

## The Content Words in the Comedy *The Old Debauchees*

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1. *The Old Debauchees* was written in 1732, when Henry Fielding was 25 years old. Although the comedy, which consists of three acts and thirty-four scenes, was to be acted at the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane by his Majesty's servants, I do not know whether it was really put on the stage.
2. The outline of the comedy is: Young Laroon and Isabel are going to be married tomorrow, but Father Martin, the confessor of Isabel, after having heard her confession, says to her, 'All the penance, . . . , is to defer your marriage one week; by which time I shall have resolved within myself whether you shall marry him (= Young Laroon) at all.' The reason why he says such a thing is that he intends to debauch her. In the meantime, Young Laroon, Isabel, and Old Laroon, who have found out the intention of Father Martin, try to reveal his sins as priest by all possible means and at last punish him by washing him a little in a horse-pond, then tossing him dry in a blanket. In the last scene Old Jourdain says, 'I hope you (= Old Laroon) will pardon what is past,' and the comedy ends by Young Laroon and Isabel beginning to live a married life happily.
3. The content words, which I think stand for the content of the comedy, are: 'nunnery', 'sin', 'priest', 'confession', 'the Devil', 'the Church', 'St. Francis'.
  - 3.1. In the scene where Isabel and Beatrice are talking (Act I, Scene I):

ISABEL. A *nunnery!* Ha, ha, ha! and is it possible, my dear Beatrice, you can intend to sacrifice your youth and beauty, to go out of the world as soon as you come into it?

BEATRICE. No one, my dear Isabel, can sacrifice too much, or too soon, to Heaven!

ISABEL. Pshaw! Heaven regards hearts and not faces, and an old woman will be as acceptable a sacrifice as a young one.

Isabel thinks a nunnery is a place where a young woman sacrifices her youth and beauty, and that to go into a nunnery is to go out of the world, while Beatrice thinks a nunnery is the same as Heaven, but Isabel thinks a nunnery is different from Heaven and is a place where an old woman is an acceptable sacrifice. For this reason, Isabel uses the word 'nunnery' in a satirical sense; Beatrice uses it in a heavenly sense.
  - 3.2. In the scene where Old Laroon, Beatrice, and Isabel are talking (Act I, Scene II):

OLD LAROON. . . . —Why, madam, if you have a mind to hang yourself at the year's end, would it not be better to spend your time in matrimony than in a *nunnery*? Don't let a set of rascally priests put strange notions in your head. Take my word for it, and I am a very honest fellow, there are no raptures worth a louse, but those in the arms of a brisk young cavalier. Of all the actions of my youth, there are none I reflect on with so much pleasure as having burnt half a dozen *nunneries*, and delivered several hundred virgins out of captivity.

BEATRICE. Oh! villany! unheard-of villany!

ISABEL. Unheard of till this moment, I dare swear.

OLD LAROON. Out of which number there are at present nine countesses, three duchesses, and a queen, who owe their liberty and their promotion to this arm.

Old Laroon brags that in his youth he burnt half a dozen nunneries and delivered several hundred virgins out of captivity. He thinks that a nunnery, in which a set of rascally priest put strange notions in one's head, stands for captivity.

3.3 In the scene where Father Martin and Isabel are talking (Act I, Scene V):

FATHER MARTIN. Modesty at confession is as unseasonable as in bed; and your mind should appear as naked to your confessor, as your person to your husband.

ISABEL. I thought he (= Mr. Laroon in her dream) embraced me with the utmost tenderness.

FATHER MARTIN. But were you pleased therewith?

ISABEL. You know, father, a lie now would be the greatest of *sins*. I was not displeased, I assure you. But I have often heard you say, there is no *sin* in love.

FATHER MARTIN. No, in love itself there is not; love is not *malum in se* (= A thing bad in itself). Nor in the excess is there sometimes any; but then it must be rightly placed, must be directed to a proper object. The love a daughter bears her confessor is no doubt not only innocent, but extremely laudable.

Isabel thinks that both to say she was pleased and to say she was not displeased are to tell a lie which now would be the greatest of sins, but that since she is in love with Young Laroon and since she has often heard Father Martin say there is no sin in love, she herself is not really telling a lie. On the other hand, Father Martin says, 'The love a daughter bears her confessor is no doubt not only innocent, but extremely laudable.' It seems to me that Fielding thinks to say such a thing is to commit a sin.

3.4 In the scene where Isabel and Father Martin are talking (Act II, Scene IX:)

ISABEL. I am infinitely obliged to my dear father; I'll prepare myself for this vast happiness, and nothing shall be wanting on my part, I assure you.

