

“Virtue’s an Ass:” When Being Bad is Really Good



For me, the easiest way to think of England’s Restoration Era is as a time that defied expectations. Theoretically, it was a return to the old regime, the end of a revolution—not the sort

of environment likely to foster a free-wheeling, fun-loving era of history as indeed it did. Reading Restoration drama gives you a good idea of how very non-conservative England’s citizens became once Charles II returned to the throne. *The Provoked Wife*, by John Vanbrugh, stands as an excellent example—it’s well-known, often studied, and, like many plays of the era, revolves around sex. Not only is the plot risqué, but the philosophy behind the play has some surprisingly radical aspects. What intrigued me most was the play’s exhortation, never fully articulated, to question authority. In an era named for returning to the status quo—restoring the deposed monarchy—Vanbrugh wrote a play championing a woman who declared that the other traditional authority figure, the Church of England, wasn’t worth obeying because its rules were unreasonable. She would be happier being “sinful,” and she could justify it too. It’s hardly the sort of claim I expected to find in a centuries-old drama, and one I was eager to examine.

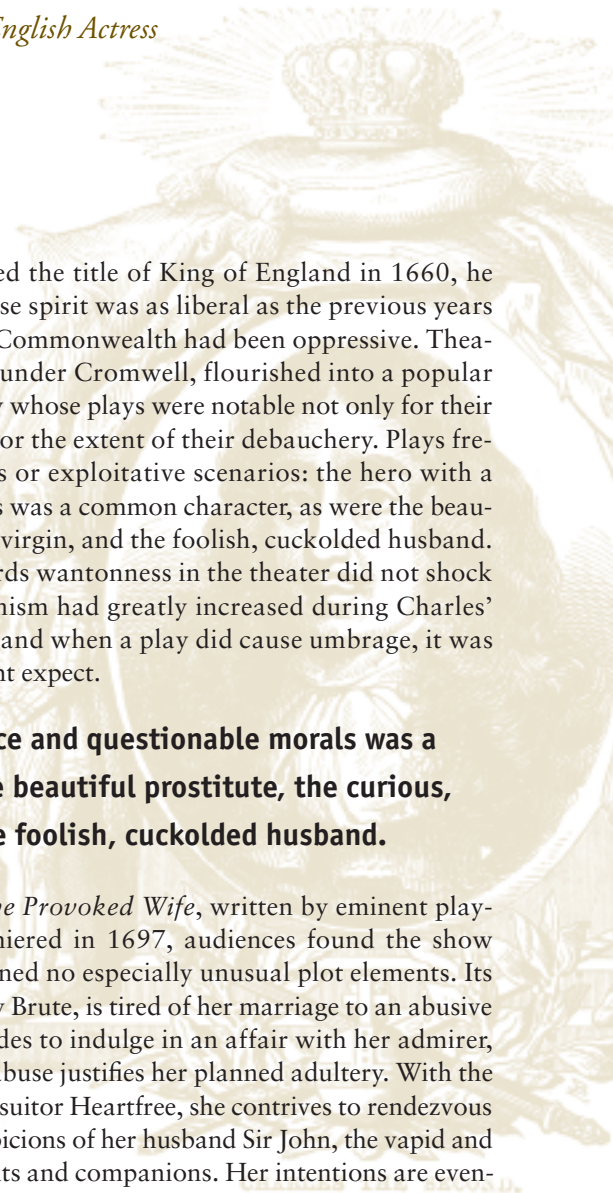
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Professor Diana Solomon

When Charles II assumed the title of King of England in 1660, he ushered in an era whose spirit was as liberal as the previous years under the puritanical Commonwealth had been oppressive. Theater, rigidly controlled under Cromwell, flourished into a popular entertainment industry whose plays were notable not only for their political and social relevance but also for the extent of their debauchery. Plays frequently featured sexually promiscuous or exploitative scenarios: the hero with a handsome face and questionable morals was a common character, as were the beautiful prostitute, the curious, coquettish virgin, and the foolish, cuckolded husband. This seemingly scandalous trend towards wantonness in the theater did not shock audiences, whose tolerance for libertinism had greatly increased during Charles’ reign. Very little was truly offensive—and when a play did cause umbrage, it was not for the reasons modern readers might expect.

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One such controversial play was *The Provoked Wife*, written by eminent playwright John Vanbrugh. When it premiered in 1697, audiences found the show appalling despite the fact that it contained no especially unusual plot elements. Its heroine, the beautiful and virtuous Lady Brute, is tired of her marriage to an abusive boor; after some deliberation, she decides to indulge in an affair with her admirer, Constant, claiming that her husband’s abuse justifies her planned adultery. With the help of her niece Bellinda and Bellinda’s suitor Heartfree, she contrives to rendezvous with Constant without arousing the suspicions of her husband Sir John, the vapid and vain Lady Fancyfull, and various servants and companions. Her intentions are eventually discovered, but while Lady Brute and Constant fail to actually consummate their relationship, they also escape censure for any intended wrongdoing. All problems are denied or explained away, and the play ends without any consequences or recriminations for Lady Brute and her compatriots. Audiences, however, failed to see Lady Brute’s actions in as forgiving a light as the play’s characters did. Even though cuckoldry was fairly common in Restoration plays, and even though Lady Brute never committed adultery with Constant, her actions caused a furor because of the contradiction they presented about virtue and vice. Oddly for such a scandalous character, Lady Brute seems not like a scarlet woman but a sensible, sinned-against wife. Rather than blaming her passionate love for Constant as the source of her intended faithlessness, she presents the case for her adultery to the audience as a reasonable action for an aggrieved wife to take—the morally correct course, even if it did techni-



