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Prof. Dr. B. Engler
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«Disguises and Counter-Disguises»
Tracing the Sources of Joe Orton’s Farces
«Loot» and «What the Butler Saw»

A. Introduction	1
B. Some Aspects of Farce as a Dramatic Genre	2
1. Defining Farce	2
2. Farce as a “Simple” Dramatic Genre	2
3. Farce and the Commedia dell’Arte Tradition	4
C. Joe Orton, Lord of Misrule	6
D. Loot and What the Butler Saw: Reinstating Farce on the British Stage	7
1. Loot	7
a. Dramatic Realism in Loot	7
2. What the Butler Saw	8
a. Psychiatry as a New Religion	8
b. Sexual Farce	9
c. Orton’s Farce as Metafarce	9
3. Parallels and Differences between Loot and What the Butler Saw	9
a. Detective Truscott and Dr Rance as Ortonian Figures of Authority	10
i. Detective Truscott	10
ii. Dr Rance	11
4. Orton’s Parody of Literary Genres	11

E. Affinities of Orton’s Farces to Specific Plays and Genres _____	12
1. Affinities of Orton’s Farces to Oscar Wilde’s Plays _____	12
a. A Comparison between Wilde’s <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i> and Orton’s <i>What the Butler Saw</i> _____	12
i. The Style is the Meaning _____	13
ii. Problems of Identity _____	14
iii. Orton’s Celebration of Sexual Identities in <i>What the Butler Saw</i> _____	15
iv. Intertextual References _____	15
v. Criticisms Levelled against Wilde’s and Orton’s Plays _____	15
1. “Unrealistic” Dénouements _____	15
2. Uniformity of Styles _____	16
vi. Generic Differences between the Two Plays _____	16
b. Wilde’s and Orton’s Aesthetic Creeds _____	17
i. Joe Orton—the Oscar Wilde of the Welfare Gentility? _____	18
c. The Manipulator of the <i>Pièce bien Faite</i> versus the Master of Black Comedy _____	18
2. Affinities of Orton’s Farces to Jacobean Tragedy _____	19
a. The Preoccupation with Sexual Passion _____	20
b. Similarities in Plot Structure and the Portrayal of the Characters _____	21
3. Affinities of Orton’s Farces to Old and New Comedy _____	21
a. Transvestism and Sexual Role Reversals _____	22
b. The Rape and the Recognition Themes _____	23
4. Affinities of Orton’s Farces to Contemporary Plays and Playwrights _____	23

F. Halliwell's Role in Orton's Creative Development _____	24
G. Conclusion: Setting Orton's Farces in Their Proper Place _____	26
H. Bibliography _____	27
1. Primary Bibliography _____	27
2. Secondary Bibliography _____	28
a. Periodicals, Journals and Glossaries _____	30

A. Introduction

In this paper I want to discuss Joe Orton's two farces *Loot* and *What the Butler Saw* with regard to three aspects. First I wish to place these two plays in the context of farce as a dramatic genre, second I want to look at the contribution that these two plays made to the revival of the farce on the British stage, and third—and to this aspect I will give most emphasis—I want to trace the constitutive influences that other plays and playwrights had on Orton's œuvre.

B. Some Aspects of Farce as a Dramatic Genre

1. Defining Farce

From the etymological point of view the meaning of the word farce suggests inessential material, padding used to conceal a void or a silence. It was thus used both for “the stuffing of a game bird and the various liturgical formulas that punctuated a priest’s prayers.” (Biggsby (1982: 52)). In terms of a dramatic genre farce is usually seen as a subclass of comedy whose main purpose is

to provoke the audience to simple, hearty laughter—“belly laughs” To do so it commonly employs highly exaggerated or *caricatured* types of characters, puts them into improbable and ludicrous situations, and makes free use of broad verbal humor and physical horseplay.¹

Abrahams (1988: 29)

A very useful description of the characteristics of farce is given by Stuart E. Baker in his book *Georges Feydeau and the Aesthetics of Farce* (1981: 115) as part of an introductory discussion of the aesthetics of farce. Although Baker’s main focus is quite clearly the analysis of Feydeau’s well-made plays, his following statement is undoubtedly of universal scope:

. . . traditional farce has maintained its popularity by unashamedly exploiting our most basic and primitive emotions. It is not afraid to use simple and universal images to reach us at this most elemental of levels, where our responses are strong, automatic, and virtually instinctive. Pratfalls and sudden blows, frantic chases, and lost trousers are all images to which we react almost without the intervention of thought. They are among the most direct and universal symbols of violence, speed, and humiliation. Farce is not limited to such things, but because it is alone in its acceptance of them, they have become its most distinctive and obvious feature. They are basic to farce not because farce is crude and physical, but because it is shameless. It freely accepts all that we dislike, fear, and censor in ourselves. It includes our elementary responses to violence and sex, our basic bodily needs and functions, although it is capable of going well beyond them. It permits us to look at aspects of our lives that we cannot yet bear to view both seriously and honestly. It allows us to acknowledge the baser side of ourselves, our laws, and our institutions, and lets us admit how much lower than the angels we really are.

2. Farce as a “Simple” Dramatic Genre

It is certainly true that farce is a simple type of dramatic (sub)genre in terms of its lack of intellectual pretension. While in serious drama the integrity of the performance is never violated and the audience is expected to regard the performance as if it were *authentic*, it is part of the farcical conventions for the actors to speak to the audience in order to reveal their own performance as a sham—

¹ cf. Abrahams’ *Glossary of Literary Terms* from whose entry I quote here. For more detailed definitions of farce the reader should refer to theatre encyclopaedias such as *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*.

they openly admit the pretence of the show and even draw attention to its artificiality. Nevertheless in spite of all the pranks they may perform on stage, characters in farce do not usually step entirely out of character. They will in fact continue playing their roles in conspicuous earnest.

Farce can indeed be seen to operate on two levels of reality simultaneously; characters are allowed to occupy “a world of actuality and a world of imagination” (Baker (1981: 11)) not *alternately*, but *at the same time*. In many successful a farce—and most definitely in Joe Orton’s *What the Butler Saw*—actors do purposefully “toy with” these two realms of reality by continually maintaining an equilibrium between the two. In this manner they dissociate themselves from the real world and create the “unreality of mood” which is so characteristic of farce.

As a consequence of this the plots of farce are unquestionably imbued with a truly anarchic spirit. At certain points in a farce things get totally out of the characters’ control². Plot in farce certainly does not imply “a specious rationalism, an illusion of natural order with metaphysical and social implications” (Biggsby (1982: 13–14)). Farcical plots have never pretended to present the audience with a stable and coherent universe—the farceur in fact turns the world into an intricate and malleable toy with which he can play at will. Baker (1981: 18) describes this process of transforming everything to a toy as follows:

Once organic forms lose their original function they become lifeless structures which the clowns can transform into temporary dwellings, much as a hermit crab inhabits the dead shell of another creature.

In this we can detect—to borrow Mikhail Bakhtin’s term—the truly carnivalesque quality of farce, since it shares with the Mediaeval carnival its hostility towards “all that was immortalized and completed” (Bakhtin (1968: 66)).

The usage of ubiquitous images of violence and unpleasantness has always been a hallmark of farce. But even while conjuring them up in front of an audience farce already dissolves these images by using “improbability, absurdity, and nonsense”, thus tempting the audience to “explosions of laughter” (Baker (1981: 8)) which then ultimately annihilate their frightening presence.

