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Perfect Instruments: Enlightenment Vulgar Comedy

 Comedy has always had a rebellious streak. The Roman poet Catullus wrote to his naysayers that he would sodomise them, since they were (as per his insult) fond of being the shameful receiving partner of male intercourse[[1]](#footnote-2). As Shakespeare, Swift and others offer proof, this bawdy style, meant to achieve laughs through discomfort as much as humour, remained ever-present. Yet something new was achieved in the 18th century. A new type of comedy used an equally new vocabulary with which to speak ill, a new medium with which to transmit such an odd message and a mischievousness matched only by its timidity. This new genre, elusive or uninteresting to previous scholarly literature, may be referred to as *Enlightenment Vulgar Comedy* for its emphasis on offensive humour and historical specificity. Regarding this previously uncategorised genre, Enlightenment Vulgar Comedy existed within, and changed, the European social world in the following ways: it peculiarly existed in the 18th century; it adopted Enlightenment values, honestly or otherwise, as a requirement in understanding its comedy; it propagated new views about gender and sexuality; and it brought about a shift in the way individuals understood Enlightenment values through its sexually subversive messages.

Enlightenment Vulgar Comedy differed substantially from the comedic works prior to its advent as well as those which came after. The nearest precedent for the style comes from what is termed Restoration Comedy, with its heyday lasting from 1660 until 1700. As the Puritan movement had achieved marked success in banning theatres and stage productions in 1642, this style is seen as a backlash borne from the comparatively liberal reign of Charles II, who sponsored a new theatre and performing company. Aside from typical instances of situational comedy, it was noted to have a fixation on the matter of adultery- so much, Bernard Shaw lamented, that “the romantic adulterers have all been intolerable boors”[[2]](#footnote-3). The vulgar humour, while surely present, was of a very direct nature, as may be seen in William Wycherley’s production *Love In A Wood*:

*Nay, look as long as you will Madam, you will find them civil Gentleman, and good Company…*

*We wanted no good company, Sir Simon, as long as we had yours.[[3]](#footnote-4)*

The new form of comedy, however, while still unabashedly sexual, was hidden beneath a thick veneer of credibility that replaced wit with deadpan delivery. Typically claiming honesty, these works took on the appearance of a genuine text and made at least a surface-level appearance of intending to genuinely provide information on a topic of little knowledge. Bowing into the tradition of Thomas More’s *Utopia* while modifying it for its own purposes, a subgenre of vulgar exploration comedy arose. While past works dwelled not on how they came to be, these new books could have had elaborate pages of “authorship” notes from as dignified a source as a Capuchin monk who had discovered the lost journal of the deceased traveller Roger Feuquewell or as low as the aptly-named “Samuel Cock”. For the latter, there are no less than seven pages of exposition explaining the pseudonymous author’s family tree, how they chanced into wealth and how his ship was built:

The last Voyage I made to Lethe was in the good ship the Charming Sally, built by the celebrated Herman Swivius, on the river Midway, by all accounts a most ingenious artist, that was provided with an excellent set of tools; and though she had not the advantage of a royal yard, she was deemed nevertheless by all good judges to be in no ways inferior to any of the king’s frigates…[[4]](#footnote-5)

The passage is the most overt Enlightenment Vulgar Comedy discovered through research, as the subtext is perhaps more noticeable in referring to the ship by the traditional female pronoun. In contrast to the other works noted within, this would break the intended effect of a hidden message through a direct reference to a woman. As it was published in 1688, it falls well within the historical bounds of Restoration comedy, but offers the best beginning to Enlightenment Vulgar Comedy as is available. Discretion, plausible deniability and the sheer comedy at the lengths gone in service to both are defining features of this genre, as seen in *A New Description Of Merryland:*

At the upper End of the great Canal, mentioned in the former Chapter, is the great Treasury or Store-house called UTRS, of which *Plautus* gives this description:

—*Item esse reor Mare ut est; quod das devorat, numquam abundat, Des quantum vis—*
Semblance meet/ of the wide Ocean, which ingulfs whate’er/ Within its Circuits falls; in its Abyss/ Absorbing Great, or Little, as it chances; Gorge it to the Brim, Straight it All devours! And craves for more.

