

STOLEN THUNDER : THE ADAPTATIONS OF JOHN DENNIS

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THE ADAPTATIONS OF JOHN DENNIS

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## Abstract

Although he has always been a controversial figure, John Dennis has recently gained credibility as a critical thinker. As a dramatist, however, he has few proponents; his eight plays were unsuccessful and have not been regarded with much interest since their first appearance in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This thesis removes the dust from his three adaptations, *Iphigenia*, *The Comical Gallant* and *The Invader of His Country*, and looks at how the plays correspond to his dramatic principles.

All three of the pieces are clearly designed to support Dennis's critical ideas, but in each case there are inconsistencies between the theory and practice which contradict his thinking. Chapter one compares *Iphigenia* with a popular pseudo-classic tragedy of the period, *Cato*, to see how Dennis's criticisms of Addison's work compare to his own attempt at the style. In chapter two, I concentrate on the reasons behind the adaptations of Shakespeare's comedies, and specifically Dennis's justification for turning *The Merry Wives of Windsor* into *The Comical Gallant*. Chapter three deals with the arguments against Shakespeare's tragedies during Dennis's age, and examines the critic's conviction that *The Invader of his Country* improves upon *Coriolanus*. In each chapter the adaptations are analysed in comparison to the originals, with emphasis placed on the most striking alterations.

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## Table of Contents

Introduction . . . . .	1
Chapter I. <i>Cato and Iphigenia</i> . . . . .	11
Chapter II. <i>The Comical Gallant</i> . . . . .	36
Chapter III. <i>The Invader of His Country</i> . . . . .	58
Conclusion . . . . .	81
Works Cited and Consulted . . . . .	84

## Introduction

"It is always with something of a feeling of boredom that one approaches the discussion of a play by John Dennis". This sentiment was uttered by George Odell in his work *Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving* in 1920, and although it is specifically directed at Dennis's adaptations, the comment expresses a popular attitude in general towards the critic which prevailed until very recently. Even after H. G. Paul's extensive analysis of Dennis in 1911, many scholars retained the old prejudices which Pope had developed through his satires and battles against his determined adversary. The gradual acceptance of Dennis as a worthwhile literary figure did not come about until Edward Niles Hooker's comprehensive notations on his critical works in 1939. Hooker's well-documented source dispells many of the earlier myths about Dennis as a critic, and helps establish his thinking as an important force in the literary theories of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As a playwright, however, Dennis has few enthusiastic followers. He wrote five original plays and three adaptations during his career as a writer, and only one of these could be said to have been successful. Generally, a play by Dennis is studied only with regards to the lengthy preface, essay or defence which the critic affixed to the printed edition; the interest lies in how his dramatic theories comply with his practice.

My focus in this thesis is on the three adaptations and the reasons why Dennis felt compelled to revise the originals. I could think of no better way to examine the collision of his theory and practice, than to look at what

Dennis changed in other playwrights' work. His own *Iphigenia* is not merely an imitation of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*, but is intended as a model for other English dramatists who were beginning to move away from the rules which he considered fundamental to tragedy. In his adaptations of Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, re-named *The Comical Gallant, or The Amours of Sir John Falstaff*, and *Coriolanus*, entitled, *The Invader of His Country, or The Fatal Resentment*, we can see Dennis fighting against the "undisciplined" works of the earlier age, and asserting the rigid formulæ of his own era. In all his adaptations, he was careful to strengthen the moral lesson and re-adjust the characters if they did not obviously help establish that lesson. What becomes immediately noticeable in a study of this kind is that Dennis is not always consistent in the practise of his theories. This is not a surprising fact, because he tended to adjust and even contradict his own ideas in his critical writing as well. He appears to have strong convictions, but an examination of his plays illuminates apparent inconsistencies which he rarely acknowledges.

Although the practice of adapting plays was popular in Dennis's day, none of his own adaptations was successful. That in itself is not proof of the plays' worth, however. Like all playwrights of his time, Dennis had to contend with the changing tastes of the public and the unpredictable swings in popularity of Whig or Tory sentiment. Being himself a strong Whig supporter, Dennis was always in danger of offending, and so being attacked by, the Tory party members. In order to put the three adaptations in context, I should briefly outline the production histories of his five original plays. Such an exercise will also acquaint the reader with the prevailing



attitude towards Dennis in his own day, and will give an overview of the type of plays the critic introduced to the stage.

*A Plot and no Plot*, a comedy, was the first of Dennis's plays to go up in Drury Lane in April or May of 1697, four years after the publication of his first critical work, *The Impartial Critic*. Like all of his plays, it is political, and its intention was to "ridicule the credulity and principles of the Jacobites," according to Theophilis Cibber in his *Lives of the Poets* (vol. vi, 230). This attack on the Jacobites, though coming close on the heels of the Assassination Plot the year before, would likely not have met with universal enthusiasm (Johnson, ix). Such a Whig-bias might have been enough to raise the ire of Tory supporters. The crowds were small, according to Dennis's own account in his advertisement, but he blames this on the "advanced Season, and the extremity of the heat" (Johnson<sup>1</sup>), insisting that the assembly would have been better in the winter. This was a false hope; the play was mounted again in the winter, but the attendance was still minimal.

Response to the play was varied. In *A Comparison Between the Two Stages*, the characters comment that overall the play did fairly well, but was "laboriously Writ, as everything of his is", and they then take a personal jab at Dennis with the line, "There's an Air of Formality in the Play agreeable to the slovenly Air in his Behaviour"(17-18). The plot and action of this comedy, as in most of Dennis's plays, are its best features; I found it engaging to read. The character of Frowzy played by the comic actor William Bullock could also have been entertaining. Unlike many of its

<sup>1</sup>The pages of Johnson's text are not numbered consecutively and the prefaces to each of the plays are not numbered at all. Aside from Johnson's introduction, which is paginated with roman numerals, all reprinted plays remain numbered as they were in the original editions. The page references given in my work will reflect this diversity.

successors, the play ran for several nights and Dennis states in his preface, "as long as I have known the Play-house, I never saw the Company there in better humour" (*London Stage*, 472). Skeptics might question Dennis's account; he was prone to embellishment when supporting the cause of his own work, but it is likely that the play found some success. The author of Dennis's *Life* in 1734 states, "This Comedy is so diverting, that it is very surprising that none of the wise Managers of the Stage have never thought it worth reviveing. . ." (19–20). It was revived in April 1746 in response to the 1745 Jacobite upheaval, but the production failed and was quickly withdrawn (Murphy, 68). The question one might ask is whether Dennis's comedy was any worse than the rest of the mediocre work being written at the close of the seventeenth century, and whether other influences beyond the play's insignificance contributed to its poor reception. The new plays at this time were mostly bad, and much of the drama in the two houses was made up of revivals of earlier plays or adaptations of popular work from Shakespeare or Beaumont and Fletcher.

Dennis's second play, *Rinaldo and Armida*, a dramatic opera taken from a story by Tasso, was produced in November, 1698 at Lincoln's Inn Fields. With Betterton leading the cast as Rinaldo, and Elizabeth Barry playing his Armida, the production was given a good start. Barry, in a letter to a friend, commented that in the midst of a terrible winter season, Dennis's play "had pretty good success" (*L.S.*, 505). Dr. William Aglionby, in his letter to Matthew Prior, calls Dennis "a poor poet who has made us a fine entertainment of *Rinaldo and Armida*" (Hooker II<sup>1</sup>, 489), and Savage,

<sup>1</sup>The two volumes of Hooker's *Critical Works of John Dennis* are the primary texts for this thesis and will be referred to hereafter simply by volume and page number.

a character in *Reflections on the Stage*, 1699, says of the play, "I have seen it 3 or 4 times already, but the Musick is so fine, and the play pleases me so well, that I should not think it a burthen [to see it again]" (L.S., 506). One would think from these accolades that the play was a hit, but most accounts suggest that though it created somewhat of a sensation, theatre-goers soon lost interest and it was withdrawn after a few nights (Paul, 25). The main reason for the stir seems to be the fact that an opera had never yet been performed at the Theatre Royal, and this novelty was enough to assure a limited interest. The play itself is a heavy-handed "Unities tragedy" (Johnson, x) with much ranting and raving; it was likely only the music and superior acting which held the audience. The fact that Dennis had even chosen to write an opera conflicts with his critical ideals. In his *Essay on the Operas* in 1706, he penned his opposition to the "effeminate" nature of Italian opera, and although *Rinaldo and Armida* is more moderate as a "dramatic" opera, writing it must still have represented a compromise in Dennis's rigid principles.

Two of the adaptations, *Iphigenia* and *The Comical Gallant* followed in 1699 and 1702, and their histories will be described at length in the chapters pertaining to them. On February 24, 1704 at Lincoln's Inn Fields, Dennis's second tragedy, *Liberty Asserted* opened to become his only real success. It ran for ten nights and was revived in 1707 and 1746. The story takes place in Canada and deals with England's battles against the French and the Indians. It is interesting that although this was his most popular play, no one claims it to be his best. The play was merely "devised to catch the temper of the hour"(Nicolli, 86) in its patriotic condemnation of the French, but it is badly written. In this, as in most of his plays, Dennis's

whiggish sentiment is strong, although he insists in his preface that "this was not a Whig but an English Play".

Confident after his first real taste of popularity, Dennis produced another play in February of the following year at Drury Lane. The comedy, *Gibraltar, or The Spanish Adventure*, was a dismal failure. Although there were alterations after the first night, it could not be saved and so was withdrawn after the second. Dennis explains the failure in his preface:

This play was so unfortunate as to find the Town out of Humor with it, whether it proceeded from the calamities which attended the Rehearsal, which were so numerous as had never befallen a play in my memory, or from the Malice of strange Prejudices with which many came prepossess'd. The first day it was well acted in most of its Parts, but was not suffer'd to be heard. The second day it was faintly and negligently acted and consequently was not seen. . . (Paul, 43)

Dennis does not seem to accept any responsibility for the play's poor reception, but he was not unaware of its weaknesses. He neglected to include it in his *Collected Works* or in an account of his life which he sent to Giles Jacobs for the *Poetical Register*. According to an anecdote in *A Critical Specimen* (1715), (which has been attributed to Pope), *Gibraltar* fared worse than most plays; the actors were "almost pelted to death with Apples and Orange-Peel" (Nicoll, 16). Nicoll softens the blow by explaining that in the on-going battle between Whig and Tory supporters, "little consideration seems to have been paid as to whether a particular author deserved such a reception".

*Appius and Virginia*, a tragedy taken from Livy, opened on February 5, 1709 at Drury Lane, with a strong cast including Thomas Betterton, Smith and Wilks, all popular tragedians of the day. Of all his tragedies, I found this one the most moving, especially in the exchanges between the two title characters. Cibber notes that Maynwaring called the play "one of our best

modern tragedies"(233). It was ultimately unsuccessful, however, being withdrawn from the stage after only four nights, but Paul reminds us that it "must have attained a certain popularity, or the shrewd Bernard Lintot would never have given £21 s.10 for it, which is the highest price Dennis is known to have received for any of his writings"(45n). In their attacks, his critics focus only on the "loud style" (Murphy, 83), ignoring a worthy moral and convincing characterizations, Dennis's strong points. John Gay's *The Mohocks* is a good example of the ridicule the play received for a subject "Horrid and Tremendous", two words aptly chosen since they are commonly found in many of Dennis's works. Tory satirists reacted vehemently against Dennis's play, and Pope made it famous by choosing it and its author "as archetypes of bad writing and irresponsible criticism" (Johnson, xxii) in his *An Essay on Criticism* two years later. He uses "Appius" as a pseudonym for Dennis in the lines:

Fear not the anger of the wise to raise;  
 Those best can bear reproof, who merit praise.  
 'Twere well might Critics still this freedom take,  
 But Appius reddens at each word you speak,  
 And stares, *tremendous*, with a threat'ning eye,  
 Like some fierce Tyrant in old Tapestry! (ll. 582-587)

Beyond this well-known quotation, Dennis's *Appius and Virginia* also gained infamy through the story about Dennis's "stolen thunder". He had reputedly invented a thunder machine for his play to accentuate the more furious, tragical speeches. The playhouse used it again for a production following his, and Dennis reportedly stood up in the audience shouting, "How these rascals use me ! They will not let my Play run, but they steal my Thunder" (Wilkins, *N&Q* 1956, 426).

*The Invader of His Country* rounds out Dennis's dramatic career in

1719. It is obvious from this cursory look at the critic's original plays, that Dennis stubbornly refused to accept the fact that he was a better critic than a dramatist. A summary of the popular opinion held by his contemporaries as to his playwriting abilities can be found in the *Biographia Dramatica* (1764). The author makes some sweeping statements about the general faults in all Dennis's plays:

As a dramatic author, he certainly deserves not to be held in any consideration. . . his characters are all ill-designed and unfinished, his language prosaical, flat, and undramatic, and the conduct of his principal scenes heavy, dull, and unimpassioned. In short, though he certainly had judgement, it is evident he had no execution; and so much better a critic is he than a dramatist, that we cannot help subscribing to the opinion of a gentleman, who said of him, that he was the most complete instructor for a dramatic poet; since he could teach him to distinguish *good* plays by his precepts, and *bad* ones by his examples. (Baker, 185)

This commentary is harsh, but mostly accurate. It is unfair to generalize when one can find examples of strong characterization and passionately dramatic scenes throughout Dennis's works, but he is at best an uneven playwright. While it is true that many of his plays met with misfortune beyond Dennis's control which indirectly might have helped spoil their reception, on the whole the plays warranted the short runs and bad reviews anyway. However, there are examples of peer support for a few of his efforts, and the plays would never have reached the stage if they did not have some merit. One might rashly compare Dennis, a failed playwright, to Joe Clark, a failed Prime Minister: "failure" is a relative term; both men were successful in acquiring their status, and so must still be recognized as important figures in their day.

The condemnation Dennis has received specifically because of his work as an adaptor is no different from attacks leveled at his contemporaries. It is generally accepted that what the Restoration and eighteenth century did

to Shakespeare was unforgivable, although less attention is paid to their Classical reproductions. After reading numerous criticisms of the adaptations, I began to object to the self-righteous tone of many twentieth-century analyses. Certainly the plays do not improve any of the originals, but Dennis's versions were primarily intended to illustrate his critical points of view, and in this they yield many interesting discoveries. He is not unlike our own dramatic experimentalists who attempt to re-dress Shakespeare in the clothing of our century. Shakespearean productions are nearly always cut to allow for a more comfortable length of stage time; Stratford in Ontario rarely sets the plays in the era originally intended, and at least two films, *Ran* and *Tempest* are only loosely based on *King Lear* and *The Tempest*, their Shakespearean counterparts. We would be hypocritical to judge the adaptations on any ethical grounds; instead, we should consider whether the playwright was successful in adjusting the play to suit the tastes of the contemporary audience. Looked at in this way, Dennis's plays had the potential for success since his changes displayed the conventions popular in the period, but still the revised versions were unable to catch the imagination of the audience. His over-emphasis on technique and reason outweighs the creativity necessary for a well-balanced play.

I will not take time to introduce Dennis's various theories in this introduction; those which relate specifically to dramatic criticism will be detailed in the following chapters. I suggested earlier that Dennis's theories were not always consistent. In fact, the bulk of his thinking remained static, but some connecting ideas fluctuate depending on the principle which he is defending. It is difficult to summarize Dennis's critical views. What Gene Hardy points out about Dennis's comic theory in

his thesis, *John Dennis as Comic Dramatist*, can be applied to the critic's dramatic theory as a whole. His ideas were not "highly original and personal"; his theory was "founded on what Dennis took to be the best thinking of the finest critics, ancient and modern. Even so, he did not hesitate to disagree on occasion even with those whom he admired most"(3). In his introduction to the second volume of Dennis's *Critical Works*, Hooker does an admirable job sorting out the pot pourri of critical ideas, and evaluating the emphasis placed on the many sources Dennis relies upon. My thesis considers the major influences, and illustrates how Dennis employed them in his three adaptations.

