

## Joe Orton's Laodicean Tragedy: *The Good and Faithful Servant*\*

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In Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken," there are two roads that diverge in a yellow wood. The poet takes one and wonders what would have happened had he taken the other. But there is another way of interpreting the topos of the road not taken. This is the theme of the Henry James story "The Beast in the Jungle." The protagonist is unable to take any road at all. He is stuck in a comfortable stasis, a psychological paralysis that prevents him from acting on his own behalf. As he comes to realize this, that is his tragedy. His passivity in relation to choice is like that of the Laodiceans in the New Testament book of Revelation, where 3:15-16 reads: "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth."

These ideas apply very aptly to Joe Orton's television play of 1967, *The Good and Faithful Servant*. The title comes from Matthew 25:21, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant," and it is meant ironically. This short play, written in 1964, is one of Orton's least appreciated and least performed works, but Francesca Coppa calls it "brilliant (and underrated)."<sup>1</sup> Even though it follows *Entertaining Mr Sloane* and precedes *Loot*, Orton makes none of his characteristic attempts to make the play farcical, and it lacks his usual violence and sexual energy. The humor, what there is of it, is bitter and accusatory, especially of the corporation as a symbol of the soullessness and de-personalization of capitalism. It is Orton's most Marxist work. Some

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\*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debcharney01813.htm>>.

of the bitterness comes from the fact that the main character, Buchanan, a doorman at a huge factory, is closely modeled on Orton's father, a very silent and ineffectual man, who worked as a gardener for the city of Leicester and lost three fingers in the service.

In the first scene of the play, Buchanan is described as "an old man, wearing a commissionaire's uniform" (153).<sup>2</sup> A commissionaire is what we would call a doorkeeper or doorman. He has worked for the corporation for fifty years and is about to retire. Along the corridor to the Personnel Director's office he meets an old woman, Edith, who is scrubbing the floor. It turns out that she is his former lover, Edith Anderson, by whom he had twins, both of whom died when, during the war, a "peasant's son offered them water from a poisoned well—he meant no harm—it was an accident" (155). This is the first of a whole series of baleful accidents, for which no one is responsible.

The world immediately presented by the play is a cruel and capricious place. In a typical exchange, Buchanan wonders what has happened to Edith's beauty:

EDITH. I remained desirable until I was thirty.

BUCHANAN. You lasted so long?

EDITH. Then I had my first illness. (155)

Their grandson, Ray, is still alive. Edith looks after him, but announces: "When he's settled I shall die" (156). Buchanan asks "What of?" and Edith answers "Does it matter?" This is Orton in his jokey and nonsensical phase, but there is a bitterness in this scene that makes the jokes fall flat. The scene scrupulously avoids any of the expected joyousness of a long-lost couple meeting again after fifty years. All emotional gestures are kept to an absolute minimum.

Buchanan is on his way to the office of the Personnel Director, Mrs. Vealfoy, whose name ties in with the second epigraph of the play: "*Faith*, n. Reliance, trust, *in*; belief founded on authority" (151). This is quoted from the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, and it includes Orton's favorite authority words: *faith*, *reliance*, *trust*. It is interesting that in the 1967 television production of *The Good and Faithful Servant* on Rediffu-

sion, Mrs. Vealfoy was played by Patricia Routledge, the much-loved, imperious star of the long-running television series *Keeping Up Appearances*. Mrs. Vealfoy is the exemplar of a blank and unexpressive cheeriness in the play. She is a perfect personnel director because she is totally impersonal. For example, she asks Buchanan, "May we be completely informal and call you 'George'?" Buchanan, of course, agrees, and she answers affably: "Good, good. (*Laughs.*) My name is Mrs. Vealfoy. I expect you know that, don't you?" (156-57). Mrs. Vealfoy reviews all the anticipated responsibilities of the firm as Buchanan is about to retire: "You lost a limb in the service of the firm? (*She consults a file on her desk.*) You conceal your disabilities well" (157). She flatters Buchanan as she tightens the legal screws:

And the pension paid to you by the firm for the loss of your arm plus the cash was legally binding. We are in no way responsible for your other limbs. If they deteriorate in any way the firm cannot be held responsible. You understand this? (158)

The climax of this scene comes when Buchanan casually mentions his grandson, whose existence he has just discovered in the first scene. Mrs. Vealfoy, who has put on her hat and is about to leave, is suddenly taken aback:

