JOE ORTON: THE OSCAR WILDE OF THE WELFARE STATE

by

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B.A. (Honours), University College, London, 1972

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
(Department of English)

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
April, 1977

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ABSTRACT

This thesis has a dual purpose: firstly, to create an awareness and appreciation of Joe Orton's plays; moreover to establish Orton as a focal point in modern English drama, as a playwright whose work greatly influenced and aided in the definition of a form of drama which came to be known as Black Comedy. Orton's flamboyant life, and the equally startling method of his death, distracted critical attention from his plays for a long time. In the last few years there has been a revival of interest in Orton; but most critics have only noted his linguistic ingenuity, his accurate ear for the humour inherent in the language of everyday life which led Ronald Bryden to dub him "the Oscar Wilde of Welfare State gentility." This thesis demonstrates Orton's treatment of social matters: he is concerned with the plight of the individual in society; he satirises various elements of modern life, particularly those institutions which wield authority (like the Church and the Police), and thus control men. Orton's satire on these institutions may be seen as extending to an attack on the Welfare State, a social phenomenon which epitomises all the aspects of control Orton disliked so much. The title of this thesis therefore makes the connection between Orton's verbal brilliance and his concern for humanity.

The introductory chapter discusses theatrical traditions which may have been an important influence on Orton's work. These traditions are
not only considered in general terms; they are also discussed with particular reference to playwrights (and other authors) whom Orton admitted to admiring greatly. Writers analysed in this chapter include Ben Travers, Strindberg, Pinter, and, of course, Oscar Wilde. These dramatists are not examined to deny Orton's originality, but rather to prove it; it is shown that Orton's plays cannot be categorised; his work is a fusion and revision of several different theatrical forms.

Orton's seven plays can be divided into two groups: the earlier, more realistic dramas, and the later farcical plays. This division is made purely on account of form; the thematic concerns may differ slightly from play to play but do not vary from group to group. The central themes in these dramas include man's isolation in society, the greed and bestiality of mankind, the corruption of the Church and the Police, and man's hypocrisy. Chapter II treats the earlier, more realistic "comedies of language"; the major analysis is of linguistic devices, particularly the characters' use of euphemism, and the dislocation between the propriety of their words and the amorality of their deeds. Chapter III discusses Orton's use of farce, and his great theatrical achievement in using a traditionally light-hearted genre to make a serious comment about mankind. Orton's farces show man as a victim of modern society; the frantic pace of farce provides a theatrical correlative for his view of man's struggle for survival in a hostile universe. In both these chapters, each play is examined individually for themes, tone, form and linguistic devices.

The final chapter considers Orton's effect on some important dramatists of the late 1960's and early 1970's. The works of David Mercer, Simon
Gray, Tom Stoppard and Peter Barnes are briefly examined, and similarities to Orton in theme and tone are noted. It is stressed that although Orton's greatest achievement may well have been in the establishment of Black Comedy as a genre, his influence can be said to be wide-ranging since many modern writers have emulated individual elements of his style. However, this chapter, and the thesis as a whole, stresses that in the final analysis, Orton's work must be considered inimitable.
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CHAPTER I

In all the history of the New Drama in Britain there is no career more spectacular, and alas none briefer, than that of Joe Orton.¹

This comment by John Russell Taylor in his book *The Second Wave* epitomises a shift in critical opinion about Orton. Only six years earlier, Mr. Taylor had dismissed *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* as "commercial,"² and, until the beginning of the 1970's, critics persisted in either ignoring Orton entirely, or in regarding him as an amusing, but somewhat trivial playwright "who outdid all his contemporaries in offending the traditional West End audience."³ There is no doubt that the violent manner of Orton's death (his lover Kenneth Halliwell beat his brains out with a hammer and then committed suicide) did little to increase his dramatic reputation, since the majority of critics were fascinated by the "poetic justice" of this event, and disregarded the material in his plays in favour of commenting on his exceptionally flamboyant life and death. Of course it is important that Orton's dramatic career was "cut short by his own death, in a manner reminiscent of his own plays,"⁴ just as it is important to recognise that Orton's plays reflect his life, and his vision of the world. The amoral, vicious, cruel and egotistical society depicted in Orton's work really did exist for him; because of his diaries, letters and other writings we are able to see how his experiences are translated into his plays.

- 1 -
Orton loved to shock people, in his life as much as in his work. His behaviour was often outrageous; indeed many of his exploits read like potential playscripts. He was an inveterate letter-writer, and his favourite nom-de-plume was that of Edna Welthorpe (Mrs.), an alter ego who perpetuated the scandal surrounding his plays by writing condemnatory letters to the press. Edna Welthorpe, however, did not restrict her activities to talking about the theatre; she maintained a wide circle of correspondents, including a local vicar. Her letter to the manager of the Ritz Hotel in London is an Orton classic; it presents the vision of corrupt society and the desire to shock the reader into awareness that we see in Orton's dramas.

Dear Sir,

I had tea in your palatial establishment last Wednesday. I must congratulate you on your décor. I was with my friend Mrs. Sullivan. You'll remember her. She was the one in the fur coat. Unfortunately I left behind a brown Moroccan leather handbag which contained a Boots folder holding snapshots of myself and Mrs. Sullivan in risqué poses. There was also a pair of gloves made of sticky vegetable matter. If you could recover these, Mrs. Sullivan and I will be enormously grateful and relieved.

Yours sincerely,

Edna Welthorpe

Orton's own behaviour is equally evident in his work. His admittedly amoral attitude towards sex is reflected in such characters as Sloane in *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* and Hal and Dennis in *Loot*. John Lahr, in his introduction to Orton's collected plays, quotes from Orton's diaries to demonstrate that all his talk about sexual adventuring was indeed fact. Moreover, these diaries show that many of the situations in a play like *Loot* are based on realistic experience. Although *Loot* was written -- and was in fact being performed -- at the time of Orton's
mother's death, many incidents connected with the corpse, coffin and funeral seem to be uncannily foreshadowed by the play.

As the corpse is downstairs in the main living room it means going out or watching television with death at one's elbow. My father, fumbling out of bed in the middle of the night, bumped into the coffin and almost had the corpse on the floor. Peggy Ramsay said how dreadfully reminiscent of Loot it all was. Orton was very insistent that his plays were reality, not fantasy. In order to impress this point on the cast of Loot he kept his dead mother's false teeth and presented them to the actors.

'Here, I thought you'd like the originals.' He said, 'What.' 'Teeth,' I said. 'Whose?' he said. 'My mum's,' I said. He looked very sick. 'You see,' I said, 'It's obvious you're not thinking of the events of the play in terms of reality if a thing affects you like that.'

Of course, much of the satire in Orton's plays, particularly his biting satire against the police, and authority in general, sprung from his feeling of being violently persecuted by figures of authority. His prison experiences (he was sentenced to six months imprisonment for stealing and defacing library books), reinforced his attitudes and opinions of society.

Before I had been vaguely conscious of something rotten somewhere: prison crystallised this. The old whore society really lifted up her skirts, and the stench was pretty foul. This 'foul stench' is seen throughout Orton's canon, but is probably most noticeable in the earlier plays, and particularly in The Ruffian on the Stair which was written only a few months after his release from jail.

After the scandal surrounding Orton's death had diminished, a revival of interest in his plays took place. At this time, critics began to
note Orton's importance, but they restricted their praise to his amazing ability with words. His desire to point out the cruelty and horror of society, and, perhaps most important of all, his brilliant dramatisation of many central attitudes of the 1960's (the narrow distinction between madness and sanity, the abnormality of the term "normal," and the nightmarish, isolated situation of man in society) have been almost totally disregarded. Many of these issues dramatised by Orton and other playwrights of the period are discussed in psychological terms by R. D. Laing. Although it is unlikely that Orton had read Laing, and thus his plays must on no account be considered as a mere dramatisation of psychological theory, Laing crystallises and defines the concepts of isolation and alienation so prevalent in the drama of this time.

We are born into a world where alienation awaits us. We are potentially men, but are in an alienated state, and this state is not simply a natural system. Alienation as our present destiny is achieved only by outrageous violence perpetrated by human beings on human beings.10

Orton's plays present a vision of this world, an image of alienated man. In particular, his works are concerned with violence: violence, however, does not exist only in physical terms; it is far more effective and more dangerous when it threatens one's emotions.

Violence attempts to constrain the other's freedom, to force him to act in the way we desire, but with ultimate lack of concern, with indifference to the other's own existence of destiny. We are effectively destroying ourselves by violence masquerading as love.11

Orton's views coincide with Laing's suggestion that violence is at its most dangerous when it is masquerading as something else; thus his focal points of attack are institutions (such as the Church and the police) which, while pretending their concern for mankind springs
from love and a desire for law and order, seek the power to control men and direct their behaviour. Moreover the callous indifference of society troubles Orton greatly: many of his plays deal with man's essential loneliness in the world; they show how human beings are treated as machines, and discarded once they have outlived their usefulness. Orton is therefore far from being the light-hearted, outrageous stylist that many have thought him; he is a serious moralist, a social critic who demolishes many of the foundations of society to reveal the corruption and evil lurking there. Of course, it would be a fatal error to deny the brilliance of Orton's humour: he attacks through laughter; his satiric thrust often seems to make his point more forcefully. He mocks British justice, destroys the myth about the wonderful English policeman in a marvellously funny portrait of an inept, but curiously sinister detective in Loot, casts enormous doubt on the validity of those who profess to be religious (or even moral and genteel), by revealing the vast gap between their protestations and their actions, and effectively diminishes figures of authority by showing their inhumanity and stupidity.

Underlying most of this satire, however, is an extraordinary exuberance, a willingness to laugh and a delight in the follies and foibles of mankind. Like many modern playwrights, Orton is concerned with stripping away the layers, taking off the mask of gentility to see what lies beneath. Unlike many writers, however, he is delighted by what he discovers. He has said that he found people "profoundly bad, but irresistibly funny," and insisted that Entertaining Mr. Sloane (and presumably his later plays) should not be categorised with whatever
It's just a play, which happens to make people laugh about sodomy and nymphomania. It's a comedy insofar as the whole world and the whole human situation is comic and farcical.

This vision of the human condition as farcical suggests a link between Orton's image of society and that expressed by the dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd. However, it would be an error to place Orton firmly in the tradition of the Absurd. As will be seen, Orton's work defies categorisation; it is a fusion of many traditions which reforms and revises all previous influences to create an original contribution to modern drama.

The two most generally acknowledged influences on British drama of the 1960's and '70's are Bertolt Brecht and the Theatre of the Absurd. Laurence Kitchin, rephrasing this statement in more general terms, states that the two dominant forms of drama in the 1960's were epic and compression-ism. Whatever terms we use, however, it is clear that this division of influences cannot be satisfactorily applied to Orton. At least one of his plays (The Erpingham Camp) has a somewhat Brechtian or epic structure; it represents a version of the Brechtian Parable play. On the other hand, lest we should be inclined to deny the influence of the absurdists, many of Martin Esslin's comments on the significance of the Theatre of the Absurd can (and indeed, should) be applied to Orton.

In the Theatre of the Absurd, the spectator is confronted with the madness of the human condition, is enabled to see his situation in all its grimness and despair. Stripped of illusions and vaguely felt fears and anxieties, he can face this situation consciously, rather than feeling it vaguely below a surface of euphemisms and optimistic illusions. By seeing his anxieties formulated he can liberate himself from
them . . . . It is the unease caused by the presence of illusions that are obviously out of tune with reality that is dissolved and discharged through liberating laughter at the recognition of the fundamental absurdity of the universe. 15

Although Orton's writing demonstrates many of these qualities, we must be careful to note the ways in which he differs from the absurdists. It appears that he has more in common with the philosophies of Sartre and Camus (both of whom, incidentally, wrote dramas in "traditional" forms) than with many of the external aspects of absurd drama. The form of absurd drama is very important: "the devaluation or downright dissolution of language, the disintegration of plot, character, and final solution which had been the hallmark of drama" 16 distinguishes absurd plays from other types of drama. Certainly Orton does not conform to these externals; his language is vitally important and is honed to a sharp brilliance, his plot is complex and well-constructed, the characters are traditional (in the sense of having a clearly-defined background, unlike "absurd" characters), and all the plays have a recognisable, and indeed, essential, climax. The effect of the absurdists, therefore, is seen only in their themes; in a similar manner, Orton appears to accept many of Artaud's theories on the Theatre of Cruelty (considered by most critics to be a central source for many absurd dramatists), but does not follow his ideas on staging or presentation.

The theatre will never find itself again . . . . except by furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitate of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism pour out on a level not counterfeit and illusory, but interior. 17

Far from following Artaud's visions of a theatre of Balinese dancers, and movement of light and sound, Orton incorporated these theories into
plays traditional in form, indeed resembling 18th and 19th century comedies of manners in construction and style. In particular his wit and manner is polished and sparkling; he mentions Wilde, Congreve and Sheridan as authors whose style he admires, and presumably is influenced by.

Since Orton was quite specific about which writers he admired, the best way to discuss the traditions affecting his work is to examine those authors he admits to have been an influence. Among these are Swift, Voltaire, Lewis Carroll, Strindberg, Ben Travers, Beckett, Pinter and Wilde. The very variety and range of these authors testifies to our inability to categorise Orton: the effect of Voltaire and Swift is seen in his vision of mankind and his biting satire; the influence of Lewis Carroll is echoed by the dream-like, almost nightmarish qualities of some of Orton's work, and, of course by the wonderfully nonsensical non-sequiturs and other aspects of his language. Strindberg's effect on Orton's writing is harder to locate, particularly since Orton stresses the importance of his later works like The Ghost Sonata. Thus it is not the Strindbergian conflict between the sexes that Orton is influenced by (although there may be vestiges of this in The Ruffian on the Stair, Entertaining Mr. Sloane and What the Butler Saw), but the later Strindberg, which is a direct source of the Theatre of the Absurd in its brilliant portrayal of dreams and obsessions. Martin Esslin's description of Strindberg's methods in The Ghost Sonata --

\[\text{[He] merely translated the psychological situation of the chief character of a play like The Father into a direct image of his nightmares and obsessions}\]

-- corresponds directly to Orton's concretization of man's psychological
state in the farce of *Loot* and *What the Butler Saw*. The dramatic vision
presented by the frenetic and frantic scurrying of the farce expresses
man's nightmare, his loneliness in society and his inability to control
any aspect of his life or behaviour. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly,
*The Ghost Sonata* is an expose of viciousness and corruption: in the
character of Hummel, Strindberg demonstrates the evil social effects of
man's desire for power; indeed all the figures at the ghost supper are
drawn together because of their wicked and cruel behaviour. The connection
between this image of society and that presented in Orton's plays is

clear.

The inclusion of Beckett and Pinter in the list of influences testifies
to the importance of the Theatre of the Absurd in Orton's work. In addition,
the effect of Pinter can be seen directly in Orton's early work. *The
Ruffian on the Stair* has passages of Pinteresque dialogue --

> Wilson: (smiling). I've come about the room.
> Joyce: I'm afraid there's been a mistake. I've nothing to
do with allotting rooms. Make your enquiries elsewhere.
> Wilson: I'm not coloured. I was brought up in the Home Counties.
> Joyce: That doesn't ring a bell with me, I'm afraid.23

-- and *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* is very reminiscent of Pinter in theme
and tone. In both cases, however, the influence of Pinter is transcended,
partly because Orton perverts the typical Pinter situation of an intruder
and two people in a room that is the basis for these dramas, but mainly
because the style, the humour, and, despite a hint
of Pinter, the language is unmistakeably original. It is only in Orton's
"realistic" dramas that the effect of Pinter can be seen; in his later,
more farcical work this influence has completely disappeared.
Orton's drama can be divided into two periods: his early plays (The Ruffian on the Stair, Entertaining Mr. Sloane and The Good and Faithful Servant) which are primarily comedies of language, and his later, primarily farcical works (Loot, The Erpingham Camp, Funeral Games and What the Butler Saw). It is, of course, this latter group which shows the effect of his admiration for Ben Travers. Orton has done much to demonstrate that "farce is the most serious of all art forms." Indeed, he has extended and developed the boundaries of farce to present an image of man as a victim of society.

In farce, people are victims of their momentum. Survival and identity are at stake. The body and mind are pulverised in their pursuit of order. Unheeding and frantic, characters rebound off one another, groping for safety.

Once again, this vision corresponds to that of R. D. Laing. In his book The Divided Self, Laing shows how an "ontologically insecure" person, a man without sufficient sense of himself to mitigate the despair, terror and boredom of existence, often feels he has no real identity.

The body is felt more as an object among other objects in the world than as the core of the individual's being.

Laing also demonstrates how a person in this position may feel "split" into a body and a mind: Orton's plays show the body as somehow disconnected from the mind; the body undergoes a plethora of undignified experiences through impulse, not through rational thought. Thus farce is used to represent and emphasise the schizophrenic behaviour of man in modern society. This behaviour is a direct outgrowth of the repression and violence forced on mankind; man feels compelled to conform to the "norms" of society, and by so doing, may twist and pervert his character to a situation resembling schizophrenia. The general influence of Ben Travers,
the most prolific and best writer of farces in the twentieth century, is evident in Orton's recognition of the inherent possibilities of the farce form. A more specific influence may be seen in the amorality, greed and corruption of many of Travers' characters, who seem to prefigure these characteristics in Orton's drama. It is probably no coincidence, therefore, that Orton's first full-fledged farce should be called *Loot*, while one of Travers' best known plays (and perhaps the one that presents the clearest picture of the amoral, greedy, status-seeking society), is entitled *Plunder*.

The final, and certainly most obvious, influence on Orton is that of Oscar Wilde. It is by now a critical commonplace to praise Orton's brilliantly accurate ear for language and to compare his wonderfully witty epigrams and glittering style with that of Wilde. Certainly these points of comparison exist: Ronald Bryden rightly dubbed Orton "the Oscar Wilde of Welfare State gentility," and pointed out that his drama must be considered as if the language, rather than the plot were the supreme ingredient. This latter point compares very closely to Wilde. In a play like *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the plot is absurd, but the dialogue comments on life. Wilde's plots and characters are comic; however as Eric Bentley accurately points out, his witticisms "are not comic but serious relief. They are in ironic counterpoint with the absurdities of the action." This perceptive interpretation can equally be applied to Orton's methods. The satire is not embedded in the plot, but in the language. Thus, in *Loot*, the plot is a light-hearted parody of detective fiction, but the verbal wit provides a devastating attack on British justice.
Fay: You must prove me guilty. That is the law.

In addition, Bentley's comments about the effect of the satire in *The Importance of Being Earnest* provide an illumination of the reason for many critics' misconceptions of Orton. Bentley maintains that the play is

forever on the frontier or satire, forever on the point of breaking into bitter criticism. It never breaks. The ridiculous action constantly steps in to avoid the break.

Orton's plays are constructed in a similar manner, although sometimes the criticism does break through and disturb the balance of the play. This is only momentary however; the structure of the play shakes, but then the ludicrous behaviour of the characters prevents the drama from toppling over completely into bitter diatribe. Many critics have disregarded the serious aspects of both Wilde and Orton; they have been misled by the wit and farce into neglecting the serious tone beneath the laughter and thus misinterpreting these authors.

A direct Wildean influence can be seen throughout Orton's language. Both authors make effective use of the epigram as an instrument of moral anarchy. This device presents a conventional image of society, but introduces a slight change in the traditional wording so that the moral tone is perverted or even completely reversed. Thus Wilde's epigram, "Life's aim, if it has one, is simply to be always looking for temptations," compares with Orton's

The theft of an article of clothing is excusable. But policemen, like red squirrels, must be protected.

In both cases the statement appears at first to be reasonable, yet both
epigrams, in different ways, pervert the moral universe of their respective plays. Wilde creates a vision of amorality; one would expect life to be a perpetual avoidance of temptation, rather than a continual search for it. Orton, by reducing the police force to the level of an endangered species, and moreover to a species of rodents, brilliantly diminishes its worth and even humanity. Moreover, on several occasions, Orton seems deliberately to invoke echoes of Wilde. Gwendolyn's demand for a proposal in *The Importance of Being Earnest* --

And to spare you any possible disappointment, Mr. Worthing, I think it only fair to tell you quite frankly beforehand that I am fully determined to accept you.

-- is directly echoed by Fay's request to McLeavy.

Go ahead. Ask me to marry you. I've no intention of refusing. On your knees. I'm a great believer in traditional positions.

Orton goes beyond Wilde in this example, for the double-entendre of "traditional positions" has echoes of Wycherley and other Restoration comic dramatists.

Orton not only models his stylistic devices of language on Wilde, but he also uses Wilde's work as a basis for complete scenes. The opening interview between Dr. Prentice and Geraldine in *What the Butler Saw* appears to have been derived directly from Lady Bracknell's interrogation of Jack Worthing in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The sexes have been reversed in Orton's play, and of course the situation has changed, but the salient features of the scene, including the questions about parents and the use of note-taking, are identical in each play.

One other playwright who may be said to have had an indirect effect on Orton is Shaw. One of Orton's trademarks of language is his wonderfully funny mixture of elegance and coarseness; he admitted that he
found a mixture of gentility and crudeness irresistibly funny. This comment calls to mind one of the classic comedy scenes in English drama: the tea-party in *Pygmalion*. Eliza's attempts at the "new small-talk" and her woeful lapses into phrases such as "It's my belief they done her in," may well have influenced Orton in some manner.

