

## THE FOPS OF THE RESTORATION COMEDY

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### ABSTRACT

*Fops may have represented the social milieu and individual virtue during the restoration period under the reign of Charles II, but they are still relevant in the centuries that followed the new literary tradition. Critics have portrayed fops in various hues; some have described them as fools as well. But Mark D. Engsberg's analysis that "Fops are easier to describe than to define" opens up verities of interpretations and suggests that this is due to their extensive collection of attributes. However, Heilman postulates that the fop could be "virtually anybody", depending on, what he terms, the "animus" of either the speaker or the playwright. Satire on fops during the Restoration and eighteenth century was influenced by a plethora of social concerns and individual behaviours that covered issues of the period like moral evils of vanity which was precipitated by nationalistic worry over being swayed by foreign ideals and class-tensions peculiar to that period. The representation of foppery on stage during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was intrinsically affected by changing English attitudes toward foppery itself and also by deeper shifts in attitude.*

Comedy makes daily life livable in spite of folly and disillusion, but its vision, though as universal, is not that of tragedy, for it laughs at the spirit as much as at the flesh, and will not take sides. Restoration Comedy reflects the ideal social world of Courtly Wits of the reign of Charles II; its relation to the spirit of the age is thus easily discernable, even though the literary form, once established, developed a momentum of its own which carried it considerably beyond the limits of the age and the class that produced it. One of the striking features of Restoration Comedy is the presence of the fop. Fop is all about the dichotomy between the inward and outward and there is incoherence between the two.

Literary critics have often taken a lugubrious tone toward the fop. Fops, we are told, are legitimate object of ridicule because they are vain, selfish, narcissistic and indifferent to the welfare of others. But in actuality, foppery is an historical phenomenon, not simply a theatrical convention. The representation of foppery on stage during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is significantly affected by changing English attitudes toward foppery itself and also by deeper shifts in attitude about what ideal masculine behaviour should be.

Restoration Comedy is crammed full of fops. For instance, Shadwell's Woodcock, Brisk and Trim; Wycherley's Dapperwit and Monsiuer de Paris; Crowne's Sir Courtley Nice; Congreve's Brisk and Lord Froth; Cibber's Sir Novelty Fashion; Van Brugh's Lord Foppington; Garrick's Modern Fine Gentleman; Edward Moore's Faddle; Hannah's Cowley's Flutter and many others.

**Who exactly are fops?** As the Oxford English Dictionary says, a fop is **"one who is foolishly attentive to and vain of his appearance, dress or manners; a dandy, an exquisite"**. Relatively more has been written on the attributes and characteristics of the fop. Mark D. Engsberg puts forth that **"Fops are easier to describe than to define"** and suggests that this is due to their extensive collection of attributes. Heilman, in turn, emphasises two interesting points. Firstly, that, "since fop is a rather rare word in our day, we easily forget that its original meaning was 'fool' ". Only in the 1670s did the word acquire the connotation of a fashionable butt of jokes. Secondly, Heilman postulates that the fop could be "virtually anybody", depending on, what he terms, the "animus" of either the speaker or the playwright. The fop is a clearly defined entity within a play and, although other characters might temporarily be the butt of jokes, more elaborate ruses mainly focus around him.

Fashionability is an essential element of the fop. Blaser proposes that "the most obvious characteristic of a fop is their penchant for excess" and she quotes Rosenthal who characterises the fop as being in possession of "a giant wig, too much lace, exaggerated gestures [and] copious theatricality". All these physical attributes, instead of increasing the fashionability of the fop, render him ridiculous. With regard to the attitude of the fop, Engsberg quotes Samuel Johnson's 1755 definition of the fop. Johnson claimed that the fop was "[a] pretender; a man fond of show, dress, and flutter, an impertinent. In this definition, Johnson refers to Sir Fopling Flutter by utilising Sir Fopling's last name as a characteristic, a possible indication of the importance and popularity of *The Man of Mode*.

Two further visions must still be mentioned. Firstly, Wilkinson states that fops are notoriously naïve or lacking the “discipline of suspicion”. They are seldom frustrated or angry since, most of the time, they hardly realise that they are the butt of a joke. This also contributes to the general conception that fops are friendly at heart, not as heartless as the rake and far removed from the hurtfulness of a character such as Medley. Secondly, Jocelyn Powell argues that the fop’s “equipage” is an extension of himself and that his servants act as instruments of self-fashioning. This fact can clearly be observed in Act III, Scene III of *The Man of Mode* when Sir Fopling renames a servant from Trott to Hampshire, fashioning him to better express the fop’s taste. Ironically, Hampshire is associated with the dullness of the countryside by every witty character, both confirming Sir Fopling’s status as a non-wit and turning him into the focal point of ridicule yet again.

