater and Persecutor General of a whole country, by which he got enough at the King's Return to secure himself the general Pardon.

*Courtine* – Nauseous Vermin: That such a Swine with the mark of Rebellion on his Forehead, should wallow in his Luxury, whilst honest men are forgotten!<sup>25</sup>

*Beaugard* – Thus forgiven, thus rais'd, and made thus happy, the ungrateful Slave disowns the hand that healed him, cherishes Factions to affront his Master, and once more would Rebel against the Head, which so lately sav'd his from a Pole. [...]

*Courtine* – His Co-Rogue I have some knowledge of, he's a tattered worm-eaten Case-putter, some call him Lawyer, one that takes it very ill he is not made a Judge.

*Beaugard* – Yes, and is always repining that men of parts are not regarded.

*Courtine* – He has been a great noise-maker in factious Clubs these seven years, and now I suppose he is courting that Worshipful Rascal to make him Recorder of some factious Town.

*Beaugard* – To teach Tallow-Chandlers and Cheese-mongers how far they may rebel against their King by vertue of *Magna Charta*.

*Courtine* – But friend *Beaugard*, methinks thou art very splenatick of a sudden, how goes the affair of Love forward, prosperously, hah!

*Beaugard* – Oh I assure you most Triumphantly, just now you must know I am parted with the sweet civil enchanted Ladies Husband.

*Courtine* – Well, and what says the Cuckold, is he very kind and good natur'd as Cuckolds use to be? (2.19)

The codes of the carnivalesque are again heavily exploited, particularly the social climbing of the mediocre contrasted with the failure and neglect of their betters. This time, no possibility of comic resolution is suggested. However, this absence of resolution and the triumph of corruption, injustice, and incompetence, is remarkably blamed as much on the rebellious subjects themselves as on the King's lax attitude and bad management of the aftermath of the Civil War. The King's need for immediate liquidity is thus responsible for the prosperity of vice ("he got enough at the King's return to secure himself the general Pardon").<sup>26</sup> The continuity between Rump Parliamentarians, Cromwell supporters, Puritan rebels, cynical opportunists, and Whig factions, though historically debatable, is once again explicitly drawn. As Jonathan Scott puts it "beneath the new labels [*whig and tory*] signifying recent experience, old fears and dangers remained unaltered" (Scott 165). The proximity of the terms "general pardon," of the committees and sequestrations, and of "preachers" and "lawyers" might be, if not an indirect allusion, at least an echo to *The Committee*. In summation, while the rebels are ostentatiously blamed for taking advantage of the disorders, the Crown is also more discreetly targeted as an active enabler.

Another striking element about this scene is its situation in the economy of the play.

Such pauses in the plot generally occur around Act IV, with songs, virtuoso pieces of comic acting, or the development of secondary plots. These grant the audience a brief respite before the rise in tension of the last act. This scene takes place earlier on, in Act II. This unusual position suggests that the passage is not simply ornamental. While it might, of course, be simply the opportunity for a star actor to deliver a showpiece improvisation, the early position of the passage could suggest its function as an interpretative key to the rest of the play. The influence of satire present in *The Souldiers Fortune* is thus not simply punctual, it is structural.<sup>27</sup>

This leaves us, however, with further interrogations. The choice to comment on nameless, voiceless characters might be appropriate in classic written satire, but in *The Souldiers Fortune*, many of the actual characters of the play (Sir Dunce, Sir Jolly) could easily have been used as targets. This would have permitted a better integration of the scene to the rest of the play, and offered a more coherent and legible moral system of praises and condemnations overall. More importantly, these aesthetical choices could have established the loyal Courtine and Beugard as stable satiric authorities, or at least normative instances, with the subsequent political implications. This possibility is excluded in a short exchange between the loyal heroes, which precedes the scene quoted above:

*Beugard* – I have heard thee rail in my time, wou'd thou wouldst exercise thy talent a little at present.

*Courtine* – At what?

*Beugard* – Why canst thou ever want a subject? Rail at thy self, rail at me, I deserve to be rail'd at [...].