Very little has been written specifically on Dennis and his plays. I used those works which were available, and discovered that many of the same thoughts emerged in all of them. While I am convinced that my approach justifies a new analysis of the critic, I have found that my conclusions vary little from earlier research on him. His plays are obviously platforms for his critical beliefs, and as such, there is not much controversy that can emerge from a discussion of them. My thesis is the only work I have found which studies the adaptations extensively as they compare to Dennis's critical writing and the original plays. Chapter one also includes his criticisms of *Cato* in order to present an objective critique on a play which is similar to *Iphigenia*. I am hopeful that my work will promote more interest in Dennis as a playwright, and perhaps convince a few scholars that his plays need not be approached with "a feeling of boredom".



Chapter One  
*Iphigenia and Cato*

The French Classicists of the seventeenth century had a tremendous impact on English criticism after the Restoration. The works of Boileau, in particular his *Art Poétique* of 1674, and the ideas of Rapin and Bossu formed the foundation of critical thinking in England (Sastri, 145). In their theatre, the French adopted many of the principles developed in Greek and Roman drama, but created their own doctrine which was grounded on reason and form (Wright, 22). The practice of the Greeks was the basis for a set of rules which the French considered essential in tragedy and comedy. The English critics somewhat moderated the French thinking, but basically complied with those theories set down in Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *Ars Poetica*. Dennis did not differ greatly from other neo-classic critics of his day, but in his approach to the rules he was careful to use common sense. Professor Paul explains that Dennis has often been misunderstood as a blind follower of the Ancients; in fact, he took what he called "a middle position" (Paul, 151), believing that the English could become superior to the Ancients if they developed some of the classical techniques without sacrificing modern innovations. It is interesting to look at how strictly he adheres to the rules when criticising the works of other playwrights as compared to his own use of the rules as a dramatist himself. In this chapter, I will be concentrating on the "pseudo-classic" style of tragedy. Addison's *Cato* is the best example of this form, and it is one which Dennis criticized severely in his *Remarks Upon Cato* in 1713. Dennis's own effort, *Iphigenia*, will be a basis for comparison, to see how consistently

Dennis employs the rules. It will also be worthwhile to look at the changes he wrought in Euripides' original play, *Iphigenia in Tauris*.

I

As an introduction to the eighteenth-century style of tragedy, I should briefly outline the neo-classical conventions generally followed by critics and dramatists during this period. The French took from Aristotle the basic concept of tragedy. It must be an "imitation of action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself"(Aristotle, 35). It should arouse pity and fear, "wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions"(Ibid), and the plot must be a fable since the ideas expressed will be more universal than a history (43). The characters should be "good", of a "higher type" (Wright, 125), appropriate and consistent (Aristotle, 56). C. H. Wright explains that the French interpretation of Aristotle differed slightly from his intent. The three unities were introduced by the French as a means of "[enhancing] verisimilitude or probability of action"(Wright,121), which is an element recommended by Aristotle. Although the unity of action is perfectly consistent with Aristotle's principles, the unity of time was only suggested as a "tendency", not, as the French interpreted it, a "rigid law"; and nowhere does Aristotle mention unity of place(124). The French also misunderstood the requirement that characters be of a "higher type". As Wright explains, Aristotle spoke of the characters' "moral grandeur", but the French took his meaning to be "social grandeur"(125). The abbe' d'Aubignac insisted that "people born or brought up among the great deal with lofty sentiments and tend to noble purposes. Hence their life is in harmony with what tragedy depicts. . .the populace, virtually wallowing in

filth, do not rise above the buffoonery of farces"(Ibid). These added strictures were mainly cosmetic, and the necessity of observing the unities especially was attacked by many English critics. From Horace, the French took the principle of "decorum" in characterization, which was "acclaimed in the name of good taste"(Gassner, 384). Overall, the French Classicists believed that "there are absolute and unchanging standards of literary excellence", and the ancients should be the guides because they agree with "nature and reason" (Sastri, 145). Finally, the ultimate end of poetry must be moral instruction, and the plot must be developed according to the lesson emphasized.

In seventeenth-century England, most of the French neo-classical theory was accepted enthusiastically. Those who opposed any aspects, generally argued against the necessity of the unities. John Loftis, in *The Revels History of Drama in England*, mentions Rymer's special emphasis on "uniformitarianism", "the assumption that all men in all places, in so far as they think justly about literature as well as everything else, think alike"(44). This theory is used to defend the application of Greek rules in modern tragedy, and it held the fore in critical thinking for the next century (Ibid). Rymer also "objected to implausibilities in plot and characterization", and emphasized "judgement over fancy" (45). Following in the footsteps of Rymer and Dryden before him, Dennis accepted the importance of the classical dramatic principles. Unlike Rymer, he tried to bend the rules slightly to suit the tastes of his audience, but he did not adjust the doctrines to the extent that Dryden did. Both Dennis and Rymer upheld the rules because "they were founded on reason and good sense, and poetry could not be profitable and delightful in defiance of them"(Krutch,

56). Rymer, in particular, assumed that if a play that had strictly observed the rules failed, it was the fault of the audience, not the play ( 57). Dryden was not so fanatic about the rules, which could explain why he was the only successful playwright of the three. As Krutch explains,

He was a dramatist first, and if some of the rules seemed to make for bad plays, then he was more ready to suspect that there was a flaw somewhere in the "reason" which supported the rules than that bad plays had been proved to be good ones. Consequently, he felt, one had best re-examine the reason. (Ibid)

By the turn of the century, many critics questioned the rigidity of the rules, and soon the rational thought of Hobbes and Newton, and the psychology of Locke began to influence critical theory, and neo-classicism became less static. Paul gives a clear summary of the newer influences in critical theory at this time (114-127).

Within the period of Augustan drama, which ranged through the first quarter of the eighteenth century, Hume cites two major trends in tragedy: the pathetic and the classic-stoic(448); Nicoll refers to the latter as "pseudo-classical", which is a somewhat more general term and the one which I will employ in my writing. The pathetic mode is best exemplified by Rowe's *The Tragedy of Jane Shore*, 1714, and the pseudo-classic by Addison's *Cato*, 1713. In all the tragedy of this period there is a marked emphasis on political theories (Hampden, v), which is more effectively portrayed in the classical works. Nicoll states that the pseudo-classical tragedies were never wholly successful, except in the case of *Cato*; the majority of spectators did not enjoy the style (85). Dennis would blame their apathy on the "degeneracy of taste" in the period, since Italian operas and comedies were in general far more popular than the "Greater Poetry" (Hume, 486). Certainly Dennis had a lot to lose from the audience's

disinterest, since "among the . . . pseudo-classic writers [he] stands prime in importance" (Nicoll, 85). His *Iphigenia* is one of the earliest examples of the style.

Before passing on to Dennis's own play, I will begin by examining his criticisms of Addison's *Cato*. Although *Cato* was written fourteen years after *Iphigenia*, in 1713, Dennis's *Remarks* exemplify the critic's attitudes towards tragedy. Dennis did not succumb to the enormous enthusiasm which the rest of the public exhibited for the play, but severely ridiculed it for its absurd use of the mechanical rules and various infractions of the elements he believed were necessary to make a good play.

The success of *Cato* has been much wondered at, since most critics in later centuries consider it a weak play. Krutch also imagines that the Elizabethan audience would "not have been . . . fooled" by *Cato's* popularity; "It would have recognized immediately the lifelessness of [the play]" (Krutch, 231). Twentieth-century critics would generally agree with Hooker that it is merely "pretentious and hollow" (II, cxxxviii), although David Lindsay does praise it as a "serious political drama. . . written with an authority, a mastery of phrase not to be found in any other eighteenth-century tragedy" (Addison, ix). Addison was unquestionably diplomatic about the political scene; he was careful to avoid partisan leanings, asking a Tory poet, Alexander Pope to write his prologue, and a Whig poet, Samuel Garth, to write the epilogue. Whigs and Tories alike applauded the play for its "praise of liberty and virtue"(ix), but as Krutch indicates, the political approval was not the only agent working in Addison's favour.

It was a success also because it fulfilled the requirements set by the now popular criticism for a good tragedy. That it should please was secondary. A tragedy, said the critics, must be regular, and above all, must be instructive -- must be a

sugar-coated pill of philosophy. These conditions *Cato* fulfilled. . .(230)

If the rest of the critical world was excited about the play's merits, it seems strange that Dennis was not also enthralled: others agreed it was regular and morally instructive, two of our critic's key credentials for a successful tragedy. Dennis was still able to uncover many flaws, however, and did so even at the expense of passing for "a Man who is conceitedly resolv'd to like nothing which others like"( II, 41).

Dennis includes a number of examples to disprove the prevailing opinion that the play was "regular". To begin with, he found many inconsistencies in Cato's character which did not agree with reason. He considered Cato's stoicism a specific problem which I will consider at length later, but the irregularity of his character is illustrated in his suicide. Since, as Dennis affirms, Cato's main characteristic is a love for his country, it is improbable that he would commit suicide "as long as his Life is necessary to the good of his Countrey"( II, 46). Dennis supports this opinion with appropriate lines from the play attesting to Cato's importance to the state, the most crucial one coming from Portius just before his father's death is revealed. Portius claims that since Pompey's son is eager to join the battle, "Were Cato at their head, once more might Rome/ Assert her rights, and claim her liberty"(Addison, 49). Liberty is a cause which Dennis upholds in all his plays, and it would be impossible for him to accept a tragic hero who would so selfishly ignore his country at such a climactic moment. He presents his reaction to the disclosure of Cato's death:

. . 'tis difficult to tell at which Indecency and which Inconsistency I am shock'd the most, at a Philosopher's acting against the Light of Nature, or at a Stoick's yielding to ill Fortune without the last necessity, or at the unjust and unfortunate End of a Man of Accomplished Virtue, or at a Lover of Liberty and of his Country deserting both by his Death. ( II, 47)

Cato also exhibits an inconsistency in his brief moments of emotion. In Act

IV, he remains dry-eyed when receiving the news of his son's death and viewing his corpse, but "in the same Page sheds Tears for the Calamity of his Country, and does the same thing in the next Page, upon the bare Apprehension of the danger of his friends"( II, 67). Beyond the irregularities in Cato's character, Dennis also quotes examples of unreasonable exits and entrances which he suggests are clumsy devices to introduce or remove characters from the action. He also identifies inconsistencies in other principal characters such as Marcia, Juba and Syphax. Clearly, the doctrine of decorum has been ignored throughout Addison's play, and critics of the period must have recognized that Dennis's observations were correct in terms of the neo-classical formula.

As to morality, Dennis gives two reasons why he believes *Cato* fails to present a clear moral lesson. The first is that the play is not a fable but an historical event, and therefore cannot forcefully relay a lesson to the audience. Aristotle explains that "poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of a nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars" (Aristotle, 43). Dennis claims that since *Cato* is based on "a particular Historical Action" and "not an action Allegorical and Universal"( II, 45), it is not an appropriate vehicle for tragedy, because no moral lesson can be drawn from it. Also, since Cato chooses to die, which as I explained above is an unnatural action for his type of character, he is a particular, not a universal character; his actions therefore cannot be said to be moral or allegorical. Dennis's moral choices at the close of the play are either, he sarcastically concludes, "That Fools and Knaves should have a care how they invade the Liberties of their Country, lest Good and Wise Men suffer by it, or that Good and Wise Men

should have a care how they defend those Liberties, lest Fools and Knaves should Triumph"(II,45).

The second reason Addison's play cannot effectively present a moral is found in Cato's character. Because he is a Stoic, Cato must always suppress his emotions; historically his character is drawn as a man whose "natural Temper, as well as his Philosophy, was repugnant to Passion" ( II, 50). In terms of Aristotle's principles and Dennis's own beliefs, if Cato cannot demonstrate any powerful emotion, his character will be unable to move the audience. Dennis wrote extensively on the necessity of passion in poetry which "instructs and reforms the Reason" ( I, 337), and he believed that passion was especially necessary in promoting the moral lesson of the play. It is also important, of course, that the audience experience strong passions while watching the play. When Cato dies, Dennis insists the audience cannot experience catharsis, and so cannot be moved by their emotions to embrace a moral idea.

By proving that the play is neither regular nor moralistic, Dennis has quickly contradicted the two strongest arguments his peers made in defence of the play. These are not the most noticeable weaknesses Dennis observes, however; what bothers him the most is that poetical justice is not properly meted out. Poetical justice basically requires that the good are rewarded and the bad punished at the catastrophe of the play. Although this idea is not strictly a part of the French classicism, and is nowhere mentioned in Aristotle, Dennis proves that the latter agreed with it, even though he did not directly employ the same term. In a letter to "The Spectator", he reminds the "correspondent" about Aristotle's advice regarding characters for tragedies:



We are neither to make them very virtuous Persons on the one side, that is Persons who absolutely command their Passions, nor on the other side, Villains who are actuated by inveterate Malice, but something between these two, that is to say Persons who neglecting their passions suffer them to grow outrageous, and to hurry them to Actions which they otherwise would abhor. And that Philosopher expressly declares. . . that to make a virtuous Man unhappy, that is a man who absolutely commands his Passions, would create Horror instead of Compassion, and would be detested by all the World. And thus we have shewn that Aristotle is for Poetical Justice. (II, 21)

The villains of *Cato*, Syphax and Sempronius, are "actuated by inveterate malice" in Dennis's opinion, and so are inappropriate for tragedy. Cato, as the principal character in the play, is also an unacceptable tragic figure since he is too virtuous, and so his death must appear abhorrent to the audience. Dennis also found that throughout the play virtue was punished and vice rewarded. Some of his examples are extreme, especially when he condemns Portius, who he thought worked "sly Subtlety and Dissimulation. . . over the generous Frankness and Open-Heartedness of Marcus"(II, 49), but the fact that Cato is vanquished by Cæsar and no sense of order is restored, is a strong example of rewarded vice.

The plot of *Cato* is unfit for tragedy for more reasons than that it is taken from an historical event. Unlike Dennis's tragedy, *Iphigenia*, there are no discovery scenes or "surprises" in it which excite "Compassion and Terror" in the audience. Dennis complains that Addison uses "no Art or Contrivance by which . . . Authors excite our Curiosities and cause those eager Longings in their Readers to know the Events of things"(II, 49). Instead, we know from the first four lines spoken by Portius that Cato might die on this day:

The dawn is overcast, the morning lowers,  
And heavily in clouds brings on the day,  
The great, the important day, big with the fate  
Of Cato and of Rome. . .(Addison, 7)

There is also no dramatic movement in the play. Cato begins in a state of

sorrow and ends in no more and no less a state of sorrow. The only change is that he has now made up his mind to commit suicide. Dennis explains that *Cato* cannot be said to be a tragedy since without surprise, there is no tragical scene in which "we are extremely mov'd" (II, 47).

