

10. SENTIMENTAL COMEDY: RICHARD STEELE'S *THE CONSCIOUS LOVERS*

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1. Steele's *The Conscious Lovers*: An Unfashionable Classic?

With 26 performances following the first night on 7 November 1722 at Drury Lane Theatre and re-openings in every London season up to 1775, Sir Richard Steele's *The Conscious Lovers* was spectacularly successful and one of the most influential plays of the 18th century. In print, *The Conscious Lovers* proved to be even more profitable. The three editions published in 1722/23 were followed by 45 in the ensuing 77 years, among them translations into German, Italian, and French (cf. Ellis 1991: 54). Moreover, George I allowed the play to be dedicated to him and awarded Steele (1672-1729) a gratuity to the amount of £500.

In spite of its extraordinary reception history, this famous drama, which has come to be regarded as the prototypical 'sentimental comedy,' did not appeal to later audiences in the same way as it did to contemporary audiences; it began to sink into oblivion in the early 19th century. Especially 21st-century readers find it difficult to relate to the play since they are used to different kinds of character and speech. Furthermore, present-day notions of authenticity and expectations regarding the plot conform to patterns of perception and changing viewing habits based on short-term attention induced by television formats and video clips. Whereas 'Restoration comedies' (see chapter 8) have fared well as far as modern repertoires are concerned, the sentimental comedy is supposed to be unpalatable to the taste of modern theatre-goers.

In order to explain why strikingly few 18th-century plays have gained the status of 'literary classics,' one has to take into account a number of different, yet related factors: the cultural context and the preoccupations of 18th-century readers and authors, the emergent culture of sentiment, the generic features of comedy and the poetological debates of the times (see chapter 9).

Whereas nowadays the terms 'sensibility' and 'sentiment' have decidedly pejorative connotations, smacking of melodrama and sentimentality, these terms carried very positive implications in the 18th century, especially from the 1740s onwards. To say, for example, that someone had 'sensibility' suggested a very attractive character. Originally these terms did not only refer to emotions; up to the middle of the 18th century, 'sentiment' also meant 'opinion,' which only slowly became associated with feelings and 'moral' attitudes. Sensibility referred to a (physical) ability similar to our contemporary term 'sensitivity;' its meanings included a capacity for empathy as well as one's emotional affection by the actions and feelings of others. Such sentimental values were closely connected to a new image of man; in concord with (later) European

thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), latitudinarian clergymen and the Earl of Shaftesbury believed as early as the beginning of the 18th century that man was by nature a 'good' and social animal. Later, philosophers like Adam Smith (1723-1790) and David Hume (1711-1776) presumed that women and men were able to adopt the perspective of others, that they had compassion and naturally felt sympathy when they imagined, for instance, a fellow human being tortured. To be good-natured, to feel benevolence for others, and to express these 'delicate,' kind, and 'tender' feelings in polite behaviour was held to be a natural characteristic of man. Sensibility and sentiment thus had a wide range of positive connotations; they were closely connected to refined emotions and supposed to lead to a kind of behaviour that benefited one's companions as well as the society at large. It has to be borne in mind, however, that these features, which were talked about as if they were common to mankind, were usually related to the middle and upper ranks. The lower classes led a completely different life; physical labour transformed their bodies, and it was believed that they were basically concerned with egotistic aims ensuring their survival; the fashionable values of sentiment were therefore reserved to the upper ranks and served as a means to demonstrate their alleged superiority (for an overview of the most important values of the culture of sensibility cf. Nünning 1996; Barker-Benfield 1992; Todd 1986).

To be sentimental was therefore something very different from our contemporary understanding of the term; as a matter of fact, to be sentimental meant to be both fashionable and good. However, the very popularity of the concept proved to be a double-edged sword later on. On the one hand, the values of the culture of sentiment initiated and strengthened many humanitarian concerns; they led to very diverse movements such as the establishment of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and, of course, provided a boost for abolitionism. On the other hand, the supposed link between ostensibly 'sentimental' behaviour and one's own benevolence was conducive to a rather hypocritical staging of sensitivity. The desire to impress others with one's alleged good nature and fashionable behaviour gave rise to a 'cult of sensibility' in which the emotions were divorced from both reason and action. From the middle of the century onwards, 'sentimentality' for many became an end in itself so that the term eventually acquired ambivalent connotations. 'Languishing ladies,' for instance, preferred lying on the sofa and talking about the acuteness of their emotions to visiting the poor or even a friend in distress: They claimed that they would suffer so much in these situations they would faint – and thus preferred to stay at home.

