

Tragedy and Soap: Orton's *Good and Faithful Servant**

SIMON SHEPHERD

In his essay on Orton's *Good and Faithful Servant* Maurice Charney argues that it is, for Orton, a strange sort of play.¹ He calls it a "Laodicean tragedy," on the grounds that "there is no road that could have been taken. The characters are paralyzed, frozen, rendered incapable of any action on their own behalf" (Charney 148). Certainly it is a peculiar work in the Orton oeuvre: though not, I think, easily definable as tragedy. But, of course, tragedy itself is not easily definable. Here, as in all cases, we have to ask what sort of tragedy it might be, what its elements are, whether the whole play is governed by tragic shape, and, if not, what relationship tragedy has to everything else. Indeed the play might turn out to be interesting culturally for the ways in which it—so to speak—contains tragedy.

1.

The main character George Buchanan seems to fit into a diligently classical tragic sequence. There is his hubris at his retirement, when he considers himself, erroneously, to be a significant and valued employee of the company, a doorman who "saw the Chairman of the Board several times" (84). He experiences a change of fortune when, after a conversation with someone who claims to have remembered

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him as an employee, it turns out that the other person thought he was someone different. He comes to realize that the firm to which he was so loyal has next to no memory of him and that the gifts he has been given, as tokens of esteem, are worthless. As a result of this anagnorisis he smashes them apart. From here comes the final catastrophe, when he lies in bed weeping, and then dies. Tucked into an apparently realist television play broadcast in 1967 this quotation of a tragic sequence has an unsettled relationship to what's around it.

For the typical Orton style is also very evident, as in the sequence with Buchanan's newly discovered grandson Ray after a woman has been found under his bed. Edith blames "the sex-education"; Ray says he didn't get any but learnt from other boys, which cues Buchanan's almost inevitable line: "What kind of boys are these that teach each other about the family way?" (75). So, too, there are familiar parody targets, through Buchanan's invocations of the value of a "steady" job and the importance of family, views which can be taken to have been learnt from the "firm" to which he is such a loyal servant. But to these are added other areas of parody. In her speech on his retirement, the manager, Mrs Vealfoy, recalls George taking on "extra responsibilities" at the outbreak of the Second World War: "He shouldered his share of the burden which we all had in those days" (58). This is part of a series of references back to a shared recent past which Edith first mentions, using a standard 1960s cliché: "It was the conditions. You couldn't blame them. We were so frightened in those days." Later Buchanan will also invoke "the conditions" when he contrasts his own hardship with that of Ray (54, 75).

While discourse about "those days" was recognised in the 1960s as the rhetoric of an older wartime generation who censure the young, the play's parodic activity begins somewhere much wilder than this. When Buchanan first meets Edith, "as I came along, there seemed something familiar. Something about your stance. Something that awaked memories" (52). As she scrubs the floor, he relates a meeting with a woman who was "in difficulties by the roadside." Edith gives a cry, then when he names her stands up, with tears glistening in her

eyes: "It was me!" He recoils: "You!" She pulls off her plastic glove to reveal the ring on her hand. If we are not already associating this with the language of romantic film, Edith's tale will crank up the pressure. "I was turned out by my father. I wandered for a long time until I found somewhere to have the babies." But these are now dead, "Killed in Italy." "What," asks Buchanan, "were they doing so far from home?" "They were wounded in a skirmish and taken to a peasant's hut for shelter," and there they were inadvertently given water from a poisoned well (52-53). The wartime story in combination with unlikely melodramatic reversals suggests that the TV drama's very first scene in its realist workplace setting is simultaneously a quoted romantic film, the sort of thing, as we shall see, that Orton watched on TV.

This is a new sort of satiric mode for Orton. It sits alongside some of his more regular attacks, but it also sits with that miniature tragic sequence. George Buchanan is ambivalently positioned as tragic hero and parody of tragic hero. The tragic and parodic are alike driven by a similar sentiment. Charney notes that: "The humor, what there is of it, is bitter and accusatory" (139). In making its accusation the play sets its tragic sequence in a larger formal frame that is familiar from Orton's immediate cultural context. We shall look later at what significance tragedy has within it, but first that context needs description.