Dennis next tackles the unities. He claims Addison does observe the mechanical unities of time and place, but "without any manner of Judgement or Discretion" ( II, 68). Dennis makes a strong case to support reasons why the unity of place in *Cato* is made to appear ridiculous. In particular, since all actions must take place in the great Hall of the Governor of Utica's palace, it is unbelievable that Syphax and Sempronius would plot against Cato in his own establishment. The unity of action, the only one of the unities Dennis considers essential in tragedy, is more conspicuously faulty than the first two unities. Interestingly enough, the disruption of the unity is caused by the incongruous emphasis on love, a passion which Dennis defended years earlier in *The Impartial Critick* (I, 12), and which he used liberally in his own tragedy, *Iphigenia*. In his *Remarks upon Cato*, Dennis states that the love in *Cato* "is not a Tragical Passion because it produces no real Tragical Distress, but a Distress which proceeds only from the Whimsies or extravagant Caprices of the Lovers"(II, 61). Later, I will look at the difference in the way Dennis used love in *Iphigenia*. In *Cato*, love disrupts the main action of the play since the love-sick scenes between Portius and Marcius, Lucia and Marcia seem to belittle the real tragedy facing Cato and Rome. Dennis cites a number of examples of indiscretion shown by the younger characters, but the most notable is in the first scene of Act I between Portius and Marcius. After a few brief exchanges which establish the desperate situation Rome

is in, Marcius whines that "Passion unpitied, and successless love,/ Plant daggers in my heart, and aggravate/ My other griefs. -- Were but my Lucia kind --" (Addison, 8). The scene ends with a discussion of Marcius's overwhelming passion for Lucia, and Juba's patient desire for Marcia. Dennis has a point. The introduction of a sub-plot involving a love triangle or two cannot be easily reconciled with a main plot of such tense confrontation. Like the chorus Dennis believed weakened the emotional impact of the episodes in Greek tragedy, the romantic intrigues in *Cato* rob the action of its dramatic intensity.

Many of Dennis's arguments against *Cato* are insightful and carefully analyzed, but while he is justly critical of Addison, his own play would not come out spotless if he were to direct the same criticisms at it. The second half of this chapter will be devoted to *Iphigenia*. First I will concentrate on the changes Dennis saw fit to make to Euripides' original, and then look at how it compares to Addison's play in its use of the principles Dennis advocates himself.

## II

As a critic, Dennis agrees with Horace "that the Rules signifie nothing without Genius" ( II, 291), and the opinion of his public unfortunately seemed to be that this was the element lacking in his own attempt at tragedy. *Iphigenia* is Dennis's third play, acted in December, 1699 at Lincoln's Inn Fields. Although Betterton played Orestes and Mrs. Barry and Mrs. Bracegirdle portrayed the Queen and Iphigenia, their histrionic abilities were unable to save the production. It ran weakly for six nights, and as Downes explains, it was "a good tragedy and well Acted; but answer'd not

the Expences they were at in Cloathing it"(Downes, 45). According to the account in *A Comparison Between the Two Stages*, Colonel Codrington, who contributed the epilogue, attempted to "stack" the house on the third night to help increase Dennis's profits, but his efforts were unsuccessful. The rival playhouse did not improve Dennis's luck by staging Abel Boyer's *Iphigenia of Aulis* in the same week. This competing play lasted only four nights, and Boyer complained bitterly that its poor reception was due to the public's dislike of Dennis's play:

This Tragedy came out upon the Neck of another of the same Name, which being the product of a Giant-Wit, and a Giant-Critick. . . had miserably balk'd the World's Expectation; and most People having been tir'd at Lincoln's-Inn-Fields, did not care to venture their Patience at Drury-Lane, upon a false Supposition that the two Iphigenia's were much alike"(Murphy, 75)

Although Boyer unwittingly compliments Dennis by referring to his fame (however sarcastically), he does blame his failure on Dennis's unsuccessful play. The disapprobation our critic's first tragedy received was not universal, however. Years later, when writing a generally uncomplimentary account of Dennis's life in his *Lives of the Poets*, Theophilus Cibber almost rises above his tone of contempt for the critic in praise of *Iphigenia*. He explains that ". . .this is by far the most affecting tragedy of our author; it is almost impossible to read it without tears", but he then cuts the sentiment short by concluding, "though it abounds with bombast" (233).

Dennis's preface holds more hints as to how the play was received. He notes that while it was performed,

I never in my life at any Play took notice of a more strict attention, or a more profound silence. And there was something like what happen'd at the Representation of Pacuvius his Tragedy. For upon Orestes discovering his passion to Iphigenia in the fourth Act, there ran a general murmur through the Pit, which is what I had

never seen before. (Johnson)

According to Dennis, during the Roman version of the play, shouts of applause were heard when Orestes and Pilades attempted to save each other from sacrifice. Judging by the critics' general disdain for the production, one might question whether the "murmur" in the Pit of the London stage was intended to be a sound of approval. Dennis seems to imply that it was merely the fickleness of the public which condemned his play. He explains that several people who had originally, when seeing the play, "wholly abandon'd themselves to the Impression which Nature had made on them, began to study how to be discontented by Art; and repented heartily at having been pleas'd with what Athens and Rome and Paris had been pleas'd before"(Johnson). He insisted that, contrary to their belief, it was not his "defects" which the audience was displeased with, since they "were more touch'd by the fourth and fifth Acts" which were entirely his own, than by the second act, almost entirely Euripides'. Dennis's hope in pointing this out is perhaps to prove that his failure was due to the random prejudices of the critics in his day rather than the faults which might have existed in the play itself. Clearly, the tragedy failed for a variety of reasons, and although it may be true that "the play is not good theatre" (Murphy, 71), as Murphy concludes in his brief examination of it, many external influences also inhibited its chance for success. Despite its shortcomings, *Iphigenia* illustrates many of Dennis's important critical ideas.

The preface describes Dennis's reasons for revising the ancient play, and explains how his various changes improve it for modern audiences. He admits that the story of *Iphigenia* had recently been re-worked by other playwrights, (most notably by Racine and de la Grange in France), but he insists that the "Fable or Plot is intirely [his] own" (Johnson). In 1725,

years after the play was produced, Dennis wrote the *Causes of the Decay and Defects of Dramatick Poetry*, in which he emphasizes Aristotle's belief in the importance of the fable in tragedy, as opposed to mere historical events (II, 286). Dennis also paraphrases his favourite philosopher in the preface to *Iphigenia*, stating, "I consider, that the Writing of good Verses may make a man a good Versifyer, but 'tis the forming a Fable alone that can make a Poet". This turns out to be a telling statement, because Dennis's verse is the weakest element of the play; his plot is its greatest strength. It is Dennis's opinion also, that his tragedy is more "regular" than most modern tragedies. He goes on to rage against the disrespect paid to Aristotle and Horace in the playhouses of his day, in which, he says, they "endeavour to make the Rules, that is, Nature and Right Reason, as ridiculous and contemptible as the Rules have made their Writings". He cannot resist criticism of the stage even in his prologue, when he shakes a finger at the audience for its lowered standards. The Tragic Muse asks herself:

Oh is my Brittain fain to that degree,  
 As for effeminate Arts t' abandon me?  
 I left the enslav'd Italian with disdain,  
 And servile Gallia, and dejected Spain:  
 Grew proud to be confin'd to Brittain's shore,  
 Where Godlike Liberty had fix'd before;  
 ...  
 But oh, she cry'd, I feel a Ruder care,  
 And I have chang'd Ambition for Despair.

By the end of the prologue, of course, it is clear that the Muse will be reassured by the tragedy about to be presented. It was Dennis's hope to show the audience how much more moving and powerful a British tragedy could be if the rules were observed with reason and regularity. He also concentrated on emphasizing friendship in the play to promote patriotism

because, as he says, "He who is generous enough to love his Friend, has greatness of mind enough to serve his Country"(Johnson). His major objectives in presenting the play were to improve the art of neo-classical tragedy and develop a stronger feeling of patriotism.

The most striking technical change Dennis makes in his *Iphigenia* is to remove the chorus. Since he had earlier stated many reasons against the use of a chorus in *The Impartial Critick*, it is not surprising that he does without it in his own tragedy. In those dialogues of 1693, he gives many strong reasons why the chorus would appear ridiculous on the English stage, and some general observations explain why it should be considered an unnecessary part of any tragedy. The character Freeman, reminds his companion that Aristotle himself "slighted" the chorus by his very brief mention of it in the *Poetics* ( I, 34). In explaining its original use, he suggests that on the Greek stage the chorus was compatible with the religion of the Athenians, but in England, "having nothing in our Religion or Manners, by which we may be able to defend it, it ought certainly to be banished from our Stage"(I, 11). Aside from its religious implications, the singing of the chorus four times in the course of the play has little more meaning than to divide the acts, or in the ancient tragedies, to separate the "episodes" in which the action takes place (32). He goes on to prove that the passions evoked by the episodes would be better served without the chorus, "because the Chorus in some measure must calm an Audience which the Episode disturb'd by its Sublimity", and this effect weakens audience response. Freeman also acknowledges that "the design of the Chorus is to give good Advice, to preach up Morality, to extol Vertue, to praise or pray to the Gods", but he insists that the reflections of the chorus should not be

necessary if the actors play their roles convincingly enough (35). Finally, he concludes that the chorus is an awkward addition to tragedy. He uses examples from *Electra* in which Orestes must entrust his secret to sixteen women, which Freeman states is unnatural, and the singing of the chorus in front of *Electra's* palace seems unbelievable since such open contempt of their Queen would be impossible.

Although there is no chorus in *Iphigenia*, Dennis does provide his heroine with a handmaiden, Euprosine, who gives advice and preaches morality, and in this way he incorporates another classical convention: the confidante. Her role is small, however; Dennis wants the morality in the play to stand on the merit of the principal characters themselves. The religious impulses too, are to be found in his characters. It was more important to Dennis that he impress upon the audience the individual's own responsibility for his actions. The two male characters preach morality to the point of redundancy, and their actions are always virtuous. In each of the five acts, at least part of the dialogue revolves around Orestes and Pilades' superior friendship. For almost half of Act II the men argue over which of them will die for the other. Here is a brief sample:

Orestes. What have I done t' induce you to believe  
 That I should prove so recreant to all goodness,  
 To let you suffer here instead of me?  
 Pilades. Would you not have me suffer?  
 Orestes. Would I not have thee suffer? canst thou ask it?  
 O my Friend!  
 Pilades. And yet you urge me to survive you,  
 O Contradiction!  
 Orestes. What hast thou done, which can deserve the death,  
 Which fondly thus thou court'st?  
 Pilades. What have I done that I deserve to live  
 After the only man of all the world  
 That's fit to be my friend? (Johnson, 21)

These are not empty words. The actions of all three of the main characters,



Iphigenia, Orestes and Pilades, illustrate their willingness to die for the others. By the end of Act V, they fall over themselves for the honour. The stage directions clearly indicate the order of attempted martyrdom: first Iphigenia "offers to stab herself" when she thinks Orestes is the victim; then "the Victim throws off his Veil, and wrests the Knife from her, discovering himself to be Pilades"; later, "As the other Priestess is going to strike, Orestes enters, runs between the Dagger and Pilades, and embraces him"; and finally, as both men are about to die, "Iphigenia interposes" once again (50-51). In the original play, the characters share the task of relaying the moral lesson with the chorus; they are less conspicuous in their heroisms and their personalities are not as well-defined.

Because of the removal of the chorus, Dennis's characters are painted with broader strokes and coloured with vivid morality. Although they are basically the same as their counterparts in the Greek play, Orestes and Pilades also tirelessly sermonize on the values of friendship, and prove brave and true to each other whenever they enter the stage. Most notably, Iphigenia is no longer the "cruel woman" of the original play who will kill her victims without a tear (Euripides<sup>1</sup>, 135). She does not wish to avenge herself on those who betrayed her as Euripides' heroine hoped to when she spoke these lines:

If but some heaven-sent wind, forcing a ship  
Between the Clashing Rocks, might bring me Helen,  
The Helen whom I hate, and Menelaus,  
That I might make of them a sacrifice,  
Let a new Aulis expiate the old,

<sup>1</sup>all quotations from *Iphigenia in Tauris* will be taken from Witter Bynner's translation. Gilbert Murray's translation, cited at the end of my thesis, is an additional source.

And vent my vengeance! It was Helen's fault  
 And his that Greek hands lifted me at Aulis  
 And led me like a beast where, at the altar,  
 My father held the sacrificial knife.  
 I live it all again. . . (Ibid)

The original Iphigenia begins as a strong, ruthless woman who has been preparing victims for sacrifice for eleven years. The temple itself graphically depicts its purpose; as the stage directions explain in Gilbert Murray's translation: it is "stained with blood. There are spoils of slain men hanging from the roof". By contrast, Dennis's Iphigenia is a meek, forgiving creature, who would rather forget the past than consider revenge, and who feels pity for the men in the storm even before meeting them. Robert Hume uses the adjective "insipid" (454) to describe Dennis's title character, but J. W. Johnson is more judicial in his appraisal of Dennis's characterization, calling the play "interesting for its emphasis on the long-suffering, noble, sensitive heroine: Iphigenia is one of the first of the long line of "Augustan" heroines -- Jane Shore, Indiana, Roxana, Pamela, Clarissa, and Amelia among them" (Johnson, xvi). The play has elements of the "pathetic" mode Nicoll talks about; Dennis makes sure that Iphigenia is a sympathetic character so the audience can pity her. Dennis also clearly felt that Iphigenia must be purified, for if the moral lesson which he deemed important to tragedy was to be learned, then each of his characters needed to be obviously good or bad. There was no chorus to sing the lesson to the audience. His Iphigenia is not even allowed to have been previously tainted by the sacrificial rite. She explains in Act I that ". . . But yesterday/ This fatal office was conferr'd upon me,/ Which to refuse had brought me certain Death" (Johnson, 2). Dennis likely thought that the original character was too barbaric for the sensibilities of his day, and that

decorum would be compromised if she appeared in any way "unseemly" (II, lxxxviii).

In contrast to Iphigenia, Dennis created the Queen of the Scythians, a replacement for King Thoas in the original play. She has a much greater role than the king, however, since it is the love she bears for Orestes that causes many of the incidents to occur. I will say more later about love as an emotion in the play, but it is important to note here that because of her passion for Orestes, the queen becomes a kind of "deus ex machina". As A. N. Wilkins explains in his article, *John Dennis on Love as a Tragic Passion*, in Euripides' version, Athena prevents the King from pursuing the prisoners, whereas "in the adaptation, it is the queen who permits the transportation of the image to Greece" (*N & Q*, 418). Johnson suggests that Dennis was "aware of recent criticism of playwrights for dignifying pagan gods"(Johnson, xv), and so he removed most of the supernatural forces found in the original play. The various commands of the queen serve, in A. J. Murphy's words, to bring the events "logically toward a reasonable and thereby more persuasive conclusion" (71). Also important in terms of the moral of the story is that the queen's irrationality, caused by a selfish love, brings about the chaos. By the end of the play when Iphigenia's identity is revealed and order is restored, the queen becomes reasonable again and asks Iphigenia, "Canst thou forgive me all this cruel Usage, / Of which Love only could have made me guilty?"(Johnson, 58). Dennis is cautioning the audience to guard against dangerous passions.

As I mentioned earlier, Dennis defends the use of love in modern tragedy in his preface to *The Impartial Critick*. He explains that romantic love was an emotion rarely seen on the Greek stage because

"when lovers came together in Greece, they found something else to do, than to talk. Their Women under so warm a Sun, melted much sooner than ours" (I, 12). The idea of love and intrigue might be ridiculous on the Greek stage, but that does not mean it has to be removed from the English stage. To illustrate his belief, Dennis introduced a variety of romantic loves in his version of *Iphigenia*. Both Orestes and Pilades fall in love with Iphigenia and both Iphigenia and the queen fall in love with Orestes. Although this complicated quadrangle adds a new dimension to the tragedy, the most important relationship for Dennis was friendship, with which he hoped "to enflame the minds of an Audience" (Preface). Since Orestes is the hero of the play, and is moved more often by friendship than love, Dennis does not break his own rule that love should not overpower the hero of the tragedy. He states that "Love, predominating in the principal Character too often falsifies and confounds the Sentiments"( II, 168), and we have already seen his aversion to its use in *Cato*. Wilkins argues at length that Dennis does upset his own rule, however, insisting that the destructive love the queen had for Orestes played the most crucial role in the plot development. Overall, love does obviously heighten the complication of the plot, and as Murphy states, the love between Orestes and Iphigenia "[doubles] the dramatic impact" by introducing a second discovery scene. (Murphy, 73).