Equally remarkable is how resilient to and apparently unaffected by this violence the characters in farce are. Farce characters don’t seem to experience pain in the same way as “ordinary” human beings. They may be kicked, knocked to the ground, battered and bruised—they always bounce back and emerge fully intact. Here we are dealing with almost abstract figures which are detached from reality.—Feelings of pity and compassion for the characters on the part of the audience are consequently not called for. Many literary critics who have often judged farce “by the standards of literary comedy and, not surprisingly, ... found wanting” (Baker (1981: 1–2)) as well as the “more cultured” amongst audiences have seen farce’s irresponsible and seemingly irrational nature in general and its celebration of cruelty and lascivious frivolity in particular in an entirely negative

² It has been often remarked that for this effect to be fully realised, the dramatist has to exert a tight control over the sequence of events. What appears to be anarchic horseplay at first sight often turns out to be a well arranged manoeuvre by the playwright, whose function as the “master juggler of events” is likened to that of “the acrobatic clown” who creates his own world of imagination (Baker (1981: 21)).

light³. Such attacks often bemoan the fact that something which is so obviously unpleasant, violent, illogical and amoral, such an “inchoate *vis comica*”, should be so popular⁴. Faced with such criticism I am tempted to fully agree with Baker’s (1981: 108) defence of farce

If critics are to understand and appreciate farce, they must try to do so on its own terms, or run the risk of distorting it to suit their prejudices.

3. Farce and the Commedia dell’Arte Tradition

For an understanding of Orton’s outrageous pranks in his farces—which at the time seemed so shocking to the audience—I think it is vital to at least partly place them within the context of the notorious lazzi of the Commedia dell’arte in order to show that they are often more than matched in their sleazy “unpleasantness” by their historic ancestors.

As in the case of Orton’s jests, audiences as well as critics find it likewise difficult to appreciate all the sleazy innuendoes that are part of many of these lazzi—the foolish and witty stage tricks at the heart of every Commedia dell’arte performance⁵. These comic routines are often of a scatological and sexual nature—including rather disgusting activities such as vomiting or the standard lazzo of *Il Dottore* administering an enema to one of the *zanni*.

Commedia dell’arte has always been closely associated with farce, since both obey similar structural principles. But whereas one could (though avowedly in a rather simplistic fashion) argue that the secret of a successful Commedia dell’arte performance is finding a means to skilfully string together a series of scenari and lazzi, the same argument does not hold good for farces. In a successful farce there has to be a harmonious relationship between individual gags and jokes which are “a way of playing with words, ideas, and images” and the structure of the farce as a whole which in terms is defined as “a way of playing with some larger aspect of reality” (Baker (1981: 23)).

Further characteristics that the two dramatic genres have undoubtedly in common are that all of the characters on stage are essentially stock figures⁶ and that they do not exclude (the mocking of) any genre from their respective scope—not even tragedy. Also in both Commedia dell’arte as well as

³ cf. Baker (1981: 1–25) for a discussion of critics’ attitudes towards farce over the centuries. One of Baker’s major arguments in favour of farce in my opinion is that “its very frivolity permits it to remove the moral blinders of its age, to accept and explore aspects of reality obscured to seriousness by fear and bias.” (Baker (1981: 24)).

⁴ The pronounced shift away from comedy and towards farce that is so apparent in drama since the Second World War, however, has often been seen as a “hostile take-over” of this popular genre by contemporary playwrights. To many of these playwrights the grounds upon which the moral world once rested have collapsed. Farce, where the world is turned into a toy and where actions cease to be morally significant, consequently seemed an attractive genre in which to write.

⁵ Actors often exploit such lazzi in Commedia dell’Arte performances to either “pep up” the repetitive plots outlined by the scenari and to give them an unexpected comical or dramatic effect, or else to suddenly break off a scene that appears to drag on for too long and treat the audience to a few laughs. The same is true of some of Orton’s pranks, such as when he intended to give *What the Butler Saw* a good “hot up”.

⁶ In this context I would like to draw attention to the fact that the various characters of Commedia dell’Arte performances are called maschere (derived from Italian maschera, mask). As genres certainly both Commedia and farce lend themselves to this depersonalisation of characters.

in farce the clown is given a prominent role as a supreme player in the play. Kathleen Lea (1962: vol 1; 196) in her standard volume on Italian popular comedy comments on the Commedia's affinity to farce:

The Commedia dell'arte begins with Zanni and virtually it ends with Pulcinella. Farce it is and to farce it must return.

C. Joe Orton, Lord of Misrule

John Lahr in *Prick Up Your Ears*, his biography of Joe Orton, frequently describes Orton with regard to his outrageous acts of unreason that he accomplished both on stage and in real life as a “Lord of Misrule” and thus places him in the tradition of the great clowns of this century. In his farces Orton consequently—as Rusinko (1995: 10–11) points out—“has contained and shaped the perverse cavorting of the clown within the conventions of the well-made play.”

Orton chose the phallus as the symbolic object of potency, strength and complete mastery to define his persona⁷. He heavily relied on this power of the penis. It allowed him to suppress and counteract any feeling of artistic inadequacy which he possibly still had, having so desperately failed as a novelist⁸, and direct his whole potency towards the celebration of his anarchic feast on stage.—A feast not unlike “the medieval feast of fools—the brief carnival period that preceded the restoration of order” (Rusinko (1995: 114)). For Orton, however, the ensuing order could never exist independently of the anarchy which had ruled the stage before. Orton’s farces are a constant blending of Apollonian and Dionysiac principles—and it is this combination which adds a continual carnivalesque quality—an ingredient so essential to the genre of farce in general, but even more pronounced in Orton’s farces—to his plays.

Orton in his version of farce violates the traditional principle of farce that characters should suffer no injury. In their often distasteful violence and bloodshed Orton’s farces mock the conventions of the light-hearted *pièces bien faites*.

For Orton, farce became both an expression of anarchy and its only antidote. In his plays, role playing is not a series of false surfaces concealing a real self; it is the total meaning or unmeaning of protagonists who survive by refusing all substance.

Bigsby (1982: 50–51)

All of these aspects of Orton’s farces are part of the semantic content of the coined term “Ortonesque”, which Lahr in *Prick Up Your Ears* (1978: 5) defines as “a shorthand adjective for scenes of macabre outrageousness”.

⁷ Bigsby (1982: 18) sees this as Orton’s retreat “into a mannered role playing He played his roles with total conviction and was very much his own creation.”

⁸ With regard to his development as a dramatist his novel *Head to Toe*, however, proved to be “a mine of material” (Charney (1984: 11)) from which he recycled at will.

D. Loot and What the Butler Saw: Reinstating Farce on the British Stage

As this paper is primarily concerned with an assessment of Orton's contribution to the farcical tradition on the one and the (historical) sources on which he had drawn in his two farces on the other hand, I will not go into any detailed discussion of the plot, motives and themes of Orton's two farces for their own sake.

Having said this, I nevertheless like to point out in this chapter certain aspects of his two farces which I regard as important for an understanding of the uniqueness of his farce oeuvre.

1. Loot

Loot marked a pronounced shift in Orton's dramatic work. While *Entertaining Mr Sloane* and especially *The Ruffian on the Stair* were unashamedly Pinteresque in their plot, character configuration, dialogue and absurdist outlook, *Loot* fully embraces the anarchic conventions of farce and black comedy.

On the face of it *Loot* is a satire on (ill) manners, hypocrisy, greed, corruptness and all the pomp and religious worship surrounding a funeral. But in spite of its strong satirical thrust *Loot* is imbued with the same festive spirit as *What the Butler Saw* and ultimately led the way to Orton's dramatic masterpiece. In *Loot* Orton celebrates the total subversion of good taste. He reminds us of the capacity of subversion which farce has. Beyond a splendid surface which is preserved by the protagonists' strict observance of proprieties there is corruption and decay. During the play criminals are unmasked, but not punished, because detective Truscott turns out to be the most corrupt of the protagonists, which of course is a hilarious absurdity in itself.

True to the conventions of farce as discussed above, the characters in *Loot* are allowed to inhabit two worlds at the same time; thus they are performers throughout the play and as such draw an audience's attention to the fact that a script is constantly lurking behind all of the highly stylised dialogues and clever repartees which often seem to confess to their fictiveness.

