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A Very British Bacchanalia:

Classical Themes in the Works of Joe Orton

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Table of Contents

Introduction 4.

A Very British Bacchanalia: 8.

The Bacchae and *The Erpingham Camp*

Hidden Comedy in *Oedipus Rex* 32.

Understanding the Oedipus Complex 38.

Oedipal Menage a Trois: *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* 43.

Loot and *What the Butler Saw*: 50.

Developing Classical Themes

Orton and his Erastes 60

It's 2009: Where's Orton? 64

Epilogue 69

Bibliography 70

Introduction

This thesis sprung from my initial hope to find a topic that would combine my interests in English literature and the classics. After considering several topics, I discovered a copy of Orton's plays, *Prick Up Your Ears* by John Lahr, and Orton's diary in three separate used book stores. I read all three books, and quickly discovered that Orton is a writer who is difficult to ignore. His caustic one-liners and frequently hilarious plots immediately grabbed my attention. In the fall of 2007, I spent a semester in London. Living in the city where Orton achieved notoriety sealed my decision to research Orton for my thesis. I enjoy the black humor of Orton's work, and though it has been difficult researching a little-known playwright, the experience has also been very rewarding.

Reading Orton's works, I was struck by certain similarities to classical literature. I began by considering *The Erpingham Camp* as a farcical version of *The Bacchae*. I then moved on to Orton's treatment of oedipal themes, especially in *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* and *Loot*. Finally, I considered classical structure and Euripidean elements in *What the Butler Saw*. In this thesis, I argue that Orton is not solely a blue-collar playwright or a member of the "Angry Young Men." He is a writer who consciously employs classical structures and themes, and his work should be viewed in classical contexts.

A number of sources were instrumental in developing my argument. Peter Walcot's article "An Acquired Taste: Joe Orton and the Greeks," was the most influential in shaping my view of Orton as a classicist. Walcot, more than any other scholar, sees classical elements not only in Orton's work, but in his personal life as well. He views Orton's relationship with his lover Kenneth Halliwell as particularly Greek. Walcot also recognizes Orton's interest in, and knowledge of, the classics. He begins his article with this quote from Orton:

> I always say to myself that the theatre is the Temple of Dionysus, and not Apollo. You do the Dionysus thing on your typewriter, and then you allow a little Apollo in, just a little to shape and guide it along certain lines you may want to go along. But you can't allow Apollo in completely.[1]

In this quote, Orton reveals that he is knowledgeable about the roles of Apollo and Dionysus. He may also be familiar with Nietzche's theories about the Apollonian and the Dionysian in art. Walcot also points out that Orton demonstrated knowledge of the classics in interviews, naming various classical writers and works. Walcot's analysis of the classical in Orton's work was invaluable in formulating my thesis. Patricia Juliana Smith's article, "You Say You Want a Revolution: Joe Orton's The Erpingham Camp as the Bacchae of the 1960s," was extremely helpful in writing the section dealing with *The Erpingham Camp*.

Other scholars of Orton recognize that Orton had some interest in the classics, but they do not consider these interests further. John Lahr, author of *Prick Up Your Ears* and a preeminent Orton scholar, uses the quotation cited above, but he does not consider its possible implications. He recognizes that the chaotic frenzy of Dionysian themes appealed to Orton, but he does not fully consider Orton's use of classical themes in his work. Lahr is more concerned with solving the alleged mystery of Orton's death. Throughout the book, Lahr treats Kenneth Halliwell negatively without realizing the immensely positive influence Halliwell had on Orton.

Simon Shepherd, in his book *Because We're Queers: The Life and Crimes of Kenneth Halliwell and Joe Orton*, utterly disagrees with Lahr's assessment of Halliwell. Shepherd makes sure that Halliwell receives full credit for his own achievements, down to putting his name first on the book cover. Shepherd's section on Orton and Freudianism was very helpful in the development of my sections on *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, *Loot*, and *What the Butler Saw*. He astutely deals with Orton's use and mockery of Freudianism as it was expounded in the 1950s. Shepherd's book is also concerned with how Orton fits into the typical homoerotic literature of the period. This was useful in developing some of my ideas on Orton. However, Shepherd, like Lahr, does not fully see the presence of the classical in Orton's work.

My aim, then, in this thesis, is to build on the work of previous Orton scholars. Lahr, Shepherd and others do not devote significant attention the classical themes throughout Orton's work. In this thesis, I develop their ideas on Orton, combined with my own thoughts, using Walcot's article as the base of my argument. This thesis represents a comprehensive in-depth study of the classical themes in Joe Orton's work, which, to my knowledge, has never been attempted before.

Joe Orton has been somewhat lost in the shuffle of modern drama. His works are infrequently performed and almost never taught in the classroom. My contention is that his work does deserve merit, for both for its unique brand of humor and fresh use of classical themes. Scholars may assert that Orton's work lacks the technical finesse of other playwrights such as Pinter and Stoppard, and I will not refute that assertion. Orton, however, does deserve to be examined, as his work occupies a unique niche in modern drama; he is a playwright from the 1960s who is deeply aware of the classical. This thesis reveals a new perspective on Orton. He was not merely the blue-collar, angry young man from Leicester. He was also an extremely clever and imaginative author. Not a traditional classicist, perhaps, but a classicist in his own way.

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[1] Walcot, Peter. "An Acquired Taste: Joe Orton and the Greeks," 99.

A Very British Bacchanalia:

The Bacchae and The Erpingham Camp

Joe Orton's comedies are marked by a various surprising classical themes. Orton is particularly interested in Dionysian themes. In his biography of Joe Orton, John Lahr notes that

> The combination of sex, hashish and sun fulfilled the Dionysian intention that lies behind Orton's comedies. They celebrate instinct and gratification and Orton aspired to corrupt his audience with pleasure…Like the votaries of Dionysus, Orton was hounded by his passion. In his plays, he faced his rage and exorcised it by his lethal wit. [1]

Orton's fascination with the classical, and with the Dionysian in particular, is especially evident in *The Erpingham Camp*, which Lahr refers to as "[Orton's] reworking of *The Bacchae*" [2] In *The Erpingham Camp*, Orton combines the destructive frenzy and the dismemberment of a hubristic authority figure of *The Bacchae* with his own brand of dark humor and caustic wit to create a unique theatrical experience.

Euripides' *The Bacchae* is a masterful tragedy focused on the conflicts between the diametrically opposed passionate god and the man of reason. Its savage denouement is possibly the most notorious in extant Greek tragedy. The success of the play is rooted in Euripides' supreme command of dramatic irony and in the fascinating battle between god and man.

The tragedy lies in the doomed Pentheus and his fatal hubris. When he first appears in the play, Pentheus is aghast at the Bacchic chaos the god has

brought to Thebes, and he is revolted that the women of the city may be engaging in sexual misconduct. Pentheus makes his position clear by openly reviling the Bacchants and refusing to believe in the divinity of Dionysus. "…I'll put a stop to this outrageous Bacchism./ They tell me, too, some oriental conjurer/ Has come from Lydia…*He's* the one-this foreigner-/ Who says Dionysus is a god…The truth about Dionysus is that he's dead,"[3]. The prophet Teiresias urges Pentheus to respect the god. "Pentheus, pay heed to my words…Welcome this god to Thebes,/ Offer libations to him, celebrate his rites,/ Put on his garland…Think of this too: when crowds stand at the city gates/ And Thebes extols the name of Pentheus, you rejoice;/ So too, I think, the god is glad to receive honor."[4] Cadmus appeals to his grandson's pragmatic nature and warns him of the dangers of competing with the gods.

> Your wits have flown to the winds, your sense is foolishness. Even if, as you say, Dionysus is no god, let him have *your* acknowledgement; lie royally, that Semele may get honour as having borne a god, and credit come to us and all our family. Remember, too, Actaeon's miserable fate- torn and devoured by hounds which he himself had bred, because he filled the mountains with the boast that he was a more skillful hunter than Artemis herself. Don't share his fate, my son![5] (334-343)

Despite the sensible warnings offered by Cadmus and Teiresias, Pentheus refuses to accept Dionysus. At this point, it is quite possible that Pentheus will indeed share Actaeon's fate. Teiresias confirms this suspicion. "Cadmus, the name/ *Pentheus* means *sorrow*. God grant he may not bring sorrow/ Upon your house."[6] (366-368)

When Pentheus encounters Dionysus, who is disguised as a mortal, he remains intractable. The god endeavors to sway Pentheus to his side through dire threats and by piquing his curiosity about the Bacchic rites. The ensuing *stichomythia*, or long conversation, focuses on the act of sight and ends with Pentheus remaining firm in his belief that Dionysus is not divine. "…he interprets the stranger's admonitions in a wholly secular spirit. His scepticism renders him deaf, as well as blind, to evidence of Dionysiac power."[7] Pentheus' fate lies in his literally being unable to see the god.

> DIONYSUS: The god Himself, whenever I desire, will set me free.
> PENTHEUS: Of course-when you, with all your Bacchants, call to him!
> DIONYSUS: He is close at hand here, and sees what is done to me.
> PENTHEUS: Indeed? Where is he, then? Not visible to my eyes.
> DIONYSUS: Beside me. You, being a blasphemer, see nothing.[8]

Before he is taken to prison, Dionysus echoes Teiresias' comment about Pentheus' name, "Your name points to calamity. It fits you well."[9] The god's last words in this section are a carefully worded attempt to convince Pentheus of the god's existence. "But I warn you: Dionysus, who you say is dead,/ Will come in swift pursuit to avenge this sacrilege./ You are putting *him* in prison when you lay hands on me."[10] (516-518) Once again, Pentheus fails to correctly interpret Dionysus' warnings.

Later in the play, the god slyly evinces Pentheus' desire to look on the forbidden Bacchic rites. In the following section, the god astutely dissuades

Pentheus from waging open warfare on the Maenads and convinces him to spy on them.

> DIONYSUS: Wait! Do you want *to see* those women where they sit together, up in the hills?
> PENTHEUS: Why, yes; for that, I'd give a weighty sum of gold.
> DIONYSUS: What made you fall into this great desire to see?
> PENTHEUS: It would greatly distress me to see them drunk with wine.
> DIONYSUS: Yet you would gladly witness this distressing sight?
> PENTHEUS: Of course- if I could quietly sit under the pines.[11]

Pentheus' sudden desire to witness the Bacchants becomes so possessing that he tamely follows Dionysus' advice, even allowing the god to dress him in women's clothes. Dionysus seizes on Pentheus' desire as the means to take revenge on him. "Now I will go, to array Pentheus in the dress/ Which he will take down with him to the house of Death/ Slaughtered by his own mother's hands. And he shall know/ Dionysus, son of Zeus, in his full nature God,/ Most terrible, although most gentle, to mankind."[12] Pentheus' desire to see that which is forbidden becomes his inevitable downfall. "From the ancient perspective, the essential point about the man who 'sees what he should not see' is…that he has violated some prohibition and must be punished accordingly."[13] Pentheus' impious transgressions are twofold; he denies the divinity of Dionysus and he violates the sanctity of the Bacchic rites.

