

**MISANTHROPY CONVERTED TO ACCEPTANCE BY LOVE'- A ROVING EYE
ON CHRISTOPHER FRY'S 'THE LADY IS NOT FOR BURNING'**

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Introduction

Christopher Fry is a great playwright and poetic-drama revivalist of the 20th century. He has come on to the modern stage like a beam of spring sunshine after a hard winter. He has been an enigma to his critics. He was applauded as a 'word-smith'; a 'word-juggler'; a 'word-fancier'; a 'poetaster'; a 'relishing rhetorician'; and a 'varnisher of our language'. He has made great contribution to the poetic drama of the present century by inventing 'Comedies of Mood', 'The Theatre of Words', 'Seasonal Comedies'. He wrote religious plays, seasonal comedies, tragedy and history plays. Despite such varied production, his works display a remarkable unity of theme, '*exploration into God*', '*exploration into the mystery of life and death.*'

Fry is a playwright with a philosophical bent of mind. He achieved harmony by blending the poetic and the realistic, to provide aesthetic delight and emotional gratification. He attached considerable importance to the practice of Christian qualities, on account of his intimate knowledge and association with Quakerism and the corresponding philosophy of life. Denis Donoghue has rightly observed that, "he saw a world in which we are all poised on the edge of eternity, a world which has deep shadows of mystery in which God is anything but a sleeping partner."¹

Fry's general themes are mystery and joy of existence, besides the regenerative power of life which can overcome existential alienation and despair. Fry reminds us that, full as life is of mystery and sadness, there exists comedy, and high-spirited characters who find enjoyment in the process of living. Fry's thinking about God is inventive and adventuresome. By emphasizing mystery Fry seems to be trying to say something more than mere good theatre can state. What Fry affirms is no paradise, however; it is the complex chaos and contrariness of human experience itself. Geoffrey Bullough admits, "He regrets that human life is largely getting used to the mystery of things, the domestication of the enormous miracle."² Fry offered mystery instead of a deterministic universe and verse instead of the naturalistic language of the stage. He had asserted the claims of diminutive man's freedom to think and will on his own without worrying about predestination. Fry's drama is inseparable from God and His creation. It fuses drama, poetry, religion, faith and philosophy together. Laughter and tears, Man and God, Mystery and Revelation, this-worldliness and other-worldliness go hand in hand in his plays. He enables us to discover a correspondence between appearance and reality. The quests for love and death in Fry are intertwined ambivalently, taking apparently contrasting forms which complement one another. All of Fry's plays approach a potentially tragic crisis near the end, a point of ritual death. Considering Fry's greatness and success as a dramatist, Derek Stanford quoted, "In a

universe often viewed as mechanistic, he has posited the principle of mystery; in an age of necessitarian ethics, he has stood unequivocally for ideas of free-will.”³

The function of Fry’s comedy is not to expose social and economic evils, defects of personality and temperament, or moral vices and hypocritical codes of conduct. The stress in Fry’s comedies is on the metaphysical and the spiritual. His comedy is the comedy of “religious faith”⁴. It is not a drama with the addition of laughs, but “an angle of experience where the dark is distilled into light either here or hereafter, in or out of time”.⁵ His comedies have two layers; the top is literal and comic, the bottom one symbolic and moral. His comic vision is not that of a jester or a satirist, but that of a philosopher and a healer of sick souls. Fry’s comedy is not merely the tickling of thoughtless laughter with a romantic love story, varied with interludes of fun, but a spiritual exploration as well as means of salvation from pain and misery. From this it follows that Fry’s comedy is a discovery of truth: it is “a comment on the human dilemma”.⁶ In it the characters do not mock at the bullies and foibles of one another, but at the futility of death and pain, and also at man’s spiritual hollowness. Fry’s comedy, thus, is not a mere phantasmagoria of incongruities, eccentricities, oddities, witticisms, jokes, humours, love affairs, farcical events, or weddings; it cannot be pigeonholed as classical, romantic, psychological, naturalistic, domestic, or social; nor can it be called a comedy of plot, of character, of intrigue, of humours, of sentiment, or of social ridicule. There are times when, according to Fry, comedy is especially important “and the present is one of them: time when the loudest faith has been faith in a trampling materialism, when literature has been thought unrealistic which did not mark and remark our poverty and doom. Joy (of a kind) has been all on the devils side, and one of the necessities of our time is to redeem it.”⁷ To achieve this redemption, Fry proposed a comedy of seasons, for comedies of mood, “I don’t know whether a comedy of mood is an accepted category or whether it’s something I’ve coined to cover my particular end. It means that the scene, the season and the characters are bound together in one climate.”⁸ Derek Stamford had suggested the term “comedies of ambivalence”⁹ to the seasonal comedies of fry, for it is the juxtaposition of the ambivalent aspects of life, the paradox of faith and absurdity, that is the mainstay of these plays. Seasonal symbolism finds characteristic representation in Fry’s ‘comedy of moods’. In all his four comedies, life of man is traced in a cyclic pattern, his mood being governed by each season, designed to represent the spirit of Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter respectively. This fact also goes to conclusively establish Fry as secular dramatist, who more than amply demonstrates a strong commitment to life and its celebration through peace, mercy and harmony. R.L. Varshney asserts, “In his comedies, Fry has combined the metaphysical, the mystical and the comic in a wonderful manner.”¹⁰