To modern readers, sentimental values and didactic literature seem to be worlds apart. We know that literature was held to teach by example and that plays were meant to 'entertain and instruct' the audience, but didacticism is nowadays often linked to cognitive aspects of morality: The contents of the 'teachings of literature' are moral precepts or Christian values. However, due to the conviction of the importance of emotions and the intimate relation between emotions and reason (nowadays confirmed by insights from neurobiology), feelings came to be thought of as worthy of being both acquired and taught during the 18th century. As a result, it became particularly im-

portant for the middling ranks to display the 'correct' virtuous and tender feelings. After all, the growth of the middling ranks was a relatively new phenomenon, closely related to the demographical and cultural changes and the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution. Since this rising social group was interested in establishing its position in society, it claimed virtue and refined feelings as characteristics of its own class. By means of their virtue, they stressed, they were superior not only to the allegedly immoral lower ranks but even to the aristocracy, which they regarded as insincere and of lax (sexual) morals (cf. Nünning 1995: 19-41). The didacticism of Steele's play is best understood in this context: He wanted to demonstrate what 'good' and 'refined' feelings are, and aimed at inciting these sentiments in his audience so that theatre-goers and readers would learn how to feel these emotions and thus become worthy members of society.

Since the traditional characteristics of comedies did not agree with this kind of teaching, the didactic aim "to chasten wit and moralize the stage" (Prologue 28) heavily influenced the kind of comedy that sentimental writers put on stage. The love affairs and intrigues, the folly and deviant behaviour of the often less than perfect characters in comedies could not incite the proper feelings of tenderness, sympathy and pity. In the 17th century, the audience had roared with laughter when a clever young couple outwitted its elders; they had enjoyed the battle of the sexes and were delighted when the dim-witted 'fops' and lusty old men were punished (see chapter 8). This, however, ran counter to sentimental values: To set up bad examples, to reward cruel egotists, and to laugh at pitiful losers did not contribute to the moral education of the audience.

As early as 1698, Jeremy Collier had acidly criticized earlier comedies in his pamphlet *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*; and even though the plays written in the 1690s did not really deserve this diatribe, his text triggered a controversy which lasted well into the 18th century. This prepared the ground for Steele's success: People recognized that they were faced with a new, morally rewarding kind of play. Unlike its predecessors, this innovative kind of drama, which was influenced by the values of sensibility, lacked the obviously comical. Now stripped of 'low laughter,' the sentimental comedy came to share many features of the tragedy.

As journalist, Member of Parliament, and manager of the Drury Lane Theatre, Steele was in a position to realize his reform agenda on stage. Long before the curtain was raised on *The Conscious Lovers*, the author had propagated the new values of sentiment (as far as they were developed at the time) in his early pamphlet *The Christian Hero* (1701). More importantly, he developed his ideas in the influential journals *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, two standard-setting moral magazines he co-edited with Joseph Addison. Unlike severer critics who wanted to close the theatres, he saw the potential of combining entertainment and moral advice (cf. *Tatler* 16.4.1709). His early plays *The Funeral* (1701), *The Lying Lover* (1703), and *The Tender Husband* (1705) already showed a departure from traditional comic forms. We can therefore witness a

gradual emergence of sentimental features on stage, even though *The Conscious Lovers* is widely regarded as his first full-fledged 'sentimental comedy.' Earlier plays such as Colley Cibber's *Love's Last Shift* (1696) and *The Careless Husband* (1704), for instance, employed conventions characteristic of both sentimental and Restoration comedies.

Nonetheless, the opening night of *The Conscious Lovers* was preceded by an extraordinary publicity campaign between partisans and critics of sentimental values. The prologue (written by Leonard Welsted) advertised the play as an audacious attempt to displace the corrupt and immoral "strategems" (Prologue, 3) of earlier comedy. Obviously, the play annoyed traditionalists, who attacked Steele personally, accusing him not only of commercialism but also of dilettantism since he flouted hitherto widely acknowledged functions of comedy (cf. Hynes 2004: 146).