Everyone in the play speaks in one-liners and put-downs, so that the dialogue has a strongly exhibitionistic flavour. Everyone is always performing and on display.

Rusinko (1995: 91)

In the end we see a hands down victory of the evil and corrupt forces and the only innocent and righteous character, McLeavy, is punished for his "non-cooperative" behaviour.

a. Dramatic Realism in Loot

Orton cherished the term "realistic" as an adjectival explanation of how he wanted his play to be staged. He insisted that all performances of *Loot* had to be absolutely realistic, i.e. true to human experience, and told his American director "Unless *Loot* is directed and acted perfectly seriously, the

play will fail”⁹ (Lahr (1978: 199)). He detested any “campy” interpretation and artificial stylisation of his farce.—Orton did not think that the characters in *Loot* used highly elaborate epigrammatic speech patterns in their dialogues, but spoke “in the jejune platitudes and tired, proverbial formulae of ordinary conversation.” (Charney (1984: 20))

Orton was well aware that by the insistence on his key concept of realism he deliberately worked against the farcical conventions which demand that the actions on stage are detached from the reality of daily life and therefore the characters are insulated from any physical violence. His own concept of farce is in this respect based on a contradiction in terms. He was prepared to go very far to make his point, as is shown in the following macabre prank which he recorded in his diaries four days after his mother’s death

Leonie and I spent part of the afternoon throwing out cupboardsful of junk collected over the years: magazines, photographs, Christmas cards. We burnt eight pairs of shoes. I found a cup containing a pair of false teeth and threw it in the dustbin. Then I discovered that they belonged to my father. I had to rescue them. I found my mother’s teeth in a drawer. I kept them. To amaze the cast of *Loot*.¹⁰

The Orton Diaries (1984: 44)

2. What the Butler Saw

What the Butler Saw Orton certainly deserves to be called Orton’s comic masterpiece. Just as *Loot* it can equally be interpreted as a parody or satire. Only this time, Orton’s farcical attack is directed against psychiatry as the new religion. Set in a lunatic asylum it portrays the mental hospital as a microcosm of contemporary society.

a. Psychiatry as a New Religion

Orton saw psychiatrists as the foolish exponents of a mad pseudoscientific system that had no relation to any perceivable reality and that regarded the direct expression of sexuality as a surface phenomenon which it then proposed to displace onto some deeper level. This seemed to Orton a way of suffocating experience by trying to “explain” direct sexual impulses in the terminology of pseudo-meanings that this arcane system offered. He showed signs of deep scepticism towards the psychiatrists’ approach:

Everybody is a little like psychiatrists today. They’ve got this enormous wish to explain everything. Religion—especially Christianity—tries to show things following a logical progression. And for all we know the whole thing may turn out to be some vast joke.

Charney (1982 : 500)

⁹ The first production of *Loot* as a pre-London run in 1965 was a failure and so was the New York production in 1968.

¹⁰ The dead Miss McLeavy’s teeth are misused in the play as castanets, cf. p. 226–227.

b. Sexual Farce

With its obsession with polymorphous sexuality *What the Butler Saw* is in an absolutely literal sense a sexual farce. The energetic dionysiac liberation of the id is perpetually glorified. “All values are relative and fluid, and especially those connected with gender and sexual preference.” (Charney (1984: 23–24)) The sexual anarchy is predominately performed on the level of costume; the exchange of clothes is at the same time an exchange of (sexual) identities, which in terms are perceived by the characters as only transitional states.

Normally a means of confining a character to a socially prescribed role, clothes here serve both to drive the plot mechanics and to create a Bacchic release of natural impulses in response to the Pentheus-like authoritarian figures of Prentice and Rance.
Rusinko (1995: 116)

It is obvious that Orton’s concept of radical sexual decompartmentalisation is a far cry from the coy adulterous tryst of Feydeau’s traditional *pièces bien faites*.

c. Orton’s Farce as Metafarce

Apart from the grotesquely complex plot structure of *What the Butler Saw* which by itself can be regarded as Orton’s satirical comment on farce conventions, there are numerous additional digs at the whole genre throughout the play which give the play a pronounced metafarical flavour. The “door scene” (p. 376–377) is just one of a number of such delightful metafarical comments and allusions.

Rance. Why are there so many doors. Was the house designed by a lunatic?
Prentice. Yes. ... We have him here as a patient from time to time.

No doubt that there is more to this joke than meets the eye at first. Here we don’t just have a blending of a send up of the conventions of the *pièces bien faites* where doors often play a prominent role with a sideswipe at psychoanalysis, but

The joke reflects back metatheatrically on Orton himself—*he* is the lunatic who designed both the play and its architecture.
Slater (1986: 89)

3. Parallels and Differences between *Loot* and *What the Butler Saw*

So far I have looked at Orton’s *Loot* and *What the Butler Saw* independently as the two greatest plays of the playwright. I think that is quite illuminating to briefly look at the two farces in a comparative way in order to depict a certain development in the playwright’s small farcical oeuvre.

What strikes me as the most profound farcical “innovation” in Orton’s latter farce when compared to *Loot* is that the disguises and counter-disguises which the protagonists assume are physical

in *What the Butler Saw*. In *Loot* these disguises exist “only” in the different roles which the characters act out, such as—most obviously—detective Truscott’s claim to be an inspector from the *Metropolitan Water Board*.

In contrast, in *What the Butler Saw*, clothes¹¹ are extensively used to “define” the changing identities of the protagonists. They positively drive the plot right from the very beginning when Geraldine is told by the lecherous Dr Prentice to undress as part of his thinly disguised attempt to seduce her. By shedding their clothes the characters are allowed to escape the confinements of socially prescribed roles. Orton thus demonstrates a truly flexible approach to identities; for the characters changing their identities is as easy as changing their clothes.

Both of his farces end with an ironic mock-return to harmony, a further element of traditional farce being flouted by Orton. He simultaneously seems to pay homage to the demands of the farce genre, while obviously ridiculing it. Both Fay’s last utterance “People would talk. We must keep up appearances.” (p. 275) in *Loot* as well as Dr Rance’s final statement “I’m glad you don’t despise tradition. Let us put our clothes on and face the world.” in *What the Butler Saw* certainly have to be interpreted in this light.

a. Detective Truscott and Dr Rance as Ortonian Figures of Authority

An evident parallel between *Loot* and *What the Butler Saw* is Orton’s representation of the menacing burlesque figure of authority. In detective Truscott in *Loot* and Dr Rance in *What the Butler Saw* we can detect the prototypical Ortonian figure of authority.

i. Detective Truscott

Detective Truscott is a figure who operates solely on his self-defined level of (il)logicality. Masquerading as an inspector of the *Metropolitan Water Board*, an institution not subject to the same legal restrictions as the police, he is free to apply his stupendous and ultra-sophisticated methods of detection, including utterances of verbal threats as well as the use of raw physical force, at will.¹²

In a deconstruction of Holmesian myth, Truscott’s deductive logic demolishes any opponent with a fury that establishes him as a formidable caricature of his famous prototype. With his lethal illogic and all the authority of his position, he is able not only to garner 25 percent of the take but to take the entire casket of loot into his possession for safekeeping. He brilliantly outmanoeuvres Hal, Dennis, and Fay, at their own game and is the prime mover of the play’s action. His game, like that of his victims, is money...

Rusinko (1995: 88)

¹¹ The presence or absence of articles of clothing had naturally been exploited far earlier than Orton in the *pièces bien faites*. Baker (1981: 35) remarks that “clothing is a vital issue in a world which demands the appearances of respectability, and disputes over it can lead to desperate measures. In three of the plays ... questions of clothing drive Feydeau’s normally non-violent heroes to the point of brandishing revolvers.”