In terms of plot, the changes from the original are quite extreme after the first two acts. The text of the play is longer than Euripides', adding almost a thousand lines to the original story. By the third act of Dennis's play, almost all the events of the classical tale have occurred and the additional arrests, battles, attempted sacrifices and professed loves are entirely Dennis's creation. Unfortunately, most of the action throughout is

accompanied by bombastic dialogue, and as Murphy notes, "instead of making a dramatic point quickly and moving on, [Dennis] often draws out a point through dozens of listless lines. . ." (74). The repeated attempts at escape and noble self-sacrifice wear thin by the end. Dennis does comply with the requirements of the best "complex" plot described by Aristotle. Like the *Iphigenia in Tauris* "the change in the hero's fortunes" (Aristotle, 46) includes peripety and discovery, and Dennis even attempted to improve on Euripides by adding the discovered love between brother and sister.

Although most twentieth-century critics are liable to call *Iphigenia* a tragi-comedy, there is no suggestion that Dennis would have categorized his play as anything but a pure tragedy. Hooker maintains that the term tragi-comedy in Dennis's day suggested "a poem in which tragedy and humor were intermingled, or, in Addison's words, 'a motley piece of mirth and sorrow' " (II, 440). Like most critics of his age, Dennis was opposed to such a "Mixture of Raillery" (I, 178), and *Iphigenia's* tone remains solemn throughout, except for the unexpected happy ending. It is not inconsistent with Dennis's notion of proper tragic form to save the principal characters from death at the catastrophe. The critic is famous for his defence of poetical justice, and as we have seen, much of his criticisms of *Cato* revolve around the notion. As Wilkins explains in his article, *John Dennis and Poetic Justice*, the critic occasionally had difficulty conforming to his own rule, since in *Appius and Virginia*, the character of Virginia is purely virtuous and yet is killed by her father's hand. Dennis was a strong believer in the convention, however, and so would consider the development of *Iphigenia* correct according to the virtuous nature of the principal characters.

I stated in the introduction to this chapter that Dennis takes a "middle position", and beside Rymer and Dryden, his stand certainly seems to be a compromise between the two. After study, however, he might appear to lean more to the Ancients than the Moderns. It is important to note that he chose a classical play as the basis for his first tragedy, and one which is repeatedly praised by Aristotle in *The Poetics* as exemplary. Dennis's hostility toward the movement of modern tragedy away from the Ancients, (a trend which he criticizes in his preface and prologue), indicates that he believed his play would somehow teach other playwrights a lesson in proper technique. The epilogue proudly states that, unlike other contemporary playwrights, Dennis will not "...[shame] the Goddess by a forein Dress/ That decks her like a trivial merry Muse". His choice to leave tragedy at its "Grecian Source" rather than introduce it to "an English Dress" does not show much confidence in his own age. Although he relinquishes the chorus and introduces love as a tragical passion, in general, Dennis maintains a conservatism towards changes in the classical tradition.

The question which still remains to be answered is whether *Iphigenia* is more correct than *Cato*, by Dennis's own standards. They are similar plays in many important ways. Both are political: Dennis's tragedy stresses liberty almost to the same extent Addison's does, although the message is not as overt. They are each based on classical sources and are revised in order to teach a lesson to their own era. But even though *Cato* had many of the qualities Dennis respected in a play himself, he still found it wanting in the artistic elements. *Iphigenia* is more regular than Addison's play in most areas. The movement from scene to scene is reasonable and convincing, and all of the action develops logically throughout the play. I

would argue though, that like the character of *Cato*, the queen is inconsistent and so upsets the doctrine of decorum for probability in character. Even though she is intended to be distracted in her jealous passion for Orestes, it is unlikely that a woman who loves virtue and honour to the extent she does, could so ignore those qualities in her own actions towards her captives. She offers marriage to Orestes and when he refuses the first time, vindictively chooses to kill him. When he refuses the second time, she tries to kill Iphigenia. It is too difficult to believe that such cruelty could be tamed by the end of the play, merely by discovering Iphigenia's true identity. Dennis would argue that when she is released from her jealous passion she becomes reasonable again, but this seems a feeble argument after such examples of viciousness.

Dennis is relentlessly emphatic about morality in his own plays, and it would be difficult to fault him on it. In his criticisms of *Cato*, however, he concentrates primarily on the play's catastrophe, and one might have problems with *Iphigenia* looked at from this approach. It is not through strength of friendship that Orestes and Pilades escape death and are later rewarded, but by the irrational whim of the queen and the surprise discovery that Orestes and Iphigenia could only love as brother and sister. Using Dennis's logic, in his appraisal of *Cato's* lesson, *Iphigenia's* moral might be, "Beware of jealous queens, and always hope that if one falls in love with you, your sister will be there to bail you out". This is ridiculous, but Dennis's criticism of *Cato* is no less extreme in his effort to promote derision of Addison's tragedy.

As much as Dennis trumpets the cause of poetical justice in his critical writings, in *Iphigenia* we might question the validity of the

queen's happy end after her cruelty throughout the play. As I quoted earlier, she apologizes to Iphigenia for her abusiveness, but this is not enough to reconcile the audience with the reward she receives in marrying Orestes. Iphigenia could also be considered too virtuous to be a convincing tragical figure according to Dennis's own specifications that characters should be neither too good nor too evil. As mentioned earlier, Dennis completely ignored his own rule about poetical justice in *Appius and Virginia* when he allowed Virginia to die. Clearly, the critic had some difficulty complying with the convention in his own plays.

Though Dennis has no trouble complaining that the mechanical unities in *Cato* are poorly employed and so "render the action more improbable, and the Representation more absurd" ( II, 68), his own play also exhibits inconsistencies of time and place. All of the action of *Iphigenia* takes place in "a Wild Country on the top of a Mountain before the Temple of Diana Taurica", but much of the offstage events occur at the base of the mountain by the coast, or climbing the slopes while doing battle. Johnson observes in his preface to the play,

Dennis's obsession with the Three Unities causes incongruities in timing: a ship lands after being caught in a violent storm at the opening of the drama, its occupants ascend a steep mountain, they then descend, fight a battle with the Scythians, reascend the steeps, and perform other unlikely offstage feats -- all within two hours.( xv)

Johnson's argument against Dennis's use of the unities of time and place is as strong as the critic's disapproval of Addison's techniques. Dennis cannot be faulted for any inconsistencies in the unity of action, however, although he does develop love interests as Addison does. The difference in *Iphigenia*, is that love plays a key role in the "tragical distress"; it causes the queen's irrational behaviour and prompts her decision to let Orestes and Pilades



live or die. Since the emotion plays an important role in the overall action, it does not interfere with the unity.

Clearly Dennis is inconsistent in theory and practice. Many of the errors he saw in *Cato* can be seen in his own play, but he seems unaware of any contradictions. He cannot be said to be less of a critic for being unable to evaluate his own work justly, however; it is difficult to maintain the objectivity necessary for such a task. Perhaps his real crime is that he was not gifted with the poetic genius which he himself considered crucial in both a critic and playwright, and this deficiency could have obscured his judgement of other dramatists. Since he had no direct experience with inspiration, he was unable to get beyond the many constrictions of convention to recognize the genius in those creative playwrights who did not conform to the rules. In the case of *Cato*, his instincts about the play as a work of bad theatre were correct, but when he begins his criticisms of Shakespeare, much of what he says sounds petty and simplistic in the face of such accomplished genius.

## Chapter Two

### *The Comical Gallant*

When playwrights of the Restoration and eighteenth century set about adapting the Greek plays, their intent was to imitate the ancients in their own English verse. They were not improving upon the plays; they merely hoped to re-create the beauty of the Ancients. However, the philosophy behind Shakespearean adaptations was distinctly different. When Shakespeare's "undisciplined" work came under the scrutiny of the neo-classical critics, they found it too barbaric for their own civilized age. Their objections were clearly focused; changes were made to "reform and make fitt" any aspect of the plays which did not conform to classical convention. Rymer's voice was the most strident in opposition to Shakespeare's work, but Dryden, Gilden, Dennis and many others soon expressed their own concerns about the playwright's weaknesses. The comedies were attacked the most vehemently for their many irregularities. In an attempt to demonstrate how the bard's plays could be made more regular, Dennis adapted *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, renaming it *The Comical Gallant; or the Amours of Sir John Falstaff*. Although he might seem justified, even by twentieth-century standards, in tightening the structure of the play, his energetic modifications removed the heart of the original and left nothing with which to revive the body. As with his adaptation of *Iphigenia*, he justified his revisions at length, and described what changes he had made. In this chapter, I will be concentrating on the general reasons behind the Shakespearean adaptations after the Restoration, with a slant toward the restored comedies, the comic theories, and

specifically Dennis's own theories in his play, *The Comical Gallant*.

I

Initially, when Davenant began re-introducing Shakespeare's plays after the Restoration, he merely edited lines and scenes. He explained to the reader as a preface to the printed edition of *Hamlet* that, "This Play being too long to be conveniently Acted, Such Places as might be least prejudicial to the Plot and Sense, are left out upon the Stage" (Odell, 25). It was not long afterwards, however, that his alterations became more pronounced. He chose plays such as *The Tempest*, *Macbeth* and *The Taming of the Shrew* as the basis for operatic productions. Davenant developed his enthusiasm for spectacle and elaborate scenes while exiled in France; "musical entertainments" were best suited to his extravagant tastes, and proved a lucrative draw. *The Tempest* in particular, remained in its popularized operatic form up to the nineteenth century (Odell, 88). Odell identifies the next step in the Shakespeare revisions as the period between 1678 and 1682 when historical plays were utilized, "that lent themselves with greater or less readiness to connection with the troublous political times in those very years of Charles II's reign"(87). Most of the changes which occurred in the plays up to this time reflected the varying interests of the audience and did not openly focus on Shakespeare's faults. It was not until the later seventeenth century that the French classical influence had peaked in England, and Shakespeare's flaws were illuminated in high relief. In Rymer's *Short View of Tragedy*, written in 1693, he criticizes Shakespeare's ignorance of poetical justice and the immorality evident in

most of his plays. He condemns Othello especially as "a bloody farce"(Spencer, 27), and of Desdemona's death he asks his readers,

What instruction can we make out of this Catastrophe? Or whither must our reflection lead us? Is not this to envenome and sour our spirits, to make us repine and grumble at Providence; and the Government of the World? If this be our end, what boots it to be Vertuous?(Hume, 155)

Rymer goes on to outline all the other serious offences which Shakespeare makes against art. Hooker explains that the term "art" in its contemporary sense meant the system of rules laid down by Aristotle and Horace, "particularly the Rules concerning decorum and fable"(II, 428).

Shakespeare's tragic characters were not acceptable because "he had represented men as they were, not as they ought to be. . . what was to be imitated was not life in the raw, which could be sordid and thus not 'instructive', but 'la belle nature', a world of types and ideals"(Vickers, 2). In addition, Shakespeare breaks the unities of time and place, and his language is often inappropriate to the characters portrayed, moving between the two extremes of "bombast and quibbles" (Ibid). In general, Rymer's criticisms were aimed at the tragedies; he was one of the few critics of the period who preferred Shakespeare's comedies (II, 433).

Not all the critics of the period agreed with Rymer's more vehement attacks, and Vickers suggests that many of his claims were an embarrassment to those neo-classics "who took their critical system seriously, yet admired Shakespeare"(3). Dennis's *The Impartial Critick* is a rebuttal to Rymer's *Short View*, and much of Dryden's critical writing supports Shakespeare's work, even in its "primitive" state. Many critics, including Dennis, were able to shift the blame from Shakespeare to the age

in which he lived, and in the later Augustan period there was even a tendency to argue that "Shakespeare was great *because* he broke the rules, since genius and the laws of poetry are not compatible"(Vickers, 9). It was generally accepted that Shakespeare had no classical training, and so was unfamiliar with the rules. Those who suggested he did know the ancients but merely ignored them were opposed by the majority who refused to admit that the master of English dramatic poetry could have been so careless.

Although there were apologies and excuses for Shakespeare, all agreed that his plays warranted improvement. By the time Dennis introduced his two revisions, the tradition of adapting Shakespeare had been alive for almost half a century, and his audiences were likely more familiar with the adapted versions than Shakespeare's original plays. My focus in this chapter is on Shakespeare's comedy. Odell points out that all of the Shakespeare adaptations between 1692 and 1703, the period in which Dennis introduced *The Comical Gallant*, were comedies except for Cibber's *Richard III*, and that most of them were "tortured" into forms of masque or opera(87). Although Dennis's revision does not at first seem to fit into either category, his insertion of "the terrible symphony" in Act V gives the fairy scene the appearance of a masque, coming as it does at the end of the play. Hooker states that in general, the Augustans disliked Shakespeare's romantic comedies, and that "Dennis had no taste for the 'fairy way of writing' " (II, cxxxix). Hooker goes on to speculate that "the sheer gaiety and high spirits of the brighter comedies did not greatly appeal to him; in fact, he apparently did not see far beyond the more obvious excellencies of plot and characterization". It is clear from Dennis's preface to *The Comical Gallant* that his interest does revolve around these latter two elements in

Shakespeare's play. To understand the overall opposition to Shakespeare's comedies, it is necessary to look at the general theories of comedy which came out of the Restoration and which were either upheld or attacked in the transitional Augustan age.

Hume's analysis of the comic tradition in the Restoration period is comprehensive and covers the range of divergent attitudes before the advent of sentimental comedy. Typically though, critics agreed with Aristotle that comedy is "an imitation of men worse than the average"(Aristotle, 33) and that it should improve mankind through "ridiculum", which was interpreted in Dennis's day as "laughter mixed with contempt and disapprobation"(Paul, 170). There were two main comic trends in this period: the comedy of humours, exemplified in Jonson's work, and the comedy of manners, which Wycherley perfected. Although Hume warns against such clear cut definitions, he recognizes a basic distinction between "the low, crudely instructive 'comedy of humours' and the gay, witty, refined 'comedy of manners'"(37). Dennis was aligned more with the Jonson tradition and Dryden with Wycherley. We have already seen Dennis's bent toward instruction, and so it is not surprising that he should disagree with his mentor in preferring the humours style of comedy. To Dennis, ridicule was also what made comedy pleasing ( 1, 224), whereas Dryden believed wit to be the most "pleasurable"(Hume, 37), and therefore more appropriate for comedy. However, in the latter half of the seventeenth century, there was concern as to whether the witty characters of the comedy of manners were perceived as ridiculous or whether they were admired for their debauchery. Hume cites as an example the characters of Dorimant and Harriet in Etherege's *Man of Mode or Sir Fopling Flutter*,

whose witty banter makes vice appealing at the expense of virtue (40). Dennis defended Dorimant fifty years after the play had been written in his *Defence of Sir Fopling Flutter* (1722), insisting that though the character was pleasing, and "all the World was charm'd with [him]" he could still instruct by his "Insulting, and his Perfidiousness" (II, 248). Even with Dennis's defense in mind, it would be difficult, Hume argues, to find Dorimant "actually instructive" (41), and by the late seventeenth century a trend developed whereby "exemplary" characters were introduced whose actions were clearly moralistic. Somewhat before the Collier Controversy, there was a reaction against farce, and a new "heightened" comedy introduced characters who could not be ridiculed. This effectively changed the accepted premise of comedy (47). The next reform was of course the movement towards the sentimental, which turned the "soul of comedy" (II, 245) into colourless blancmange.

My historical summary of comic theory up to the Augustan age is skeletal, but is intended only as a background to Dennis's personal theories and his application of them in *The Comical Gallant*. I mentioned above that Dennis promoted the cause of the humours comedy, but it is also important to note his opposition to wit. Although he accepts that it is "diverting" in moderation, he gives many reasons why it is inferior to humour in his *Large Account of the Taste in Poetry, and the Causes of the Degeneracy of it*, which he affixed to the printed copy of *The Comical Gallant*.