This key passage clearly presents the satiric gaze as unstable and dangerously reversible. The heroes might well be critical of the world around them, and their position of superiority is a precarious one. They are dangerously susceptible to the same contempt (“rail at me, I deserve to be railed at”). This draws our attention further to the symmetry between Courtine’s laments (“‘tis as unreasonable to expect a man of sense should be preferr’d,”

“honest men are forgotten”) and Beaugard’s critic of the Lawyer (“always repining that men of parts are not regarded”). The eerie similarity of these complaints suggests they are reversible, and ultimately as laughable as one another. If the heroes and the comic butts are both ridiculous, who is the target and who is the authority of the satire?

A closer look reveals, in fact, that discourse on decadence in the play, be it elegiac or satirical, is not limited to the “victims,” or even to the participants of the traumatic years of the 1640s and 1650s. Otway’s characters in *The Souldiers Fortune* are all presented as fallen characters in a fallen world.<sup>28</sup> Each one of the characters appropriates the rhetoric of decay to such an extent that even the discursive posture of the satirist becomes itself an object of self-reflexive parody in the play. Beginning with the hero, Courtine’s poverty and loss of social status is heavily emphasised from the very beginning. The amorous pair, however attractive, is no longer in its prime, and as Hume writes, Beaugard is “not the usual airy younger son” but rather “a grown man facing a bleak future (Hume 1976, “Otway and the Comic Muse 99”).” In Act III, Sir Jolly Jumble, a pimp and a voyeur, praises the hero in ambiguous terms by stressing that Beaugard is not what he used to be: “E’en a scandalous Rake-hell, that lingers up and down the Town by the Name of Captain *Beaugard*, but he has been a bloody Cuckold-making Scoundrel in his time.(3.28)” Beaugard and Lady Duncie are former lovers who meet again after years of separation, but what follows seems less like a providential second chance to redress former grievances than the half-hearted realisation that pretending things have not changed is futile. The lovers are too old, and their relationship seems fundamentally trapped in the past. Given the equivalence previously established between sexual attitudes and political ones, it becomes clear that the futility of amorous nostalgia, and the decadence it refuses to acknowledge, constitute a commentary on political nostalgia. Thus, the failure of the Restoration itself as a regenerative political force is implied. This is particularly visible in the following dialogue between the lovers, which takes place right after sexual intercourse:

*Lady Duncce* – What think you now of a cold wet March over the Mountains, your Men tir'd, your Baggage not come up, but at night a dirty watry Plain to Encamp upon, and nothing to shelter you, but an old Leager Cloak as tatter'd as your Colours? Is not this much better now, than lying wet and getting the Sciattica?

*Beaugard* – The hopes of this made all Fatigue easie to me; the thoughts of *Clarinda*, have a thousand times refresht me in my Solitude, whene'er I Marcht, I fancy'd still, it was to my *Clarinda*! When I fought, I imagin'd it was for my *Clarinda*, but when I came home, I found *Clarinda* lost! (5.56)

Lady Duncce's playful, anti-epic description of the soldier's life, possibly reminiscent of audience members during their Civil War days, contrasts with the exaggeratedly pathetic tone of Beaugard's lament on lost love, thereby suggesting that neither should be taken entirely at face value.

In the same way that Beaugard slips between source and target of satire, many other passages of the play seem so conventional that they border on parody. The audience, let alone the reader, is left unable to determine when serious satire ends and when parody begins. If we were to take all this lamentation at face value, would the play even still be a comedy? This apparent tirade, for example, on how authentic friendship is as a virtue of the past, might instead be used for parodic treatment with radically opposing political undertones.

*Courtine* – Friends, *Beaugard*; faithful hearty Friends, things as hard to meet with as Preferment here: Fellows that wou'd speak truth boldly, and were proud on't; that scorn'd Flattery, lov'd Honesty, for 'twas there Portion; and never yet learn'd the Trade of Ease and Lying; but now. (4.37)

How seriously are we supposed to take this topical and clearly exaggerated complaint? Is it not ironically intended to stress how *unfaithful* and *dishonest* Beaugard is, who does not hesitate to cuckold a friend behind his back? Such a clearly unrealistic depiction of the chivalrous values of the past is more likely, in the context of Restoration comedies, to trigger a laugh than a sigh.<sup>29</sup>