This *Store-house* is of a very particular Structure; in Shape it somewhat resembles one of our common Pint-Bottles, with the Neck downwards. It is so admirably well contrived, that its Dimensions are always adapted to its Contents; for as the Store contain;d in it increases, so the Bounds are extended in Proportion; & when it is quite empty, or but little in it, in contracts or diminishes proportionably…[[5]](#footnote-6)

 All for the sake of making a veiled reference to the uterus. This may be compared to Voltaire’s work *La Pucelle d’Orleans*, written in 1730, which adopts a far more carefree attitude in his satire on the life of Joan of Arc:

Our lovers their delight and joy confess’d/ desire inflam’d, and Transport fill’d each breast/ supremely form’d, by sprightly Wit to please/ eager they listen, or alternate gaze

While their discourse, without Indecence, free/ gave their Impatience fresh vivacity/ The Prince on fire, devour’d her with his eyes/ mix’d were his Tales of Love with ardent Sighs[[6]](#footnote-7)

Being a poem, it follows far more of the old technique of Restoration Comedy than it does the new. Another style of work, perhaps a novel, could have presented an opportunity, but comedic poems are not known for their subtlety. There is no earnest seriousness, as it is obviously a comedic poem; no attempt to establish the trust of the author; and no Enlightenment knowledge is necessary to understand it. This text was censored, as was much of Voltaire’s work, in stark contrast to the other works noted here.

One explanation for the flourishing of Enlightenment Vulgar Comedy is the increasing presence of the personal censor corresponding to the lack of an official one. Karen Harvey, in the book *Reading Sex In The 18th Century*, discusses the shifting English legal and printing system. In particular, she notes that English printers had but three official publishing companies from which to receive approval. If the material provided did not pass muster, it could not be legally sold on the market. The books that *were* allowed were licensed, approved and placed on a registry. In 1695, the law mandating this was not renewed. While it caused the end of official state censorship of books, it was not the end of literary suppression. Moralists would often challenge books, suing the publisher and author for indecency. This was usually to good effect: Voltaire, *in absentia*, was banned in England by this very method. So, too, were other books banned: *An Essay On Women*, an explicit poem parodying Pope’s *An Essay On Man*, was read from cover to cover out loud in the House of Lords, who promptly called for the imprisonment of its author and the banning of its sale. The author was in fact none other than the fellow Member of Parliament John Wilkes, who fled to Paris to escape arrest as well as the duels and attempted murders resulting from his infamy.[[7]](#footnote-8)

 Curiously, one defining aspect of Enlightenment Vulgar Comedy was its resistance to such lawsuits. When brought up on trial, the wordplay was not deemed evidence enough that the work was indecent, and the assumption of ill intent was placed squarely on the accuser. By proxy, the reader was assumed to be innocent of ill will, and only found humour in what was not designed to be humourous. This may be the main reason that the genre became as popular as it did- while works containing even a hint of explicit content were speedily prevented from being published, this new medium was left undisturbed.

After the heyday of Enlightenment Vulgar Comedy, a new style of writing known as the Sentimental Comedy came about, in direct response to the vices exhibited by the supposedly devious texts. In this type of play, sexual ramblings were replaced with presentations of honest and goodhearted men and women, who may initially appear to have ill intentions yet ultimately find pure romance with each other. Even this was parodied in yet another text attributed to Samuel Cock, *Hudibrasso*, on its face an opera but in all likelihood not intended to be performed. The play’s theatre is stated as *Voluptario*, and from this it may be deduced that it is yet another attempt at coy humour. The play, calling on mythology, finds the eponymous prince asking the princess Ironia for her hand in marriage, though she always rejects him in favour of her true love Crowdero:

HUDIBRASSO: Love is the Trade, the only Trade that’s driven- it is the interest of State in Heaven.

IRONIA: Mistake not, Prince- I am not yet so fond- you say you love-

Hud.: I’ll give my Oath, my Bond-

Iro.: Vows go for nought, and tender things men say- I am not to be caught I’th’ vulgar Way,
With me I own the most prevailing Trope, is or a Pistol, Poison, or a Rope-
These are the unfeigned Realities of Love![[8]](#footnote-9)

 The text attempts to show the folly of this new style, where the “vulgar Way”, quick and speedy romance without meaning or substance, is considered less enviable than suicide by the conventions of Sentimental Comedy. Alas, since it was a niche text, as were the other texts of Enlightenment Vulgar Comedy, it did not elicit the intended response among readers. Thus did this medium fall by the wayside after 1750, existing in a much-diminished fashion until fading into obscurity shortly before the dawning of the 19th century. Enlightenment Vulgar Comedy was thus the successor to Restoration Comedy, had its greatest popularity in the first half of the 18th century and slowly faded from view before becoming nonexistent by 1800.