Orton's use of language is probably the most important part of his work. He conceived of words as weapons; his novel *Head to Toe* describes experimentation with words in an attempt to find the most effective and lethal combinations. His technique is very well expressed in this passage, particularly his reasons for writing plays rather than novels: the effect of the spoken word is far greater than that of the written phrase.

He thought of a book. But that was no use . . . . To be destructive, words had to be irrefutable. And then the book might not be read. He was aware that words and sentences often buried themselves into readers' minds before exploding and then went off harmlessly. Print was less effective than the spoken word because the blast was greater; eyes could ignore, slide past, dangerous verbs or nouns. But if you could lock the enemy into a room somewhere and fire the sentence at them you would get a sort of seismic disturbance . . . .

Language is used for manifold purposes in Orton's plays. His use of the epigram shows the perversion of society; the lack of communication among men is demonstrated by a number of dislocated exchanges in which the reply appears totally unrelated to the question; the hypocrisy and false gentility of mankind is delightfully satirised by his brilliant ear for dialogue, and the language of modern society, the jargon of newspapers, television and advertising is accurately and effectively reproduced. These and other uses of language will be discussed in detail for each play.
Orton's achievement can be summed up in two main areas: his rejuvenation of farce and his wonderful use of language. However, it is important not to forget his subject matter: Orton satirised taboo subjects, death, religion, sexuality and that acme of sacredness, the British policeman. The farcical treatment of these topics can be categorised as a new subdivision of drama: Black Comedy. Orton was one of the best writers of Black Comedy in Britain in the 1960's, and if not the first author to write in this vein, was probably the playwright who did most to refine and define the genre. The wide range of influences which are found in his work have been briefly discussed here; the conclusion to this thesis will discuss the genre of Black Comedy and demonstrate how Orton himself influenced the course of British drama in the late 1960's and early 1970's.
CHAPTER II

The three plays discussed in this chapter are Orton's earliest work. The basis for their grouping is not merely chronological, however; it is also stylistic. These plays can be classified as "comedies of language," dramas which are basically realistic in tone and content. This realism distinguishes them from Orton's later, more farcical, plays. Although Orton found his métier as a farceur and did much of his best work in that genre, these early plays should not be neglected. They are interesting as forerunners of his later work, since we see a gradual movement towards farce, an experimentation with aspects of the form. Moreover, all three plays, but Entertaining Mr. Sloane in particular, are worth studying in their own right. Entertaining Mr. Sloane (and to a lesser degree, The Ruffian on the Stair and The Good and Faithful Servant) is a brilliantly witty comedy of manners; the language captures the essence of lower-middle class gentility, yet the thrust of the play uncovers the ugly forces of greed and ruthlessness that operate beneath this surface. Entertaining Mr. Sloane shows the greed of society; the satire of The Ruffian on the Stair focuses on man's loneliness in an indifferent world, that of The Good and Faithful Servant deals with authority. In all three plays (and indeed, throughout Orton's work), hypocrisy of every kind is attacked; the mask of social conformity is ripped off to reveal the basic animal cruelty, or, at the very least, egotistical indifference, of man.
The gradual movement towards farce in these dramas begins in the final act of Entertaining Mr. Sloane. Here the action teeters on the brink of farce as Kath's false teeth are knocked out in her struggle with Sloane.

Kath: My teeth! (She claps a hand over her mouth). My teeth. (Sloane flings her from him. She crawls round the floor, searching). He's broke my teeth! Where are they?

The Good and Faithful Servant develops this movement by dwelling on Buchanan's need for false limbs. Orton wrote farces because he found in the genre a means of visually creating the image of anarchy that his language portrayed so well. Thus, Buchanan's artificial attachments act as a visual manifestation of his gradual decay and imminent collapse. Orton foreshadows Loot in his reduction of man to a series of appliances.

Edith: Your arms! Where has the extra one come from?
Buchanan: It's false.
Edith: Thank God for that. I like to know where I stand in relation to the number of limbs a man has.

The Ruffian on the Stair, although originally written before the other two plays, was revised later, and so presents even more farcical ingredients, for example Joyce's reaction to Wilson's death.

Wilson: ... coughs, blood spurts from his mouth ... Am I dying? I think ... Oh ... He falls forward. Silence.
Joyce: He's fainted. (p. 42)

Although the gradual growth of farce is interesting, these plays are most important for their use of language. Once again, Entertaining Mr. Sloane is outstanding. In this play Orton certainly deserves his soubriquet of "the Oscar Wilde of Welfare State gentility"; the play glitters with poetic, yet ludicrous language. Phrases like "The air around Twickenham was like wine," show the ridiculous elevation of man's
pretensions. Orton brilliantly captures the nuances of this shabby gentility; his characters reveal their darkest secrets through euphemistic phrases, thus the humour exists in the discrepancy between reality and their self-conceived images of propriety. In addition, of course, all Orton's dramas demonstrate the dislocation between word and action; the deeds of his characters show their true nature, but they persist in maintaining an appearance of elegance and morality.

Despite a certain similarity of subject matter and treatment, it is a mistake to discuss these plays generally. Orton's wit, use of language, and specific objects of satiric attack can best be examined by an individual analysis of each play.

The Ruffian on the Stair was the first play Orton wrote on his release from prison, and was, in fact, his first work to be accepted for public performance (as a radio play on the BBC), although it was not broadcast until August 1964, a few months after the success of Entertaining Mr. Sloane. The play was performed again, in a substantially revised version, as half of a double-bill entitled Crimes of Passion at the Royal Court Theatre in June 1967. In this discussion the text under consideration is that of the stage play, which, it is generally agreed, represents a significant improvement over the radio version. Many critics have noted the play's indebtedness to Pinter. While this influence is retained even in the revised version, the original was not only Pinteresque in idea and situation, but also in dialogue.

Wilson: I've come about the room.
Joyce: What room?
Wilson: Didn't you advertise? In the shop down the road?
Joyce: Who sent you?
Wilson: I saw the card in the window.
Joyce: You must have made a mistake.
Wilson: Didn't you advertise? I've got the wrong address?
Joyce: We've no room.

The overtones of menace and intrusion in this passage are, of course, derived from Pinter, and the whole interchange is very reminiscent of his play, The Room.

Mr. Sands: Well, we'd better try to get hold of this landlord if he's about.
Rose: You won't find any rooms vacant in this house.
Mr. Sands: Why not?
Rose: Mr. Kidd told me. He told me.
Mr. Sands: Mr. Kidd?
Rose: He told me he was full up.

The plots of these two plays seem, at first, remarkably similar; however Orton's play develops in a very different manner. In The Room cause and effect are not clearly distinguished; moreover we are never really certain as to the relationship between Rose (or Sal?) and Riley, nor of the significance of Mr. and Mrs. Sands. The Ruffian on the Stair, on the other hand, has a highly developed and clearly organised plot: Wilson's search for a room is seen to be part of a complex revenge plan. Nevertheless, and despite Orton's revisions to the text, the play, on a first reading at least, appears "derivative of Pinter as a whole."

A deeper analysis of The Ruffian on the Stair demonstrates Orton's originality. Christian W. Thomsen points out that Orton does not imitate Pinter blindly, but inverts Pinter's dramatic tension. This results in a reversal of the typical Pinter situation: the intruder becomes the victim.

Es ist wiederholt bemerkt worden, dass die beiden Anfangsdramen Ortons noch deutliche Pinter-Einflüsse zeigten, die Stilprinzipien von dessen "comedy of menace" nachahmten. Es ist dabei jedoch übersehen worden, dass sich sowohl in "Ruffian on the Stair" wie in "Entertaining Mr. Sloane" schon eine
subtile Umkehrung der Pinterschen Ursituation des Eindringens dunkler, drohender mystifizierter Macht in einem bewohnten Raum vollzieht.\endnote{6}

This point is only partially correct since we cannot classify Wilson and Sloane together. Sloane is truly the intruder who becomes the victim; Wilson's behaviour, however, is analogous to Jerry's in Albee's *The Zoo Story*,\footnote{7} since he, the intended victim, is in control of the situation. Like Jerry, Wilson exerts his will and cunning on his killer, who merely acts out his suicidal tendencies.

John Lahr takes this analysis one step further. He maintains that Orton is attacking "the melodramatic conventions of modern 'serious theater' (and their implications)."\footnote{8} This comment is illuminated by John Russell Taylor who states that Orton's intricate plots "create a critical distance between play and spectator."\footnote{9} Orton uses his plots as a deliberate mechanism to distance the audience and to enable them to view his treatment of society as objectively as possible. In this sense he does attack modern theatrical conventions, not overtly, as Mr. Lahr seems to suggest, but by that most insidious and devastating of all methods -- parody. *The Ruffian on the Stair* parodies the "comedy of menace" by reducing the threats and fears inherent in this genre to absurdity. We need only read the final lines of the play to realise this farcical treatment. Joyce completely ignores the dead Wilson, whose sheet-covered corpse dominates the stage, and bemoans the accidental death of her goldfish.

Joyce: They're dead. Poor things. And I reared them so carefully. And while all this was going on they died.

Mike: Sit down. I'll fetch the police. This has been a crime of passion. They'll understand. They have wives and goldfish of their own. (p. 43)
It should be noted that this light-hearted treatment emphasises one of the themes of the play: society's disregard for individuals (which leads to the negation of the importance of human life). In Orton's view, society is more concerned with inanimate trivia such as goldfish, or with superficial pomp and circumstance, as exemplified by the British Legion, than with human beings.

The Royal Family were out in full force. Furs and garters flying. My old man was in it. He couldn't come to the funeral because he was on the British Legion float. He represented something... He thought more of tarting himself up than burying his son. (p. 40)

The Ruffian on the Stair presents Orton's most vicious view of society. Since the play was written only a few months after his release from prison, we can identify the reason for much of his bitterness. Orton has spoken of how imprisonment crystallised his attitudes towards the rotten aspects of society: in his later plays this vicious vision is covered by a zany humour; here much of the social comment is left bare. Thus, although the play may parody various theatrical styles, the content of the play is a serious attack. The most revealing comments about this society surround the character of Joyce. Her isolation and complete loneliness, her lack of any solace from friendship and religion, and above all, her total horror, are exceptionally strong images for man's unstable position in the world.

I can't be as alone as all that. Nobody ought to be. It's heartbreaking. (p. 21)

Orton demonstrates the lack of human contact with devastating clarity. Joyce is imprisoned in her room, only visited by representatives of bureaucracy: the National Assistance, the insurance man, and of course, that ubiquitous consoler of lonely women, the milkman. The ex-prostitute
is lonely and uncared-for, more unhappy in her conversion to so-called respectability than she was previously.

Mike: Where did you go?
Joyce: Into Woolworths.
Mike: What for?
Joyce: The people. The lights. The crowds. (p. 24)

This exchange epitomises the loneliness of an individual in society.

The theme of isolation is not common in Orton's plays; in fact his only other treatment of it is in The Good and Faithful Servant. However, the theme of hypocrisy is one seen throughout the Orton canon, and is introduced here with great virulence. Joyce, an ex-prostitute, is ridiculously concerned with the propriety of other people's language.

Wilson: I never tried to interfere with you, did I?
Joyce: Stop using that kind of talk. (p. 28)

The ludicrousness of Joyce's gentility foreshadows the brilliant use of euphemism in Entertaining Mr. Sloane, where it blossoms into Kath's wonderfully genteel lasciviousness.

Another aspect of hypocrisy introduces a further, often-repeated theme: Orton's attack on religion. Here, as in his later work, it is not religion per se that is lampooned, but the hypocritical use of religion as a shield or refuge for nefarious activities. Mike, like Fay in Loot, professes to be a devout Catholic, but is in fact a professional murderer. Orton uses this exaggerated example to show his dislike of those people who are only concerned with the externals of religion and are completely unaware of the true meaning of Christianity.

Mike: What's your profession?
Wilson: I'm a Gents Hairdresser.
Mike: You wouldn't have to be dabbling with birth-control devices? That's no way for a Catholic to carry on. (p. 29)
Of course, Mike does not consider that murdering at least five people in less than two years is no way for a Catholic to behave. His creed is that appearances are everything. His concern with how things look is so extreme that he is unwilling for Joyce to lie about Wilson's death since it might lead to adverse publicity.

Joyce: ... I'll tell them I was assaulted.
Mike: (horrified). It'll be in the papers. (p. 43)

His phobia with externals takes precedence over everything, even saving his own life. For this reason, Catholicism is the focal point for Orton's attacks on religion, since Catholicism, more than most other Western religions, demands adherence to externals.

The image of society as a hypocritical, uncaring sterile wasteland is reinforced by the selfishness of the characters. We have seen Mike's concern with externals; Orton is anxious to present this regard for appearances as, if not a neurosis, then a compulsion on Mike's part. Our first sight of him is at his toilette; we repeatedly see him brushing his clothes, combing his hair, or tending to a flower for his buttonhole. Mike's selfishness and vanity are such that he is more concerned with his appearance than with helping Joyce cope with Wilson.

Joyce: Stay where you are! Stay here!
She attempts to grab his arm. He tries to shake her off. She hangs on. He shrugs her away, violently. She comes back. They struggle. Mike goes to the mirror and runs a comb through his hair. (p. 26)

The combination of selfishness and vanity leads to Mike's prevailing emotion: jealousy. His comment

I'd kill any man who messed with you. Oh yes, I'd murder him (p. 14)

is an outgrowth of his selfishness, rather than his affection for Joyce.
On the other hand, Joyce does possess more humane feelings. She expresses a genuine care and concern for Wilson,

> You poor boy. Oh you poor boy. She kisses his cheek tenderly (p. 42)

and her heartbreak for the goldfish is clearly an outburst of real affection. However, this love for the goldfish is essentially a negation of love for humanity. She is more troubled by the shattered goldfish bowl than by Wilson's death; not only is she unaware at first that he has died, once she realises the fact, she shows little concern for his corpse.

> Mike: Bring a sheet. Cover his body. Joyce: I've a bit of sacking somewhere. (p. 42)

Wilson, however, is a very different character. His grief at his brother's death and his rejection of the callous and indifferent society is undoubtedly genuine, and is indeed the motivating force for his own death. He can be seen as a type of norm or standard, a measure of goodness and purity, by which we can more accurately gauge the perversions and calculated coldness of the rest of the world. If he is interpreted in this way, the force of Orton's attack on society is somewhat diluted, yet Wilson's anguished concern, his vociferous complaints about the behaviour of his father and his brother's fiancée reinforce the bleak vision of the play.

> My brother's fiancée resembled you in many ways. Fickle in her emotions. She was trying on her wedding-gown when we got news of Frank's death. Now she's had it dyed ice-blue and wears it to dinner dances. (p. 40)

It has been noted that Orton's use of comedy emphasises his brutal view of society, since it encourages a detachment on the part of the audience. The initial reaction is laughter; the realisation follows with a greater impact. In *The Ruffian on the Stair*, Orton's comic method is
extraordinary; he attempts to balance farce and realism. John Russell Taylor aptly views the "curious mixture" of elements in this play as "an intricate 'revenger's tragedy' compressed into one act and played as farce." The farcical aspects of the play are manifold, and consist to a large extent of mocking established dramatists and dramatic traditions. Among those parodied are, as we have seen, Pinter, not only in the overall conception of the play, but also in the dialogue.

Joyce: I've had a busy day.
Mike: Are you tired?
Joyce: A bit.
Mike: Have a busy day, did you?
Joyce: (sharply). Yes. Why don't you listen? (p. 19)

A distinction must be made between this and the dialogue previously quoted from the original radio play. This passage also shows the lack of communication, the sense of each character's being in his own private world, but the parody is evident in Joyce's question which deliberately shatters the mood, and thus the Pinteresque illusion. The absurd, and in particular Ionesco's *The Bald Prima Donna*, is echoed in a ludicrous version of the mutual acquaintances' "do you know" game.

Mike: I once knew a lad from Sligo. Name of Murphy. I wonder if maybe your Ma would've come across him?
Wilson: I'll make enquiries.
Mike: I'd be obliged if you would. He had dark curly hair and talked with a pronounced brogue. Not an easy man to miss in a crowd. (p. 28)

In addition, Christian W. Thomsen sees a parody of *Othello* in the situation between Mike and Joyce, with Wilson as Iago, dropping poisonous allusions into Mike's ear.

I might decide to put Maddy in the pudding club. Just to show my contempt for your way of life. I never take precautions. We're skin to skin. Nature's method. (p. 36)

This is an interesting comparison. Certainly, Mike's monologue bemoaning
Joyce's infidelity is somewhat more interesting if viewed in this light; otherwise we are inclined to agree with Martin Esslin that the monologue is a leftover from the original radio play, a medium in which monologues are natural, "but appear as odd throwbacks into Victorian melodrama asides on the stage." However, Mr. Thomsen provides a much more interesting and important parallel when he likens Wilson's death to that of Jerry in Albee's *Zoo Story*.

Mr. Thomsen points out the differences in their deaths; although both have a death-wish, Jerry's motive for death is ostensibly to communicate with Peter, while Wilson's is only to avenge his brother. Once again an element of parody can be seen. Jerry achieves a type of mystical attainment, a release which transcends his sordid death; Wilson's death is not only sordid, but is also debunked. There is no sense of mystery, just a wry, almost resentful comment.

He took it serious. How charming . . . . He's a bit of a nutter if you ask me. (p. 42)

Thus the death wish, which in *Zoo Story* has overtones of heroism, is reduced to the level of a silly game.

The heart is situated . . . (He points) . . . just below this badge on my pullover. Don't miss, will you? I don't want to be injured. I want to be dead. (p. 36)

Beneath the farcical element lies the truth. Wilson really does want to die, not only to avenge his brother's death and thus bring Mike to justice, but because he cannot conceive of life without his brother. Here we have Orton's most serious account of homosexuality: an explicit
account of how painful it is to live without one's beloved. It is interesting to note that this is the most touching portrait of affection in Orton's plays. As his career progressed, he did not cease writing about homosexual couples, but had an increasing tendency to view sex of any kind as a commercial enterprise. The Ruffian on the Stair is all the more remarkable since it presents an obviously truthful picture of devotion --

I'm going round the twist with heartbreak . . . I don't want to live, see (p. 32)

-- under farcical externals: the parody of the comedy of menace and Orton's brilliant use of language.

We had separate beds -- he was a stickler for convention, but that's as far as it went. We spent every night in each other's company. It was the reason we never got any work done. (pp. 31-2)

The first sentence reinforces Orton's view of man's obsession with appearances, and the euphemistic politeness of this and all Wilson's speeches

We were bosom friends. I've never told anyone that before. I hope I haven't shocked you (p. 31)

adds to the humour of the play. The second sentence is straightforward, but the third is a masterpiece. Orton deliberately reduces the level of this love from something spiritual and fine to sordid reality. Thus the idea of loyalty and fidelity is destroyed, or at least, diminished in a few words. It will be noted that this treatment of Wilson demonstrates a basic ambiguity of the play. Orton does not appear to conceive of him as a hero, since the manner of his death, the whole concept of his revenge, and even his love for his brother is treated with an element of farce. Nevertheless his obvious grief and his powerful attack on society will not allow us to accept him as a fool, a somewhat over-excited impetuous
youngster who does not realise what he is doing. Thus the focus of the play is somewhat confused; the uncertainty and variety of tone adds to this problem.

Joyce's euphemisms, as an aspect of her hypocrisy, have been mentioned, as have Wilson's wonderfully polite comments about sexuality. Orton does not use his brilliant flair for language only to attack hypocrisy, however; here, as in Entertaining Mr. Sloane, we see a satire on the media. Mike talks in the stereotyped clichés of advertising; he sounds as if he is promoting a new super-masculine after-shave.

I'm a powerfully attractive figure. I can still cause a flutter in feminine hearts. (p. 14)

The most remarkable aspect of the language in The Ruffian on the Stair is its variety. In a few lines Orton ranges from the ability to create a real feeling of menace and fear --

Mike: Did he try to get in the room?
Joyce: No.
Mike: Could he have got in if he'd wanted?
Joyce: (pause) Yes (p. 25)

⇒ to complete absurdity.

Joyce: He'd've killed me.
Mike: How do you know that? You've no evidence to support your theory.
Joyce: But . . . (wide-eyed) . . . I'd be dead if I'd got evidence.
Mike: I'd prosecute him on your behalf, Joycie. (p. 25)

Another unique feature of the language in this play is the use of Irish speech rhythms. Orton's ear for dialogue is faultless; here he accurately parodies the lyricism of the Irish.

I was born in the shadow of the hills of Donegal. We had a peat farm. It was the aftermath of the troubles drove us away. (p. 27)
The Irish are obviously a source of amusement to Orton, particularly in their attitude to religion.

Wilson: I'd be proud to hear the Lateran ring with the full-throated blasphemies of our native land.
Mike: What are you thinking of? The Vicar of Christ doesn't blaspheme.
Wilson: He would if he were Irish and drank Guinness. (p. 29)

Wilson's first comment is Wildean in construction. Like Wilde, Orton takes a common thought or comment, and makes a slight change to it which reverses the moral tone and import. Wilde's statement about the House of Commons, for example,

Really, now that the House of Commons is trying to become useful, it does a great deal of harm

in which "harm" is substituted for "good," is obviously a model which Orton imitates here.