... Humour is the business in Comedy, and not Wit. The business of a Comick Poet is to shew his Characters and not himself, to make ev'ry one of them speak and act, as such a person in such circumstances would probably act and speak. Comedy, is an Image of common Life, and in Life, a Man, who has discerning Eyes, may find something ridiculous in most People, but something witty in very few. . . Now that

which is truly ridiculous in any man is chiefly Humour , or the effect of Humour.  
( I, 282)

Dennis elaborates on his theory about humour at some length, so it is clear that he disapproves of mere wit in comedy. To emphasize the extent of his condemnation, the anonymous author of his biography in 1734 quoted Dennis's comment that "no Man would make a Pun, that would not pick a Pocket"(56). As is obvious in his *Remarks on a Play Call'd "The Conscious Lovers"* Dennis was just as strongly opposed to the later trend toward sentiment. He criticizes Steele's prefatory remarks about a "joy too exquisite for laughter", insisting that joy is common in all poetry, but that "the kind of Joy which is attended with Laughter, is a Characteristic of Comedy" alone ( II, 260).

Throughout his career Dennis supported the cause of ridicule in comedy, and saw that in comedy the characters were even more significant than the plot since they are the vehicle for instruction ( I, 145). This opinion runs opposite to Aristotle's instruction which stresses plot before character in both comedy and tragedy. Hooker finds another example of Dennis's disagreement with the ancients in terms of characterization in comedy. He states that "whereas classicists stressed the universal, Dennis tended to stress the local and temporary; he defended the *Man of Mode* because its presentation of a gentleman reflected accurately the manners and customs peculiar to the time of Charles II" (II, xc). Hooker's assertion needs qualification, however, because Dennis also insisted that "at bottom" all characters are "universal and allegorical or else the Instruction could not be Universal"(I, 187). In order to reconcile the two positions it is necessary to determine Dennis's own understanding of universality. Hooker makes an attempt by suggesting that Dennis "regarded characters as universal and



allegorical if they displayed manners and customs familiar to contemporary audiences, and if their main traits. . .were appropriate to men of their respective ages"(I, 496). It is more difficult to include in this definition Dennis's insistence that humours characters should be "individual" and if possible "originals" (I, 284). Instead, I think one must accept the fact that Dennis's theories are not always consistent from one work to the next.

In his support of contemporary characters Dennis cites Rapin to explain the importance of the audience's identification with the characters,

. . .Comedy is as it ought to be, when an Audience is apt to imagine, that instead of being in the Pit and Boxes, they are in some Assembly of the Neighbourhood, or in some Family Meeting, and that we see nothing done in it, but it is done in the World. For it is . . . not worth one Farthing, if we do not discover ourselves in it, and do not find in it both our own Manners, and those of the Persons with whom we live and converse. (II, 248))

Later in the same piece Rapin is quoted to support Dennis's own opinions about ridicule: "Comedy . . . is an image of common life and its end is to expose on Stage the Defects of particular Persons in order to cure the defects of the Public and to correct and amend the People by the fear of being Laughed at". In agreeing with Rapin, Dennis recognizes a basic difference between comedy and tragedy: the characters of comedy are drawn from common life, and their appeal is in their immediacy, but in tragedy the characters are ideal and so transcend the ordinary to represent universal "truths".

Although he stressed action, Dennis believed characterization to be the key to comedy, and it is necessary to look more closely at his concerns about it. He supported Wycherley because he believed him to be the only playwright to find humour in high characters (I, 283), and he agreed that high characters could be introduced in comedy to add variety (Paul, 171), but

in general Dennis was guarded against their use. In chapter one, I mentioned that the French Classicists misunderstood Aristotle's definition of "low" characters; it would appear that Dennis also assumed that social rank not morality was implied. He explains in this passage from *A Large Account* that it is more difficult to find humour in the educated:

Now the more education a Man has, the more he is capable of subduing, or at least of hiding his Passions and his Humours. And that which we call good Breeding, is, or should be nothing else but a Habit and Custom of doing things, which reason has dictated for the convenience, and ease, and good of Society. From which it follows, that among People of condition there is more Resemblance, and a greater appearance of reason.( I 283)

But this does not suggest that Dennis was opposed to instructing people of the upper class. He defended the ridicule of the gentry against Collier's attacks, insisting that "Since Follies ought to be exposed, the Follies of the Great are the fittest, as being most conspicuous and most contagious" (I,182). He suggested likewise that "a Lord can be corrected nowhere but on the Stage" (Ibid). In his preface to *The Comical Gallant*, however, he also defends his own use of low characters, insisting that "'tis among People of the lower sort, that by the means of Passion and Humour, Nature appears so admirably conspicuous in all her Charming diversities"(I, 285). Because many of his contemporaries also understood the importance of "the local and temporary", they objected to his use of characters which were "obsolete and quite out of date". Dennis finds a way around this criticism by insisting that "any Characters in Comedy which are finely drawn, will please those who can judge", while conceding that a poet "must Copy the present Age" in order to "please the generality"(Ibid). He then asserts his infamous independence by concluding that he "never made it [his] chief aim to please the generality". It would be difficult to come up with Dennis's definitive

position on characterization in comedy because his stand alters slightly according to his purpose: he maintains a stricter ideology when criticizing other work than he does in defence against his own.

The lack of form is one of the consistent objections which the adaptors had against Shakespeare's work, and Dennis suggested that comedy should be more regular than tragedy "because its scope and subject is smaller"(II, lxxxix). It is the irregularity of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* that he was most concerned with in his adaptation, and many of his changes are instrumental in giving form to the otherwise chaotic arrangement of Shakespeare's play. Having looked at the adaptors preceding Dennis, and the general attitudes towards comedy held by our critic and his contemporaries, it only remains to analyse Dennis's comedy and see what he has done with Shakespeare.

## II

The critical piece, *A Large Account of the Taste in Poetry*, is in part an explanation as to why Dennis chose to adapt *The Merry Wives*, and what changes he believed it necessary to make. He notes that he had "two sorts of people" to contend with in working with the play: "The one believed it to be so admirable, that nothing ought to be added to it; the other fancied it to be so despicable, that any ones time would be lost upon it" (I, 280). It is worth noting Vickers' claim that by the early 1700's there were signs of opposition against Shakespearean adaptations (12), which could explain why some disapproved of the play's correction. In his research on *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Roberts cites Gildon and Dryden among those who praised the comedy, and Dennis might have counted

his friends among those who believed it above reproach. Gildon apparently considered it Shakespeare's only "true comedy" (62), and Dryden, in his *Essay on Dramatick Poesy* believed it to be "almost exactly formed"(62). Kilbourne also mentions Dryden's appreciation of the comedy's regularity with respect to the unities (39). I could not find specific examples from contemporaries who condemned the play, but it is a safe bet that they considered it too farcical to be of much consequence, and agreed with Dennis that the action was not unified.

Dennis briefly explains why he feels the play worthwhile and also why it needs improvement. He opens his defence of the play by reminding the reader that Queen Elizabeth, "one of the greatest Queens that ever was in the World" (I, 279), asked that this comedy be written for her and was "very well pleas'd at the Representation". According to Dennis's personal hierarchy of endorsers, royalty ranks first, and he goes on to include the pleasure Charles II's court gained from the play. One aspect that he himself approves of in the play is the characterization, saying, "I found three or four extraordinary Characters that were exactly drawn, and truly Comical; and that I saw besides in [the play] some as happy touches as ever were in Comedy"(Ibid). He also mentions the action, which is plentiful and more "regular" than the antics of Falstaff in *Henry IV*. Of his reservations about the play, his first is that because it was written in only two weeks, it cannot be perfect (I, 280); he comments on the impossibility of such a feat in the prologue: " But Shakespeare's Play in fourteen days was writ,/ And in that space to make all just and fit,/ Was an attempt surpassing human Wit." (II, 391). Dennis's greatest complaint seems to contradict his enthusiasm for the abundance of action; he worries about the broken unity explaining,

"...there are no less than three Actions in [the play] that are independent one of another, which divide and distract the minds of an Audience"(I, 280). In addition to this larger crime, Shakespeare's style is often "stiff, forced, and affected, whereas the Dialogue of Comedy ought to be as free as the air". In changing the style Dennis was also careful to remove much of the witticism which might inhibit the humour. Next, though he likes Shakespeare's characters, Dennis still feels further action should be added to "make them show the better"(Ibid). Finally, although Shakespeare's comedy is more morally conscious than many of his others, Dennis still believed that changes were necessary to properly instruct the audience. With these criticisms in mind, we should proceed to *The Comical Gallant* itself to determine how Dennis made his corrections.

To unify the action, Dennis "made everything Instrumental to Fenton's Marriage, and the whole to depend on one common Centre"(I, 280). Since in the original, Fenton had a very minor part to play, Dennis adjusted the plot considerably to fit the new scheme. In his version, Fenton plans all of the escapades of Falstaff, the wives, the husbands, and Ann Page's suitors in order to "divert" them while he marries Ann(*C. 6, 3*). The logic behind such an elaborate scheme seems shaky at best; Kilbourne raises a strong objection to Dennis's method of unifying the action:

How much more natural and artistic are Shakespeare's method of setting Sir Hugh and Doctor Caius at variance and his making Falstaff of himself become amorous of the wives, than Dennis's artificial expedient of making Fenton the bringer about of both conditions (46).

Kilbourne also criticizes the misnomer in the title. If Dennis had sincerely intended to build-up Fenton's involvement in the plot, the title should have reflected that change instead of centering even more decisively on Falstaff

than the original. Murphy recognizes that Dennis's attempt to unify the action does not succeed anyway, because it is "merely cosmetic"; Fenton and Ann are still peripheral characters, and are on the stage even less frequently than in Shakespeare's version (84). Fenton introduces the plot in Act I, but does not return until the end of Act IV. Murphy explains that "meanwhile, all our attention is focused on Falstaff's blundering relations with the wives and Ford. . . the Fenton-Ann plot line is even more subordinate than in the original"(Ibid). Dennis has not repaired the unity as he claims he has in the preface. To support the apparently misleading title, however, Gene Hardy insists it would be equally possible to judge that Etherege was "confused when he named his play *The Man of Mode, or Sir Fopling Flutter* and then created the action of the plot around the love interests of Dorimant and Young Bellair" (111). Dennis clearly believes that in *The Comical Gallant* it is enough that Fenton's handiwork unifies the plot; the focus of the title should still be on the character to be ridiculed so that the moral will be better understood.

Dennis's next objection is to Shakespeare's style, which he believes does not conform to the comic characters. I mentioned above his aversion to witty banter which shows the character of the playwright rather than the personalities in the play; in *The Comical Gallant*, Dennis removes much of Shakespeare's punning and clever retorts found throughout the original. Typically, those witticisms which Dennis keeps complement the "humours" of the characters. An example is the exchange between Falstaff and Pistol in Act I, Scene i in which Falstaff begins revealing his plan:

Falst. My honest lads, I will tell you what I am about.

Pist. Two yards or more.

Falst. No quips now Pistol. Indeed I'm in the waste two yards about. But I am now

about no waste, I'm about thrift. (*C. Q.* 4)

Dennis wants to lose no opportunity which makes the characters ridiculous, and so it is not superfluous wit to laugh about Falstaff's size, an important aspect of his character. On the other hand, Dennis removes Falstaff's retort in Act III, Scene v after he has been thrown into the Thames: "Mistress Ford! I have had ford enough: I was thrown into the ford: I have my belly full of ford. (*M. W. W.*, 80).

In general the language is changed so that it better suits the lower characters. In his preface, Dennis gives as an example the affectation in Shakespeare's dialogue between the wives in their first scene together, and Ford's part in his first scene with Falstaff. I will be dealing with the characters more extensively later, but it is important to note that in changing the style Dennis changed the characters significantly. When we are introduced to the two wives in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, they appear sensible, level-headed middle-aged women who disdain the advances of the knight and want revenge against him because he assaults their honour. Dennis has made it clear in his preface that he intended all the characters to be "low", and to facilitate this requirement in the wives, he turns each of them into a gossipy flirt who wants revenge primarily because her pride is hurt that Falstaff has been wooing someone else. Here is an example of the wives' dialogue in Shakespeare's version:

Mrs. P. What's the matter, woman?

Mrs. F. Oh woman . . . if it were not for one trifling respect, I could come to such honour.

Mrs. P. Hang the trifle, Woman, take the honour: What is it? Dispense with trifles: What is it?

Mrs. F. If I would but go to hell for an eternal moment or so. . . I could be knighted!

Mrs. P. What? Thou liest! Sir Alice Ford! These knights will hack, and so thou shouldst not alter the article of thy gentry.

Mrs. F. . . .Here, read, read: perceive how I might be knighted. I shall think the

worse of fat men, as long as I have an eye to make difference of men's liking. (*M. W. W.*, 70)

The changed dialogue in Dennis's version reads:

Mrs. P. So, you have got a Gallant then.

Mrs. F. But such a Gallant --

Mrs. P. Nay, I'd have you to know, I have not been behind with you. I have done execution too, and upon the greatest Man in the Kingdom.

Mrs. F. Ay, for Title perhaps, but for substance none can be compared to mine.

Mrs. P. Do you think so? But twould make your Heart ake tho, to carry but half the substance of my Gallant.

Mrs. F. Will you persist in comparing your Lover to mine; there's to convince you.

Mrs. P. Well! And there's my argument! (*Giving one another Letters*)(*C. G.*, 7)

Neither of the wives of Shakespeare's version is truly impressed by Falstaff's advances, but Dennis adds ridicule to his own treatment of the women as they genuinely boast of their supposed victory over the knight's heart. The dialogue throughout the scene is fast-paced, unlike his long-winded declamations in *Iphigenia*; his intent is to simplify the language so that it takes on the idioms of an everyday exchange. Shakespeare's dialogue is unquestionably more elevated, and the wives speak at greater length using colourful figures of speech and clever repartee.

The second scene in which Dennis revises the style extensively is the first meeting between Ford and Falstaff. Again his intention is to keep the characters low, and so he reduces Ford to a raging cuckold who is more reminiscent of Pinchwife in *The Country Wife* than the "jealous but dignified" (Kilbourne, 44) husband of *The Merry Wives*. The original scene is very brief and precise: Ford maintains a cool demeanor as he listens to Falstaff boast about his wife and malign his own character; he tells the knight what he wants him to do and only shows his anger in a soliloquy at the conclusion of the scene. With Dennis's alterations, however, the scene



becomes much longer and more farcical. It begins with a physical "struggle" as Ford attempts to give money to Falstaff while he feigns refusal (*C. G.* 12), and later there is more action as Falstaff puts his hand on Ford's forehead to show where the horns grow on a cuckold; Ford exclaims, "Zounds you hurt me, (*pushing away Falstaff rudely*) why this is Rare! Is not this Rare?" (*C. G.*, 16). The language Ford uses reflects the changed scene and his much altered character. In the original his speeches are long and Falstaff's are mostly short questions or exclamations; Ford is clearly in control. As the character "Brook", he tastefully describes his unrequited love for Mrs. Ford, summing it up in two lines of poetry: "Love like a shadow flies when substance love pursues,/ Pursuing that that flies, and flying what pursues." (*M. W. W.*, 73). In a kind of parody of these two lines, Dennis develops a less poetic way to explain "Broom's" plight through short snappy dialogue between the two men:

Falst. . . .you love Mrs. Ford, you say?  
 Ford. Extreemly!  
 Falst. And you have follow'd her like any Dog?  
 Ford. I have indeed.  
 Falst. And you have hunted her like any Deer?  
 Ford. I have indeed.  
 Falst. Sometimes she has kept out of sight, sometimes she has run in view.  
 Ford. She has so.  
 Falst. But when you have come up with her, she has kept you off, with Oh my Virtue! Oh my Honour! Oh my dear Matrimonial Vow.  
 Ford. Her very words.  
 Falst. But -- a -- hold you me! Ay, you have conceiv'd a shrewd suspicion, that while she has been keeping you at Bay thus, some slyer Curs have come in with her Haunches.  
 Ford. Ay, there lies the business.  
 Falst. Ha, ha, ha, ha!  
 Ford. You are merry, Sir John.  
 Falst. My Dame Ford's a wag. . . , Master Broom, she serves you, for all the world, . . . as she does that Cuckoldly Rogue her Husband. Ha! Ha! Ha! (*C. G.* 15).