The tragedy culminates with Pentheus being dismembered by his mother, Agave, and her fellow Maenads. In the horrifying climax of the play,

Agave enters carrying her son's head, believing it to be a lion's head. Dionysus appears and pronounces punishment on Agave and Cadmus. The god refuses to listen to their pleas for mercy, insisting that the house of Cadmus must be punished for refusing to believe that Dionysus is the son of Zeus.

> CADMUS: Have mercy on us, Dionysus. We have sinned.
> DIONYSUS: You know too late. You did not know me when you should.
> CADMUS: We acknowledge this; but your revenge is merciless.
> DIONYSUS: And rightly; I am a god, and you insulted me.
> CADMUS: Gods should not be like mortals in vindictiveness.
> DIONYSUS: All this my father Zeus ordained from the beginning.[14]

By the end of the tragedy, authority has been literally and figuratively dismembered. Pentheus, the ruler of Thebes, is killed by his mother, and the royal family is sent into exile. The final anarchic element of Dionysus' revenge is highlighted by the Chorus. "Gods manifest themselves in many forms,/ Bring many matters to surprising ends;/ The things we thought would happen do not happen;/ The unexpected God makes possible:/ And that is what happened here today."[15] The Chorus places the events of *The Bacchae* not in the remote past but "here today," thus reminding the audience that these events may recur in the future. This idea blends legend and reality and creates a sense of discomfort and insecurity as the play ends.

The Bacchae clearly adheres to the elements of tragedy. There are, however, some surprising comic elements within the play, as Bernd

Seidensticker notes in “Comic Elements in Euripides’ *Bacchae*.” Seidensticker argues that comic elements do not detract from the power of a tragedy, citing the porter scene in *Macbeth* as an example.[16] In his discussion of *The Bacchae*, Seidensticker points to two specific scenes as evidence of the comic within the tragedy. These are the scene between Cadmus and Teiresias at the beginning of the play, and the scene in which Pentheus is dressed in women’s clothes.[17]

The scene with Teiresias and Cadmus has caused a great deal of debate among scholars as to its comic elements. “Critical evaluation of this scene with its two male bacchants differs widely. No one disputes that their unexpected (and inappropriate) dress is as such a comedy element; it is the atmosphere and tone of the scene on which scholars do not agree.”[18] However, it seems clear on reading this scene that there is at least some comic intent apart from the dress of the two men. One of the main comedic aspects of the Teiresias-Cadmus scene depends on the laughable incongruity of two elderly men wearing the bacchic dress. Thus, this point is somewhat lost in reading the play, but the characters make frequent reference to their oddity of dress and the situation. “Where shall we go to dance/ And take our stand with the others, tossing our grey heads?/ You tell me what to do, Teiresias. We’re both old,/ But you’re the expert.”[19] Teiresias and Cadmus both claim that wearing

the bacchic dress makes them feel young again. Cadmus insists that he could dance all night, but immediately after this he asks if they should go to the mountains in a coach.[20] This seems to be a joke at the expense of Cadmus and his false bravado. Furthermore, there must be hidden humor in the moment when Cadmus announces Pentheus' presence for the benefit of the blind Teiresias. "Teiresias, I shall be your prophet, since you are blind./ Pentheus, to whom I have resigned my rule in Thebes,/ Is hurrying here towards the palace."[21] Cadmus' choice of words is especially humorous; Teiresias is a prophet, but he cannot predict the approach of Pentheus because he is blind.

For his own part, Pentheus is disdainful at the sight of the two men so inappropriately dressed. "Why, look! Another miracle! Here's Teiresias/ The prophet-in a fawnskin; and my mother's father-/ A Bacchant with a fennel wand! Well, there's a sight/ For laughter! Sir, I am ashamed to see two men/ Of your age with so little sense of decency."[22] Seidensticker cites Pentheus' reaction as further evidence of the comic intent of the scene. "Pentheus is not a very likeable personality. A confrontation with two dignified old men…would entirely rob Pentheus of the audience's understanding and sympathy and hence already destroy the delicate balance between the two antagonists,".[23] Pentheus cannot be made to appear a bully before he even meets Dionysus. After Pentheus' entrance, the scene becomes much more serious as Cadmus and Teiresias warn him of the dangers of his actions.

It is only after Pentheus exits and the two men are alone again that the comic elements resurface. The two men must lean on each other as they attempt the journey to Cithaeron. “Come, now, take your ivy staff/ And let us go. Try to support me; we will help/ Each other. It would be scandalous for two old men/ To fall; still, we must go and pay our due service/ To Dionysus, son of Zeus.”[24] Immediately after this, the men depart. It is not entirely clear whether their exit is intended to be comic, but it would be logical, given the tone of the scene and Teiresias’ earlier shaky entrance. In performance, the tendency seems to be to make the exit and the entire scene quite comic. In a 2007 production of *The Bacchae* at the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre in London, Teiresias and Cadmus performed a preposterous shuffling sort of tap dance with canes followed by a very wobbly exit. Though the appearance of a comic scene at the beginning of a tragedy is unusual, it does not detract from the tragic foreboding of the moment, especially since the scene contains Teiresias’ sober warnings to Pentheus. “…in the *Bacchae* the tragic threat is clearly felt without weakening or even spoiling the ridiculousness of the two old men- the ‘blind’ and the ‘lame’-the unvoluntarily comic quality of their short dialogue, and the ludicrousness of their tottering departure.”[25]

While the comic elements of the Teiresias and Cadmus scene are somewhat subtle, they are far more distinct in the dressing scene between

Pentheus and Dionysus. Much of the comic elements in this scene are derived from Pentheus' complete shift in behavior. Earlier in the play, Pentheus is completely opposed to Dionysian worship. But in the dressing scene, his desire to see the rituals makes him eager to look and act like a traditional Maenad. To achieve this effect, he becomes completely subservient to Dionysus and allows the god to manipulate him into the proper image of a Maenad.

> PENTHEUS: You dress me, please; I have put myself in your hands now.
> DIONYSUS: Your girdle has come loose; and now your dress does not hang, as it should, in even pleats down to the ankle
> …
> PENTHEUS: Ought I to hold the thyrsus in my right hand-so, or in the left, to look more like a Bacchanal?
> DIONYSUS: In the right hand; and raise it at the same time as your left foot. I am glad you are so changed in mind.
> PENTHEUS: Could I lift up on my own shoulders the whole weight of Mount Cithaeron, and all the women dancing there?
> DIONYSUS: You could, if you so wished. The mind you had before was sickly; now your mind is just as it should be.[26]

Dionysus arranging Pentheus' dress and hair is undoubtedly comic. This scene was wonderfully played in the 2007 London production of the play. Dionysus became a sort of personal stylist, debating which gown would look best with Pentheus' hair and adjusting his tiara. Pentheus even sang a song about his desire to see the Maenads ".in their hidden nests/ Like birds, all clasped close in the sweet prison of love,"[27] clad in an evening gown, gloves and a tiara.

Far from diminishing the tragedy, the comedy adds to it. By this point in the play, the audience knows what Dionysus has planned for Pentheus. Thus the humor of watching Dionysus adjust Pentheus' gown is combined with the knowledge that Pentheus will soon die in that gown. Seidensticker notes the sense of combined comedy and tragedy in this scene.

> At the same time, however, the scene is extremely pathetic, indeed tragic. The ironic cat-and-mouse game has reached its climax; one of the most comic scenes in Greek tragedy is at the same time one of the most gruesome and pitiful…The tragic irony underlying the comic surface is intensified by the symbolic meaning of the dressing which not only provides the preparation for Pentheus' military reconnaissance on Kithairon, but is also the visible expression of the total destruction of the θεομάχος [fighting against God] who having lost his fight against maenadism is himself turned into a maenad. His bacchic dress, however, will not be a dancing costume, but his shroud.[28]

The overall effect of the scene gives the spectator combined sensations of humor and terror. The tone of this scene is quite different from the Teiresias-Cadmus scene. "…in the earlier scene towards the beginning of the drama, both components are less intense than at its climax, immediately before the horrible death of Pentheus."[29] Seidensticker also points out that "The indissoluble blending of the tragic and the comic is an expression of the enigmatic ambivalence of the Dionysiac, which is, after all, the ritual and psychic substratum out of which tragedy *and* comedy grew."[30]

These two scenes provide excellent examples of concentrated comic elements within *The Bacchae*. Still, the play also contains large numbers of

isolated comic moments. An example of this occurs when Dionysus plays a series of tricks on Pentheus, making him tie up a bull, causing him to believe that the palace is on fire, and so on. But the most prevalent form of isolated comic elements in the play lies in Euripides' brand of dramatic irony, which can be humorous, or chilling, or both. This irony is present in a series of misunderstandings between Dionysus and Pentheus. Dionysus makes statements which Pentheus interprets in wildly different ways. There are also isolated moments of humor that are not related to dramatic irony in the conversation of the two men.

This conversation demonstrates Euripides' use of humor as Dionysus manipulates Pentheus' desire to go to Cithaeron.

> DIONYSUS: Then shall I lead you? You will undertake to go?
> PENTHEUS: Yes, lead me there at once; I am impatient to go.
> DIONYSUS: Then, you must first dress yourself in a fine linen gown.
> PENTHEUS: Why in a linen gown? Must I then change my sex?
> DIONYSUS: In case they kill you, if you are seen there as a man.
> PENTHEUS: Again you are quite right. How you think of everything!
> DIONYSUS: It was Dionysus who inspired me with that thought.
> PENTHEUS: Then how can your suggestion best be carried out?
> DIONYSUS: I'll come indoors with you myself and dress you.
> PENTHEUS: What? Dress me? In woman's clothes? But I would be ashamed.
> DIONYSUS: Do you want to see the Maenads? Are you less eager now?[31]

In this section, Dionysus becomes a sort of criminal mastermind, with Pentheus as his sidekick. Pentheus asks the questions, and praises Dionysus for his ability to think of everything. The line "It was Dionysus who inspired

me with that thought," is especially ironic since the audience knows, as Pentheus does not, that Dionysus is actually speaking. Dionysus skillfully overcomes Pentheus' objections to dressing in women's clothes by drawing on his desire to see the Maenads. Pentheus slowly accepts the idea, posing questions about the sort of dress he must wear. "And after that? What style of costume must I wear?"[32] By the time Pentheus exits, he is completely persuaded and the audience has been rewarded with a wonderfully humorous scene.