The overall result of *The Ruffian on the Stair* is somewhat messy. The tone is uncertain: it see-saws between overwhelmingly bitter social comment and light-hearted parody of theatrical conventions. Moreover, the centre of the play, Wilson's revenge plot, is ambivalently presented; Orton appears unsure as to the effect he wishes to create. Nevertheless, this is a remarkable first play, and very interesting to read in the light of Orton's later work, since it is fascinating to see the origins and development of his themes. It is also noteworthy as a masterpiece of literary parody, an amazing, and amusing, mixture of styles and forms. Most importantly, this work demonstrates Orton's felicity with language, an element which illuminates and transcends all other aspects of the play.
**Entertaining Mr. Sloane**, Joe Orton's first full-length play and first play to be publicly performed, has not been given enough consideration by critics. Although Sir Terence Rattigan was widely quoted as saying it was the best first play he'd seen for twenty-five years, and indeed *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* won the London Critics Variety Award for the best play of 1964, many critics, while admiring Orton's abilities, considered this play merely a commercial success. John Russell Taylor's introduction to an edition of *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* excels in this type of patronising denigration.

The New Drama has done its work well in conditioning audiences so that if they are not quite ready to accept, say, Arden or Livings straight, they are at least prepared for a good commercial substitute. That, it seems to me, is what *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* offers, and it is none the worse for that . . . . Joe Orton is the first dramatist to write a solid, well managed commercial play which belongs specifically and unmistakably to the 1960's; and that in itself entitles him to quite a sizeable salute.16

American critical reactions were even more adverse. Apart from the critic who dismissed *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* as having the "sprightly charm of a mediaeval English cesspool," the prevailing critical opinion was that the play was "a work impossible to take with critical seriousness"; too incredible to be drama and too realistic to be comedy. This point is well expressed by Walter Kerr:

*Entertaining Mr. Sloane* is a bizarre black comedy which is simply not bizarre enough to drive its point home.19

In recent years critics have been kinder to the play, although many still tend to regard it as a pale shadow of *Loot*, an interesting example of "early Orton." Katharine Worth is of this school, and although she quite rightly concludes that the characters and movement are not those of farce, she is unable to come to terms with the play.
... its terms are too human, the mechanism is too slow, to let us take the characters as figures of farce, and yet the central events, the brutal mishandling of the old man and the sexual blackmail that follows, are presented with a kind of unyielding comic aplomb that undercuts human responses and raises worrying doubts about the playwright's own sympathies. Ms. Worth is quite correct up to a point, but she does not carry her perceptions far enough. The attack on Kemp and the sexual blackmail are certainly treated with "an unyielding comic aplomb," but why should this raise doubts as to Orton's sympathies? She continues:

It is hard to avoid ordinary human uneasiness about Mr. Sloane's attack on Kemp: there's too strong a feeling of real pain and fear in it to allow the detachment Orton seems to invite with his tough jokes... Surely this shows a basic misunderstanding of Orton's method in this play; the humour is an integral part of the violence, a device to make the audience more aware of it, and to increase their shock. Orton himself was explicit on this point.

Just as the humour should make the sex more real, so too, it should make Sloane's murder of Kemp more real. Put a murder on the stage with a straight face, and it's just a whodunnit and nobody takes it seriously. Make it funny and you make people think about it.

We are not meant to avoid being uneasy; the comedy is intended to make us feel more so.

Orton's work is an indictment of modern society, a comic -- and sometimes not so comic -- distortion of meaningless social conventions which cover depths of depravity, greed, sterility and egotism. In all his plays we see clearly that the sensibilities (or rather insensibilities) of the characters are shaped by society. Therefore the inhumane and cruel behaviour of these figures reflects on the state of society in general, not these people in particular. Moreover, Orton's plays suggest that
one needs to be ruthless to survive in today's world; the weaker characters are always overcome by the tough and grasping, no matter how unfair or immoral this may be.

All the characters in Entertaining Mr. Sloane are dramatic representations of "the psychopathic style of the '60's -- that restless, ruthless single-minded pursuit of satisfaction," unaware of evil, treating rape, murder, and sexual perversion as everyday occurrences in their search for self-gratification. This play demonstrates the egotistical pursuit of satisfaction in sexual terms. The use of this analogy reveals the hypocrisy of society. Sex is rarely mentioned, and never in overt terms; the surface behaviour of all the characters is polite and genteel, yet the motivating forces for their actions are vital, animal and primal.

One of the reasons for Orton's use of sexual passion as an illustration of greed is his desire to break down sexual barriers, his wish for a lack of "compartmentalisation" in sex. This refers to his insistence on sexual freedom; Sloane is therefore bisexual and completely uninhibited about sex. Orton was concerned with creating an awareness and acceptance of homo- and bi-sexuality and with proving that the motivating forces of heterosexual relationships were identical to those of homosexual activities. Ed's and Kath's pursuit of Sloane is made wildly funny. Sloane is literally attacked from both sides; both are extremely jealous of the other and very anxious to protect their own interests. Kath's seduction technique demonstrates her hypocrisy; despite trying desperately to arouse Sloane by walking around "in the rude," she maintains that he is attacking her.

Kath: You can't see through this dress can you? I been worried for fear of embarrassing you.

(Sloane lifts his hand and touches the point where he judges her nipple to be.)
Kath: (leaps back.) Mr. Sloane -- don't betray your trust.
Sloane: I just thought --
Kath: I know what you thought. You wanted to see if my titties were all my own . . . . I must be careful of you. Have me naked on the floor if I give you a chance. (pp. 26-7)

The inversion of truth in this final line is wonderfully funny.

Kath is a brilliantly created character; her overwhelming greed and desire for Sloane are manifested by her perpetual sucking of sweets. Her gustatory enjoyment suggests her voracious sexual appetite; moreover her perpetual concern with food, tablets or sweets emphasises her greedy nature, which is perennially in search of satisfaction. Ed's seduction of Sloane is on a different, more sinister level, one which relates the themes of sexual passion and greed through Sloane's materialism. Ed uses his wealth and position as factors to influence Sloane.

I've a certain amount of influence. Friends with money.
I've two cars. Judge for yourself. I usually spend my holidays in places where the bints have got rings through their noses. (p. 35)

The equation between sexuality and greed is clearly seen at the crisis point of the play when Kath and Ed argue for possession of Sloane. It should be noted that at this point both are aware that he has murdered their father, and Kath also knows that he has committed murder once before. Nevertheless, both want total possession of him, and resort to sexual taunts to assert their superiority.

Kath: . . . What more could he want?
Ed: Freedom.
Kath: He's free with me.
Ed: You're immoral.
Kath: It's natural.
Ed: He's clean-living by nature; that's every man's right. (p. 89)

Through this dialogue Orton makes us aware of the hypocrisy and amorality of these people. Objectively, of course, Kath and Ed and Sloane are immoral, unnatural, and anything but clean-living.
It is this sexual greed that is so beautifully and aptly satisfied by the resolution of the play: Kath and Ed's sharing of Sloane for alternate six-month periods. Both are delighted by this idea; Ed modestly acknowledging it as part of his experience in business. "Put it down to my experience at the conference table" (p. 97). This experience is experience in society's dehumanisation of people, and treatment of them as objects. Sloane becomes an object, to be used, despised and passed on. He falls to pieces in the presence of this voracious couple; the cool self-assured young man becomes a hysterical grovelling wretch. This transformation points the "obvious" moral of the play: the biter bit. Sloane is himself the incarnation of greed; he plays Kath and Ed off against each other to have the easiest life possible. He is completely amoral; sex is only a tool, a way of making money.

Yes, yes. I'm an all rounder. A great all rounder. In anything you care to mention. (p. 34)

However, Sloane's downfall by no means constitutes a victory for all good citizens, since both Ed and Kath are revealed as infinitely more harmful, inhuman and dangerous than the self-confessed murderer Sloane. Orton's moral has therefore an unexpected twist, a further pointer to the corruptness of humanity.

Another aspect of society attacked with great vehemence in this play is sterility. The Kemp's house is situated in the middle of a rubbish dump, surrounded by the decaying debris of society. Many productions have utilised this visual metaphor by piling scrap metal, old tires, and other cast-off paraphernalia of society at the edge of the set, as if it were gradually encroaching on the Kemp family's lives: an image
reminiscent of the corpse in Ionesco's *Amedée*. This sterility is the sterility of corruption, of stifled life. None of the characters has a purpose, a reason for living. The large, important issues of life are non-existent; in their place are trivia. Life is reduced to a series of boring and sterile activities. Sloane's description of his parents typifies this.

From what I remember they was respected. You know, H.P. debts. Bridge. A little light gardening. The usual activities of a cultured community . . . . Every year I pay a visit to their grave. I take sandwiches. Make a day of it. The graveyard is situated in pleasant surroundings so it's no hardship. (p. 16)

The externals are all important to this society, and Orton gives us a brilliantly subtle view of these externals in his stage directions. Kath sprays the room with an aerosol prior to seducing Sloane -- probably a sickly-sweet scented flower spray -- instead of opening a window; the sideboard contains a marvellous selection of useless, decaying and ill-assorted artefacts: a piece of unfinished knitting, a tattered knitting pattern, a broken china figure and a doorknob. The theme of sterility and falseness is thrust home when, at the tensest moment of the play, the tension is undercut by Sloane shaking out Kath's false teeth. "My teeth! My teeth. He's broke my teeth. Where are they?" (p. 94). This wanton destruction of material things annoys Ed more than Sloane's previous behaviour, including the murder of his father.

Expensive equipment gone west now see? I'm annoyed with you, boy. Seriously annoyed . . . . Is this what we listen to the Week's Good Cause for? A lot of actors and actresses making appeals for cash gifts to raise hooligans who can't control themselves. (p. 94)

These sterile physical externalities are paralleled by the sterile mentality, including the single-minded greed mentioned previously. Other
mental limitations include an inversion of morals — within limits. Ed, for example, sees Sloane quite clearly as amoral, but perceives himself as a liberal high-principled man.

Ed: You're completely without morals, boy. I hadn't realised how depraved you were. You murder my father. Now you ask me to help you evade Justice. Is that where my liberal principles have brought me?
Sloane: You've got no principles.
Ed: No principles? Oh you really have upset me now. Why am I interested in your welfare? Why did I give you a job? Why do thinking men everywhere show young boys the strait and narrow? Flash cheque books when delinquency is mentioned? Support the Scout-movement? Principles, boy, bleeding principles. (p. 82)

The humour in Ed's reply is wonderful. He is revealed as a narrow-minded homosexual whose "principles" are directed towards "redeeming young boys" for his own ends. In this society terms like morals and principles are debased and used without a thought for their real meaning. Within the confines of his society Ed may well be moral and principled, but Orton enables us to see how false this world is. He creates what appears to be a conventional social situation, then engineers its dislocation to present a picture of moral anarchy. In this play, moral systems only exist insofar as they can be perverted to suit personal ends; society may establish laws, but individuals break them with impunity.

It is Orton's use of language that has attracted most critical attention, and rightly so. As John Russell Taylor points out:

The key to Orton's dramatic world is to be found in the strange relationship between the happenings of his plays, and the manner in which the characters speak of them. The happenings may be as outrageous as you like in terms of morality, accepted convention or whatever, but the primness and propriety of what is said hardly ever breaks down.25

Most critics are unanimous in their praise for Orton's dialogue, especially for its accuracy of characterisation, "the prepacked phrases of advertising,"26
"the idioms of the popular press, the stilted lusciousness of Grade B movies." His trademark is affected gentility; the speaker strives for elegance, but somehow misses. It is often the discrepancy between the appearance of the character and his language that is amusing, as well as the discrepancy between word and action. For example, Kemp, an archetypically rude, ignorant old man, explains the reason for his strained relationship with his son in mock-legal jargon.

Then one day, shortly after his seventeenth birthday, I had cause to return home unexpected and found him committing some kind of felony in the bedroom. (p. 19)

Kath, whose "motherly" tendencies towards Sloane have been very evident, and who has confessed to having an illegitimate child within the first three minutes of his conversation with a perfect stranger, has the amazing ability to maintain a pretence of purity.

I'd the upbringing a nun would envy and that's the truth. Until I was fifteen I was more familiar with Africa than with my own body. That's why I'm so pliable. (p. 25)

Kath's "pliability" is demonstrated during this speech by her openly lusting after Sloane, and stroking his skin, under the guise of bandaging his leg. The contrast in both these cases is hilarious. Kemp looks and acts as if he is unable to read, let alone pronounce such sentences as "I'd done it as a precautionary measure," and the discrepancy between Kath's words and actions is clear.

All Orton's characters are masters of euphemism; they soften the harshness of reality with genteel phrases. The contrast between the gloss of gentility and the facts is one of the chief sources of Orton's humour.

Kath: I've something to tell you. (She lifts her apron. Shyly) I've a bun in the oven.
Ed: You've a whole bloody baker's shop in the oven from the look of that.
Kath: Mr. Sloane was nice to me. Aren't you shocked? (p. 87)

Kath's first statement reveals her true origins; the humour of Ed's response is obvious, but the more subtle humour and attempt at propriety of "Mr. Sloane was nice to me," coming from a rampant nymphomaniac, is a masterpiece. The contrast between Kath's physicality and her extreme gentility of language is wonderfully maintained. She resorts to euphemisms even when she is on the point of raping Sloane.

That seat is erected to the memory of Mrs. Gwen Lewis. She was a lady who took a lot of trouble with invalids. It was near that seat that my baby was thought of. (p. 42)

The use of euphemistic language is not restricted to Kath. Sloane, the amoral, sexually adaptable murderer, sounds the picture of propriety and gentility when describing the circumstances under which he murdered a man.

He wanted to photo me. For certain interesting features I had that he wanted the exclusive right of preserving. You know how it is. I didn't like to refuse. (p. 73)

Thus the euphemistic dislocation is one of Orton's best known linguistic trademarks; not only does it contribute significantly to the humour of the play, it also defines its moral universe, since it is an image of the characters' behaviour.

Another aspect of dislocation in the language of this play is seen in the terms of domestic affection which consistently deny the real nature of the relationships being established. Thus the whole family situation is perverted. In place of father, daughter and lodger (who is the daughter's lover), the language presents a horrifying picture of sexual perversion. Kath, in referring to herself as Sloane's Mamma, effectively creates an
Oedipal relationship, an image reinforced by Sloane's murder of the Dadda. Moreover she introduces the idea of incest, since she, the daughter, is also the Mamma, and therefore presumably her father's wife. This vision of anarchic morality is once again achieved by the dislocation of language.

The Kemp family's language is formed by the media, by images of genteel life in advertisements, magazines and films. Ed's comments on his activities could be the scenario for an up-market cigarette or liquor commercial;

I shall dress in a quiet suit. Drive up in the motor. The Commissionaire will spring forward. There in that miracle of glass and concrete my colleagues and me will have a quiet drink before the business of the day (p. 38)

whereas Kath's description of her former lover is straight out of the pages of True Romances.

He too was handsome and in the prime of manhood. Can you wonder I fell? (p. 42)

The brilliant use of language makes these characters easily identifiable and believable. Surely Norman Nadel misses the point when he says: "Orton's characters fascinate us but we don't really believe in them." We should see these people as real, perhaps too stereotyped to be totally believable as individuals, but certainly easily recognisable members of society in their desires and in their methods of behaviour.

One further aspect of Orton's language needs examination -- his affinity with Wilde. The use of the epigram as an instrument of moral anarchy has been discussed; in this play Orton's language emphasises the immorality of society. His comment: "It's all any reasonable child can expect if the dad is present at the conception" (p. 97) demonstrates this moral anarchy and compares closely in rhythm, idea and content with

To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune: to lose both looks like carelessness.
This epigrammatic facility is seen clearly throughout Orton's work, but Orton is very careful to control it.

I have to be very careful in the way I write, not to let it become sort of a mannerism, it could very easily become a mannerism.30

Orton uses language for realism, for definition of character; he does not let himself wallow in felicitous phrases for their own sake. In this respect, he is very different from Wilde. Many, if not all, of Wilde's epigrams are just as amusing out of context; Orton's phrases lose their bite when divorced from the character.

Entertaining Mr. Sloane should therefore be seen as worthy of detailed critical analysis. It is an indictment of society; an attempt to make the reader or audience aware of how we destroy ourselves with excessive greed. To create this awareness, Orton employs taboos -- in this play murder, homosexuality and nymphomania -- to confront the reader and shock him into awareness -- through laughter. Ironically, the play is dedicated to Kenneth Halliwell, whose greed and possessiveness caused him to murder Orton. Thus the portent of the drama was fulfilled, a point which should not only make the message even more poignant, but should also demonstrate that the world of Orton's dramas was not fantasy, but reality.

The Good and Faithful Servant was written in 1964, a few months before Loot, but was not televised until April 1967. The play is not one of Orton's best; consequently it has been ignored by the majority of critics. John Lahr attempts to place it chronologically, by viewing the play as "the transition from Sloane to Loot, from the innuendo of a comedy of manners to outrageous farcical explicitness."31
and Faithful Servant suffers from this definition, since the problem of the play is precisely that it falls between two stools: it is neither a comedy of manners nor a farce. There is none of the brilliant characterization of Entertaining Mr. Sloane: most of the characters are stereotypes, even Mrs. Vealfoy, the most interesting figure, later reincarnated in the more fascinating form of Erpingham in The Erpingham Camp, is hardly a character worthy of comparison with, for example, Kath in Entertaining Mr. Sloane. Moreover, although certain elements of the play (Debbie giving birth during her wedding, the scene in Ray's bedroom) may be accurately classified as farcical, The Good and Faithful Servant does not really foreshadow any of the brilliantly funny, mordant farce of Loot. In fact it is an error to view this as a transition play, since, if it is remarkable at all, it is for its uniqueness within Orton's canon. This is Orton's only play to leave the reader or audience with a prevailing mood of sadness; the social comment, like that of The Ruffian on the Stair, is only slightly tempered by the humour. However, unlike The Ruffian on the Stair, which leaves a "nasty taste," a bitter feeling of virulent anger, The Good and Faithful Servant conveys a more gentle sorrow.

Perhaps it is this unusual (for Orton) hint of compassion that has lead to effusions from those critics who have commented on the play. John Russell Taylor states that it "shows a remarkable extension of his [Orton's] range" and maintains that

\[
\text{despite the harsh irony of the play... a surprising amount of compassion and human warmth -- not qualities we would normally associate with Orton -- comes through.}
\]

Parts of this analysis are accurate: the play is not as funny as the rest of Orton's work; his biting wit is replaced by a gentler tone; he
appears less angry at the reasons for the situation than sad at its existence. Nevertheless, Mr. Taylor is stretching a point by calling this play a remarkable extension of Orton's range; it appears rather to be a retrogressive step, since it consists only of a plot reminiscent of any of several "slice of life" playwrights, for example, Clive Exton and Alun Owen -- enlivened of course by Orton's extraordinary style. Christian Thomsen, agreeing with John Russell Taylor that this play represents a breakthrough for Orton,

Zum erstenmal in seiner Dramatikerkarriere kommt Orton hier hinter seiner Deckung von Ironie und Zynismus hervor, zeigt sich verwundbar, beweist Eigenschaft wie menschliche Warme, Mitleid und kampferischen Hass 34

admits that the theme of this play is not new; however, he maintains that "Sie ist aber in dieser Form für das englische Drama neu."35 It is unclear exactly what Thomsen means by "in this form"; by the rest of his argument, one assumes he is referring to Orton's unique manner which informs his treatment of the theme. Orton's style and humorous viewpoint are indubitably original; nevertheless Mr. Thomsen cannot use this somewhat tenuous argument as a point in favour of the unoriginal plot.

Despite the stereotyped characterisation and the hackneyed theme, Orton presents a coherent and well-developed satire against authority. The epigraph to the play consists not only of the Biblical reference to "thou good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21), but also provides the Concise Oxford Dictionary's definition of faith. "Faith, n. Reliance, trust in, belief founded on authority" (p. 151). Reliance on authority is wonderfully satirised in the character of McLeavy in Loot. George Buchanan, in The Good and Faithful Servant, is not, however, a figure
of fun. Whereas McLeavy's belief in the trustworthiness of the police force and the efficacy of the English judicial system is shown to be ludicrous, Buchanan's total reliance on his firm for fifty years of his life is merely rather sad. Belief in and obedience to society informs Buchanan's universe. His firm is portrayed as a microcosm; Mrs. Vealfoy organises and makes arrangements for all personnel literally from the cradle to the grave.

Of course this image of man as an automaton subservient to authority is not new. W. H. Auden's poem, "The Unknown Citizen" may provide the model for many of Orton's lines.

> Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd
> Had anything been wrong we should certainly have heard. 

This statement resurfaces in *The Good and Faithful Servant* as

> Should your private life be involved, we shall be the first to inform you of the fact. (p. 159)

Orton's play is however, a much more damning picture of society than Auden's poem, since it stresses one of the cruelest aspects of modern life -- isolation. Buchanan has no family (until the very end of his life), and does not appear to have any friends or interests outside his work. The most powerful element of this play is the brilliantlly acute picture of a man with nothing to live for. Retirement is seen to be dull and stifling; old age offers nothing except disappointment. Orton presents a compassionate view of the problems of aging: the image of "old, tired and depressed faces" valiantly trying to sing "all the songs with 'Happy' in them" in response to Mrs. Vealfoy's exhortations is extremely moving. However, it would be a mistake to imagine that Orton's energies are directed solely against authority; it is true that he is
explicit about the abruptness of Buchanan's dismissal --

After lunch you're free. We've no further need of you. She smiles and goes out. Buchanan is alone. He picks up the parcels, joins the lunch queue. No one speaks to him or is aware of his presence. The queue moves forward (p. 161)

-- and is concerned that we should make the equation between Buchanan no longer being needed and his loneliness, yet he is also fighting what John Lahr so aptly terms "the lifesleep of the credulous," the attitudes of people like Buchanan who have let themselves be sucked dry.