Sentimental comedies do indeed differ from earlier plays, in particular from Restoration comedies. The characteristics of both sub-genres become most obvious in comparison: Both differ markedly as far as speech and dialogue, the allocation of information, perspective structure, *dramatis personae*, and depiction of characters, plot and closure, norms and values as well as intended effects are concerned (for a detailed overview of the characteristics of sentimental plays as opposed to Restoration plays cf. Barkhausen 1983; Nünning/Nünning 1998: 103-08). Though many critics have pronounced it impossible to define or, indeed, identify the features of the sub-genre (cf. Bevis 1988: 146 ff.; Loftis 1959: 127-32), one can roughly characterize sentimental comedies as being informed by the intended effect on the audience, whose moral emotions were to be incited and developed. This overall aim manifests itself in the conception of the characters, which are mainly used to embody the values of sensibility, compensate for the lack of intrigues and deception, emphasize the 'inner conflicts' and feelings of the protagonists as well as foreground the use of language and dialogue. Our interpretation of Steele's play will show to what extent the typical features of sentimental comedies shape this drama, which can be thought of as a paradigmatic embodiment of the genre. Moreover, we will try to provide an insight into the main features of sentimental comedies in general.

2. *The Conscious Lovers*

In his preface to the play, Richard Steele famously said that his aim was to provide a "joy too exquisite for laughter." This remark is both pertinent – it came to be a kind of motto for his successors – and astonishing: What is a comedy without laughter? What might seem rather quaint and old-fashioned today was both radical and innovative at the time. Steele made an attempt to provide an answer to the harsh criticism of the alleged immorality of comedies, which, in an increasingly moral society, threatened to render them both unattractive and unimportant. As a result, he not only used the stage to promote the new ideas about human nature, but at the same time managed to meet the taste of the audience and make the play as profitable as possible. The sentimental

features of Steele's play become particularly evident when one looks at its predecessor and intertextual model, the Latin play *Andria* by Terence (166 BC). While the plot is rather similar to Steele's play, it displays many of the characteristics of comedy and clearly abides by traditional rules.

In *The Conscious Lovers* and in most sentimental plays, the family is shown to be a unit based not only on financial but also on emotional and moral relationships. The parents, and with them characters of the older generation, are shown in a positive light (cf. Ellis 1991: 52), whereas servants represent (now negatively connoted) features of the heroes of earlier comedies. As an important part of the new middle class, rich merchants are now placed on a par with people who were formerly thought to be their superiors. Furthermore, the promotion of new values of sentiment throughout the play deeply informs the structure and diction of the play. Passages with quick repartee are next to non-existent, whereas the integration of many moral speeches is striking. As a consequence, we are not confronted with the suspense of a tight plot but instead with the addition of scenes which at first appear strangely unconnected to the action.

2.1 The 'World of the Story': Characters and Plot

As in most sentimental plays, the constellation of characters is firmly rooted in the middle class; but the main characters are part of the more mundane merchant world. The introduction of a merchant as a positive character is in itself an innovation, since tradesmen were held to be part of the 'monied interest,' which, in opposition to the old 'landed interest,' was supposed to be potentially dangerous: After all, they might profit from a war which would be England's ruin, and were not allowed to vote or have a seat in parliament. While merchants slowly came to be respected as necessary and valuable parts of the commonwealth, they were still widely regarded with suspicion. Nonetheless, merchants are depicted positively in this play. As a foreign trader who has become immensely rich through his involvement in the Eastern trade, Mr. Sealand is presented as a respectable character whose daughter Lucinda is set to marry Jack Bevil, the son of the squire Sir John Bevil, who belongs to the landed gentry.

Although he is a very virtuous character who wants to obey his father, Jack Bevil is not happy with the forthcoming wedding; he is in love with Indiana, a beautiful orphan without any social connections. His bride Lucinda also regards the marriage with dread, since she has lost her heart to Bevil's friend Myrtle, who longs to marry her. What stands in the way of the four lovers is not only the fact that their fathers want to match them in a different way, but that the children are set on respecting the wishes of their parents. Moreover, the nobleman Cimberton, another suitor for Lucinda's hand, enters the stage in the second act. However, he is not taken seriously but ridiculed as a fop throughout the play; a fate often met by the aristocratic characters, who are usually shown to be both lusty and immoral. After the usual number of complications, which in this play cannot be regarded as comic, the orphan Indiana is revealed to be Sea-

land's first daughter whom everyone had long believed to be lost and dead. After this, everything can end well.

This ending has been read as the triumph of bourgeois sensibility. Nevertheless, one has to take into account that among the middling ranks, both money and reputation were widely held to be more important reasons for marriage than love, at least until the beginning of the 19th century. As in many 18th-century plays and novels, love and fortune coincide, and the protagonists are allowed financially profitable marriages which gratify their feelings at the same time. As co-heiress to Sealand's fortune, Indiana becomes an eligible daughter-in-law for the Bevil family, who are representative of the 'landed interest.' Moreover, Sir Bevil comes to accept love as a positive ingredient of married life and accepts the importance of emotions – as he can now afford to do so. Steele therefore skilfully utilizes the prestigious traditional status of the Bevils in order to demonstrate their compatibility with emerging middle-class values and propagate new ideas of morality.