Euripides' humor is frequently far darker, however, as the following scene will demonstrate. Immediately prior to Pentheus' demise, he has a final conversation with Dionysus that is a masterful example of Euripidean dramatic irony.

> DIONYSUS:…Perhaps you will catch them-if you are not first caught yourself.
> PENTHEUS: Now take me through the central streets of Thebes; for I am the one man among them all that dares do this.
> DIONYSUS: One man alone, you agonize for Thebes; therefore it is your destined ordeal that awaits you now. Come with me; I will bring you safely to the place; Another shall conduct you back.
> PENTHEUS: My mother-yes?
> DIONYSUS: A sight for all to witness.
> PENTHEUS: To this end I go.
> DIONYSUS: You will return borne high-
> PENTHEUS: Royal magnificence!
> DIONYSUS: In your own mother's arms.
> PENTHEUS: You insist that I be spoiled.
> DIONYSUS: One kind of spoiling.
> PENTHEUS: Yet I win what I deserve.[33]

This *stichomythia* comprises one of the most chilling moments in the play. The dark humor is derived from Pentheus' inability to interpret the god's words in the proper way. Dionysus means that Pentheus' "destined ordeal" is to be dismembered at the hands of his mother and brought home as a sacrifice. Pentheus interprets these words as an assurance of his own victory over the Maenads. Pentheus' final line is especially poignant. He believes that he deserves victory, yet from the god's standpoint, what he deserves is death. These moments of dramatic irony can be wonderfully rendered in performance. In the 2007 London production, Alan Cumming's Dionysus sneering "When I'm done with you, your own mother won't recognize you," was at once utterly humorous and chilling.

Orton utilizes the mass violence and dramatic irony of *The Bacchae* is his own one-act play *The Erpingham Camp*. Orton's work, however, is also marked with a caustic wit that is all his own. *The Erpingham Camp* was televised in 1966 and staged for the first time in 1967 at the Royal Court Theatre. The play begins by introducing Erpingham, who is Orton's version of Pentheus. Pentheus' controlling demeanor and concern for sexual standards are utterly exaggerated in the character of Erpingham, "…an embodiment of anachronistic Victorian mores and British imperialism reduced to absurdity."[34] The introductory dialogue of the play demonstrates Erpingham's need to control every detail of his camp.

> ERPINGHAM: Where's your badge of office?
> RILEY: An oversight, sir. I'm sorry.
> ERPINGHAM: You should be wearing your decorations. You know the rules. Any member of the staff found improperly dressed on Saturday night is subject to instant dismissal. Only I am excused.
> RILEY: I'll put them on at once.
> ERPINGHAM: I didn't make the rules, Chief Redcoat Riley. I only carry them out.[35]

Echoes of Pentheus are also visible in the way Erpingham arrogantly assumes that he is superior to others.

Orton skillfully pokes fun at Pentheus and figures like him by giving Erpingham a rather pathological prudishness. Erpingham desires to destroy anything and anyone that threatens the sexual purity of his campers, especially the women and children.

> ERPINGHAM: And the toddlers' paddling pool? Have you removed whatever was causing the disturbance?
> RILEY: Yes.
> ERPINGHAM: Good. What was it?
> RILEY: Two ducks. Made of plastic. They were stuck together.
> ERPINGHAM: Beak to beak? (*Pause.*) Was the joinery smutty?
> RILEY: Well, sir- the Engineer in charge had to perform surgery.
> ERPINGHAM: Did the kiddies see?
> RILEY: No. They were having a quick run round with Matron.
> ERPINGHAM: I want those ducks destroyed. We've no time for hedonists here. My camp is a pure camp.[36]

While Erpingham's censorious attitude toward the plastic ducks is undoubtedly humorous, it also suggests a sinister urge to destroy any perceived instance of sexual misconduct. "The incident of the toy ducks demonstrates that his prudery and repression, like Pentheus', excite both the voyeuristic desire to visualize the scene and the concomitant need to destroy

those who would enjoy pleasure outside the established norms."[37] Just as Pentheus is compelled to destroy allegedly promiscuous women, Erpingham is compelled to destroy any threat to the so-called purity of his established kingdom.

A second example of Erpingham's misplaced prudishness occurs in Scene Three. Erpingham says, "I'm going to undress, Padre. Cover up the portrait of Her Majesty."[38] This incident demonstrates Erpingham's sexual psychology on a far larger scale than the incident of the ducks. Patricia Juliana Smith adds that Erpingham also incorporates the Queen into his sexual fantasy.

> Erpingham not only subscribes to the pathetically infantile notion that Queen Elizabeth, through the medium of her likeness, is omniscient and omnipresent-as some undoubtedly presumed her great-great grandmother Queen Victoria to be-but also coyly situates the monarch as a participant in his sexual fantasy, even as he ostensibly repudiates the possibility. As is so often the case in Orton's plays, the paradigms of Freudian psychology have run amok in a world apparently oblivious to its own psychoses.[39]

But Smith neglects an important facet of Erpingham's behavior in this scene. His prudishness in covering the Queen's portrait is offset by his putting on a corset under his suit. This gender-bending behavior seems to be Orton's attempt to recall Pentheus dressed in women's clothes. As with Pentheus, a strict adherence to gender stereotypes and an occasional departure from these same stereotypes are convergent in the character of Erpingham. The last Euripidean parallel in this scene is the character of the Padre, who acts as a

sort of Dionysian figure, lacing Erpingham's corset, fastening his suspenders, and so on.

Orton diverges considerably from his Euripidean model in his treatment of mass violence. His characters are indeed manipulated into madness, but not through the actions of a god. Instead, they are driven mad by a code of gender stereotypes gone wrong. Orton's approach forces his audience to realize the madness inherent in ordinary citizens, especially heterosexuals. As Smith points out, "…in *The Erpingham Camp*, the "mad people" are aggressively heterosexual, demanding recognition, reward, and privilege for their sexuality and reproductive capacities. Thus, Orton…subverts the dominant pattern by effectively urging the audience to look at the madness and violence of the *straight* people."[40] The Chorus warns the audience at the end of *The Bacchae* that the mass violence may recur, and Orton's straight people follow the lead of the Maenads. Orton's voice echoes Dionysus, who warns Pentheus that "I am sane, and you are mad."[41]

Orton's Dionysian figure, however, is not far removed from the people he instigates to violence. Chief Redcoat Riley is an unwitting Dionysus, not to mention utterly incompetent. He accidentally incites the crowd to violence as he attempts to lead the camp entertainments. Like Dionysus, Riley is marked as different, in this case because he is both Irish and Catholic. Nevertheless, Erpingham incorporates Riley into his imperialist fantasy.

> ERPINGHAM:…And when, Riley, we plant our first flag upon the white, untouched plains of Asia-you will be in our thoughts that day. The Camps of India, the Eternal Tents of the East will echo to your name as we remember the deed with which you won your spurs. And in those times we shall rejoice that of your own free will, you were born an Englishman.
>
> *The music fades.*
>
> RILEY: I was born in County Mayo, sir.
>
> ERPINGHAM: Ireland counts as England.[42]

Riley's incompetence is noted early in the play, when Erpingham blames him for the outcome of an "Ugliest Woman Competition." "You nearly won that yourself. Causing scandal."[43] As Smith notes, Riley's incompetence seems to stem from being "…completely ignorant of socially appropriate gender behaviors, as evinced in the 'entertainments' he organizes…he sets off a fatal sequence of events by initiating competitions based on the worst extremes of gender stereotypes,"[44]. In another nod to Euripides, the character of Kenny is selected to play "Tarzan of the Apes" for a week and is forced to wear a leopard skin. Another man, Ted, is asked to dance the can-can sans trousers. The women, Lou and Eileen, take part in a competition to see which of them can scream the loudest. "Loudest scream wins a cash prize. Just scream. As loud as you like!"[45] The competition abruptly backfires when the pregnant Eileen becomes hysterical. Riley slaps her face in an attempt to quiet her. His actions incur the wrath of his resident "Tarzan of the Apes," Kenny, who immediately begins to thrash Riley while Eileen encourages him, sobbing hysterically. The other campers take Kenny and Eileen's side, and anarchic

violence ensues. Riley is stripped of his honors after the utter failure of the entertainments. "Another disaster to add to your growing list of failures, Riley! Your technique might have been admirable at Nuremberg, but it's still in advance of the Home Counties. Give me your sash and medal. You've proved yourself unworthy of them."[46]

Riley's role in the play is not limited to an incompetent Dionysus. He is also presented as an ineffectual Teiresias, a role which he shares with the Padre. Early in the play, Erpingham describes his arrogant imperialist fantasy of heading a kingdom of holiday camps.

> Rows of Entertainment Centres down lovely, unspoiled bits of the coast, across deserted moorland and barren mountainside. 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'.*
> There'll be dancing. And music. Colourful scenes. Official pageantry. Trained drum Majorettes will march hourly across the greensward. The shapeliest girls in Britain-picked from thousands of disappointed applicants.[47]

Erpingham is so fixated on his fantasy that he will not allow anything to disturb it. He dismisses Riley's worries that the planned site for a new camp is National Trust territory with a bird sanctuary nearby. "Human beings need sanctuaries, Riley, as well as birds. The world is in danger of forgetting that fact."[48] Riley cautions Erpingham of the dangers of this arrogant pride by employing Catholic discourse.

> Oh, take care, sir. One flick of Fortune's wheel and you'll be brought low. I was taught by a nun once who itched like the Devil to become Superior. One day the message came from the Eternal City. Sister Mary had made it. Promoted to Higher Office. But-God's anger light upon me if I'm not telling the truth-as they sang the Te Deum she was seized in a sudden fit and fell to the ground mouthing words that nobody understood-save an old lay sister who'd once been an usherette at the Roxy and was more worldly than the rest. Sister Mary had got to be Superior, but she had to be put away for her foolish pride in believing she had it all worked out. So, take care, sir. I know too well what the punishment is for your kind of sin. It's written over and over again in the books of the Ancient East. And in the Bible, too.[49]

Erpingham only hears the Catholic lore, which he finds suspicious, in Riley's warning, and thus is unable to understand the meaning of the warning. "We live in a rational world, Riley. I've no use for your Hiberian cant."[50] Smith notes that parts of Riley's warning can be traced back to Euripides. "Such facets of Greco-Roman beliefs as 'Fortune's wheel' and 'the books of the Ancient East' (to which the Bible is appended as an afterthought) evoke a pre-Christian metaphysical interpretation of events that harkens back to Euripides."[51]

Riley's role as the Teiresias of *The Erpingham Camp* is shared by the Padre. Like Teiresias, the Padre is a religious figure. But in the world of *The Erpingham Camp*, the Padre is something of a corrupt priest. Orton handles the Padre's failings with his customary satirical wit.