Enlightenment Vulgar Comedy required its readers to be familiar with Enlightenment values and ideas in order to find humour in the text. For example, the very nature of the books was related to emerging narratives of biological difference between male and female. Much as animals could be classified as being different from each other, Thomas Laqueuer argues in *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* that the narrative on male and female development shifted in the 18th Century. The prior body of knowledge from the 17th century and before favoured a one-body model, in which the same basic body was built upon in different ways. In the 1700s, however, this changed into a two-body model of thought, where men and women were remarkably different from each other, and differences in social behaviour ascribed to natural reasons inherent in the construction of the male and female body[[9]](#footnote-10).

This is mirrored in *Lethe*, as the text goes to directly describe the female body as the equivalent of a faraway sea, away from the eyes of all but a few men. *Merryland*, too, refers to a great kingdom that is hidden away from the perception of others. In this way, the texts accept the underlying notion of a foreign body and play it up to its maximum extent- not only is it not male, it is not even a body. While they are recognisable if odd to a modern reading, the descriptions of islands, gates and rivers would have been very relevant to the European tradition of exploration and documentation of new lands that was very much still active at the time. The effect must have been even greater upon the original readers, and in this manner the texts reinforced and popularised emerging concepts of gender in Enlightenment thought.

Additionally, in the aforementioned texts, a number of authors chose to write Latin in their books. This was done, as Karen Harvey suggests, to make the books appear more masculine, as Latin was not seen as a language men were to know but which women would supposedly only have a passing understanding of, playing into the gendered politics of the works (Harvey 56). In another case of the use of Latin, Thomas Stretzer’s *A New Description of Merryland* appears to use the Virgil quote “Felix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas” in a manner akin to an esteemed author, yet without context or any discernible intent[[10]](#footnote-11). It does not match the text surrounding it, and seems to be gratuitous use of Latin for its own sake. This may be a lampooning of the Royal Society, an academic group within England who were a common target of these works and whom did indeed write in Latin regarding scientific discourses. As *A Voyage to Lethe* states, “…I conceive [my studies] to be well worth the consideration of the public, and particularly that learned body of men which composes the Royal Society”[[11]](#footnote-12). Appeals to existing groups of authority are a running gag amongst these texts.

While it cannot be substantiated with a particular source, it may be seen as a trend within the books discussed to include passages of Latin in books as a manner of flavour text, to spice up a book with pertinent information presented in a way intending to catch the eye. By subverting this convention of literature, Enlightenment Vulgar Comedy distinguishes itself by directly comparing itself to genuine scholarly works so that they may be mocked for their perceived shallowness.

 The ultimate example of the necessity of Enlightenment thought in understanding Enlightenment Vulgar Comedy comes from the Marquis de Sade’s book *Philosophy in the Bedroom*. Written in 1795, it mirrors the style of discussion found in works such as Denis Diderot’s philosophical text *D’Alembert’s Dream* and places it within the context of a very vulgar story indeed. Set between the conversation of three anxious soon-to-be-lovers, the two male characters go off on extended soliloquys on the perceived evils of religion: “What do I see in the God of that infamous sect… but a frail being forever unable to bring man to heel and force him to bend a knee[?]”; poverty itself: “You wish to have no poor in France? Distribute no alms, and above all shut down your poorhouses”; and the hypocrisy of almsgiving:

Begone those virtues which produce naught but ingratitude! But, my charming friend [Eugenie], be not at all deceived: benevolence is surely rather pride’s vice than an authentic virtue in the soul; never is it with the single intention of performing a good at, but instead ostentatiously that one aids one’s fellow man; one would be most annoyed were the alms one has just bestowed not to receive the utmost possible publicity[[12]](#footnote-13).

 Once again mirroring *D’Alembert*, the theme of an innocent woman asking questions of philosophy to a wiser male companion is seen here, yet while the similar text is delving into radical philosophy with the means of explaining some truth to the reader, here the same exposition is given to the author’s philosophy on sexual and moral matters.

While the book is ultimately a banned explicit text, it is certainly philosophical in nature, as the above three examples can attest to, and this portion of the book is offered in direct contrast to the explicit texts that surround it. In the Fifth Dialogue, the Marquis discusses the ongoing French Revolution. He calls for the destruction of the Catholic Church, the casting off of French culture and morals, and predictably calls for the rejection of all laws and cultural foundations that interfere with the pursuit of pleasure. The entire book is marked by this dualistic combination of sex and exposition. While it was not specifically designed to be a comedy, in writing the work in such an openly absurdist format the Marquis de Sade designed it with a specific kind of secondary comedy that would only be found entertaining if the reader were well-versed in French Enlightenment literature.

Since *Merryland, Lethe* and *Philosophy* require the reader to be familiar with the literary conventions of Enlightenment nonfiction works, classical mythology and the emerging backlash to the use of reason, it may be argued with confidence that Enlightenment Vulgar Comedy required one to be familiar with Enlightenment thinking in order to understand its humour.