2.

The early 1960s saw a new fashion for satire, in which parody was a regular mechanism. This was marked most famously in *Beyond the Fringe* and its successors and imitators. By 1962, in the form of *That Was the Week that Was*, satire came to television. Many of the targets of this satire were contemporary politics, but *Beyond the Fringe* had also provoked outrage by lampooning the recent past. "The Aftermyth of War" parodied media representation of British achievements in the Second World War. It was, in brief, an attack on nostalgia. A similar

sort of attack, this time directed at an explicit cultural target, can be seen in the radio show *Round the Horne*, first broadcast in 1965. A regular sketch had Celia Molestrangler and Binkie Huckaback delivering an absurd version of the language and posturing of the 1945 film *Brief Encounter*. The characters' names evoke both the film specifically—through allusion to Celia Johnson—and old-fashioned west end theatre more generally, through allusion to Binkie Beaumont, the powerful (and gay) producer.

Contained within this ideological target, figured as nostalgia, are two elements. The first, and ideologically most effective, is a sense of real national history, a looking back to the war effort and to an image of a society felt to be more integrated than the present. Alongside this is the more obviously fictional evocation of a past offered by artworks, and in particular old films, in which familiar situations were handled in language and costumes that implied a supposedly more gracious society than that depicted in the works of the newer "kitchen-sink" realism. A younger, and satirical, generation rejected these references back to the war and to a fictionalised past. Orton, for example, tells us of his own cynicism about worn-out filmic vocabularies when he watches the 1932 *Shanghai Express*: "Very ridiculous. Well-worn clichés [sic] all the way. And no inkling that they were using them" (*Diaries* 79). Set in civil-war China in 1931, it concerns the relationship—and undeclared feelings—between an English Captain and Shanghai Lil, a prostitute, played by Marlene Dietrich. Orton's response was not simply a rejection of out-of-date filmic language and a romanticising of an imperial past. He detects within a twist of the story a revelation of the film's racism: "We cannot have the honour of a white Aryan tart soiled by a Chinaman. So a Chinese tart got stuffed instead." For those like Orton nostalgia had to be attacked because of the values it contained. Clichés of expression, sentimental history and racism—all of this may be taken to motivate Orton's other remark: "A most foolish story which I fully intend to pinch at some time in the future" (Orton, *Diaries* 79-80).

Yet even as these clichés and their values were being pilloried by educated young satirists, a new television serial looked as if it might buck the trend, as if, indeed, it might re-state a number of the cherished truths that England told about itself. This serial, trundling from week to week, was set in an imaginary north-western town, peopled with characters drawn from an imagined urban working class. *Coronation Street* was first broadcast in December 1960. It quickly became popular with audiences, getting to top of the ratings by September 1961. From that point on *The Street* became something of a national institution. And, as such, it was a repository of particular assumptions about nation and society. Richard Dyer has noted that the values of *Coronation Street* tended to conform to those expressed in Richard Hoggart's influential book *The Uses of Literacy*: "the emphasis on common sense, the absence of work and politics, the stress on women and the strength of women, and the perspective of nostalgia" (4). As Marion Jordan put it, "the ethos is that of nostalgia for vanished virtues" (35). And the consequence is a form of conservatism: while the serial celebrates the strength of women it assumes their position is given and inevitable. So, too, the nostalgia "consigns any lingering class consciousness to something that, to all intents and purposes, is in the past" (Dyer 5). If it brought representation of the working class to television, this was a version of realism very different from the "angry" plays of the late 1950s with their images of youthful alienation. *Coronation Street* was a working-class urban landscape mediated not through politics and critique but through "common sense," gossip and personal relationships. Not so much gritty, perhaps, as *Woodchip*. It was realism under pressure from the sensationalism that aims to build and sustain viewing figures. Thus, famously, on 13 May 1964 one of the central female gossips, Martha Longhurst, died from a heart attack in her traditional place in the local pub. And the story-line moved out from the fictional serial to be taken up in news media coverage.