> ERPINGHAM: What happened to you in court this morning?
> PADRE: I was acquitted, sir. The young woman withdrew her charge.
> ERPINGHAM: I'm pleased to hear it. You must give up your evangelical forays into teenage chalets. They're liable to misinterpretation.[52]

In expounding on the subject of his next sermon, the Padre unknowingly predicts the violence that is to come. Although the Padre rather incompetently analyzes the meaning of the story of the Gadarene swine, the Teiresian parallel is clear.

> PADRE: I wonder, sir, whether you've ever stopped to consider the meaning of the Gadarene swine?
> ERPINGHAM: I haven't, Padre. Hand me my shirt.
> *The* PADRE *hands* ERPINGHAM *his shirt and* ERPINGHAM *puts it on.*
> PADRE: You recall, sir, how a madman was cured of his delusions. How the devils within him took up abode in a herd of swine? How the swine ran mad causing great destruction?
> *He hands* ERPINGHAM *his trousers and* ERPINGHAM *puts them on.*
> ERPINGHAM: It's a most instructive tale. What meaning do you attach to it?
> PADRE: We are meant to understand, sir, that with madness, as with vomit, it is the passer-by who receives the inconvenience.[53]

Erpingham is unable to see the warning behind the Padre's idiosyncratic analysis and he dismisses the story of the Gadarene swine. "And I think you'd better find another subject for your sermon tomorrow. I don't feel that the story of the Gadarene swine has any real meaning for us today."[54] It remains clear to the audience, however, that the Padre's tale and Riley's warnings have more meaning than Erpingham supposes.

Like Pentheus, Erpingham remains unable to follow good advice. After the fiasco of the camp entertainments, Erpingham insists on inflicting multiple punishments on the campers. His staff members attempt to dissuade him from this course of action, but Erpingham is unmoved.

> W.E. HARRISON: Your stiff-necked attitude will bring untold harm. Be warned before it's too late.
> MASON: Let discretion play the better part, sir.
> ERPINGHAM: Never! This is my kingdom. I make the laws
> …
> RILEY: Oh, sir, (*Pleadingly.*) Call them back. Let's thrash it out over a cup of instant.
> PADRE: Had Pharaoh done as Chief Redcoat Riley suggests, sir, the ten plagues would not have been inflicted on the fair land of Egypt.
> …
> ERPINGHAM: (*to* RILEY) I won't have your rubbishy ideas brought into my camp…This whole episode has been fermented by a handful of intellectuals. If we stand firm on the principles on which the camp was founded the clouds will pass. To give in now would be madness.[55]

Erpingham's last words echo Pentheus', and like his Euripidean counterpart, he is fated to die in an attempt to quell the mania in his kingdom. Erpingham dies when he falls through the floor and lands on a dancing couple below. His death is not depicted as a tragic calamity. Instead, Erpingham is given a falsely sorrowful eulogy by Riley. "Though bloodied and battered by the rioters, Riley joins Padre in eulogizing the slaughtered Erpingham. He fabricates a piously bogus narrative to cover up the crime, an ironically fitting valediction without mourning for a bogusly pious man."[56]

Erpingham's somewhat nonchalant ending remains in keeping with Orton's treatment of the classical text. Throughout the play, Orton skillfully blends important themes and elements of *The Bacchae* with his own darkly humorous voice. Erpingham is a strikingly modern version of Pentheus. One can easily imagine Pentheus saying, "This is my kingdom. I make the laws," but Erpingham's arrogance is offset by a unique brand of prudishness that

causes him to see corruption in innocuous plastic ducks. Teiresias, the dignified seer of legend, is portrayed by an Irish Catholic man and a very unorthodox priest. In one of his largest departures from classical tradition, Orton's Dionysus is an inept camp entertainer. Orton gives his characters lines that would not seem out of place in *The Bacchae*, contrasted with lines that are utterly unlike Euripides. In *The Erpingham Camp*, Joe Orton gives audiences a uniquely farcical version of *The Bacchae*. Figures from the Greek tragedy are juxtaposed with middle-class Britons. Though *The Erpingham Camp* represents a nearly forgotten part of theatrical history, Orton's play remains a treat for readers and audiences: a delightfully British bacchanalia.

[1]Lahr, John. *Prick Up Your Ears*, 15.
[2] Lahr, 15.

[3] Euripides, *The Bacchae*, lines 232-244.
[4] Ibid., 310-322.
[5] Ibid., 334-343.
[6] Ibid,, 366-368
[7] Gregory, Justina. "Some Aspects of Seeing in Euripides' 'Bacchae'.", 28
[8] *The Bacchae*, 498-502.
[9] Ibid., 508.
[10] Ibid., 516-518
[11] Ibid, 810-815.
[12] Ibid, 855-860.
[13] Gregory, 24.
[14] *The Bacchae*, 134-1349.
[15] Ibid, 1388-1392.
[16] Seidensticker, Bernd. "Comic Elements in Euripides' *Bacchae*," 307-310.
[17] Ibid, 310, 316.

[18] Ibid, 311.
[19] *The Bacchae,* 183-186.
[20] Ibid, 187-190.
[21] Ibid, 210-212.
[22] Ibid, 248-252.
[23] Seidensticker, 314.
[24] *The Bacchae*, 362-366.
[25] Seidensticker, 315-316.
[26] *The Bacchae*, 933-948.
[27] Ibid, 951-52.
[28] Seidensticker, 317-318.
[29] Ibid, 319.
[30] Ibid, 320.
[31] *The Bacchae*, 818-828.
[32] Ibid, 831.
[33] Ibid, 954-969.
[34] Smith, Patricia Juliana. "You Say You Want a Revolution: Joe Orton's The Erpingham Camp as the Bacchae of the 1960s," 31.
[35] Orton, Joe. *Joe Orton: The Complete Plays*, 279.
[36] Ibid, 279.
[37] Smith, 32.
[38] Orton, 289.
[39] Smith, 33.
[40] Ibid, 28.
[41] *The Bacchae*, 504.
[42] Orton, 289.
[43] Orton, 280.
[44] Smith, 35.
[45] Orton, 295.
[46] Ibid, 305.
[47] Ibid, 281.
[48] Ibid, 281.
[49] Ibid, 282.
[50] Ibid, 282.
[51] Smith, 35.
[52] Orton, 292.
[53] Ibid, 290.
[54] Ibid, 292.
[55] Ibid, 307-308.
[56] Smith, 35.

Hidden Comedy in Oedipus Rex

Orton employs classical themes not only in his one-act play, but in his full-length plays as well. In his three major works, *Entertaining Mr. Sloane, Loot,* and *What the Butler Saw,* Orton changes direction from the mass violence of Euripides to oedipal themes derived from Sophocles. These three plays all contain at least some oedipal overtones and his final play, *What the Butler Saw*, ends with a revelation of double incest. It seems that, for Orton, incest became something of an obsession. In these plays, Orton takes a classic tragedy, praised by countless critics since Aristotle, and Freud's theories of the oedipal complex and transforms them into appropriate material for a farce.

Oedipus Rex, the tragedy from which both Freud and Orton drew inspiration, is certainly not farcical. Aristotle points to Sophocles' play in his *Poetics* as an excellent example of what tragedy should be. The plot of *Oedipus Rex* is extremely well-known, but it is worth revisiting. A plague ravages the city of Thebes, and Oedipus, the king, vows to find out if the gods are angry with the people of Thebes. Oedipus' brother-in-law. Creon, returns from the Oracle at Delphi with the news that the gods have sent the plague to Thebes because of the murder of Laius, the former king of the city.

Oedipus summons the seer Teiresias to instruct him how to find the murderer of Laius. However, the prophet's words are less than pleasing to the king.

> TEIRESIAS: So? I charge you, then, abide by the proclamation you have made: from this day forth never speak again to these men or to me; you yourself are the pollution of this country.
> OEDIPUS: You dare say that!
> …
> TEIRESIAS: I say that you are the murderer whom you seek…I say that you live in hideous love with her who is nearest to you in blood. You are blind to the evil.[1]

Oedipus angrily turns Teiresias away and accuses Creon of plotting with the prophet to discredit him.

Jocasta, Oedipus' wife, tries to convince him that Laius was killed by robbers at a crossroads. Oedipus is far from comforted, however, because he killed an old man at a crossroads before he came to Thebes. He also reveals that he left his home in Corinth because the oracle told him that he would kill his father and marry his mother. A messenger then arrives to tell Oedipus that his father has died in Corinth. Oedipus is relieved, thinking that he has managed to evade the prophecy, but the messenger adds that the king of Corinth was not Oedipus' real father. The messenger then tells Oedipus that a shepherd found him as a baby with pierced ankles abandoned on Mount Cithaeron. Oedipus asks to question the shepherd and discover his true parentage. Jocasta, suspecting the truth, begs Oedipus to remain ignorant, but Oedipus is insistent. The shepherd confirms that Oedipus is the son of Laius and Jocasta. Horrified by this news, Jocasta hangs herself and Oedipus blinds himself. The play ends with Oedipus being sent into exile from Thebes.

The power of Sophocles' tragedy lies in two themes; sight, or the lack of it, and the pursuit of knowledge, combined with ignorance of the truth. There is a very interesting paradox in the characters of Teiresias and Oedipus. Teiresias is blind, but he can see the truth. Oedipus possesses sight, but he is blind to the truth of his own past and parentage. Teiresias accuses Oedipus of blindness during their quarrel. "In response to Oedipus "proof," Teiresias delineates the hero's guilt in explicit detail and prophesies that this guilt will be brought to light…Analysis of Teiresias' statements reveals that the primary emphasis falls, not on the enormity of Oedipus' misdeeds, but on his failure to see them."[2] Oedipus remains steadfastly unable to see the truth until his final encounter with the shepherd. It is Jocasta who glimpses the truth first, but Oedipus remains immune to her pleas.

> IOCASTE: For God's love, let us have no more questioning! Is your life nothing to you? My own pain is enough for me to bear…Listen to me, I beg you: do not do this thing!
> OEDIPUS: I will not listen; the truth must be made known.
> IOCASTE: Everything that I say is for your own good!
> OEDIPUS: My own good snaps my patience, then; I want none of it.
> IOCASTE: You are fatally wrong! May you never learn who you are![3]

When Oedipus finally learns the truth, it is so staggering that he is forced to blind himself because seeing has become too painful. The blinding may have been Sophocles' addition to the Oedipus myth and the symbolism is very effective.