The hierarchy within the *dramatis personae* also supports sentimental values. The characters are grouped according to their virtue; characters embodying middle-class morals become the protagonists of the play. Though young Bevil may appear to be a boring example of traditional virtue to modern readers, he differs markedly from earlier heroes. His prodigious display of morality marks him as a member of a 'new' and rising social class who reads edifying literature at night. As a representative of a new ideal of the gentleman who embodies sentimental and moral values instead of wit, Jack Bevil is "indeed hard to believe in" (Ellis 1991: 47): Not only does he sport tender but always honourable feelings for the languishing Indiana, he also obediently seeks to obtain his father's consent although he – unlike the hero of Terence's play – is financially independent through a maternal legacy. Thus, he does not need the good will of his father, but still he sees himself bound by a "religious vow" (2.1.) not to marry Indiana without his father's consent. This sentimental hero finds his counterpart in the afflicted heroine Indiana, who enters the stage as an early epitome of the 'damsel in distress:' young, beautiful, impoverished, and orphaned. Just like Antonio Scarlatti's uncomplaining opera heroine Griselda, whom Indiana admires, she patiently endures all tribulations (2.2.). Bevil selflessly supports her to the point of being suspected of secret amorous motives which he, ironically, has, but does not confess to, since they would not be deemed 'right' as he is not in a position to marry her. Even Indiana herself, who is also in love with him, comes to believe in his lack of romantic feelings for her. After his lengthy assurances of being merely motivated by compassion, she finally renounces him in agony. With this altruistic act, she reaches the peak of her ordeals; after all, she has lost her parents in infancy, survived a maritime disaster and was barely able to defend her virginity against a French rogue. The Indiana sub-plot echoes elements of the immoral comedy as it creates suspense, and her relationship to Bevil shows some similarities to that of a kept mistress (2.2.).

However, unlike her alter ego in Terence's play, who is suspected of being a courtesan, Indiana is never supposed to be a 'fallen woman' who has lost her chastity.

Her virtue shines through, even during her hardships. Sir Bevil is taken aback when he first encounters her at a masked ball admiring “[h]er uncommon air, her noble modesty, the dignity of her person” (1.1.). Even Sealand has to forget about his prejudices on becoming acquainted with her; “so worthy an object, so accomplish’d a lady, as your sense and mien bespeak” (5.3.). As a woman who patiently endures affliction and firmly resists harassment, Indiana is a representative of the ideal young woman. In concord with the values of sensibility, the main couple’s ‘conscious love’ (i.e. sentimental love), which the title of the play accentuates, is admirable because of their moral superiority rather than the erotic appeal which characterizes the protagonists of the Restoration comedy. Thus, physical tokens of love like kisses are reserved for the lower classes, as Lucinda’s maid Phillis realizes, who is the subject of yet another (low) love plot (cf. 3.1.).

Stock characters like the rake or the coquette, who were of major importance in earlier plays, are doubly marginalized by being either out of fashion or relegated to the servant class. By putting the rogue and the coquette on the level of the lower orders, Steele ridicules the former models of behaviour that were of central importance to the heroes and heroines of Restoration comedies. Jack Bevil’s manservant Tom – “the prince of poor coxcombs” (1.1.) – likes to pose as a libertine, and Lucinda’s maid Phillis acts out the part of the coquette. Phillis, whom her mistress thinks of as a “pert merry hussy” (3.1.), refers to the negative view of their assumed roles: “O Tom! Tom! Is it not a pity that you should be so great a coxcomb and I so great a coquet, and yet be such poor devils as we are?” (1.1.) Moreover, Sir Bevil’s ‘good,’ faithful servant Humphrey exposes the degenerated image of the rogue when he derides Tom’s self-fashioning: “I hope the fashion of being lewd and extravagant, despising of decency and order, is almost at an end, since it is arrived at persons of your quality” (1.1.).

As far as the upper middle ranks are concerned, libertinism is a thing of the past. Sir John Bevil is known to have been a rakish figure in his youth, but he has now changed. His son mentions the comic turmoil on his parent’s marriage day which resembles typical elements of restoration comedy:

I have been told, Sir, that, at the time you married, you made a mighty bustle on the occasion. There was a challenging and fighting – scaling walls – locking up the lady – and the gallant under an arrest for fear of killing all his rivals. (1.1.)

When Sir Bevil and his servant Humphrey wear the clothes of Bevil’s father at a masquerade, they are followed by a yelling, masked crowd “as if we had been the most monstrous figures in that whole assembly” (1.1.). In the 18th century, the Restoration is as old-fashioned as the late Baron’s garments.

