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Entertaining the Lord Chamberlain: Joe Orton and His Black Comedy

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ABSTRACT

This essay attempts to explore the shock value of Joe Orton's black comedy in the 1960s. The homosexual playwright has been known for his rebellious and subversive humor, with which he scandalized and confronted the bourgeois audience and the English society at that time. The shock effects of Orton's black comedy have been questioned. In his "Who was Afraid of Joe Orton?" Alan Sinfield maintains that Orton succeeded in shocking and offending the conservative theatergoers, but failed to provoke or disturb the progressive ones. This essay will argue that it was, and had been, the orthodox bourgeoisie, rather than the young and radical generation, that Orton's outrageous comedy aimed at. The essay will also point out an influence on the shock effects that is important yet has not been considered by Sinfield, namely, stage censorship. Writing at a time when the censorship was still effective, Orton had to confine his work within the boundaries of what was allowed on stage. Theater censorship was certainly one of the factors—and an irrefutable one—that frustrated Orton's radicalism. This essay therefore will discuss how Orton deliberately stepped over the Lord Chamberlain's limits to challenge his authority by showing the censor's reactions to Orton's scripts and his unfavorable opinions of them. The purpose of the essay is to contend that Orton's black comedy was shocking and provocative in his time, and could have been more shocking and provocative if not restricted by the censoring powers.

Keywords : Joe Orton, black humor, black comedy, shock value, shock effects, censorship, the Lord Chamberlain.

娛樂審查大人：喬・歐騰及其黑色喜劇

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摘　要

本論文擬探討喬・歐騰的黑色喜劇在一九六〇年代的驚嚇、激怒效果和意義。這位同性戀劇作家向來以其叛逆、玩世不恭的特質而聞名；運用黑色幽默，歐騰令當時的中產階級觀眾和英國社會感到震驚、憤怒。歐騰蓄意驚嚇、挑釁觀眾的結果曾受到學者的質疑。辛富德(Alan Sinfield)在他的〈誰怕喬・歐騰？〉中強調，歐騰的黑色喜劇雖然成功地震嚇、冒犯保守的觀眾，但卻無法惹惱或刺激開放的一群。本文因此首要指出，歐騰一開始便以守舊、反動的中產階級觀眾爲攻訐的目標，並非年輕、進步的一代。本文接著要提出一項重要卻未被辛富德納入討論的因素，即是審查制度。在歐騰創作時期，劇場審查制度仍具效力，歐騰的作品皆需通過審查，方能搬上舞台。審查制度無疑是削弱歐騰顛覆力量的一項事實。本文因而要呈現、討論當時審查人員對歐騰作品的反應、批評和要求，藉此說明審查制度對歐騰作品的干預和阻礙，以及歐騰如何不斷地僭越審查制度的設限、挑戰審查大人權力。本論文希望闡述歐騰的黑色喜劇在六〇年代的驚嚇效果和意義，進而臆測，若非受限於審查制度，歐騰的顛覆力量可能更激烈、影響的觀眾更廣大。

關鍵詞：喬・歐騰、黑色幽默、黑色喜劇、驚嚇、激怒、挑釁、審查制度、審查大人

Entertaining the Lord Chamberlain: Joe Orton and His Black Comedy[1]

Chun-Yi Shih

Introduction

Joe Orton (1933-67) has been unanimously acknowledged as master of contemporary black comedy. He uses black humor as a device for eliciting laughter, and at the same time maneuvers it as a political strategy. The subject matters he tackles include sexuality, gender, the family, religion, the police, psychiatry, death, and madness, all of which are treated in a radical and scandalous manner. As Katharine Worth puts it in her *Revolutions in Modern English Drama*, "it is this power of his to shock and offend susceptibilities that first comes to mind when Orton is named. He goes in such a head-on way for taboos and sacred areas of all kinds" (148). By deliberately employing outrageous humor, Orton launched assaults on the traditions, systems, and authorities in the 1960s; the homosexual playwright determined to invert and subvert the gender/sexual paradigms of the "straight" society and call for sexual liberation and freedom. His black comedy catches the sensation, rebellion, and turmoil of the "Swinging Sixties," the era marked by youth culture, revolt against the Establishment and the icons, and sexual revolution.

The shock value of Orton's black comedy is called into question. In his "Who was Afraid of Joe Orton?" Alan Sinfield notes that by the mid-60s theatergoers had split into conservative and progressive. The progressive audience, associated typically with the Royal Court Theatre, "had come to indulge what was being called 'permissiveness,' and felt confirmed in their progressive stance" (175). That is, this audience wanted to see permissive plays and enjoyed radicalism. But Orton, unaware of this change in audiences and the great increase in public discussion of homosexuality, and also indifferent to other gay plays and new fringe companies, had an inflated idea of his own outrageousness. For Sinfield, the prominence of Orton's plays depended on the social atmosphere of the 1950s; Orton "could affront the Aunt Ednas only by failing to engage with other audiences" (180-81).[2]

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[1] This paper is a revision of part of my doctoral thesis, *"The Theatre of Disturbance": Black Comedies by Joe Orton & Peter Barnes*, completed in 2004.

[2] Aunt Edna was created by Terence Rattigan as his voice against the critics who berated him for

Responding to this question, John M. Clum in his *Acting Gay* argues that Orton was not as naïve as Sinfield thought. In Clum's opinion, Orton's focusing on West End audiences was because he aspired to the fame and fortune of his homosexual predecessors like Noël Coward and Terence Rattigan (133).

Does it—shocking the Aunt Ednas—reveal Orton's limitations or signify his ambitions? Orton as a playwright emerged at a time when sexual morality was under severe examination. Jonathan Dollimore in his "The Challenge of Sexuality" makes it clear that "in the post-war period sexuality became, to an unprecedented extent, a topic for public debate" (59). The Kinsey Reports—*Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* (1953), the Wolfenden Report (1957), and the *Chatterley* trial (1960) were all concerned with the contentious issue. Orton wanted to shock the audience out of their moralism, and found that the only field that was still heavily unexplored was the sexual one, as he said to Peter Burton in an interview of 1966 (John Lahr, *Prick Up Your Ears* 186). For Orton, sexuality was possessed of a subversive power—sex "is the only way to smash the wretched civilisation," Orton stressed in his diary (*Diaries* 125). He believed that transgressing the restrictive gender/sexual boundaries could destabilize the existing structure. In other words, deviant sexuality was to challenge the existing norm, posing a threat to the old order. Orton made middle-class audiences, the bastions of the establishment, his targets for attack. Aunt Edna was Orton's practical joke, but, more importantly, this personification of his targets indicated that Orton was firm on unsettling the conservative *status quo*. This aim, maybe limited as Sinfield postulates, was no doubt achieved during Orton's meteoric writing career. The angry reactions of the orthodox audience pointed to the fact that Orton managed to shake the foundations of the moral British society in the mid-60s.

Orton's radicalism is seen in his subverting the social order of the 1960s, and in his confronting the censoring powers of the Lord Chamberlain as well. Despite the facts that the Lord Chamberlain had bent to the climatic changes in British society by the mid-60s and relaxed his attitude towards the reaction against the sexual *status quo*, and that there was an alternative of putting on

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writing well-made plays for the middle-class audience rather than plays with ideas. Aunt Edna thus represents a member of the typical bourgeois audience. Orton changed the figure into Edna Welthorpe (Mrs) and, under the name, he wrote letters attacking his own plays. In addition to this name, John A. Carlson and Donald H. Hartley were used by Orton to express their appreciation of his plays.

plays at theater clubs in order to avoid censorship, for Orton, a playwright who pursued West End success, encountering the censor's absoluteness was inevitable. One passage in his diaries shows that he was alert to the restrictive powers: "I've begun the second half of *What the Butler Saw*. Successful at the moment. Likely to raise eyebrows in the Lord Chamberlain's office" (*Diaries* 35-36). There is also one passage indicating Orton's worries that the play could not pass the censorship: "Willes doesn't think that we'll have trouble with the Lord Chamberlain. This makes me tremble. It probably means the play will be banned outright" (*Diaries* 252).[3]

Subject to the censor, Orton, on the other hand, defied his powers. For the censor, Orton's black comedy was in shockingly bad taste, irreverent, blasphemous, and outrageous. Orton challenged the Lord Chamberlain vigorously and persistently, so much so that he is praised as "one of the slyest and sharpest saboteurs of the old theatrical school of gentility" in Nicholas de Jongh's research on English theater censorship, *Politics, Prudery and Perversions* (202). This paper therefore will show how Orton scandalized and provoked the censor by presenting his adverse comments on Orton's scripts; by so doing, the paper attempts to prove that Orton's black comedy was, and probably still is, shocking, and could have been more shocking if not confined by the censoring powers.

