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Plays, they are for the most part true, and most of the Humorous Characters Master-pieces. For *Ben. Johnson's* Fools, seem to shew his Wit a great deal more than his Men of Sence: I admire his Fops, and but barely esteem his Gentlemen. *Ben.* seems to draw Deformity more to the Life than Beauty: He is often so eager to pursue Folly, that he forgets to take Wit along with him. For the Dialogue, it seems to want very often that Spirit, that Grace, and that noble Railery, which are to be found in more modern Plays, and which are Virtues that ought to be inseparable from a finish'd Comedy. But there seems to be one thing more wanting than all the rest, and that is Passion, I mean that fine and that delicate Passion, by which the Soul shews its Politeness, ev'n in the midst of its Trouble. Now to touch a Passion is the surest way to Delight; for nothing agitates like it: Agitation is the Health and Joy of the Soul, of which it is so entirely fond, that even then, when we imagine we seek Repose, we only seek Agitation. You know what a famous modern Critick has said of Comedy:

*Il faut que ses Acteurs badinent noblement,  
Que son Noeud bien forme se denoue aisement;  
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*Que l'action Marchant ou la Raison la Guide,  
Ne se perde Jamma dans une Scens vuide,  
Que son Stile humble & doux se releue a pro-*

*[pos,  
Que ses discours par tout fertiles enbons mots,  
Soient pleius de Passions finement maniees,  
Et les Scenes toujours l'une al'autre liee.*

I leave you to make the Application to *Johnson*— Whatever I have said my self of his Comedies, I submit to your better Judgment. For you, who, after *Mr. Wycherley*, are incomparably the best Writer of it living, ought to be allowed to be the best Judge too.

*I am yours, &c.*

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*Mr. Congreve, to Mr. Dennis.*

*Concerning Humour in COMEDY.*

*Dear Sir,*

**Y**OU write to me, that you have entertained your self two or three days, with reading several Comedies, of several Authors; and your Observation is, That there is more of Humour in our English Writers, than in any of the other Comick Poets, Ancient or Modern. You desire to

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know my Opinion, and at the same time my Thought, of that which is generally call'd Humour in Comedy.

I agree with you, in an impartial Preference of our English Writers, in that particular. But if I tell you my Thoughts of Humour, I must at the same time confess, that what I take for true Humour, has not been so often written even by them, as is generally believed: And some who have valued themselves, and have been esteem'd by others, for that kind of Writing, have seldom touch'd upon it. To make this appear to the World, would require a long and labour'd Discourse, and such as I neither am able nor willing to undertake. But such little Remarks, as may be contain'd within the Compass of a Letter, and such unpremeditated Thoughts, as may be communicated between Friend and Friend, without incurring the Censure of the World, or setting up for a Dictator, you shall have from me, since you have enjoyn'd it.

To define Humour, perhaps, were as difficult, as to define Wit; for like that, it is of infinite Variety. To enumerate the several Humours of Men, were a Work as endless, as to sum up their several Opinions. And in my mind, the *Quot homines tot Sententia*, might have been more properly interpreted

terpreted of Humour; since there are many Men, of the same Opinion in many things, who are yet quite different in Humours. But tho' we cannot certainly tell what Wit is, or what Humour is, yet we may go near to shew something, which is not Wit or not Humour; and yet often mistaken for both. And since I have mentioned Wit and Humour together, let me make the first Distinction between them, and observe to you, that *Wit is often mistaken for Humour.*

I have observed, that when a few things have been wittily and pleasantly spoken by any Character in a Comedy, it has been very usual for those, who make their Remarks on a Play, while it is acting, to say, *Such a thing is very humorously spoken; There is a great deal of Humour in that Part.* Thus the Character of the Person speaking, may be, surprisngly and pleasantly, is mistaken for a Character of Humour; which indeed is a Character of Wit: But there is a great Difference between a Comedy, wherein there are many things humorously, as they call it, which is pleasantly spoken; and one, where there are several Characters of Humour, distinguish'd by the particular and different Humours, appropriated to the several Persons represented, and which naturally arise from the different Constitu-

tions, Complexions, and Dispositions of Men. The saying of Humorous Things, does not distinguish Characters; for every Person in a Comedy may be allow'd to speak them. From a witty Man they are expected; and even a Fool may be permitted to stumble on 'em by chance. Tho' I make a Difference betwixt Wit and Humour; yet I do not think that Humorous Characters exclude Wit: No, but the manner of Wit should be adapted to the Humour. As for Instance, A Character of a Splenetick and Peevish Humour, should have a Satyrical Wit; a Jolly and Sanguine Humour, should have a Facetious Wit: The former should speak positively; the latter, carelessly: For the former observes, and shews things as they are; the latter rather overlooks Nature, and speaks things as he would have them; and his Wit and Humour have both of them a less Alloy of Judgment than the others.