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cally break her marriage vows. Her stance scandalized audiences accustomed to plays where faithless wives, whether or not they received comeuppance for their sinful actions, tended to blame lust and their own human weakness for any indiscretions. The motive behind Lady Brute's intended cuckoldry represented a new, more sympathetic interpretation of values than the traditional, Church-imposed standard, one based on reason and a sense of equity rather than a woman's ability to maintain a façade of chastity.

Vanbrugh begins by establishing that his character's actions have a well-reasoned ethical basis. Lady Brute never presents her intended cuckoldry of Sir John Brute as an action of impulse or lust. Her opening monologue instead makes clear how she reached a decision to commit adultery through logical argument: when her husband broke his matrimonial vows, hers became similarly nullified. Her circumstances are such that infidelity becomes a retaliatory act, a skewed attempt at justice. As she asserts to Bellinda, originally skeptical of her aunt's intentions, "according to the strict statute law of religion, I should do wrong; but if there were a Court of Chancery in heaven, I'm sure I should cast him" (Vanbrugh 8). The Court of Chancery was a special branch of the English legal system, notable for making decisions based not on rigid interpretation of English law but rather on the moral culpability of those involved in each case (Vanbrugh 8, footnote 2). Sufficient justification for what was technically illegal would be taken into account, and Lady Brute claims that she has such justification. She is aware that the institution of the Church would automatically consider any adultery to be immoral, but she also feels that a heavenly court, one that literally would judge her soul, would not hold adultery against her. To a divine Court of Chancery, concerned with individuals' consciences rather than whether their actions follow Church teachings exactly, she has extenuating circumstances that supersede her duty to follow her wedding vows. Thus while she may seem to be committing a sin by breaking her marriage vows, Lady Brute has a clean conscience and cannot be faulted as a mere pleasure-seeker or naturally unfaithful wife. The culpability lies entirely with her husband. She views herself (and hopes the audience also views her) as doing nothing more than claiming compensation for her suffering.

Vanbrugh goes on from this justification for adultery to establishing an underlying

change in the play's moral atmosphere with a setting in which mores relating to female sexuality differ from those outside the theater. This dissimilarity appears in the original depiction of Lady Brute as a woman of impeccable reputation, emphasizing her credibility in moral matters. "My lady is a young lady, a fine lady, a witty lady, a virtuous lady," Sir John relates to the audience (5). The term "lady" implies nobility, integrity, possession of all the qualities women are exhorted to have. Lady Brute is enough of a lady that her loutish husband not only notices it but seems obsessed by it—he uses the word to refer to her five times in a single sentence, as if reiterating that gentility will bring him closer to understanding it. This appellation of "lady" shows that, while his wife may be hateful to him, she has no character flaws obvious enough for him to notice and attack. Even after Lady Brute attempts a liaison with Constant, only three of the main characters—Sir John, Lady Fancyfull, and Lady Fancyfull's vituperative French maid Mademoiselle—express any disapproval of her. As they all possess obvious and serious flaws in the form of lack of intelligence (Sir John and Lady Fancyfull), lack of compassion (Mademoiselle) and a shared lack of sympathy and understanding, their judgments matter far less than the forward-thinking protagonists. By having only those characters the playwright established as fools censure Lady Brute for her infidelity, Vanbrugh creates an environment in which virtue is not necessarily related to fidelity. The actions that provoked moral outrage among theater audiences—as Marsden notes, *The Provoked Wife* ranks high among the most controversial plays of an era in which theater often depicted debauched, rakish behavior—are deemed only mildly reprehensible within the confines of the play (Marsden 52). This scenario allows Lady Brute to be both a faithless wife and a lady, someone whose conscience remains clean despite actions that would normally earn her condemnation.

The standard of ethical behavior in *The Provoked Wife*, then, hinges on a reevaluation of virtue's definition in Restoration society. Characters' conversations within the play often lambaste this quality as a defunct notion arbitrarily imposed on women. Lady Brute rants that it is considered important not because of any real value but because of "the credit of old foolish philosophers," going on to stress its inanity: "Virtue's this, virtue's that—virtue's an ass..." (Vanbrugh 7). Virtue, that much-lauded quality, has no truly

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tangible aspects. The attributes subscribed to it are arbitrary and variable, “this” and “that”—the easiest measure is not specific qualities a woman has, but rather her avoidance of sinful behavior. Not only is it an overly vague standard of judgment, but this negative definition of virtue has lessened credibility because of the “old foolish philosophers” who created it. They have neither Lady Brute’s youth nor her acumen, so it seems unlikely to her that they could create a working model of virtuous behavior superior to hers. Most pertinently, their standard lacks any sense of context. According to the prevailing standard of the era, certain actions always garner condemnation, regardless of the motivations behind them. Lady Brute, however, takes circumstances surrounding technically sinful actions into consideration, making her concept of virtue a more reasonable standard. The ethical judgments Lady Brute makes within the play have a significance previous arbiters of virtue could not supply.