Stage Censorship

Between 1737 and 1968 the Lord Chamberlain enforced censorship over the text of any play that was to be preformed before a public audience. His censoring powers were legalized with the passing of the Stage Licensing Act in 1737, and extended by the Theatres Act of 1843. As John Johnston states in The Lord Chamberlain's Blue Pencil, under the provisions of the 1843 Act, a play previously unperformed had to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's Office; the censor could impose a ban "whenever he shall be of opinion that is fitting for the preservation of good manners, decorum, or of the public peace so to do" (30). It was not until 1909 that the criteria on which the Lord Chamberlain judged plays were defined in law. The only guidelines, "Proposals with respect to the Licensing of Plays," were laid down in the third section of the Joint Select Committee's Report. According to the section, the Lord Chamberlain should license any play unless he considers that it may reasonably be held:

[3] Peter Willes produced Orton's TV plays.

1. To be indecent;
2. To contain offensive personalities;
3. To represent in an invidious manner a living person, or a person recently dead;
4. To do violence to the sentiment of religious reverence;
5. To be calculated to conduce to crime or vice;
6. To be calculated to impair friendly relations with any Foreign Power;
7. To be calculated to cause a breach of the peace. (63-64)

The main principle of the Lord Chamberlain was to maintain social propriety, conventional morality, and orthodox values. He forbad attacks on the Church, the Royal Family, and politicians, and tried stubbornly to prevent the theater from becoming a forum for controversial issues. The authority of the Lord Chamberlain had courted dispute since the mid-1950s. The post-war generation playwrights, such as John Osborne, John Arden, and Harold Pinter, rejected traditional theater forms; they aspired to bring to the stage new characters, fresh themes, and blunt language, which in their view spelt out the social changes. They wrote in a colloquial idiom, often full of four-letter words and invective, and the subject matters they dealt with ranged from sex, drugs, homosexuality, and abortion, to political issues. Encountering the Lord Chamberlain's blue pencil, these authors were given warnings or instructed to make excisions or alterations due to the illicit expressions, obscenities, or offensiveness in their works. The censoring powers—anachronistic, arbitrary, and absolute—hindered theatrical innovation. As Dominic Shellard remarks in *Harold Hobson*, "[i]n an era in which dramatists, reflecting the increasingly open nature of British society, [. . .] these limitations were deemed to be insupportably restrictive and the office of the Lord Chamberlain was considered too inflexible to adapt to this new climate of artistic exploration" (195).

Homosexuality as a stage theme had been banned by the Lord Chamberlain before the publication of the Wolfenden Report in 1957. The Wolfenden Committee was organized to review the law following the increase in prosecutions for prostitution and male homosexual offences between 1939 and 1953. The Report claimed the purpose of the criminal law was to preserve public order and decency, but not to impose a particular pattern of moral behavior on individuals. It proposed a retreat of the law from private areas: just as prostitution in private was not illegal, so homosexual behavior in private should be decriminalized. The Committee furthermore

adopted a psychologization of prostitution and homosexuality, identifying them not as a sin or disease but as mental illness or maladjustment, and thus urged treatment or adjustment. The Wolfenden Report provoked debates on the issues of homosexuality. In 1958, the Lord Chamberlain bowed to the enquiring spirit of the times and relaxed his absolute veto on the discussion of homosexuality on stage. The subject would be allowed on certain terms, as Johnston records:

1. Every play will continue to be judged on its merits and only those dealing seriously with the subject will be passed;
2. Plays violently homosexual will not be passed;
3. Homosexual characters will not be allowed if their inclusion in the piece is unnecessary to the action or theme of the play;
4. Embraces between homosexuals will not be allowed. (172)

By the early 1960s, people began to question whether the office of a censor was compatible with a healthy democracy. And the theater profession vigorously campaigned to rescue drama from censorship. In early 1967, the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Censorship advocated the abolition of the 1843 Act. After all the controversies and debates, stage censorship finally came to its end on 25 September 1968.

Entertaining the Lord Chamberlain

Joe Orton first made himself generally known to the English public in 1962. He and his partner, Kenneth Halliwell, were arrested on the charge of defacing library books. Between 1959 and 1962, they stole books from the Islington public libraries; they removed 1,653 plates from art books, replacing drawings and photographs on the dust jackets and book pages. The visual effects were disturbing and shocking. What Orton and Halliwell had done was held up as the depth of iniquity, so that both were sentenced to prison for six months. Orton the delinquent, with his destructive humor for shock and offense, found a stage in the theater not long after the event. His earliest play, *The Ruffian on the Stair*, was accepted by the BBC Third Programme in 1963, though not broadcast until 1964. *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, Orton's first full-length play, opened at the New Arts Theatre in London in May 1964. The play revolves around a lower middle-class family, Kemp, the father, Kath and Ed, sister and brother. Kath picks up Sloane from a library, and offers him a lodging in the house; she desires him and seduces him. Ed, a successful businessman, is also attracted by Sloane; he asks the latter to work as a

chauffeur for him. Sloane kills Kemp in a fit of temper. In order to have Kath and Ed cover the crime for him, Sloane agrees to stay and be shared by them.

Sloane is thought to be Pinteresque. In Pinter's early plays, such as *The Room*, *The Birthday Party*, and *The Caretaker*, visitors come unexpectedly, bringing threats to the established domesticity. Similarly, Sloane turns up in the Kemp household and takes advantage. Meg's attraction to Stanley and her Oedipal behavior with him in *The Birthday Party* is paralleled in the relationship between Kath and Sloane. The resemblances, however, fade quickly as Sloane is found to pose no threat and be desired by both Kath and Ed. In Orton's version, the incestuous desire of the mother for the son is excessively displayed. Kath used to have an affair with Ed's mate, Tommy; their illegitimate son was given away by Ed. Throughout the play Kath declares herself Sloane's mamma and him, her baby. The incest-taboo is released and realized when she pulls off his trousers to bandage the wound on his leg and tumbles over his body:

> KATH. I couldn't describe my feelings. (*Pause*.) I don't think the fastening on this thing I'm wearing will last much longer. [. . .] (*Pause: he attempts to move; she is almost on top of him*.) Mr Sloane… (*Rolls on him*.) You should wear more clothes, Mr Sloane. I believe you're as naked as me. And there's no excuse for it. (*Silence*.) I'll be your mamma. I need to be loved. Gently. Oh! I shall be so ashamed in the morning. (*Switches off the light*.) What a big baby you are. Such a big heavy baby. (1.94-95)

Kath acts out the son's fantasy in the Oedipal stage that the mother can be nurturing and sexual at the same time. As C. W. E. Bigsby in *Joe Orton* puts it, Kath shows "a grotesque mixture of motherly love and lust;" she is animated only by a grotesque sexual urge (29).[4] Moreover, unlike those intruders who are resisted or excluded in the end in Pinter's plays, Sloane is accepted and established as a family member, even after his murder of the father. As a whole, Pinter's comedy of menace is appropriated and rewritten into Orton's comedy of *ménage à trios*.