¹² Rusinko (1995: 15–16) claims that “Orton’s source for the detection logic and manoeuvring of Sergeant Truscott in *Loot* is the treatment he received at the hands of legal authorities. Unrepentant, he especially attacked the threatening nature of the law in Truscott’s merciless attack on Hal even when the latter was down.”

Truscott as an exponent of the law—or rather of the *Metropolitan Water Board*—makes extensive use of the terms of the legal system strictly according to its own internal rules and thus proves a master of circular reasoning. Adrian Page (1992b: 149-150) in his article “An Age of Surfaces: Joe Orton’s Drama and Postmodernism” shows that farce is the dramatic genre which is most apt to foreground “the production” of such “legitimizing narratives”. Narratives which are internally coherent are acceptable as explanations, such as when Mrs McLeavy’s mummified body is falsely presented as a tailor’s dummy or Fay’s confession of her murder of Mrs McLeavy, to which Truscott replies “Very good. Your style is simple and direct. It’s a theme which less skilfully handled could’ve given offence.” (p. 255). Appearances are to be preserved by means of verbal artifice is what Truscott seems to insinuate here.

ii. Dr Rance

Similar to Detective Truscott in *Loot*, the psychiatrist Dr Rance, Orton’s real madman in *What the Butler Saw*, represents Orton’s caricature of the figure of authority. Spouting a barrage of psychological clichés, “speculative psychoanalytic gibberish” (Page (1992b: 155)), Dr Rance interprets every action on stage as evidence of his own dogmatic double-incest theory, which in the end in a truly farcical twist proves to be a reality.

He sees the all-pervasive power of the sex drive as motivating everybody; yet he interprets the farcical events on stage, which for the most part are the result of attempts of the protagonists to conceal their sexual acts and wishes, as clear symptoms of madness. Rance is portrayed by Orton as the menacing cold theoretician who—like detective Truscott—operates on his self-defined level of (il)logicality and is all too willing to resort to force—especially when certifying sane characters. Similar to Truscott his motives are intensely selfish and in the end he gets his “share of the loot” in the form of empirical evidence for his imminent sensationalist best-seller, an aim which he had been pursuing from the beginning.

4. Orton’s Parody of Literary Genres

Orton was always keen on using and parodying theatrical genres. In plays prior to his two masterpieces he had already trifled with both the theatre of menace and the comedy of manners in *Entertaining Mr Sloane* and melodrama in *The Good and Faithful Servant*. In *Loot* and *What the Butler Saw* he added the detective story or “whodunit” and the bedroom farce in the tradition of the *pièces bien faites* respectively to his list of generic models which he used for parodic purposes with regard to an audience’s genre expectations.

E. Affinities of Orton's Farces to Specific Plays and Genres

Although on the surface Orton's most apparent genre models for his farces were—as I have just discussed—the Holmesian detective story and the bedroom farce there are a great number of other models hidden beneath the brilliant surface; there are Wildean paradoxes, Old and New Comedy, the untamed spirit of Restoration drama, all mixed with black comedy, music hall humour and sixties slang. Charney (1984: 82–84) uses the term “quotidian farce” to describe this unique mixture,

which is much closer to black comedy than to the upper-class, comedy-of-manners assumptions of Restoration comedy, or even the middle-class gentility that Feydeau so deftly titillated in his brilliant social comedies.

What follows is a discussion of the most relevant affinities of Orton's farces to other plays and (historical) genres.

1. Affinities of Orton's Farces to Oscar Wilde's Plays

Amongst the first commentators on the close relationship between Joe Orton and Oscar Wilde was certainly Terence Rattigan, who added the caveat that “Orton goes even beyond Wilde in the bite of his aphoristic wit” (as quoted in: Rusinko (1995: 94–95)).¹³

a. A Comparison between Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Orton's *What the Butler Saw*

Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Orton's *What the Butler Saw* commonly share the structure of their highly elaborate plots and their central theme of identity—or rather the confusion thereof, albeit the widely different ways in which the two playwrights treat this subject matter. In both plays each of the protagonists perceives a different reality

and makes this the basis for actions which, while logical enough given the nature of the initial premise, are irrational when viewed from any other perspective.
Biggsby (1982: 57)

¹³ This is certainly in itself quite an interesting point, as Rattigan could hardly have failed to notice a certain literary lineage of homosexual writers of comedy of manners—Wilde, himself and Orton. But while Wilde and Rattigan disguised homosexuality in heterosexual terms, Orton's unashamed concern—or shall we say obsession—with (homo)sexuality in his plays as well as his life is legendary. “Orton dared—in the 1960s, a time of worldwide social upheavals yet one during which homosexuality dared not speak its name—to speak a forbidden language.” (Rusinko (1995: 28)).

The overall influence that Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* has effectively had on Orton's play is more comprehensive, however, and I am tempted to include relevant similarities in the aesthetic notions and creeds of the two playwrights in the discussion.

It is no exaggeration to say that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is constantly lurking behind Orton's play—it can in fact be seen as a subtext against which Orton's farce has to be read. Throughout *What the Butler Saw* Orton does not miss many opportunities to parody Wilde's play. Indeed, the impact that *The Importance of Being Earnest* has had on Orton manifests itself in a truly remarkable—and one is tempted to say: Ortonesque—way; in most of the overt or indirect allusions to Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* Orton exhibits an overwhelming delight in mocking his predecessor's Victorian conventions by—as he himself puts it in another context in his diary—giving them a good “hot-up”.

The correspondence between the satire of earnestness in Wilde and the parody of madness, or rather psychiatric insanity, in Orton is apparent. Both earnestness and madness are identified by the playwrights as the root of all evil from which all the confusion and misunderstandings spring. Orton's heavy emphasis on psychiatry and psychoanalysis (or rather pseudoanalysis as Orton would probably have called it), however, marks a striking difference between the two plays. But rather than mirroring genuine inherent differences in the two plays, I think this prominence is rather evidence of the overwhelming preoccupation of the twentieth century with popular conceptions of psychiatry and psychoanalysis.—In this respect the question of the missing father, around which the plots of both *The Importance of Being Earnest* as well as *What the Butler Saw* evolve, undoubtedly assumes a different relevance in Orton's farce in terms of the additional significance that it is given in Freudian analysis to which Orton sardonically refers throughout his play.

i. The Style is the Meaning

To a great degree, the style of the plays of the two playwrights constitute their meaning, apart from which there is little of overt content. Both playwrights show a great delight in highly sophisticated verbal play. Their witty style heavily relies on the irony implicit in their characters' often ambiguous and self-contradictory epigrams which have been described as paradoxes. Harold E. Toliver (1963 : 398) in his article “Wilde and The Importance of ‘Sincere and Studied Triviality’” argues that the game involved in most of the protagonists' statements in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is

to make of serious moral questions a catalyst for creative wit. By reversing the orthodox, wit like poetry and other forms of lying, gives one a sense of liberation. Philistines and Pharisees cannot tolerate, or be tolerated by, the absurd.

Comic situations in Wilde's and Orton's plays are derived from the respectability of the characters and the hypocrisy of their behaviour¹⁴. They express in reputable language some disreputable, often frivolous idea. This “combination of elegance and crudity”, which “is always ridiculous” (*The Orton Diaries* (1986: 71)) could indeed be proposed as a definition of Ortonesque humour. Both Orton and Wilde were intensely alert to manners, and “the appropriate style accompanying them, as a

¹⁴The same discrepancy is of course exploited in the French pièces bien faites.

mask for morals." (Charney (1984: 123–124)) Nevertheless, the thrift, greed and opportunism of the characters are only thinly disguised by their elegant diction.

Orton in *What the Butler Saw* not only successfully assimilates various sources of popular culture and fuses them into his own epigrammatic style, but he also carefully studies the prevalent dominance of psychoanalytic terminology in society in order to render Dr Rance's speeches as authentic as possible.