The mockery of obsolete Restoration ideals is mainly located at the level of the minor characters. Lucinda’s snobbish mother and especially the “formal, philosophical, pedantic” (2.1.) aristocrat Cimberton appear as figures of fun whose intrigues prove to be futile. Their main function is to set up obstacles for the lovers’ union and to add a comic tinge to the main plotline. Despite his long pedigree and being “three hundred years an older gentleman than any lover [...] [Lucinda] ever had” (3.1.), the

old Cimberton is a weak antagonist for Jack Bevil. The aristocrat reveals his disregard of sentimental values when he examines Lucinda's body as if he were purchasing a horse: "I am considering her, on this occasion, but as one that is to be pregnant" (3.1.). When Indiana is finally revealed to be Lucinda's elder half-sister who is to share her inheritance, Cimberton realizes that he will get considerably less money if he marries her and breaks off his advances as he "was in treaty for the whole" (5.3.). In consequence, he exposes himself as a lustful and avaricious fop. Moreover, Mrs. Sealand's unproductive efforts to bring about a marriage with an aristocrat are looked upon with derision. Her attempt at pairing her daughter with her noble kinsman Cimberton is exposed as the motive of a "poor troublesome woman" by Myrtle (2.1.). Besides, a merchant's wife – however blue-blooded her own ancestors might have been – in pursuit of a pure noble lineage is a satiric device in itself. Aristocratic values are therefore ridiculed not only through the foppish, weak, and lusty Cimberton, but also through Mrs. Sealand's pathetic efforts to re-establish the alleged link between her family and the nobility.

The distance between the ideal characters and the others is confirmed by the fact that there is general agreement about the traits of good and foolish figures. Except for Mrs. Sealand, the vain Cimberton is condemned by all of the characters. Lucinda sees in him only a "phlegmatic fool," and according to Myrtle he exhibits only "very little judgement: [...] No, no; hang him, the rogue has no art, it is poor simple insolence and stupidity." (2.1.) Similarly, Jack Bevil's filial obedience is universally acknowledged and there is no doubt about the merits of the virtuous, beautiful, and long-suffering daughters of Mr. Sealand and of the two fathers.

2.2 Diction and Structure

In addition to the content and the constellation of characters, the morality and the sentiment of the play also inform the tempo of the dialogic exchange between the characters. Moreover, the register differs considerably from colloquial speech: Exalted elocution and an emotionally charged vocabulary form essential parts of the sentimental characters' dialogues. Jack Bevil and Indiana use a style similar to earlier heroic plays and to the use of language of aristocratic characters in 16th- and 17th-century tragedies: They converse with much pathos and in set phrases (and sometimes in rhymes, cf. 2.2.). The lively exchange of verbal blows in quick repartee that was characteristic of Restoration comedy is debased by the fact that it is used by 'low,' uneducated servants. In analogy to Shakespearean plays, however, the lower orders also provide comic relief: Tom's and Phillis' down-to-earth and juicy flirtations (1.1.) provide a contrast to the 'conscious' lovers. As a result, the servants act out the battle of the sexes which the sentimental couples deny themselves.

Sentimental plays tend to give the characters space to express their views without interruption by others: owing to the overall didactic aim, the worthy sentiments of the characters must be treated with respect; they could not be ridiculed. Consequently, the

key scene (cf. 2.1.) between Indiana and Jack Bevil features very little interruption; moreover, entire scenes display a virtually monologic structure “punctuated by the occasional enabling ‘phatic’ interjection from a supposed interlocutor” (Hynes 2004: 151). Abstract concepts such as love, reason, and understanding are meticulously analysed while standard devices in Restoration comedy such as ambiguity or sexual allusions are omitted. Instead, the diction of the sentimental protagonists is marked by clear propositions and sentimental emphasis (cf. 2.2.).

As the few instances of verbal sparring in the main characters’ dialogues do not feature diverging opinions, a conciliatory tenor pervades the play. Even the dichotomy between the traditional values of the landed gentry and the newly emerging merchant elite turns out to be only an outward antagonism. Mr. Sealand and Sir John Bevil may fight a comic verbal duel over the importance of “genealogy and descent” (4.2.), yet their concepts of marriage policy complement one another. Moreover, Sealand’s verdict about the rise of the merchant class is often cited as an important statement proclaiming the new prominence of commerce in society:

We Merchants are a Species of Gentry, that have grown into the World this last Century, and are as honourable, and almost as useful, as you landed folks, that have always thought your selves so much above us. (4.2.)