One of the themes of this play, a view of the worker as a mechanical product which wears out, is well expressed by Thomsen:

Der Arbeiter erscheint selbst als halbmechanisiertes Produkt, welches ausschliesslich seine Arbeitskraft reproduziert und verkauft, der ausgenutzt, abgewirtschaftet und dann beseitigt und abgeschrieben wird.38

The concept of mechanisms breaking down or wearing out, is of course, central to this play. George's body is seen in mechanical terms: he needs his artificial arm, hearing-aid and glasses to function properly.

On a table, an artificial arm, a pair of glasses, a hearing-aid. Edith enters . . . She helps Buchanan to sit up and gives him his glasses. Now you can see the world. She gives him his hearing-aid. Now you can hear. (p. 171)

The toaster and clock, Buchanan's retirement gifts, are like his body in that they too do not function properly. They are not only metaphors for the natural deterioration of the body; they may also serve as images for the breakdown of society. Like society, the clock and the toaster do not provide their expected services, but, like society, again, they do more: they actually cause harm.

Buchanan goes to the shelf and picks up the clock. Buchanan: It's going backwards! Something's wrong with the works. (He turns the clock over and drops it) Oh!
Edith: What is it?
Buchanan: Gave me a shock it did. Right up my arm.
(He puts the clock beside the toaster on the table)
Edith: (with a shrug) They seem more like murder weapons than gifts from a grateful employer. (p. 177)

Another aspect of authority in this play is Mrs. Vealfoy's insistence on controlling people's emotions. She will not tolerate any deviation from her standard of slightly manic cheerfulness,

Mrs. Vealfoy: Repeat everything I say. Is that clear?
What were you thinking just now?
Buchanan: Nothing.
Mrs. Vealfoy: I don't allow thoughts like that. (p. 189)

and insists that Ray acquiesce to everything she says.

An affirmation of anything is cheering nowadays. Say 'Yes' as often as possible, Raymond. I always do. (p. 189)

This control of people's thoughts and emotions, reminiscent of George Orwell's 1984, relates to the image of man as a machine. Man is not allowed to be human: he is programmed to be efficient and obedient, to have no original thoughts or emotions. The control extends not only to feelings but to all aspects of behaviour. Any possibility of friendship or relationship between the workers is effectively prevented.

Buchanan and Edith have worked in the same firm for fifty years, but have never met.

Edith: Which gate do you use?
Buchanan: Number eight.
Edith: Ah, well, you see, that explains it. I've always entered by number fifteen. (p. 154)

Whenever the employees do meet socially, Mrs. Vealfoy is on hand to spy, prevent confidences and break up incipient friendships.

Mrs. Vealfoy: What are you saying? Is it interesting? Can I hear? Are you talking about old times as I told you?
Buchanan: No.
Mrs. Vealfoy: Why not? What were you talking about? Both of you have a lot to look back on. (Pause, sharply)
Answer my question! What were you talking about? (p. 187)

As befits a symbol of authority, Mrs. Vealfoy is everywhere. Her mission is to find out the employees innermost thoughts, and to arrange their lives for them. Her portrait is a vicious caricature of a typically officious do-gooder; one cannot see even a glimmer of an honest wish to help people behind her delight in patronising, pontificating and organising. Orton attacks petty bureaucracy, and its insistence on a myriad of ridiculous rules and regulations. Like many officials, Mrs. Vealfoy seems totally obsessed with trivia, to the exclusion of more important issues. She cannot deal with abstractions such as Debbie's worry about pregnancy and marriage, so she takes refuge in insignificant details, such as the composition of the wedding bouquet.

As through no fault of your own, the ceremony looks like being delayed, we'd better make it of some large and showy bloom. Lilies won't be appropriate under the circumstances. Chrysanthemums would do. Or even peonies. If we leave it much longer it will have to be sunflowers, I'm afraid. (p. 170)

Mrs. Vealfoy shows all the qualities of ludicrous literalness that mark Orton's portrait of Dr. Rance in What the Butler Saw. Her comment

There's a query beside the sex of the child. I hope it won't stay that way (p. 169)

is so ridiculously literal-minded as to show us a woman devoid of any imagination or feelings, a walking computer.

The rest of the characters are, as already mentioned, stereotypes. Edith is completely devoid of interest; Debbie is too naive and stupid to be credible; even Ray is merely a weaker version of Sloane or Hal in Loot, an amoral youth who lives "for kicks." Buchanan is meant to be an Everyman: yet he is by no means sympathetic. The compassion
shown by Orton in this play is surely undercut by his treatment of Buchanan. Just as we should not take the downfall of McLeavy in *Loot* as a tragedy, because we are aware of his hypocritical qualities, we are meant to see Buchanan's character in the same light and be less sympathetic to him.

George Buchanan is extraordinarily hidebound by convention. He wants to marry Edith, to "put things to right," even though, as she quite honestly says, "It's only for show. It's a waste getting married when you're my age" (p. 180). His narrow outlook on life, total absorption in the work ethic and lack of a sense of humour are evidenced by his conversations with Ray.

Ray: I don't work.
Buchanan: Not work!? *(He stares, open-mouthed)* What do you do then?
Ray: I enjoy myself.
Buchanan: That's a terrible thing to do. (p. 167)

Certainly much of Orton's satire is directed against the Buchanans of the world, men who consider that life consists only of working every day and conforming to the conventions of society. Buchanan is shown to be as unimaginative and literal-minded as Mrs. Vealfoy --

Buchanan: If you're determined to persevere with women I can see no future for you. There are other group activities, you know.
Ray: Yes, but the rules are in French.
Buchanan: Learn the language. Acquire a fluency in something else. Ludo would be less of a strain in the long run (p. 176)

-- an element of his character, which, although it does not negate our pity for him, greatly diminishes it. Moreover our sympathy is lessened still further by our realisation of George's hypocrisy. His language becomes wonderfully euphemistic when describing his liaison with Edith.

And as luck would have it, our way lay through a meadow and the grass was high. (p. 154)
In addition, he is sententious, sentimental and quite unreasonable. Since he fathered illegitimate children himself, one would not expect him to pass judgement on the morals of others, yet he is insufferably pious about Ray's indiscretions with Debbie:

Buchanan: I'm outraged by it, I am. Carrying on above our heads. I would never have slept easy if I'd known. Eleven o'clock on a weekday morning! How many of us did that kind of thing?
Edith: Not many without a priest had sanctioned the act.
Buchanan: And not often then.
Edith: It's something of a miracle we had a succeeding generation at all, we were so unconscious of that side of things.
Buchanan: When I met you it was at least the afternoon. (p. 175)

The irony with which Orton invests this passage is clear; we laugh uproariously at this comment, but wholeheartedly condemn Buchanan for his hypocritical attitude.

The portrait of Buchanan leads to the central problem of the play -- how can we feel sympathy or compassion for this figure? Obviously, it is difficult to do so, yet the tone of the play seems to encourage a sympathetic response. Certainly we do not respond consistently with laughter; although many of the lines are witty and epigrammatic in Orton's best manner, the overall effect of the play is not funny. Indeed the most effective lines are those that convey a feeling of sadness, of life having passed us by.

Buchanan stares at the ring. Pause. Stares into Edith's face.
Buchanan: But . . . (He shakes his head.) . . . you were so beautiful. (p. 154)

Orton is particularly good at demonstrating how the most trivial and unimportant incidents take on great magnitude in an otherwise unremarkable life.
Edith: I particularly liked the photos of the canteen. I swept it out once. When one of the kitchen staff was away they sent for me.
Buchanan: They recognised your worth?
Edith: Yes.
Buchanan: They're good like that. (p. 171)

This exchange is incredibly sad. In only a few words Orton brilliantly demonstrates the wasteland of Edith's life.

Thus the prevailing mood of the play is one of sadness, yet the tone is uncertain. John Russell Taylor finds that "for once the style never seems in danger of taking over control; it is kept firmly in its place." The style never seems in danger of taking over control because there is no established style; the play is a hotch-potch of wit and sentiment. There is no doubt that the language has many of Orton's trademarks: euphemisms, Wildean epigrams and an accurate ear for character (and class) distinctions; however, in keeping with the uncertain tone, the style fluctuates wildly. At times the language is very amusing and reminiscent of Entertaining Mr. Sloane.

Edith: Before they died they produced a son.
Buchanan: With whose help?
Edith: A young girl of impeccable character who worked in a pub.
Buchanan: Was it legal?
Edith: No.
Buchanan: Which one fathered the child?
Edith: No one knows. (p. 155)

Only Orton could write this hilarious passage. He shows the falsity of such labels as "impeccable character" with brilliant clarity and wonderful humour. The euphemisms in this play are Orton at his best. Ray's comment about his relationship with Debbie

I put something into operation a few months ago which looks like having far-reaching consequences (p. 173)
is a marvellous way of confessing to having made her pregnant! In addition,
Mrs. Vealfoy's cliches are an excellent verbal manifestation of her stereotyped opinions and conventional attitudes --

He shouldered his share of the burden which we all had in those days (p. 160)

-- and Edith's inane chatter reveals the emptiness beneath her words:

So much laughter, so much joy in people's hearts, so many happy faces all around. (p. 191)

Despite the humour of the language, John Lahr is right that "the blast of its [the play's] humour is curiously muted by its naturalistic format."40 The irony of Ray's entering the firm, marrying Debbie and condemning himself to a life like Buchanan's is much more sad than it is funny. Edith's comment, "It got him married. Settled. With a future before him" (p. 191), following, as it does, right after the notice of Buchanan's death, is quite poignant.

On the whole, however, the play is not a complete success, since the mixture of styles work against each other: the humour is dimmed by the sombre tone, while the compassion is undercut by Orton's wit. Orton's next television play, The Erpingham Camp, also portrays society as a microcosm, but this time in a far more original setting -- a holiday camp. This setting is infinitely better suited to Orton's unique qualities; the totalitarianism of authority is heightened by the frivolous surroundings. Orton seems more sure of himself, since the style is consistent and the tone clearly farcical. The Good and Faithful Servant is interesting for the reasons mentioned in this analysis, but is even more fascinating when viewed as a foreshadowing of this later play.
CHAPTER III

The pinnacle of Orton's achievement can be seen in his later plays. It has been said that he found his métier as a farceur, and that he redefined and extended the boundaries of farce to create an image of man as a victim of modern society, but no discussion of farce as a genre has been provided. There are few, if any, adequate definitions of farce: The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre terms it "an extreme form of comedy in which laughter is raised at the expense of probability, particularly by horseplay and bodily assault,"¹ and states that comedy differs from farce in that comedies "contain some subtlety and character-drawing."² These definitions are, to a certain extent, accurate (although farce need not rely on laughter "raised at the expense of probability"; it is often one of the most logical theatrical forms), but on the whole they are woefully inadequate. Certainly farce characters are less finely drawn than those of comedy, yet, as Eric Bentley points out, these broader portraits have an important function.

They [farce characters] are human nature in the abstract, in the mass, in the rough, in the raw, in anything but fine personal flower . . . . They are monuments to stupidity, yet, surely, deliberate reminders that God lavished stupidity on the human race with a recklessly prodigal hand. They put us in mind of our own stupidities.³

In Bentley's view, farce demonstrates the worst aspects of mankind, and is meant to remind the spectator of these elements in his own character.
The key phrase in the two definitions given above is the qualification "particularly by horseplay and bodily assault." The effect of farce is to reduce man to the level of a body; he is no longer a thinking human being, but an automaton or mere puppet. This effect is brought about by the frenetic to-and-froing of traditional farce: the characters dash about the stage in response to impulses; they do not stop to think about their actions, but succumb to the pressures of the moment. Farce characters therefore have their mental capabilities negated; thus their superiority to beasts is effectively denied. Farce refutes, and even makes nonsense of, the concept of the soul's divinity; it stresses man's existence as an animal.

Tragedy presents a nobler, more profound image of man. . . . Farce confronts the cruder kinds of man's strength, all of which he misuses. Man, says farce, may or may not be one of the more intelligent animals, he is certainly an animal . . . .

Orton has, of course, redefined farce in the sense that he "moves the laughter out of the parlor and puts it in a mortuary (Loot) and a psychiatric clinic (What the Butler Saw)." However, this is a minor alteration, and of no real importance per se; it is Orton's use of farce as an integral part of his comment on society that constitutes his contribution to the genre. Farce is not only the form or vehicle used to present the social comment; in addition, because it conveys an image of man's animality and stresses the worst elements of his character, the farce acts as part of Orton's vision of society and adds significantly to his commentary. Since farce destroys the myth of man's superior intelligence, it is, as John Lahr has pointed out, "the most anarchic stage form." Farce is therefore a perfect theatrical correlation
for Orton's view of the anarchic society presented in the four plays
in this chapter. Anarchy is also the central concern of two of these
plays; the Shavian epigraph to Loot expresses this theme: "Anarchism
is a game at which the Police can beat you." In addition, the plot
of The Erpingham Camp can be seen as a political analogy in which the
forces of anarchy revolt against a tyrannical despot. These two plays,
in particular, show Orton's brilliant use of the genre.

Farce, as we have seen, stresses the impetuosity and impulsiveness
of man's actions when he is under pressure.

In farce, people are pushed out of their minds, propelled
by the momentum of circumstances, not free will. This creates a vision of man's behaviour which Orton develops to great
effect. He demonstrates that in farce people appear to act irrationally,
but they are, in reality, manipulated by circumstances which provide a
logical reason for their behaviour. The logic, of course, depends upon
a number of factors known only to the character, thus the other characters
(and sometimes the audience), brand this behaviour irrational or even
insane. Orton is anxious to show how we make judgements on other people's
actions without having any real knowledge of what motivates them. Dr.
Prentice's behaviour in What the Butler Saw is a perfect example of this.

Dr. Prentice stares about him in desperation. He sees a tall
vase of roses. He removes the roses and stuffs the under-
clothing and one shoe into the vase. The second shoe won't
go in. He pauses, perplexed. He is about to replace the
roses when Mrs. Prentice enters. . . Dr. Prentice conceals
the shoe under his coat. Mrs. Prentice stares. He is holding
the roses. He gives a feeble smile and presents them to her
with a flourish.

All Dr. Prentice's actions are supremely logical; however Mrs. Prentice,
who is not aware of his desperate attempt to cover every trace of Geraldine's
existence, quite naturally assumes he is going mad. Thus the farce serves two purposes: it shows how society can label the most logical behaviour 'mad', if it is not aware what forces cause people to act strangely; in addition, it demonstrates man's struggle to extricate himself from a series of untenable positions -- a view which corresponds to Orton's vision of man's perpetual fight for survival. Therefore, in What the Butler Saw, a play about the blurred distinction between madness and sanity, farce is used "to offer a precise theatrical correlative to Orton's view of social insanity," and thus contributes visually and conceptually to the leading theme.

Eric Bentley has stated that there is a connection between farce and dreams, in that "both show the disguised fulfillment of repressed wishes." Orton's farces are more analogous to nightmares than dreams; instead of (and in What the Butler Saw, as well as) half-naked men and women romping around a bedroom, Orton's plays present horrific visions of bloody riots, sawn-off hands, and the most unsacrosanct, inhumane treatment of a corpse. This use of farce demonstrates how effectively the genre can be used for serious purposes; Orton's plays are hilariously funny, but beneath the humour is a painful vision of life.

Loot, Orton's second full-length play, has been analysed and discussed by critics who have shown an incredible diversity of opinions. Most are agreed that it has "a number of wild and outrageous moments of farcical humour" but very few concur about how these effects are created; there is no concensus of opinion as to the genre of Loot, or to the effectiveness of Orton's commentary in this play. These two
topics are of course inextricably related; critics who are unable to come to terms with Orton's use of farce in this play are equally unable to appreciate the levels and subtlety of the social comment.

The lack of agreement as to Loot's literary genre can be seen from the opinions of several leading critics. Martin Esslin sees the play as a drawing-room comedy, following the tradition of Restoration Comedy in elegance and emptiness, but spiced up by the addition of some religious jokes and a "thrilling" plot: a sort of "Arsenic and Old Lace modernised and laced with a few cracks against Roman Catholics." Another critic, Douglas Watt, unwittingly comes very near to understanding the essence of Loot when he dismisses the play as "Feydeau farce masquerading as social commentary." Simon Trussler appears to understand the genre of Loot in his refusal to classify it as "a sort of latter day comedy of manners: a welfare state version of all those upper-class-oriented skirmishes in verbal gamesmanship." However, Mr. Trussler wrongly maintains that the essential difference between Restoration Comedy and Orton's plays is that Orton's characters, unlike those of Restoration Comedy, are not proudly conscious of their amorality, but very concerned about their reputations. Of course, the code of social propriety exists very strongly in Restoration Comedy; most characters are vitally concerned with their reputations, thus Simon Trussler's analysis seems based on a somewhat shaky understanding of theatrical history. Nevertheless, because of his interview with Orton, in which Orton stated his admiration of Strindberg and Travers, Trussler suggests Loot is a synthesis of Strindberg's "jagged flair for elaborating sexual tension, with the latter's [Travers'] exemplary use of the farcical vehicle": a combination
which results in a hybrid of tragedy and farce.

It is an error to suggest that in *Loot*, Orton created a new genre; he is merely exploiting farce to its fullest potential, taking the traditions and stretching them to their utmost limits. There can be little doubt that he is working in the farcical tradition; many of Eric Bentley's comments on farce can be applied *in toto* to *Loot*.

Farce . . . begins by accepting the bland, placid imposing façade of life [then] proceeds to become farcical by knocking the façade down.\(^\text{18}\)

Orton follows this method closely. In *Loot*, as in *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, appearances are vital, but the propriety of the appearances is often undercut by the rest of the situation. Fay's behaviour at the beginning of the play seems strictly conventional; her speeches show an insistence on propriety, but the audience is aware of how tenuous the façade is. We know that Mrs. McLeavy has been dead only three days, that Fay has literally stepped into her shoes (or slippers at least), and that her pretensions to propriety are extraordinary in view of her past.

My husbands died. I've had seven altogether. One a year on average since I was sixteen. (p. 14)

The façade gradually disintegrates with the action, and finally collapses completely with Fay's confession.

Mrs. McLeavy was dying. Had euthanasia not been against my religion I would have practised it. Instead I decided to murder her. (p. 67)

The extraordinary -- and totally original -- aspect of Orton's work is that his characters still cling to the remnants of their dignity, still assure themselves that they are behaving politely and with propriety, even when it is obvious to everyone that they are renegades, egotistical
evil-doers, and, in some cases, murderers. This device is seen to
great effect at the end of *Loot*, when Fay, who has by then committed
at least eight murders, connived in a bank robbery for a share of the
stake, and been instrumental in sending the innocent McLeavy to prison,
is as prim and proper as ever.

Fay: When Dennis and I are married we'd have to move out.
Hal: Why?
Fay: People would talk. We must keep up appearances.
(She returns to her prayers, her lips move slowly.) (p. 87)

Fay's rejoinder is a masterpiece, but the stage direction is a stroke
of genius. Orton has shown the total demolition of the façade, yet
in these few words he captures the hypocrisy, amorality and sublime
selfishness of this society.

Having established that *Loot* is a farce, we can turn to the problem
of the social comment. Martin Esslin represents the school of thought
that sees *Loot* as too commercial for any valid social commentary; he
acknowledges Orton's potential, but feels that he does not fulfill it
in this play.

I wish Joe Orton had remained in his previous sphere --
which was no less funny, no less satirical, no less amusing --
and in addition, also much more satisfying; the sphere
of drama as a vehicle of expression for someone who wants
to say something because he has something urgent and important
to say.19

Ronald Bryden presents the opposite critical opinion. He maintains
that *Loot* is marred because of the truthfulness of the satire which
"distorts the fabric of the fantasy,"20 since in Mr. Bryden's opinion,
"satire cannot both be accurate and in bad taste."21 These comments
are perceptive, yet Bryden's refusal to accept the blend of satire
and farce is a negation of Orton's originality. Why cannot satire
be accurate and in bad taste? Orton functions by presenting the truth, but by disguising it in "bad taste," by cloaking the truth in a mechanism which provokes laughter and an instinctive acceptance of the situation as pure fantasy. Then, during the laughter, awareness of the reality encroaches on the reader and the shock of recognition is keenly realised. Martin Esslin's statement demonstrates an inability to see beyond the initial reaction; he accepts Orton's work as fantasy and cannot see the social comment beneath it.

If we are unaware of this method of Orton's, we misunderstand much of the play. The most daring theatrical moment in *Loot* demonstrates this pattern.

Truscott: (Standing over Hal) Where's the money?
Hal: In church.
(Truscott kicks Hal violently. Hal cries out in terror and pain.)
Truscott: Don't lie to me!
Hal: I'm not lying! It's in church!
Truscott: (shouting, knocking Hal to the floor). Under any other political system I'd have you on the floor in tears!
Hal: (crying). You've got me on the floor in tears.