Martha died while, it seems, Orton was working on *Servant*. Lahr tells us that it was mainly finished in June 1964. There is no evidence,

however, that Orton watched *Coronation Street*. Certainly he did watch series such as *Dr Who* and, as we know, old films. And he read the letters pages of the *Radio Times* and *TV Times* where he found the English "equivalent of fascism" (Shepherd, *Because We're Queers* 147). He was also alert to what the press was talking about, and learnt its habitual language. But if he knew nothing of *Coronation Street* then we have to concede that he was independently writing something that played with some of its features. We've already noted the nostalgic looking backward. To this might be added the emphasis on women characters, with Mrs Vealfoy being a caricature of female "strength." The industrial work of the workplace is never shown but is instead replaced by "personal" scenes. And there is certainly no element of class consciousness. Within its world *Coronation Street* contained narratives of surprising returns, marital deceptions, sudden deaths. During the first two or three years a husband re-appears after 15 years, someone else returns after 50 years, a baby is stolen, Martha dies during a party in the pub. In a similar way the narrative of Edith's past, comically condensed, is replete with sudden revelations of death and birth: "This tablecloth belonged to the mother of our grandson. She left it me in her will." "Is she dead?" "She took her own life, poor dear" (63).

Quite apart from ethos, Orton was also careful about the mode and texture of *Servant*. It is positioned very precisely in relation to what has been called "Soap-Opera Realism" (Jordan 28). The opening image is of a corridor with closed doors from behind which come the sounds of typing and, faintly, a telephone. Edith, old, scrubs the floor. Buchanan, old, walks towards her, and us, and pauses, out of breath. The choice of characters and occupations, the orchestration of sounds, the perspective disciplined by the corridor, pulling us in: all are characteristic of the sort of penetration into real-life settings that TV drama seemed to offer, with its back-office activity in police stations and hospital wards. But, having set this up, the meeting of Edith and Buchanan slides into the texture of romantic fiction, with its tale of death by poisoned water. And Buchanan's appearance, too, must have

been slightly disconcerting—real, maybe, but not appropriately so. For Orton tells us that Donald Pleasance, as Buchanan, had adopted a “ghastly pair of false teeth. Quite macabre.” By contrast Hermione Baddeley as Edith was costumed in one of the overalls worn by the real canteen staff: “Very appropriate. Exactly right,” Orton notes. When he saw the completed recording, he was very pleased because “[i]t’s been directed and acted absolutely *real*.” And he notes that this had “astonishing results. H. Pinter says it’s like *The Battleship Potemkin*. I won’t go as far as this but it’s very good” (Orton, *Diaries* 75, 77, 78). Pinter’s admiration, even with its somewhat inscrutable analogy, suggests the territory we’re in. Like his own plays at that time it is recognisable both as a real world and yet something distilled, abstracted, from that world (Shepherd, *Cambridge Introduction*). Orton’s enthusiasm for accuracy of realism is combined with dialogue which tells of confused births and death in a peasant’s hut, a real canteen overall and macabre false teeth. It is realism that refuses to vouch for its trustworthiness.

While *Coronation Street* remained carefully trustworthy in terms of the coherence and conventions of its own world, its soap-opera realism is actually a mingling of social realism with other elements. Jordan notes the artily filmic linking devices, the caricatures of appearance and speech, and the use of comic patter. In the first episode in December 1960, Elsie Tanner confronts her son Dennis about being unemployed. He explains that employers always ask about “experience.” “Well you’ve got experience,” she says. “Not the right kind though” he replies (Nown 77). It’s a small step from this to Orton’s Ray. When Buchanan says his old firm would be delighted to employ him, Ray asks: “What about my outside interests?” (71). If we miss the possible innuendo about Dennis’s “experience,” it’s hard to avoid in the case of Ray’s “outside interests.” For Ray belongs with a series of young men that we now tend to see as typically “Ortonesque,”² often viewed either as Orton self-portraits or as images of the position in early 60s culture of male homosexuals in general. But as I have argued elsewhere (Shepherd, *Because We’re Queers*), it’s not only Orton who

