

Summer 6-1-2013

Moral Reform in Comedy and Culture, 1696-1747 & Dangerous Women, Libertine Epicures, and the Rise of Sensibility, 1670-1730. (Review)

Rachel Carnell
Cleveland State University, r.carnell@csuohio.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/cleng_facpub



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Recommended Citation

Carnell, Rachel, "Moral Reform in Comedy and Culture, 1696-1747 & Dangerous Women, Libertine Epicures, and the Rise of Sensibility, 1670-1730. (Review)" (2013). *English Faculty Publications*. 13. https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/cleng_facpub/13

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.

In the 1980s and 1990s, research on Restoration and eighteenth-century drama followed a similar trajectory to research on the early British novel. During the decades when Jane Spencer, Michael McKeon, Ros Ballaster, and Toni Bowers were helping us rethink the political and social history of the British novel, Derek Hughes, Robert Hume, J. Douglas Canfield, Jean Marsden, Susan J. Owen, Laura Rosenthal, and Cynthia Lowenthal added nuance to our understanding of how gender, class, and partisan tensions intersected on the Restoration stage. These influential studies nevertheless treated drama and the novel largely as separate entities—a division reinforced by a tendency to teach them in separate university courses. Laura Linker's new book helps bridge the divide between these two fields by exploring the changing representation of the female libertine from the Restoration stage to the mid-eighteenth-century novel. Aparna Gollapudi, meanwhile, provides a nuanced study of reform comedy across approximately the same historical period, offering important insights into how emotion and the interior self were both written and performed.

While scholars have long understood the connections between the male rake and Humean and Epicurean philosophy, they have only recently begun to examine the category of the female libertine in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In *Sexual Freedom in Restoration Literature* (1995), Warren Chernaik devotes a chapter to the female libertine in Restoration drama and poetry and in prose fiction by Aphra Behn and Delarivier Manley. Linker now offers a compelling narrative of the trajectory of this figure from her depiction in drama from the 1660s and 1670s to her appearance in novels across the eighteenth century. Linker begins with Lucretius's *De rerum natura*, a work that coincidentally has just been made famous by Stephen Greenblatt as a turning point to modernity. (Linker's book was published a few months before Greenblatt's *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*, and neither cites the other.)

Translations of Lucretius's *De rerum natura* by Thomas Creech, John Dryden, and the Earl of Rochester offered philosophical justification for libertinism in the Restoration. Aphra Behn provided a public appreciation of Creech's translation in her poem "To Mr. Creech," which was included in the second edition of Creech's verse translation of Lucretius. Behn celebrated Creech's rendering of the soul, Linker argues, as "a feminized and mortal part of the body" (4). The mind becomes not only "a feeling entity," but "also, in Creech's translation, a feminized one" (5). The figure of Lady Lucretius, inspired by Creech's translation of *De rerum natura* as well as by Charles II's mistresses and the culture of libertinism at his court, appears in Restoration verse and drama as embodying a potentially disruptive sexuality. In *Marriage à la Mode*, Dryden depicted the dangers of this disruptive potential to both domestic and political stability by promoting the ideals of "duty, humility, and self-control" (34). However, in the 1680s, Aphra Behn offered a new version of the female libertine, which Linker labels "Lady Sensibility," a sympathetic figure inspired in part by memoirs of the Duchess of Mazarin and heroines of the French *nouvelle*. Dedicating her *History of the Nun* to Mazarin, Behn pleads for "Pity" for her heroine (quoted in Linker, 60). Whereas many scholars have emphasized Behn's general critique of patriarchy in this novella, Linker positions Behn's critique within the discourses and depictions of female libertines, such as Mazarin, from the period. Behn's novella thus suggests the need for "a sympathetic community" for Lady Sensibility.

For Linker, the sympathetic community that Behn demanded for the female libertine laid the groundwork for subsequent depictions in the 1690s and early 1700s of the "Humane Libertine," exemplified by the heroine of Catharine Trotter's *Olinda's Adventures*, who has difficulty choosing between suitors. During the same era, Delarivier Manley

offered a similarly sympathetic rendering of the “Natural Libertine,” the most striking example of which is Manley’s depiction of herself in *The Adventures of Rivella*. By the 1720s, libertine women were more likely to be satirized than sympathized with. Yet, as Linker shows in her discussion of the “Amazonian Libertine,” Daniel Defoe was unable to denounce fully his Roxana. By the time we reach Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, Sophia “remains chaste, signifying that a heroine of sensibility can no longer act as a libertine” (141), while Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* realizes that in the eyes of the world, she has become “a fallen woman, a female libertine” (143). In Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, Mary Crawford’s libertine and “corruptive influence must be expunged” (144).