Oscar Wilde's highly polished epigrammatic wit in *The Importance of Being Earnest* mirrors his own concern with the perfection of form and his total disregard for content that seemed to him utterly irrelevant. Wilde modelled his play along the same values that he as aesthetic critic had deemed precious in art, amongst which he regarded the achievement of perfect form as being the most precious.

In contrast to Oscar Wilde's rather elitist word plays and emphasis on pure aesthetics, Joe Orton's style could be described in terms of a patchwork of the popular sixties culture. As Orton pointed out in a BBC interview, he is not interested in creating his own highly artificial language for the stage, but his main source of inspiration is—according to his own statement—the language used in everyday conversation¹⁵.

I think you should use the language of your age, and use every bit of it, not just a little bit, they always go on about poetic drama and they think that you have to sort of go into some high-flown fantasy, but it isn't poetic drama, it's everything, it's the language in use at the time.

Lahr (1976 : 9)

ii. Problems of Identity

Problems of identity take centre stage in both plays. *What the Butler Saw*, however, touches on a larger concept of identity than Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in the sense that it poses the question of how to maintain one's sanity in Dr Prentice's private lunatic asylum, which is Orton's microcosm of a world that has gone mad. The imaginary butler whom Orton uses in his play—which, as Charney (1982 : 496) suggests, should more properly have been called *What the Butler Might Have Seen*—as observer and "fly on the wall" can only chronicle what his "creator" had to say about his own role as playwright:

¹⁵ In this respect there is a remarkable relationship between Orton's farces and the humour which is part of music hall performances. Especially the non-sensical "cross-talks" in the music hall are often based on the absurdities of everyday conversations. As we know from *The Orton Diaries*, Orton was a close observer of everyday conversations and meticulously recorded them in his diaries. Ute Drechsler (1988: 63) in her book *Die «absurde Farce» bei Beckett, Pinter und Ionesco. Vor- und Überleben einer Gattung* describes the typical music hall monologue as thus: "In ihren geschwätzigen ausholenden, mit Klischees überladenen Monologen berichten die Conferenciers der Music Hall von alltäglichen Ereignissen, leiten diese aber durch eine bildhaft ausführende Sprache, Übertreibungen, Unwahrscheinlichkeiten, Gedankensprünge und Widersprüche ad absurdum und entführen die Zuschauer ins Reich des Aussergewöhnlichen, der unendlichen und unwahrscheinlichen Möglichkeiten und des Irrationalen." Detective Truscott in *Loot* and Dr Rance in *What the Butler Saw* are undoubtedly equally accomplished masters of such "feasts of unreason".

In a world run by fools, the writer can only chronicle the doings of fools or their victims. And because the world is a cruel and heartless place, he will be accused of not taking his subject seriously.
Lahr (1976 : 7)

iii. Orton's Celebration of Sexual Identities in *What the Butler Saw*

Orton takes the crucial Leitmotiv of tragedy, namely the question of a protagonist's identity and, following in Wilde's—who in *The Importance of Being Earnest* employs the protagonists' different identities as their comic disguises which enable them to indulge in all sorts of Bunburying—footsteps, moves one step further forward by translating this essential question into what he perceives as its farcical equivalent: sexual identity. But by doing so, he goes beyond what he sees as the restrictive bounds of classic farce and in fact liberates twentieth century British comedy of its restraining conventions by expanding its scope to include his emphasis on varieties of sexual behaviour.

iv. Intertextual References

Although it goes without saying that throughout Orton's *What the Butler Saw* there are a great many more intertextual references to Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the following two examples of very direct references that I have singled out for discussion may suffice to illustrate my point: first there is Orton's choice of the infamous linen cupboard of the Station Hotel as the place where Geraldine and Nicholas had been conceived, a scenario which lucidly mirrors the situation of Ernest whose origin goes back to the ordinary black leather handbag in the cloakroom at Victoria Station; second we find a clear reference to *The Importance of Being Earnest* in Orton's mock Wildean *anagnorisis* scene at the end of the play. Here, Orton utilises both the brooch and the phallus as parodic objects of Wilde's one object, the conspicuous handbag.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest* this recognition scene is treated as the comic Wildean adaptation of the great Greek *anagnorisis* theme and while certainly involving recognition of Ernest's true identity, its real importance is to reconcile him, who is in the embarrassing position of being respectable in moral outlook and yet unfit for good society, with the conventions of Victorian society and thus to ensure Lady Bracknell's consent to his marriage to Gwendolen. Although we find a similar sort of *anagnorisis* in *What the Butler Saw* in terms of the characters' recognition of their family kinship, Orton's additional obsession with "hotting up" his play by giving it a distinctly sexual flavouring becomes apparent when he triumphantly exposes the incestuous nature of the protagonists' previous sexual activities.

v. Criticisms Levelled against Wilde's and Orton's Plays

1. "Unrealistic" Dénouements

One just criticism that can be levelled against both playwrights is that their whole plot structure—especially in terms of their dénouements, which, however satisfying in that they complete the comic movements of the plays, would hardly occur in reality and therefore demand a very strenuous "suspension of disbelief" in an audience—is very improbable and in some instances appears to be

downright impossible. In Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* the only purpose of the plot is to serve as a vehicle for his superior witticism, and while the same holds certainly true in Orton's case, we find that the farcical nature of *What the Butler Saw* on the whole adds to its being perceived by an audience as a non-naturalistic play in which not everything has to be believed—in spite of Orton's insistence that in his farces everything must be believed and that the direction and acting must be absolutely realistic. Orton was afraid that without this air of credibility, *What the Butler Saw* could totally disintegrate into a series of meaningless and chaotic actions devoid of any sense and purpose.

2. Uniformity of Styles

A similar criticism that could be expressed with regard to both plays concerns their uniformity of style. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* there is no attempt at characterisation, but all the dramatis personae, from the major protagonists down to the butlers, talk pure and undiluted Wildese, and represent various shades of Wilde's aesthetic creed. In Orton, too, we find this distinct lack of characterisation and all of his characters speak in a similar style, namely Orton's very own Sixties idiom, which we might—by analogy to Wilde—call Ortonese. In both plays witty lines seem to come from almost anyone and everyone.

Everybody seems to speak journalese, to use second-hand phrases. The spoken language is so arranged that as we listen to it we hear a written text.

Charney (1984: 94–95)

Certainly Wilde's and Orton's characters are compulsive verbalisers whose language are of light substance; seen in a more positive light, however, one could of course argue that the playwrights' concept of giving everybody at least one witty line shows their belief in democratic stage principles.

vi. Generic Differences between the Two Plays

There are also very vital generic differences between the two plays. Most critical readers would probably agree that Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* is indeed comedy (and not farce), whereas Orton's *What the Butler Saw* clearly constitutes the opposite case. Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* is—as he himself once remarked to a reporter:

exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy. Its philosophy is that we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality.

Toliver (1963 : 389)

It is thus meant to amuse an audience, engage its delighted attention without stirring any profound concern and prepare it for a happy ending. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* the characters live in a Wildean world of ideal surfaces—something which Lady Bracknell is very happy to acknowledge when she speaks of the “age of surfaces” that we live in (p. 62)—and the characters in the play succeed by cleverly manipulating these surfaces.

In Orton's *What the Butler Saw* by contrast, however

role playing is not a series of false surfaces concealing a real self; it is the total meaning or unmeaning of protagonists who survive by refusing all substance.

Bigsby (1982 : 17)

b. Wilde's and Orton's Aesthetic Creeds

In terms of their aesthetic creeds Oscar Wilde was very much the exponent of a small circle of *fin de siècle* dandies who believed that the appropriate response to what they regarded as the Philistine Victorian society was to live by a philosophy in which—as Arthur Ganz summarises it in his article “The Meaning of *The Importance of Being Earnest*” (1963 : 43)—“aesthetics replaces ethics” and which found satisfaction in the “achievement of perfect form”. In Wilde's plays the characters consequently exist in a self-contained artificial world of “pure form” that is ruled by pure aesthetics and which Ganz describes as “the world of perfect Wildean dandyism”. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, as well as in fact most of Wilde's work, is—apart from everything else—an outspoken celebration of his own aesthetic manifesto and although the plot resolves around quite earnest moral questions, their ultimate *raison d'être*, however, is to serve as a hone for Wilde's wit.