If *Sloane* thematically parodies Pinter's early comedies, generically, it exploits and parodies the comedy of manners. Terence Rattigan expressed his appreciation of *Sloane* after he saw it; in the play he observed a style that

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[4] *Entertaining Mr Sloane* is said to be the most blatantly autobiographical of Orton's plays. The character of Kath bears many resemblances to Orton's own mother, Elsie Orton. For this connection, see John Bull and Frances Gray's "Joe Orton," 77-78.

could be compared with the Restoration comedies, with Congreve and Wilde. The comedy of manners fascinated Orton, and Wilde's works, especially their epigrammatic dialogues, were influential in Orton's creation. Language in this form of comedy, as being its marked feature, is conventionally elevated, brilliant, and witty. It is intended to show the propriety and respectability of the upper-class characters, but turns out to betray their hypocrisy, absurdity, and vulgarity behind the decorous conduct. Witticisms, ridicules, and innuendoes are thus deployed to expose and satirize the discrepancy between the exterior and the interior, as well as to elicit humor and mirth.

Some critics have noted how Orton utilizes the linguistic devices of the comedy of manners in *Sloane* to make a mockery of the incongruities in the lower middle-class characters and, furthermore, to touch on the issue of homosexuality.[5] Kath and Ed speak moralizing epigrams, attempting to build up a façade of politeness and cultivation. Their discourses, however, fall short of the attempt and lay bare their desire, cupidity, and callousness beneath surface appearances. And *double entendre*, operated in the comedy of manners to suggest indecency, is maneuvered by Orton to bring out the homosexual relation between Ed and Sloane. One classic case is the conversation of Sloane and Ed when they meet for the first time:

> ED. [. . .] Developing your muscles, eh? And character. (*Pause*.) …
>
> Well well, well. (*Breathless*.) A little bodybuilder are you? I bet you are … (*Slowly*.) … do you … (*Shy*.) exercise regular?
>
> SLOANE. As clockwork.
>
> ED. Good, good. Stripped?
>
> SLOANE. Fully.
>
> ED. Complete. (*Striding to the window*.) How invigorating.
>
> SLOANE. And I box. I'm a bit of a boxer.
>
> ED. Ever done any wrestling?
>
> SLOANE. On occasions.
>
> ED. So, so.
>
> SLOANE. I've got a full chest. Narrow hips. My biceps are—
>
> ED. Do you wear leather…next to the skin? Leather jeans, say? Without … aah …

[5] See John Russell Taylor's "Joe Orton" in *The Second Wave*, 123-40; David L. Hirst's *Comedy of Manners*, 96-110; Maurice Charney's "Occulted Discourse and Threatening Nonsense in *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*" in *Joe Orton*, 70-79; Joel Greenberg's "Joe Orton," 133-44.

SLOANE. Pants? (1.86-87)

Ostensibly, athleticism is the topic under discussion, yet the deliberately apparent subtext actually alludes to Ed's desire for male bodies. And Sloane, getting the picture, appeals to Ed's homosexuality by responding eagerly to the topic. Leather jeans, in the mean time, imply Ed's sexual fetish, and his questioning of whether Sloane wears them is thus like a try-out, intended to see if Sloane meets his desire.

In addition, while pleading with Ed to cover up his crime of murder, Sloane offers to be Ed's homosexual partner by insinuation:

SLOANE. Let me live with you. I'd wear my jeans out in your service. Cook for you

ED. I eat out.

SLOANE. Bring you your tea in bed.

ED. Only women drink tea in bed.

SLOANE. You bring me my tea in bed, then. Any arrangement you fancy. (3.135)

Playing with variations of language, Orton manages to tackle the subject tabooed by society, which makes *Sloane* not merely playful but also audacious and abrasive.

Despite that *Sloane* demonstrates Orton's clever use of the comedy of manners, the comedy, in larger part, parodies this genre. The mannered comedy is marked by the elaborate and scintillating dialogue; no ordinary or colloquial idiom is suitable for the complexities of a society that values, above all, outward appearances. Orton converts the high comedy linguistic style into an absurd and banal confusion of titillating clichés, nonsensical platitudes, and coarse phrases. Moreover, the comedy of manners is populated by characters of self-awareness and sophistication, who strive to maintain their decorum, namely, their pretension. In contrast, Orton's characters are simply poseurs. Kath, Ed, and Sloane are all driven by their sexual impulses and eager for gratification and pleasure. Such sexual satisfaction is taken for granted and natural; at heart they feel no shame at all. Characteristically, libidinous is *the* epithet for the three figures, and what they act out is a comedy of "need and greed," as Maurice Charney puts it in *Joe Orton* (72). This lack of character development and thematic nuance is controversial. In his "Joe Orton: The Comedy of (Ill) Manners," Martin Esslin condemns the play, for sexual bargains are negotiated from the very start to the end. "This absence of a sub-text reduces the characters to fully conscious personifications of their basic instincts: it is characteristic of Orton's fully developed style"

(100). However, for John Mortimer, Orton's comedy, which gives no hint of depth, is "bright and fresh as the paint on the newest coffee bar, and done in the best contemporary styles" (*Evening Standard*, 7 May 1964). Bigsby underlines that role-playing in Orton's plays "is not a series of false surfaces concealing a real self; it is the total meaning or unmeaning of protagonists who survive by refusing all substance" (*Joe Orton* 17). The diminution of diverse dimensions of character, furthermore, parallels that of a moral perspective and a language full of meanings. Bigsby values the negation of depth and substance as Orton's affinity with some postmodernist novelists, for example, Thomas Pynchon.[6] Flat characterization, as Mathew Winston points out, is deployed by black humorists to break away from the realistic tradition and to create humor (40). Orton's characters, led by their sexual urges throughout the play, reflect the eternal nature—lust—of human beings. And the humor of the Ortonese characterization lies in the revolt of the id and its triumph.

Orton not only inverts the comedy of manners dialogue and characterization, but also reverses the ambience—instead of an upper-class drawing room, he depicts a lower middle-class parlor. The house of the Kemps is situated in a countryside dump, which is "filthy," "fouling," and "an eyesore" (1.72). What can be seen in the drawing room is Kath's Bombay vase, her transparent negligee, her nylon stocking put between the cushions, and the drawer with a piece of unfinished knitting, a broken china figure, and other stuff. Far from the urbanities of high living, Orton stresses the tackiness and drabness of low living. It is not a room for romantic love but a room for sexual indulgence. Orton carries it even further by turning the room into a crime site where Kemp is murdered. As Freud says in his *Civilization and Its Discontents*, "Beauty, cleanliness and order obviously occupy a special position among the requirements of civilization" (93). What Orton presents, then, is a disordered, instinctive, and savage void, a pre-civilized world.

Through *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, Orton assaults middle-class respectability and pretension. He takes bourgeois mores as the most ludicrous incongruities in the modern world and sets out to break them down. His parody of comedy of manners demolishes the façade of gentility, disclosing the hidden sexuality, power play, and violence. It displays a world where the unspeakable is permissible and the absurd possible, where animality is fundamental. This

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[6] For an extensive discussion of Orton's plays within the context of postmodernism, see Adrian Page's "An Age of Surfaces: Joe Orton's Drama and Postmodernism."

parody aims to shock the audience. As Christopher Innes writes in his *Modern British Drama 1890-1990*, "The setting of seedy naturalism, and the use of a sentimental comedy formula for a perverse action that the characters treat as perfectly acceptable behaviour, is designed to intensify the shock effect" (269). *Sloane* is also an obscene joke made by Orton. According to Freud, obscene jokes "offer the amplest occasions for obtaining comic pleasure alongside pleasurable sexual excitement; for they can show human beings in their dependence on bodily needs (degradation) or they can reveal the physical demands lying behind the claim of mental love (unmasking)" (*Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* 222). Orton's sexual parody/joke unmasks the hypocrisy and absurdity of conventional morality, and the state of the primitive sexual instincts and their free satisfactions.

