

Laura Martínez-García 2014
***Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century English
Comedies as a New Kind of Drama.
A Foucauldian Interpretation of Family Relations,
Sexuality, and Resistance as Psychological Power***
Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press.

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Laura Martínez-García is a young researcher from the University of Oviedo who is mainly interested in gender and cultural studies, and usually focuses on the Restoration period. The book reviewed here is her first extensive publication and aims to apply the Foucauldian notions of power and resistance to the analysis of four comedies of the aforementioned period: William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675), George Etherege's *The Man of Mode* (1676), and Susanna Centlivre's *The Busybody* (1709) and *The Wonder* (1714). The author sees these plays as "points of resistance" (ii) in the transition from what Foucault calls the "deployment of alliance" to the "deployment of sexuality" during the early modern period. She really seems to aim high, because she claims that with this book she hopes to open new ways to study Restoration comedy (i) and make the readers "fall in love with a period that has a wealth of things to offer, but which has been unfairly neglected and ignored for far too long" (vi). So, as Dr Álvarez Faedo states in the foreword, this is certainly "an ambitious study" (iv). The enthusiasm with which Martínez-García devotes herself to such challenging undertaking is clear in the more than four hundred pages that follow.

After the prefatory sections of the abstract, forward, preface and acknowledgements, the main core of the study is divided into five chapters before reaching its conclusions. The first is entitled "The

plays in context: history, literature and criticism" (pp. 3-32). This is an introductory section in which the author presents the corpus of her study and justifies the choice of those abovementioned plays, two written by male authors in the 1670s and the other two by a female dramatist of the first decades of the eighteenth century. With this selection, Martínez-García intends to provide a "complete scope of the perceptions of gender and sexuality at the time" (7), although, bearing in mind the title and the aims stated above, one would expect a more extensive corpus. She also explains that she will use the tags *Restoration comedies* and *comedies of manners* to refer to the four texts in a loose manner, simply to avoid repetition and because of a lack of more appropriate terms, since she considers labels such as *sex comedies*, for instance, "too negative and judgemental," as well as too restrictive. Besides, she believes that Centlivre's plays cannot be really considered *sentimental comedies*, as they have been often called. Although it is debatable whether all these texts may really fit into the category of *comedies of manners*, it is understandable for the sake of convenience. However, what is definitely incorrect is to consider *Restoration comedy* a genre, because this denomination makes reference to comic plays written at a particular period of time rather than to a type of text with common generic markers. The first chapter also includes a brief historical contextualization and a concise review of literary criticism about late seventeenth-century comedies.

The following section, "Reconstructing the Restoration" (pp. 35-76), is designed to be "an archaeology of the discourses of truth" that dominated during the period of this study (35). For this purpose, Martínez-García uses Foucault's theories on the evolution of both the punitive system, in *Discipline and Punishment* (1977), and the notion of power, in his *History of Sexuality* (1978). She is particularly interested in Foucault's explanation of how in the early modern period there was a gradual change in punishment practices from the – often public – physical punishment of medieval times to the seizure of property and restriction of freedom after the eighteenth century. Yet she is even more concerned with the parallel shift from the repressive relations of power typical of the "deployment of alliance" towards a seemingly more humane – though eventually more controlling – model of relations that is characteristic of the "deployment of sexuality." Both systems sought to buttress the patriarchal power of rich, educated, middle-aged men over all their

dependants (women, children, and servants), but the philosophical, medical, and moral discourses used are different. As the theoretical basis of the ensuing study, the contents of this chapter are certainly pertinent, but what seems inappropriate is the heading, because no actual *reconstruction* of the late Stuart period is explained there. Similarly, the heading of section 2.2, “Rediscovering the 17th and 18th centuries,” can hardly be considered suitable for what we read in those six pages.

Chapter 3 is entitled “Power, sexuality and resistance: identity in Restoration comedy” (pp. 79-139). Here the author analyses how the three playwrights, according to her, reject the deployment of alliance by condemning the practice of arranged marriage in their plays, but they also seem to be suspicious about the deployment of sexuality. For this analysis, Martínez-García divides this chapter into two sections: one focusing on the changing notions on manhood, and the other on the shifting views on womanhood. In both cases she pays attention to biological and philosophical theories, the manner in which age and marital status interacted with gender hierarchies to produce a complex map of power relations, and how these ideas of gender and sexuality conditioned the notion of honour and, consequently, the behaviour of men and women in the early modern period.

In the next chapter, “Power and the family: patriarchy and social order” (pp. 143-232), the author sets out to analyse the chosen plays by focusing on the type of family relations their characters have. She is especially interested in the clash between parents and children regarding the choice of spouse, and in the conflict between husbands and wives as a result of adulterous affairs. According to Martínez-García, the three dramatists whose plays are studied here condemn not only arranged marriage but also marital violence and repression. For her, the tyrannical fathers and husbands shown in these comedies are representative of the old deployment of alliance that was gradually being replaced by the new deployment of sexuality. By ridiculing those men on stage, the playwrights seem to defend the idea that marriage should be based on affection and respect rather than on social and financial interests, and to favour less repressive relations within the family in general.