The pervasive influence of satire on the play thus challenges at its core the very



possibility of pinning down a normative stance, including regarding its bitter discourse on the winners and losers of the conflicts during the 1640s. The credibility of the elegiac or satiric authorities itself is constantly undermined. Nowhere is it more manifest than when the old pimp, Sir Jolly Jumble, laments on the loss of his “honour” when Beaugard refuses to meet the prostitute Sir Jolly has so carefully selected for him. The passage goes as follows:

*Sir Jolly* – Take away my Reputation, and take away my Life, I shall be disgrac’d for ever. [...] You shall find you have wrong’d me, and wrong’d a sweet Lady, and a fine Lady: – I shall never be trusted again! never have employment more! I shall dye of the Spleen –. (2.20)

A careful audience might note the similarities of tone between Sir Jolly's lament here and Beaugard and Courtine's splenetic description of the passers-by, especially when Sir Jolly comically concludes that “there are no honest Fellows living, but Whore-Masters” (5.63). The satiric discourse on decay is itself the target of self-reflexive criticism, and again susceptible of parody. The unusual scene where Sir Jolly explains to the heroes where his prostitutes come from, and their family history, has a similar ambiguity:

*Beaugard* – Truly, *Sir Jolly*, you are a man of very extraordinary discipline, I never saw Whores under better command in my life.

*Sir Jolly* – Pish, that’s nothing man, nothing, I can send for forty better when I please, Doxies that will skip, strip, leap, trip, and do any thing in the world, any thing old Soul.

*Courtine* – Dear, dear *Sir Jolly*, where and when?

*Sir Jolly* – Odd as simple as I stand here, her Father was a Knight.

*Beaugard* – Indeed *Sir Jolly*, a Knight say you?

*Sir Jolly* – Ay, but a little decay’d, I’ll assure you she’s a very good Gentlewoman born. (2.11)

Depending on the actors’ interpretations, this passage could be made a serious lament on the havoc wrought by the Civil War and on the fall of great families, shamefully besmirched at their most vulnerable point (i.e., their women). From this perspective, the early

Restoration years could be indirectly condemned as a failure to return to the natural order of things. But an alternative performance may just as well present Sir Jolly as a shrewd pimp, who invents such tales purely to give his prostitutes added sexual desirability. In either case, the choice of the silly and perverse Sir Jolly to voice this lament is an ambivalent one. The parodic litany of decay does not stop there. In a passage memorable for its grim humour, even the hitman Bloody-Bones laments the dwindling of his business:

*Bloody Bones* – [...] A private Murder done handsomely is worth Money; but now that the Nation's unsettled, there are so many general Undertakers, that 'tis grown almost a Monopoly. (4.41)

Beaugard and Courtine therefore share with the two most dubious characters, a pimp and a hitman, the observation that the nation has changed for the worse. Yet again, it is unclear who exactly is responsible for all this “unsettling”. The prologue, written not by Otway himself but by Lord Falkland, and epilogue do not provide helpful answers. Both insist on the times' hypocrisy, inconstancy, and fickleness, but without clarifying which period of recent history corresponds to this prelapsarian description and, most of all, riddled with self-reflexive irony:

Remember Faithless Friends there was a time;  
(But oh the sad remembrance of our Prime!)  
When to our Arms with eager joys ye flew  
And we believ'd your treach'rous Hearts as true  
As e're was Nymph of ours to one of you:  
But a more pow'rful Saint\* enjoys ye now. (\*Pope Joan)<sup>30</sup>

The lamentation over the loss of love and innocence (“there was a time...”) is very vague, with clear ironic undertones. Even more so when the changing of hearts is paralleled with the audience's typically fickle attendance of the theatres. The audience is presented as preferring to see Elkanah Settle's popular play about a female prelate (Pope Joan), an obvious incongruity given that the potential hearers would, by definition, have chosen *not* to attend the rival play. The allusion to Catholic popes and saints is not explicit enough to

support the idea that *The Souldiers Fortune* presents itself as an anti-Catholic play, although the rivalry between the two performances is likely to have taken place during the 1679/80 season, right after the Popish Plot scare.<sup>31</sup> Though the strong presence of irony suggests a satiric charge, neither the target nor the normative stance are clearly identifiable, thus leaving the audience and reader to draw their own conclusions.