created these figures. And what I haven't observed before is that they are there in *Coronation Street*. In 1961 the young Jed Stone returns to the street. He has been in a borstal, where he met Dennis Tanner. Both Jed and Dennis were conceived as a slightly dark criminal element in the narrative, but this quality was in practice sentimentalised. Dennis was always trying to make amends and found himself in some ridiculous situations (such as keeping seals in Annie Walker's bath); and Jed's criminality tended towards the handling of dodgy goods in the market. They are young men with criminal pasts who are not wholly integrated into family-centred society, yet they are at the same time engaging. It may be entirely coincidental that Orton later used one of their names for the pair of lads at the centre of *Loot* (1966).

So, while it cannot definitively be established that Orton was specifically parodying *Coronation Street*, it can be said with confidence that he was attacking the attitudes of a culture which made *Uses of Literacy* into a best-seller. These attitudes included an emphasis on common sense above class consciousness, a stress on the strength of women, moral panics about young people, a sentimentalised version of the working class, and an inclination towards nostalgia. It was *Coronation Street's* business—literally—to weave these attitudes into stories replete with emotional crisis. But it was doing so in a world that had also developed scepticism about moral panic, nostalgia and even community. From a satirist's point of view the capacity of any form straightforwardly to represent contemporary emotional crisis becomes problematic, even—or perhaps especially—where that form was tragedy.

3.

The problem was articulated eloquently even while Orton was between drafts of *Servant*. In 1966, in *Modern Tragedy*, Raymond Williams described a perceived gap between the use of the word "tragedy" to reference "a particular kind of dramatic art," and the same word used to describe everyday experiences of disaster and loss. In

relation to the double usage he asks: "what actual relations are we to see and live by, between the tradition of tragedy and the kinds of experience, in our own time, that we ordinarily and perhaps mistakenly call tragic?" His book seeks to answer the question by showing how the meanings of tragedy have shifted across different cultures. He notes, for example, that "in our century" a particular, and simplified, association of tragedy and death has been established: "What is generalised is the loneliness of man, facing a blind fate, and this is the fundamental isolation of the tragic hero." This model of tragedy is that used by Orton for Buchanan. But of this sort of emphasis Williams says: "what seems to me most significant about the current isolation of death, is not what it has to say about tragedy or about dying, but what it is saying, through this, about loneliness and the loss of human connection" (Williams 14-15, 57, 58). We shall return to that observation later, but for now we have to note how it highlights the specificity of Orton's choices in handling Buchanan.

He is made comical, we know, as a loyal subject of the firm who has absorbed its values about work and family. This status is more brutally reduced in the non-verbal activity scripted for him. He is seen standing in a lunch queue, carrying his retirement gifts, ignored by all around him; taking off and handing in his uniform, revealed as "shrunk and insignificant" (62); being led to a chair after one of his gifts has exploded, hunching and coughing; waking in the morning and given his glasses and then hearing aid, his artificial arm on a table nearby; smashing the gifts given to him by the firm. These gifts have become images for Buchanan himself. Apparently valuable objects, they are badly made and cheap and break easily. These join those other objects more intimately associated with Buchanan, his glasses, hearing aid and artificial arm. With his presence comprised of a gathering of objects, he seems himself to be—always was, perhaps—a sort of physical object of limited functionality. In that the faulty toaster joins the artificial arm as an image of Buchanan's incapacity, we have to note a tendency in Orton's writing here to see physical disability as negative, reductive of the human being. Later generations have learnt

to repudiate that sort of thinking. But this wrongheadedness on Orton's part seems to be produced by a desire to make a critique of "the firm." Buchanan, its ideological subject, spouting its values, thinks of himself initially as important and fulfilled. Orton's tragic sequence works to show, instead, an actual physical dependence and vulnerability, and, going further, the sort of objecthood that comes from being absorbed into the firm.