Joe Orton in his complete submission to anarchy in *What the Butler Saw* equally transforms a world of morality into one of pure aesthetics. Orton, too, was thoroughly dissatisfied with the “tight-arsed” British society, “the great whore”. But at the same time he was quite fascinated by her violent underside with which he came into contact while serving his prison sentence¹⁶ for “embellishing” books in the Islington public library, delighting in watching the shock on the faces of unsuspecting library users when they encountered his doctored books¹⁷.—One of his first pranks played out in public. His tactics as a dramatist were similar to those narcissistic exploits which he meticulously recorded in his diaries¹⁸, since

¹⁶ The prison experience apparently had a special aesthetic flavour for Orton: “Before, I had been vaguely conscious of something rotten somewhere; prison crystallized this. The old whore society lifted up her skirts, and the stench was pretty foul. Not that the actual prison treatment was bad; but it was a revelation of what really lies under the surface of our industrialized society.” (Lahr (1976: 15)). Apparently society's stench seems to have delighted him to a far greater degree than it outraged him.

¹⁷ Esslin (1981: 95) in his rather unsympathetic essay “Joe Orton: The Comedy of (Ill) Manners” in fact regards Orton's work as a playwright as a continuation of the defacing of library books “by other and more widely effective means”. Already in this early prank we find Orton's ability to shock and offend—one of his outstanding hallmarks which he later fully exploited in his farces—in full swing.

¹⁸ The Orton Diaries clearly show that Orton did not only write bawdy farces; he had a gargantuan urge to live them, too. “It is in his Diaries that Orton's serious trickerism reveals the essential man and writer. ... *The Orton Diaries* ... combine the clowning of his earlier years with the detachment that characterises his plays. They deserve a place among the notable diaries of the past for their insights into both the style and subject matter of Orton's plays.” (Rusinko (1995: 19–20; 12)). *The Orton Diaries* indeed constitute a gold mine of material which complement his farces perfectly. Similar to the shifting identities in *What the Butler Saw*, Orton in his diaries adopted numerous personae or selves. Also the astounding force of the sex drive which Orton bestowed on protagonists in *What the Butler Saw* is lucidly reflected in his need to amass sensual experience in the form of his frequent chance homosexual encounters that form a large part of his private sex life. In these passages Orton's alertness of the essential absurdities of his age and life clearly shines through.

The narcissist is only apparently self-sufficient; he needs an audience to confirm his own self-regard. And Orton certainly was such a narcissist.

Bigsby (1982: 35)

While for Wilde the portrayal of obscenity or any cruder aspects of comedy was out of the question, Orton was fascinated by the cruder elements in Aristophanes' comedy as well as in English Restoration comedy.

No doubt Orton was in his anarchic subversiveness and rebellious trickerism—which so often showed clearly exhibitionist traits—very much a child of the sixties¹⁹. In sharp contrast to Wilde, however, art for Orton was a provocation, an act of revenge on society whose stultifying delicacy he loved to mock.

i. Joe Orton—the Oscar Wilde of the Welfare Gentility?

Although the metaphor of Joe Orton being “the Oscar Wilde of the Welfare gentility” is a delightful one, it has its distinctive shortcomings. While it is certainly true that Oscar Wilde and Joe Orton were the great stylists of the British stage and their epigrammatic and highly structured styles—despite several attempts to copy them—have so far proved to be inimitable, their personalities were quite different. Whereas Oscar Wilde was very much the refined *fin de siècle* aesthete who saw dandyism as both his philosophy and a desirable aristocratic attitude towards life, Joe Orton's *Weltanschauung* was that of an anarchist, while his attitude towards life was the same that characterised his protagonists in *What the Butler Saw*—namely a complete disregard for any conventions coupled with an emphasis on as much (sexual) variety as possible.

c. The Manipulator of the Pièce bien Faite versus the Master of Black Comedy

In conclusion we might say that Wilde can be regarded as the skilful manipulator of the *pièce bien faite*, while Orton can be described as an extraordinary successful manipulator of and contributor to the black comedy genre. His formula of having his unshockable characters in traditionally absurd or bizarre situations making clever witticisms and sick jokes became his true hallmark.

Both Wilde's plays and Orton's two farces *Loot* and *What the Butler Saw* follow perfectly in the English dramatic tradition of verbal theatre and draw on its power to expose the disjunction between the characters' highly decorous epigrammatic language and their not so decorous behaviour, while exploiting the ambiguities created by this abyss.

¹⁹ Bigsby (1981b: 29) insists on the uniqueness of Orton's voice: “Though it is tempting to see him as very much a product of a period in which boundaries of all kinds were under assault—sexual, class, generational—and though his anarchic rebellion was of a piece with that more cynically deployed by Andy Warhol in another medium in America, and not unrelated to the aesthetics of ‘happenings’, his was ... in its essentials, a unique voice. And his assault was more profound than that of those playwrights who attacked authority in its capitalist guise, but left the authority of the theatre, of character and of language largely untouched.”

2. Affinities of Orton's Farces to Jacobean Tragedy

Orton's "revolutionary" concept to put sexuality and violence back on stage in all its facets invokes and celebrates the shocking and often savage spirit of Restoration comedy and Jacobean tragedy and thus marks a revival of its anarchic and promiscuous traditions on the British stage. The revenge plays of the seventeenth century in particular²⁰, with their bloodshed and social anarchy, rather than the comedies of manners of the same period—which fundamentally rested upon a comic treatment of sex²¹ and depended for their effect upon the exclusion of moral and passion—are very close in spirit to Orton's farces. While the treatment of even serious issues and actions—such as gratuitous violence, incest²² and murder—is purely comic in Restoration comedies, it is mainly bloodshed and the resulting "ironic horror" (Rusinko (1995: 125)) which determine the development of the revenge plays' plots²³. Williams Hutchings (1988: 234) in his essay "Joe Orton's Jacobean Assimilations in *What the Butler Saw*" maintains that Orton's rationale behind his insistence on glorifying this gory part of British stage history is "to outrage conventional proprieties". Orton in *What the Butler Saw* "attunes" the bloodshed he inherited from the Elizabethan revenge plays to a pronounced farcical madness.

Upon advice from producer Peter Gill Orton chose the subplot of Thomas Middleton's *The Changeling* as the setting for *What the Butler Saw*; "I bought a copy of Middleton's *The Changeling*. Peter Gill said I should use the subplot in a play of my own someday." (*The Orton Diaries* (1986: 144)). The mental hospital as a microcosm mirroring an imprisoned world in which the guardians and directors of lunatic asylums can hardly be distinguished from the patients, where "democratic lunacy" rules, so to speak, obviously fascinated Orton²⁴. Hutchings (1988: 229; quoted in Rusinko (1995: 113)) likens the psychiatrist's office as the

modern counterpart of the Jacobean stage's Italianate court, ... [where], ... amid elaborate intrigues, disguises, and self-serving duplicities—all sorts of passion and lusts, however forbidden or illicit, flourish outside any norms of moral judgement, unrestrained by social taboos and regarded with clinical detachment by both perpetrators and authorities in charge.

Orton's *Loot* shares with Jacobean tragedies two basic overriding themes; namely death and evil. Also there are common technical elements; Cyrus Hoy (1964: 219–220) in his book *The Hyacinth Room* points out that in the Jacobean revenge plays "the effects are so sardonic as to amount virtual-

²⁰A point which is undoubtedly corroborated by Orton's choice of the epigraph 'Surely we're all mad people, and they whom we think are, are not.' from Middleton's (Tourneur's?) *Revenger's Tragedy* in *What the Butler Saw*.