One should take into account Williams’ division of fops into two groups: the rejected fop whose eccentricities transform him into a “scapegoat figure” and the “tolerated fop” who is granted entry in fashionable society (“Men of Mode”). While clearly possessing characteristics of both groups, Williams categorises Sir Fopling as a tolerated fop on account of his presence in fashionable society and the parties at Lady Townley’s house. The main difference between these two groups is that, according to Williams, the tolerated fop is not just the object of ridicule, but “the conflicting images of social form and customs his presence generates” (“Men of Mode”) increases the overall cultural value of the play. The tolerated fop acts as a mirror to society. His exaggerated manners and out of the ordinary fashion provide a negative example for others.

Performativity in relation to the characterisation of the fop in Restoration theatre is important. In her essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”, Judith Butler famously discussed the Performativity of gender. In *The Man of Mode*, the fop’s gender is a construct consisting of a combination of his clothes and actions, both of which reflect femininity and masculinity at the same time. Sir Fopling has certain feminine characteristics and identifies with the women in the play while attempting to impress the men, but at the same time seeks admittance to the group of witty males who pursue women. Fops are in various ways effeminate they are rarely presented as homosexual. On the contrary, they are asexual who like to spend time with the ladies.

The fop is a free man, but is bound to certain expectations in dress and manner. He performs the part that he has chosen to play and very little room is left for improvisation. The fop’s clothes set him apart from the audience and from the wit characters, but these two groups do not differ from the fop to the same degree. For the aristocracy, middle class copying resulted in the necessity to change the definition of “fashionable” regularly, something that agreed perfectly with the culture of excess which they had adopted. This sheds new light on the relevance of the theatre, not only as meeting place and pinnacle of culture, but as a bridge crossing classes and providing the middle class with information about fashion that they would otherwise have little access to. With the introduction and popularisation of the fop and rake in Restoration comedy, the culture of excess in fashion became available to all. Generally, the fop lead by negative example, proving how superfluity, if such a term can apply to the Restoration culture, can make one ridiculous while attempting to be fashionable.

A mention of mirror is relevant in relation to the fop. For instance, in Act IV, Scene II where Sir Fopling asks Dorimant “why [he] hast not [...] a glass hung up here”, adding that “a room is the dullest thing without one!”. This instance already reveals one of the primary functions the mirror fulfils in the eyes of the fop: entertainment. Although Sir Fopling is in the presence of two men he values highly, both for their sense of dress and wit, he is still inclined to search for diversion in a reflection of himself. The fop’s search for a mirror could be interpreted as his attempt to compare his own appearance to that of the other men, as an egocentric action enabling him to become the centre of attention once more or to affirm his self proclaimed aesthetic superiority. Sir Fopling proposes that it is convenient when one is alone, as “[in] a glass a man may entertain himself”. This statement is followed by a long pause, indicating that the playwright was aware of the sexual innuendo of the sentence and reveals the untruthfulness of images and shallowness of the fop. Sarah Grace Marsh claims that Sir Fopling’s “satisfaction in the ‘shadow’ surface reflection of things” is what makes him a fop.

These interpretations reveal the close relation between the fop and the mirror. The fop utilises the mirror to reassure himself of his own beauty and to allow him to adjust his appearance at all times. This constant use of the mirror was seen as a prototypically and caricaturally female occupation during the Restoration. The relation between female beauty and the mirror is also useful in this context. On the one hand, the fop possesses various feminine characteristics, both in appearance and attitude. He is aware of fashion and

gossip, refrains from fighting and spends most of his time in the company of women. On the other hand, his appearance resembles that of a woman so that the entertainment acquires a new dimension. Since the fop's clothes and movements lean towards the feminine, the object of his desire, they allow him to take pleasure in a shadow of the female beauty instead of simply enjoying the beauty of the self as reflected in the mirror, a typical act of homoerotic desire. Linked to this is the obvious vanity of the fop. He believes himself to be perfection in every way, as a conversational partner, as a fashionable man, but also as a woman. Additionally, the mirror represents a dream image to the fop. The mirror represents his ultimate desire, a being consisting solely of an exterior; an empty, but ornate, shell.