That choice of characterisation may be informed and driven by contemporary assumptions about the effects on the individual of corporate organisations or capitalism in general. A generalised sense that human energy and imagination were repressed by dominant structures led to the late 1950s rhetoric about the need to rediscover "life," to celebrate what is "vital" (cf. Rebellato). This critique was theoretically sharpened and de-sentimentalised by the Marxist Herbert Marcuse, who in 1964 observed that "in the most advanced areas of this civilisation, the social controls have been introjected to the point where even individual protest is affected at its roots. The intellectual refusal 'to go along' appears neurotic and impotent" (Marcuse 12). In the viewpoint of *Servant*, unlike the "vitality" expressive heroes of the late 1950s, there is no position outside repression. With grim inevitability Ray, the young man literally and morally outside employment and family structure, gets drawn into the network of the firm through having made one of his partners pregnant. Debbie, the partner, becomes the mechanism for taming Ray. He will then remain inside the firm, it is implied, until he too becomes like Buchanan an object-human.

Now in most tragic sequences this focus on repression might be followed by something else. In his attempt to define common elements within the cultural variants of tragedy, Williams notes "the creation of order is directly related to the fact of disorder, through which the action moves." Although "the nature of tragic disorder" may vary, at different moments, the relationship between disorder and order persists (Williams 52). Now if disorder in *Servant* is shown as Buchanan's personal crisis, Orton's handling of it works to reduce a sense of his

full humanity. It is disorder somewhat evacuated. The reason for that, I suspect, is that Orton's text is more interested in, or fixated on, the imposition of order. As important to the play as Buchanan is Mrs Vealfoy. She is not, significantly, the firm's chief executive but its "personnel lady," the manager who oversees what we now call—ha ha—Human Resources. As such, she seems to run everything. "Should your private life be involved," she tells Buchanan "we shall be the first to inform you of the fact" (57). While we never know what products the firm makes, we have a very good sense that it produces people's lives. The first scene between Mrs Vealfoy and Debbie begins with Mrs Vealfoy at her desk. After inviting Debbie in she asks what her department is and goes to the filing cabinet. She then asks Debbie's name. Mrs Vealfoy returns with a file, sits at her desk and then smiles at Debbie: "How can I help you?" Debbie breaks down and Mrs Vealfoy asks "*(quietly and with compassion)* Are you having a baby?" She puts her arm round Debbie's shoulder as Debbie weeps. Then Mrs Vealfoy learns that Debbie barely knows the man: "Well, you must get to know him. Try to win his confidence. Has he any hobbies to which he is particularly attached?" (59-61). Note the three phases: first, the bureaucratic manner that asks for the department before the name, and only relates to the person once their file is retrieved; next, the directness of manner, both verbal and physical, with the arm round Debbie; last, a return to clearer comic tone as Debbie is manipulated to pursue Ray, with Mrs Vealfoy revealing the ignorance of her class and age in assuming that men like Ray have "hobbies." The second scene with Debbie is more straightforward. Mrs Vealfoy smiles again—she does remorseless smiling throughout the play—but the main activity of the scene is Debbie signing forms in relation to the birth. Forms cross the desk to Debbie, then return to Mrs Vealfoy. Later her distribution of paper, in the form of leaflets about the firm, arrives in Edith's house and gets to Ray's bedroom. Ray will follow their route back to Mrs Vealfoy.

When we see Mrs Vealfoy on her own she is "speaking to a recording machine," dictating memos about use of the staff lifts and the

firm's newly formed staff club for which the condition of membership is that people "must be old, lonely and ex-members of the firm." She communicates with her secretary via intercom and, before Debbie comes in, "[s]he turns to the mirror and puts on her hat" (76). The composing of her physical demeanour, the proliferation of smiles, the communication through electronic devices, the circulation of objects: all these are part of a process whereby Mrs Vealfoy doesn't simply generate material stuff but also gathers people in, such as Ray, and never lets them leave. Her new mechanism is a club for ex-employees. The closing sequence of the play illustrates her effect. It is the firm's dance, a band is playing. Mrs Vealfoy invites the employees to ask the Directors for a dance. The band plays softly while she announces George Buchanan's death, and then the dancing recommences. The band plays "On the Sunny Side of the Street," dancers fill the floor and everyone who isn't dancing sings along, including the directors and Mrs Vealfoy. In terms of a tragic sequence this might be seen as restoration of order and reintegration of community. But in structural and thematic terms it is less connected with Buchanan than it is with the project of Mrs Vealfoy. These are not just images of festivity, they are evidence of the gathering in of people. The screen is literally filled with dancing and singing, a staging of fullness.