Furthermore, with *Sloane*, Orton challenged the sexual ideology of the 1960s. By the early 60s an economic growth had led British society into an age of affluence. It impacted on an emergent youth culture, on flexible attitudes towards class relations, women and sex, and, more importantly, on various social modifications. All these shaped Britain in the 60s into a permissive society. Of all the official modifications, the Wolfenden Report was a monumental one. However, what is revealing in the Report is that heterosexuality was still held as the sexual paradigm and other forms of sexuality were judged by it. Homosexuality, now anchored in medical moralism instead of in Christianity or in law as it had been before, became a psychological problem. This psychological approach in fact replaced moral and legal sanctions with medical regulations. In other words, it was one of the political strategies to bring those sexualities deviant from heterosexuality under control. Permissiveness, from this perspective, was not articulating the myth of liberation, but, paradoxically, charting the topography of power. Therefore, as Jeffrey Weeks notes in his *Sex, Politics and Society*, "The paradox at the heart of the Wolfenden Committee's work, its status both as an expression of 1950s moral anxieties and a blueprint for the 'permissive' legislation of the 1960s, can be partly grasped if we see its roots in this search for a more effective regulation of sexual deviance" (242). What was indicated in the Wolfenden Report is not a permissive attitude towards "abnormal" sexualities but a means of placing a curb on them.

On stage, homosexual characters were subject to the idea that they were abnormal in order to pass the censorship of the Lord Chamberlain. They often appeared to be effete, effeminate in the mainstream theater. In the 50s, they were identified with female characters, for example, Webster in John

Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956), and Geof in Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1958). Or, they were depicted to be mentally ill, as the result of a dysfunctional family and the cause of destructive, neurotic behavior, like Clive in Peter Shaffer's *Five Finger Exercise* (1958). In short, homosexual characters lived with the oppression of guilt, remained on the margin of society, or were seen as sick.

Orton did not conform to the stereotyped portraits. He mentioned his non-conformism and characterization of Ed in his interview with Giles Gordon in 1967:

> In *Sloane* I wrote a man who was interested in boys and liked having sex with boys. I wanted him played as if he was the most ordinary man in the world, and not as if the moment you wanted sex with boys you had to put on earrings and scent. [. . .] It's compartmentalisation again. Audiences love it, of course, because they're safe. But one shouldn't pander to audiences. (95)

In opposition to the conventional compartmentalization, Orton displayed a different aspect of homosexuals in *Sloane*. Ed and Sloane are ruthless and aggressive, committing themselves not to love, relation or family but to their own desires. They are not inflicted by guilt because they are amoral. Regardless of morality, they long for sexual pleasure, as it is natural.

Sloane, under the examination of the Lord Chamberlain, was considered to be "very unattractive," "very uninteresting," and with "no attempt to deal with the subject of homosexuality in a serious manner."[7] Most of the vulgar phrases were not allowed; for instance, "I just don't give a monkey's fart," "Like an old tart grinding to her climax," "Why don't you shut your mouth and give your arse a chance?" and "You're not vaginalatrous?" Dictions like "old prat," "their old shit," "bugger," "sagging tits," and "Oh, Christ!" were prohibited. In addition, Sloane was not to touch Kath's breasts, and a warning was given about the scene where Kath tumbled over Sloane:

> Kath's action with Sloane is not to exceed that given in the stage directions. You are particularly warned that any movements implying or simulating copulation have not been allowed and furthermore, that such actions in such a context have been described in judge's obiter dictum given in the High Court of Justice as "obscene."

[7] The comments of the censors are quoted from the Lord Chamberlain's File on *Entertaining Mr Sloane*. The Lord Chamberlain's Plays and Files are now collected in the British Library.

The comments make it clear that the censor kept to his principle of preserving propriety, and the irrelevant reference to the High Court showed his intimidating authority. Subject to several revisions and deletions, licence was recommended.

Concerning the censorship of *Sloane*, Orton mentioned how he felt in an interview of 1967: "the funny thing about the Lord Chamberlain was that he cut all the heterosexual bits and kept in all the homosexual bits" (qtd. in Lahr 191). Indeed, many of the gay innuendoes slipped through the censoring powers, for instance, "He was an expert on the adolescent male body," "He wanted to photo me. For certain interesting features I had that he wanted the exclusive right of preserving." As de Jongh observes, "[*Sloane*,] the first play in which homosexuality was a simple if sexy fact of life, was allowed to take the stage" (120). In *Sloane*, Orton discards the homosexual stereotypes used by his predecessors and portrays two masculine gay men unoppressed by shame or guilt, thereby demystifying the dominant conception of homosexuality as sin, sickness or danger. With its re-presentation of homosexual desire, *Sloane* marked a transitional phase in shaping homosexual characters in English theater.[8] And through this black comedy Orton revolted against the sexual ideology of the 60s, namely, the idea that heterosexuality was normal and perversity abnormal. For him, sexuality should not be categorized, demarcated, or subjugated; the medicalization of perversions at that time was not intended to have them confirmed in the society but to make them conform to the prevailing sexual criterion and social morality.

Loot, written in 1964, was first staged at Cambridge in 1965, and had its London première in 1966. Between the years *Loot* underwent numerous rewrites. The story, given in general outline, tells of an investigation into murder and theft. Fay, a Catholic and nurse by profession, has murdered her seven husbands for money before being employed by McLeavy to attend on his sick wife. Fay makes Mrs. McLeavy change her will so that she can

[8] Contemporary gay critics tend to attack Orton for his sexual conservatism. Sloane, after all, is a bisexual instead of a homosexual like his creator, revealing that Orton did not come out of the closet. And the characterization of Ed, his predatoriness and misogyny, aligns Orton with the prejudices against homosexuals. Despite the arguments, it is acknowledged that Orton transformed the image of the effeminate or sick homosexual character and dramatized guiltless homosexual desire on stage. For studies of the issue of homosexuality in Orton's plays, see Simon Shepherd's *Because We're Queer;* de Jongh's *Not in Front of the Audience: Homosexuality on Stage*, 86-105; Clum's *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*, 114-33; Sinfield's "Is There a Queer Tradition, and is Orton in it?"; David Van Leer's "Saint Joe: Orton as Homosexual Rebel."

inherit all the property, and then kills her with poison. McLeavy, knowing nothing about Fay's secrets, indulges in sorrow; he devises an elaborate funeral for his wife, whose body has been embalmed and placed in a coffin. McLeavy's son, Harold, robbed a bank with his partner, Dennis, an undertaker. In order to hide the stolen money from the search of Truscott, a detective, Hal suggests putting it in the coffin. They thus remove the corpse into a wardrobe and replace it with their loot. Truscott comes to detect Fay's crimes and the larceny in the guise of an inspector sent by the water board. He then finds the lost money unexpectedly and gains an advantage in this situation.

What is shocking and outrageous in this macabre comedy is the treatment of the dead. The body is minus the vital organs so that it can be preserved—"Good for centuries" (1.208). False eyes and teeth and W. V. S. uniform are put in/on simply to maintain its appearance. When the space of the coffin is needed, the corpse is dislodged and thrown into a cupboard, with the head downwards. Clothes and dentures are even removed from the corpse to erase its identity because Hal and Fay want to dispose of the body by burying it. While they are stripping the dead, Hal talks about his plan of running a brothel with the money and scandalously trifles with the dentures:

> FAY *hands across the screen in quick succession, a pair of corsets, a brassiere and a pair of knickers.* HAL *puts them into the pile.*
>
> HAL. [. . .]
>
> I'd have a French bird, a Dutch bird, a Belgian bird, an Italian bird—
>
> FAY *hands a pair of false teeth across the screen*.
>
> —and a bird that spoke fluent Spanish and performed the dances of her native country to perfection. (*He clicks the teeth like castanets.*) I'd call it the Consummatum Est. And it'd be the most famous house of ill-fame in the whole of England.
>
> FAY *appears from behind the screen*. HAL *holds up the teeth*.
>
> These are good teeth. Are they the National Health? (1.227)

Moreover, the body, tied with bandages and mistaken for a tailor's dummy by the unwitting McLeavy and Truscott, is moved to and fro on stage. One of the glass eyes drops out of the corpse, and is passed around like a marble.

