

## Excerpt from *THE CONSCIOUS LOVERS*

BY Richard Steele

(1722)

Example of eighteenth-century sentimental comedy—for comparison with Goldsmith's "laughing comedy" *She Stoops to Conquer*.

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Characters who appear in the following scene:

BEVIL JUNIOR

TOM, servant to Bevil Junior

SIR JOHN BEVIL, father to Bevil Junior

HUMPHREY, an old servant to Sir John Bevil

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[Act I, scene ii.]

SCENE—BEVIL JUNIOR'S lodgings.

(*BEVIL JUNIOR reading.*)

**BEV. JUN.** These moral writers practice virtue after death. This charming Vision of Mirza! Such an author consulted in a morning sets the spirit for the vicissitudes of the day better than the glass does a man's person. But what a day have I to go through! to put on an easy look with an aching heart. If this lady my father urges me to marry should not refuse me, my dilemma is insupportable. But why should I fear it? is not she in equal distress with me? has not the letter I have sent her this morning confessed my inclination to another? Nay, have I not moral

assurances of her engagements, too, to my friend Myrtle? It's impossible but she must give in to it: for sure, to be denied is a favour any man may pretend to. I must be so. Well, then, with the assurance of being rejected, I think I may confidently say to my father I am ready to marry her. Then let me resolve upon—what I am not very good at, though it is—an honest dissimulation.

(*Enter TOM.*)

**TOM.** Sir John Bevil, Sir, is in the next room.

**BEV. JUN.** Dunce! Why did not you bring him in?

**TOM.** I told him, Sir, you were in your closet.

**BEV. JUN.** I thought you had know, Sir, it was my duty to see my father anywhere. (*going himself to the door*)

**TOM.** (*aside*) The devil's in my master! he has always more with than I have.

**BEV. JUN.** (*introducing SIR JOHN*) Sir, you are the most gallant, the most complaisant of all parents. Sure, 'tis not a compliment to say these lodgings are your. Why would you not walk in sir?

**SIR J. BEV.** I was loath to interrupt you unseasonably on your wedding-day.

**BEV. JUN.** One to whom I am beholden for my birthday might have used less ceremony.

**SIR J. BEV.** Well, Son, I have intelligence you have writ to your mistress this morning. It would please my

curiosity to know the contents of a wedding-day letter, for courtship must then be over.

**BEV. JUN.** I assure you, Sir, there was no insolence in it upon the prospect of such a vast fortune's being added to our family, but much acknowledgment of the lady's greater desert.

**SIR J. BEV.** But dear Jack, are you in earnest in all this? And will you really marry her?

**BEV. JUN.** Did I ever disobey any command of yours, Sir? nay, any inclination that I saw you bent upon?

**SIR J. BEV.** Why, I can't say you have, Son; but methinks in this whole business you have not been so warm as I could have wished you. You have visited her, it's true, but you have not been particular. Everyone knows you can say and do as handsome things as any man, but you have done nothing but lived in the general—been complaisant only.

**BEV. JUN.** As I am ever prepared to marry if you bid me, so I am ready to let it alone if you will have me.

*(HUMPHREY enters, unobserved.)*

**SIR J. BEV.** Look you there now! Why, what am I to think of this so absolute and so indifferent a resignation?

**BEV. JUN.** Think? that I am still your son, Sir. Sir, you have been married and I have not. And you have, Sir, found the inconvenience there is when a man weds with too much love in his head. I have

been told, Sir, that at the time you married, you made a mighty bustle on the occasion. There was challenging and fighting, scaling walls, locking up the lady, and the gallant under an arrest for fear of killing all his rivals. Now, Sir, I suppose you, having found the ill consequences of these strong passions and prejudices in preference of one woman to another, in case of a man's becoming a widower—

**SIR J. BEV.** How is this!

**BEV. JUN.** I say, Sir, experience has made you wiser in your care of me; for, Sir, since you lost my dear mother your time has been so heavy, so lonely, and so tasteless, that you are so good as to guard me against the like unhappiness, by marrying me prudentially by way of bargain and sale. For as you well judge, a woman that is espoused for a fortune is yet a better bargain if she dies; for then a man still enjoys what he did marry, the money, and is disencumbered of what he did not marry, the woman.

**SIR J. BEV.** But pray, Sir, do you think Lucinda, then, a woman of such little merit?

**BEV. JUN.** Pardon me, Sir, I don't carry it so far neither. I am rather afraid I shall like her too well; she has, for one of her fortune, a great many needless and superfluous good qualities.

**SIR J. BEV.** I am afraid, Son, there's something I don't see yet, something that's smothered under all this raillery.

**REV. JUN.** Not in the least, Sir. If the lady is dressed and ready, you see I am. I suppose the lawyers are ready too.