The Lady’s Not For Burning was written in 1947 and produced in March 1948. When the play blazed into the prevailing grayness, it seemed likely to become the beacon of a new era of poetic glory in which words would again be released into magnificence. The play has been called, not only a Comedy of Spring, but also a First cousin to artificial comedy.’ In Fry’s own phrase, “*The Lady’s Not For Burning* is the first cousin to an artificial comedy.”¹¹ The play may be regarded as comic fantasy where opposite paradoxes are freely permitted, and wit has a unique wisdom. The quality that allies the play most closely to pure comedy is the humorous zest for the whole of life with the strangeness of its juxtapositions of the sordid

and the beautiful, the dull and the wonderful. Fry has little use for painstaking realism; he is interested in exploring and exposing the behind-the-scenes system of relations rather than in purveying the visible actuality. Chronologically Fry's Second Comedy, *The Lady's Not For Burning* occupies itself in a like fashion with the nature and function of love. Love is seen as a life-restoring energy working against the wiles of the death-wish. In the play Fry took a potentially tragic theme and treated it comically. Set in the month of April, the play is of the heart's springtime. The need to work out problems rather than die and that life is worth living, and that it is worth living fully and not over-cautiously is the dominant theme of the play. But that surely is the theme, in so far as it can be summarized, of *Twelfth Night*.

The plot of the play is set against a background of superstition, alchemical early science and hysterical witch-hunting. Fry used this play to comment on a conventional hypocritical post-war society that has no use for veterans, marries for money, overlooks crimes when expedient and condemns a girl who lives alone and dabbles in science. Because the play is so complicated and diverse, critics have applied such terms as 'symphonic' to its apparently non progressive plot, and Fry himself has termed it first cousin to an artificial comedy'. The play places the quest for identity in the village of Cool Clary as much 15th century as anything, although it really is Eden. The paradox of the play is the twin theme of Spring and Apocalypse. The theme of the play is misanthropy converted to acceptance by love, and rationalism converted to a sense of the mystery of existence by just the same factor. Fry in a foreword to the first edition, has suggested that we might think of this play 'in terms of light', of inconstant April sunshine, of sunset, twilight, and full moon; of human intelligence in a dance together, sometimes with nothing but buoyancy, sometimes with a seriousness which has been sufficiently mocked by distress to be able to mock back. April, in this play, is cruel and beautiful month, but unlike the springtime of Eliot's *Four Quarters*, the Springtide that we meet here is still in 'time's convenient'. The Spring has a positive aspect: promise.

The scene of the play, for the most part is a room in the house of Hebble Tyson, who is the Mayor of the small market-town of Cool Clary. In an epigram appended at the very beginning of the play, it is mentioned,

'In the past I wanted to be hung. It was worth
While being hung to be a hero, seeing that life
Was not really worth living'.

A convict who confessed falsely to a murder, February 1947

The play opens with Thomas Mendip leaning in at the window, interrupting Richard at his figures. Annoyed Richard chooses, out of all possible oaths: 'Damnation'. Thomas voices Fry's universal declamation of the post-war predicament,

Don't mention it. I've never seen a world
So festering with damnation. [Act-I.p.1.]