It is obvious from this excerpt that Falstaff gains the upper hand in this

scene, and Ford is ridiculed repeatedly. This type of dialogue continues at great length throughout the episode, with frequent asides from both characters to allow the audience a glimpse of their real humour. Dennis has certainly succeeded in lowering the tone of the comedy by developing more farcical dialogue, but as Spencer argues, it "did not improve the original" (346).

I've already spoken briefly about Dennis's changes in characterization to align with his preference for low comedy. The wives are crude; and Mrs. Page in particular shows a strange brutality when she beats Ford in her disguise as Captain Dingboy. Kilbourne comments that Mrs. Page's "masquerading as an eighteenth-century spark, while doubtless pleasing to the audiences of Dennis's time, makes the character a dreadful caricature of the right-minded wife of the original"(44). By allowing the characters to "shew themselves" in the scene between Ford and Falstaff, Dennis also turns the two principal males into caricatures. The conclusion of the scene has Falstaff lewdly describe how Mrs. Ford will undress when she meets him at their rendez-vous, ostensibly to whet the disguised Ford's appetite. The language is coarse; Spencer calls it "unquotable"(347), and Murphy rightly points out that, "if he expects us to find such lines humorous, Dennis has misgauged our relish for low comedy"(85). The passage has a sadistic tone to it which makes the audience uncomfortable for Ford; it does not promote laughter. Dennis would never admit that he has created characters of farce, but in a letter to Congreve he explains that characters become farcical when they are too "extravagant" and "singular" to move or instruct the audience (II, 385), and I believe Falstaff and Ford cross that line during their scene together.

Ann and Fenton are the only two principal characters who escape ridicule. Murphy calls Fenton "a weak cousin of the young plotters who add so much to the intrigue comedies of Wycherley and Congreve"(84), and it is interesting that Dennis adopted this element from the Restoration comedy of manners for his low comedy of humours. Odell also asserts that the scenes between Fenton and Ann are developed in the "courtly love language" of the Restoration; he calls the dialogue "staccato"(80). Perhaps in their first meeting together there is evidence of this style, but I would argue that Ann at least, seems more like a heroine from a sentimental comedy -- which is particularly surprising considering Dennis's distaste for that trend. It is evident in their first meeting that Ann has difficulty disobeying either of her parents' wishes though she loves Fenton,

Fent. Can I have the happiness to see you at last, unkind Mrs. Page!

Mrs A. Well! Are you not the most ungrateful Man upon Earth, to upbraid me with unkindness, when I do and suffer so much for you. Have not both my Parents forbid me the very sight of you upon pain of their mortal displeasure. And is it a small proof of my esteem for you that I give you, in disobeying their orders?  
(*C. G.*, 2)

At the conclusion of the play we discover that the couple did not marry, and Ann explains to her parents, "I never did, and never will do any thing against your commands"( *C. G.*, 47). In Ann, Dennis has created an "exemplary" character; she helps to balance out all the other farcical characters in the play.

In improving the morality of the play, Dennis includes a series of explicit moral lessons. An example is the sentiment found in Ann and Fenton's decision to obey the parents. The final couplet honours the couple: "But heav'n will Crown this Marriage with success,/ Which Love and Duty thus conspire to bless"( *C. G.*, 49). Kilbourne scoffingly concludes that this is

merely "a moral directed against clandestine marriages"(43), and certainly this lesson seems simplistic after all the vice exposed during the play. Roberts explains that *The Merry Wives of Windsor* focuses on marriage also, but more generally in "the problems of achieving it and the perils of maintaining it" (73). He states that Shakespeare reveals "the enemies of good marriage" in the play, which are: "greed, lust, jealousy and stupidity"(Ibid). Through their action, the various characters promote these 'enemies' but ultimately overcome them. In Dennis's version, the same vices exist but there is more emphasis on punishing the individual characters who exhibit them. Shakespeare's play uses Falstaff as a kind of "scapegoat" (Murphy, 85); his punishment at the end washes everyone clean of vice, and they can then "laugh this sport o'er by a country fire -- Sir John and all"(*M. W. W.*, 89). In the adaptation, Falstaff is made to look like a fool during much of the play, but it is Ford who receives the final humiliation at the end. Kilbourne interprets this major revision as a nod to the comic traditions of Dennis's day.

Dennis, in making this denouement, brought his play into conformity with that immorality which characterized the Restoration comedies, in which the injured husband is made to suffer ridicule, while the profligate gallant who has tampered with the wife gets off scot free with commendation and applause ( 44).

I agree that it certainly looks as though Falstaff gets off 'scot free', but I don't believe that that was Dennis's intention. He probably felt that the wives had been strangely lenient on Ford, and Shakespearean scholars since have also observed the disproportionate amount of abuse levelled at Falstaff (Kilbourne, 74). If we do not accept the theory that Falstaff is a scapegoat, then surely Dennis is correct in distributing the punishment more evenly. The measures he takes are extreme, since the fairy attack is longer and

crueler than Shakespeare's song and dance, but according to his principles of comedy, Dennis is correcting an error in the moral lesson. He also elaborates on the lessons learned by the two foolish suitors, having Page recommend to Caius: "...learn wisdom from what has happened to you, and the next Woman you pretend to; make it your business to gain the Heart of your mistress, as well as the consent of her Parents, for be certain that a forced Marriage is but a lawful Rape"( *C.G.*, 49). This argument also condemns the Pages' involvement in arranging the marriage without their daughter's consent, and so all the older characters are shown in need of some instruction. With so many offenders, however, Falstaff's indiscretions are forgotten in the scuffle, and we lose the more clearly focused lesson found in Shakespeare's comedy.

After Dennis had carefully smoothed out the rougher areas of Shakespeare's play, he was disappointed that his audience was unreceptive to his craftsmanship. *The Comical Gallant* opened in the spring of 1702, while the stage was still smarting from the sting of Collier's attacks. According to Murphy, the Falstaff character in the *Henry IV* plays had regained popularity at approximately the same time Dennis presented his play, "so that in terms of audience receptivity to the material being adapted, [his] timing seems right"(83). Unfortunately though, the timing was not enough to save his comedy. From what is available in the records, it appears the play was removed from the stage after the first night. Johnson calls it "the most dismal failure of Dennis's playwriting career" (xvi). Murphy reminds us of the circumstances at the time which rendered the success of the play unlikely, noting Collier's control, theatre closures after King William's death and the fact that Dennis could not choose his

preferred comic lead (86). Even still, he admits, the play could not please an audience "under the best of circumstances". There is a surprising amount of obscenity in the play, in spite of the Collier Controversy, which could certainly have influenced its failure. The critics of the day panned it remorselessly, but the most vitriolic attack I could find was in the more recent work of Hazelton Spencer, who called it "a contemptible compound of farce and smut. . . the play died immediately; and if anyone but the adaptor mourned, I have not seen the record of it"(350).

Dennis's preface to the play was intended to analyse the "degeneracy" of taste in his contemporary audiences, in comparison to the better judgement found in Charles II's day. As Hooker suggests in his Explanatory Notes on the text, perhaps "the fact that up to this point not one of [Dennis's] plays had succeeded may help to explain in part his attitude toward contemporary taste" (I, 491). Spencer is less diplomatic in his comments: "it was not so clear from his remarks that Dennis was an intelligent critic as that the failure of his play had got under his skin" (346). In his preface, Dennis blamed his failure on the weak acting of its principal character:

Falstaff's part. . . on which almost all the rest [of the play] depends, was by no means acted to the satisfaction of the audience; upon which several fell from disliking the Actions into disliking the Play, which will always be very natural upon such occasions, though sometimes not very reasonable, and divers Objections were made, which if the Play had succeeded had perhaps never been thought of.  
(Paul, 40)

There is no list of the actors included with the play, but Genest suggests Powell might have played the lead (250), and Colley Cibber apparently proposed William Bullock (Hardy, 97). Neither identification can be proven, and it is equally unclear whom Dennis wanted for the part. The critic tended

to make excuses for the many failures he experienced during his career as a dramatist, but there were a number of factors working against him in this production. Such a low comedy would also have had to struggle against the force of sentimentality which was gaining momentum during this time, and perhaps the relationship between Ann and Fenton was Dennis's attempt to appease the popular taste of the day. It did not go far enough, however; the farcical elements were clearly too broad for the new audience.

Unlike Dennis's adaptation of *Iphigenia*, there are few redeeming features in *The Comical Gallant* which justify this revision of the original. We can understand Dennis's rationale, but the play which results from it falls far short of his ideals. It is more unified, but the strictures he employs to refine the play are faulty and squeeze the life out of the plot. Adding action and expanding scenes give actors more opportunity to personalize the characters, but as Odell complains, the "episodes are spun out to intolerable length, making the play very dull reading"(81). Perhaps it works as a farce, but since this was not Dennis's intent, we must consider the play a failure.

Chapter Three  
*The Invader of His Country*

The critics of the eighteenth century greatly admired Shakespeare's tragedies, although this may not seem the case to judge by the liberties taken in their adaptations. Most agreed with Dennis that Shakespeare was a master at evoking terror in the audience, a fundamental requirement in tragedy (II,1), and that his genius was best suited to the "sterner passions" (II, 433). The emphasis of criticism overall was placed on tragedy rather than comedy at this time because, as Hooker points out, "[it] was recognized as one of the three genres of 'the Greater poetry' and comedy was not"; therefore, "critics desiring to assert the greatness of their national literature naturally turned to Shakespeare's tragedies" (Ibid). It follows then, that adaptors would want to adjust any imperfections noticeable in the plays so as to further beautify and perfect the works of their heritage. Dennis's own effort in this beautification process resulted in *The Invader of his Country*, produced in 1719, an adaptation of *Coriolanus*. Because of its political implications it was an obvious choice for the Whiggish Dennis to make, and he was not the only adaptor to recognize its value in an age of the Jacobite threat. Tate revised the play before Dennis in 1682 and James Thomson produced his version after Dennis in 1749. Odell recognizes a similarity in the timing of the three plays; he notes that *Coriolanus* "seemed destined to be launched, with new trimmings, during or after each of England's successive politico-civil upheavals"(59). Certainly the subject matter was relevant in Dennis's day, and many of the changes he made heightened an interpretation appropriate for his own audience. I have



already briefly outlined the critical theory of tragedy followed during this period in chapter one. This chapter concentrates on the general opinions held about Shakespeare's tragedies, Dennis's views in particular, and a comparison of *The Invader of His Country* to *Coriolanus*.

I

When critics of Dennis's period approached Shakespeare as a tragedian, they tended to treat him, to use Odell's description, as "a wayward child of extraordinary cleverness"(88). Adaptors would agree with Tate that a tragedy by Shakespeare was like "a Heap of Jewels, unstrung, and unpolished"(Branam, 5). Loftis stresses the importance of "judgement" over "fancy" in the dramatic criticisms, and in this area, Shakespeare was seen to use too little judgement in his over-abundance of fancy(45). Of his language, critics and adaptors decried his "false images, hard metaphors and flights, where the eye of Judgement cannot trace him"(Branam, 3). Saintsbury gives a good example of the common sense approach to metaphor in this period. They knew that one would offend propriety by stating: "And periwig with snow the baldpate woods", but from this they went on to censure, "The multitudinous seas incarnadine"(415). The key was that style must suit the subjects, but they were perhaps too restrictive in their demands of the image. Still, they admired Shakespeare's imagination, and appreciated fancy under the right circumstances. Lewis Theobald praised the witches of *Macbeth* and Caliban in *The Tempest*, but explained that because Shakespeare lacked art he was unable to discriminate between appropriate and inappropriate use of fancy; "sorting out [his] good strokes and putting them in proper order were the tasks of the adapter"(Branam, 5).

Of course, Shakespeare was not alone in his violations of probability; these criticisms could be applied to most Renaissance tragedy (Loftis, 44).

The doctrine of decorum was another weak spot in Shakespeare's work. His best characters were too individual to comply with Rymer's insistence on uniformity, or to be "representatives of their social ranks, occupations and ages"(Loftis, 45). We've already seen Dennis's disapproval of Shakespeare's too dignified personalities in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*; the tragic characters are far more complex and ambiguous, and therefore caused even more consternation for the critic. Although many critics, including Dennis, praised Shakespeare for his well-defined characters (II, 4), their taste in characterization was more simple and generalized. The purpose of the characters was to help administer an overall moral to the play. Also, audiences were plot-oriented, and as Branam explains in his work *Eighteenth-Century Adaptations of Shakespearean Tragedy*, it was more interesting for them to watch "a probable character react to a trying situation . . . [than explore] the possible varieties of human character"(115). They did not want subtlety in the character development, only flat types (114). The types also had to be consistent with the genre. A tragedy was to concern itself only with the higher ranked characters: "the king belonged to tragedy, the tinker in comedy; the two should never meet". Genres were to be strictly adhered to, and no overlapping should be attempted. The neo-classicists were opposed to the idea of tragi-comedy and to comedy being introduced as relief in tragedy ( 47). Since Shakespeare's tragedies were filled with contrast and variety of personalities, it was often necessary for adaptors to remove undesirable characters, or revise those that offended against decorum.

Orderliness and symmetry of action were essential to a well-designed tragedy, and Shakespeare's artlessness was nowhere more apparent than in his haphazard form. An adaptor's greatest challenge was to re-shape the plot so that the "liaison des scènes" remained unbroken, and the action unified. It was not always possible to unify the scenes when the action occurred in different settings, but Dryden remarks in his preface to *Troilus and Cressida*, "I have so ordered them, that there is a coherence of 'em with one another, and a dependence on the main design: no leaping from Troy to the Grecian tents, and thence back again in the same act; but a due proportion of time allowed for every motion"( Dryden, 241). Again, it is the emphasis on probability that determines how the play should be structured.

There is a pattern in the differences between the dramatic writing of Shakespeare's age and that of Dennis's. Generally, the movement is from the individual to the type found in a specific genre. Shakespeare repeatedly appears to thwart audience expectations in his individual characters: his kings are peevish and his jesters philosophic. He makes no attempt to fit the character to a general type. By Dennis's day, however, individualism was considered disorderly. Better to follow a clearly marked authority which insists that certain types be presented in each genre. This change in taste explains why Dennis approved of Falstaff who, unlike most of Shakespeare's characters, is a kind of stock personality, recognizable in any age. The basic shift in focus from the individual to authority accounts for the many changes made in the adaptations. To suit the genre of tragedy, the new versions focus on order, regularity, simplicity, verisimilitude, poetical justice and clarity. With these conditions in mind, I will now turn to Dennis specifically to examine his own views on Shakespeare's ability.

In his *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Shakespeare*, Dennis begins by praising the playwright:

His imaginations were often as just, as they were bold and strong. He had a natural Discretion . . . and his Judgement was strong and penetrating. . . his characters are always drawn justly, exactly, graphically, except where he fail'd by not knowing History or the Poetical Art. . . He had so fine a Talent for touching the Passions, and they are so lively in him, and so truly in Nature, that they often touch us more without their due Preparations, than those of other Tragick Poets, who have all the Beauty of Design and all the Advantage of Incidents. . . His Sentiments for the most part in his best Tragedies, are noble, generous, easie and natural, and adapted to the Persons who use them. His Expression is in many Places good and pure after a hundred Years; simple tho' elevated, graceful tho' bold, and easie tho' strong ( II, 4).