**HUMPH.** (*aside*) This may grow warm if I don't interpose.—Sir, Mr. Sealand is at the coffee-house, and has sent to speak with you.

**SIR J. BEV.** Oh, that's well! Then I warrant the lawyers are ready. Son, you'll be in the way, you say --

**BEV. JUN.** If you please, Sir, I'll take a chair, and go to Mr. Sealand's, where the young lady and I will wait your leisure.

**SIR J. BEV.** By no means. The old fellow will be so vain if he sees—

**BEV. JUN.** Ay; but the young lady, Sir, will think me so indifferent --

**HUMPH.** (*aside to BEVIL JUNIOR*) Ay, there you are right; press your readiness to go to the bride—he won't let you.

**BEV. JUN.** (*aside to HUMPHREY*) Are you sure of that?

**HUMPH.** (*aside*) How he likes being prevented!

**SIR J. BEV.** (*looking on his watch*) No, no. You are an hour or two too early.

**BEV. JUN.** You'll allow me, Sir, to think it too late to visit a beautiful virtuous young woman, in the pride and bloom of life, ready to give herself to my arms;

and to place her happiness or misery, for the future, in being agreeable or displeasing to me, is a — Call a chair!

**SIR J. BEV.** No, no, no, dear Jack; this Sealand is a moody old fellow. There's no dealing with some people but by managing with indifference. We must leave to him the conduct of this day. It is the last of his commanding his daughter.

**BEV. JUN.** Sir, he can't take it ill that I am impatient to be hers.

**SIR J. BEV.** Pray, let me govern in this matter; you can't tell how humoursome old fellows are. There's not offering reason to some of 'em, especially when they are rich. — (*aside*) If my son should see him before I've brought old Sealand into better temper, the match would be impracticable.

**HUMPH.** Pray, Sir, let me beg you to let Mr. Bevil go. — (*aside to SIR JOHN*) See whether he will or not — (*then to BEVIL JUNIOR*) Pray, Sir, command yourself; since you see my master is positive, it is better you should not go.

**BEV. JUN.** My father commands me as to the object of my affections, but I hope he will not as to the warmth and height of them.

**SIR J. BEV.** (*aside*) So! I must even leave things as I found them, and in the meantime, at least, keep old Sealand out of his sight. —Well, Son, I'll go myself, and take orders in your affair. You'll be in the way, I supposed, if I send to you. I'll leave your old friends

with you. —Humphrey, don't let him stir, d'ye hear?  
—Your servant, your servant!

*(Exit SIR JOHN BEVIL.)*

**HUMPH.** I have a sad time on't, Sir, between you and my master. I see you are unwilling, and I know his violent inclinations for the match. — I must betray neither and yet deceive you both, for your common good. —Heaven grant a good end of this matter! But there is a lady, Sir, that gives your father much trouble and sorrow. You'll pardon me.

**BEV. JUN.** Humphrey, I know thou art a friend to both, and in that confidence I dare tell thee—that lady is a woman of honour and virtue. You may assure yourself I never will marry without my father's consent. But give me leave to say, too, this declaration does not come up to a promise that I will take whosoever he pleases.

**HUMPH.** Come, Sir, I wholly understand you. You would engage my services to free you from this woman whom my master intends you, to make way in time for the woman you have really a mind to.

**BEV. JUN.** Honest Humphrey, you have always been an useful friend to my father and myself; I beg you, continue your good offices, and don't let us come to the necessity of a dispute; for, if we should dispute, I must either part with more than life, or lose the best of fathers.

**HUMPH.** My dear master, were I but worthy to know this secret that so near concerns you, my life, my all should be engaged to serve you. This, Sir, I dare

promise, that I am sure I will and can be secret. Your trust, at worst, but leaves you where you were; and if I cannot serve you, I will at once be plain and tell you so.

**BEV. JUN.** That's all I ask. Thou hast made it now my interest to trust thee. Be patient, then, and hear the story of my heart.

**HUMPH.** I am all attention, Sir.

**BEV. JUN.** You may remember, Humphrey, that in my last travels my father grew uneasy at my making so long a stay at Toulon.