The body and its insides and parts as well are relentlessly manipulated as if they were objects. Neither is human content connected with the dead, nor is respect paid to its former life. As Manfred Draudt puts it, the corpse is deliberately "dehumanized and reduced to mere matter," and death, which used to be "a subject of gravest concern and metaphysical speculation, is there exposed in all its ridiculous grotesqueness" (205-6). The materialization and utilization of the corpse disrupts the solemnity, reverence, and fear associated with death. And death, dissociated from its substance and significations, becomes a body, a thing, and a farce. The interplay of death and eroticism, its primary function, is to evoke fierce reactions in the audience. The shock of *Loot*, therefore, derives from Orton's manipulation of death.

With his shock tactics, Orton gives an outlandish, ferocious, and farcical presentation of death. He believes that the dramatist has "the right to change formal gear at any time," and "*must* shake the audience out of its expectations" (qtd. in Lahr 227). *Loot* jolts the audience out of the common preconceptions about death; by so doing, it forces the audience to confront the sentiment and the hypocrisy in front of death and, furthermore, to criticize them. The targets of such criticism are the two figures, McLeavy and Fay. McLeavy, in deep grief, arranges hundreds of roses for his wife's funeral, and wishes to build a Memorial Rose Garden, which "will put Paradise to shame" (1.217). His love for the dead, however, is betrayed by his error about the color of her eyes. He mistakes the false blue eyes as her natural brown ones. When Fay wears the black dress that belongs to Mrs. McLeavy, he does not recognize it. In addition, confident that he will soon succeed to his late wife's money, he is stunned by the change of her will. On hearing that, in Fay's dream, he is accused by Mrs. McLeavy as the murderer, he fights back the deceased mercilessly: "Complete extinction has done nothing to silence her slanderous tongue" (2.252). What McLeavy's excessive woe reveals, in the end, is less a great affection for the dead than a blind reverence towards death. While McLeavy still retains affection/reverence, Fay takes death, or, more precisely, the funeral, as merely an occasion for public display. Her advice to Hal, who prefers mourning in private to attending the funeral, is "Show your emotions in public or not at all" (1.198). The Mother's Union is given the signal to shed tears, and the cortège "must ride the tide of emotion while it lasts" (1.219). And a Catholic ceremony will be observed as well. The character of Fay, whose absolute is that "We must keep up appearances" (2.275), acts out Orton's attack on the rigid Catholics, for whom trappings of piety mean everything. The funeral thus becomes a performance of

bereavement, sensation, and proprieties. Like the embalmed body with a fair exterior disguising its hollowed inside, the funeral is a grandiose demonstration empty of essence.

Centering on the tabooed issue of death, *Loot* makes an onslaught against sentimentality, hypocrisy, the police, law, and religion at the same time. It was banned by the Lord Chamberlain's Office in the first place.[9] In the Reader's Report by Kyrle Fletcher, dated 8 December 1964, it says that the play contains filthy dialogue, blasphemy, and references to flagellation, voyeur watching, and homosexuals. Above all, the whole atmosphere is repellent; a typical scene is the one in which "Fay undresses the corpse and describes it in callous and indecent language to Hal." A licence for the play is thus not recommended. However, a contradictory report was given by another examiner, C. D. Heriot. Heriot thought that what mattered in this black comedy was not the macabre element but the shocking bad taste with which it was presented. A licence could be granted subject to some excisions. As the censor insisted, indecent words should be cut, such as "balls-up," "piss-taking," "buggery," "knocked it off," and "shag their birds." (Homo)sexual puns were disallowed; for instance, "Ever since we reached puberty together one afternoon with a wallop," "He has a very personal approach to flogging," and "He'd take a detached view of the proceedings." The profane remark, "While Jesus pointed to His Sacred Heart, you pointed to yours," was banned, as was the dialogue between McLeavy and Fay, the latter suggesting that the widower should remarry:

> MCLEAVY. I can't marry. I'm nearly fifty.
> FAY. Our Lord was younger than you when he was crucified.
> MCLEAVY. Oh, but I don't have His stamina.
> FAY. I'm sure He wouldn't have adopted this ridiculous attitude. He would've got on with the job in hand.
> MCLEAVY. He was a celibate.

Besides, the association of the Royal Family with the brothel could not be approved. The censor's main concern was with the corpse. The following stage directions must be carried out:

1. The corpse is a dummy;
2. That the dummy corpse is never unclothed;
3. That the corpse is seen by the audience only when it is completely wrapped and shrouded.

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[9] The following comments are quoted from the Lord Chamberlain's File on *Loot*.

Loot passed the censorship in 1965, and was first staged at Cambridge. The assistant comptroller, Johnston, reported to the Lord Chamberlain on his visit to the performance at Wimbledon Theatre on March 15, saying that:

> Much as I expected, this is a pretty dreary play and not good entertainment. It is a brand of sick humour which probably goes down quite well with certain sections of the public particularly those people who like to be shocked at the outset in some unusual way. The ruse used here as you know is the pretty irreverent and sleep-stick treatment of a corpse.
>
> [. . .]
>
> There is a certain amount of improvisation and dialogue alteration, all of it, as far as I was concerned, quite innocuous, except perhaps that an imaginary firm who made glass eyes do so for Royalty.

There could be various reasons for the outcome of the tour production, for its being an "innocuous" farce on stage. One factor is no doubt that the edge of Orton's attack in the original version of *Loot* had been blunted by the censorship. What is made clear in Johnston's report as well as in the others is that it was Orton's "ruse"—to defy sentiment, hypocrisy, and reverence—that challenged the censors and was subdued. In other words, the shock of the macabre comedy, or Orton's sick humor, had been diminished.[10]

Loot reopened in London in 1966, under the direction of Charles Marowitz. Before that, the script, which had gone through much revision since 1965, was submitted to The Lord Chamberlain's Office. Again, the censors were annoyed by Orton's strong language. Many of the words and lines which they had insisted be removed from the previous version had crept back in and, unsurprisingly, were again forbidden to be used. As stated in the reports on *Loot*, the following expressions are banned: "balls-up," "knocked it off," "Under that picture of the Sacred Heart. You've seen it," "While Jesus pointed to His Sacred Heart, you pointed to yours," "knock shop," "buggery," "I'd do a boy more good than a clergyman," "shag their birds," and "I will call it the Consummatum Est." Besides, when Hal wipes the casket, which is

[10] It seems that the problem with the direction also caused the failure. The corpse posed a threat to the director, Peter Wood, as it taunted the censoring powers. Talking about how he directed *Loot*, Wood said: "I was kind of afraid of the play. There was something about the body of the late Mrs McLeavy which could disassociate the audience. I tried to find a style which would allow the body to be thrown and be totally accepted" (qtd. in Lahr 241). The difficulty in finding a style gradually exhausted the actors and crippled the performances.

used to hold the dead's insides, no stain should appear on the handkerchief. Orton's deliberate intention to disturb the censors was more than obvious. And again, the treatment of the corpse was given the most attention. Four stage directions must ensure to be followed so that the play could be licensed:

1. The corpse must be inanimate and not played by an actress;
2. The corpse must not be seen by the audience except when completely wrapped and shrouded;
3. Nothing must drop from the corpse at any time during the action of the play;
4. Whilst an unidentifiable object may be displayed, there must be no realistic glass eye as the subject of by-play.

The Lord Chamberlain then accepted two alterations: "Under the picture of the Infant Samuel" substituted for "Under that picture of the Sacred Heart"; "Your wreaths have been blown to beggary" substituted for "Your wreaths have been blown to buggery."

The London production enjoyed success. *Loot* won the *Evening Standard* Award for the Best Play of 1966. The announcement of the Award brought in more audiences for *Loot*. Nevertheless, according to Marowitz in his *Burnt Bridges*, there were always some people who stormed out of the theater (104). A few letters of complaint were sent to the Lord Chamberlain, one of which objected that *Loot*, breaking every canon of decent behavior and a shocking example to young people, should pass his censure (Johnston 195). In addition, a letter written to the management of the theater condemned the blasphemy and filth in *Loot*, and suggested that the advertisement should indicate to the public the immoral tone of the play. This letter was forwarded to Orton and received a most emphatic response from Edna Welthorpe, who invited the writer to join her in a meeting with the Lord Chamberlain "to protest against plays in general and this travesty of the free-society *Loot* in particular" (*Diaries* 288-89). The scenes of anger pleased Orton, for shocking the audience out of their daily life was exactly what Orton attempted to do with *Loot*.