## **Conclusion**

The close reading of these two plays makes plain the ways in which generic and aesthetical choices can confirm, complexify, or challenge the reading of comedies as pieces of historic commentary. Carnavalesque codes, satire, elegy and parody overlap in ways which make it impossible, despite the apparent simplicity of the political discourse underlying the plots, to formulate a coherent comic discourse on the Civil War trauma. The essential characteristic of the Civil War on the Restoration comic stage is not its stability as an object against which to build a counter-discourse, but rather its interpretative plasticity and hermeneutical elusiveness. That is not to say that these are apolitical plays. As we have seen, the blurring of responsibilities is a deliberate strategy, obeying strong political imperatives. In an uncertain world where loyalties shift rapidly, it can only have been an asset for a play, a playwright, and a troupe to allow as much room as possible to differing interpretations. Given the plasticity of these plays, it is not hard to imagine two audience members from radically opposing sides leaving the theatre, both equally convinced that they had seen a show that supported their cause. To these political factors, commercial necessity can only have contributed to discouraging bold stances. The theatres could not rely on only one socio-political group to survive, and the collective nature of the theatrical enterprise, which involved playwrights, actors and shareholders, meant that taking risks potentially endangered the livelihood of many.

Unless the truly normative instance of *The Souldiers Fortune* is the unassuming and pragmatic servant Fourbin. He is the only character in the entire play who refuses to engage

in satiric rants, or to lament the way things are or should be:

*Sir David Duncce* – In troth, Friend, these are sad times, very sad times; but here’s to you.

*Fourbin* – ‘Pox o’ the Times, the Times are well enough, so long as a Man has money in his Pocket. (4.44)

Fourbin, contrary to every other character in the play, is content enough because he explicitly refuses to take sides or engage in abstract controversies. Fourbin even succeeds later in the play in passing himself off as the Chevalier, Fourbin of the Fourbinois, which means that he symbolically follows the opposite trajectory of his master’s downfall. He confides the secret of his success to Sir David:

*Sir David Duncce* – ‘Tis true, here I have been bargaining with you about a Murder, but never consider that Idolatry is coming in full speed upon the Nation. Pray what Religion are you of, Friend?

*Fourbin* – What Religion am I of, Sir? Sir, your humble Servant.

*Sir David Duncce* – Truly a good Conscience is a great happiness. (4.45)

Fourbin’s great wisdom lies in his ability to suggest the answer that the listener might want to hear, without saying anything that would put him at risk. In this respect, it is Fourbin’s philosophy, not the protagonists’, that best explains the ways in which playwrights, troupes and theatre personnel engaged with the nation’s past on the Restoration comic stage.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, I have departed from standard dramatic citation practice by referencing the quotations only by act and page number (ex: *The Committee*, 4.50). Neither *The Souldiers Fortune* nor *The Committee* are divided into scenes in their original versions, a common characteristic of Restoration plays. References to the pages of the original edition make the citations convenient to trace back in the readily-accessible digital copies of the play. The act number is added to give the reader a sense of where the extract is situated in the larger economy of the play.

<sup>2</sup> While historians carefully distinguish the episodes of the two decades between 1640 and 1660 (the escalation of the tensions, the different phases of the Civil Wars, the death of the king, *etc.*), their representation on stage is often more symbolic of the period at large than precisely referential. As argued convincingly by Aparna Dharwadker, the events referred to on stage are meant to be interpreted following a “metonymic” logic: they constitute miniature representations of the struggle of two sides in general, rather than limited comments on one precise episode or another. The term “metonymy” thus refers to the way the playwrights “treat one prominent practice of the Commonwealth period – the sequestration, confiscation and sale of royalist estate – as metonymic of all political and social injustices” (Dharwadker, 413). What matters in these representations is less the individual circumstances of the different phases of the conflicts than the retrospective, politically

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convenient fiction that these two decades constitute one single historical moment, structured by the continued struggle of Cavaliers and Parliamentarians, ending only with the defeat of the latter. Following this logic, I use the term “Civil War”, in the increasingly obsolete singular (although Christopher Hill, Ronald Hutton and Tim Harris retain it), to reflect the ways in which these two decades were presented as a whole, while keeping in mind that this unity is, in fact, a retrospective fiction. “Civil War” is therefore to be understood here in the inclusive, broad sense it has in popular practice: that of the period broadly comprised between the execution of Strafford and the Restoration.