*As Wit, so, its opposite, Folly, is sometimes mistaken for Humour.*

When a Poet brings a Character on the Stage, committing a thousand Absurdities, and talking Impertinencies, Roaring aloud, and Laughing immoderately, on every, or rather upon no occasion; this is a Character of Humour.

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Is any thing more common, than to have a pretended Comedy, stuff'd with such Grotesque Figures, and Farce-Fools? Things, that either are not in Nature, or if they are, are Monsters, and Births of Mischance; and consequently as such, should be stifled, and huddled out of the way, like *Sooterkins*, that Mankind may not be shock'd with an appearing Possibility of the Degeneration of a God-like Species. For my part, I am as willing to Laugh, as any body, and as easily diverted with an Object truly ridiculous: but at the same time, I can never care for seeing things, that force me to entertain low Thoughts of my Nature. I don't know how it is with others, but I confess freely to you, I could never look long upon a Monkey, without very mortifying Reflections; tho' I never heard any thing to the contrary, why that Creature is not Originally of a distinct Species. As I don't think Humour exclusive of Wit, neither do I think it inconsistent with Folly; but I think the Follies should be only such, as Mens Humours may incline 'em to; and not Follies intirely abstracted from both Humour and Nature.

*Sometimes personal Defects are misrepresented for Humours.*

I mean, sometimes Characters are barbarously

barously exposed on the Stage, ridiculing natural Deformities, casual Defects in the Senses, and Infirmities of Age. Sure the Poet must both be very Ill-natur'd himself, and think his Audience so, when he proposes by shewing a Man deform'd, or deaf, or blind, to give them an agreeable Entertainment; and hopes to raise their Mirth, by what is truly an Object of Compassion. But much need not to be said upon this Head to any body, especially to you, who in one of your Letters to me concerning Mr. *Johnson's* Fox, have justly excepted against this Immoral Part of Ridicule in *Corbaccio's* Character; and there I must agree with you to blame him, whom otherwise I cannot enough admire, for his great Mastery of true Humour in Comedy.

*External Habit of Body is often mistaken for Humour.*

By External Habit, I do not mean the ridiculous Dress or Cloathing of a Character, tho' that goes a good way in some received Characters; (but undoubtedly a Man's Humour may incline him to dress differently from other People) but I mean a Singularity of Manners, Speech, and Behaviour, peculiar to all, or most of the same Country, Trade, Profession or Education. I cannot think that a Humour, which is  
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only a Habit, or Disposition contracted by Use or Custom; for by a Disuse, or Compliance with other Customs, it may be worn off, or diversifi'd.

*Affectation is generally mistaken for Humour.*

These are indeed so much alike, that, at a distance, they may be mistaken one for the other: For what is Humour in one, may be Affectation in another; and nothing is more common, than for some to affect particular ways of saying, and doing things, peculiar to others, whom they admire and would imitate. Humour is the Life, Affectation the Picture. He that draws a Character of Affectation, shews Humour at the Second-hand; he at best but publishes a Translation, and his Pictures are but Copies.

But as these two last Distinctions are the nicest, so it may be most proper to explain them, by particular Instances from some Author of Reputation. Humour I take either to be born with us, and so of a natural Growth; or else to be grafted into us by some accidental Change in the Constitution, or Revolution of the internal Habit of Body; by which it becomes, if I may so call it, naturaliz'd.

Humour is from Nature, Habit from Custom; and Affectation from Industry.

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Humour shews us as we are.

Habit shews us, as we appear, under a forcible Impression.

Affectation shews what we would be, under a voluntary Disguise.

Tho' here I would observe by the way, that a continued Affectation, may in time become a Habit.

The Character of *Morose* in the *Silent Woman*, I take to be a Character of Humour. And I choose to Instance this Character to you, from many others of the same Author, because I know it has been condemn'd by many as Unnatural and Farce: And you have your self hinted some Dislike of it, for the same reason, in a Letter to me, concerning some of *Johnson's* Plays.