The dramaturgic importance of Mrs Vealfoy is that she is a vehicle for the anger against repression. In the closing sequences it is suggested that the repression works in part through the construction of pleasures. While for the audience the actual fun comes from spotting double meanings and innuendo, the images of fullness here are to do with compulsory ideological and physical inclusion, the absence of doubleness, everyone singing the same song. This is not something in which the audience shares. The result is that the firm, and Mrs Vealfoy in particular, are most dislikeable, not perhaps because they repress and make lives miserable, but because they produce fullness and apparent joy.

The most savage version of this effect of the firm is the scene set in the new club for ex-employees. People in wheelchairs, blind, with

dementia sing around a piano in “[w]eary, apathetic voices” (81). Buchanan is compelled to talk to another old man. A woman falls over and is then carried off on a stretcher. Mrs Vealfoy organises and patronises everyone, laughing merrily. And it ends with more compulsory group singing. Savage as it is, though, this version of the firm’s efficacy is perhaps less subtle than the closing scenes. For the club clearly shows alienated people being compelled into mirth. The death is marked but obscured from view so that the remorseless mirth may roll on unopposed. What is staged is explicit compulsion. In the closing images of the firm’s dance, by contrast, there is apparently willing acquiescence in organised jollity. In that nobody registers alienation this is a much more effective exercise of power through mirth.

The idea of repression operating through provision of apparent pleasures is as old as the hills, or at least the hills of Rome, where the ancient rulers offered the populace bread and circuses. It was restated in the mid 1970s by Michel Foucault when he argued that what enables power to be accepted, and thus what makes it work, is that “it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse” (Foucault 119). Part of the effectiveness is to do with gathering people into the discourse, an operation often simplified when satiric treatments of bread and circuses enable the audience to be comfortably distanced from what is going on. In his rather careful handling of Mrs Vealfoy, an image perhaps of “non-sovereign”—corporate—“disciplinary power” (Foucault 105), Orton makes life a little more difficult for the audience in that, in her dealings with Debbie, she is figured as a somewhat enabling rather than repressive presence, one who speaks with compassion, even while she locks both Debbie, and through her Ray, into a discursive coherence. Mrs Vealfoy is a device for making things orderly. That orderliness works through pleasure: this proposition might in turn explain why tragedy is felt to have limited potential. If the model assumes that tragedy is focussed on the individual, concerned with suffering rather than pleasure, unaware that the return to order is itself precisely the problem, then as a form it may seem insufficient to engage, and too close

to, a value system packaged and sold for mass enjoyment in the form of regularly recurring individual crises. Orton's version of modern tragedy is tragedy made banal by modernity.

4.

But a concept of pleasure as repression does more theatrically than upstage tragedy. It has impact on the stage significance of festivity. Orton's group festivity is rather unusual in the context of 1960s drama. In 1963 John Arden's *Workhouse Donkey* had a scene of an art exhibition organised by the Conservative town council being disrupted by a form of carnival, with protestors entering the auditorium and fighting in the aisles. At the other end of the 1960s, after Orton was dead, the American musical *Hair* (which opened in London in autumn 1968) ended with a scene where the audience was invited to come up onto the stage and dance. Also in 1968, Ed Berman's *Nudist Campers* ended with the audience being invited to move into the playing space and take their clothes off. All these are instances of theatre being used as a mechanism for pushing back against repression. They aim to take the audience into a new space where assumed norms no longer obtain, where their bodies can experience something different from learnt everyday behaviours. Theatre makes the claim to offer emotional and bodily pleasure as an alternative to a dominant power which works through repressive discipline. By contrast, Orton's version, admittedly for television rather than theatre, has pleasure as itself a disciplinary operation of the dominant.