Finally, it may be asserted that this form of comedy brought about a shift in private thought on sexuality. Whereas explicit personal accounts of romance were once unacceptable to publish in any state, in the second half of the 18th century a new style of man came along known as the Libertine, which is discussed by the Marquis de Sade in the above text. The ideal Libertine man- and it was always a man- would find women who were “chained” to the unwelcome marriage of their husband, or perhaps lonely if single, and give them an emotionally and physically charged evening before casting away on a new whim. The most famous of these works, *Histoire de Ma Vie* by Giacomo Casanova, is a prototypical example of this.

 This gives precedent for a shift in values from a purely religious and cultural basis for purity into an individualistic one. If one sought to remain chaste, as in Sentimental Comedy, that was their decision and it was accepted by society. Yet if one did not wish to be so, it was also suddenly within the power of women to surrender what they perceived to be their good morals and consensually join these men for their own ends.

A counterpoint to the hidden world of the Rake, an exploitative libertinist, is the journal of Gouverneur Morris, an American who lived in France for ten years and served as ambassador there from 1792 to 1798[[13]](#footnote-14) (Foster 66). Although he is not famous for it, his diary contains a trove of firsthand information on sexual liaisons with *madames* during his time in Paris. While the Rake was considered a predatory personality, exploiting women to their detriment and the man’s gain, Morris kept detailed notes on his opinions of the women and theirs of him that offer a very sympathetic view of late Enlightenment consensual sexual mores. Deriding the established view present in Sentimental Comedy that sex was something to be disgusted by, Morris fully accepts the Enlightenment Vulgar Comedy positions that sex is beneficial, and instead breaks by thinking of women on a very personal and individual level rather than through the perspective of stereotype or misogyny[[14]](#footnote-15).

 Indeed, he waits for consent and goodwill in everything he does. As he writes: “[a]t Midnight the Gentlemen kiss the Ladies but I do not attempt this Operation because there is some resistance and I like only the yielding Kiss and that from Lips I love” [sic][[15]](#footnote-16). Thus, by rejecting Sentimental values while also rejecting a purely exploitative view of women, he forges a path guided by Enlightenment Vulgar Comedy that hints of the restraint shown by the texts- he is neither totally explicit, as are the Rake and Restoration Comedy, nor is he oppressive, as Sentimentalism is.

By viewing the chronological timing of these pieces- the earliest *Merryland* book being printed in 1675, the later one and *Lethe* coming about in 1741, and Morris’ journal and the Marquis’ book both being written in the 1790s- a gradual cause and effect may be seen. While Restoration Comedy did not appear to have any effect on the viewing population except in reinforcing their already held views, Enlightenment Vulgar Comedy subtly played with the notion of what sexuality consists of. Are women similar, or are they hopelessly different? Can they be understood by all, or do only a select few truly know the art of good conversation with the opposite sex? While an Englishman in 1700, judging by the themes of Restoration Comedy, would have said *Yes* to the first and third questions, the comparable man living in 1799, judging by *Philosophy* and Morris’ diary, would likely say the opposite.

Thus, it may be asserted that Enlightenment Vulgar Comedy specifically existed from the very late 17th century to the late 18th, as it was borne from Restoration and gave way into Sentimental; that it required knowledge of Enlightenment values and society in order to find it entertaining; and that it changed the concept of sexuality and gender in the private lives of those living during the time.

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1. Catullus 16, 1-11 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Martin L. Kornbluth, “Shaw and Restoration Comedy,” *Shaw Society of America* 2, no. 4 (1958): 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. William Wycherley, *Love In A Wood* (Ann Arbor: Early English Works Text Creation Partnership (2012), 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Samuel C., *A Voyage To Lethe,* (1741), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Thomas Stretzer, *A New Account Of Merryland* (1741), 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. François-Marie Arouet, *La Pucelle D'Orléans. Poéme Héroi-Comique En Dix-Huit Chants* (1775), 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Arthur H. Cash, *John Wilkes: The Scandalous Father of Civil Liberty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 143-164. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Samuel C. *Hudibrasso: A Burlesque Opera Of Two Acts,* 49 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), 1990. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Thomas, Stretzer, *A New Description Of Merryland*, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Samuel C. *A Voyage To Lethe* (1741), 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Donatien Alphonse François, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, trans. Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse (1795), 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Thomas Foster, “Reconsidering Libertines and Early Modern Heterosexuality: Sex and American Founder Gouverneur Morris.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 22, no. 1, (2013): 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Foster, “Reconsidering Libertines and Early Modern Heterosexuality,” 74 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Ibid. 75 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)