Initially we accept the humour of this repartee, but gradually the horror of it dawns on us. Katharine Worth's analysis of this scene misses this point.

Truscott getting Hal on the floor and kicking him isn't a pleasant sight. But it's kept at a careful distance, partly by being taken so fast, partly by the jauntiness of the dialogue at the receiving end of the violence . . . . So long as the victims can keep their end up with this sort of stoical calm we can keep up our detachment too.22

Ms Worth is correct about the careful distance and the initial detachment -- the acceptance of the brutality as fantasy -- but the importance of this scene is the realisation of the ugliness and cruelty. The audience
accepts the situation without realising it, and is shocked at its ready acceptance and laughter when it clearly recognises the horror of the event.

What social comment is Orton making? Here, as in the previous plays we are presented with an indictment of modern society. However, whereas in *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* we saw the effect of society satirised in the behaviour of characters, in *Loot* the demands of institutions are the key to the satire. The central theme is not the attack on Catholicism per se, or even as John Russell Taylor suggests, the attack on religious hypocrisy; it is an attack on a system that manipulates people, that demands blind, unquestioning obedience, and that concentrates on the minutiae of outward appearances to the exclusion of the reality within.

Thus Orton chooses Catholicism as a focal point for his attack. All religions and beliefs can be used to show the discrepancy between man's professions of goodness and his wicked deeds, but Catholicism also demands many outward forms of belief, and indeed, if practised blindly, can lead to unquestioning acceptance of dogma.

Fay: She's treating it as a specifically Catholic problem.
McLeavy: She treats washing her feet as a Catholic problem.
Fay: She has every right to do so.
McLeavy: Don't Protestants have feet then?
Fay: The Holy Father hasn't given a ruling on the subject, and so, as far as I'm concerned, they haven't. (p. 9)

It is this unquestioning belief that Orton wishes to demolish; the belief that authority is always right, man's lack of ability to realise the corruption and evil surrounding him. By focussing on that acme of sacredness, the British policeman, for the rest of his attack, Orton strikes at the heart of present day society. *Loot* shows the greed and corruption lurking behind the masks of religion and respect for
Critics have noted that McLeavy, the only innocent figure, is the victim in *Loot*, but have not emphasised the reasons why he is victimised. He is not taken to prison and "accidentally killed" because of his innocence, but because of his naïveté, his extreme gullibility. He is the only figure in the play with a belief in religion and an unshakeable faith in the justice of the law; thus he must learn the truth and suffer. His final cry points to the futility of belief and to the horrifying and arbitrary cruelty of society.

I'm innocent! I'm innocent! Oh, what a terrible thing to happen to a man who's been kissed by the Pope. (p. 86)

Orton is concerned to show how these institutions exist only to demand obedience from individuals, not to protect them. Authority, in the shape of the Law or the Church is seen as bureaucratic, unthinking and inhuman. The nightmare of the bureaucracy of authority is brilliantly conveyed by Orton's dialogue.

McLeavy: I want to see someone in authority.
Truscott: I am in authority. You can see me.
McLeavy: Someone higher.
Truscott: You can see whoever you like, providing you convince me first that you're justified in seeing them. (p. 86)

The satire on authority extends to the red tape of officials and bureaucrats. Truscott, like many other civil servants, is at a loss when confronted with an unusual situation. When he discovers £100,000 stolen from the bank, he is not immediately concerned with apprehending the criminals, or with discovering the truth of the situation, but is worried about the irregularity of the experience!

How dare you involve me in a situation for which no memo has been issued. In all my experience I've never come across a case like it. Every one of these fivers bears a portrait
of the Queen. It's dreadful to contemplate the issues raised. Twenty thousand tiaras and twenty thousand smiles buried alive! She's a constitutional monarch, you know. She can't answer back. (p. 82)

Orton's vituperative portrayal of Truscott is no doubt influenced by his various unpleasant encounters with the police force. However, the enormous amounts of power and trust vested in the English police force can be extremely dangerous in the hands of a ruthless, ignorant and corrupt individual. There is almost certainly a modicum of truth in this dialogue between Truscott and Fay.

Fay: I can't be had for anything. You've no proof.
Truscott: When I make out my report I shall say that you've given me a confession. It could prejudice your case if I have to forge one.
Fay: I shall deny that I've confessed.
Truscott: Perjury is a serious crime.
Fay: Have you no respect for the truth?
Truscott: We've a saying under the blue lamp 'Waste time on the truth and you'll be pounding the beat until the day you retire.'
Fay: The British police force used to be run by men of integrity.
Truscott: That is a mistake which has been rectified. (pp. 67-8)

The treatment of Truscott is very similar to that of Fay. We see beneath the façade of righteousness to the hypocrisy and evil, yet Truscott is always concerned with his reputation.

McLeavy: Has no one considered my feelings in all this?
Truscott: What percentage do you want? . . . Now then, sir, be reasonable. What has just taken place is perfectly scandalous and had better go no further than these three walls. It's not expedient for the general public to have its confidence in the police force undermined. (p. 83)

The coolness of this final statement echoes Fay's total self-absorption. Both these characters see nothing wrong with their methods of living as long as they are not found out. Morality in this society bears no resemblance to the facts, only to appearances.
Orton's view of morality and its debasement in the society of this play informs his treatment of religion. Catholicism in *Loot* affects only external morality; Hal can steal £100,000, can suggest burying the money in a coffin and dumping his mother's corpse in a desolated spot, but refuses to undress her dead body.

I am a Catholic. I can't undress her. She's a relative. I can go to Hell for it. (p. 21)

In the same way Fay appears to be devoutly religious. She is constantly saying her prayers; she has a rosary and a crucifix -- the external trappings of religion -- yet has regularly "knocked it off" with Dennis under her picture of the Sacred Heart. Religion is treated as a useful tool. Man may sin, repent, and sin again. Orton, as always, provides an exaggerated account of this type of behaviour.

I shall accompany my father to Confession this evening. In order to purge my soul of this afternoon's events . . . . Afterwards I'll take you to a remarkable brothel I've found. Really remarkable. Run by three Pakistanis aged between ten and fifteen. (p. 79)

This may be an extreme example, but it is perilously close to the way many people view confession.

Fay's behaviour introduces a satiric attack on another institution: the nursing profession. Like Truscott, she perverts the essential qualities of her profession; instead of tending her patients, she robs and murders them. The satire on all these institutions which should care for people, but are indifferent to their well-being, can be seen as an attack on the Welfare State. The Welfare State is supposed to look after the weaker members of society; however, all too often it dehumanises these people, so that the welfare of weaker individuals is of less account than the self-seeking attitudes of those who wield control.
Loot presents a vision of a decaying society, a moral universe which is totally concerned with appearances, but which is rotten to the core. The treatment of Mrs. McLeavy's corpse emphasises the inhumanity and bestiality of man's behaviour.

Your sense of detachment is terrifying, lad. Most people would at least flinch upon seeing their mother's eyes and teeth handed round like nuts at Christmas. (p. 84)

This statement gains greatly in ironical value when we realise it is spoken by Truscott, whose sense of detachment is so marked that he does not even recognise the glass eye as a part of the human body.

(He holds it to the light in order to get a better view. Puzzled. He sniffs at it. He holds it close to his ear. He rattles it.) (p. 58)

It has been shown that one of the effects of farce is to reduce man to a body; Orton develops this effect to its very limits by his use of Mrs. McLeavy's corpse as a theatrical image of man's dehumanisation. Her body is manipulated into a number of extremely uncomfortable and undignified positions; these manipulations may perhaps be seen as a correlation to the extraordinary contortions which Orton considers to be part of man's struggle for survival. Moreover the disintegration of the corpse (her eyes fall out, her teeth are removed) may well serve as a grotesque reminder of the disintegration of society.

The central image for corruption in this play is desire for money, as suggested by the title, Loot. However, as in Entertaining Mr. Sloane, greed and sexuality are closely related: Dennis wants his share of the money to impress Fay into marrying him, Hal dreams of opening a brothel with his loot, and Fay, like Sloane, regards her sexuality as a purely practical means of assuring herself of a comfortable and wealthy existence. All the characters in this play correspond to Bentley's
comments about farce characters; they are not well-rounded, three-dimensional figures. However, it is a mistake to dismiss them as completely wooden; each has recognizable human or societal attributes. Truscott has been discussed in some detail; he is perhaps the least interesting of the characters, an archetypal authority figure, appalling in his ignorance, yet clever enough to be dangerous. McLeavy is his foil, and as such is probably the most complex character in the play. He appears to be a good solid citizen:

Oh, we can rely on public servants to behave themselves . . .
As a good citizen I ignore stories which bring officialdom into disrepute. (p. 29)

However, the balance of Loot would be spoiled if we were to see McLeavy's downfall as a tragedy, so Orton makes it clear that he is by no means a completely virtuous character. He, like everyone else in the play, is impossibly selfish; his only concern about his wife's death is cataloguing the variety of roses on the wreaths.

Do you know what his only comment was on my mother's death? . . . He said he was glad she'd died at the right season for roses. (p. 11)

This attitude casts an interesting light on the validity of McLeavy's professed Christianity. Beneath his pious exterior is a very smug, self-satisfied attitude; an aspect brilliantly delineated by Orton in neo-Biblical phrases and evangelical language.

The smell of corruption and the instruments of death behind them, the riches before them. (p. 19)

His pomposity and self-congratulatory attitude is clearly seen in his description of the funeral procession.

We set off in high spirits. The weather was humid, a heat mist covered the sky. The road to the graveyard lay uphill.
It was a sad occasion for me. In spite of this I kept a tight hold on my emotions, refusing to show the extent of my loss . . . . We got admiring glances for the flowers and sympathetic nods for me. (p. 49)

Although he may be less unscrupulous than the other characters, McLeavy is not immune to the prevailing passion of Loot -- greed. His attitude towards money is to resist spending it, rather than trying to obtain vast amounts.

Come on! We'll have a damaged motor horn to pay for next! . . . The number of people staying away from the poor woman's funeral is heartbreaking. And I hired a de luxe model car because they're roomier. I could've saved myself the expense. (p. 32)

Even though all the characters resemble those of traditional farce, they differ greatly from this genre in their use of language. The language of farce is traditionally "lacking in subtlety"; Orton's language is brilliant, ingenious, and above all, subtle. Since the characters are more thematic than realistic, the language echoes this emphasis. As we have seen, Orton masterfully creates the language of bureaucracy, hypocrisy and greed. He is obviously enjoying playing with various styles of language in this play; the speeches of the characters often parody themselves. Therefore Truscott speaks in a parody of detective jargon:

My methods of deduction can be learned by anyone with a keen eye and a quick brain. When I shook your hand I felt a roughness on one of your wedding rings. A roughness I associate with powder burns and salt. The two together spell a gun and sea air. (p. 26)

as well as in the brilliant official language we have already noted.

The euphemistic dislocations that Orton uses to such great effect in Entertaining Mr. Sloane are not missing from Loot, but their use is
much more restricted in this play. Hal, for example, has never heard of euphemism; we know he is incapable of lying, "It's against my nature," but he also seems unable to use language that has any pretensions to gentility. The description of his ideal brothel is a masterpiece of blatant earthiness, and incidentally reduces the moral/political issue of the colour bar to a matter of sexual preference.

I'd have a spade bird. I don't agree with the colour bar. And a Finnish bird. I'd make them kip together. To bring out the contrast... I'd have a midget. And a tall bird with big tits. (p. 38)

Fay is, of course, the master of the euphemistic dislocation; she maintains a wonderful appearance of good-breeding, even when talking of her seamy past.

And then I lived under stress near Penzance for some time. I've had trouble with institutions. (p. 14)

What a brilliantly genteel way of suggesting that she has spent some time in prison!

The anarchic aspect of language is very important to Loot. Since the play shows the anarchy and collapse of society, the language reflects this moral breakdown. This is seen clearly in the series of "dislocated" questions and answers which occur when a question is answered on an entirely different moral plane from the one it was asked on.

McLeavy: Despite appearances to the contrary, criminals are poor sleepers.
Fay: How do you sleep, Harold?
Hal: Alone. (p. 17)

Fay's question is obviously intended to satisfy her suspicion of Hal's guilt; Hal misunderstands her, wilfully or otherwise, and so creates this dislocation. The same effect can occur in conversation. Fay is castigating Hal for his lascivious behaviour, and in an attempt to
convert him to "a decent life" she questions him about his future.

Fay: What will you do when you're old?
Hal: I shall die.
Fay: I see you're determined to run the gamut of all experience.

(p. 12)

Neither Hal's reply to Fay, nor her response to him, is on the same level of morality and understanding. This technique emphasises the nightmare quality of the play, the lack of communication between characters. It is another image for the anarchy of society.

Loot is a wonderful play. It shows remarkable consistency: the genre, farce, is an integral part of Orton's vision of anarchy; the major dramatic technique, the dislocation between characters' protestations and their behaviour, is echoed by the "dislocating" use of a traditionally light-hearted genre to communicate a serious message. Loot represents a great theatrical advance for Orton since it not only extends his skills, but rejuvenates and expands the boundaries of farce in the theatre.

The Erpingham Camp was written in 1965, immediately after Loot, and was performed on television on 27th June 1966, three months before Loot reopened in London at the Jeanetta Cochrane theatre. The failure of the initial provincial tour of Loot (it opened in February and closed less than a month later), and the original adverse critical reaction to Entertaining Mr. Sloane had saddened and disgusted Orton to such an extent that he determined to write no more stage plays.

I shall throw the play [Loot] on the fire. And I shan't write a third stage play. I shall earn my living on T.V.24

Fortunately, however, Loot did reopen in London, and was a critical and box-office success. Reassured by this, Orton not only wrote more stage
plays, he also rewrote The Erpingham Camp for the stage. The text under discussion is thus that of the version produced (with The Ruffian on the Stair) in the Royal Court double bill Crimes of Passion in June 1967.

John Lahr provides an illuminating example of Orton's indebtedness to Brechtian techniques in an earlier draft of the play.

Orton . . . then developed it [The Erpingham Camp] as a Brechtian epic complete (in early stages) with illustrative banners such as SCENE 5: AN EXAMPLE OF THE ACTIVE LIFE OF THE CHURCH. ERPINGHAM PREPARES HIMSELF TO MEET THE PEOPLE. THEOLOGY DISCUSSED. THE PADRE PROVES THAT CHRISTIANITY IS ESSENTIAL TO GOOD HEALTH.

It is generally agreed that the idea for this play came from Lindsay Anderson --

he was doing a film which he'd got from the Bacchae. He asked if I could do anything with it

-- and that when Anderson decided not to use Orton's screenplay, Orton developed it into The Erpingham Camp, which was then broadcast as part of a series of plays entitled "The Seven Deadly Sins." The influence of the Bacchae is obvious in the story of the forces of anarchy rebelling against a tyrannical dictator and causing his death, but few critics have mentioned Orton's extraordinarily Brechtian treatment of the theme. Even though the illustrative banners no longer exist in the stage version, a Brechtian tone seems to pervade the play. This effect is achieved by two central devices: the insistence that "no attempt must be made to reproduce the various locales in a naturalistic manner," and the vital importance of the music, which serves simultaneously to elevate (and thus ridicule) the actions and characters, and therefore distances the audience. These devices represent the external elements of Brecht,
as imperfectly understood by several exponents of English theatre. However, there is a more important Brechtian influence in the 'parable' structure of the play and in the political nature of the drama. Although the play may appear to be a political allegory, Orton is not praising the virtues of anarchy; the audience is not to identify with either party in the struggle, but should be aware of the defects of both. "Alienation" techniques thus mock the pretensions of Erpingham (although they are by no means necessary for a realisation of his pride and dictatorial qualities), and prevent our sympathising with the forces of anarchy, as personified by Eileen and Kenny. It is clear, however, that these techniques do not really contribute to the revised version of the play, since Orton's excellent characterisation secures our detachment by its own merits. Since the Brechtian influences were stronger in drafts of *The Erpingham Camp*, one may hypothesise that the initial failure of *Loot* led Orton to experiment with theatrical methods in an attempt to control his audience's reactions. The subsequent success of his work may have allowed a modification of these techniques in *The Erpingham Camp*, and increasing confidence in his dramatic abilities and unique style is evidenced in the lack of any further superimposition of theatrical convention.

In addition to the obvious parody of the *Bacchae*, Christian Thomsen suggests that *The Erpingham Camp* parodies various other types of drama, notably mediaeval mystery plays and Elizabethan tragedy.
Mr. Thomsen's connection between this play and Elizabethan tragedy is quite interesting, especially when we consider that the manner of Erpingham's death is very reminiscent of Barabbas' fall through the trap door in *The Jew of Malta*. However, the comparison with mediaeval drama proves even more useful. Erpingham does behave like God: one of the focal points of satiric attack in this play is contemporary religion; thus Erpingham's omnipotence and despotism, combined with his delusions of grandeur, enable us to see him as a parody of God, as ruler of the "Earthly Paradise."

Another tradition which has clearly influenced Orton's writing of *The Erpingham Camp* is vaudeville. The songs and dances, the emphasis on "entertainment" throughout the play, and much of the dialogue, particularly in the entertainments sequence, has a decided music-hall flavour.

Riley: (To Kenny). I want you to put this on. It's our resident 'Tarzan' gear. Kenny takes the skin and is about to put it on. Riley stops him. You'll have to drop your slacks, my lad. Kenny looks dubious. Mason gives a giggle and a professionally coy smile.

Mason: He doesn't want to take them off in front of a lady.

Riley: Where's the lady? You're not trying to tell us that you're a lady, Miss Mason?

Mason: I am.

Riley: We'll have to check your credentials later. (To Kenny) Go with Miss Mason. She plays to the house. You'll have a whale of a time, but remember to keep your cheques and legs crossed. (p. 61)

The interchange between Riley and Mason is decidedly vaudevillian. Orton uses the traditional material of music-hall jokes ("That wasn't a lady, that was my wife"), and even the slightly risqué double-entendres
so beloved of stand-up comedians. Naturally the choice of music contributes to this effect, as does Mason's concertina.

Moreover, the amazing diversity and range of the music outside the entertainments sequence (from "La Marseillaise" to "Knees Up Mother Brown" and Gounod's "Ave Maria"), when considered in conjunction with the many references to art and the extremely detailed visual effects specified by Orton --

The body of Erpingham is left alone in the moonlight with the red balloons and dying flames in a blaze from the distant stained glass. A great choir is heard singing 'The Holy City' (p. 88) -- leads Thomsen to view this play as a representative of Pop-Theatre, a genre in which divisions between the arts are broken down, resulting in a type of "happening" or multi-media art experience.²⁹

Although these influences and categorisations are interesting, the primary form of the play is farce. Orton develops and extends the farcical tradition he used in Loot to provide an even stronger vision of anarchy and a bleaker view of man's bestiality. The description of the entertainments sequence emphatically negates man's superiority over other animals.

Lou and Eileen are screaming, Kenny is grunting and grinning like an ape and flexing his muscles at an indifferent Mason. Ted is dancing the can-can, whilst Mason plays the squeeze-box. (p. 64)

Not only does this image deny that man, as seen by Orton, has any intrinsic dignity, Kenny's Tarzan imitation also demonstrates man's affinity with primates, a point reinforced by the other characters' behaving like performing animals. Moreover, the animality of all mankind is emphasised by the description of the rioters.
They were running about half-naked spewing up their pork 'n beans. I counted eight pairs of women's briefs on the stairs. There'll be some unexpected visits to the pre-natal clinic after tonight. (p. 72)

Thus, as in *Loot*, the farce is an integral part of Orton's vision of society; it emphasises the anarchic and bestial qualities of modern man.

Orton's focal points of satiric attack in this play are not new. He vigorously renews his attack on the Church; here, unlike *Loot*, the focus is on Christianity in general, not Catholicism or any one particular religion. The other main satiric thrust is directed against authority: obviously there is a connection between this and the Church, but the focus of this attack is secular, in the person of Erpingham. Orton's attitudes towards a totalitarian society have been discussed in *The Good and Faithful Servant*; however, *The Erpingham Camp* is, in many respects, more subtle in its criticism. Firstly, the concept of a holiday camp as "a sort of voluntary concentration camp" is more original than the image of the firm as microcosm used in *The Good and Faithful Servant*, yet is just as effective.

> [it] has enough recognizable truth in it, enough relation to the known traits of sufficiently believable human beings to produce resonances in our minds beyond the confines of what we see before us . . .

Moreover, since Erpingham, the central authority figure, seems ridiculous from the outset, and because his pretensions to grandeur are consistently undercut, both by excellent characterisation and the use of "alienation" devices, Orton successfully demonstrates the amusing idiocy of his delusions and his subsequent downfall.

Erpingham: Rows of Entertainment Centres down lovely, unspoiled bits of the coast, across deserted moorland and barren mountainside. The Earthly Paradise. Ah . . .
He stares raptly into the distance.  
I can hear it. I can touch it. And the sight of it is hauntingly beautiful, Riley.  
Music: 'The Holy City' (p. 49)

The folly and futility of dreams of dictatorial omnipotence are clearly demonstrated here, and thus the authority figure is diminished. This is a more effective technique than that used for Mrs. Vealfoy in The Good and Faithful Servant. She was, in a way, impervious to a satiric treatment: too omnipotent, too successful to be destroyed. Thus we were presented with a brilliant portrait of a figure of authority, but the satire could only nibble away at details -- her petty bureaucracy, her obsession with trivia -- and not demolish the concept of authority.