He re-stated this theme in *The Erpingham Camp* (broadcast 1966), a play about a holiday camp run by a militantly moralistic owner with power-crazed ambitions, and modelled on a specific classical text, *The Bacchae*. Erpingham uses entertainments to keep the holiday makers under control; they revolt nevertheless, but return at the end to submissiveness, cowed and penitent in response to the ritual of Erpingham's funeral. Despite the interest in the use of entertainment and ritual, however, this play centres on a maniacal sovereign ruler for

whom these are clearly repressive devices. Orton's wishes for the production style clarify what his target was. He wanted it done as the Royal Shakespeare Company did Shakespeare's histories. As I say elsewhere (Shepherd, *Because We're Queers* 147), he probably had in mind the nationalistic occasion of the 1964 celebration of Shakespeare's birth. The target in *Erpingham* is nationalism, and the play uses cod epic effects to send up nationalist attitudes. By contrast, *Servant* is instead locked into local and low-key incidents, and its texture refuses over-the-top effects just as it refuses the style and panache of staged epigram. Orton seemed to want to make things more complicated than the satire movement produced: he thought the American parody *Macbird* "juvenile" and "undergraduate" (*Diaries* 137). So he mingles a tragic sequence with a satiric comedy, all operating within and against the social world and languages of TV realism. This produces a play which draws new sorts of writing from Orton, addresses new targets, is tonally complex, indeed sometimes undecidable, and shuffles different quoted modes in a way which would later be known as postmodern. But there is also another consequence.

An attack on TV realism fits with Orton's views of dominant culture. We know he was conscious of, and angry about, the effects on gay men of heterosexual society. So too we know he had an interest in, and mocked, the discourses of popular journalism. His spoof letters to newspapers, as Edna Welthorpe among others, tested the capacity of newspapers, and their readers, to take ridiculous positions seriously. But his opposition becomes more complex when he chooses to satirise the social values associated with *Uses of Literacy* and their expression in mass culture, for these values are disseminated by corporate mechanisms that are designed to generate pleasure. It's not just corporate dances but mass pleasure itself that becomes a target.

If the attack is against such engines of mass pleasure as TV entertainment, then these are something bigger than any one agent. Thus, when Charney quotes Shepherd's opinion from 1989 that Mrs Vealfoy was "a horrific prophecy of Margaret Thatcher" (145), I am not sure now that this is right. Shepherd was perhaps too tied up in the mind-

set of a Britain run by Thatcher's government. Given the analysis I've tried to make here, Mrs Vealfoy falls into place as a prophecy of something different—not a single repressive figure but a machine for organising pleasures, for defusing satire and depoliticising audiences, the machine that is *X Factor*, *Strictly Come Dancing*, endless shows about things you can't quite buy, repeated adventures in making over and making good. Mrs Vealfoy is less a person than a vision of a system that maintains itself through pleasure.

And the pervasiveness of that system may be remarked in the fact that Orton himself, despite his personal feelings, was not outside it. His play seems already penetrated by the domination of the thing he resisted. Williams suggests that through ideas of tragedy, "the shape and set of a particular culture is often deeply realised" (Williams 45). We have seen that in *Servant* tragedy is ambivalently rendered, tonally unreliable, framed by what is around it. A traditional role of the tragic hero, to enter conflict with the dominant, becomes, in the loyal servant George, evacuated, showing simply, in Williams's formula, loss of human connection. So too the notion of mass festivity as route to liberation is closed off. The stage's capacity both to enact tragic challenge and to offer liberatory mass pleasure is forestalled. In its angry reflections on repression and power, *Servant*, perhaps despite itself, has already assumed that there can be no coherent challenge to the dominant. Its handling of tragedy may then, following Williams, be read as an early symptom of a cultural development which saw the spread both of mass entertainment and of postmodern pessimism.

University of London

NOTES

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²Cf. Sheperd, *Because We're Queers*; and Zarhy-Levo.

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