To the enquiry of Mendip's antecedents and nature of business, he wishes to discuss with His worship the Mayor regarding the latest news and information about a crisis in Cool Clary, which is a gossip of murder and witchcraft. When Richard insists upon having Mendip's name, in a cogitative manner, Thomas expresses,

It's no earthly
Use to me. I travel light; as light,

That is, as a man can travel who will
Still carry his body around because
Of its sentimental value. [Act-I.p.2.]

Richard informs Mendip, that the Mayor is otherwise preoccupied and is moreover expecting the company of a girl. Still, Thomas adamantly craves to meet the Mayor, for he has an express desire to be hanged, which he protests cannot be objectionable or offensive in the least. When Richard cannot conceal his amazement at this very peculiar request, Thomas tries to reason with him and explains which both his personal and cosmic apocalyptic concerns are;

Life, for bye, is the way
We fatten for the Michaelmas of our own particular
Gallows. What a wonderful thing is metaphor. [Act-I.p.3]

Alizon Eliot's arrival is pronouncedly marked with dexterous interlacing of Spring imagery. As Fry himself asserts, "I have tried to make the words and deeds of the characters move all the time with a sense of the particular moment at which they are said or done, so that we can be aware continually of the April afternoon, for example, with the scents and sounds of it, or the April evening and night as the play goes on; moreover, to make these scents and sounds an essential part of the action, conditioning the words of the characters."¹² Though, originally preordained to become a nun, Alizon is now seen betrothed to Humphrey. While Thomas is preoccupied in his own thoughts at the unexpected problem of facing an identity crisis, even while asking for death, Nicholas announces a witch come in search of the Mayor. It is none other than Jennet Jourdemayne, who causes a turmoil and sensation, nothing short of torment in their midst. Meanwhile, Humphrey returns breaking the news of minor revolution, caused in the wake of rumours, about the drowning, of a pig-man and the murder of old skips, the rag-and-bone man. Just as Thomas claims responsibility for both the disappearances, Jennet, who is attributed to have turned a man into a dog through her occult witchcraft bears the same name of old skipps. The First Act closes with an expression of sarcasm from Thomas advising Jennet to file her petition for redressal of her grievances into 'Pandora's box' for Tyson exercises his authority in having them both arrested and remanded for judicial hearing and verdict.

The Second Act resumes in the same setting, about an hour later, with the introduction by Fry of Cool Clary's justice, Edward Tappercoom, who bears a towering personality. Tappercoom faces the greatest obstacle to administer justice, since he can neither coax nor cajole Thomas Mendip to deny having anything to do with the murders, especially for the fact that there is not even a scrap of evidence to support it. Fry possesses a powerful vision of existence which is broad and diffused and cannot be reduced to one imperative command or formula. Fry attributes the great enigma underlying life is to an utter lack of proper knowledge about human existence, with all its perplexities, dilemmas and confusions. The solution to this greatest riddle or puzzle posed is the 'act of faith' which seems to resolve it. As an intellectual and advanced thinker of his own day, Fry seems to grapple and come to concrete terms with problems dealing with existential philosophy and their pertinence to life. The chaplain's contention is that, though the world may appear to be gloomy, it is not entirely 'salubrious' as not to offer hope, faith and courage for a happier state of existence, rather than expressing 'an aptitude for death'. Meanwhile Humphrey, Nicholas and Margaret

enter into the scene. Nicholas projects Fry's chief object, 'offer a greater life, a life lived and perceived by the spirit'.

Meanwhile Thomas and Jennet are kept in a room till further orders. Fry communicates the immanence of mystery by a sort of indirect method, a power of atmospheric delineation, when Jennet asks Thomas what he can see outside the room, he answers

Out here? Out here is a sky so gentle
Five stars are ventured on it. I can see
The sky's pale belly glowing and growing big,
Soon to deliver the moon. [Act-II.p.49]

Fry implies that, the entire Life and Death cycle is a peculiar variety of palingenesis, suggesting rebirth along with his favorite use of imagery corresponding to 'five fingers' or 'five stars' representing the temporal and the eternal respectively.