²¹ cf. also Palmer (1962: 139–140)

²² Rusinko (1995: 113) in this respect notes that only "in a few periods has incest been so prevalent a dramatic theme as in the seventeenth century". Amongst the plays in which there are scenes of incest she mentions John Ford's *'Tis a Pity She's a Whore*, Beaumont and Fletcher's *A King and No King* and Middleton's *Women, Beware Women*.

²³ Draudt (1978: 209–210) notes that "*The Revenger's Tragedy* is perhaps the most notable example in Jacobean drama of deliberate and sustained reliance upon the ironic method."

²⁴ By setting *What the Butler Saw* in a lunatic asylum Orton pays of course also homage to the "traditional" function of farce as exposure of the world's madness. As a matter of fact some of the French pièces bien faites use lunatic asylums as a backdrop for their actions. Bigsby (1981b: 19) also points out in this respect that the mental hospital became a favourite image of disruption, disintegration and decay for the playwrights of the 60s and 70s.

ly to a burlesque of tragedy". He goes on by asserting that the "notoriously bizarre [nature of Jacobean tragedy] ... lies in its expropriation of a number of devices traditionally associated with comedy." This is a highly relevant statement with regard to Orton's own understanding of farce. Lahr (1976: 25) quotes Orton as saying

As I understand it, farce originally was very close to tragedy and differed only in the *treatment* of its themes—themes like rape, bastardy, prostitution.

Although the vision of the two genres may be quite different, the same situations, problems and themes are presented in tragedy and farce.

Draudt (1978: 206) even suggests that

The identification of parallels between an Elizabethan blank verse tragedy and a modern farce may lead to a reconsideration of the relationship of the genres and point to basic characteristics common to the 'tragic' and the 'comic'.

Similar to Restoration drama, the treatment of death, which is so central a subject in *Loot*, is grotesquely humorous.²⁵ Both Orton and his Jacobean ancestors employ macabre humour as an ironic method. Orton in *Loot* causes a partly comic, partly shocking response by exploiting the incongruity between the outrageous events on stage (the treatment of the dead body as if it were alive; the gradual dismantling of the corpse, etc.) and the well-mannered language with which the protagonists comment their actions. This ironic discrepancy between the formal and sometimes highly euphemistic language in the tradition of the Comedy of Manners and the farcical actions undoubtedly constitutes a very prominent characteristic of Orton's farces.

Yet while in Jacobean tragedy underlying the comic stage business lurked "sombre moral themes" (Draudt (1978: 208)), we don't find a similar basic moral substance in Orton's farces, although we are clearly confronted with the motif of the corrupting influence of money in *Loot*. But while in *The Revenger's Tragedy* all the evil protagonists and Vindice, the revenger himself, pay for their evil doings with their life, in Orton's play all characters—including Truscott as the representative of law and order—unanimously and without being punished for their evil deeds succumb to the pecuniary temptation at the end of the play. Moral values and standards are completely annulled in Orton's farce.—Injustice wins the day: Detective Truscott gets his trip to see the tulip fields of Holland with his wife and Hal and Dennis are free to use their share of the loot in whatever way they choose. Orton in this respect presents "a post-moral world" (Bigsby (1982: 17)).

a. The Preoccupation with Sexual Passion

A very prominent similarity between Orton's *What the Butler Saw* and Jacobean revenge tragedies is the preoccupation of both with sexual passion—a theme that is normally associated with comedy. Orton clearly delighted in the stage anarchy that he created in his play by having his protagonists

²⁵ For an enlightening comparison between Orton's *Loot* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with a special emphasis on the discrepancy between seeming and being, i.e. between public appearance and emotional reality, cf. Draudt (1978: 202–206).

undergo continuous sexual metamorphoses. Sexuality thus in fact becomes a role which one can put on and off at free will.

Orton's open celebration of sexuality is certainly one of the major aspects of *What the Butler Saw*. Maurice Charney (1982 : 498) in her article "What Did the Butler See in Orton's *What the Butler Saw*" argues that sexuality in *What the Butler Saw* "becomes a synonym for the imagination" and that "polymorphous perversity" is indeed its "guiding principle". Following his train of thought we might say that in *What the Butler Saw* multitudinous sexual practices such as exhibitionism, lesbianism, hermaphroditism, sadomasochism, fetishism, transvestism and nymphomania—not to speak of necrophilia, which, as Dr Rance announces, we might even get in the end—are all imaginative variations on the same basic theme and constitute the whole range of imaginative behaviour through which the characters can express their longings and needs. Orton

tried to make transgression itself a value, and in that process unregulated sexuality was an enabling strategy and a central fact rather than simply an image.

Biggsby (1982: 68)

b. Similarities in Plot Structure and the Portrayal of the Characters

The close vicinity between Orton's two farces *Loot* and *What the Butler Saw* and some plays of the Restoration period can undoubtedly also be seen on the level of dramatic characters. Orton's characters are far from being fully rounded; they—as in the plays of the Restoration period—constitute established two-dimensional types without any depth of realism. We are confronted with farcical caricatures and mere puppets whose common ancestry is the mediaeval morality play with its allegorical tradition of the comic vice figure.

Particularly in *Loot* we find an impressive array of vice figures: Fay, the mass-murderess and legacy hunter; Hal and Dennis, the hardened criminals; and finally Inspector Truscott—a most interesting personification of hypocrisy, greed and corruption who hides these "qualities" behind a mask of a specious official authority and personal integrity.

On the level of the plot finally both in *Loot* and in revenge tragedies the actions are taking place at staggering speed.

The actions are developed at , and one startling situation follows another in rapid succession so as to create incessant suspense. ... It is this exponential growth of danger and cunning (every new danger requiring a more ingenious device for the solution of the problem) which is responsible for the tempo and suspense...

Draudt (1978: 211)

3. Affinities of Orton's Farces to Old and New Comedy

It would be quite inappropriate to exclusively acknowledge the pervasive influence that the raunchy conventions of Restoration comedy have undoubtedly had on Orton, while at the same time not to give due credit to the equally strong impact that Greek Comedy in general and Aristophanes—

whose boisterous sexual energy and animalistic spirit is very apparent as the Dionysiac element in *What the Butler Saw*—and Euripides in particular had on him. These influences are far more manifest in *What the Butler Saw* than they are in *Loot*, for which reason I will confine this discussion to Orton's farcical masterpiece.

Orton's obsession with comic festivity and fertility rites as components of the Dionysiac becomes very clear at the end of *What the Butler Saw* when Sergeant Match—as Orton's stand-in for the Greek god Heracles—exposes the remarkable result of his enquiry in the form of the missing part of the statue of the great Prime Minister and wartime leader Sir Winston Churchill. In this final scene there is clearly more than a wink at Aristophanes intended by Joe Orton and one is of course distinctly reminded of the central part that the phallus as the symbol of generative power had played on the Greek stage²⁶.

What must have particularly attracted Orton to Greek comedy and farce, however, was the "imaginative" and non-restrictive approach to sexual categories that he found in it, although it might be said that in terms of subject matter sexuality had never been given such central relevance in Greek comedy and farce as Orton gave it in his plays.

a. Transvestism and Sexual Role Reversals

One element that we find very prominently in the classic Greek tradition of farce and with which Joe Orton was quite obsessed in *What the Butler Saw* is that of demoniac transvestism. We can find it in the scene when Geraldine finds herself dressed in the uniform of Nick, and Nick, the hotel page, in turn puts on Geraldine's dress in order to evade his arrest by Sergeant Match. It is also apparent in the final scene of the play when Sergeant Match, clad in the leopard-spotted dress of Mrs Prentice, "holds high the nation's heritage" (p. 448) and later on leads all the characters on stage to a mock heroic exit through the skylight. In all of these situations the costumes themselves cease to be the only sure guide to the sexual identities of the characters and Orton's dramatis personae appear in what Charney (1982 : 498) in his article describes as "that epicene middle state where the categories of masculine and feminine lose their clear outlines". By blurring distinctive dress conventions the characters abandon their narrow sexual identities. As a consequence of this, Nick, Geraldine and Sergeant Match, despite their desperate but vain attempts to establish their maleness or femaleness, turn into truly androgynous beings—but rather than remaining in this "epicene middle state" for long, this condition is a transient one for them, after which their "true" sexual identities are re-established.