Let us suppose *Morose* to be a Man naturally Splenetick and Melancholy; is there any thing more offensive to one of such a Disposition, than Noise and Clamour? Let any Man that has the Spleen (and there are enough in *England*) be Judge. We see common Examples of this Humour in Little every Day. 'Tis ten to one, but three parts in four of the Company that you dine with, are discompos'd and startled at the Cutting of a Cork, or Scratching a Plate with a Knife: It is a Proportion of the same Humour, that makes such or any other

other Noise offensive to the Person that hears it; for there are others who will not be disturb'd at all by it. Well; but *Morose*, you will say, is so extravagant, he cannot bear any Discourse or Conversation, above a Whisper. Why, it is his Excess of this Humour, that makes him become ridiculous, and qualifies his Character for Comedy. If the Poet had given him but a moderate proportion of that Humour, 'tis odds but half the Audience, would have sided with the Character, and have condemn'd the Author, for exposing a Humour which was neither remarkable nor ridiculous. Besides, the Distance of the Stage requires the Figure represented, to be something larger than the Life; and sure a Picture may have Features larger in Proportion, and yet be very like the Original. If this Exactness of Quantity, were to be observed in Wit, as some would have it in Humour; what would become of those Characters that are design'd for Men of Wit? I believe if a Poet should steal a Dialogue of any length, from the extempore Discourse of the two wittiest Men upon Earth, he would find the Scene but coldly receiv'd by the Town. But to the purpose:

The Character of *Sir John Daw* in the same Play, is a Character of Affectation: He

He every-where discovers an Affectation of Learning; when he is not only conscious to himself, but the Audience also plainly perceives that he is Ignorant. Of this kind are the Characters of *Thraso* in the Eunuch of *Terence*, and *Pyrgopolinices* in the *Miles Gloriosus* of *Plautus*: They affect to be thought Valiant, when both themselves and the Audience know they are not. Now such a Boasting of Valour in Men who were really Valiant, would undoubtedly be a Humour; for a fiery Disposition might naturally throw a Man into the same Extravagance, which is only affected in the Characters I have mentioned.

The Character of *Cob* in *Every Man in his Humour*, and most of the under Characters in *Bartholomew-fair*, discover'd only a Singularity of Manners, appropriated to the several Educations and Professions of the Persons represented. They are not Humours but Habits contracted by Custom. Under this Head may be ranged all Country Clowns, Sailors, Tradesmen, Jockeys, Gamesters and such like, who make use of Cants or peculiar Dialects in their several Arts and Vocations. One may almost give a Receipt for the Composition of such a Character: For the Poet has nothing to do, but to collect a few proper Phrases and  
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Terms of Art, and to make the Person apply them by ridiculous Metaphors in his Conversation, with Characters of different Natures. Some late Characters of this kind have been very successful; but in my mind they may be painted without much Art or Labour; since they require little more, than a good Memory and superficial Observation. But true Humour cannot be shown without a Dissection of Nature, and a narrow Search to discover the first Seeds from whence it has its Root and Growth.

If I were to write to the World, I should be obliged to dwell longer upon each of these Distinctions and Examples; for I know that they would not be plain enough to all Readers: But a bare Hint is sufficient to inform you of the Notions which I have on this Subject: and I hope by this time you are of my Opinion, that Humour is neither Wit, nor Folly, nor personal Defect, nor Affectation, nor Habit; and yet, that each, and all of these, have been both written and received for Humour.

I should be unwilling to venture even on a bare Description of Humour, much more to make a Definition of it; but now my hand is in, I'll tell you what serves me instead of either: I take it to be, *A singular and unavoidable manner of doing, or saying any*

any thing, peculiar and natural to one Man only; by which his Speech and Actions are distinguish'd from those of other Men.

Our Humour has relation to us, and to what proceeds from us, as the Accidents have to a Substance; it is a Colour, Taste, and Smell, diffused thro' all; tho' our Actions are never so many, and different in Form, they are all Splinters of the same Wood, and have naturally one Complexion; which tho' it may be disguised by Art, yet cannot be wholly changed: We may paint it with other Colours, but we cannot change the Grain. So the natural Sound of an Instrument will be distinguish'd, tho' the Notes expressed by it, are never so various, and the Diversions never so many. Dissimulation, may by degrees, become more easie to our Practice; but it can never absolutely transubstantiate us into what we would seem: it will always be in some proportion a Violence upon Nature.

A Man may change his Opinion, but I believe he will find it a Difficulty to part with his Humour; and there is nothing more provoking, than the being made sensible of that Difficulty. Sometimes, one shall meet with those, who perhaps, innocently enough, but at the same time impertiently, will ask the Question, *Why are you not mer-*

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ry? *Why are you not gay, pleasant, and cheerful?* Then instead of answering, could I ask such one, *Why are you not handsome? Why have you not black Eyes, and a better Complexion?* Nature abhors to be forc'd.

The two famous Philosophers of *Ephesus* and *Abdera*, have their different Sects at this Day: Some weep, and others laugh at one and the same thing.