Laughter is the chief manifestation, according to Fry, of the miraculous in man. Referring to man's discovery of laughter, he says, "When he was able to grasp the tragic nature of time he was of a stature to sense its comic nature also. The difference between tragedy and comedy is the difference between experience and intuition".¹³ It is through intuition that man comes to see 'the oddness of a creature who has never got acclimatized to being created', and his body is 'endlessly quaint and remarkable to him'. The same view is experienced by Thomas when he tells Jennet,

For the reason of laughter, since laughter is surely
The surest touch of genius in creation. [Act-II.p.50]

Jennet speaks about her father who was drowned in the pursuit of alchemy. Attacking the self deception Jennet shares with all society, Thomas plays devil to her saint. Like the existentialist Orestes in Sartre's *The Flies*, he finds order and sensuous beauty in the universe no argument for some divinely-ordained moral purpose. While Thomas' self-destructive glimpses of human depravity fail to supplant his sensuous apprehension of natural wonders, Jennet wants to live without poetic vision. Piqued by her tenacious hold on the 'essential fact', Thomas rejects Jennet's logical positivism for 'creations vast exquisite dilemma'. It is now Jennet's turn to place herself in Thomas' position and start ruminate about the reasons for wanting to be hanged. Jennet remains in an unhappy state fearing death, whereas Thomas eagerly seeks death. Since the two have come together, Fry finds scope to weave a web of romance, reminiscent of Shakespeare's heroines. Thomas with metaphysical disgust with his equally metaphysical innocence disillusioned humanity. Under the influence of Thomas, Jennet has developed an aesthetic awareness of the flesh, which it to say, are erotic attraction. Meanwhile, this final assertion of Jennet is immediately pounced upon by Tyson, Tappercoom, Humphrey, and the Chaplain, who returns from the ante-chamber and take it for a clean confession of her acknowledging being a witch and siding with the Devil, Thomas Mendip. Tappercoom orders Thomas to spend the evening joyously, sociably taking part in the pleasures of his fellow men as punishment when Humphrey proposes to keep Thomas and Jennet in the same room Tappercoom agrees and the Second Act draws the curtain with the decisions of Thomas and Jennet's.

The Third Act reveals the same room. The time is night where Fry's plays point out the mystery that is life and the mystery that is death. The close ironic juxtaposition of life and

death and the over-all mystery of existence i.e., sainthood, incarnation, multiple vision, history and myth, the role of women, atonement, resurrection, law and sin, trinity, pacifism, spiritual evaluation are the themes of Fry's plays and the themes only vary in play after play to create new situations. Fry's way of seeing life and death is better expressed by Thomas who is seen indulging in a soliloquy with Shakespearean echoes,

Where in this small taking world can I find
A longitude with no platitude? – I must
Apologize.

[Act-III.p.64]

From these lines, one is reminded of the existential philosophy propounded and popularized by such distinguished men of letters as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, around the 1940's, when this play was being contemplated by Fry. Existential philosophy came "to view a human being as an isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe, to conceive the universe as possessing no inherent truth, value or meaning, and to represent human life, as it moves from the nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end, as an existence which is both anguished and absurd."¹⁴ Eugene Ionesco, a leading French writer of absurd drama expresses a similar notion that once man is cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental moorings he is lost and all his actions become meaningless, absurd and useless. Ionesco is also accredited for his comments on the mixture of moods in the literature of the absurd, as Fry is acknowledged for his expressionism of moods in his 'Seasonal Comedies.'

Tyson, the Mayor staunchly resolves to abide firmly by his resolve to see the two Thomas and Jennet die, since youth is a sign of spirited existence, which appears enviable and intolerable to people in dotage. Tapperoom admonishes Tyson for showing reticence in any manner in this instance. After the exit of Tapperom, the Chaplain and Tyson, the Mayor, Alizon enters the room, while Thomas, as in the First Act looks in through the window from the garden. Both appear to share a kindred feeling of melancholy quite in contrast, Thomas reflects on the season of Spring, with moonlight in April illuminating the garden. As Thomas saunters away back into the garden, losing himself in his own thoughts, Richard and Alizon find some privacy to open up their hearts and speak. In the tête-à-tête, which ensues between Richard and Alizon, Fry has provided ample scope for fresh romance to spring, bud and blossom into an ideal love between a pair of well-matched lovers. Meanwhile Humphrey, Nicholas, Jennet enters the room. While Jennet is in search of Thomas, Nicholas and Humphrey try to poison her mind and prejudice her against him. But Jennet courageously withstand, stating,

Hope can break the heart, Humphrey. Hope
Can be too strong.

[Act-III.p.83].