A large portion of Oedipus' difficulty with perception lies in his use of false logic. Oedipus leaves Corinth because the oracle has told him that he will kill his father and marry his mother. However, he wrongly assumes, without proof, that Polybus and Merope, the king and queen of Corinth are his parents. This faulty logic leads to Oedipus' ultimate downfall. "Since the oracle had threatened parricide and incest, it was 'logical' that the hero should resolve to keep his parents out of sight. But logic, in this case, proved worse than useless,"[4]. Oedipus is so confident in his belief in his parentage that he does not hesitate to kill Laius at the crossroads. Similarly, he has no anxiety about marrying Jocasta, a woman old enough to be his mother.

Another important theme in the tragedy is the pursuit of knowledge and ignorance of the truth. At the beginning of the play, Oedipus is ignorant of the truth. However, something in his nature forces him to stubbornly pursue the truth once he realizes his own ignorance. Robert L. Kane makes an important point about the nature of Oedipus' ignorance. "But the circumstance which has the greatest effect on his destiny is not simply that he is ignorant of the facts but that, like the people whom Socrates met on the street, he often acts as if he knew what he does not."[5] Oedipus never questions his assumptions about his parentage. More importantly, he never questions the wounds on his ankles. It seems incredible that he should never have asked his

parents about them. However, he attaches no significance to them and nothing can shake him in his belief that Polybus and Merope truly are his parents.

However, when Teiresias makes his accusations, he sows the seeds of doubt in Oedipus' mind. The prophet tells Oedipus that his parents consulted him. Oedipus responds, "My parents again!-Wait: who were my parents?"[6] Suddenly Oedipus realizes that his knowledge of the truth is far from certain, and from this moment on, he is unable to remain ignorant. It is this inability that drives Oedipus to discover the truth, even if the truth may prove fatal. He cannot refuse to summon the shepherd, even if the shepherd's testimony will be Oedipus' downfall.

Though *Oedipus Rex* is by no means a comedy, there are some absurd elements in the play which would not have gone unnoticed by Orton. When a character in Woody Allen's film *Crimes and Misdemeanors* announces that Oedipus is funny, he is recognizing these absurd elements. The audience goes along with Oedipus' reasoning that Polybus and Merope are his parents. But in reality, Oedipus' stubborn belief that they are in fact his parents with no proof, and with some attempts to prove the opposite, seems ridiculous. Furthermore, Oedipus takes care to avoid Corinth due to the oracle's prediction. Yet he kills a man old enough to be his father without a second thought. Finally, he marries a woman who has suspiciously lost her husband and is old enough to be his mother. Oedipus' actions in light of the oracle's

predictions are utterly absurd and his belated recognition of the truth, while not exactly comedic, is slightly risible. It is the absurdity lurking behind *Oedipus Rex* that draws a twentieth century playwright like Orton to this ancient tragedy.

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[1] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, lines 349-367
[2] Robert L. Kane, "Prophecy and Perception in the Oedipus Rex", 192
[3] Sophocles, 1060-1069
[4] Kane, 196
[5] Kane, 189-190
[6] Sophocles, 436

Understanding the Oedipus Complex

Any analysis of oedipal themes in literature would be incomplete without a discussion of the theory of the Oedipus complex. This theory has become so much a part of a universal discourse that it is difficult to separate the original theory from later interpretations. Orton was by no means the first or the last writer to poke fun at a perceived nuttiness in Freud's theories. But Orton is particularly irreverent, mentioning Freud by name in *What the Butler Saw* in a less than complimentary way. However, since Orton distorts and alters Freud, it is necessary to go back to go back to Freud's original work before Orton's parodies of Freudian theory can be understood.

The theory of the unconscious is perhaps the most important concept in Freud's work. According to Freud, the unconscious is the deepest part of the mind, where all of our socially unacceptable impulses reside. Extremely sexual and violent impulses are relegated to the unconscious, where they remain sealed through a process of repression. Freud further asserts that the only way these impulses can come to the surface of the mind is through censoring. The process of censoring and distorting these impulses is known as sublimation. "…in this process they are sublimated-that is to say, they are diverted from their sexual aims and directed to others that are socially higher and no longer sexual."[1]

For Freud, the impulses found in the unconscious, especially sexual impulses, play a large role in the process of artistic creation. "It asserts further that these same sexual impulses also make contributions that must not be underestimated to the highest cultural, artistic and social creations of the human spirit."[2] Simply put; art and literature are essentially sublimated sexual impulses. But what of a writer like Orton, whose impulses are far from sublimated? Indeed, Orton's sexual impulses are on full display in his plays. According to Freud, this does not necessarily make him perverse. Rather, it gives him a fuller understanding of the unconscious.

In addition to the unconscious, another key concept is theory of stages of psychic development. The third stage of psychic development is the latency stage. For Freud, a child must overcome the unconscious obstacle of lust for one parent and aggression toward another. This obstacle is in place before the latency stage. "What, then, can be gathered from the direct observation of children at the time of making their choice of an object before the latency period? Well, it is easy to see that the little man wants his mother all to himself, that he feels the presence of his father as a nuisance,"[3]. Children make their choice of a parent as a love-object before the latency stage, and it is during this stage that they must overcome this obstacle. If the obstacle is not overcome, an Oedipus complex is the result.

For Freud, this is where the fun begins. In the normal course of events, a boy will attach to his mother and a girl to her father.

> The little boy may show the most undisguised sexual curiosity about his mother, he may insist upon sleeping beside her at night, he may force his presence on her while she is dressing or may even make actual attempts to seduce her…all of which puts beyond doubt the erotic nature of his tie with his mother…Things happen in just the same way with little girls, with the necessary changes: an affectionate attachment to her father, a need to get rid of her mother as superfluous and to take her place, a coquetry which already employs the methods of later womanhood-these offer a charming picture, especially in small girls, which makes us forget the possibly grave consequences lying behind this infantile situation.[4]

This passage indicates the presence of sexism in the early stage of Freud's theory. The image of the boy as the miniature seducer and the girl as a little coquette are based on possibly faulty assumptions about gender behavior. Freud later amended his theory and allowed that a child could develop the Oedipus complex with a parent of either sex. However, it is easy to see how Freud's assumptions about gender can lead to Freudian parodies.

Repression also plays a large role in the Oedipus complex. The repression of desire for a parent can frequently appear in dreams. Freud uses an example from *Oedipus Rex* when Jocasta disparages the validity of dreams. "Have no more fear of sleeping with your mother: / how many men, in dreams, have lain with their mothers! / No reasonable man is troubled by such things."[5] From Jocasta's comments, it appears that incest is an everyday occurrence in dreams. Yet she seems strangely indifferent to the fact that these

dreams may not be irrelevant. Jocasta may be in denial about the true meaning of these incest dreams, but for Freud, they are a lingering reminder of the Oedipus complex. "The reminder of dreams given to us by the wife and mother of Oedipus must not be allowed to remain fruitless…They are allocations of the libido and object-cathexes which date from early infancy and have long since been abandoned as far as conscious life is concerned, but which prove still to be present at night-time and to be capable of functioning in a certain sense."[6] If this is true, then the Oedipus complex can never truly be overcome. However, it remains trapped in the unconscious.

Freud asserts that the Oedipus complex is common to mankind as a whole and he offers proof of this assertion in the fact that there are laws against incest everywhere. "In all this the fact is entirely overlooked that such an inexorable prohibition of it in law and custom would not be needed if there were any reliable natural barriers against the temptation to incest. The truth is just the opposite."[7] If laws need to be instituted prohibiting incest, then incest must be a fairly common problem in society. For Freud, then, Kath's oedipal desires in *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* and the incestuous relationships in *What the Butler Saw* are not individual perversities. Rather, they are part of universal oedipal situations. It is the universality of the Oedipus complex which causes Freud to label it "the nucleus of the neuroses."[8]

Clearly, there were no writers deliberately using the theory of the Oedipus complex when Freud lectured on the subject as he was still developing the theory. However, Freud was aware that oedipal themes had already been a common factor in literature. "Among its remoter connections I will only give you a further hint that it has turned out to have a highly important effect on literary production. In a valuable work Otto Rank [1912b] has shown that dramatists of every period have chosen their material in the main from the Oedipus and incest complex and its variations and disguises."[9] Presumably, Freud also recognizes that dramatists will continue to use the Oedipus complex in their works. Now it is time to return to Orton. Using Freud's theories as a starting point, Orton twists and pokes them, giving the reader a world where nothing is unacceptable, and incest can be an everyday affair.

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[1] Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, 27
[2] ibid., 26
[3] ibid., 412
[4] ibid., 413-414
[5] Sophocles, 981-983
[6] Freud, 420
[7] ibid., 416
[8] ibid., 419
[9] ibid., 419

Oedipal Menage a Trois: Entertaining Mr. Sloane

Orton's interest in Oedipal themes is evident in his first full-length play, *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*. The play was first produced in 1964 at the New Arts Theatre in London. *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* was subsequently transferred to Wyndham's Theatre in the West End. Orton freely admitted that he borrowed from Sophocles' *Oedipus* plays in writing *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*.

> Orton's first stage play, *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, is a modern version of the Oedipus story. In an interview Orton claimed that he had used the most famous Oedipus plays, those by the ancient Greek dramatist Sophocles…*Sloane* does have some close points of contact with the Greek…the old man Kemp temporarily lames Sloane by jabbing him with a toasting fork, and Kemp is called Dadda; the relationship of Ed with his father uses lines from *Oedipus at Colonnus*; Ed is a comic reworking of Creon.[1]

Furthermore, Sloane's relationship with Kath presents clear echoes of the marriage of Oedipus and Jocasta.

From the beginning of the play, Kath is attracted to Sloane's youth. She reminisces about the son she lost and immediately begins using a maternal discourse to refer to Sloane. "Just a motherly kiss. A real mother's kiss."[2] Kath also uses childlike epithets to refer to Sloane when she seduces him.

> Mr. Sloane…(*Rolls on to him.*) You should wear more clothes, Mr. Sloane. I believe you're as naked as me. And there's no excuse for it. (*Silence*) I'll be your mamma. I need to be loved. Gently. Oh! I shall be so ashamed in the morning. (*Switches off the light.*) What a big heavy baby you are. Such a big heavy baby.[3]

After seducing Sloane, Kath casts herself in the role of Sloane's "Mamma" who also happens to be his lover. She continually addresses Sloane as "baby." Kath becomes extremely possessive of Sloane, though she denies it. She even forces Sloane to give her a locket that his mother gave him, saying, "I'm your mamma now…You mustn't cling to old memories. I shall begin to think you don't love mamma."[4]

Kath's use of familial dialogue continues throughout the play. Instead of simply telling Sloane that she is pregnant, she says, "Mamma is going to have…a baby brother."[5] She refers to Sloane as "one of the family."[6] For Kath, there is nothing wrong in having a relationship with a boy young enough to be her son. Far from being disturbed by Sloane's youth, she treats him as if he were her son. Her behavior stems from grief over the lover and son she lost. She clings to Sloane as a substitute for both figures. The situation is complicated by the fact that Kath's brother, Ed, also loved Tommy, her former lover. Ed blames Kath for what he perceived as Tommy's corruption, and great discord arose between them. It is easy to see that history will repeat itself with Sloane.