Chapter 5, “Power and resistance: disruptive identities” (pp. 235-392), is the most extensive and is subdivided into two main parts:

one about characters that Martínez-García considers gender “misfits” or “unlikely men and women” (237), and one that analyses the endings of the plays. The first of these studies certain characters that the author deems subversive because they disrupt established notions of gender roles, such as libertines (both male and female), eunuchs, male gossips, meek men, fops, jealous men and women, cuckolds, witty heroines, and the “New Gentlemen-Rakes” (348). The use of the plural in some of these categories does not seem justified, since she only talks about one male gossip (Marplot in *The Busybody*), one meek man (Young Bellair in *The Man of Mode*), and one (false) eunuch (Horner in *The Country Wife*, who is not really castrated and is, in fact, also included in the category of male libertine). The rest are all recurrent characters in Restoration comedy and need no explanation here. Martínez-García calls “new gentlemen rakes” those rakish heroes in Centlivre’s plays, such as Colonel Briton or Sir Charles, who are less cold and cynical than Horner and Dorimant, and therefore less offensive to audiences of the early eighteenth century, although still far from the contemporary ideal of a gentleman. For the author, these deviant characters represent alternative identities that challenge the hegemonic discourses of the period. What is not clear is whether she is aware that some are presented as heroes and heroines whereas others are ridiculed on stage, and the difference this is supposed to make for their interpretation. Fops, cuckolds, and jealous people may be considered misfits, but certainly not subversive or with new identities to promote. This is even more problematic when we see that Martínez-García opens a brief section in order to argue that the very dramatists themselves are also misfits because their private lives confirm their commitment to resistance against social and gender roles. Probably Wycherley and Etherege sympathised with Horner and Dorimant, and Centlivre with her witty heroines, but it is surely doubtful that they sympathised with their fops and cuckolds.

In the sixth section of this book, entitled “General conclusions: From the Leprosarium to the Panopticon” (pp. 395-411), the author summarises a series of conclusions that she has made explicit throughout the previous chapters. Basically, she argues that the period between the reigns of Charles II and Queen Anne is a transitional age in Britain, a shift towards modernity that can be explained with the help of Foucault’s theories about the evolution of

the penal system and the conception of sexuality. Applying these theories to her analysis of the plays she selected, Martínez-García reaches the conclusion that they are “spaces of resistance where a group of rebellious characters, living in the fringes of normality and prescription, propose new and revolutionary gender roles for a free society” (406). After these conclusions, the author registers the bibliographical references she has used for this monograph (pp. 415-39). It is an extensive list that includes the most important studies of Restoration comedy and about gender issues in the early modern period. But as usual, one misses the work of authors that would be worth taking into account as well, such as J. Douglas Canfield, Brian Corman, Derek Hughes, Susan Owen, Deborah Payne, and Harold Weber, among others, and texts of the late Stuart period that deal with marriage, sexuality, and gender roles. However, one is also aware that it is not easy to have access to a complete bibliography, and Martínez-García has really worked with an extensive range of critics.

The main problem of this book is perhaps the title, which creates expectations that the contents do not satisfy. The title suggests this will be a study covering many plays and authors of the two centuries mentioned, and about how English comedy changes during that period. Instead, we find a study of only four pieces, and no matter how important and interesting they may be, they can hardly meet the expectations generated. The title may not be the one the author had in mind originally, as seems to be indicated on page 6, where it is referred to as: *Power, sexuality, identity and resistance: a new approach to the works of Etherege, Wycherley, and Centlivre*. This would have been a much more appropriate title, since it conveys what the monograph is about, and it would not have been so misleading. Still, a reference to other plays by those three playwrights, and to other comedies of the period, would have been useful. Even if the reader considers the published title inaccurate (whether by the author’s decision or – most likely – the publisher’s), and that there was never an intention to cover the whole eighteenth century, the explicit aim of showing the evolution from the deployment of alliance to the deployment of sexuality points to the convenience of including other works where this may be more evident. No wonder the author is forced to admit that it is difficult for her to find examples of characters that may reflect the modern concepts of the deployment of sexuality in the plays she focuses on (pp.145 and 209-10). So, why

not analyse plays where that could really be found? Choosing texts and restricting periods for the purposes of analysis have always been complicated tasks. That said, the book is an insightful study of the four texts chosen, and I warmly encourage the author to continue researching on the Restoration period, which is certainly a fascinating moment in English history and provides plenty of texts and issues worth our attention.

How to cite this review:

Figueroa Dorrego, Jorge. Review of Laura Martínez-García 2014. *Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century English Comedies as a New Kind of Drama. A Foucauldian Interpretation of Family Relations, Sexuality, and Resistance as Psychological Power*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press. *SEDER* 25 (2015): 195-200.

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