FATHER MARTIN. And if any thing be wanting on mine, may I never say mass again, or never be paid for masses I have not said. "Either this girl has extraordinary simplicity, or, what is more likely, extraordinary cunning; she does not seem averse to my kisses. Why should I not imagine she sees and approves my design? Well, I'll say this for the sex; let a man but invent any excuse for the *sin*, and they are all all ready to undertake it." How happy is a priest,

Who can the blushing maid's resistance smother,  
With *sin* in one hand, pardon in the other.

Probably Fielding wants to describe Father Martin who, with in mind a design of debauching a young woman, says masses for her, or rather two sides, sin and pardon, which a priest is generally likely to have.

3.5. In the scene where Father Martin comes to Old Laroon, Young Laroon, Isabel, and Beatrice and talks to them (Act I, Scene IV):

FATHER MARTIN. Peace be with you all, good people.

Old Laroon. Peace cannot stay long in any place where a *priest* comes. (Aside.

What Old Laroon says is a bitter satire to a priest who should bring peace.

3.6. In the scene where Isabel and Young Laroon are talking (Act III, Scene I):

ISABEL. You shall promise not to commit any violence; you know too well what will be the consequence of that. "Let us sufficiently convict him, and leave his punishment to the law.

YOUNG LAROON. And I know too well what will be the consequence of that. There seems to be a combination between *priests* and lawyers; the lawyers are to save the *priests* from punishment for their rogueries in this world, and the *priests* the lawyers in the next.

ISABEL. However, the same law that screens him for having injured you, will punish you for having done justice to him.

Both Young Laroon and Isabel have already seen through priests and lawyers who cover one another up for their sins or crimes, so they are impatient of their inability to really convict Father Martin, who is one of those men.

3.7. In the scene where Father Martin is talking to himself (Act III, Scene VII):

FATHER MARTIN. (*Solus.*) Go. While I retire and comfort your daughter (= Old Jourdain's). Was this a suspicion of Laroon's, or am I betrayed? I begin to fear. I'll act with caution: for I am not able yet to discover whether this girl be of prodigious simplicity or cunning. How vain is policy, when the little arts of a woman are superior to the wisdom of a conclave! A *priest* may cheat mankind, but a woman would cheat the devil.

This seems to be a monologue spoken by a man who is not a priest, but perhaps the author wants to say that if a priest is compared with a woman, a priest who may cheat mankind is not so sinful as a woman who would cheat the devil.

3.8. In the scene where, when Father Martin is talking to Isabel, he is interrupted by Old Laroon (Act I, Scene IV):

FATHER MARTIN. Daughter (= Isabel), I am ready to receive your *confession*—

OLD LAROON. Ay, ay, she has a fine parcel of sinful thoughts to answer for, I warrant her.

FATHER MARTIN. Mr. Laroon, you are too much inclined to slander, I must reprove you for it. My daughter's thoughts are as pure as a saint's.

OLD LAROON. As any saint's in Christendom within a day of matrimony.

FATHER MARTIN. Within a day of matrimony! it is too quick, I have not yet had sufficient time to prepare her mind for that solemn sacrament.

OLD LAROON. Prepare her mind for a young fellow (= his son Young Laroon); prepare your mind for a bishopric.

Old Laroon is reproving a woman for her sinfulness rather than for what Isabel is going to confess, and is telling Father Martin to do his duty, while Father Martin is screening Isabel for her sinfulness instead of his sinfulness of debauching her.

3.9. In the scene where Isabel and Father Martin are talking (Act II, Scene IV):

ISABEL. Oh! I see it is in vain to hide my secrets from you. What need have I to confess what you already know?

FATHER MARTIN. *Confession* was intended for the sake of the penitent, not the confessor: for to the Church all things are revealed.

ISABEL. Oh! then I had a dream—I dreamt—I dreamt—oh! I can never tell you what I dreamt.

FATHER MARTIN. Horrible!

ISABEL. I dreamt—I dreamt—I dreamt—

FATHER MARTIN. Oh! the strength of sin!

ISABEL. I dreamt I was brought to bed of the pope.

What Father Martin says is inconsistent, in saying ‘Confession *was* intended for the sake of the penitent, not the confessor,’ or rather he may be careful in not saying ‘Confession *is* intended for the sake of the penitent, . . .’ Father Martin says to himself (in Act III, Scene VII), ‘I’ll act with caution: for I am not able yet to discover whether this girl (= Isabel) be of prodigious simplicity or cunning,’ but it is not she but he who is of prodigious cunning. In this scene he is threatening her cunningly, and confession is used as a priest’s means of threat.

