THE COURT DIVERSION

[January, 1686]

In the winter of 1685–86, the priest-ridden Court of gloomy King James II settled down to dullness and mediocrity. King James worked steadily at his plans for Catholicizing England. Unhappy Queen Marie, once a blithe spirit, withdrew to a life of religious devotion. In general libertines were frowned upon and light ladies (even the King’s mistress, Katherine Sedley) were discountenanced. Libelers still found subjects for satire—including the King—but they had to search farther and dig deeper into the affairs of the day. There were sinners aplenty, but they were less open in their sinning.

The satire must have been written between December 17, 1685, when Lord Ranelagh got Fox’s place as Paymaster General, and February 2, 1686, when the Duke of Grafton killed Jack Talbot in a duel. The copy text, undated, is MS. English Poet. d. 152, f. 74. The satire is also undated in Harleian MS. 7319, p. 385.

Before you’re at one tedious page’s end,
Dear bought will be the scandal that I send;
But, since you’ll venture, my part is to give
A true, though dull, description how we live.
We have at Court the players twice a week, 5
Who never fail to play the King asleep.
How sweet a sight it is I need not tell;
For all he does, you know, becomes him well.
At all these games a friend of yours presides,
Who strikes, knaps dice, makes bargains, and besides 10
A thousand gifts too long for me to name,
And scarce a courtier without the same.
To add more splendor to the Court, a ball
Calls twice a month the coxcombs to Whitehall,
Where deep-mouthed booby blockhead’s sure to bring 15
His little changeling duchess to the ring
To contract a past pox with uncle King.
There Lady Arran, pocky, pale, and lean,
Makes Clifford start at deceased Lady Jane,
Ogling and begging, till she proves at last
Sweet Mulgrave modest and Jack Talbot chaste.

Talbot, a youth of so dilate a name,
To let our country 'scape his brighter fame,
In France he was the Town and Court's salt-bitch;
Each page and footman knew him by his breech;
Till of both sides and tongue he was so free,
H'was banished Sodom for debauchery.
Then, with a pimp's high character, he comes—
Ambitious youth!—with letters of Vendôme's;
Where Portsmouth's whispers began to be thought
About himself, when 'twas the news he brought.
Mistaken pleasures are his chase all day,
And scorns all reason in a common way;
A convert now, Papist i'th'late King's life,
Buggers the husband to persuade the wife;
Thrusts that long prick in good Lord Mulgrave's hand,
Which he refused the King's miss of the land.
Thy mother, Jack, would have thought such a prick
Of better use than every page's trick.

Devonshire, a coxcomb of more low degree,
At eight and forty, every day we see,
With stinking breath, high shoulders, French grimace,
In fifty postures, ogling each new face,
Declaring love; and love is a fine jest
Without w'are able to perform the rest.

Hewitt, whose figure is the jest of pages,
Tells you of nothing but how many stages
Last night he made; derides and laughs at plays,
Where tittle-tattle fool steals all he says.

Cholmley, a fool yet of a lower sort.
Dogging with Radnor is the blockhead's sport,
Minding who ogles who, and where
Good father Ranelagh brings his daughter fair
To meet a Treasurer with a squirrel face.
Crofts makes the swap 'twixt whore and Fox's place.
Fine times indeed would young men have in town,
If naught but money bags could throw a countess down!
Where Lady Lichfield with her new poxed charms
Holds the religious monarch in her arms;
Where Nancy Villiers makes her weak-back stripling  shake,
But long prick makes up for a long weak back;
Where Grafton meets her hare-brained buccaneer,
And gets at home a beating from her dear;
Where Berkeley and her youthful lover knock it;
The jilt is ne'er without a dildo in her pocket;
Old earl's too short, too small for such a socket.
Poets are next the scandal of our age,
And D'Urfey is the dullest of the stage.
Parsons and Baber, in the same degree,
Excel in melting elegy.
Falkland might write, could he be brought to moil,
But the degenerate wretch disdains to toil;
Gives votes as if he took the country's part,
But is, I fear, an atheist in his heart.

5. *the players.* If by "players" the poet meant "actors," he was mistaken. Theater records show that during the winter of 1685–86 plays were performed at Whitehall not oftener than once a week (Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of English Drama*, 1952, I, 350). Perhaps he meant "gamesters"; see "At all these games."

9. *a friend.* Perhaps either of two well-known professional gamblers, John Germaine or Thomas Bourchier.

10. *strikes.* Throws dice. *knaps.* Throws dice so that one die will not roll upon the table, a favorite trick of sharpers. *makes bargains.* Probably the sharper engages at very favorable odds to share another player's bet.