*She stares at BUCHANAN sharply.* Pay attention to me! What grandson? You've no descendants living. I have the information from our records. (158)

Buchanan's protests about his newly-discovered wife Edith are ineffectual. Mrs. Vealfoy rejects Buchanan's pleas with angry annoyance: "Your wife is dead! Have you been feeding false information into our computers?" (159). There is no way that the innocent Buchanan can convince Mrs. Vealfoy that the sacred records are wrong. He says pitifully: "It's a personal matter. My private life is involved," but he cannot reach the supremely impersonal Mrs. Vealfoy: "Should your private life be involved, we shall be the first to inform you of the fact" (159). In the corporation, there is no such thing as a "private life." According to the always smiling Personnel Director, the personal is

swallowed up in the corporate. The individual has no separate, intrinsic existence.

At the retirement party in Scene Three, Mrs. Vealfoy presents Buchanan with an electric toaster—a “very lovely electric toaster”—and an electric clock. She refers to “his cheery laugh” (160), but there is not the slightest evidence for any cheery laugh in the play. Buchanan’s acceptance speech is full of nonsensical and unfathomable platitudes:

Over the years I’ve witnessed changes both inside and outside the firm. The most remarkable is the complete overhaul of equipment which has taken place during the last year. I am truly sorry to leave without seeing much of it in operation. But—there it is—what will be, will be. (160)

This fatalistic *qué será será* formula is the closest Buchanan ever comes to a philosophical observation. At the end of the scene he “*joins the lunch queue. No one speaks to him, or is aware of his presence*” (161).

Buchanan’s retirement presents, the toaster and the clock, keep reappearing in the action as symbols of the ‘benevolent’ corporation. In Scene Six, Edith opens the first parcel, the clock, and exclaims: “They gave you the wire as well. Shows how much they think of you” (165). It is odd to consider the gift of an electric clock without the wire. She opens the second parcel, the toaster, and is equally enthusiastic: “It’s a good make too. We must have toast for tea to try it out” (165). These casual remarks follow a very surprising and seemingly disconnected interchange with Buchanan. We learn from the stage direction that Edith “*stares*” at her husband “*in amazement*” (164). Her first words are “Oh! [...] Your arms! Where has the extra one come from?” Edith is grateful for Buchanan’s reply: “It’s false”—“Thank God for that. I like to know where I stand in relation to the number of limbs a man has” (165).

Buchanan is the mechanical man, like the heroine of the song “After the Ball Was Over,” and Scene Nine opens in his bedroom in the morning: “*On a table, an artificial arm, a pair of glasses, a hearing aid*” (171). This is a comic idea growing out of the theories of Henri Bergson, in which the mechanization of the human is a vital source of

comedy. As Edith says, "That hand of yours is almost human. The things you contrive to do with it are miraculous." Ray, the grandson, a pleasure-loving youth, calls the clock and the toaster a "load of old rubbish," as is Buchanan himself, thrown on the scrapheap by the corporation. Edith's closing comment in Scene Six is unconsciously ironic: "It was presented to Mr Buchanan by his firm. As a reward for fifty years' service" (168).

Of course, the clock and the toaster don't work.<sup>3</sup> Even Edith agrees that the clock "[t]ells whatever time it fancies" (177)—like the clock in Ionesco's *Bald Soprano*—and when Buchanan drops it, it gives him a nasty shock. Even the ever-optimistic Edith is forced to conclude: "They seem more like murder weapons than gifts from a grateful employer." In Scene Seventeen, right before Buchanan dies, he "*stands beside the table. On the table the clock and the toaster. He lifts a hammer and smashes them to pieces*" (190).<sup>4</sup> This is a powerful nonverbal scene. It is surprising that Orton makes Buchanan so inarticulate, unlike most of his other glib and voluble characters. In Scene Eighteen, Buchanan dies without a single word. He "*lies back, stares at the ceiling,*" while Edith tries to comfort him: "Why, you're crying. (*She kisses him.*) Tears running down your cheeks. (*She hugs him*)" (191). This is the only personal, emotional note in the entire play. But Edith is preoccupied with the company's annual get-together at the Bell Hotel: "I'm buying a new dress for the occasion. And I shall smile a lot, more than usual, because we have so much to be thankful for." Edith has picked up the cheery style of Mrs. Vealfoy. Meanwhile, "*BUCHANAN closes his eyes and dies*" (191).