For those of us who have long believed that the “reality” to which “novelistic realism” refers is not “life itself” but the “realities” depicted by prior narratives, Linker’s study offers a nuanced etiology of the figure of the female libertine from her first appearance on the Restoration stage to her continued appearance (if only to be morally expunged) in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century novel. In a study covering this much ground, it is not surprising to find one or two tiny errors: for example, Linker follows slightly dated scholarship on Manley, spelling her name “Delariviere,” rather than “Delarivier.” Overall, her research is solid. Moreover, Linker’s prose is lucid: several of my undergraduates in a seminar on Restoration drama found her work helpful and accessible. I look forward to referring to Linker’s etiology of the female libertine next semester when teaching a course on the eighteenth-century novel.

Focusing on the subcategory of reform comedy, Aparna Gollapudi covers approximately the same expanse of history as Linker, yet she intentionally does not move from Restoration drama to the eighteenth-century novel. Observing that Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* “was successful with a public accustomed to the onstage spectacle of rakes being reclaimed from decades past,” she cautions us not to understand reform comedy as merely “some kind of pre-novelistic discourse” (18). In choosing to explore a particular subcategory of Restoration drama, Gollapudi works from Robert Hume’s and Douglas Canfield’s careful anatomizations of Restoration drama, efforts that helped modern readers tease out the subtle differences between farcical, satirical, humane, reform, and exemplary comedy (as described by Hume in *The Rakish Stage*) and between heroic romance, political tragedy, personal tragedy, tragicomic romance, social comedy, subversive comedy, corrective satire, Menippean satire, and laughing comedy (following Canfield’s rubric in his *Broadview Anthology of Restoration & Early Eighteenth-Century Drama* [2001]). As Gollapudi points out, there has been no in-depth study of reform comedy beyond Hume’s *The Rakish Stage*. Her monograph offers a careful examination of this somewhat overlooked

subfield, along with crucial insights into evolving cultural attitudes towards companionate marriage and sentimentality.

Whereas common wisdom about reform comedy has been that it reaffirms conservative bourgeois moral values, Gollapudi suggests that these comedies both reinforce and resist such values. By focusing on key visual aspects of the performances, she demonstrates how these plays stage an interior moral self. In Colley Cibber's *Love's Last Shift*, for example, we must keep in mind that in the first half of the play Loveless would have appeared unkempt and wigless—a visual cue that diminishes an audience's perception not only of his social rank, but also of his masculinity and humanity. It is essential that before his wife (whom he does not recognize) welcomes him back to her bed, she provide him not just food but a periwig and a nightgown as well. For Gollapudi, "Loveless's conversion as a theatrical spectacle ... helps us to envision how Cibber conveyed the efficacy of his 'internal' transformation to his audience"; visualizing this scene also helps refute modern readings of Loveless's reformation as an "implausible, fifth-act convention" (22).

Following a similar analysis of visual clues in Susanna Centlivre's *The Gamester*, Gollapudi finds a presentation of moral conversion that is more cynical: "With an acute sense of the theatrical, Centlivre incorporates the semiotic slippage between moral earnestness and over the top emotionalism into the fabric of her reform comedy." By "revealing the faultline in performance conventions," in other words, "she systematically dismantles the scene of sincere repentance" (49). For Gollapudi, reform comedy cannot be explained as merely a response to the demands of the moral reformers, such as Jeremy Collier, since it offered spectacles of convincing reform and "a site of resistance to the drive to moralize comic entertainment" (75).

By the mid-eighteenth century, reform comedy was operating so as to inculcate not resistance but adherence to an emerging ideal of companionate marriage. Benjamin Hoadley's *The Suspicious Husband* concludes with an image of "the arch-rake ... loping around the Strickland's home like a lost puppy" (166). This visual image lifts the "distorting fog of jealousy" from Mr Strickland while at the same time allowing his wife, and women more generally, to be "restored to the status of fully-unified beings who had complete mental and emotional control over their own bodies" (166). Gollapudi's study ultimately provides an in-depth examination of reform comedy as a genre in performance, as well as an appreciation of the cultural work it performed in establishing "the emergence of middling-class values by anathemizing aristocratic mores" and in "changing people's minds about a range of issues but in a more activist and radical mode" (169). She demonstrates that reform comedy did not merely encourage a cultural turn "towards sentimentality

or morality” but helped control and channel “the impact of economic, political and social changes in the period” (167). Her lucid prose will make these ideas accessible to a broad range of scholars and students.

Never subordinating Restoration drama to the novel, Gollapudi offers important insights for our understanding of both Restoration comedy and novelistic realism. Following reform comedy as it stages the “interior” self from the Restoration into the mid-eighteenth century, Gollapudi’s study has resonance for research on novelistic representations of selfhood. Her work fits not only into a subcategory of literary history but also into the larger research area of the cultural history of emotions.

Both Linker and Gollapudi start with a fairly narrow focus—the representation of the female libertine, the development of reform comedy—and weave their narratives outward to offer rich and nuanced observations about specific literary genres and emerging conceptions of gender, morality, emotion, and selfhood.