The church is attacked through the character of the Padre. In fact, that phrase is somewhat misleading, since the Padre does not have a clearly developed character; he is a two-dimensional figure, a symbol of the ineffectiveness, hypocrisy and futility of the modern church. Religious hypocrisy is one of Orton's favourite themes, and the Padre behaves in a manner totally unsuitable for a Christian priest; he has been accused of molesting a teenage girl --

You must give up your evangelical forays into teenage chalets. They're liable to misinterpretation (p. 60)

-- his duties seem mainly to consist of adding 'tone' to the proceedings --

I'd like your presence at the bathing beauty contest tomorrow, Padre. A clerical face always inspires confidence at a gathering of semi-nude women. And, in the evening, perhaps you'd mingle with the older men and tell a few of your "off-colour" stories? (p. 67)

-- and, for the final touch of hypocrisy, he, a priest, has somehow forgotten or mislaid his symbol of religion and Christianity: his crucifix.
Erpingham: Have you got a crucifix, Padre?
Padre: No, sir. I've come out without it. (p. 81)

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Padre's behaviour, though, is his constant attempt (and failure) to make Christianity relevant, to relate contemporary issues to their Biblical counterparts. He excels in producing pathetic and ridiculous similes; his modernisation of the parable of the Gadarene swine is hilariously incompetent.  

We are meant to understand, sir, that with madness, as with vomit, it's the passer-by who receives the inconvenience. (p. 58)

Not only does this show a fundamental misunderstanding of the Biblical story, it also demonstrates Orton's thesis: the Church (and thus by implication, the Bible) have no relevance in modern society. This point is continually thrust at us, sometimes by the Padre's ludicrous comparisons, at other times by his ineffectual behaviour.

Riley: Oh, sir, (Pleadingly) call them back. Let's thrash it out over a cup of instant.
Padre: Had Pharoah done as Chief Redcoat Riley suggests, sir, the ten plagues would not have been inflicted on the fair land of Egypt. (p. 76)

The image of Pharoah bargaining with Moses over "a cup of instant" is irresistibly funny. In addition, the Padre is an abject failure as a negotiator: he is incapable of turning back the hordes of rioters (the comparison with Pope Leo is a further use of elevation and hyperbole to diminish a character), and his prayers in the midst of slaughter are totally pathetic.

Riley and W. E. Harrison are fighting off the attacks of the other campers. Kenny is viciously beating up Erpingham. Eileen is screaming and hitting Jessie Mason. The Padre kneels amid the carnage. His hands folded in prayer. Padre: Oh, Merciful Father, in Thee we trust when dangers threaten.

He is hit by an egg. (p. 85)
This ignominious action typifies Orton's attitude towards the Church; indeed it appears to be Orton's viewpoint that the Padre voices.

It's Life that defeats the Christian Church. She's always been well-equipped to deal with Death. (p. 86)

It has been said that the Padre's character is two-dimensional; this comment can be equally well applied to any of the other characters in *The Erpingham Camp*. The statements made about characterisation in *Loot* apply here: farce demands a different type of character delineation from other comedy, and the characters in this play are clearly developed, well-characterised (or perhaps caricatured) and brilliantly successful. Unlike *The Good and Faithful Servant*, where there is really only one interesting character, all the cast of *The Erpingham Camp* are fascinating.

Erpingham, is of course, the central figure; his god-like fantasies have been discussed, and this delusion extends to his management of the camp, his views on religion, morality --

Riley: Two ducks. Made of plastic. They were stuck together.
Erpingham: Beak to beak? Was the joinery smutty?
Riley: Well sir -- the Engineer in charge had to perform surgery . . .
Erpingham: I want those ducks destroyed. We've no time for hedonists here. My camp is a pure camp (p. 48)

-- and punishment. In fact Erpingham's intransigence before the deputation of campers is truly that of a despot. He is convinced that it is his duty to punish the miscreants, indeed, that it would be wrong for him not to do so.

You have damaged my property, poured scorn on my staff and insulted me. You've cast my hospitality in my face. And yet, the bitter taste of ingratitude not dry upon my lips, you come to me with your arrogant demands. No, you must be taught a lesson. (p. 75)

The language of this speech is impressive. Erpingham sounds and behaves
like an absolute monarch, a man whose power is so complete that he will allow no rebellion. However, this dignity is immediately undercut.

It is my intention to defy the forces of Anarchy with all that is best in twentieth century civilisation. I shall put a record of Russ Conway on the gram, and browse through a James Bond. (p. 76)

Bond and Russ Conway are symbols of middle-class mediocrity; a frightening image for "all that is best in twentieth century civilisation." Once again, Orton uses hyperbole to demolish the force of a statement.

The other characters are not dealt with in quite the same way. With the exception of Riley, they are all excellent vignettes: Mason is a wonderfully hypocritical nymphomaniac, Kenny a rabble-rouser, somewhat reminiscent of Osborne's Jimmy Porter, and Eileen a marvellous creation, a half-witted, addle-pated girl who thinks and talks solely in cliches, particularly those of sentimental journalism.

We defied the ban on our love! I'm pregnant. I've a right to protection, haven't I? (p. 70)

Riley is a more complex character. It is difficult to decide whether he is a nincompoop or very, very clever. It is suggested that he is the latter; he may have killed the Entertainments Officer to obtain his job. Certainly, whether wittingly or not, he is the cause of Erpingham's downfall and death, and his final comments to the dead body suggest an element of gloating.

I'll arrange a Class A (Higher Employee) wreath, sir. I hope that will be all right?

Turns to go. Looks back.

Goodbye, sir. Be seeing you. (pp. 87-88)

His funeral oration for Erpingham shows him to be either utterly hypocritical and unscrupulous, or completely incapable of perceiving the truth.
He was a great man. One of the greatest of our time . . .
His death, when it came, found him quite prepared. He went quietly and with great dignity. (p. 87)

The blatant untruthfulness of the final statement (since we have just seen Erpingham fall through the stage to an extremely noisy and undignified death) suggests that Riley may be clever enough to pervert all occasions to his own use; however, the play does not allow for sufficient explanation or development of his character, and thus inconsistencies remain.

Orton's use of language is, as always, masterly in this play. His most often used techniques are elevation (to make Erpingham, in particular, look foolish), and simplification, a type of *reductio ad absurdum*, used to great effect with the Padre. Erpingham's foolish delusions of grandeur are represented as much in his language as they are by the music, lighting and other effects.

Riley: The Resident Medical Officer went an hour ago. The Chief Engineer and the Security Officer have gone within the last few minutes.
Erpingham: We've lost Medecine, Science and Defence. Any more?
Riley: The Liberal Arts, sir. Represented by the woman at the postcard stand. (p. 81)

The concept of elevating the lady at the postcard stand to the representative of Liberal Arts epitomises Erpingham's grandiloquent fantasies. The language, as it does so often in Orton's plays, demonstrates the hypocrisy of modern man. Here, as in *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* and *Loot*, it shows the affected gentility and false morality of the characters. Erpingham, as we have seen, has asked the Padre to attend the beauty contest and tell dirty jokes to the spectators. However, he is very much concerned that his camp should appear moral and above reproach, thus his insistence on appearances is seen to be ludicrous.
Erpingham: (staring at Ted, outraged.) What has become of your trousers? (To the Padre) This is no place for a priest. 
(Back to Ted) I don't allow indecent exposure in my camp. (p. 70)

Orton's masterly revelation of this hypocrisy is seen again to great effect in Riley's funeral oration.

Eileen's "sentimental journalesque" has already been identified, and somewhat resembles Kath's cheap romantic longings in Entertaining Mr. Sloane; however The Erpingham Camp is remarkable for its unique use of political language, in which Orton exactly captures the rhetoric and intensity of a highly effective demagogue.

They have denied our children bread, insulted our womenfolk and ignored our every plea. There is nothing left but direct action. I say we should break open the Stores. Take the means of supply into our own hands. (p. 77)

Indeed there is more variety of language in The Erpingham Camp than in any other Orton play. In addition to the many different styles, there are "many nice ruthless jokes in Orton's best fantastic vein,"33 all designed to show the holiday camp as a shelter for the worst aspects of humanity.

Erpingham: Our disability bonus was won by Mr. Laurie Russel of Market Harborough. Both Laurie's legs were certified 'absolutely useless' by our Resident Medical Officer. Yet he performed the Twist and the Bossa Nova to the tune specified on the entrance form.

Ted: He fell over, though. Twice.
Lou: They help them a lot, don't they? That blind woman would've never found the diving board if the audience hadn't shouted out. (p. 51)

The traditional competitions and events in holiday camps are twisted, perverted and parodied by Orton to provide an ugly view of mankind. Man is seen as enjoying the disabilities of others, deriving pleasure from dubious sensations, and generally lacking compassion for those who suffer.
In *The Erpingham Camp*, Orton shows us society *en masse*, and demonstrates how easily man can be swayed to violence and destruction. The play is not a political allegory in the sense that it celebrates the triumph of anarchy over despotism, but it does have a social message. Man is viewed as an animal: irrational, ready to follow the herd, unsympathetic, and above all, uncontrollably violent. The force of this image, combined with the satire on the Church and authority, makes *The Erpingham Camp* Orton's most powerful one-act play.

*Funeral Games*, Orton's last one-act play, was written in the final months of his life, and produced on television in August 1968, over a year after his death. The play was broadcast only a few days after the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, therefore most television critics commented not only on Orton's "stylistically elegant and gravely witty" handling of the theme, but also noted that the "vision of life as a horrible and violent farce seemed relevant . . . to a great deal we had been watching." Orton's view of mankind must have seemed particularly apt at such a time; indeed the coincidental relevance of the play may account for the discrepancy in opinion between the television critics and the later, more academic reviews. Nearly every critic in this latter group considers *Funeral Games* a disappointment: at best it is thought to be a black comedy which "fails to raise its theme of religious hypocrisy above the level of cheeky fun," at worst a tasteless collection of jokes about death, with anti-religious tendencies. Certainly the play does little to enhance Orton's reputation: many of the brilliantly funny lines consolidate his position as a master of language, but the
extraordinarily (and unnecessarily) complex plot, in conjunction with the unsubtle (and, on occasion, utterly ludicrous) satiric comment, prevents the central thrust of the play, the attack against religion and religious hypocrites, from being taken very seriously.

_Funeral Games_ is definitely one of the funniest of Orton's plays, and it may be this humour that dilutes the force of the satire. In Orton's other works the laughter increases the satiric thrust; in _Loot_, for example, the audience laughs at Truscott kicking Hal, then realises the truth of Orton's comment on police brutality. Here the humour exists because of the sheer ridiculousness of the situation; the laughter may be louder, but the utter ludicrousness diminishes the deeper comment.

Pringle: What shape is your hot water bottle?  
Caulfield: I haven't got one.  
Pringle: Too proud. Mine takes the form of a cross. There's piety for you.  

This is a very funny interchange, and does indeed discuss one of Orton's favourite themes: the importance of appearances (especially to religious hypocrites). Nevertheless, the concept of a hot-water bottle in the shape of a cross is so unlikely that much of the thrust is lost. Indeed, John Russell Taylor's comment that "the action takes place in a never-never land," although not strictly accurate, has much truth in it. It is difficult to recognise the society in this play: Orton is remarkable for his often distorted, but always readily identifiable views of mankind; here, however, his imagination appears to have taken flight. Certainly there are recognisable elements in _Funeral Games_, but, on the whole, the vision of a lustful, hypocritical, greedy, and somewhat maniacal clergyman employing a homosexual photographer's model to investigate, and subsequently murder, his wife (not to mention all the other intricacies
of the plot, including an old, mad, blind donkey-keeper) can only with
difficulty be related to modern society. Mr. Taylor makes this point
quite forcefully:

In the circumstances it is hard to relate characters or events
to any external reality, and therefore to any existing code
or convention of morality, propriety and what-have-you. But
if this is a fantasy world where anything goes, then how can
you hope to bring off effects which depend on a sense of
outrage at the breaking of taboos? Shock cannot exist without
at least some partial, provisional sense of belief. 40

This is a perceptive comment, but the society of the play is not really
a "fantasy world"; it is however, too exaggerated and distorted an image
of reality for a strong feeling of shock to exist.

Since the central characters in this play are clergymen, Orton is
able to satirise the function and behaviour of the Church in many different
ways. On occasion the attack seems to be limited to Pringle's esoteric
sect, whose activities are described in terms appropriate for a gang
of hooligans.

Have you heard of my group? The Brotherhood. We hang about
on street corners. (p. 324)

However, the Brotherhood (or Brethren, as it is sometimes called) is
not satirised on its own account. Orton uses this sect to present a
viciously funny caricature of Christianity in general. From Pringle's
irreverent remarks about the holy water --

It's reported to have miraculous powers. I use it as
a laxative myself (p. 324)

-- to his description of Christmas (where the tongue-in-cheek attitude
is evident, particularly in the pun on "the unusualness of the conception"),
we can see that Orton is delightedly mocking all the sacred rituals of
the established Church.
Christmas. We call that the festival of the Renewal of the Spirit. We have a cot with a baby in it outside the church. I dare say you're surprised by the unusualness of the conception. (p. 324)

The Brotherhood, therefore, is to be viewed as a microcosm; all the sex, violence and hypocrisy so rife in that organisation correspond to Orton's vision of the behaviour of Christian man.

Of course Orton cannot resist poking fun at the Church whenever possible. Thus, the play has, as a type of running joke, a series of exchanges which completely pervert all the ideals of Christianity.

Caulfield: I've an appointment at the nude calendar shop. I've been commissioned to do February.

McCorquodale: The Church Gazette put out a nice calendar. They might be able to use you. (p. 334)

The thought of a nude male model in the Church Gazette is hilarious, but harmless. Not so funny or harmless, however, is Caulfield's injunction to Pringle:

Unless you kill your wife she'll accuse you of not being her murderer. You're a clergyman. It's time you practised what you preach. (p. 353)

The consequences of the clergy in Funeral Games practising what they preach are indeed horrifying. In Orton's universe the prevailing emotions that govern all men's lives are revenge, lust, greed, and above all, a desire for self-gratification. Thus Orton is anxious to demonstrate that men must not view the Church, and particularly the clergy, as sacred and inviolate. Since priests are human, they experience the same emotions as all mankind; in fact in Orton's view, they differ from ordinary men only in that they use their religion and position as a cover to indulge more freely in their animal natures.

Although the characters are attacked for various aspects of hypocrisy,
for example, Pringle's burning desire for wealthy women, the central satiric thrust of the play comments on the physical violence connected with religious beliefs. Orton's thesis has been described as an attempt to prove that "violence and religion are forever destined to go hand in hand"; a situation that McCorquodale's painting depicts emblematically.

McCorquodale: It was my intention to represent -- in a symbolic fashion -- the Christian Church.
Tessa: A bird of prey carrying an olive branch. You've put it in a nutshell. (p. 355)

Since the play is concerned with violence, it is interesting to look at the way force is presented. On at least two occasions the power of the violence is such that it breaks through the laughter and shatters the audience into shocked silence. This occurs first when Pringle prepares to kill Tessa. The fun and jokes continue until Tessa becomes aware of the real danger and screams. We, the audience, react equally violently; the ugliness of reality seems all the more shocking in contrast to the farce.

Pringle points the gun at Tessa's heart. She backs away. Screams, suddenly afraid.
Caulfield picks up a bottle and crashes it over Pringle's head. Pringle drops the gun and falls to the ground.
Tessa: (pause, to Caulfield). You want to be careful. You might hurt somebody. (p. 339)

The humour of Tessa's comment to a man who has saved her life is obvious; it restores the play to the level of farce. Nevertheless, Orton is using violence for particular effect here; lest we should miss the point, he demonstrates it again in a remarkably similar incident.

Tessa is trapped. She shrinks away.
Tessa: No. Don't touch me. Please let me alone.
Caulfield pushes the gun into her face. He pulls the trigger.
Click of barrel turning. He pulls the trigger again. Click of barrel turning. Caulfield examines the gun.
Caulfield: It's empty.
Tessa gives a cry of relief and bursts into tears. (p. 357)

Once again the tension is greater than the laughter. Orton breaks down the distance between actor and audience; he smashes theatrical conventions to give his plays the greatest possible relevance. Here he is concerned not with maintaining the correct proportions of humour and suspense to create a funny, interesting play, but with emphasising the amount of violence in our lives; not necessarily in such a concrete physical form, but as a metaphor for mental and emotional violence. Thus the connection between religion and brute force works on two levels: first, it is an excellent, and amusing, image of hypocrisy.

What an amazing sight -- two men of God trying to throttle one another. (p. 356)

Moreover, it demonstrates Orton's view of the effect religion has on men's minds, since he envisions religious dogma as an attempt to manipulate and control mankind.

The attack on hypocrisy in this play is not restricted to the characters' attitudes to religion: Pringle's protestations of disregard for money (despite direct evidence to the contrary), and McCorquodale's inability to admit the truth about his behaviour are also satirised. We know McCorquodale has killed his wife, yet he is anxious to minimise his responsibility for her death.

McCorquodale: The actual burial was done by the National Coalboard. She's under a ton of smokeless. I got it at the reduced summer rate.
Caulfield: You're a murderer?
McCorquodale: These 'with it' expressions aren't familiar to me. (pp. 331-2)
The semantic quibbling is very effective. McCorquodale demonstrates his guilt by his futile equivocation; he also makes his amorality clear. In this society, murder is a mere term; McCorquodale, who considers he had adequate reasons for killing his wife, does not think of himself as a murderer. Here, as in most of Orton's plays, a completely amoral universe exists; the characters behave "naturally" -- that is they follow their instincts and emotions; they obey no laws of society except to maintain an appearance of gentility.

Indeed, the amoral perversity of society is shown quite clearly in Funeral Games. Pringle is idolised by all women once it is thought he has murdered his wife: "It's my unsavoury reputation. Attracts them like flies" (p. 343). This portrait is a parody, a perversion of the typical rakish hero of novel and screen. These heroes are nearly always wicked, "love 'em and leave 'em" types, men who are attractive for their devil-may-care attitudes, and their reckless, ruthless approach to life. Pringle is the almost logical extension of the prototype, yet he differs in one vital respect: he is supposed to be a murderer. This vital difference, which should make women wary of him, only serves to make him even more attractive; society is so sensation-seeking that a murderer immediately achieves a certain status, a measure of notoriety.42

This was a present from a woman journalist. She wanted the privilege of kissing hands that had taken human life. (p. 334)

There can be little doubt that this view of mankind is easily recognisable: this is one of the most effective themes of the play.

McCorquodale's refusal to admit his guilt, and Pringle's fear lest his innocence be discovered are motivated by the same cause: an
overwhelming concern with appearances. In this play, as in much of Orton's work, the discrepancy between what the characters actually do and the face they present to the world is great. Here, Orton uses a neat twist: for once, one of the characters is trading on his 'evil' reputation. Pringle's hypocrisy is a direct inversion and parody of McCorquodale's; he is pretending to be guilty, McCorquodale to be innocent. This hilarious contrast reinforces man's ludicrous concern with how things seem; and the humour of the situation is typified by Tessa's discussion of her murder.

It isn't the kind of death I'd hoped for. However, as long as I was fully dressed and had recently attended some place of worship I won't withhold my consent. (p. 341)

Orton's brilliant facility for language captures the euphemistic dislocation between a character's behaviour and his words. In Funeral Games euphemisms abound. Some of these are, however, slightly different; they are double-entendres, slightly smutty jokes masquerading under a cover of gentility. Thus when Pringle admits to the seduction of Valerie his language seems pure, even ecumenical on the surface, but has another, quite opposite and very sexual meaning.

The spirit of the Brotherhood entered Valerie about a year prior to her death. (p. 358)

Another aspect of dislocation in the language of this play is seen in a number of exchanges in which the reply is based on a misunderstanding, or partial understanding of the previous statement.

Tessa: I've bought a cake.
McCorquodale: Is it an anniversary?
Tessa: No. It's a Dundee. (p. 347)

This epitomises man's inability to communicate with other men; it is also a wonderful example of Tessa's absurd literalness, her insistence
on taking every comment at face value.

Tessa: What happened to your wife?
McCorquodale: She was taken up to Heaven. In a fiery chariot. Driven by an angel.
Tessa: What nonsense. Valerie would never accept a lift from a stranger. (p. 351)

This device encapsulates many of the frustrations of man's efforts to make himself understood; however Orton also uses it for its very funny effects.

Pringle: A love-nest adjacent to a bookshop. I do hope she hasn't betrayed me with a seedy intellectual.
Caulfield: (turning the letter over). The watermark is in the form of a frog.
Pringle: A French intellectual would be even worse. (p. 326)

This technique is very close to another linguistic form used in this play: the vaudevillian one-line joke. The best examples of this device are both punning and somewhat "sick," but very, very amusing.

Caulfield: I couldn't get her head off. It must be glued on.
McCorquodale: She always was a headstrong woman.
Caulfield: I had to take a hand instead.
Tessa: (to Caulfield, over her shoulder). Do you want to wash your hands before tea.
Caulfield: Yes.
Caulfield goes to the sink. He washes the hand and his own. (p. 348)

The humour here is obvious; indeed it is the linguistic ingenuity that enables us to laugh at the vision of Caulfield vainly trying to sever the corpse's neck with a meat cleaver, and to accept the sight of the bloody severed hand.