<sup>3</sup> Amongst the studies of the Crown's rhetorical attempts to brush over the very real and persistent divisions of the country, see Stoye, Kewes “Acts of Remembrance” and Scott 161-166.

<sup>4</sup> Allardyce Nicoll identifies a series “constituted, in chronological order” (224-242) by *The Rump, or, The Mirror of Late Times* (John Tatham, 1659); *A Phanatick Play* (John Tatham, 1659); *Cromwell's Conspiracy* (by “A Person of Quality,” 1660); *The Heroick Lovers* (George Cartwright, 1661); *The Cutter of Coleman Street* (Abraham Cowley, 1661); *The Cheats* (John Wilson, 1662); *The Unfortunate Usurper* (anonymous, 1663); *The Ungrateful Favorite* (by “A Person of Honour”, 1664); *The Comical Revenge* (George Etherege, 1664); and *The Old Troop* (John Lacy, 1665).

<sup>5</sup> I adapt the expression from the preface of Cowley's *Cutter of Coleman-Street*. The original quotation reads: “I must be too much a Madman to be trusted with such an Edg'd Tool as Comedy” (no page indication).

<sup>6</sup> Much work has already been done on the blurry limit between adaptation, translation and original work, yet many crucial points concerning the status of the author, especially the playwright, are still under debate. Some helpful elements might be found however in Harbage, Allen, Milhous and Hume, *Publication*, and both Kewes, *Authorship and Plagiarism*.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed exploration of this perceived continuity, see the chapters “Restoration memory” and “Second Restoration 1679-85” (Scott, 161-166 and 434-442).

<sup>8</sup> Earlier in the play *The City-Heiress*, the dishonorable Sir Timothy Treat-all also alluded ironically to 1641: “my Integrity has been known ever since Forty One” (1.3). Another such allusion might be found in D'Urfey's *The Royalist*, first published in 1682, which includes allusions both to Boscabell in the first stage direction and to the Committee of Sequestration in the *dramatis personae*.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Scott concurs: “Public memory governed restoration politics much more surely than Charles II. It was not, however, only one thing, leading in one direction. It was not much less complex than the embattled past to which it related” (162).

<sup>10</sup> Hume is here considering exclusively the period between 1660 and 1665.

<sup>11</sup> Such an interpretation is perhaps responsible for the persisting image that Restoration theatre was for the court's entertainment exclusively. This view has since been debunked. For details of the debate, see: Love, “The Myth”; Bear, then Love, “Bear's Case”.

<sup>12</sup> The “Parliamentary Committee for the Sequestration of Delinquent's Estates” was set up before the war, in 1643, to confiscate the estates of those who fought against Parliament. Royalists could then pay a fine to their local committee to recover their estates, if they swore not to take up arms against Parliament again.

<sup>13</sup> It is worth mentioning that, although the Committee acts immorally, its appropriations are sanctioned by the law. Its members do not usurp property strictly speaking, although they bend the law to serve their own interests. The idea of theft comes from the repetition of the politically-charged word “usurper”, and from the semantic contamination of the pun “to take the Covenant” (to swear the oath/to steal) which is one of the central sources of comedy in the play.

<sup>14</sup> It is true that, although the printed play bears Howard's name, the text might well have been amended by the actors, the theatre manager or the printer himself before printing, as the text belonged to the theatre rather than to its author.

<sup>15</sup> Aparna Dharwaker comes to a similar conclusion, saying that “this transformation of political crises into social conflicts centring on class, property and marriage is the distinctive method of early Restoration political comedy.” Dharwaker also asserts that “the primary identity of the Puritan-in-power is not religious but bureaucratic” (425).

<sup>16</sup> On the rhetorical importance of Providence in Restoration discourse and its instability, see McKeon 262.

<sup>17</sup> The act known as the “Act of Oblivion” was given royal assent on the 29th August 1660, under the full title of “Act of Free and General Pardon, Indemnity and Oblivion”. For a detailed analysis of the preparation and aftermath of the act, see Keeble 70-76.