This reinterpretation of what is ethical leads to a depiction of the religious rituals that support the traditional moral system as misguided practices. Prominent examples of this are the play’s scenes of confession, penitence, and absolution. Women preside over these religious rituals instead of priests, reflecting the views of Lady Brute, rather than the Church, on morality. The first instance, in which Lady Brute and Bellinda stage a mock confession of their vanity-related sins before offering each other absolution, establishes the women’s awareness of this new and improved interpretation of values. As Jean Marsden writes in *Fatal Desire*, this scene depicts women consciously becoming “objects of male gaze and desire,” appearing in order to be noticed and validated by men rather than for their own pleasure (55). But Marsden neglects to note the tone in which



this revelation is presented. Neither woman completely resents this self-display; if they did, they would deplore their objectification instead of staging a bantering mock confession. Rather, they find the necessity of spectatorship and the other formalities male-dominated society requires (including church attendance) to be amusing in their absurdity—acts with no real purpose, no real value, but nonetheless vital to a woman’s reputation. Alone, they can drop the pretense of seriousness that surrounds these practices and absolve each other of giving in to societal demands. By transforming their subjection into a jest, they become masters of the situation, because only they, not the men, are astute enough to realize the ridiculousness of these strictures.

This consciousness of their superiority accompanies a denigration of the usually dominant moral authority, the Church of England. Lady Brute proclaims that without men’s forceful influence, women would not attend church because “religion would ne’er prevail with us” (Vanbrugh 58). The word “prevail” implies that the choice to participate in church is the result of a struggle, with one side claiming victory, rather than a voluntary decision. While Lady Brute maintains a public appearance of piety and obedience to traditional values, she neither desires nor truly accepts it. Her own beliefs differ from those forced upon her by men,

hence why she makes decisions considering not the moral teachings of the Church but those that are more amenable to women’s plight. Sir John unwittingly emphasizes this idea of religion as an unwanted enforcer when he tells his acquaintance (and Bellinda’s suitor) Heartfree why he does not fear being cuckolded. “I believe my wife’s religion will keep her honest,” he explains. And how does he know she will follow the Church’s teachings? “Persecution; and therefore she shall have it” (28). Not only does he state even more clearly than Lady Brute that she practices religion out of obligation rather than faith, he explicitly names it as the custodian of her virtue. Little does he know that Lady Brute has discarded this unwanted interference from the Church in favor of a more flexible definition of right and wrong.

This revised standard of conduct gives Lady Brute and Bellinda a dominant position within their immediate society, which they exercise over the other char-

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acters. They are the ones who deal with Rasor, Sir John's valet, after he confesses that he told Mademoiselle that Lady Brute had cuckolded Sir John. Though Rasor addresses a group of both men and women, it is Bellinda, not Sir John or Constant, who speaks to offer Rasor forgiveness after he recants and declares Lady Brute and Bellinda to be innocent. The two women are also the ones who chastise Lady Fancyfull when her perfidy—attempting to destroy Bellinda's and Lady Brute's reputations—is revealed. With two simple pronouncements, they fulfill Rasor's wish to punish Lady Fancyfull by transforming her from a villainess to a fool:

Bellinda: Impertinent!

Lady Brute: Ridiculous!

All: Ha ha ha ha ha! (Vanbrugh 107)

Lady Fancyfull's allegations become suddenly benign—once she is declared to be impertinent and ridiculous, her words cease to be damaging. Rather, they are notable for how foolish they are, how poorly they reflect on her for being silly enough to make them. The revelation of Lady Fancyfull's unfounded slander makes her impertinent, but it is her ignorance of the fact that the better-informed characters condone Lady Brute's infidelity that condemns Lady Fancyfull to absurdity. She has attempted to judge her peers within the confines of classic

morality when they have moved on to the new reason-based standard, and she becomes a laughingstock as a result.

While on a *prima facie* level, Lady Brute's intention to commit adultery is morally wrong, delving deeper into the treatment of morality in *The Provoked Wife* shows that her actions bear no consequence and little culpability. By establishing a more concrete standard for virtue, one that requires justification for actions rather than simply accepting long-standing decrees that certain things are good or bad, Lady Brute also reveals herself to be a more empowered woman than her contemporaries. It may be that the controversy over her actions among audiences merely indicated theatergoers' inability to accept Vanbrugh's secular, reason-based interpretation of right and wrong. Perhaps, sadly, they understood but were unable to accept women as empowered and intelligent as Lady Brute and Bellinda prove themselves to be. ■

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