**HUMPH.** I remember it; he was apprehensive some woman had laid hold of you.

**REV. JUN.** His fears were just, for there I first saw this lady. She is of English birth: her father's name was Danvers, a younger brother of an ancient family, and originally an eminent merchant of Bristol, who, upon repeated misfortunes, was reduced to go privately to the Indies. In this retreat Providence again grew favourable to his industry, and in six years' time restored him to his former fortunes. On this he sent directions over that his wife and little family should follow him to the Indies. His wife, impatient to obey such welcome orders, would not wait the leisure of a convoy, but took the first occasion of a single ship, and, with her husband's sister only, and this daughter, then scarce seven years old, undertook the fatal voyage—for here, poor creature, she lost her liberty and life; she and her family, with all they had, were unfortunately taken by

a privateer from Toulon. Being thus made a prisoner, though as such not ill-treated, yet the fright, the shock, and cruel disappointment seized with such violence upon her unhealthy frame, she sickened, pined, and died at sea.

**HUMPH.** Poor soul! Oh, the helpless infant!

**REV. JUN.** Her sister yet survived, and had the care of her. The captain, too, proved to have humanity, and became a father to her; for having himself married an English woman, and being childless, he brought home into Toulon this her little country-woman, presenting her, with all her dead mother's movables of value, to his wife, to be educated as his own adopted daughter.

**HUMPH.** Fortune here seemed again to smile on her.

**BEV. JUN.** Only to make her frowns more terrible; for in his height of fortune this captain, too, her benefactor, unfortunately was killed at sea, and, dying intestate, his estate fell wholly to an advocate, his brother, who coming soon to take possession, there found, among his other riches, this blooming virgin at his mercy.

**HUMPH.** He durst not, sure, abuse his power!

**BEV. JUN.** No wonder, if his pampered blood was fired at the sight of her—in short, he loved. But when all arts and gentle means had failed to move, he offered, too, his menaces in vain, denouncing vengeance on her cruelty, demanding her to account for all her maintenance from her childhood, seized on her little fortune as his own inheritance, and was

dragging her by violence to prison, when Providence at the instant interposed, and sent me, by miracle to relieve her.

**HUMPH.** 'Twas Providence, indeed. But pray, Sir, after all this trouble how came this lady at last to England?

**REV. JUN.** The disappointed advocate, finding she had so unexpected a support, on cooler thoughts, descended to a composition, which I, without her knowledge, secretly discharged.

**HUMPH.** That generous concealment made the obligation double.

**BEV. JUN.** Having thus obtained her liberty, I prevailed, not without some difficulty, to see her safe to England, where no sooner arrived but my father, jealous of my being imprudently engaged, immediately proposed this other fatal match that hangs upon my quiet.

**HUMPH.** I find, Sir, you are irrecoverably fixed upon this lady.

**BEV. JUN.** As my vital life dwells in my heart; and yet you see what I do to please my father; walk in this pageantry of dress, this splendid covering of sorrow. But, Humphrey, you have your lesson.

**HUMPH.** Now, Sir, I have but one material question –

**BEV. JUN.** Ask it freely,

**HUMPH.** Is it, then, your own passion for this secret lady, or hers for you, that gives you this aversion to the match your father has proposed you?

**REV. JUN.** I shall appear, Humphrey, more romantic in my answer than in all the rest of my story; for though I dote on her to death, and have no little reason to believe she has the same thoughts for me, yet in all my acquaintance and utmost privacies with her I never once directly told her that I loved.

**HUMPH.** How was it possible to avoid it?

**BEV. JUN.** My tender obligations to my father have laid so inviolable a restraint upon my conduct that till I have his consent to speak I am determined, on that subject, to be dumb forever.

**HUMPH.** Well, Sir, to your praise be it spoken, you are certainly the most unfashionable love in Great Britain.

*(Enter TOM.)*

**TOM.** Sir, Mr. Myrtle's at the next door, and, if you are at leisure, will be glad to wait on you.

**BEV. JUN.** Whenever he pleases. —Hold, Tom! did you receive no answer to my letter?

**TOM.** Sir, I was desired to call again, for I was told her mother would not let her be out of her sight. But about an hour hence, Mrs. Lettice said, I should certainly have one.

**BEV. JUN.** Very well.

**HUMPH.** Sir, I will take another opportunity: in the meantime, I only think it proper to tell you that, from a secret I know, you may appear to your father as forward as you please to marry Lucinda, without the least hazard of its coming to a conclusion. Sir, your most obedient servant!

**BEV. JUN.** Honest Humphrey, continue but my friend in this exigence and you shall always find me yours.

*(Exit HUMPHREY.)*

I long to hear how my letter has succeeded with Lucinda—but I think it cannot fail, for at worst, were it possible she could take it ill, her resentment of my indifference may as probably occasion a delay as her taking it right. Poor Myrtle, what terrors must he be in all this while? Since he knows she is offered to me and refused to him, there is no conversing or taking any measures with him for his own service. But I ought to bear with my friend, and use him as one in adversity:

All his disquiets by my own I prove;  
The greatest grief's perplexity in love.

*(Exeunt.)*

[End of Scene.]