The Ruffian on the Stair and *The Erpingham Camp* were presented as a double-bill entitled *Crimes of Passion* in 1967. In *The Ruffian on the Stair*, Mike is a hired killer and Joyce, an ex-prostitute; they have been living together for two years. Wilson, the title character, whose brother has been run down by Mike's van and killed, appears to apply for a room vacancy that does not exist. Wilson's appearance and his further menacing behavior disturb Joyce greatly. Wilson used to be unusually intimate with his brother; after the

accident, he has no will to live. He attempts to provoke Mike into killing him, so that he could fulfill his wishes of committing suicide and having Mike arrested. As the story ends, Wilson pretends to be making love to Joyce, and Mike, angered by what he sees, shoots Wilson dead. Under the examination of the censor, the line, "The Royal Family were out in full force. Furs and garters flying," was not allowed; "Furs and garters flying" must be removed. In one scene, the actor and the actress must not be in bed together. The censor also forbade the slang expressions like "pissed," "sod," "knocking it off." The producer, Peter Gill, tried to negotiate. In his letter to the Office he said that the play was "an intensely verbal play, relying for its effect on the juxtaposition of English idioms and clichés," and the monosyllables the censor disallowed were essentially English. However, the license was issued subject to the omissions of those words.[11]

The Erpingham Camp is a play modeled on the Dionysian theme. With its location in a holiday camp, the story tells how a group of holiday makers, including one man who is asked to put on a leopard skin for a contest, gradually get out of the control of the camp authorities and confront them by turning the site of entertainment into one of obstreperousness, anarchy, and madness. Lahr considers this work as Orton's recreation of Euripides' *Bacchae*; in it he sees "passion—the thrilling, punishing battle between licence and control" (16). What Lahr refers to is the Dionysian cult in *Bacchae*, wherein women in ecstasy worship Dionysus with dance and song, and the young king, Pentheus, who has resisted Dionysus yet been persuaded to go to spy on the cult in the disguise of a female maenad, gets killed by his own mother.

Orton's satirical description of the authority figure, Erpingham, and his holiday camp demonstrates how society regulates and represses people. More than a societal force, the camp is also an epitome of colonizing power. In "Edna's Last Stand, or Joe Orton's Dialectic of Entertainment," Simon Shepherd accentuates the point that the Erpingham camp signifies a modern version of colonialism, imprinting Western capitalist values on the colonized as well as on holiday-makers. Entertainment becomes a form of imperialism, by means of which the Establishment not only makes money out of people but at the same time manipulates and educates them (88). Erpingham, with his prudery, personal aggrandizement, and exploitation, is "an embodiment of anachronistic Victorian mores and British imperialism reduced to absurdity," in the words of Patricia Juliana Smith (31).

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[11] All the comments are quoted from the Lord Chamberlain's File on *The Ruffian on the Stair*.

Erpingham's contempt for anarchy is challenged by a result more disastrous than he could have imagined. He has a confrontation with Kenny, the leader of the revolt, who comes to negotiate for food and shelter, which have been denied by Erpingham as a punishment. Erpingham refuses the demands relentlessly, and is threatened by Kenny: "You'll pay for this, you ignorant fucker!" (9.307). Cries of horror are heard from the staff. It is Eileen, Kenny's wife, who physically attacks the despot:

> EILEEN *hits* ERPINGHAM *on the back of the head with a bottle.* ERPINGHAM *sinks to his knees*.
>
> PADRE (*lifting his hands in horror*). That's Mr Erpingham! *He supports* ERPINGHAM *and helps him to rise*.
>
> (*White-faced*). You've struck a figure of authority!
>
> ERPINGHAM *shakes his head, dizzily. He stands upright, frees himself from the* PADRE *and turns coldly upon* EILEEN.
>
> ERPINGHAM. You are banned from the Erpingham Camp for life!
>
> EILEEN *makes a farting noise*. *The rest of the* CAMPERS *jeer*. *The* PADRE *wrings his hands*. (9.303)

With a forceful and farcical attack on authoritarianism, the play stands out as Orton's most political black comedy. This black satire gives the playwright's critique of contemporary English society. In the Lord Chamberlain's Office, Orton's verbal vulgarism and the lavatorial humor in the play made the censor uneasy.[12] He disallowed words like "fucker" and "piss-off," and the scene where Eileen makes a farting noise was banned. Consequently, "ponce" was accepted as a substitute for "fucker," and "push-off" for "piss-off." Regarding the coarse scene, the producer, Peter Gill, insisted that it was the moment when Erpingham reached the fulcrum of hubris, and it was necessary that he should receive a non-verbal puncture. The Lord Chamberlain's Office then accepted Gill's suggestion that the stage direction "Eileen makes a farting noise" would be amended as "Eileen blows a raspberry," and the sound would be inoffensive.

The Bacchic riot, in which stability gives way to agitation, reason to sensation, and restriction to liberation, recurs in *What the Butler Saw* (1969) in a more sophisticated and radical demonstration. Pentheus, the authority figure in *Bacchae*, transformed by Dionysus into a female reveler with a

[12] The following comments are quoted from the Lord Chamberlain's File on *The Erpingham Camp*.

leopard skin, is impersonated by Sergeant Match in Orton's version. In the end, Orton lets Sergeant March hold up the penis of Winston Churchill's Statue and lead the people out of the asylum, thereby reviving the symbol of pleasure, fertility, and life central to Dionysus' celebrations and to Aristophanes' theater. Like Pentheus, Sergeant March becomes a disciple of Dionysus, apparently a burlesque one: he cross-dresses, exalts sexual freedom, and, as Leslie Smith puts it, joins "the forces of disorder by co-operating in keeping the crimes committed out of the paper" (134). In this black comedy, acknowledged by critics to be his best, Orton not only borrows but also innovates the Dionysian excesses—sexuality, disorder, and frenzy—and their explosive power of relinquishing limits and releasing energies.

What the Butler Saw, set in a mental asylum, begins with an interview between Dr. Prentice and his prospective secretary, Geraldine. Desirous of her, he coaxes her into undressing for a physical examination. Right at this moment, his nymphomaniac wife, who is supposed to be at a lesbian meeting, appears unexpectedly. Together with her is a page-boy, Nick. Nick has attempted to rape Mrs. Prentice in a linen cupboard of the Station Hotel and taken some indecent pictures of her; he is now blackmailing her. Dr. Rance from the government also arrives to inspect the clinic. He soon finds the naked Geraldine behind the curtains and asks for an explanation. Intending to hide his improper behavior from Dr. Rance and his wife, Dr. Prentice pleads with both Geraldine and Nick to exchange and change clothes to play different roles. Coincidently, Sergeant Match is sent here to investigate an explosion, which has caused the penis of Winston Churchill's Statue to go missing. He is drugged and undressed by Dr. Prentice, in order to get his uniform for Nick. After a constant chase, cross-dressing, and gunshots, it turns out that Geraldine and Nick are actually twins, conceived when Mrs. Prentice was raped by Dr. Prentice in a linen cupboard of the Station Hotel. The rape happened before their marriage, so the babies had to be given away. Soon after the revelation, Sergeant Match, dressed in Mrs. Prentice's leopard-spotted dress and holding up the missing part that has just been found, directs the people out of the asylum.