This demonstrates a new self-assurance of a formerly marginalized group that now confidently claims an exalted place in society. Merchants are said to be a species of ‘Gentry,’ a title reserved for the ‘landed gentry.’ Consequently, merchants are not only shown to be respectable – as Mr. Sealand and his perfectly virtuous daughters indicate – they are even explicitly said to be just as important and worthy as the landed gentry, whom Sealand refers to as ‘folks.’

Since the interests of the landed gentry and the rich merchants are shown to be intertwined, the play lacks a real social conflict – the aristocrat Cimberton is unambiguously criticized, and the lower classes are not taken seriously either. Moreover, Jack Bevil’s conflict between his love towards Indiana and duty towards his father turns out to be a pseudo clash of interests in the end. Myrtle’s jealousy of his alleged rival Jack, whom he believes to be in love with Lucinda, is ungrounded, nor is it developed into a comic, fast-paced plot. Conflicts such as these only serve to induce edifying speeches and scenes of moral demonstration. In addition, there are no real villains: Even Indiana’s French would-be-ravisher “on cooler thoughts” (1.2.) desists from pursuing her further. Based on the belief in the positive nature of mankind, Steele’s dramatic world is not a natural habitat for thoroughly wicked villains. Novak (1979: 50) is right when he points out that in sentimental plays, characters’ flaws just occur to such an extent that they are “led astray by passion or by a lack of proper polish and civilization.” The ‘duel scene’ (4.1.), which according to Steele was his reason for writing the play, serves as a fine example for this statement: this scene is ultimately all about the necessity and ways of circumventing a duel.

Since Jack Bevil thinks solving a conflict with violence foolish, the ‘duel scene’ becomes a demonstration scene depicting the virtue and repentance of the central char-

acters. In consequence, the strategic moves and combats of wit which were representative of earlier comedies are now replaced by the representation of insight into higher virtues. The quarrel between Myrtle and Jack Bevil, which leads Myrtle to challenge his alleged rival, culminates in Myrtle's realization of his own rashness. When he displays "quick anger," Jack Bevil meets him in a "cool manner" and with "moderation" (4.1.). As the epitome of sentimental virtue, Jack disapproves of the duel, which continued to be an important way of resolving conflicts of 'honour' until the early 19th century. It is not before Myrtle questions Indiana's virtue that Bevil consents to meet his friend's challenge. Of course, this imprudent move has no impact; when the misunderstanding is cleared, Myrtle admits his defeat and apologizes:

Dear, Bevil, your friendly conduct has convinced me, that there is nothing manly but what is conducted by reason, and agreeable to the practice of virtue and justice. And yet, how many have been sacrificed to that idol, the unreasonable opinion of men! (4.1)

Critics have stressed that the 'duel' scene is dysfunctional for the play as a whole since it is unconnected to the previous scenes and irrelevant for the progression of the plot. However, the fact that the scene seems rather unrelated to the rest of the play is a typical feature of sentimental drama as well as of sentimental novels. Essential scenes gain their importance not from their position in a causally connected plot, but from the moral lessons which are disclosed by the insights and feelings of the characters. This often leads to long tirades or 'tableau scenes' in which the characters adopt evocative positions and gestures in order to invoke an image similar to a didactic painting.

The lack of external conflicts and a fast-paced plot already points to the sentimental concern with the 'inner world' of the characters. In a crucial scene (2.2.) Jack Bevil and Indiana negotiate sentimental values; otherwise nothing else happens. This dialogue illustrates that possessing sensibility not only entails the ability to have benevolent feelings, but also being aware of and reflecting upon one's emotional world.

BEVIL JUN. If I might be vain of any thing in my power, Madam, 'tis that my understanding from all your sex, has mark'd you out, as the most deserving object of my esteem.
[...]

INDIANA. [E]steem is the result of reason, and to deserve it from good sense, the height of human glory; nay, I had rather a man of honour should pay me that, than all the homage of a sincere and humble lover.

BEVIL JUN. You certainly distinguish right, Madam, love often kindles from external merit only –

INDIANA. But esteem arises from a higher source, the merit of the soul –

BEVIL JUN. True – And great souls only can deserve it. (2.2.)

In many scenes, the features of love, esteem, merit, understanding, reason, mind, good sense, and judgment, as well as the differences between these emotions are elaborated or at least represented. Modern readers have a hard time reconstructing all the subtle differences of meaning of the terms, but it is this kind of awareness of the 'refined emotions' and the search for even more subtle and delicate feelings, as well as the recognition of their close connection to both reason and virtue, which mark the merit of

the sentimental hero or heroine. Just as Restoration protagonists displayed their wit with relish, the central couple in the sentimental comedy delights in this almost ostentatious exhibition of feelings that was meant to stir the emotions of the audience.