The transformation wrought about after this lengthy ordered is vehement desire to undergo the death-wish, especially since she cannot evoke the slightest consideration, nor pity in her present plight out of Humphrey. Fry suggests through Thomas' reply the overpowering influence of love to overcome the death-wish as a plausible explanation. The exception to death is countermanded decisively by an open confession of love. He vouchsafes his primary concern for Jennet's personal safety and welfare, rather than his own. When Jennet replies Tapperoom that she is prepared to forfeit and forego all her worldly possessions and property in order to follow Thomas into the big, wide world and start her life

afresh with him, Thomas' enigmatic reply that life is continuous puzzle and riddle is striking. He attempts to reason with her. Jennet, towards the close of the play assumes the familiarity of intimacy with him and wonders whether she has not already become a botheration and inconvenience to Thomas.

The whole play is observed at the end with 'tomorrow's dawn' – the meaning, incidentally of Jennet's last name: 'Jourdemayne'. Even if Skipps were not to appear and if the burning were held on schedule, Jennet, once devoted to the law of reason, would still have become aware of mystery, the essence of tomorrow. Thomas, the prophet of nihilism, would still have found purpose in the mystery of tomorrow. Richard Findlater points out, "In this play the author shows not merely a verbal wit, a fertile fancy and a whimsical humour, but a compassionate delight in observing the human condition."¹⁵ The anguish of Thomas Mendip resembles the existential sense of metaphysical solitude, which is seen reflected in many European writers, particularly Camus, though in the comedy it is reconciled without being sentimentalized. Thomas generates in himself whichever of the three essential components of life are lacking – faith, reason, or aesthetics – but the resolution of form and content body and soul is automatic. To emphasize Thomas' anti-messianic point, Fry has planted hints of the Christian mythos throughout the play. Thomas is a humorous Christian figure. The three main events of the play are mythic representations of significant events in the Christian view of history. The first, the fall of man, takes place in the garden. The 'devil' (Humphrey) is temporally defeated, but he is not really dead, and will be back in the second event, Christ's redemption. When Jennet is just ready to succumb to the devil's lures, Thomas appears to say she is not for burning. But the charges are not actually dismissed until the appearance of the resurrected Skipps. Thus, the Fall, the Redemption are comically represented in the play. In a smaller context, the main characters and their actions resemble Jesus' trail. The central character wants to be hanged. He announces the last Trump, and comes to a civil magistrate (Pilate) with his eccentric wish. Margaret (Pilate's wife) is fretfully uneasy. The Mayor's indecisiveness leads to a scheme produced by a political crony (Herod) and a religious figure (Caiaphas). The three conspire until Thomas is called 'Evil, Hell, the Father of Lies', a comic inversion of the Son of God. Thomas offers out of love to die and in the end, through the resurrection of Skipps, is given a new life.

Jennet, the eponymous heroine of the play, is a character of some depth. She and many of the other characters – Alizon, Jennet, Devizes, take their names from a famous Lancashire witchcraft trial of the seventeenth century. Jourdemayne particularly gave Fry the scope to play upon the meanings of *Jour* 'today' and *demain*, 'tomorrow'. Like the April setting, Jennet is both bright and dark, sunny and melancholy, witty and earnest. As an anachronistic forerunner of the Enlightenment, Jennet proclaims her belief in the human mind and is evidently mistaken in that belief in so far as it applies to the town folk of Cool Clary.

The whole play is summarized in the last line of the play, spoken by Thomas: 'And God have mercy on our souls.' There is no doubt that God can have mercy, because he has had mercy. He has elected Thomas into love so that he can pray this prayer, unplayable for him at the play's start. The prayer is its own answer. The judgment in the love makes wickedness seem foolish and laughable as well as wicked. The unity of body and soul, not their duality, underlies the unity of humankind's reason, aesthetic sense, and sense of God – underlies the play and all of Fry's plays. The last line, 'And God have mercy on our souls', is

a judgment on the Platonized audience, which resists living the full human life and prefers blindness and violence and struggle. The last line is a genuine prayer for mercy so that we in the audience can undertake the living of a fuller human life, under God.

The play, *The Lady's Not For Burning* can be compared with Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*. The play also has something of Marlowe's dialectical abandon, united with something also of the intellectual acrobatics of the metaphysical, and while there is much exquisite grace of expression there is also the earthly state of colloquialism. H.H. Gowda avers, "The story of the comedy, almost equally admired in the theatre and in the library, easily reveals its spiritual purpose showing Fry partial to the two fold cause of optimism and imagination"¹⁶.

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