Similar to the mirror, the use of "glass" is situated in the realm of the optical. Like the magnifying glass, the fop distorts and attempts to highlight natural beauty. The fop and the magnifying glass both attempt to magnify life in one way or the other. They pertain to the same culture of luxury. The fop required a substantial amount of money to appear fashionable and to be able to change his clothes and accessories whenever fashion changed. The magnifying glass was one of the luxury items at the fop's disposal. It needed to be crafted with special care and skill in order to create a lens able to magnify evenly. Furthermore, Sarah Grace Marsh suggests that the play itself could be seen as a microscope or magnifying glass. Her argument is that the play exaggerates the faults of society and investigates the vices to ridicule them.

An interesting occurrence of a fan in the play can be found in Act V, Scene I where Dorimant reprimands Loveit for spending time with fops. Most importantly, he tells her that Sir Fopling had been "Playing with [her] fan", indicating how improper it was for a man to handle a fan.

The action does reveal the double meaning of the fan. While one could suggest that, by taking the fan from the woman, Sir Fopling robs her of her defence, the defensive properties of the fan are also projected on the fop and the woman is no longer in need of defence. The coyness which is characteristic of the women and embodied by the fan also applies to Sir Fopling.

While it is true that, in an attempt to express his individuality, Sir Fopling wears the hair of several other individuals, on a more profound level he shows himself to be a slave to the market and the whims of fashion. The wig proves that he follows the opinions and taste of a select group of people. In Festa's words, "[t]he wig ceases to be the sign of masculine autonomy and becomes instead a declaration of one's subjection to fashion and of one's overvaluation of mere things". This evolution is clearly visible in Sir Fopling, who wears a wig because it is fashionable; Etherege once again questions the internal content of the fop by having Sir Fopling attempt to focus all conversational attention on his attire rather than on his personality. Perhaps, once every layer of clothing is peeled away from the fop, nothing of interest remains, a thought that would explain why Sir Fopling never engages in any sexual acts or true commitment.

Fops were advocates of non violence. Indeed, the invincible good nature and complaisance of most fops even in the plays where they are quite roughly handled, is perhaps their most endearing quality. After having been bound hand and foot and locked in the filthy dog's kennel, emerging to find his younger brother married to Miss Hoyden, Lord Foppington had no violent desire of revenge.

Restoration comedy has a different relationship to the text than its Elizabethan predecessor. Wit, or performative utterances, determined the value of a theatrical character in plays before the Restoration. In contrast, while speech was still considered the primary condition of being allowed into the group of wit characters, a new, economic factor came into play during the Restoration. Wealth allowed people to acquire material objects indicating their worth without speech which led to attempts to acquire membership to the wit group via material attributes instead of wit. This shift required the exhibition of these material attributes on stage, as without the visual component, the partial admittance of Sir Fopling into the cultural centre of society seems effortless, downplaying the exclusivity of the group. One has to remember that it was exactly this group who wrote the plays and intended to distinguish themselves from other social classes. The apparent admittance of one without wit or wealth would devalue the group and the image of its members, and reveal to the audience that neither wit nor wealth would be necessary to be accepted. To avoid the loss of prestige of the group, the fop was luxuriously dressed, thereby complying with one of the necessary characteristics.

Although the fop is being mocked, one must remember that Etherege is holding up to society, the French fashion and Restoration court is equally being mocked. While a proportion of society was struggling to attain sufficient food for survival, the elite spent money on replacement hair that they kept perfectly

groomed with flour at all time. It is, therefore, imperative to discuss the ambiguity of the fop's motivation. One possibility is that the fop's ultimate enjoyment and goal in life is conversational attention, while sexual attraction is the instrument he employs to attain his goal. The fop utilises the instruments of seduction in order to become the conversational topic, while simultaneously educating those around him on the possibilities of fashion.

Satire on fops during the Restoration and eighteenth century was prompted by wide varieties of motives ranging from concern over the moral evils of vanity through nationalistic worry over being inundated by foreign ideals and foreign goods to specific class tensions peculiar to the period. We will continue to laugh at the fops in comedy, but when we do so let us now and then recall that even Socrates could be made to seem absurd by a talented reactionary satirist, and that like Socrates, the fops in their behaviour more than in their dress were early champions of new values. The technique applied through the fops may be regarded as an early attempt (though imperfect) at the refinement, civility and sensitivity most of us would now say are desirable masculine virtues.

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**Failure is success if we learn from it.**

**~ Malcolm Forbes**