> KATH: No, I didn't say that. But he calls me mamma. I love him 'cause I have no little boy of my own. And if you send him away I shall cry like the time you took my real baby.
> ED: You were wicked then.
> KATH: I know.
> ED: Being rude. Ruining my little matie. Teaching him nasty things. That's why I sent it away. (*Pause.*) You're not doing rude things with this kiddy, are you, like you did with Tommy?

KATH: No.
ED: Sure?
KATH: I love him like a mamma.[7]

Just like Tommy, it is clear that Sloane will become caught in this extraordinary family's tangled mess of desires.

The figure of Ed is central to the play. While Kath's desires toward Sloane are clearly oedipal, and have often been discussed as such, Ed's desire for Sloane can also be termed oedipal. "The child feels desire toward one parent and animosity towards the other, but this desire does not operate heterosexually. The child may desire the parent of the same sex and hate the parent of the opposite sex…Popular notions of the Oedipus complex forgot or ignored Freud's insistence on the bisexuality of the child's desires, where the child could fix on either or both parents (at different times) as love-objects."[8] (Shepherd, 73-74) The oedipal triangle presented in *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* is unique in that Sloane desires both the mother and the father figure at the same time, while they both desire him. Having said this, it is still true that the relationship between Kath and Sloane represents a more common oedipal situation, and Kath's use of maternal language reinforces the oedipal nature of that relationship.

The relationship between Sloane and Ed can be viewed as traditionally Greek. In his essay, "An Acquired Taste: Joe Orton and the Greeks," Peter Walcot discusses Joe Orton's relationship with Kenneth Halliwell in terms of the *eromenos*, the loved one, and the *erastes*, the lover. Halliwell took the

young Orton under his wing and provided an intellectual and sexual role model for Orton. In a similar way, Ed tries to be what he believes is a proper role model for Sloane. This includes attempting to steer him away from women at all costs. “And you shouldn’t be left with her. She’s no good. No good at all. A crafty tart she is. I could tell you things about-the way these women carry on…I’ve seen funny things happen and make no mistake. The way these birds treat decent fellows. I hope you never get serious with one.”[9] (Orton, 112-113) It is no coincidence that at their first meeting the two men discuss Sloane’s athletic activities and Ed becomes clearly aroused, just like a older man of antiquity admiring a young athlete.

> ED:…do you…(*Shy.*) exercise regular?
> SLOANE: As clockwork.
> ED: Good, good. Stripped?
> SLOANE: Fully.
> ED: Complete. (*Striding to the window.*) How invigorating.
> SLOANE: And I box. I’m a bit of a boxer.
> ED: Ever done any wrestling?
> SLOANE: On occasion.
> ED: So, so.
> SLOANE: I’ve got a full chest. Narrow hips. My biceps are-
> ED: Do you wear leather…next to the skin? Leather jeans, say? Without…aah…[10]

Sloane accepts Ed’s attentions and begs him for clemency when he gets in trouble. “You can’t ruin my life. I’m impressionable. Think what the nick would do to me.”[11] When Sloane kills Kemp, it is Ed that he asks to see, not Kath. It is true that the relationship between Sloane and Ed is based on lust

and opportunism rather than true affection, but elements of a classical Greek relationship between an older man and a young boy are clearly visible.

The London production of *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* received highly mixed reviews. "Orton's 'family' was greeted with distaste by audiences."[12] The play produced a maelstrom of positive and negative press. W.A. Darlington of the *Daily Telegraph* wrote, "Not for a long time have I disliked a play so much as I disliked Joe Orton's *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*,"[13] Orton himself joined in the fray, using the pseudonyms of Edna Welthorpe and Donald H. Hartley. Edna Welthorpe wrote, "I myself was nauseated by this endless parade of mental and physical perversion. And to be told that such a disgusting piece of filth now passes for humour,"[14] while Donald H. Hartley countered, "God knows the theatre is dreary enough at the present time. Any oasis in the wasteland is welcome."[15] The reviews were not entirely negative, however. The play did create some admirers, one of whom was the playwright Terence Rattigan, who wrote a delighted Orton a fan letter. "I don't think you've written a masterpiece-and you wouldn't want me to say that you had-but I do think you've written the most exciting and stimulating first play (is it?) that I've seen in thirty (odd) years' playgoing."[16] Rattigan admired the play so much that he was instrumental in its transfer to the West End. *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* also enjoyed a brief run on Broadway.

The film of *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* premiered in 1970, three years after Orton's death. It was directed by Douglas Hickox and starred Beryl Reid, Harry Andrews and Peter McEnery. The film begins with a shot of phallic imagery that would have delighted Orton. Kath is shown eating a popsicle and watching a funeral service. The film is quite true to Orton's plot and dialogue, though the oedipal themes are somewhat toned down. Kath does still refer to herself as Sloane's "Mamma" and call him "baby," though with less frequency than in the original. Interestingly enough, the film plays up the relationship between Ed and Sloane. In their first meeting, Sloane is shown lying on a bed, clad only in his underwear. His fingers slowly trail over his muscles as he describes his athletic activities to a very interested Ed. In another scene, the two characters visit a swimming pool and Sloane asks Ed to rub some sunscreen on him. The film's emphasis on athleticism and the male body accurately depicts the *erastes*/*eromenos* relationship already present in the play.

The film differs most radically from the play in its ending. In the play, Sloane goes off with Ed and Kath is left alone with the promise that Sloane will return in six months. In the film, Ed is insistent that Kath and Sloane should be married. Accordingly, he marries them with the corpse of the Dadda as a witness. Kath is content with this, but she decides that Sloane and Ed should also be married. Sloane is the only one who comments on the

bigamous nature of this situation. "I'm not marrying a fellow! Apart from anything else, it'd be bigamy!"[17] His objections are ignored, however, and Sloane finds himself married to both Kath and Ed. The final shot depicts Kath and Ed leaning in to kiss a rather bewildered Sloane. This ending loses the bite of Orton's original ending, but it accomplishes something rather different. By having Sloane marry both Kath and Ed, the film grants their relationship some status of normalcy. Since this relationship is simultaneously oedipal and bigamous, the film out-Ortons Orton in pushing the envelope of normalcy.

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[1] Shepherd, Simon. *Because We're Queers: The Life and Crimes of Kenneth Halliwell and Joe Orton*, 72.
[2] ibid., 68.
[3] ibid, 95.
[4] ibid., 103.
[5] ibid.,, 101.
[6] ibid., 104.
[7] ibid., 107.
[8] Shepherd, 73-74.
[9] Orton, 112-113.
[10] ibid., 87.
[11] ibid., 133-134.
[12] Shepherd, 74.
[13] Lahr, 166.
[14] ibid., 166-167.
[15] ibid., 167.
[16] ibid., 169.
[17] Douglas Hickox, dir. *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, 1970.

Loot and What the Butler Saw: Developing Classical Themes

Loot, Orton's second full-length play, represents a less evident display of the author's interest in the classical. Still, *Loot* is decidedly a farce, a genre that dates back to classical times. The relationship between Hal and Dennis is important to note. In these two characters, Orton subverts the current stereotypes that surrounded homosexuals. Orton was adamant that the boys should not be played according to these stereotypes. "I don't want there to be anything queer or camp or odd about the relationship of Hal and Dennis…They must be perfectly ordinary boys who happen to be fucking each other. Nothing could be natural."[1] By creating characters that do not fit into the "camp" mold of the period, Orton goes back to a time when relationships between men were viewed as natural. Hal and Dennis have more in common with the youths of ancient Greece than with their contemporaries.

Though they are not as blatant as those in *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, subtle oedipal themes can be found throughout *Loot* in the use of Mrs. McLeavy's body. The corpse of Hal's recently deceased mother is continually on display in surprising ways. The mayhem begins when Hal and Dennis decide to hide the money from the bank robbery in her coffin. They boys unceremoniously dump the corpse into a wardrobe. Dennis comments that they will have to remove her clothes. Hal replies, "Bury her naked? My own mum...It's a Freudian nightmare."[2] Despite this comment, Hal

does not object to having his mother undressed, which demonstrates that he doesn't really care about this so-called "Freudian nightmare." When Nurse Fay opens the wardrobe and discovers the corpse, she states, "This is unforgivable. I shall speak to your father. *Pause.* She's standing on her head."[3] Fay undresses the corpse and gives Mrs. McLeavy's false teeth to Hal, who clicks them like castanets. Hal's attitude toward his mother's corpse is callous to say the least. Even Truscott, the corrupt police officer is surprised by Hal's lack of emotion. "Your sense of detachment is terrifying, lad. Most people would at least flinch upon seeing their mother's eyes and teeth handed around like nuts at Christmas."[4] Hal is unable to associate these glass eyes and false teeth with his mother. Orton himself shared Hal's sentiments. After his own mother's funeral, Orton took her false teeth and presented them to the actor who was playing Hal.

> I'd taken my mother's false teeth down to the theatre. I said to Kenneth Cranham [who played Hal], "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 that you're not thinking of the events of the play in terms of reality if a thing affects you like that."[5]

In *Loot*, Orton demonstrates that fears of an oedipal fixation on a corpse are utterly meaningless. It is impossible to equate the embalmed body of Mrs. McLeavy, complete with glass eyes and false teeth, with someone who once was a living woman.

Orton's various classical interests run rampant in his final play, *What the Butler Saw*. Orton completed the play prior to his death in 1967. The play was first produced in 1969. In the play, Orton not only mocks Freud's concept of the Oedipus complex, but the entire system of psychoanalysis. The play is set in a psychiatric clinic, and it is the perfect setting for the frenzy that Orton creates. Within this madhouse, important classical allusions are lurking beneath the surface. *What the Butler Saw* is a farce of epic proportions, a great play and a sad indication of what Orton might have accomplished were it not for his untimely death.

What the Butler Saw is essentially a farce at the expense of the psychiatric profession. The play begins with Dr. Prentice's attempt to seduce a young woman applying for a secretarial position. When his wife arrives on the scene, the doctor is forced to cover his infidelity with lies. His lies set in motion a chain of further deception. When Dr. Rance arrives to inspect the clinic, Dr. Prentice claims that Geraldine is in fact a patient. Dr. Rance questions Geraldine and immediately jumps to some startling conclusions.