It is important to note all the qualifiers Dennis carefully employs in his praise; Shakespeare is great only in so far as his unrefined age allowed. He goes on to imagine, "If Shakespeare had these great Qualities of Nature, what would he not have been, if he had join'd to so happy a Genius Learning and the Poetical Art"(II, 5). To Dennis, Shakespeare's gift is his natural genius, but there is no doubt in his mind that without art, he is only a partially successful playwright. It is because he was unaware of the rules that Shakespeare was not consistently strong. Paul suggests, however, that even with his emphasis on the rules, Dennis conceded that Shakespeare's breaches of the minor unities were necessary "for attaining higher beauties"(187). What Dennis stresses throughout his treatise on the playwright, is that without art, he misses opportunities to heighten audience enjoyment. The incidents in *Coriolanus*, for example, are "less moving, less surprizing, and less wonderful" for want of poetical art (Ibid). In Dennis's adaptation of *Coriolanus*, his objective is to pick up those missed opportunities and so improve the play's dramatic effect.

Most of Dennis's specific criticisms of Shakespeare's tragedies are revealed in his reasons for revising *Coriolanus*. The mistake Shakespeare

makes in all of his historical plays is to follow history instead of constructing a fable. To Dennis, "the very Foundation of Tragedy. . . is a Fable"(II, 286). A fable is carefully prepared so that the parts of the action are dependent on one another and so move the passions more strongly than the arbitrary cause and effect of acts in history (II, 5-6). Shakespeare's actions "ramble" and seem unfocused; a fable has a "just beginning" in which the causes of events are described and consistent throughout the work. The fable is especially important in the composition of related scenes and the distribution of poetical justice, both of which elements *Coriolanus* is lacking. To Dennis, Shakespeare moves the passions by the "sheer force of nature"(II, 428), but if he had created a fable instead of an historical play, "he would have mov'd ten times more"(II, 5).

Dennis's arguments against *Coriolanus* are often very similar to his criticisms of *Cato*. In both cases there can be no moral instruction because there is no fable. In many of Dennis's critical writings he complains of Shakespeare's ignorance of poetical justice. He asks the reader in his *Decay and Defects of Dramatick Poetry*, "Is there anything like a Fable, any thing like a generall morall in the *Hamlett*, the *Othello*, the *Mackbeth*, the *King Lear*, or the *Julius Cæsar* in all which the good and Bad perish promiscuously?"(II, 286). It is important to Dennis that "the Good must never fail to prosper, and the Bad must be always punish'd : Otherwise the Incidents, and particularly the Catastrophe. . .are liable to be imputed rather to Chance than to Almighty Conduct and to Sovereign Justice"(II, 6). His criticisms of Shakespeare's other tragedies are no less relevant in *Coriolanus*. Dennis does not argue that Coriolanus should have escaped death; he was guilty of treason and should be made "a dreadful

Example to all who lead on Foreign Enemies to the Invasion of their native Country"(Ibid). What bothered Dennis was the manner in which the hero is killed. Instead of being left to the justice of the state and found guilty because of his own misconduct, he is murdered by the whim of Aufidius and so dies through treachery not punishment. This treatment appears to be the result of chance rather than providence, and so goes against poetical justice. What is even more unjust in the play is that Aufidius and the two Tribunes receive no penalty for their crimes, and in his own play Dennis makes sure to correct this error. Dennis is particularly incensed that Aufidius "not only survives, and survives unpunish'd, but seems to be rewarded for so detestable an Action; by engrossing all those Honours to himself which Coriolanus before had shar'd with him"(Ibid). The Roman Tribunes are also guilty of misleading the people and having Coriolanus banished under a "pretended Jealousy". Unless justice is properly administered, a tragedy can have no moral value.

Dennis also evaluates the characters in the play and finds them wanting. To begin with, although Shakespeare follows history he often does so incorrectly, especially when developing his characters. In his essay on Shakespeare, Dennis spends some time defending his opinion that he was not familiar with original Greek and Roman texts, especially the work of Livy. He suggests that Shakespeare was able to write *The Comedy of Errors* simply because there was a translation of Plautus's *Menæchmi* available in his day, but not one of Livy or any of the other Ancients. (Hooker notes that Dennis was wrong about Livy; there was a translation available in 1600, approximately eight years before Shakespeare wrote *Coriolanus*: 431.) In *Troilus and Cressida* Dennis points to various anachronisms;

an example is that Aristotle is introduced, although he was born long after the Trojan war took place (II, 8). Dennis also reminds the reader that Alexander, who is mentioned in *Coriolanus*, lived "above two hundred years after him", and that the name of the hero's wife should be Volumnia and the mother Vetturia as they are in Livy instead of Virgilia and Volumnia as Shakespeare has named them (II, 9). These observations seem petty and inconsistent with Dennis's emphasis on the fable rather than history, but his remarks on other characters of *Coriolanus* are based more solidly on his critical beliefs.

Decorum requires that all characters of tragedy be dignified and serious. Dennis accuses Shakespeare of offending "against the Dignity of Tragedy. . .the Truth of Fact , the Authority of Ancient Rome, and the Majesty of the Roman People", by introducing a "rabble" into *Coriolanus*. He explains that historically,

. . .that part of the People who ran about the Streets upon great Festivals, or publick Calamities, or publick Rejoicings, or Revolutions in Government, are certainly the Scum of the Populace. But the Persons who in the Time of Coriolanus, rose in Vindication of their own rights, and extorted from the Patricians the Institution of the Tribunes of the People, and the Persons by whom afterwards Coriolanus was tried, were the whole Body of the Roman People. . .which Body included the Roman knights, and the wealthy substantial Citizens, who were as different from the Rabble as the Patricians themselves, as qualified as the latter to form a right Judgement of Things, and to contemn the vain Opinions of the Rabble (II, 9).

Dennis argues against the introduction of such low characters in tragedy, and also explains how Shakespeare could have avoided including the rabble if he had been more conversant with ancient history.

In addition to this lapse in dignity, Shakespeare is also "sinning against history"(Paul, 131) by turning the "eloquent" character of Menenius into "an errant Buffoon", by portraying Aufidius as a "base and a profligate villain" and by allowing inconsistencies in the perception of the title character

( II, 5). Dennis calls the Menenius of Shakespeare a "Ciceronian Jack-pudding" who is depicted as "a Hater and Contemner and Villifier of the People". Livy represented him as "extremely popular" with the people; he was a man who was instrumental in establishing the Institution of the Tribunes rather than opposing it (II, 10). Dennis does not go into as much detail in his opposition to Aufidius's character, but most likely his argument would be that, like the villains in *Cato*, the Volscian General is too evil to be appropriate for tragedy. Also, since he is a rival to Coriolanus in battle, he should be given the dignity of heroism as well, even though his faults outweigh his virtues. Finally, Shakespeare has "offended against the Equalities of the Manners"(II,5) in his inconsistent development of Coriolanus. In the beginning he is "shewn so open, so frank, so violent, and so magnanimous", but "is represented in the latter part by Aufidius, which is contradicted by no one, a flattering, fawning, cringing, insinuating Traytor"(ibid). This apparent inconsistency in character is part of the ambiguity of Shakespeare which Dennis seeks to eliminate in his own version.

The above faults in *Coriolanus* are the ones most emphasized in Dennis's essay, and which he endeavours to correct in his own tragedy. The analysis is also consistent with his general opinions about Shakespeare as a tragedian, and accurately reflect the prevailing attitudes of other Augustan critics. The second part of this chapter will concentrate on Dennis's *The Invader of His Country* as it compares to *Coriolanus*, and will examine the many scuffles that ensued before and after his play's production at Drury Lane.



## II

Dennis's most difficult task in revising the play was to create a fable out of Shakespeare's history by tightening the design and making all action focus on the overall moral lesson. Just as Dryden ran into problems with the continuity of scene in adapting *Troilus and Cressida*, Dennis was not wholly successful in limiting the action of his play to one place. But like Dryden, he was careful to preserve probability wherever possible. In Act I, instead of jumping from a Roman street, to Corioli, to Marcius's house, back to Corioli then to the two battle camps as Shakespeare does, Dennis constricts all of his action in the first act to the Roman camp outside of Corioli. As Branam explains, by paring down the scene shifts this way, Dennis "was not able to . . . retain the mass of expository material Shakespeare had packed into his first act; but if his exposition is less full, it is accomplished with apparent order and design"(25). Later in the eighteenth century, Dr. Johnson commented that in Shakespeare's play "there is, perhaps, too much bustle in the first act, and too little in the last"(Ibid). Johnson would likely have been in favour of our critic's revision, since the added action of Act V in Dennis's play more than makes up for the eliminated "bustle" of Act I. Branam himself credits Dennis's judgement in leaving out Coriolanus's entrance into Corioli, which would be "difficult to present effectively on the stage"(26); instead, the event is quickly related by a messenger. By leaving out all extraneous action except the military engagement, Dennis has created in Act I the "just beginning" of a fable. He introduces Coriolanus as an ideal hero and develops only the most essential details which maintain a unity of design to be further embroidered in the next four acts.

Now that a fable has been created, the moral instruction can be embossed onto the design. In the prologue, mention is made of the overall purpose in presenting the play:

For as when Britain's Rebel Sons of late  
 Combin'd with Foreign Foes t'invade the State,  
 She to your Valour and your Conduct owes,  
 That she subdued and crush'd her num'rous Foes:  
 We shew, to Night, such Treasons to prevent,  
 That their Guilt's follow'd by their Punishment,  
 That Heav'n's the Guardian of our Rightful Cause,  
 And watches o'er our Sov'reign and our Laws

In these eight lines Dennis enunciates the improved moral lesson, its application to his own audience, and the poetical justice implicit in his revised scheme. It is interesting to note that all the other Shakespearean adaptations in the period between 1720 and 1723 also deal with "faction and uprising: . . . Cibber's *Henry VI*, Theobald's *Richard II*, Buckingham's *Julius Cæsar* and *Marcus Brutus*, Hill's *Henry V*, and Ambrose Philip's *Humfrey Duke of Gloucester*" (Branam, 62-63). Also evident in Dennis's political moral is the partisanship typical of the period between 1714 and 1760 (Johnson, xxv). As Johnson points out, "Like his predecessors, John Dennis assumed that the 'lessons' of the past were pragmatically applicable to current events"(Ibid). The changed title best reflects the new emphasis. Coriolanus is no longer presented as an individual but as a type, as a man who would fight against his own country; symbolically he is any Jacobite who threatens to raise foreign troops against England. Poetical justice takes on an added dimension in this context. Providence is on the side of England, and any pretenders will be duly punished. Justice is not only meted out to Coriolanus, but also to the two Tribunes, who are thrown off the cliff by the people they tried to manipulate, and to Aufidius who is

killed by Coriolanus's hand for his treachery. Dennis's ultimate message is a demand for liberty, and any who attempt to infringe on the country's liberty must die in the attempt. The last lines of his play spoken by Volumnia are even more explicit than the prologue:

But they who thro' Ambition, or Revenge,  
Or impious Int'rest, join with foreign Foes,  
T' invade or to betray their Native Country,  
Shall find, like Coriolanus, soon or late,  
From their perfidious Foreign Friends their Fate.

The most important changes in Dennis's tragedy, as in *The Comical Gallant*, are found in the characterization. In order to maintain decorum, Dennis makes many alterations in Menenius's character. He removes the first scene in Act I of the original, in which Menenius is seen chastising the populace; this revision eliminates the inconsistency with the Patrician's historical personality according to Livy. In addition, he must now turn Shakespeare's "errant buffoon" into a nobleman, as befits his rank. To do this, Dennis is careful to excise any other scenes that present the character in an undignified position. The first scene in Act II between Menenius, Brutus and Sicinius is removed because it includes the Patrician's unflattering description of himself:

I am known to be a humorous patrician, and one that loves a cup of hot wine with not a drop of allaying Tiber in't; said to be something imperfect in favouring the first complaint, hasty and tinder-like upon too trivial a motion; one that converses more with the buttock of the night than with the forehead of the morning . . . (C., 72)

Dennis took offense at the base language of this passage -- especially since it was to have been spoken by a man of high rank. As evidence of the way language is altered to better suit his character, I cannot think of a more appropriate example than the one Branam cites in his analysis: the two versions of Menenius's 'welcome home' speech. Shakespeare's style is filled

with ecstatic phrases and interesting images:

A hundred thousand welcomes. I could weep  
 And I could laugh, I am light and heavy. Welcome!  
 A curse begnaw the very root on's heart  
 That is not glad to see thee! You are three  
 That Rome should dote on: yet, by the faith of men,  
 We have some old crab-trees here at home that will not  
 Be grafted to your relish. . .(728)

Dennis's version is more subdued, although the basic idea is the same:

Now the Gods crown thee!  
 'Tis Forty Years since last my Eyes were moist,  
 But all my Mother comes into them now:  
 Now welcome, welcome, yes, ten thousand Welcomes!  
 A Curse begin ev'n at his very Heart,  
 Who is not glad to see thee. (*I.H.C.*, 17)

The latter sample intimates that this enthusiastic response is unusual for Menenius; Dennis emphasizes how long it has been since the character has cried, and takes pains to associate the act with his rarely exposed "feminine" traits. On the other hand, Shakespeare's character bubbles over with excitement, and there is little doubt that this is a typical response for him. The most significant difference in Dennis's representation of Menenius is that he eliminates his humiliating scene with the soldiers and Coriolanus at the Voscian camp. Since it is one of the best opportunities in the play to move the passions of the audience, it is clear that Dennis had to select among his critical principles; decorum and dignity outweigh audience impact.

The new Aufidius must be seen to be more heroic and less treacherous. In the original it is clear that the two generals respect one another as fighters, but in Dennis's version, Aufidius's admiration verges on idolatry. In Act IV of *The Invader of His Country*, before Coriolanus appears at

his house, Aufidius praises his enemy:

For Caius Martius was the only Roman,  
Who, when his Country had no Army ready,  
Could raise one by his Breath alone, as Jove  
First made the World, by saying Let it be.

...  
Was it their Army that reduce'd Corioli?  
No; 'twas the conqu'ring Arm of Marcius only;  
Who, by that wondrous Action, lost his Name,  
And found a nobler, with Immortal Glory. (*I.H.C.*, 49-50)

His effusive praise goes on in this vein for about thirty lines, and then just before Coriolanus appears at the door, he and the Senators discuss how fortunate they would be if he joined their side. After adding this scene, Dennis then leaves out the last scene in Act IV in which Aufidius comments on the inconvenience of Coriolanus's popularity, swearing to himself, "When, Caius, Rome is thine, /Thou art poor'st of all; then shortly art thou mine" (*C.*, 746). Instead, the adaptor creates a scene at the beginning of Act V in which Aufidius and his Tribunes ponder how to handle Coriolanus if he relents to his wife and mother. When the others consider murdering him, Aufidius opposes them saying, "Away. 'Tis true, if he relents he dies,/ But shall not basely be oppress'd by odds:/ I, in so just Cause, alone suffice" (*I.H.C.*, 64). Aufidius will kill Coriolanus if he baulks, but his method is more heroic since it comes in the form of a duel. The catastrophe of the play discovers Aufidius slain by Coriolanus, and begging forgiveness before he dies, "... forgive me, Marcius,/ That I thus far provok'd thy noble Nature" (*I.H.C.*, 76). With this final gesture, Aufidius's truly heroic character is once again restored; his treachery was fleeting and uncharacteristic. His final words also emphasize Coriolanus's worth. Unlike Shakespeare's original, Dennis's Aufidius does not muddy Coriolanus's strengths by attack; the hero is seen as a virtuous character consistently throughout the play.