There is another death set casually in the entertainment context of the Bright Hours club, designed specifically for persons of either sex who are "old, lonely and ex-members of the firm" (178). Scene Sixteen is set in the firm's recreation center: "*A number of old ex-employees are grouped around an upright piano singing: 'We'll All Go Riding on a Rainbow to a New Land Far Away.' Weary, apathetic voices*" (183). This is a savage scene, unmitigated by Orton's farcical high jinks. Besides Buchanan and the old man who at first appears to be his friend—but it

is a case of mistaken identity—we have a Goyaesque collection of decrepit old men and women: “Two of them are in wheelchairs, one is blind, a couple are simple-minded. They stare at BUCHANAN without interest. [...] Two or three VERY OLD WOMEN are knitting” (184). While Buchanan and his supposed friend are exchanging the platitudes of a seeming recognition, “[a] WOMAN at the end of the room falls over. A flutter of excitement” (184). Mrs. Vealfoy insists on maintaining the tone of forced merriment as she shoos people away from the fallen woman, but the woman is dead. This grotesque scene, with the piano playing and Mrs. Vealfoy insisting on running through all the songs with the word “happy” in them, including “Happy Days Are Here Again,” foreshadows the silent death of Buchanan in Scene Eighteen.

In her final speech in the play, Mrs. Vealfoy announces the sad death of George Buchanan in the midst of the firm’s annual festivities at the Bell Hotel:

His wife wishes me to express thanks to all in the firm who sent beautiful floral tributes in her sad bereavement. And now, on with the dance and let us pray for good weather during the holiday season. *The band plays ‘On the Sunny Side of the Street.’ Dancers fill the floor.* (192)

This may be ironic, but the irony is grim and unlike anything else in the works of Joe Orton.

Mrs. Vealfoy prepares us for the figure of Erpingham in *The Erpingham Camp*, written a year after *The Good and Faithful Servant* and produced on television by Rediffusion in 1966. *The Erpingham Camp* is a manic play full of the excitement and violence that is distinctly missing from *The Good and Faithful Servant*. Like Mrs. Vealfoy, Erpingham is an authentic “figure of authority” (*The Erpingham Camp* 303). He has a grandiose vision of “Rows of Entertainment Centres down lovely, unspoiled bits of the coast, across deserted moorland and barren mountainside. The Earthly Paradise” (*The Erpingham Camp* 281). Like *The Good and Faithful Servant*, the play uses music very effectively. Both Erpingham and Mrs. Vealfoy are mindless optimists and defenders of Establishment values, especially law and order and empty

ceremony. There is a distinctly Tory assumption that what is good for business is also good for the state. Simon Shepherd calls Mrs. Vealfoy "a horrific prophecy of Margaret Thatcher."<sup>5</sup> She and Erpingham are both totally autocratic. The corporation in *The Good and Faithful Servant* directs people's lives; like the Roman Empire, it offers bread and circuses and non-stop public entertainment to numb the workers' sensitivities. So, at a crucial moment in *The Erpingham Camp*, Erpingham denies any inherent rights to the rebellious camper Kenny: "You have no rights. You have certain privileges which can be withdrawn. I am withdrawing them" (307). Kenny's anarchic reply to Erpingham: "You'll pay for this, you ignorant fucker!"—and the campers' rebellion occurring to the tune of "La Marseillaise"—has no parallel in *The Good and Faithful Servant*. Nothing can oppose Mrs. Vealfoy, the Director of Personnel, not even death.

Some of the most effective scenes in *The Good and Faithful Servant* are wordless, which is, again, unusual for the jokey and epigrammatic Orton, who thought of himself as a successor to the Restoration comedy of manners and to Oscar Wilde, especially *The Importance of Being Earnest*.<sup>6</sup> Scene Five, for example, has no dialogue. It shows us Buchanan turning in his uniform. We see "a tailor's dummy dressed in the trousers, shirt, tie, shoes and hat belonging to BUCHANAN's uniform." We then see Buchanan entering from behind the curtain in his own clothes. The stage direction is significant: "He appears smaller, shrunken and insignificant." At the end of the scene, he "shuffles from the store" (164). There are a number of scenes of investiture and divestiture in *The Erpingham Camp*. Orton seems to have learned a lot from Brecht, especially in *Galileo*.