> RANCE…Who was the first man in your life?
> GERALDINE: My father.
> RANCE: Did he assault you?
> GERALDINE: No!
> RANCE…I'd take a bet that she was the victim of an incestuous attack. She clearly associates violence and the sexual act. Her attempt, when naked, to provoke you to erotic response may have deeper significance…Answer me please! Were you molested by your father?
> GERALDINE: (*with a scream of horror*). No, no, no!

> RANCE: The vehemence of her denials is proof positive of guilt. It's a text-book case! A man beyond innocence, a girl aching for experience…The result-madness…As far as I'm concerned this child was unnaturally assaulted by her own father. I shall base my future actions upon that assumption.[6]

Rance goes on to say that Prentice obviously resembles Geraldine's father, which is why she attempted to arouse him. Prentice knows that Rance's deductions are erroneous, but he cannot admit the truth. Rance's cross-examination of Geraldine is a lovely parody of Freudianism. Orton takes Freud's assumption that a girl must desire her father and runs with it. The dialogue between Rance and Geraldine may be laughable, but the dark humor derives from the fact that there is a kernel of truth lurking behind Rance's logic.

Orton as a homosexual writer was well aware of the implications of "Freudianism" in the 1950s and 1960s. "Families in which the woman has too much authority apparently produce queers. This is a moral lesson urging husbands and wives to adopt proper sex roles. The interest in 'Freudian' explanations of how queers are made has, I think, less to do with queers than with the effort- in'50s films and social commentaries-to resist changes in gender roles."[7] Orton's time was a time when the alleged decline of the nuclear family was a subject of concern. By displaying a doctor who takes Freud far too literally, Orton is simultaneously showing his contempt for conservative upholders of the nuclear family and demonstrating that the

nuclear family is in fact far from perfect. When Orton mentions Freud by name in the play, he does so exceptionally cheekily.

> RANCE: By no means. I once put a whole family into a communal straitjacket.
> PRENTICE: How proud your mother must have been.
> RANCE: She wasn't, I'm afraid. It was my own family, you see. I've a picture of the scene at home. My foot placed squarely upon my father's head. I sent it to Sigmund Freud and had a charming postcard in reply.[8]

Rance's violent behavior is undoubtedly startling, but what is more shocking is that he expects Freud to approve of his actions. "This, it is implied, is where Freudian views of the family lead."[9] At the end of the play, Geraldine and Nick are revealed as the children of Dr. and Mrs. Prentice. The four characters stand on stage, two parents and two children, the picture of a model family. But this family is far from perfect. Geraldine and Nick were conceived as the result of a rape and incestuous behavior has occurred with mother and son and father and daughter. None of the characters express alarm or dismay at these revelations. Rance is actually delighted, claiming that the case will enable to write a best-selling book. "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- and this is as it should be for love *must* bring greater joy than violence."[10]

The finale of *What the Butler Saw* is a comic masterpiece. It has often been compared to Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* in its depiction of

characters discovering that they are in fact related to each other. The comparison is an apt one, but Orton's ending also draws from classical predecessors.

> Yet it also been remarked that here we encounter "the classical Plautean comedy of the separated twins" and behind Plautus, of course, we have Greek New Comedy and behind Greek New Comedy lurks the person of Euripides. An ancient source, for instance, claims Euripides as the origin of Menandrean recognition, and an example offers confirmation: in the Ion of Euripides a woman, Creusa queen of Athens, who has been raped and subsequently abandoned her son, recovers the long-lost Ion when she recognizes the baby clothes in which she exposed her infant offspring and the accompanying jewellery.[11]

Walcot's reference to Euripides' *Ion* is also relevant to the plot of *What the Butler Saw.* Mrs. Prentice, like Creusa, was raped. She also recognizes her children by means of jewelry, in this case, two halves of an elephant brooch. The Plautean comedy that Walcot refers to is *The Brothers Menaechmus*. This play is known in literary history as the play which gave Shakespeare the plot for *The Comedy of Errors*. *The Brothers Menaechmus* revolves around twin brothers who are separated by a shipwreck. Years later, the brothers find each other again, but only after a series of misunderstandings as the two are constantly mistaken for the other.

The basic theme of the separated twins features prominently in Orton's play. However, Orton borrows from *Twelfth Night* in creating a brother and a sister. Yet, as in Plautus' comedy, the twins are mistaken for each other.

Geraldine is disguised in Nick's pageboy uniform, while Nick wears her clothes and Mrs. Prentice's wig to impersonate Geraldine. Geraldine and Nick's escapades may be similar to those of the Menaechmus brothers, but Orton skillfully manipulates notions of sexual identity in ways the ancients could not have imagined. The fun of reading Orton derives from observing his use of classical plots and allusions and marveling at the ways in which he updates and frequently laughs at his source material.

The finale of *What the Butler Saw* also boasts an additional nod to classical theatre. Sergeant Match holds aloft a bronze replica of Winston Churchill's penis. Though the phallus was cut from the original production, the scene was replaced when the play was revived in 1975. It is a final jab at Freudian imagery in a play fraught with snide references to Freud and Freudianism. "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 realize, of the object itself."[12] However, the phallus was also a standard image in classical theatre.

> Churchill's phallus reinforces Orton's Dionysiac imagery, for there could be no more characteristic an attribute of the Greek god than the phallus; a phallus, for example, is paraded by the worshippers as the Rural Dionysia is celebrated in Aristophanes' Acharnians. The phallus in fact typifies not only Dionysus but also the performance of Old Comedy in fifth-century Athens, and the basic comic costume consisted of tights to which a leather version of the phallus was attached.[13]

Orton also may have been familiar with Aristophanes' play *Lysistrata*, in which the phalli are not merely costume pieces. Much of the comedy revolves around the men in the play, who complain of constant erections because the women have gone on a sex strike.

The phallus in *What the Butler Saw* is a piece of a life-size statue of Winston Churchill. Churchill was a great war hero who was perhaps regarded as godlike by some in Britain. Orton's acquaintances were worried that the use of the phallus might result in a libel action. Orton vehemently disagreed. "That isn't libel, surely…I wouldn't sue anybody for saying I had a big prick. No man would. In fact, I might pay them to do that."[14] In Orton's classical view, there was nothing at all wrong with displaying Churchill's phallus on stage; phallic imagery was simply part of the theatre. And, perhaps for Orton the most important concern, it was fun.

In the final moments of the play, Orton winks at Euripides once more. Sergeant Match descends from a rope ladder wearing a leopard skin dress. The authority figure descending from above echoes the *deus ex machina*, a device that Euripides was especially fond of in his tragedies. Both Orton and Aristophanes found this tendency rather silly.

> But the link between the conclusion of What the Butler Saw and Aristophanes is considerably closer, for Aristophanes had preceded Orton by well over two thousand years in holding up to ridicule Euripides' penchant for the deus ex machina. Both comic writers found Euripides' fondness for this piece of theatre impossible to resist and both resorted to parody.[15]

In Euripides' tragedies, it is a god or goddess who descends from Olympus to sort out the mortals' affairs; in *What the Butler Saw*, it is an extremely bedraggled police officer. It is Sergeant Match who produces Churchill's phallus and agrees to keep silent about the chaotic events at the clinic. Orton ridicules the idea of the *deus ex machina*. In Euripides' tragedies, the gods can never undo the damage. In Orton's play, Sergeant Match cannot undo the embarrassing events that have just occurred. The best he can do is keep his mouth shut about them.

Match's attire in this final moment is also important. He is clad in a leopard skin dress. This is Orton's final use of Dionysian imagery. The moment recalls Kenny dressed as "Tarzan of the Apes" in *The Erpingham Camp*. "In what is perhaps the purest expression of the antic spirit in modern theatre, the play conjures a kind of halo around Match, whose leopard-skin dress signifies Dionysus and who clutches in his hand the emblem of polymorphous perversity."[16]

Joe Orton died in August of 1967. He never knew that *What the Butler Saw* would be his final play. Yet somehow it is fitting that the final scene of this final play should be filled with classical allusions, Dionysian imagery and Churchill's phallus. The finale of *What the Butler Saw* represents the culmination of Orton's incorporations of the classics into his work. When the play was first produced in 1969, it was a disaster. The public responded with

an outpouring of hate for Sir Ralph Richardson and the rest of the cast. "'There were old ladies in the audience not merely tearing up their programmes, but jumping up and down on them out of sheer hatred,"[17]. The play was received much better when it was revived in 1975. Orton's comedy provides an interesting blend of Oscar Wilde, Monty Python and Orton's own style. Sadly, it is still lacking the appreciation that it deserves. *What the Butler Saw* is performed less frequently than Orton's other plays, which is strange considering the hilarious dialogue, outlandish characters and supremely farcical plot. Still, the play is now recognized as an excellent example of farce.

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[1] Lahr, 205.
[2] Orton, 209.
[3] Ibid., 223.
[4] Ibid., 272.
[5] Lahr, 192.
[6] Orton, 383-383.
[7] Shepherd, 71.
[8] Orton, 442.
[9] Shepherd, 70.
[10] Orton, 446.
[11] Walcot, Peter. "An Acquired Taste: Joe Orton and the Greeks," 114.
[12] Orton, 447.
[13] Walcot, 114-115.
[14] Lahr, 114.
[15] Walcot, 115.
[16] Lahr, 273.
[17] Ibid., 275.

Orton and his Erastes

Joe Orton lived from 1934 to 1967. He was a member of a post-war generation of playwrights that included John Osborne and Harold Pinter, the so-called "Angry Young Men." Orton identified with these playwrights to some extent. He abandoned his birth name, John Orton, and began calling himself Joe so that the public would not confuse him with John Osborne.[1] Orton especially admired Pinter. His early play, *The Ruffian on the Stair*, demonstrates elements of Pinter's style. "Orton began the radio play with Pinter's familiar smokescreen of pause and patter as Joyce tries to coax some acknowledgment of her existence out of Mike over breakfast…The scene is stolen from the opening of *The Birthday Party*. Orton has changed the brand names but little else"[2].

Despite his degree of identification with playwrights such as Osborne and Pinter, Orton is unique among them in his interest in classical literature and use of classical themes in his work. Other playwrights besides Orton had used classical myths in their plays. Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Flies* both relate the myth of Orestes and Electra. However, the tendency to look to the past for inspiration seems less prevalent in the 1960s, when Orton wrote the majority of his works. Furthermore, Orton is interested in the humor and phallic imagery of the classics as well as theme and plot structure. Orton fits in well with other

playwrights of his day, but he distinguishes himself from them in his astonishing use of the classics.