To comply properly with the "flat" character types required in Dennis's day, Coriolanus himself receives a complete overhaul. Branam describes the fundamental difference between the two playwrights' purposes in writing the play: "Shakespeare was concerned with the effects of pride and emotional immaturity coupled with valor and inarticulateness. Dennis sought to demonstrate that it never paid to turn against one's country, whatever the provocation"(126). The original Coriolanus is not easy to sympathize with, and twentieth-century critics have often condemned the character for his "self-centered pride resulting from childish stubbornness and with radical deficiency as a human being" (Huffman, 176). Shakespeare intensifies any antagonistic feelings the audience might feel for the character by presenting his worst side first: his impatience with the populace. The first words we hear him utter are abusive to them, "...What's the matter, you dissentious rogues/ That rubbing the poor itch of your opinion, /Make yourselves scabs?" (C, 720). When we see his courage and his discomfort at being complimented above others on the battle field, our understanding of the character is enlarged, but we can never completely overlook his initial arrogant behaviour. Shakespeare maintains the audience's uneasy feelings about the hero throughout the play, and at the catastrophe, we are left to sort them out as we respond to his death. His ambiguities and individuality are what make him a rich character, but also, of course, what give Dennis such difficulty.

The most important alteration Dennis makes to simplify Shakespeare's character is to begin the play with his heroism; this allows the audience to admire him before they censure him. To heighten his heroic stature, Dennis frequently has characters refer to the hero as "Jove",

"Godlike" or "a God" (Murphy, 88), which also helps subliminally to endorse his impressive qualities. Although he does not skimp on showing Coriolanus's pride and arrogance when facing the public in Acts II and III, Dennis avoids any additional evidence of his baser characteristics. He leaves out mention of the old man Coriolanus stayed with, and the hero's inability to remember his benefactor's name in order to save him. The reference in Shakespeare's play subtly illustrates a callousness which adds more shading to the character, and which Dennis would have had problems fitting into his more shallow version.

Branam adds to the list of changes, that whereas Shakespeare's Coriolanus was essentially a "man of action", with the "impetuosity of a child", Dennis's character is given "verbal dexterity" and has "better than average self control"(125). I'm not sure I agree with Branam's latter assumption about Dennis's hero; in Act II, scene iii he is seen attacking one impudent citizen (*J.H.C.*, 27), and his treatment of the servants at Aufidius's house is far more violent than in the original play (*J.H.C.*, 46). Still, Dennis clearly means to stretch the hero's impatience to the limit, and to this end he develops more taxing confrontations. The most crucial difference between the perception of the hero in the two plays is that in Shakespeare, Coriolanus is the arbiter of his own fate because of his uncompromising personality; in Dennis he is a "victim of circumstance -- of a situation -- rather than his own nature" (Branam, 125). Dennis's hero has merely made a mistake which he repents for in the end, but too late to save himself.

Brief attention must be paid to the less obvious changes in the roles of Coriolanus's wife and mother. Although Dennis praises Shakespeare for not "making Love the predominant Quality of all"( II, 4) in his tragedies, he

nevertheless adds emphasis to the relationship between Coriolanus and Virgilia in his own adaptation. The two women in general play a greater part in the play, and when we are introduced to them at the beginning of Act II, Virgilia has had a premonition about her husband's death, just as Portia had in *Julius Cæsar*. Virgilia's fears about Coriolanus are more histrionic in this version, and when he comes home she nearly faints in relief. When the two are reunited in the original, Coriolanus takes notice of his mother first, and when he is directed to his wife, he greets her with a playful, "Wouldst thou have laughed had I come coffined home,/ That weep'st to see me triumph?" (*C*, 728). Dennis wants a more romantic exchange. In his play, Coriolanus ignores his mother in favour of his wife and he pulls Virgilia to him saying, "Come to my Heart, to which thou art more dear,/ Than the Life-Blood that warms it" (*I.H.C.*, 16-17). A better understanding of Dennis's intent in developing this relationship comes by reviewing his essay on Shakespeare. In faulting his predecessor for not taking advantage of opportunities to move the audience, Dennis uses as an example the fact that at his banishment, Coriolanus "[takes] his leave of his Wife and his Mother out of sight of the Audience" (II, 5). To remedy this error, Dennis builds up the love of Coriolanus and his wife for each other prior to Act III, and then inserts a weepy dialogue between the two at the end of the act. I agree with Kilbourne that this is a "tasteless scene", but while it is "out of keeping" with the original characters (124), it is not an improbable development of Dennis's altered personalities. The role of Virgilia is a condensed version of the suffering Augustan heroines which Iphigenia exemplifies. In keeping with the enlarged romance, Dennis down plays the influence Volumnia has on her son. Murphy calls Coriolanus's dependence on



his mother, "the mama's boy syndrome" (88), and it is this unnatural element which Dennis seeks to modify.

Since Dennis had criticized Shakespeare's use of the Roman "rabble", it is interesting to see what he has done with it himself. At the conclusion of his essay on Shakespeare he admits to Granville,

I know very well that you will be surpriz'd to find, that after all that I have said in the former Part of this Letter, against Shakespear's introducing the Rabble into Coriolanus, I have not only retain'd in the second Act of the following Tragedy the Rabble which is in the Original, but deviated more from the Roman Customs than Shakespeare had done before me. I desire you to look upon it as a voluntary Fault and a Trespass against Conviction: 'Tis one of those Things which are "ad Populum Phaleræ", and by no means inserted to please such Men as you ( II, 17).

The Latin phrase is an unacknowledged quotation from Persius, Satire III, meaning "trappings for the people" who allow themselves to be deceived. In other words, Dennis included the rabble to suit the ignorant tastes of the audience. The critic's admission in this passage is an anomaly. Nowhere else in Dennis's writing, as far as I have found, has he admitted to a possible contradiction between his theory and practice. His defence is even more unusual; elsewhere he repeatedly denies a desire to please the public. However, since Dennis has himself admitted to his deviation, I will not go into any further detail about the condition of the rabble. What is more pertinent, is the overall added emphasis on lower characters throughout Dennis's play. As I mentioned earlier, it was against the general practice of the Augustan playwrights to introduce low characters or comic relief in tragedy; Dennis does both, and even magnifies that which was already visible in Shakespeare's work. I am speaking primarily about the opening scenes in Act IV between the servants and Coriolanus. Dennis elaborates on Coriolanus's confrontation with the servingmen by introducing a conspiracy between the first two servants and a third. The third is duped by his

cohorts into believing that the hero is mild-tempered, but he is, of course, kicked like the first two were when he asks the "beggar" to leave. This low comedy might be intended to illustrate the baseness of the servants, and so justify Coriolanus's ill-treatment of them, but it is a weak addition and merely serves to distract the audience from the main event to take place: Coriolanus's meeting with Aufidius.

The final detail I would like to examine in comparing the two plays is the language. Although Dennis acknowledges Shakespeare as "the very Original of our English Tragical Harmony"( II, 4), he is not reluctant to tamper with his forerunner's style to improve upon his text. Branam's work is extremely thorough in its general analysis of the eighteenth-century adaptors' attitude toward Shakespeare's prose. In general, they sought to clarify, eliminate "puns and quibbles", elevate the diction and reduce the imagery, or at least alter it so that the figures were more acceptable (69 - 113). We have already seen examples of elevated diction in Dennis's handling of Menenius. Although Dennis generally rewrites whole passages if he feels they are inappropriate for tragedy, Branam has extracted a few alterations in specific phrases: "so much sweat" is changed to "so much toil" in Act III, scene ii; and "not worth an egg" is revised, "not worth a Drachma" in Act VI, scene ii (90). Excessive imagery is also curbed, so that "Aufidius, their very heart of hope" becomes, "Aufidius, their successful general"(106). With these slight revisions and the more extensive slashing and rewriting which Dennis applies to Shakespeare's original, *The Invader of His Country* may actually deserve the title Odell awards it as "one of the dullest in the whole range of the restructured Shakespearean drama" (241).

This play was the last of Dennis's to be produced, and its history is among the more interesting of his countless failures. Although it opened November 11, 1719 at Drury Lane, it had obviously been written much earlier, since it was with his adaptation in mind that Dennis wrote *The Genius and Writings of Shakespeare* in 1711. Between March and September of 1719, Dennis engaged in a battle with Booth and Steele by letter, for not producing *The Invader of his Country* as they had apparently promised to do in the Winter Season of 1718-1719 (II, 471). As Hooker explains, there were valid reasons why the play might have been postponed. Rehearsals for *All for Love* occupied much of the time available, and by December, Dennis's play had once again been anticipated by the rival playhouse; Rich produced Shakespeare's original *Coriolanus* "with new scenes and decorations"(Ibid). Although Dennis was unfairly critical of the manager's neglect of his play, (nowhere in his letters does he mention the lack of space or the rival play), he does have a valid argument against the run of *All for Love* in place of his adaptation. In his Dedication to the play, he describes the circumstances around which the play was to have been originally acted:

They were engaged to Act it the last Winter by their Words solemnly given, and the acting of it then had been most seasonable, when the Nation was in the uneasy Expectation of a Double Invasion from Sweden on the North, and from Spain on the West of England. Instead of keeping their Words with me; they Postpon'd a Play, that was writ in the Cause of their Country, in the Cause of their Sovereign. . .for the most Absurd and Insipid Trifles that ever came upon any stage(II, 177).

During an age in which moral instruction played a major role in the theatre, Dennis is quite right to argue that *The Invader of His Country* was more timely than *All for Love*, and the various "trifles" which also ran that Season.

When the play was finally run, the timing was bad because the King was returning to London, and Dennis believed that the play should have been given more than three nights under such confusing conditions (Paul, 76). He reminds the reader in his Dedication that Friday was his third day, and as a third it was notoriously bad at the best of times, but "this was that particular Friday when a Hundred Persons who design'd to be [at the play], were either gone to meet the KING, or preparing here in town to do that Duty, which was expected from them at His Arrival"(Ibid). The reason the managers gave for the play's withdrawal was that it was not profitable. Dennis next seems to contradict himself by insisting that the play had done well enough to be given more time on the boards. He explains in detail how the play fared:

...the Play was Acted on Wednesday the 11th to an Audience of near a Hundred Pound... It was favourably received by the audience. There did some Malice appear twice, but it was immediately drown'd by the utmost Clamours of Applause. On Thursday the Play was acted again to an audience of between Fifty and Threescore Pounds. And on Friday to an Audience of between Sixty and Seventy Pounds. Considering the disadvantages under which we lay, here was fair Hope for the Future. And on Friday, after the play was done, these tender-hearted Managers caused another to be given out, to the Astonishment of the Audience. . .(Ibid).

However, we see a curious difference in emphasis in Theophilus Cibber's record of the event:

This piece met with some opposition on the first night; and on the fourth another play was given out. The second night's audience was very small, though the play was exceedingly well acted. The third night had not the charges in money; the fourth was still worse, and then another play was given out, not a place being taken in the boxes for the ensuing night.(232)

Both the accounts are coloured by personal biases, and I am inclined to take a middle stance. The managers did play some cruel tricks on Dennis, not the least of which was the unexpected re-scheduling of the play. Colley Cibber re-wrote the epilogue without informing the playwright, and in its revised

form it severely ridiculed the play itself ! The most destructive lines run: " 'Gad, I've a mind to Damn his Epilogue ! / His Play I need not --- no; poor wretched Elf ! / That Matter's Rug ! He's done that Jobb himself"( *I.H.C.*). As with many of Dennis's failures, it is necessary to look objectively at all the facts which might have influenced the play's reception. Such a vindictive epilogue written by the manager himself could certainly have soured any favourable opinions the audience might have left with. The *Invader of His Country* is not a good play, but there are aspects of it which should have at least held currency in the Augustan period, and guaranteed a limited success.

Neither of Dennis's Shakespearean adaptations is improved by their more regular, unified designs, and the reason can perhaps be found in the critic's own thoughts on Shakespeare. In the first part of this chapter I quoted Dennis's praise of Shakespeare. He stresses the playwright's control of characterization and the passions, which are so "lively in him, and so truly in Nature, that they often touch us more without their due Preparations, than those of other Tragick Poets, who have all the Beauty of design and all the Advantage of Incidents" ( II, 4). Hooker's note on these remarks suggest that Dennis is unknowingly admitting that

the drama of characterization, in which Shakespeare admittedly excelled, might attain the end of tragedy -- that it, arousing the emotions of pity and terror -- more successfully than other plays which perfectly fulfill the Aristotelian requirements as to design and incidents. In other words, there are two types of tragedy, and Shakespeare's type, depending on fine characterization in scenes which are sufficient to arouse the passions, has by pragmatic tests proved its worth. ( II, 425)

If Dennis could only have seen past the conventions of his era, he might have accepted Shakespeare's tragedies as they were, and his forgettable adaptations would never have been attempted; "these latter performances show only too plainly the hand of the workman, who, as Dennis himself puts

it 'judges well, but cannot himself perform' "(Paul, 188). It is better, as Professor Paul recommends, to remember Dennis, not as an adaptor of Shakespeare, but as a man who confesses that he

loves and admires his Charms and makes them one of his chief Delights, who sees him and reads him over and over and still remains unsatiated, and who mentions his Faults for no other Reason but to make his Excellency the more conspicuous. . ." ( II, 17).

## Conclusion

Dennis's ultimate intention in writing all of his plays, and especially his three adaptations, was to improve the theatre of his day and the tastes of his degenerate audience. His plays were not only unsuccessful in achieving either of his immediate goals, but their weaknesses severely damaged his reputation as a critic in the centuries that followed. His passionate ideas about tragedy and his intelligent understanding of comedy risk being upstaged by his incompetent handling of the plays by Euripides and Shakespeare. We tend to be more critical of his Shakespearean adaptations than his revision of Euripides' tragedy because of our special reverence for the Elizabethan dramatist. Still, all of the adaptations were poorly re-modelled and would have been better left undone.

*Iphigenia* works the best of the three adaptations, probably because Dennis was not as intent on changing the structure of the original as he was in his Shakespeare revisions. Nevertheless, the play is reformed to better suit the "climate" of the English stage, and with this emphasis Dennis develops lengthy declamatory speeches and exemplary characters who are heavily grafted onto the ancient story. Although it can be defended as more regular than *Cato*, *Iphigenia* is not a better example of the pseudo-classic style, nor was it able to gain the popularity awarded Addison's play. *The Comical Gallant* would likely be funny if staged with a strong cast and there is enough action to keep the audience entertained (although one might question whether the original did not have enough action to begin with), but the unified plot is a clumsy contrivance and spoils the simple

logic behind the antics of *The Merry Wives*. The frivolity of the original is also lost under the deluge of morality which Dennis adds to improve the instruction. The play which is most disadvantaged by revision, in my opinion, is *Coriolanus*. With Dennis's stress on decorum and simplicity, he loses the disturbing ambiguous nature of the play. *The Invader of His Country* is a simple tale about a Roman hero with a tragic flaw. The same consideration for morality, regularity, decorum and simplicity dominates the revisions of all three plays, and in each case the results prove disappointing. The critic ably sets out his reasons for the adaptations, and many of his arguments are well-founded, but the execution of his theories only contradicts his reasoning.

Although Dennis generally insisted that rules be followed when writing a play, he was willing to accept that "they applied to the average case, and, since few writers are geniuses, it is better and safer for a poet to follow than to neglect them"(II, xc). In other words, only a genius can produce an effectively dramatic piece if the rules are broken. Looked at this way, his regulations are similar to Stanislavsky's acting technique: anyone aspiring to be an actor can become competent with proper employment of the "method"; very few are naturally gifted Oliviers who can achieve the same end without due preparation. The catch in Dennis's theory is that he proved himself wrong. The entire basis of his revisions was the emphasis on regularity and proper employment of the rules, yet it is because he is without genius that Dennis created cardboard reproductions, hopelessly stiffened by their adherence to convention. In fact, it is only a genius who can create a dynamic, exciting play while confined to such stilted form. Only Racine and Molière were able to successfully develop tragedy and



comedy this way, and they had written nearly half a century before in France. Dennis was unable to see that his principles were almost unworkable in his own unaccomplished age of theatre.

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