I don't doubt, but you have observed several Men laugh when they are angry; others who are silent; some that are loud: Yet I cannot suppose that it is the Passion of Anger which is in it self different, or more or less in one than t'other; but that it is the Humour of the Man that is predominant, and urges him to express it in that manner. Demonstrations of Pleasure are as various; one Man has a Humour of retiring from all Company, when any thing has happen'd to please him beyond Expectation; he hugs himself alone, and thinks it an addition to the Pleasure to keep it secret. Another is upon Thorns till he has made Proclamation of it; and must make other People sensible of his Happiness, before he can be so himself. So it is in Grief, and other Passions. Demonstrations of Love, and the Effects of that Passion upon several Humours, are infinitely different: But here

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the Ladies, who abound in Servants, are the best Judges. Talking of the Ladies, methinks something should be observed of the Humour of the Fair Sex; since they are sometimes so kind as to furnish out a Character for Comedy. But I must confess I have never made any Observation of what I apprehend to be true Humour in Women. Perhaps Passions are too powerful in that Sex, to let Humour have its Course; or may be by reason of their natural Coldness, Humour cannot exert itself to that extravagant Degree, which it often does in the Male-sex: For if ever any thing does appear comical or ridiculous in a Woman, I think it is little more than an acquir'd Folly, or an Affectation. We may call them the weaker Sex, but I think the true reason is, because our Follies are stronger, and our Faults are more prevailing.

One might think that the Diversity of Humour, which must be allowed to be diffused throughout Mankind, might afford endless Matter, for the support of Comedies. But when we come closely to consider that Point, and nicely to distinguish the Difference of Humours, I believe we shall find the contrary. For tho' we allow every Man something of his own, and a peculiar Humour; yet every Man has it not in  
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quantity, to become remarkable by it: or, if many do become remarkable by their Humours; yet all those Humours may not be diverting. Nor is it only requisite to distinguish what Humour will be diverting, but also how much of it, what part of it to shew in Light, and what to cast in Shades; how to set it off by preparatory Scenes, and by opposing other Humours to it in the same Scene. Thro' a wrong Judgment, sometimes, Mens Humours may be opposed when there is really no specific Difference between them; only a greater proportion of the same, in one than t'other; occasion'd by having more Flegm, or Choller, or whatever the Constitution is, from whence their Humours derive their Source.

There is infinitely more to be said on this Subject; tho' perhaps I have already said too much; but I have said it to a Friend, who I am sure will not expose it, if he does not approve of it. I believe the Subject is intirely new, and was never touch'd upon before; and if I would have any one to see this private Essay, it should be some one, who might be provoked by my Errors in it, to publish a more judicious Treatise on the Subject. Indeed I wish it were done, that the World being a little acquainted with the



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Scarcity of true Humour, and the Difficulty of finding and shewing it, might look a little more favourably on the Labours of them, who endeavour to search into Nature for it, and lay it open to the Publick View.

I don't say but that very entertaining and useful Characters, and proper for Comedy, may be drawn from Affectations, and those other Qualities, which I have endeavoured to distinguish from Humour: but I would not have such imposed on the World for Humour, nor esteem'd of equal Value with it. It were, perhaps, the Work of a long Life to make one Comedy true in all its Parts, and to give every Character in it a true and distinct Humour. Therefore, every Poet must be beholding to other Helps, to make out his Number of ridiculous Characters. But I think such a One deserves to be broke, who makes all false Musters; who does not shew one true Humour in a Comedy, but entertains his Audience to the end of the Play with every thing out of Nature.

I will make but one Observation to you more, and have done; and that is grounded upon an Observation of your own, and which I mention'd at the beginning of my Letter, *viz.* That there is more of Humour in our English Comick Writers than in any others.

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others. I do not at all wonder at it, for I look upon Humour to be almost of English Growth; at least, it does not seem to have found such Encrease on any other Soil: And what appears to me to be the reason of it, is the great Freedom, Priviledge, and Liberty which the common People of *England* enjoy. Any Man that has a Humour, is under no Restraint, or fear of giving it Vent; they have a Proverb among them, which, may be, will shew the Bent and Genius of the People, as well as a longer Discourse: *He that will have a May-pole, shall have a May-pole.* This is a Maxim with them, and their Practice is agreeable to it. I believe something considerable too may be ascribed to their feeding so much on Flesh, and the Grossness of their Diet in general. But I have done, let the Physicians agree that. Thus you have my Thoughts of Humour, to my Power of Expressing them in so little Time and Compass. You will be kind to shew me wherein I have err'd; and as you are very capable of giving me Instruction, so I think I have a very just Title to demand it from you; being, without Reserve,

*Your real Friend, and humble Servant,*

W. CONGREVE.

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