3.10 In the scene where Old Laroon, Old Jourdain, and Father Martin are talking (Act II, Scene VI):

OLD LAROON. Mr. Jourdain, your servant. Where is my daughter-in-law (= Old Jourdain’s daughter)? I’ll warrant she will easily forgive one day’s forwarding the match. Odso, it’s an error of the right side.

OLD JOURDAIN. Talk not to me of my daughter, I am possessed, I am possessed.

OLD LAROON. Possessed—What the devil are you possessed with?

OLD JOURDAIN. I am possessed with *the Devil*.

OLD LAROON. You are possessed with a priest, and that’s worse. Come, let’s have the wedding, and, at night, we’ll drive *the Devil* out of you with a fiddle. *The Devil* is a great lover of music. I have known half a dozen devils dance out of a man’s mouth at the tuning a violin, then present the company with a hornpipe, and so dance a jig through the keyhole.

FATHER MARTIN. Thou art *the Devil*’s son; for he is the father of liars.

OLD LAROON. Thou art *the Devil*’s footman, and wearest his proper livery. Old Laroon says in front of Father Martin that Old Jourdain is possessed with a priest, and adds meaningfully that he has known half a dozen devils dance out of a man’s mouth. Anyway, he wants to defeat Father Martin’s purpose, because the marriage of his son and Isabel has been deferred one week.

3.11. In the scene where Old Jourdain and Father Martin are talking (Act I, Scene X):

OLD JOURDAIN. Alas! father, there is one sin sticks by me more than any I have

confessed to you. It is so enormous a one, my shame hath prevented me discovering it— I have often concealed my crimes from my confessor.

FATHER MARTIN. That is a damnable sin indeed. It seemeth to argue a distrust of *the Church*, the greatest of all crimes; a sin I fear *the Church* cannot forgive.

OLD JOURDAIN. Oh! say not so, father!

FATHER MARTIN. I should have said, will not, or not without difficulty; for *the Church* can do all things.

OLD JOURDAIN. That is some comfort again.

It seems to me that Father Martin, who takes advantage of the position of the ‘confessor’ in the authority of the Church, practices on Old Jourdain’s credulity and is threatening him cunningly, just as he has insinuated himself into Isabel’s confidence.

3.12. In the scene where Isabel and Old Jourdain (=her father) are talking (Act III, Scene IX):

ISABEL. . . . Nay, go but with me, and you shall believe your own eyes and ears.

OLD JOURDAIN. Against *the Church*! Heaven forbid!

ISABEL. Will you not believe your own senses, sir?

OLD JOURDAIN. Not when *the Church* contradicts them. —Alas! how do we know what we believe with *the Church*? Why, I thought I saw Mr. Laroon and his son today, when I saw neither. Alack-a-day, child, *the Church* often contradicts our senses. But you owe these wicked thoughts to your education in England, that vile heretical country, where everyman believes what religion he pleases, and most believe none. Old Jourdain believes that the Church is the Absolute, and that Father Martin or a priest is absolute, and that seeing is not always believing. He is a man who is unaware of doubting in a good sense.

3.13. In the scene where Young Laroon in a Friar’s habit comes to Old Laroon and Old Jourdain and is talking to them (Act II, Scene III):

YOUNG LAROON. *St. Francis*, the patron of our order, hath sent me on this journey, to caution thee, that thou may not suffer thy sinful daughter to profane the holy veil. Such was, it seems, thy purpose; but the perdition that would have attended it I dread to think on. Rejoice, therefore, and prostrate thyself at the shrine of a saint, who has not only sent thee this caution, but does himself intercede for all thy sins. To Old Laroon saying *St. Francis* is a very honest fellow and to Old Jourdain saying *St. Francis* honours him too much, Young Laroon goes on to talk: ‘Your daughter (= Isabel) is

now with child by a young gentleman, one Mr. Laroon; it is St. Francis speaks within me, and he cannot be mistaken; you (= Old Laroon and Old Jourdain) have nothing to do now, but to prepare the match with the utmost expedition.' The name 'St. Francis' moves the two old men so much that they are beginning to think they must prepare the match as soon as possible, with the result that Young Laroon's stratagem is successful.

3.14. In the scene where Old Jourdain and Father Martin are talking (Act II, Scene V):

OLD JOURDAIN. . . . I thought you had known that I have received an order from *St. Francis* to marry my daughter immediately.