Cross-dressing, a motif in *The Bacchae*, is skillfully used to propel and effect all the actions; it is the most intriguing and complex part of the play. Dress on stage serves as a sign, signifying the sex of the body under it. Orton breaks the chain between clothes and sexes, creating playful ambiguities, or, more precisely, sex confusion and identity proliferation. For instance, Geraldine, wearing various garments, floats in the sexes/identities of

female/secretary, neutral/patient, male/Nick/Gerald Barclay. Nick, in dress and in uniform, assumes different sexes and roles. The blurring of the sex/gender distinction is indicated when Geraldine dresses as Nick and Nick as her:

> NICK. Why is he wearing my uniform?
> PRENTICE. He isn't a boy. He's a girl.
> GERALDINE. Why is she wearing my shoes?
> PRENTICE. She isn't a girl. She's a boy. (2.418)

By the same token, Sergeant Match cross-dresses between male uniform and female dress. Yet, his situation is subtler, or, more satirical. Sergeant Match represents a law figure. Having his clothes changed and been drugged by Dr. Prentice, Sergeant Match walks dizzily, "stumbling across the room, crashing and upsetting furniture" (2.436)—he becomes a caricature of the law figure.

The fluidity of sexes, genders, and identities furthermore mobilizes the firm demarcation between natural and unnatural sexualities. The sexual paradigm depending on the stabilization of sex and gender in order to assign heterosexuality as natural and other forms of sexuality as unnatural is questioned and unsettled by the replacement of clothes:

> NICK. What is unnatural?
> RANCE (*to Mrs Prentice*). How disturbing the questions of the mad can be? (*To Nick.*) Suppose I made an indecent suggestion to you? If you agreed something might occur which, by and large, would be regarded as natural. If, on the other hand, I approached this child—(*He smiles at Geraldine.*)—my action could result only in a gross violation of the order of things. (2.416)

Violating the rules of dressing, as the lines reveal, results in sexual ambivalence: heterosexuality is denaturalized, and unnatural homosexuality becomes natural. Beyond that, other unnatural (or natural) sexual desires emerge alongside the transgression of the dress codes: "buggery, necrophilia, lesbianism, exhibitionism, hermaphroditism, rape, sadomasochism, fetishism, transvestism, nymphomania and the triumphant incest," as Charney enumerates (101-2). Orton extends the signifying sequence as far as to let the signifier of attire and the signifieds of sexes/genders be gradually displaced by the signifier of sexuality and the signifieds of sexual activities. Cross-dressing under the direction of Orton is to effect a hybrid of sexes, genders, identities, and sexualities.

In her *Vested Interests*, Marjorie Garber points out that cross-dressing disrupts the traditional binarism as its principle aim by reversing the sex/gender polarity; the disruptive act—"the interruption"—further calls the gender categories into question, questioning whether they are essential or constructed, biological or cultural (2-13). Similarly, through the disruptions of (un) dressing and the shifts in clothes, Orton problematizes the innateness and continuity of gender identities. Are they natural and necessary as they have been considered? Or, are they in fact being imposed on the bodies and therefore compulsory, exterior, and contingent like clothes? By disclosing the arbitrariness of the relation between dress and sex, Orton shows the unnaturalness of gender differentiation. In addition, as Lesley Ferris observes in the introduction to *Crossing the Stage*, cross-dressing on stage invites the spectator to re-read the transvestite body, which has been "a site of repression and possession" (9). Re-reading the repressed/possessed body is, and has been, Orton's main concern as a homosexual playwright. In *What the Butler Saw*, he presents a spectacle of transvestite bodies, exposing and exploring a repertoire of sexualities running rampant between the gender oppositions, that is, polymorphous perversions. Polymorphous perversions, a psychosexual term, derives from Freud's analysis of infantile sexuality. According to Freud in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), they can be led into all possible kinds of sexual irregularities, and there is little resistance towards carrying them out, "since the mental dams against sexual excesses—shame, disgust and morality—have either not yet been constructed at all or are only in course of construction" (57). Freud acknowledges that perversity is potential in every individual, but civilization demands its subordination to the normative heterosexuality. It is the sexual diversities sabotaged and subjugated by civilization that Orton revives through the transvestites after they break down the sexual categorization.

Cross-dressing is predominant in *What the Butler Saw*; it is the means by which Orton shows the absurdity of the binary restrictions on gender and sexuality, and also the unreliability of reason and order in reality. In other words, this act of transversing gender/sexual boundaries is simultaneously an enactment of disturbing and disintegrating the formulated reality. The apparatus of the play is borrowed from French bedroom farce, represented by Georges Feydeau's *oeuvre*. Conventional deceptions, disguises, mistaken identities, unexpected incidents, frenetic running through doors, and a meticulous *dénouement* are now at Orton's disposal. Nevertheless, Orton moves his work beyond this type of farce. In "What Joe Orton Saw," Albert

Hunt states that Orton uses the theatrical conventions "not simply to destroy the sexual stability on which the mechanics of bedroom farce depend [. . .], but also to question the basic sanity of organised society" (149). Indeed, animal desires, which impel Feydeau's characters, men in particular, to fervent pursuit of gratification yet come to rest after morality, propriety, and sanity have been restored in the end, become realized and liberated in Orton's version. What they seek for is not temporary aberration but thorough liberation.[13]

Sexual excesses enable *What the Butler Saw* to signify a Dionysian site, as some critics have observed. Such observation can be exemplified by a quotation from Charney: "The Dionysiac enters *What the Butler Saw* through its enormous sexual energies. [. . .] Polymorphous perversity is the guiding principal of Orton's play, and imaginative variety defines sexual value" (100). Bigsby also indicates that Orton, like Nietzsche, is a follower of Dionysus in terms of his breaking boundaries and participating in Dionysian revels; moreover, both employ sexuality as "a primary agent of release" because "the Dionysian spirit represents sexual ambivalence and the extreme" (*Joe Orton* 66). Seen from this perspective, *What the Butler Saw*, with emancipated polymorphous sexuality, re-presents the sexual indulgence and extremity in Dionysian festivities. In the meantime, it is important to point out the subversiveness of Dionysian essence. As Charles Segal stresses in *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides'* Bacchae, Dionysus "comes as a threat to civilization, leading dangerous bands of raging women and strangers, exciting in civilized lands hostility and resistance" (17). Accordingly, Orton's bacchants, all of whom deviate from the paradigms, be they sex, gender, sexuality, reason, or/and authority, are in fact threatening to the civilized world.

Playfulness, primitiveness, grotesqueness, destructiveness, eroticism, perversity, immorality, irrationality, anarchy, and ambiguity—characteristic of contemporary black comedy—are all to be found in *What the Butler Saw*. Just as *Entertaining Mr Sloane* parodies Pinter's comedy of menace, *What the Butler Saw* exploits a different dramatic model. It is Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* that Orton pokes fun at this time. "I'd like to write a play as good as *The Importance of Being Earnest*," Orton said of his ultimate aim as a playwright in his interview with Giles Gordon (96). His

[13] Joan F. Dean in "Joe Orton and the Redefinition of Farce" expresses a similar idea: "Orton's farces have appeared so appalling because they refuse to return the audience to the safety and stability of the status quo" (491).

masterpiece bears similarities to *The Importance of Being Earnest* in plot, theme, and style, yet it differs in its shameless display of sexual desires and the audacious ending with an incestuous family.[14] And again, as with *Sloane*, Orton intended to use *Butler* to challenge the construction of gender binaries and the regulation of sexuality in the interests of the heterosexual society in the 60s. In both plays the incestuous family is strategized to confront the normal heterosexuality. But in the latter, with the father seducing his daughter and the son attempting to rape his mother, the family is tinged with double incest and furthermore open to pluralistic perversities. Deliberately, Orton pushes *Butler* as far as to lay bare a polymorphously perverse family.