It is the triviality of Buchanan that brings the play close to tragedy, but not tragedy according to Aristotle's *Poetics*, where the protagonist has to have some stature.<sup>7</sup> In Scene Sixteen, Buchanan's desultory conversation with the nameless old man who he thinks is his former mate is pitiful in the pointless details that represent the high points of their careers. Buchanan boasts that his photo once appeared in the company magazine: "I was a long-service employee. A credit to can-

teen food they said I was" (184). Buchanan explains that he looked forward to his retirement "so's I could play skittles full time. I used to be a fan. I was in line for the cup. I just missed it. The mysterious thing was that I never came in line for it again" (185). Nothing further is said about skittles in the play. The old man counters with: "I was almost mentioned in a well-known sporting periodical once," which he regards as "the high-spot of my life" (185). What sporting periodical?

At this, Buchanan insists that the high-spot of his career came "when my photo appeared in the magazine. I didn't ask them to put it in" (185). Buchanan is basking in boastful reminiscence: "I was in charge of the Main Entrance. I saw the Chairman of the Board several times. I've even opened the door to him once" (186). The old man cannot match this glorious exploit. At the end of the scene, the old man realizes that his mate was not Buchanan but Georgie Hyams. Buchanan is shocked. He catches hold of the old man's sleeve:

BUCHANAN. You don't know me then?

OLD MAN. No.

BUCHANAN. But I worked here. I was on the main entrance. Are you sure you don't remember me?

OLD MAN. I'm sorry.

*He shrugs* BUCHANAN *off and moves to the group around* MRS. VEALFOY.

BUCHANAN. Nobody knows me. They've never seen me before. (189)

Buchanan, deflated in his boasting, becomes the Invisible Man.

If Buchanan is modeled on Orton's father, and Edith, to a lesser extent, on Orton's mother, then the grandson Ray is clearly an autobiographical projection like Sloane in *Entertaining Mr Sloane* and Hal and Dennis in *Loot*. They are all hedonistic, carefree, anarchic youths with criminal tendencies. Ray is co-opted into the corporation by Mrs. Vealfoy because he gets Debbie Fieldman, whom he barely knows, pregnant—just like his grandfather did with Edith Anderson. But until that time he expresses free-spirited views that one can find frequently in Orton's diaries.<sup>8</sup> In *The Good and Faithful Servant*, Ray tends to give jokey answers to all questions, as if he were an observer rather



than a character in a play full of moral cant and sanctimoniousness. When he confesses in Scene Six that he does not work, Buchanan is outraged:

BUCHANAN. Not work!?! (He stares, open-mouthed.) What do you do then?

RAY. I enjoy myself.

BUCHANAN. That's a terrible thing to do. I'm bowled over by this, I can tell you. It's my turn to be shocked now. You ought to have a steady job. (167)

Buchanan is the unwitting spokesman for the official values of the state and the corporation, a bit like McLeavy in *Loot*. The irony is heavy. When Buchanan asserts that "Something's missing from your life. Do you know what it is?" Ray frowns, there is a pause, and he asks slyly, "Is it God?" (172). This makes Buchanan pause and he is suspicious: "Who told you about Him?" to which Ray gives a characteristically vaudevillian answer: "I read a bit in the paper once" (172). These are snappy, contemptuous replies, like Ray's explanation of why you shouldn't have sex before marriage: "Because you should save it up, shouldn't you? Make it go further. Thrift, thrift" (173). Orton is having fun with the audience by quoting from Hamlet's bitter denunciation of his mother's quick marriage to Claudius: "Thrift, thrift, Horatio. The funeral baked meats/ Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" (1.2.179-80).<sup>9</sup>

*The Good and Faithful Servant* is hardly a tragedy according to the conventional criteria of Aristotle's *Poetics*. By calling it a "Laodicean" tragedy, I want to invoke a different set of ideas more relevant to black comedy. None of the persons in *The Good and Faithful Servant* has much stature nor is there any sense of hubris, or the insolence of challenging the gods or the powers that be. Buchanan is quietly swallowed up by the corporation, but he has introjected the values of the corporation, and his prosaic proselytizing of the rebellious Ray is not very different from what Mrs. Vealfoy, the Personnel Director, would say. Buchanan is a willing victim of corporate culture in the sense that he is rendered passive and without any free will to protest his fate. He suffers from a kind of paralysis that blocks him from taking any action

at all. In this sense, he is, like the Laodiceans, “neither cold nor hot.” Once he resigns—and he has no choice in this matter—he has separated himself from the warm, living body of the corporation, and he begins to die right from the beginning of the play. His doom is sealed. *The Good and Faithful Servant* is a Laodicean tragedy, or black comedy tragedy, not in the sense that no road has been taken, but rather with the idea that there is no road that could have been taken. The characters are paralyzed, frozen, rendered incapable of any action on their own behalf by the soulless corporation.