Orton's model here is undoubtedly Euripides' *Bacchae*. While in Euripides the sexual role reversal is confined to Pentheus' departure from masculinity by his disguise as a maenad, *What the Butler Saw* revels in the complete destabilisation of (mistaken) sexual identities of all the characters, except

²⁶ We should not forget that long before the Freudian school of psychoanalysis laid claim to its symbolic significance, the phallus had been a fertility symbol and it is clearly being used as such by Orton. One cannot ignore the fact, however, that Orton indulges here in a rather sardonic dig at the "Viennese witch doctor" and its adherents. John Lahr (1976: 8) offers a more universal interpretation of the phallus symbol with regard to Orton's life and art as a whole by calling it "an archetypal comic symbol".

for Dr Rance. Orton also diverges from Euripides in that—unlike Pentheus in the *Bacchae*—none of the characters falls victim to the sparagmos as punishment for their disguises.

b. The Rape and the Recognition Themes

The recognition theme in *What the Butler Saw* shows strong similarities to Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, some of which I have already discussed at length. Slater (1986: 95), however, reminds us of its closeness to motives in New Comedy and to the Roman imitators of the New Comedy tradition—particularly in its use of the Plautean theme of the separated twins

... the chain of events which now unwinds is much closer to the rape and recognition plots of Menander, Terence, and Plautus.

But like the theme of transvestism just discussed, Orton's use of the recognition theme is ultimately reminiscent of Euripides. While in *What the Butler Saw* Mrs Prentice recognises her children by the two fragments of the brooch which was given to her by Dr Prentice after he raped her in the linen cupboard (p. 444), in Euripides' *Ion* Creusa, queen of Athens, recognises Ion as her son, whom she had abandoned immediately after his birth, by means of similar recognition tokens, namely the baby clothes and the jewellery which she left with him in his cradle.

4. Affinities of Orton's Farces to Contemporary Plays and Playwrights

Similar to Beckett and Pinter Orton includes his farces in a larger vision which finally transcends the boundaries of traditional farce and could therefore be described as meta-farce. All three playwrights are noted for their inventive stage language, but in Orton's farces there are none of the notorious pauses, false starts and dangerous silences which are so characteristic of the former two playwrights. Orton's characters are "hyped" on language.

But whereas in Pinter the language and the silence reveal the poverty of his protagonists, in Orton's theory language functions as a lethal weapon; Orton explodes the middle class idiom of his highly articulate protagonists. Yet in spite of his elaborate verbal artifice, Orton, however, contrary to such an elitist farceur as Stoppard, "like Aristophanes, Euripides, the Elizabethans ... remains accessible to all" (Rusinko (1995: 126)).

F. Halliwell's Role in Orton's Creative Development

Although the exact influence that Kenneth Halliwell had on Orton's work is difficult to trace, I think it is nevertheless important to give some consideration to it.

Charney (1984: 6) severely criticises Lahr's downplaying of the formative part that Orton's lover, long time companion, mentor and ultimately murderer Kenneth Halliwell had in the playwright's creative development.

Loot and *What the Butler Saw* clearly reflect Halliwell's literary taste, "a mixture of the camp and the classical" (Esslin (1981: 97)). As to the exact nature of Halliwell's literary influence on Orton²⁷ one can in retrospect only speculate²⁸. As far as their personal relationship is concerned, there is ample evidence in *The Orton Diaries*, however, that Halliwell's self-esteem during the last year of their relationship was at times dangerously low. To the same degree as Orton's star as a playwright steadily rose, Halliwell's importance in their relationship began to diminish.

Before Joe became a celebrity, the sophisticated and well-educated Halliwell, a student of the classics, served as mentor and big brother to him and encouraged him to read voraciously and to trust himself as a writer. What began as a collaboration in which Halliwell was dominant, gradually changed into one in which Orton wrote novels in his own name

It was—as Ian Finlayson (1992: 316–317; 321–322) in his book *Tangier. City of the Dream* convincingly shows—principally during their last holiday in Tangier that their relationship reached breaking point

Orton's promiscuity depressed, disgusted and enraged Halliwell who was no contender in the sexual contest that vitally engaged Orton's energies and did such damage to Halliwell's illusion that he and Orton still operated inseparably as a team. ...

Orton was having fun in Tangier while Halliwell was forever flouncing about in a permanent pet, deeply depressed by Orton's cockmanship. He inevitably contrasted it with his own sexual competence which was largely limited to masturbation with the boys he took up with in Tangier. He was romantically attached to Orton who had mostly lost sexual interest in Halliwell and, having become the more successful, the more powerful partner in what was left of their relationship, felt only a residual loyalty to the man he had regarded as his mentor but whom he had now far outstripped in terms of material, social and literary distinction. Orton was, to a large extent, Halliwell's creation and in the summer of 1967 Halliwell was about to lose him.

...

Tangier had brought them into bruising contact with reality by subverting and exposing them to the fictions they had constructed to minimize their deeper dissatisfactions.

Quite obviously, the relationship between Halliwell, the erastes, and Orton, the eromenos, had changed. The eromenos had become an erastes himself, "a development accepted as natural and so

²⁷ There is evidence, however, that Orton always showed great deference to Kenneth in public. Finlayson (1992: 314–315) writes that "Orton had, often and loyally, credited Halliwell as important to his work, as having introduced him to ideas and literature that he might not have so easily or quickly found for himself."

²⁸ Reading *The Orton Diaries* it becomes clear that at least the titles of Orton's two farces were Halliwell's suggestion.

inevitable by the Greeks but not by that student of antiquity, Kenneth Halliwell.” (Walcot (1984: 104-105)).

G. Conclusion: Setting Orton's Farces in Their Proper Place

Orton had a genius for pop art images that enshrine a sense of wistful absurdity. He could capture the meaningless gesture that is entirely characteristic ...

Charney (1984: 121)

Although I have tried to analyse some of Orton's borrowings from such playwrights as Pinter, Wilde, Middleton and Euripides, it seems to me that setting Joe Orton's fast-moving farces with their pronounced 1960s anti-establishment, amoral irreverence in their proper place in the history of English farce—especially with regard to the tradition of the dramatists of the English Restoration period on the one and to the trends in modern British humour manifest in black comedies on stage and television ever since his tragic death on the other hand—is a task which to my best knowledge has not yet been conclusively attempted.

At any rate Charney's (1984: 131) appraisal of Orton as a major farceur still rings true today

Orton no longer seems to be merely a footnote in the history of modern drama but merits at least a significant chapter. His growing popularity must come as a surprise to many critics and reviewers, who thought of him as a sickly clever, commercial dramatist.

This certainly constitutes a posthumous victory for a dramatist whose life and death so closely followed art. On Friday, July 14 1967, not even one month before his violent death, he wrote in his diaries:

Nobody around to pick up. Only a lot of disgusting old men. I shall be a disgusting old man myself one day, I thought, mournfully. Only I have high hopes of dying in my prime.

The Orton Diaries (p. 241)

But let me finish this paper by relishing the final tableau of Orton's *What the Butler Saw*. As the "weary, bleeding, drugged and drunk" characters "climb the rope ladder into the blazing light", it is as if New Comedy, seventeenth century Restoration drama have been successfully fused with the spirit of the sixties.—A truly explosive mixture beyond any doubt.

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