FATHER MARTIN. Oh! folly! to marry her immediately; why, ay, to marry her to the Church, *St. Francis* means. You see into what errors the laity run, when they go without the leading-strings of the Church, and would interpret for themselves what they know nothing of.

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OLD JOURDAIN. But I cannot see how that should be *St. Francis's* meaning; for though my daughter may be married to the Church in a figurative sense, sure she cannot be with child by the Church in a literal one.

It seems to me that the author wants to describe one who, on hearing the name 'St. Francis', assumes a humble attitude, and the other who, in such a case, assumes a threatening attitude

3.15. In the scene where Old Laroon in a Friar's habit induces Old Jourdain to let his daughter married as soon as possible (Act III, Scene IV):

OLD LAROON. Nothing's impossible to the Church, you know.

OLD JOURDAIN. And may I hope *St. Francis* will be appeased?

OLD LAROON. Hum! There is a great favourite of that saint who lives in this town; his name is Monsieur Laroon. If you could get him to say half a dozen bead-rolls for you, they might be of great service.

OLD JOURDAIN. How! Can the saint regard so loose a liver?

OLD LAROON. Oh! *St. Francis* loves an honest merry fellow to his soul. And harkye, I don't think it impossible for Mr. Laroon to bring you acquainted with the saint; for to my knowledge they very often crack a bottle together.

OLD JOURDAIN. Can I believe it?

Trying this or that means, Old Laroon induces Old Jourdain and at first Old Laroon's stratagem seems to be successful, but after all Old Jourdain cannot quite believe what Old

Laroon says, that is, the relation between St. Francis and Monsieur Laroon, because he regards St. Francis as the founder of his order and despises Young Laroon as a loose liver.

4. So far, we have considered the content words which seem to be important in this comedy. What does Fielding want to describe in it? What he wants to describe, it seems to me, is that: (1) the character (esp. hypocrisy, power, impudence) of Father Martin who preys on the laity (for example, when Old Laroon in a Friar's habit is discovered to be Old Laroon by Father Martin and parts from him, he calls him, 'hypocrisy' (Act III, Scene V); in Act I Scene XI, Father Martin says, 'Thou (= Old Jourdain) art a miserable wretch indeed! and it is on such miserable wretches depends our power: that superstition which tears thy bowels, feeds ours. . . . Superstition, I adore thee, Thou handle to the cheated layman's mind,/ By which in fetters priestcraft leads mankind'; in Act II Scene VI, when Old Jourdain asks 'Can I not believe my eyes!' Father Martin answers, 'Can you not! no—you are to believe mine. The eyes of the laity may err, the eyes of a priest cannot');
- (2) the character of a woman (for example, in Act I Scene IX, Old Laroon says, 'I no more rely on what a woman says out of a church than on what a priest says in it'; in Act III Scene VII, Father Martin says to himself, 'A priest may cheat mankind, but a woman would cheat the devil'; in Act III Scene the last, Isabel says, 'A woman may make a man amends for his sufferings before marriage, but can she make him amends for what he suffers after it?');
- (3) two kinds of acts of forgiving and the act of pardoning (for example, in Act I Scene X, Father Martin says, 'a sin I fear the Church cannot forgive', 'they (= all the crimes) must be confessed before they can be forgiven', 'I will, myself, say four masses a day for you (=Old Jourdain); and all these, I hope, will purchase your forgiveness; at least your stay in Purgatory will be short'; in Act II Scene VI, Old Laroon says, 'I'll warrant she (= Isabel) will easily forgive one day's forwarding the match. Odso, it's an error of the right side') (it seems to me that the words Father Martin uses has some didactic meanings in the context, but the word Old Laroon uses has a literal meaning); in Act III Scene the last, Old Jourdain says, 'I hope you (= Old Laroon) will pardon what is past, my good neighbour; and you, young gentleman (= Young Laroon), will, I hope, do the same' (although, in this case, Old Jourdain uses the word 'pardon', 'forgive and forget', I think, is one of Fielding's central thoughts));
- (4) the quality of being sincere (for example, in Act III Scene the last, Isabel says to Young Laroon, 'Well, sir, you see we have got the better of all difficulties at last. The fears of a

lover are very unreasonable, when he is once assured of the sincerity of his mistress; For when a woman sets herself about it,/ Nor priest nor devil can make her go without it) (perhaps Fielding wants to describe the sincerity that Isabel has defended to the last, although she is one of the women who cannot quite be relied upon and who would cheat the devil).