It is interesting that Orton developed some of the ideas for *The Good and Faithful Servant* in an earlier play called *Fred and Madge*, written in 1959.<sup>10</sup> Fred and Madge both have meaningless jobs, one rolling stones up the hill and the other catching water in a sieve, but they speak seriously and at length about the importance of the work they do and the nameless corporation they serve. Orton thought of himself as a realistic writer, and that is one of the ways that he separated himself from Pinter. Orton was dissatisfied with the staging of most of his plays, which he thought of as too stylized. When his mother died, the only memento that he took from her effects was her false teeth. He took them back to London and he played them like castanets for the cast of *Loot*, who were horrified by this intrusion of reality into what they understood as a stylized farce. Admittedly, *The Good and Faithful Servant* is an anomalous play that does not fit well with the other plays of Orton. It is jokey and ironic, but much too bitter to be farcical. Orton’s assumptions about the world around him must have remained pretty much the same throughout his brief career, but one can see in plays like *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, *Loot*, and especially *What the Butler Saw*, that the playwright sought vigorously to disguise his bitterness in one-liners, epigrams, polymorphous perversity, and knockabout farce.

That is why, even though all of Orton’s plays can be classified as black comedy, *The Good and Faithful Servant* is the blackest of his black comedies. Its sense of despair is unmitigated. Because it is so uncharacteristic of Orton, it is no surprise that it is his least produced and

least discussed play. I have been arguing in this paper for its excellence just because it is so anomalous, so uncompromising, so absolute. *The Good and Faithful Servant* is a remarkably quiet and unviolent play. None of its characters is very expressive and, with the possible exception of the hedonistic Ray, not very witty either. This is not what we have come to expect from Orton. The image of the world we live in—the image of the soulless and mindless corporation—hits us very hard. It is repellent and rebarbative. Those are the very qualities that make the play so strong and so compelling.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Francesca Coppa, ed., *The Visitors and Fred and Madge* (New York: Grove P, 1998) xviii.

<sup>2</sup>Orton is quoted from the edition of *The Complete Plays*, ed. John Lahr (New York: Grove P, 1976).

<sup>3</sup>On an ironic personal note, when I was honored for twenty-five years' service to my university, I received a clock (which didn't work) and an umbrella with the university logo which broke on its first use.

<sup>4</sup>Orton's roommate, Kenneth Halliwell, may have gotten the idea of smashing Orton's head in with a hammer from this scene.

<sup>5</sup>Simon Shepherd, *Because We're Queers: The Life and Crimes of Kenneth Halliwell and Joe Orton* (London: The Gay Men's P, 1989) 120. This is the best analytic study of Orton, especially from a gay perspective. Shepherd challenges the homophobia of John Lahr's biography, *Prick Up Your Ears: The Biography of Joe Orton* (London: Lane, 1978). See also my book on Orton in the Macmillan Modern Dramatists series: *Joe Orton* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

<sup>6</sup>In his article "The Orton Offensive," Ronald Bryden called Orton the "Oscar Wilde of Welfare State gentility" (*Observer* [2 Oct 1966]: 4).

<sup>7</sup>It's a moot point about the relation of *The Good and Faithful Servant* to tragedy. Obviously, Orton's play is black comedy, which is antithetical to tragedy as it is defined by Aristotle. But in productions of Orton, there is no way that pity and fear do not enter in to our reactions. In the original production of *The Good and Faithful Servant* by Rediffusion on 6 April 1967, the cast included Donald Pleasance as Buchanan, Hermione Baddely as Edith, and Patricia Routledge as Mrs.

Vealfoy. There is no way that this stellar cast could have failed to conjure up some pity and fear.

<sup>8</sup>Edited by John Lahr as *The Orton Diaries* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986).

<sup>9</sup>William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thomson and Neil Taylor (London: Thomson Learning, 2006).

<sup>10</sup>Recently edited by Francesca Coppa, cited above.