Contrary to previous generation, discussions of homosexual themes were becoming more prevalent in literature. This can be seen as both good and bad, for while homosexuality was being talked about openly, the subject was surrounded by misguiding and sometimes incorrect information. Popular novels echoed the beliefs of the day regarding homosexuality. “We should note here that in so many novels about queers, there is a close, if not dominating, relationship with the mother and an absent, or ineffectual, father…Thus we are given the scenario: women’s emancipation ‘undermines’ the (male) nation because it ‘produces’ dominant mothers who then ‘produce’ queers”[3]. This scenario combines several fears into one overarching fear; the fear of social change. Changes in sex roles and the gradual emergence of homosexuality into the public sphere forced members of the public to realize that the world of the twentieth century was changing rapidly.

Joe Orton did not have the educational background that would seem conducive to an interest in the classics. He was never a brilliant student in school. When he met Kenneth Halliwell, his life and interests changed. Halliwell came from a different economic background than Orton, and he had received a good education. “…Halliwell was a member of a British ‘institution’ now defunct, the classical sixth-form, and he took Latin, Greek

and Ancient History at his Higher School Certificate examination."[4] Peter Walcot contends that the relationship between Orton and Halliwell had "a particularly Greek quality."[5] His observations are interesting. He portrays Halliwell as the older man who offers love and knowledge to Orton. Halliwell expanded on Orton's knowledge of Greek mythology and introduced him to various classical authors. The following statement from Orton indicates the depth of the knowledge he acquired through Halliwell.

> I'm very conscious of what's come before. I like Lucian and the classical writers, and I suppose that's what gives my writing a difference, an old-fashioned classical education! Which I never received, but I gave myself one, reading them all in English, for I have so little Latin and less Greek.[6]

Walcot takes Orton's comments with a grain of salt, but there are important facets to that statement. Orton professes an awareness of the classical tradition, and he establishes himself as a largely self-educated man. Furthermore, the final line, which may be an example of Halliwell's influence, paraphrases Ben Jonson's well-known comment about Shakespeare.

Kenneth Halliwell was not well-liked in Orton's theatrical circle. Orton's diaries are filled with reports of slighting remarks made about Halliwell. Orton himself was very receptive to Halliwell's suggestions regarding his writing. An excerpt from his diary written shortly before his death reveals that Orton remained grateful to Halliwell until the end.

> Tuesday 11 July

> The last few days have been hot, muggy, typical dreadful English weather. I've finished typing *What the Butler Saw*. Yesterday Kenneth read the script and was enthusiastic- he made several important suggestions which I'm carrying out. He was impressed by the way in which, using the context of a farce, I'd managed to produce a *Golden Bough* subtext-even (he pointed out) the castration of Sir Winston Churchill (the father-figure) and the descent of the god and the end- Sergeant Match, drugged and dressed in a woman's gown. It was only to be expected that Kenneth would get these references to classical literature. Whether anyone else will spot them is another matter. 'You must get a director who, while making it funny, will bring out the subtext,' Kenneth said. He suggests that the dress Match wears should be something suggestive of leopard-skin- this would make it funny when Nick wears it and get the right 'image' for the Euripidean ending when Match wears it.[7]

In this excerpt, a good writing relationship is revealed between Orton and Halliwell. Orton has incorporated the knowledge of the classics that he obtained from Halliwell into his work. He acknowledges that only Halliwell is likely to understand the classical references. Furthermore, he adopts Halliwell's suggestions for changes, including the image of Sergeant Match wearing the Dionysian leopard skin. In this excerpt, Orton is far from the blue-collar playwright that many have perceived him to be. He is knowledgeable about the classics, clever enough to use them in farcical ways, and aware of the debt that he owes to his mentor.

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[1] Lahr, 139.
[2] ibid., 132.
[3] Shepherd, 71.
[4] Walcot, Peter. "An Acquired Taste: Joe Orton and the Greekes," 100.
[5] ibid., 100.
[6] ibid., 105.
[7] Orton, Joe, John Lahr, ed. *The Orton Diaries*, 236.

It's 2009: Where's Orton?

These days, the name of Joe Orton often provokes nothing more than a blank stare when mentioned. He enjoyed some popularity during his lifetime and gained notoriety through his death. Yet now, over forty years after his death, he occupies a miniscule niche in the theatrical canon. His plays are rarely performed, especially outside Britain, and they are almost never included in high school and college drama courses. This paper has demonstrated the considerable classical knowledge and wit that inform Orton's work. So why does this playwright enjoy so little popularity today?

Regrettably, part of the answer may lie in the very classical themes that make his work so enjoyable to some. It is clear that Orton understood that the majority of people would not understand the classical references in his work. He appreciated Kenneth Halliwell's knowledge and suggestions, but he also acknowledged that Halliwell would most likely be one of the few who would pick up on his classical references. Halliwell was the recipient of a classical education, but though that had once been the standard, it was quickly becoming outmoded by the 1960s. If Orton's classical references are becoming harder to understand in Britain, a country which once placed a high importance on classical learning, then they are virtually unintelligible in the United States except to very few people. In a supreme example of irony, the

classical themes in Joe Orton's works, perhaps their most skillful aspect, have been partially responsible for the decline in Orton's popularity.

Nevertheless, the increasing decline of the classics is not solely responsible for Orton's relative anonymity. The homosexuality of Orton's characters and of the playwright himself has also played a role in his downfall. This is not meant to suggest that Orton has become less popular simply because he was homosexual. Rather, he has become less popular because neither he nor his characters subscribe to the conventional model of homosexuality. Orton was aware of the stereotype that homosexuals must by nature be effeminate, and he utterly rejected it. "For Orton masculinity was an explicit sexual turn-on: he told people he was a body-builder, dressed as a 'working lad' to have casual sexual encounters. He was angered by the portrayal of queer stereotypes on the stage, particularly in producers' handling of his own work,"[1]. Orton's macho attitude and dress flew right in the face of these "queer stereotypes." Furthermore, the homosexual characters in his plays, Ed, Hal and Dennis do not subscribe to the stereotype of effeminacy.

In his article, "Is There a Queer Tradition and is Orton in it?" Alan Sinfield demonstrates that effeminacy had been a large part of mainstream theatre since the days of Oscar Wilde. "Ranging in tone from the thoughtful to the witty, alternately extravagant and discreet in language and costume, always upper class in manner and orientation, it [the typical West End play of

the 1950s] seemed linked by effeminacy to the world of Oscar Wilde."[2] Orton's intense dislike of gay stereotypes is evident in his gay characters. Ed, in *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, though he is overtly attracted to Sloane and is distinctly uncomfortable with heterosexuality, is not effeminate in the least, and Orton was determined that Ed's lack of effeminacy should be paramount to his stage portrayal. Hal and Dennis in *Loot* share Ed's lack of effeminacy. "Hal and Dennis are lower-class boys who are having sex with whomever they want, and who are not going to be exploited by anyone."[3] Orton was equally insistent that Hal and Dennis should not be played in accordance with gay stereotypes. Orton's homosexual characters fit into the fringe theatre world of the 1960s, which had become dissatisfied by effeminate stereotypes. Despite Orton's attempt to combat gay stereotypes in the theatre, the stereotypes proved difficult to remove. It is true that the theatre today presents a wide spectrum of homosexual characters. However, popular films and television persist in effeminate portrayals of homosexuality. In 2009, Orton's macho homosexuals can still be difficult for modern audiences to respond to.

A final important reason for Orton's decline lies in his treatment of women. Orton's diaries contain various disparaging comments about women and his personal correspondence also demonstrates a profound misogyny. Furthermore, his plays portray women in very negative ways. "The plays invite their audiences to laugh at women who are trivial and silly and at

women who are bossy and menacing. The laughter is a way of coping with an ancient masculine fear of women's sexual desire and women's social power."[4] Kath in *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* is a deluded, middle-aged woman whose seduction and subsequent infantilizing of Sloane are embarrassing. Fay in *Loot* is a selfish, mercenary murderer. Mrs. Prentice in *What the Butler Saw* is domineering and unsympathetic while Geraldine is hopelessly naïve. It cannot be a coincidence that, after a revival of his plays in 1975, Orton began his slow decline from popularity when the Women's Movement was in full swing. Orton's characterizations of women remain uncomfortable and embarrassing today and this is a compelling reason for his lack of popularity.

There may be another explanation for Orton's lack of popularity that is not related to the content of his work. Orton was primarily a playwright and plays are by definition meant to be performed. His work may not be popular today because it is difficult to perform. Most of the plays are relatively easy to stage, but Orton's dialogue is difficult to act. Sometimes the problem lies in delivering his outlandish one-liners without sounding utterly silly. But more often, the problem lies in how to deliver long speeches. There is a technique to performing Orton, and it appears to have eluded actors for generations. Seasoned actors have often had difficulty with Orton. Sir Ralph Richardson, the original Dr. Rance, had a great deal of trouble learning his lines.

> Sir Ralph, an august and lovably eccentric actor, was totally lost in the whirlwind of Orton's language. He had memorized the script, as was

> his custom, by writing it out on large music sheets, which he put on a music stand. "He learned it in rhythm and turned over each page as if it were a musical score," Coral Browne explains. "Sometimes it was difficult for him to learn because he had no idea of what the words meant. He couldn't get 'nymphomaniac' right because I don't think he'd heard of one of those…When he had one of those long speeches with words like 'transvestite' or nymphomaniac,' he was hopelessly at sea.[5]

If an actor with Sir Ralph Richardson's vast experience had difficulty with Orton, other actors are in for trouble. I myself recently performed one of Rance's monologues as an audition piece and I found it extremely difficult to make it sound humorous without being arch or false. The difficulty of performing Orton's work may be the most compelling reason for his current lack of popularity. If the actors cannot perform a work properly, the audiences will not enjoy it.

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[1] Shepherd, 34.
[2] Sinfield, Alan. "Is There a Queer Tradition and is Orton in it?" 86
[3] Ibid. 89
[4] Shepherd, 113.
[5] Lahr, 274.

Epilogue

In August of 1967, Kenneth Halliwell bludgeoned Orton to death and immediately killed himself by a drug overdose. Scholars of Orton's work have mostly been concerned with determining why Halliwell killed him. While his death was certainly tragic, Orton would not have wanted to be remembered for his death alone. It is impossible to know what Orton might have accomplished if not for his untimely death. Instead, it seems wiser to appreciate the work that he left behind. I will not speculate about the murder, as that is not the object of this thesis. Instead I will close with a final observation. A tragic sense of justice pervades Orton's death, for just as he incorporated classical themes into his work, he met his death like the Greek hero Agamemnon, at the hands of a lover.

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