2.3 Sentiment and Didactic Impact

Nearly all of the features of Steele's play are influenced by his commitment to the idea that literature should 'teach by example.' In order to inspire altruistic and elevated feelings in his viewers, he uses morally superior characters and puts them in positions in which they could illustrate (and impart) their own refined emotions. In concord with the new – and controversial – belief that man is by nature a good and social being, Steele models his figures on Shaftesbury's positive idea of man and thus constructs his main characters as perfect embodiments of virtue and politeness. The Hobbesian notion *homo homini lupus est* has become outmoded in Steele's dramatic world; instead, benevolence and sympathy are introduced as the main characteristics of the protagonists. Empathy, pity, and charity likewise are held in high esteem, and even the parents, the traditional stumbling blocks in love comedies that usually have to be outwitted by the lovers, mean well. Sir Bevil is far from being a tyrannical father who forces his son into marriage. As the servant Humphrey realizes, the uneasiness of father and son merely results from "their fear of giving each other pain" (1.1.). Even the friendship of Jack Bevil and Myrtle is spotless, in spite of the fact that one of them is engaged to the other's beloved and apart from the near-catastrophe of the duel. Moreover, honesty and frankness replace the deception strategies which determined characters' actions in earlier comedies.

In concord with the values of sensibility, the play represents a new, ideal concept of marriage based on mutual affection, which Steele had propagated in his essays in *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. In accordance with the concerns of a rising middle class, the characters in the play stress the emotional ties of the nuclear family. Even Mr. Sealand, who arranges the marriage settlement with the Bevil family in a completely businesslike manner, postpones his daughter's impending wedding on the grounds that the bridegroom is obviously in love with another woman. Moreover, despite his declarations of filial obedience, Jack Bevil prefers to marry for love and not for money. Steele therefore attributes clashing interests and a cynical view on marital life only to the elder generation, in particular to the snobbish Mrs. Sealand, who tries to marry her daughter off for purely opportunistic reasons.

Most of the scenes, however, are geared towards moving the audience, if possible even to tears. The melodramatic reunion of Indiana with her long-lost father (5.3.) does not come as a surprise to the spectators, who are already aware of the kinship between the two. Still, the characters on stage lack this knowledge; only Sealand's sister recognizes her brother at first glance. This use of dramatic irony is typical of sentimental plays: The imbroglio is not a means of letting the audience enjoy the comic en-

tanglement on stage and laugh about the (virtuous) characters; rather it serves to enhance the compassion of viewers, thus teaching them how to feel refined emotions.

The reunion between the family members also stresses the importance of poetic justice in the play. In correspondence with prevalent ideas in the 18th century, divine providence orders the events in a benevolent and just way, while the afflicted orphan waits passively for her reward. Interestingly enough, not only the virtue of the female protagonist is rewarded, but the behaviour of Jack Bevil is evaluated according to the same criteria. Thus, Mr. Sealand says about his future son-in-law: “[T]ell him [...] that this day he still shall be a bridegroom [...]. Tell him, the reward of all his virtues waits on his acceptance.” (5.3.) In contrast to the traditional idea that men have to be active and fight aggressively for honour and love, the play places the male protagonist in a position that is usually reserved for women. Indiana and Jack “have little to do besides express their mutual esteem and talk about philosophy” and “wait to see what will happen” (Hynes 2004: 150 f.). Instead of relying on the actions of the leading couple, the happy ending results from the coincidence that the central characters are revealed to be closely related. The hero Jack Bevil does not contribute to this discovery at all; he is a quite resigned character who is heard to “sigh in the most heavy manner” about his troubles (1.1.).

Indeed, it is Myrtle who devises comic subterfuge to impede Lucinda’s marriage to Cimberton. At first, Myrtle and Tom smuggle themselves into the Sealand household disguised as lawyers who insinuate that because of legal restrictions, Cimberton’s elderly uncle Sir Geoffrey must affirm the engagement of the foppish suitor to Lucinda. In their second coup, Myrtle impersonates this noble relative as a preposterous and farcical *senex amans*, thus conveniently ridiculing the aristocracy once again. These stratagems provide a lively counterpoint to the main plot, but they are unnecessary since it is Indiana’s status as Sealand’s daughter that counts. The ineffectiveness of both ventures thus shows that trust in divine guidance is superior to the deception of others in order to gain one’s ends.