16. *changeling duchess.* Isabella (Bennet), Duchess of Grafton, was a small woman, accused of frequently changing her lovers. It was rumored that King James was in
love with his niece by marriage. In “A Faithful Catalogue of our most Eminent Ninnies. 1687” (Harleian MS. 7319, p. 471) are these lines addressed to “sacred James.”

Poor Sidley’s fall, even her own sex deplore,
Who with so small temptation turned thy whore.
But Grafton bravely does revenge her fate,
And says thou court’st her thirty years too late.

18. Lady Arran. Dorothy (Ferrers), second wife of Richard Butler, Earl of Arran. When Arran died in Dublin, on January 26, 1686, his widow showed no signs of grief (Ellis Correspondence, I, 35).


21. Mulgrave. John Sheffield, Earl of Mulgrave, now Lord Chamberlain. The adjectives are ironic. Talbot. John Talbot (1665–86), second son of Francis, Earl of Shrewsbury by his wife, notorious Anna Maria (Brudenell). On February 2, 1686, Talbot was killed by the Duke of Grafton in a duel, “having given the Duke of Grafton very unhandsome and provoking language” (Downshire MS, I, Pt. 1, 115). It was later remembered that Talbot had danced in a shroud at an entertainment given by the Earl of Devonshire on January 12, 1686, and that he was “foretold that he should be killed by a tall black man before he was twenty-one years old” (Portland MS, II, 394). Grafton was tall and “black,” i.e., brunet.

29. Vendôme. Phillipe de Vendome, Grand Prior of France, visited England in the summer of 1683 and made ardent love to Louise, Duchess of Portsmouth, “the King’s miss of the land.” In November, 1683, King Charles gave him forty-eight hours to leave England. (According to a chronique scandaleuse, The Life of Francelia, 1734, King Charles caught the pair in bed together.) Vendôme went to Holland and thence to Paris, where, presumably, he gave his letters to Talbot, who brought them to England c. 1684.

34. a convert. Young Talbot was brought up in the Roman Catholic faith. Unreasonably, he was a Catholic in the reign of King Charles, and now, in the reign of Catholic King James, he becomes a convert to Protestantism.

38. Thy mother. Anna Maria, Countess of Shrewsbury; see Appendix, Shrewsbury.


47. stages. Properly stops on a journey, or the distances between stops on a journey. Perhaps the word is used here as a cant term for orgasms. See “A Lampoon,” MS. Don. b. 8, p. 485,

Anstruther all men she comes near she engages,
And rides them all freely their several stages,
But she'll fall at last to footmen and pages,
Which nobody can deny.


53. Ranelagh. Richard Jones, Earl of Ranelagh (1641–1712). His “daughter fair” was Elizabeth, who married John Fitzgerald, eighteenth Earl of Kildare, on June 12, 1684. The poet’s account is probably no more than idle gossip.

54. a Treasurer. Lawrence Hyde, Earl of Rochester, became Lord Treasurer on February 17, 1685. He was not handsome, but “squirrel face” was slanderous.

56. Crofts. Catherine Crofts (1637–86) a famous Court bawd. Fox. Charles Fox, son of Sir Stephen Fox, had been Paymaster of the Forces. Along with a number of other officials, Fox was dismissed because he voted in Parliament against the King’s demand for funds for a standing army. On December 17, 1685, a warrant was recorded “for the Earl of Ranelagh to be Paymaster of the Forces” (Downshire MS, I, Pt. 1, 75; Rutland MS, II, 96). The poet’s argument is that Ranelagh gave his daughter to Rochester as a bribe.

58. Lichfield. Charlotte (Fitzroy), Countess of Lichfield (1664–1718), King James’s niece.

60. Nancy Villiers. Anne, seventeen-year-old daughter of George, fourth Viscount Grandison. Perhaps her stripling was young Edward Rumbold, whom she married in April, 1687.

62. Grafton. Isabella (Bennet), Duchess of Grafton. Her buccaneer was Charles, Viscount Mordaunt, a swashbuckler who had spent two years at sea as a volunteer in the wars with Algiers.

64. Berkeley. Elizabeth (Massingbird), Countess of Berkeley. According to “Advice in a Heroic Epistle to Mr. Fr. Villiers” (see above), her youthful lover was John D’Arcy, grandson of the Earl of Holderness and lieutenant-colonel of a troop of horse (Dalton, II, 8).

66. old earl. George, Earl of Berkeley (1627–98), was fifty-eight, old by Restoration standards.


71. Falkland. Anthony Carey, Viscount Falkland (1656–94); see Appendix.