What the Butler Saw is "Joe Orton's most thoroughgoing cultural subversion," says Martin Priestman in his "A Critical Stage: Drama in the 1960s" (133). This subversive work was intended to shock and provoke the audience of the 60s like most of Orton's black comedies. The title alone has revealed such intention. *What the Butler Saw* derives from the peepshow machine in the seaside resort, "a carnivalesque site of pleasure" as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White describe it in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (179). Through a keyhole, the butler's mistress can be watched stripping to her suspender-belt while a gentleman sheds his pin-stripe trousers. The pier-end peepshow machine exhibits the bodies whose concealment, according to Freud in *Three Essays*, progresses with civilization and whets sexual curiosity. Clothes therefore signify civilization and its concomitant suppression of sexuality. Having removed the garbs of civilization/repression, the hidden parts are made visible and display a forbidden scene. And the voyeur—"Visual impressions remain the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused," as Freud accounts (22)—obtains sexual satisfaction by peeping into what should remain invisible. What the butler sees, then, is a sight of re-sexualized bodies, a sight of libidos.

While the peepshow spectacle was designed to arouse and satisfy libidinal desires, Orton's was to excite and irritate its theatrical voyeur, the

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[14] Charney makes the point in *Joe Orton* that *What the Butler Saw* is an "overt parody" of *The Importance of Being Earnest*; despite some resemblances to the latter, *What the Butler Saw* "plays with large concepts of identity (particularly sexual identity), incest, authority and maintaining one's sanity in a mad world" (23; 98). For parallels between the plays, see Bigsy's *Joe Orton*, 57; Worth's *Revolutions in Modern English Drama*, 148-56. For an extensive comparative study on Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Orton's works including *What the Butler Saw* and on their careers as homosexual playwrights, see Bull's "'What the Butler Did See': Joe Orton and Oscar Wilde."

audience, and to challenge the voyeuristic surveillance, the censoring authority. "[Sexual licence] is the only way to smash the wretched civilisation. [. . .] Sex is the only way to infuriate them. Much more fucking and they'll be screaming hysterics in next to no time," Orton wrote emphatically in his diary during the time of his working on *What the Butler Saw* (*Diaries* 125). The play was thus invested with excessive sexuality. When the producer, Oscar Lewenstein, suggested getting the Haymarket for the play, Orton thought that was a wonderful idea because "[i]t'd be a sort of joke even putting *What the Butler Saw* on at the Haymarket—Theatre of Perfection" (*Diaries* 256). He also wanted the set to be as conventional as possible: "It should be beautiful. Nothing extraordinary. A lovely set. When the curtain goes up one should feel that we've right back in the old theatre of reassurance—roses, French windows, middle-class characters" (*Diaries* 256). What Orton had in mind was to make the bourgeois audience believe that this ostensibly traditional comedy would offer them entertainment, laughter, and morality as this type of comedy mostly did. The assurance of the audience, however, would be struck and destroyed in the end. For they would find out it was actually an incestuous family, and "[t]he germ of moral anarchy [was] suddenly exposed at the centre of the conventional confection" (Bigsby, *Joe Orton* 57). That is, behind the French windows of Orton's bedroom farce was a Dionysian site of polymorphous perversity, which Orton contrived to assault his audience.

Orton's mischievous humor meanwhile is indicated in his allusions to the national figure, Winston Churchill. Both Lewenstein and Peggey Ramsay, Orton's agent, had reservations about the allusions and the incest in the play, which they doubted would pass the censorship. When they told Orton their opinions, the latter responded that he had thought of President Kennedy instead; as for the incest, Orton argued: "I couldn't change that, and even changing Churchill would be a blow" (*Diaries* 249-50; 252; 256).

Lewenstein and Ramsay were almost right in their judgments. The script of *What the Butler Saw* and the censors' reports on it were placed with the so-called "Waiting Box" plays, which referred to those plays that could not be granted licences until their authors had made satisfactory changes. Orton, however, did not have the opportunity to learn about the examiners' comments on *What the Butler Saw*, let alone alter the play.[15] In the Reader's

[15] On 9 August 1967, a month after *What the Butler Saw* had been completed, Orton was battered to death by Halliwell, the latter committing suicide with an overdose of Nembutals soon after the murder.

Report to the Lord Chamberlain, dated 30 July 1967, the reader, C. D. Heriot, describes the play as a funny black farce and, since it is by Joe Orton, "it has, of course, to deviate into tasteless indecencies." The reader's main concern was with the references to Winston Churchill. He suggested that all the references, even though they were supposed to be part of a statue, should not be allowed; in addition, "the missing part must not be exhibited and must in no sense resemble a phallus." The Lord Chamberlain agreed with Heriot. In his letter to Lewenstein, the censor forbids all the allusions to and manifestations of the private part of Winston Churchill. Moreover, three expressions need to be altered: "buggery," "The deafening sound of your chewing is the reason for my never having an orgasm," and "When they broke into the evil smelling den they found her poor body bleeding beneath the obscene and hal[f]-erect phallus." The Lord Chamberlain's letter was dated 10 August 1967, a day after Orton was murdered.[16] By the time that *What the Butler Saw* was posthumously produced in London, that is, 1969, theater censorship had come to its end. Even so, the private part of Winston Churchill was not seen on stage. Ralph Richardson, who played the role of Dr. Rance, turned the penis into a cigar.

Conclusion

"I know that my authentic voice is better than anyone else. It is vulgar and offensive in the extreme to middle-class susceptibilities," Orton said to his agent in a letter written during the time *Loot* was in its pre-London run (qtd. in Lahr 249). With his willed vulgarity and aggression, Orton aimed to shock the bourgeois audience as well as the Lord Chamberlain. For the censor, Orton's black comedy was notoriously in bad taste. But bad taste, under the circumstances, served a valuable function. As Bigsby underlines in "The Politics of Anxiety," "the laws of taste themselves constitut[e] a declaration of faith in moderation, in law and order, social and metaphysical" (290). Orton's deliberate bad taste signified his contempt for fixed notions of propriety and for social norms. His language was offensive, profane, and full of four-letter words. Richard Findlater in his discussion of theater censorship notes that there seems "a self-conscious naughtiness in this insistence on words still not widely used in mixed society which often has the air of a determination to embarrass the censor, to spit in Nanny's eye" (170). Findlater's observation is

[16] All the comments are quoted from the Lord Chamberlain's File on *What the Butler Saw*.

true of Orton's linguistic strategy as well as his intent. In the meantime, Orton skillfully employed the technique of insinuation when treating the sensitive topic, homosexuality. Moreover, one device Orton used to toy with the censor was to conjure up in the mind of the audience the scenes that were forbidden on stage. In *Loot*, for example, the scene where clothes are stripped off from the dead is an enactment of striptease, or a parody of striptease. In *What the Butler Saw*, Geraldine is asked to undress behind the curtains at the very beginning, and she remains naked there most of the time. Striptease and nudity, except static nude posing, were indecent for the Lord Chamberlain and disallowed on stage, but they were presented by Orton to his audience—in a suggestive way. And the illegal sexual activities of the Prentices, rape, incest, perversities, all *did* happen off-stage. These illicit acts, on or off the stage, had pushed the barriers fortified by the Lord Chamberlain.

Stage censorship was abolished in 1968. Orton was not able to enjoy the new freedom that enabled writers to explore the subjects they were really concerned about, such as sexual relationships, topical politics, and historical events, and to use a language that was not restricted to be socially appropriate. In his comparative studies of the plays of Jonson and Orton, John Bull speculates as to the direction that Orton's writing might have taken after *What the Butler Saw*, if he had continued to write in post-1968:

> For, the ultimate extension of the process of his interest in the liberation of libido in a glorious celebration of chaos and sexual flexibility, might suggest a more truly Bakhtinian notion of carnival than can be invoked for either Jonson or Orton, and the creation of a Dionysian theatre in which no distinction is made between spectators and performers [. . .]. ("'A Deal of Monstrous and Forced Action'" 151)

Bull's interesting speculation points out that *What the Butler Saw* had catalyzed truly Dionysian/carnivalesque liberation within the limits of censorship, and Orton might have offered a more truly free and sexual carnival after censorship. Indeed, *What the Butler Saw* together with Orton's other black comedies present an upside-down world, wherein all moral and social standards are obliterated, all forms of authority attacked, and disorder, irrationality, and sexualities celebrated. It is this world of freedom and laughter that makes Orton a rare phenomenon in British Theater, and a genuine black comedy master.

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