<sup>18</sup> See also this line describing the Day couple: “formal and stately Rascals / That pretended religion, and open Rebellion ever painted” (Howard, *Five new Plays* 3.60). David Bywaters' remark about a similar play, *The Rump* by John Tatham, is also applicable here: “Nowhere are the ideals of the ‘Good Old Cause’ mocked, or even mentioned” (7). Emphasis mine.

<sup>19</sup> Paulina Kewes also identifies a strategy to “unite the English by placing the blame squarely on a handful of reprobates” (“Acts of Remembrance” 115).

<sup>20</sup> Kewes adds the comment that every word of the declaration was “carefully tailored to appeal to their recipients”. For a similar strategy of planned misunderstanding, see also Solomon 289–310.

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<sup>21</sup> The known productions of *The Committee* took place at the Theatre Royal in the following months: November 1662, June 1663, May 1667, August 1667, May 1668, February 1669, February 1671, November 1675, November 1679, December 1685, February 1686, April 1686, November 1686 and February 1687 (Van Lennep, Avery and Scouten).

<sup>22</sup> Otway's most successful tragedies include: *Don Carlos Prince of Spain*, first staged in 1676; *Venice Preserv'd*, in February 1682; and *The Orphan*, in February 1680. The traceable productions of the *The Souldiers Fortune* took place on the following dates: June 1680, March 1681, April 1681, November 1682 and November 1685. The known editions of the play were printed in 1681, 1683, 1687 and 1692. Presumably to capitalise on its success, Otway also wrote a sequel, *The Atheist, or the Second Part of the Souldiers Fortune*, presented in July 1683 with little success (Van Lennep, Avery and Scouten).

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion on seeing and desiring in the play, see Lagaé 298-300.

<sup>24</sup> About *Friendship in Fashion*, another one of Otway's rather grim comedies, Hume speaks of a "ghastly parody of the usual comic resolution. Here we find no joy, no forgiveness, no festive regeneration" ("Otway and the Comic Muse" 87-116). Hume also stresses the pessimism of *The Atheist, or the Second Part of the Souldiers Fortune*, which presents Sylvia and Courtine's marital discord and bitterly denies all optimism that might have been left at the end of the first part.

<sup>25</sup> This cue echoes another one from the first act: "*Courtine* – we left our employment abroad to come home and be loyal, and now we as Loyally starve for it. *Beaugard* – Did not thy Ancestors do it before thee, man? I tell thee, Loyalty and Starving are all one: The Old Cavaliers got such a trick of it in the Kings Exile, that their Posterity could never thrive since" (Otway, *The Souldiers Fortune*, 1.1).

<sup>26</sup> Although a lot might depend on the acting choices, Courtine's incongruous toast to the King as he is drunkenly suspended halfway up his mistress's balcony could also be interpreted as an ironic attack on the King's failure to live up to his role ("*Courtine* – *God prosper our Noble King, / Our Lives and Safeties all. / I am mighty loyal tonight*", 4.47). About the "ingratitude" of Whigs, see also Wallace.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Hume calls Otway "the most determined satirist amongst writers of Restoration comedy" ("Otway and the Comic Muse" 88).

<sup>28</sup> Hume comments on Otway's comedies in the following terms: "they are not graceful, amusing displays of wit and manners, but serious, bitter satires whose surface gaiety does little to mask the author's violent disillusionment and despair" ("Otway and the Comic Muse" 87).

<sup>29</sup> As briefly mentioned earlier, allusions to the Round table and to the feudal ideals of chivalry are numerous in Restoration comedies, while being virtually all ironic. There are examples in *The Souldiers Fortune*, such as Sir Jolly being described as "the Flower of Knighthood" (2.14), or Courtine being called teasingly "my enchanted Knight" by his lover after a failed attempt at courtship (4.46).

<sup>30</sup> Epilogue to *The Souldiers Fortune*. The asterisk identifying the play *Pope Joan* is in the original edition.

<sup>31</sup> According to *The London Stage*, two plays about Pope Joan were produced during the 1679/80 season: *The History of Pope Joan, A Discovery of the Debaucheries and Villanies of the Popish Faction* (unknown author, presented in December 1679) and *The Female Prelate, Being the History of the Life and Death of Pope Joan* (Elkanah Settle, presented in May and June 1680). The two titles might refer to the same play.

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