The bloody hand, the murder and the generally violent tone of the play, places it firmly in the tradition of Grand Guignol. It seems at times as if Orton is making fun of the conventional horror of this tradition; certainly Tessa's response to finding a human hand in her cake tin shows less outrage and shock than remarkable presence of mind.
"It's real. I can spot plastic fingers a mile off" (p. 350). The humour of this line is wonderful; one is tempted not to analyse it or to probe for any deeper meaning. However, if there is an underlying comment to be found, the vision of society presented here must surely be similar to that in Loot when Truscott is unable to recognise Mrs. McLeavy's eye. Tessa does recognise the hand as "real," but the manner in which she does so negates some aspects of her humanity.

There is not much variety to the language since there is little distinction made between the character's methods of speaking. Pringle does at times launch forth with evangelistic fervour:

Trust in the Lord. We shall meet in the glory of the Infinite Morning. (p. 341)

In general, however, the language, although very funny, suffers from the faults of the play as a whole. The characters are very weak -- even for farce characters; they are by no means as fully drawn as those in Loot or The Erpingham Camp, for example. Thus the language tends to be one-dimensional and directed towards getting a laugh, rather than an organic outgrowth of the character.

Funeral Games briefly satirises other aspects of society -- McCorquodale's loneliness, Val's fervent belief in authority, the nurse's lack of concern for her patient -- all topics treated in infinitely more detail in previous plays. Indeed, in this play these ideas are just thrown in as one-off jokes and are never fully developed. In contrast the religious satire is over-developed, in that Pringle's behaviour is often so unchristian that for the most part one forgets that he is a priest; thus the force of the attack is diminished. Orton does not make the best use of his marvellous ability to shock us into awareness; we are amused but do not
really accept much of the satire as relevant. The feeling of unreality, of fairy-tale, is compounded by the ending, in which, for the only time in Orton's plays, the forces of evil are vanquished. One of the most effective elements of Orton's work is his uncompromising realism: amorality is seen to pay; contrary to popular report, society does not care for and protect the meek and good. It is therefore an extremely unsatisfactory ending to *Funeral Games* to have Pringle arrested, although one can see that Orton's sense of poetic justice was amused at the thought of arresting a man for a crime he had boasted of, but not committed. The unsatisfactory aspect consists of the arrests of McCorquodale, Tessa and Caulfield, since by arresting McCorquodale, justice is actually being done. In fact the whole plot appears too intrusive, too important and complex in and of itself, and thus detracts from the force of the satire. There is little of the powerful feeling we usually get from an Orton play: no sense of man being manipulated, only a slight glimpse of the anarchic and nightmarish qualities of society, and a very weak satiric effect. Despite some witty jokes, therefore, *Funeral Games* must be considered the least satisfactory of Orton's plays.

*What the Butler Saw*, Orton's final play, produced posthumously in 1969, has created more critical controversy than any of his previous work. John Russell Taylor's initial reaction was to call it "a very bad play," an opinion which he modified only slightly on reflection.

Both *Funeral Games* and *What the Butler Saw* give the impression of being, at best, rough drafts which he [Orton] would surely have changed, enriched, refined or perhaps even have chucked away altogether....

The theatre critic of *The Times*, Irving Wardle, concurred with Mr.
Taylor; however both Harold Hobson in The Sunday Times and Ronald Bryden in The Observer recognised part of Orton's achievement. Hobson maintains that the technical aspect of the play -- a farce which also parodies the conventions of farce -- is his only interest, and that this element is "totally spoiled by gratuitous obscenity,"\(^{45}\) but Bryden braves all other critical opinion to state categorically: "In construction and sheer density of wit, it seemed to me Orton's best play."\(^{46}\)

It must be noted that much of the adverse critical opinion may be accounted for by considering the audience reaction. What the Butler Saw had a terrible reception; the audience jeered and booed to such an extent that they practically prevented the actors from continuing their performance. There has been no adequate reason given for this occurrence; those critics who disliked the work tended to view this extreme behaviour as justified annoyance on the part of the audience, but Bryden suggests that the audience may have been outraged at the scurrilous anti-Churchill jokes. Whatever the cause, there is no doubt that the appalling reception prejudiced some critics; the revival of What the Butler Saw at the Royal Court in 1975 produced more temperate audiences and reviews.

Orton invented his own genre -- epigrammatic, subversive farce -- and this piece is its finest, if not its trimmest, flower.\(^{47}\)

The reactions among academic or literary critics were much as one would have expected. Without exception, Orton's critics fall into two camps: those, like John Russell Taylor and Keath Fraser, who consider that Entertaining Mr. Sloane is Orton's best work, and that his later plays represent a progression

down quite the wrong path for his characteristic talents . . . taking himself for a farceur when really he was a character comedian.\(^{48}\)
and, on the other hand, the school represented by John Lahr and Katharine Worth who feel that Orton's greatest achievement is his use of farce, and that What the Butler Saw represents the culmination of this achievement. In spite of, and perhaps because of the adverse critical and public opinions of this play, this latter group of critics are resounding in their praise; indeed Frank Marcus, the author of the controversial play The Killing of Sister George, finds depths to What the Butler Saw of which critics do not conceive.

I do consider it to be a crucial play. I think for example it's a much more profound and serious play than Chips With Everything or Look Back in Anger. And I think it will survive and tell people more about what it felt to be alive in the Sixties than almost anything else of that period.49

There can be little doubt that the subject matter of What the Butler Saw is potentially profound and serious. The play's motto, taken from The Revenger's Tragedy, sets out the central theme:

Surely we're all mad people, and they Whom we think are, are not.

Orton's focus of attack is psychiatry, which, like Catholicism in Loot, is satirised not for its own sake, but because it serves "as a metaphor for a system which operates by manipulating minds."50 The manipulation here consists of the arbitrary labels bestowed by society, not only in the terms of sanity and insanity, but also in sexual matters. Loot was described as a "plea against compartmentalisation,"51 but this phrase is even more applicable to What the Butler Saw. Indeed, Orton is extraordinarily overt about his purposes in this play. The purpose of Dr. Prentice's methods is "to liberate and exploit madness," resulting in "a lessening of tension between the sane and insane" (p. 32). Orton's
purpose is to destroy myths about insanity: the audience is aware that Prentice's behaviour is quite natural, or at the very least, logical, yet appreciates why the other characters classify him as mad. Insanity is thus seen to be in the mind of the beholder; all information, whether rational or ludicrous, is twisted into proof.

Rance: Has Dr. Prentice at any time given you cause to doubt his own sanity?
Mrs. Prentice: He's a respected member of his profession. His work in all fields has been praised by numerous colleagues.
Rance: Radical thought comes easily to the lunatic. (p. 33)

Society is seen to misconstrue the most innocent of incidents and occurrences.

Mrs. Prentice: Are you ashamed of the fact that you write to strange men?
Prentice: There's nothing furtive in my relationship with the editor of The Guardian. (pp. 37-8)

This determination to ascribe a bizarre purpose for every action extends to an inability to perceive the natural and proper functions of people and objects.

Rance: A skylight too? Is it functional?
Prentice: No. It's perfectly useless for anything -- except to let light in. (p. 21)

This exchange demonstrates the perverted perceptions of society. What is the function of a skylight -- except to let light in? In this society, however, natural behaviour is discounted and man is perpetually searching for the obtuse, abstruse and non-existent. The natural extension of this attitude is that order and normality, although they are words used with great authority by the characters, must be recognised as only relative terms. The keyword of What the Butler Saw is "normal," and in typical Orton fashion the meaning of this word is stretched, perverted and even inverted, until we have no idea what normality is. When Dr.
Rance inquires "Were your relations with your secretary normal?", he assumes that normality is a heterosexual relationship. Geraldine's comment -- "I lived in a normal family. I had no love for my father" -- shows another aspect of "normality" in this society, while Orton emphasises the point by providing a third criterion.

Rance: Did you father have any religious beliefs?
Geraldine: I'm sure he did.
Rance: Yet she claims to have lived in a normal family. The depth of her condition can be measured from such a statement. (p. 26)

Orton's own viewpoint, the lack of any true standard or touchstone of normality is put forward by Rance. "His belief in normality is quite abnormal" (p. 73). This comment may seem iconoclastic and uncharacteristic of Rance, but in fact it demonstrates the Catch-22 implications of his own rational psychiatry. Rance again points out the central theme of the play: the discrepancy between the appearance of order / sanity / normality and the reality:

Rance: (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. (p. 60)

This is a brilliant theatrical moment. Of course Nick is dressed as a girl, and Geraldine as a boy, therefore Rance believes he is subscribing to society's norms. However, Orton utilises these disguises very cleverly; he breaks down sexual compartments so that not only is Rance's statement wildly funny, it is also ludicrous in its concern with externals, and thought-provoking in that it inspires instinctive distrust in society's methods of categorising people. It should be noted that a superficial reading of the play will not necessarily reveal all these qualities,
partly because "the paradoxical theme of madness and sanity in a psychiatric clinic seems hackneyed," and partly because of the humour of this play.

The amazing speed of the action, the brilliance of the dialogue, and the (superficially) obvious moral tend to obscure -- at least for the less aware reader or spectator -- the deeper elements of this play.

What the Butler Saw represents Orton's greatest achievement: an excellent integration of his comments on society into (what appears to be) traditional bedroom farce. Characters zip on and off the set in various stages of undress, men disguise themselves as women and vice versa, mistaken identities abound; in short the whole tone of the play is brilliantly summed up by the title, What the Butler Saw -- the traditional title of penny slot machines on piers in English seaside towns, which show a series of risqué tableaux. This title "exactly catches the saucy and slightly menacing notes" of the play, but beneath the vulgar exterior (which is reminiscent of another English seaside tradition, the saucily humorous Donald Gill postcard), Orton's attack on all his previous targets is renewed.

As has been noted, What the Butler Saw is brilliantly successful in breaking down sexual barriers, and all the more extraordinary for so doing in the context of what is surely one of the most sexist of genres: bedroom farce. However, not only are sexual compartments redefined; in this play Orton is concerned with examining and abolishing the sexual taboos of society. Rape, incest, transvestism, nymphomania, bisexuality, lesbianism, masochism -- all these and other socially condemned aberrations are treated as a matter of course. Orton is expressing his ideal of sexual freedom; all aspects of sex are to be seen as natural, and sex
itself is to be viewed as a pleasurable rather than a commercial or social enterprise. Hypocrisy about sex is satirised; Mrs. Prentice pretends she has repulsed an assault from Nick, yet appears not to have withheld very much.

When I gave myself to you the contract did not include cinematic rights. (p. 14)

Indeed at the end of the play she confesses the truth.

My son has a collection of indecent photographs which prove beyond doubt that he made free with me in the same hotel . . . (p. 90)

Not only does Mrs. Prentice lie to both Rance and Prentice about the assault, she also constantly acts in a manner directly contrary to her sexual feelings. Prentice calls her a "rampant nymphomaniac," yet admits that

Despite all appearances to the contrary, Mrs. Prentice is harder to get into than the reading room at the British Museum. (p. 40)

This comment, when considered with her admission "My uterine contractions have been false for some time" (p. 16) builds a very complex, and somewhat confused picture of sexual frustration. However, Orton is not concerned with accurate sexual analysis -- indeed it would be difficult to identify Mrs. Prentice's predilections with any degree of accuracy -- but merely with mocking hypocritical sexual pretensions, whether to gentility or to amorality.

Unhypocritical sexuality is treated as an accepted norm. Dr. Prentice initiates a seduction of his secretary as part of the interview.

Perhaps you have other qualities which are not immediately apparent. Lie on that couch. (p. 10)

Rape and incest are dismissed in an equally cavalier fashion; transvestism
becomes a matter of course, and Mrs. Prentice's masochistic desires are made wildly funny.

(eagerly) Are you going to beat me? Do if you wish. Your psychotic experiences are immensely valuable to you and should be encouraged rather than thwarted or repressed. (Dr. Prentice seizes her, smacks her face and tears the dress from her. She struggles.) (gasping as he slaps her). Oh my darling! This is the way to sexual adjustment in marriage. (pp. 74-5)

The attitude to sexuality in this play, the emphasis on amorality or sexual anarchy is symbolised by the missing part of Sir Winston Churchill. Orton's audacity in reducing the greatest of modern English statesmen to a phallic symbol reinforces his connection between sex and society. For Orton, sexual repression is an emblem for society's corruption; in this case, society's narrow-mindedness and instant desire to think the worst of people is condemned. It will be remembered that Mrs. Barclay's only "relationship" with Sir Winston was to have been killed in the same gas explosion that destroyed his statue. Nevertheless she is spoken of as a whore.

Shortly before her death her name has been linked in a most unpleasant way with that of Sir Winston Churchill. Mrs. Barclay's association with the great man gave offence in some circles. (p. 46)

The outrageous use of Churchill as a phallic symbol is compounded by Orton's brilliant introduction of his ubiquitous cigar. The missing part is explicitly identified.

How much more inspiring if, in those dark days, we'd seen what we see now. Instead we had to be content with a cigar -- the symbol falling far short, as we all realise, of the object itself. (p. 91)

John Lahr sees this as an emblem of Orton's dramatic achievement.

The phallus is the emblem of comedy's ruthless sexual mischievousness and amorality. Nobody came closer than Orton to reviving this spirit on the English stage.54
Of the other aspects of Orton's attack in this play, religion is dismissed as "Always the last ditch stand of a man on the brink of disaster" (p. 35), and the idea of a genuine religious experience is brilliantly ridiculed.

Rance: When were you first aware of a special relationship with the Almighty?
Nick: When I was presented with a copy of the Bible bound in calf.
Rance: Was it an autographed copy?
Nick: I don't think God actually signed it.
Rance: Well, of course, these things slip one's memory. Was there an inscription?
Nick: Yes.
Rance: What did it say?
Nick: W. H. Smith and Sons.
Rance: Oh. They count as God. You've clearly had a genuine religious experience. (pp. 59-60)

The law is effectively ridiculed by the vision of Sergeant Match in a leopard-skin dress. Not only is his appearance a travesty of the British policeman's propriety, his mental capabilities are a travesty too.

Prentice: You'll be disappointed, Sergeant, if you imagine the boy has lost his virginity.
Match: I hope he'll be considerably more experienced before he loses that, sir. (p. 53)

Once again, the common man's faith in justice and in the honesty, uprightness and incorruptibility of the police force is seen to be misplaced.

Prentice: You imagine you'll be safe from acts of indecency in a police station?
Geraldine: Of course.
Prentice: I wish I shared your optimism. (p. 54)

The lunatic actions of the doctors are surely a parody of the white-coated ideal image propagated by television series. Rance's language supports this satiric attack; his prose is that of a romantic novel, his themes and plots those of medical soap operas.

A respected member of the medical fraternity is married to a dazzlingly beautiful woman. Hopelessly in love, but, through mutual distrust, refusing to admit it... (p. 68)
Rance is also the key to another attack in the play -- a satire on over-literal interpretations, or taking things too seriously. Rance is accurately and concisely described by Katharine Worth.

He is the epitome of literalness and earnestness and quite the maddest character in the play, never further from the truth then when he's congratulating himself on having found the right answers.

Thus his diagnosis of Dr. Prentice's insanity and the origins of his illness incorporate every little piece of information he has managed to gather.

I trace the origins of his illness as far back as that first letter to The Guardian. From the startling ideas of Dr. Goebbels on the function of the male sexual organ we pass quite logically to white golliwogs. An attempt, in fact, to change the order of creation -- homosexuality slots in here -- dabbling in the black arts. (p. 68)

Rance's thematic functions are manifold. He represents the medical profession as an object of Orton's attack, but also epitomises the madness of society, and particularly of the bureaucracy.

I represent Her Majesty's Government. Your immediate superiors in madness. (p. 20)

Although many critics describe the play as a parody of a farce, they do not explain their reasons or Orton's intentions in so doing. Certainly Orton utilises the extraordinary physicality that farce demands; the play moves at an amazing speed, and many of the images we retain are of man's contorted and frenzied movements: tearing off clothes, hiding behind pieces of furniture, running on and off stage. In Loot most of these frenzied movements are restricted to a corpse; What the Butler Saw makes a more poignant comment in viewing humanity as puppets, "numbed and dizzied by the speed of experience," by life itself. The stage directions present a powerful picture of man's confusion and impotence.
Mrs. Prentice fires. Dr. Prentice ducks and runs quickly from the room into the garden. Mrs. Prentice follows and fires again. Sergeant Match runs out of the dispensary, terrified. Seeing him Mrs. Prentice screams. Sergeant Match gives a bellow of fright and runs into the hall. Nick runs from behind the desk into the hall... Geraldine... runs into the dispensary. Mrs. Prentice runs to the ward door. As she reaches it a shot is heard and Nick re-enters, moaning and clutching his shoulder. (pp. 80-1)

What an accurate image of man's entrapment in society, his fear and his tortured scurrying hither and thither -- all to no avail! Orton is not parodying farce here, he is extending the genre, as he did in Loot, by making it an integral part of his comment on society.

Orton is well known for his verbal abilities, but on the strength of this play he can be hailed as a master of the physical image. The stage directions are, as we have seen, very important in emphasising man's frantic struggles to escape; this image of imprisonment is repeated with greater emphasis at the end of the play.

A siren wails. Metal grilles fall over each of the doors. The lights go out. (p. 86)

The set has literally become a prison. Society is seen to have no escape; "the bars are a stirring image of spiritual stalemate, of the sterility of life. The brilliance and daring of this theatrical image is surpassed only by that at the end of the play. Sergeant Match, the deus ex machina, still in his leopard-skin dress, like an extraordinary mélange of Tarzan and "a Bacchanalian bisexual god," rescues humanity by means of a rope ladder through the skylight. The characters

pick up their clothes and weary, bleeding, drugged and drunk, climb the rope ladder into the blazing light. (p. 92)

What amazing resilience Orton attributes to mankind! The visual effects of these stage directions elevate What the Butler Saw above the level
of farce to the status of a play that contributes a comment on man's struggle for survival.

In addition to reaching new heights in the physical aspects of this play, Orton maintains a brilliantly consistent level of verbal humour. Apart from the obvious jokes that can be made about sexual confusion, What the Butler Saw positively teems with funny one-liners, beautifully pointed Wildean epigrams, ridiculous juxtapositions, and of course, Ortonesque euphemisms. One of the most important functions of language in this play is to emphasise the farcical element. The tortured verbal gymnastics echo the physical contortions.

Rance: Have you suffered from lapses of memory before?
Prentice: I can't remember.
Rance: Your memory plays you false even on the subject of its own inadequacy?
Prentice: I may have had a blackout. I don't recall having one on any other occasion.
Rance: You might have forgotten. You admit your memory isn't reliable. (p. 31)

The satiric function of the language is fulfilled through Rance's "lurid novel" prose, and his wonderfully literal (but mistaken) interpretations of all facts. Often this emphasis on literalness mocks the medical or scientific professions.

As a transvestite, fetishist, bi-sexual murderer Dr. Prentice displays considerable deviation overlap. We may get necrophilia too. As a sort of bonus. (p. 72)

At other times it reinforces the theme of the play: the lack of any clear division between madness and sanity, normality and abnormality, reality and illusion.

Mrs. Prentice: Is this blood real?
Dr. Rance: No.
Mrs. Prentice: Can you see it?
Rance: Yes.
Mrs. Prentice: Then what explanation is there?
Rance: I'm a scientist. I state facts. I cannot be expected to provide explanations. Reject any para-normal phenomena. It's the only way to remain sane.
Mrs. Prentice: It seems real.
Rance: Who are you to decide what reality is? (pp. 83-4)

Of course much of the humour in *What the Butler Saw* springs from Rance's ludicrously literal replies. Some of these are obviously based on misunderstanding and are Orton's version of traditional music-hall cross-talk --

Match: The doctor said he wanted to put the boy in some kind of club.
Rance: It's no good trying to do that. Boys can't be put in the club. That's half their charm (p. 54)

-- others are founded on a total lack of communication, on pursuing one's own train of thought regardless of the response.

Rance: What have you in the way of dogs?
Prentice: A spaniel and a miniature poodle.
Rance: Let them be unleashed! (p. 30)

*What the Butler Saw* also refines an aspect of language seen previously in *Loot*: the series of "dislocated" responses, where a reply is given on an entirely different moral plane from that of the previous speaker.

Mrs. Prentice: The youth wanted to rape me.
Rance: He didn't succeed?
Mrs. Prentice: No.
Rance: The service in these hotels is dreadful. (p. 34)

As in *Loot*, this technique demonstrates the nightmare quality of the play and acts as an image for the anarchy of society.

Orton's debt to Wilde is seen more clearly here than in any of his previous plays. Of course the language is epigrammatical and the wit Wildean, but as Katharine Worth demonstrates, the plots of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *What the Butler Saw* are "strikingly close at crucial points." She shows how Orton complicates Wilde's identity theme:
As Wilde's Algernon steals the identity of Ernest, so Nick and Geraldine steal each other's secondary identities... Getting rid of the alter ego, as in Wilde's play, proves more difficult than creating it...

Again, as in Wilde's play, the crowning joke comes at the end when the invented identities turn out to be, after all, the true ones.60

There can be no doubt as to Orton's debt to The Importance of Being Earnest. The dénouement of this play is an excellent parody of Wilde: the linen cupboard at the Station Hotel has many of the symbolic qualities of Miss Prism's handbag; the ludicrous details about the brooch, "It fell from the collar of a pekinese," mock the precise description of the bag.