A number of heterogeneous dramatic devices thus serve a didactic effect, helping establish the theatre as a “school of morality.” In this regard, the comment about *The Conscious Lovers* in Henry Fielding’s novel *Joseph Andrews* (1742), uttered by the very likeable, boisterous yet virtuous character Parson Adams, speaks volumes: in his opinion, the drama is the only play that is “fit for a Christian to read” because of the passages that are “almost solemn enough for a sermon” (Fielding 1999: 266). In a comic novel like Fielding’s, this is an acid criticism of the morality of the play. But even though both sentimental values and Steele’s drama were not to everyone’s taste, it is important to remember that the play managed to imbibe, illustrate and popularize new values, making the reading and watching of plays a respectable endeavour.

3. Conclusion

Taking up, negotiating, and shaping current ideas, sentimental dramas helped propagate new values. Arguably, it was the genre of the sentimental comedy that paved the way for the entry of the values of sensibility into the literature of the 18th century. Since in the early decades there was still a very close connection between the finer, social emotions and reason as well as moral principles, it was possible to express such feelings in short monologues and discuss them in the dialogues between the virtuous characters. Moreover, tableaux scenes helped to visualize refined sentiments. The play thus managed to deal with important topical issues of the times as well as propagating the new position of the middling ranks. In addition, the drama expressed the optimistic Enlightenment belief in the understanding and malleability of men: Human beings could be educated and the formerly denigrated stage was held up as the proper place for important parts of this education.

With the development of the culture of sensibility, the greater stress on emotions, and the differentiation between their finer nuances, it became more difficult for plays to express and negotiate current values. While the drama had proved to be the genre most sensitive to the changes in the mental climate, the novel turned out to be better equipped to 'teach' the values of sensibility. As Virginia Woolf argued a century ago, the dramatic mode lends itself to abstraction and the presentation of intense passions, while the epic, narrative mode is geared towards dealing with details, with the development of nuances, and more subtle emotions. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that from the 1740s onwards, the values of sensibility became more popular in novels than in plays. With the psychological realism that emerged in the novels of Samuel Richardson, Henry Mackenzie, or Frances Burney, prose fiction was technically better equipped to portray the inner worlds of characters. Simultaneously, the epistolary novel, which lends itself to the spontaneous expression of feelings, began its career as the most popular mode of writing of the time. The 'easy and familiar' style of letters appealed to the polite middling ranks, who read, for instance, history books written in letters, political pamphlets, conduct books, and, of course, sentimental novels in epistolary form. The presentation of refined feelings, the delicate forms of perception, and the portrayal of consciousness became a common feature of many novels, even of the late novels of Henry Fielding, the harsh critic of sentimentality.

In this respect it is not surprising that the heyday of sentimental drama was relatively short. Despite the enormous impact of the Theatre Licensing Act (1737), which effectively silenced more humorous and satirical dramatists like Henry Fielding, and irrespective of the tremendous success of plays like *The Conscious Lovers* and *The Provoked Husband* (1728) by John Vanbrugh and Colley Cibber, the genre soon lost its former popularity. In contrast to a commonly held opinion – fostered by Oliver Goldsmith, who claimed to reintroduce laughter into the comedy in the 1770s – the sentimental drama never succeeded in ousting laughing comedies from the stage. Even during Steele's creative period between 1710 and 1728, more 'true comedies' than sentimental plays were

presented. As a consequence, the development of English comedy throughout the 18th century is characterized by an alternation of 'truly' comic and sentimental features.

Steele's ambition to moralize the English stage was taken up, however, in the works of his followers Edward Moore (*Gil Blas*, 1751) and Richard Cumberland, whose most successful plays, *The Brothers* (1769) and *The West Indian* (1771), can be regarded as paradigmatic examples of the sentimental genre with long moralizing conversations between altruistic and self-sacrificing characters.

In addition to these plays, comedies conforming to older genre traditions continued to be written and performed. The oeuvres of George Colman, Samuel Foote, and Arthur Murphy show that this tradition was still strong – though it marked a continuation of conventions which cannot be regarded as 'typical' of or specific to the 18th century. Though some of these plays mock sentimental values, not all of them do so; Murphy's plays, for instance, do not completely reject moral sentiments, and especially Oliver Goldsmith's and Richard Sheridan's works feature benevolent, good, and tender-hearted heroes; refined feelings and kindness were still attractive character attributes in their plays (see chapter 12). The culture of sensibility thus continued to influence literature throughout the 18th and 19th century – it was only the choice of genre, modes of writing, and emphasis that changed.

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