Yes, here is the injury it received through the upsetting of a Gower Street omnibus in younger and happier days61 and Rance's delight at having his psychological theories proved true is a marvellous mockery of the delight expressed by the characters at the end of Earnest.

Oh what joy this discovery gives me! (Embracing Mrs. Prentice, Geraldine and Nick). Double incest is even more likely to produce a best-seller than murder. (p. 90)

The title of Wilde's play is of great importance to Orton, for surely Dr. Rance epitomises the dangers of being Earnest. Earnestness in What the Butler Saw is "the determination to categorize and label and pin people down,"62 the very centre of Orton's attack.

What the Butler Saw is Orton's greatest play. It presents his most profound view of society, embedded in a theatrically brilliant, witty, fast-moving farce, which in itself acts as an image for man's situation. The language is a razor-sharp instrument of anarchy; the visual effects present a poignant and profound picture of man's struggle. Orton is
capable of making us laugh hysterically, then stop short in fear when we realise we have been laughing at ourselves. It is a tribute to his abilities that we can read What the Butler Saw, laugh constantly throughout, yet leave the play feeling as if we have learned something vital about both ourselves and the human condition.
CHAPTER IV

The purpose of this study has been twofold: firstly, to create an awareness and appreciation of Orton's dramatic talents through a detailed analysis of his plays; moreover, to show how Orton may be considered a focal point in English comedy. It is hoped that Orton will never again be dismissed with the epithet "commercial"; although his plays may be box-office successes, they are by no means only light-hearted farces in the Whitehall tradition. Orton's work demonstrates a concern with the individual in society, a desire to show man how he is destroying himself. In addition, it satirises various elements of modern society, in particular perhaps, the Welfare State, for this societal phenomenon epitomises all those aspects of authority and control that Orton disliked so much.

We can probably best sum up Orton's dramatic achievement by discussing the term Black Comedy. While it is true that "gallows humour," or sick jokes, or whatever phrase one wishes to employ, is certainly not a modern "invention," it must be accepted that, in Britain particularly, in the late 1960's, a whole spate of new playwrights were writing in the same vein -- a vein that can be loosely classified as Black Comedy. Although there are no rules set down for this type of play, the majority of playwrights conform to two major areas. The prevalent form of the comedy is farce: the "black" aspect usually consists of a treatment of
taboo subjects -- particularly death, sexuality and severe disablement. It is clear that Orton's plays are written in this manner, thus it may be postulated that he acted as a model for many writers of this type of drama. If we consider both his dramatic "ancestors" and imitators, the concept of a focal point becomes more clear. Some specific instances of influence have been mentioned in the introduction; however, even if we deny the validity of some of these particular examples, we can nevertheless draw some general conclusions. Orton's work fuses the traditions of the comedy of manners, the Theatre of the Absurd, and, occasionally, the political implications of Brechtian theatre. The term Ortonesque has crept into our theatrical vocabulary, but is hardly ever adequately defined. If we examine exactly what is meant by this term, we see that it describes Orton's unique blend of humour (usually concerning a taboo subject) expressed in his inimitable style. These elements can be traced to the aforementioned traditions: the humour is derived from the traditions of farce, the use of language from the comedy of manners, and the use of taboos to shock the reader into an awareness is taken from the Theatre of Cruelty, Artaud's manifesto which "formulated some of the basic tendencies of the Theatre of the Absurd."

Orton's direct influence on later dramatists is, of course, impossible to prove. However, there is little doubt that his style and subject matter did create a trend in plays, film and television. The movement towards black humour in general, is not, however, under discussion here; we are concerned with examining those individual modern playwrights who can be said to be Ortonesque in some respects. Among those authors
who exhibit traces of Orton's influence are David Mercer, Simon Gray, Tom Stoppard and Peter Barnes.

Mercer, whose early work is contemporaneous with Orton's, resembles him greatly. Many of Mercer's plays are Laingian in their sympathetic concern with "madness, loneliness, neurosis and the blurred frontier between what society calls sane and insane." His plays about madness and sanity, particularly A Suitable Case for Treatment (later filmed as Morgan), may well have influenced Orton in some ways. However, Mercer's later work, particularly Flint, seems remarkably Ortonesque. It is not only the slightly manic clergyman that reinforces this comparison; the style seems at times to be a direct copy of Orton.

I've been agnostic for over fifty years. Ever since I was ordained. I doubt if I could have survived without a complete lack of faith.

Moreover, the themes of this play, although more overtly political than most of Orton's work, are very similar to those of Loot, for example. In Flint, Mercer is concerned with the amorality and immorality of the Church, the ridiculous insistence on the superficial aspects of the Catholic faith, religious hypocrisy, and the increasingly commercial aspects of religion.

Christmas is a commercial farce, isn't it? And take last Easter. I've got two boys and a girl, came late in life. What's Easter to them? Chocolate rabbits, eggs, chickens ... (Pause.) I do have irreverent thoughts about it all. Imagine if you were there on crucifixion day. Calvary. (Pause.) You walk up to the foot of the cross. You cup your hands to your mouth and call up. (Cups his hands to his mouth) 'Jesus,' you shout. (Hands down) 'Yes?,' he says. (Hands to mouth.) 'I've brought your chocolate rabbit,' you say. (Pause.) That's going to cheer him up, isn't it? That's a rare old Christian message, isn't it?
Although their concerns may be similar, Mercer's treatment of this theme is very different from Orton's. Mercer is very overt; his characters explicitly state his viewpoint: "Christmas is a commercial farce." Orton's characters hardly ever do this; instead Orton presents an implicit dramatisation of the situation he wishes to attack.

In addition, many of the other themes of the play, for example, Flint's voracious undiscriminating sexual appetite -- "What if I'm just omnisexual? What if I just enjoy everything?" -- and the comments on the corruption of the police force appear to have their origins in works like those of Orton's. Even the characters, particularly the lunatic clergyman, Flint, are Ortonesque, as is the vision of anarchy presented by the farcical aspects of the play. However, Mercer is by no means merely a pale imitation of Orton: despite his wonderful use of farce, he consistently brings his plays back to a level of realism. As Katharine Worth points out:

> His farcical technique functions as a defuser, taking the heat out of the wild events, allowing us to contemplate them coolly and rationally; paradoxically the farce in his drama isn't a turning away from motive and the analysis of motive, but a way of leading back into it.6

Unlike Orton, who never provides motives for his characters' behaviour, Mercer is constantly delving into psychological realms. Despite these essential differences, Orton and Mercer seem to have shared a concern with certain themes, and Flint certainly demonstrates Mercer's debt to Orton.

Another dramatist who is seemingly indebted to Orton is Simon Gray. Whereas Mercer's later plays develop Ortonesque tendencies, Simon Gray has moved from the writing of Black Comedy to works of a more realistic
nature. His earlier plays, especially Wise Child and Dutch Uncle seem very much in the school of Orton. Wise Child treats the themes of homosexuality, transvestism, murder and racism. The impression given is of imitation Orton, possibly because of the use of taboos, but there is no definite influence that can be shown in this play, and certainly the language is much flatter, much less sparkling and funny than that of Orton. However, Dutch Uncle shows a closer resemblance to Orton's work. In this play, as John Russell Taylor states, Gray "continued to explore the same sort of sub-Orton territory, with an overlay of Donald McGill seaside-postcard vulgarity carefully cultivated." The themes of sexual perversion and murder are evident here, as is transvestism. Moreover, the farcical situation with (live) bodies tumbling in and out of the wardrobe is quite reminiscent of the antics with the coffin in Loot, and the perverted, corrupt, unaware police officer seems a direct descendant of Truscott. The death of the guppies through Goodboy's incompetent manoeuvrings with the gas pipe is surely somewhat similar to the death of the goldfish in The Ruffian on the Stair. This connection is strengthened by Goodboy's perpetual concern for and feeding of these fish while he is continually planning to murder his wife and Doris, a situation parallel to Joyce's lack of concern for humanity, but grief for her goldfish. A connection can be made between the treatment of the guppies in Dutch Uncle, and the theme of the goldfish in Tom Stoppard's Jumpers. Here too, the life of a fish is seen to have more importance than that of a person: George's fury at the death of the fish (and the tortoise and the hare) is in direct contrast to his total unawareness of McFee's death.
Many critics, when writing of Tom Stoppard, have been content to label him as an "intellectual." This label may have originated because so many of Stoppard's dramas are derived from other playwrights or authors; obvious examples are the influence and contribution of Shakespeare, Beckett and Pirandello to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, and the effect of the Shavian drama of debate, Wilde (and The Importance of Being Earnest) on Travesties. It seems quite clear that Stoppard is more Wildean than other modern playwrights: his plays are in general "the working out of an intellectual, almost one might say, a scholarly conceit." Certainly Stoppard places more emphasis on language than any modern writer; his plays are pyrotechnics of verbal wit and ability. In addition to this Wildean influence, Stoppard is obviously indebted to the Theatre of the Absurd; his plays have very definite existential undertones (and in the case of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, existential overtones). Thus Stoppard, in combining the traditions of comedies of language and the Theatre of the Absurd, is very definitely continuing Orton's tradition, even if he is not directly indebted to Orton.

By a more detailed examination of Stoppard's work, however, we can show a closer link between Stoppard and Orton. The Real Inspector Hound certainly reminds one of Loot, partly because both parody elements of detective fiction (as, incidentally, does After Magritte), but also because Inspector Hound and Chief Inspector Foot ("Foot of the Yard") are versions of the corrupt policeman, Truscott. In After Magritte, British justice is shown to be something of a farce; like the detective in Loot, Foot will not let rules and regulations prevent him from doing
his duty!

Harris: Just a minute. Have you got a search warrant?
(Foot pauses.)

Foot: Yes.

Harris: Can I see it?

Foot: (incredulous.) You can't find your search warrant!

Harris: (smoothly.) I had it about my person when I came in.

Foot: (incredulous.) You can't find your search warrant!

Harris: (incredulous.) You can't find your search warrant!

Foot: I may have dropped it. Have a look round, Holmes ....

Harris: Now look here --

Foot: Can I see your television license?

(Harris freezes with his mouth open. After a long moment he closes it.)

Foot: (vaguely) Er, it must be about . . . somewhere.

Harris: (incredulous.) You can't find your search warrant!

Foot: Good. While you're looking for your television license,

Harris: (incredulous.) You can't find your search warrant!

Foot: Holmes will look for the search warrant.

(Harris sits down thoughtfully)

The technique of bamboozlement and veiled threats employed here is identical to Truscott's insistence that he is from the Water Board.

McLeavy: Who are you?

Truscott: I'm an official of the Metropolitan Water Board, sir, as I've already told you.

McLeavy: But the water board has no power to keep law-abiding citizens confined to their rooms.

Truscott: Not if the citizens are law abiding.

McLeavy: Whether they're law abiding or not the water board has no power.

Truscott: I don't propose to argue hypothetical cases with you, sir. Remain where you are until further notice.

Bones, the detective in Jumpers is also in this mold. He is rather stupid --

George: Yes, I'm something of a logician, myself.

Bones: Really? Sawing ladies in half, that sort of thing?

-- and not entirely above resorting to bribery and corruption when need be.

I should think that any competent, or better still, eminent psychiatric expert witness would be prepared to say so. Of course, he wouldn't be cheap, but it can be done, do you follow me?

There is a further similarity between the "lunacy" of Dr. Prentice in What the Butler Saw and that of George Moore in Jumpers. In both cases
these characters are demonstrated to be far less mad than the indomitable rationalists (Rance and Archie respectively) in these plays. Orton and Stoppard share in a vision of the Absurd, not as an existential contingency, but as a form of control, rationalism and authority.

Perhaps the playwright whose affinities with Orton seem the closest, and who appears to be continuing and redefining the genre of black comedy most successfully, is Peter Barnes. He and several other modern writers (for example Howard Brenton and David Halliwell), have been described as writing a new and complex kind of black comedy.

[They] treat material of a certain kind (thus murder, but sex murder or child murder) in a certain way, without disapproval and in a comic manner suggesting that life is more complex than ever and that dark fantasy and savage comedy are the most direct and only adequate way of telling the truth without compromise.\(^{15}\)

This form of writing continues the Orton tradition; both the subject matter and the treatment mentioned here are Ortonesque. (It is a comment on our age, however, that ordinary murder is no longer a taboo -- in order to shock one has to write about a particularly nasty type of murder.) Moreover, Arnold Hinchcliffe's comment that Peter Barnes "wishes to write comedy that is intensely serious in a theatre that is both a moral platform and entertaining"\(^{16}\) could equally well have been applied to Orton. Barnes' first successful play, The Ruling Class, is concerned with the blurred distinction between madness and insanity, and is also quite Ortonesque in its ruthless portrayal of man's hypocrisy -- especially about sex.

Tucker, why are those table legs uncovered? Stark naked wooden legs in mixed company -- it's not decent.\(^{17}\)

Society's concern with appearances and its ridiculous acceptance of
the 14th Earl when he appears sane and decorous (although he is in reality behaving like Jack the Ripper) is masterfully portrayed here. The themes are not only Ortonesque: the manner is too.

His affinity with Orton comes out in his leaning to Victorian matter and manner and in his way of handling similarly sensational material -- sex murders, bizarre complexes -- in a similarly cool, deadpan style.

The farcical style of this play is reminiscent of Orton, as are the incredibly literal exchanges which demonstrate man's lack of imagination and concern with tradition.

Dr. Herder: His lordship is a paranoid-schizophrenic.
Sir Charles: But he's a Gurney.
Dr. Herder: Then he's a paranoid-schizophrenic Gurney who believes he's God.
Sir Charles: But we've always been Church of England.

A final, perhaps somewhat tenuous link to Orton is that the Master of Lunacy in this play is called Truscott. He, like his namesake in Loot, is corrupt and foolish; it would be tempting to assume Barnes had bestowed the title of Master of Lunacy upon him, not only for the necessities of plot in The Ruling Class, but also as a tribute to Orton's characterization.

Barnes' next play, The Bewitched, develops and strengthens the genre of black comedy even further. Ronald Bryden sums up its importance:

In the black farce of Joe Orton, the metaphysical wit of Tom Stoppard, the Goyescan horror of Edward Bond's Early Morning and Lear, there is a common note which one could only, at the time, describe briefly as Jacobean -- a sense of things falling apart, a bitter delight in their new randomness, an appalled disgust at the superstition and brutality revealed by the collapse of the old order . . . .

Peter Barnes gathers all these threads together in The Bewitched. It is a neo-Jacobean play which crystallizes, clarifies and pins down what it is links the Jacobean and his contemporaries.
The Bewitched thus completes the circle, as it were, of Black Comedy, by returning to one of the roots or sources of the genre. Although Orton's indebtedness to Jacobean drama has not been considered important enough to discuss in detail, Orton has obviously read and taken something from this drama, as the epigraph to What the Butler Saw demonstrates.

We can therefore see that many modern playwrights are following and reshaping Orton's dramatic universe, not only by writing Black Comedy, but also by developing various other aspects of his drama -- for example, his style and verbal brilliance. Nevertheless his greatest contribution to English drama was probably in the field of Black Comedy, mainly because this genre has had so much effect on British theatre in the last ten years. The discussion of these newer playwrights is not intended to denigrate their originality, nor to reduce Orton to the status of a mere innovator or figurehead. The authors mentioned in this final chapter are all worthy of individual consideration; moreover, Orton, although his form, content and even style may have been copied, parodied and experimented with by numerous other writers, remains, as this study has suggested, inimitable.
NOTES

Chapter I


6 John Lahr, Introduction to The Complete Plays by Joe Orton (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1976), passim.

7 Ibid., p. 22.

8 Ibid., p. 24.


11 Ibid., p. 50.

12 James Fox, "The Life and Death of Joe Orton," p. 68.

13 Joe Orton in "The Biter Bit."


19 Orton mentions his admiration for Strindberg and Travers in "The Biter Bit"; James Fox cites the influence of Voltaire, Swift and Lewis Carroll (p. 71), and in an interview with Giles Gordon, *Transatlantic Review* 24 (1967), Orton talks about his admiration of Wilde, Pinter and Beckett.


21 Ibid., p. 304.


32 *Loot*, p. 56.

34 *Loot*, p. 31.


Chapter II

1 Joe Orton, *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, rev. ed. (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1973), p. 94. All further references are to this edition and will henceforth be quoted in the text.

2 Joe Orton, *The Good and Faithful Servant* in Joe Orton, *The Complete Plays*, p. 165. All further references are to this edition and will be quoted in the text.


6 Christian W. Thomsen, "Joe Orton und das englische Theater der sechziger Jahre," *Maske und Kothurn* 19, no. 4 (1973), 326. (It is repeatedly noted that Orton's first two plays exhibit a distinct influence from Pinter; they imitate the stylistic principles of his "comedy of menace." However, it is often overlooked, that in *The Ruffian on the Stair* as in *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, a subtle inversion of the typical Pinter situation of an intruder's dark, threatening, mysterious influence in an inhabited room takes place. [Translation mine.])

7 Thomsen also makes this comparison, but in a different context. See note 14 below.


10 Joe Orton in "The Biter Bit."


12 Christian W. Thomsen, p. 327.
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14 Christian W. Thomsen, p. 328. (Wilson, like Jerry in Albee's *Zoo Story*, wishes for this death, not in order to obtain a sort of quasi-mystical communication between victim and killer, but to revenge himself for the murder of his brother. [Translation mine.])


21 Ibid.

22 Joe Orton in "The Biter Bit."


28 Norman Nadel, "Review of *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*."


30 Orton talking to the B.B.C. Quoted by Lahr, Introduction to *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, p. 9.


33 Ibid., p. 136.

34 Christian W. Thomsen, p. 336. (For the first time in his career as a dramatist, Orton has come out from behind his cover of irony and cynicism, has shown himself to be vulnerable and demonstrates characteristics such as human warmth, pity and fighting hatred. [Translation mine.])

35 Ibid. (It is however, in this form, new to English Drama. [Translation mine.])

36 W. H. Auden, "The Unknown Citizen."


38 Christian W. Thomsen, p. 336. (The workman appears as a half-mechanical product, which without exception his skill reproduces and sells, who wears out, ruined by bad management, and is then set aside and written off. [Translation mine.])


Chapter III


4 Ibid.


6 Ibid.

7 George Bernard Shaw, *Misalliance*, quoted as epigraph to *Loot*.

Joe Orton, *What the Butler Saw* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1969), p. 28. All further references are to this edition and will be quoted in the text.


"The Biter Bit."

Simon Trussler, Introduction to *New English Dramatists 13*, p. 11.


Martin Esslin, "Review of *Loot.*"


Ibid.

Katharine Worth, *Revolutions in Modern English Drama*, p. 150.


Ibid.


Stage direction in Joe Orton, *The Erpingham Camp* in *Crimes of Passion*, p. 46. All references are to this edition and will be quoted in the text.
Christian W. Thomsen, p. 334. (Erpingham, however, behaves like God the Father in the mediaeval mystery plays . . . . The comparison is not far-fetched. In addition to his mediaeval dramatic heritage, Orton imitates Elizabethan tragedy. Prepared by the prophecy of his hubris from the beginning of the play, the spectator experiences Erpingham's downfall from the zenith of his might. [Translation mine.])

Ibid., pp. 334-5.


Ibid.

The parable of the Gadarene swine may also be seen as a Brechtian encapsulation device which points out the political moral of the play.


Michael Billington, "Wit over the Corpse," The Times, August 27, 1968.


Keath Fraser, "Joe Orton: His Brief Career," p. 418.

Christian W. Thomsen, p. 337.

Joe Orton, Funeral Games in The Complete Plays (London: Eyre Methuen, 1976), pp. 324-5. All references are to this edition and will be quoted in the text.


Ibid., p. 137.

Michael Billington, "Wit over the Corpse."

One need only read the enormous proliferation of articles on the late Gary Gilmore to realise the perceptiveness of Orton's comment.


Robert Cushman, "Review of What the Butler Saw."

Orton interviewed by Giles Gordon, Transatlantic Review 24, p. 94.


Katharine Worth, Revolutions in Modern English Drama, p. 153.


Katharine Worth, Revolutions in Modern English Drama, p. 153.

John Lahr, Astonish Me, p. 94.


Katharine Worth, Revolutions in Modern English Drama, p. 153.

Ibid., p. 151.

Ibid., p. 152.

Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest, p. 311.

Katharine Worth, Revolutions in Modern English Drama, p. 153.

Chapter IV


3 Katharine Worth makes a specific connection between Flint and Funeral Games; this is quite accurate, but the play is Ortonesque in more general ways as well.

5 Ibid, p. 58.

6 Katharine Worth, *Revolutions in Modern English Drama*, p. 40.


8 Ibid., p. 170.

9 Hinchcliffe, *British Theatre*, p. 141. John Russell Taylor agrees with this term, but points out that intellectual should not be used in a pejorative sense.


12 *Loot*, p. 52.


14 Ibid., p. 58.


16 Ibid.


18 Katharine Worth, *Revolutions in Modern English Drama*, p. 156.

19 Peter Barnes, *The Ruling Class*, p. 9.

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Introduction to The Complete Plays by Joe Orton. London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1976.


----------.  "The Biter Bit:  Joe Orton introduces  *Entertaining Mr. Sloane.*"  *Plays and Players*, August 1964, p. 16.


