



GEORGE FARQUHAR (1677—1707) (The Trinity Monday Memorial Discourse, 1957)

Author(s): FITZROY PYLE

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HERMATHENA



GEORGE FARQUHAR (1677–1707)

(The Trinity Monday Memorial Discourse, 1957)

Ye beaux and belles that form this splendid ring,
Suspend your conversation while I sing.

It is my duty and privilege to sing to-day the praises of George Farquhar, who wrote for the stage from 1698 to 1707. The lines I have quoted, though not Farquhar's but Goldsmith's, bring to notice a general condition of the art of the playwright which has particular relevance for Farquhar and his time—the condition, that is, that the theatre is a place of social resort, the performance of a play the occasion of a social gathering. The dramatist writes for the stage; the stage, as Farquhar saw, 'cannot subsist without the Strength of Supposition, and Force of Fancy in the Audience' ; and in his day this was not always easy to secure, for instead of concentrating as a matter of course upon the play the spectators (like many nowadays who go to the College Races) tended to let their attention fly off at a tangent to more enticing attractions near at hand. Will. Phillips, for example, Farquhar's contemporary, who in 1700 gave to the Dublin theatre a comedy with a Dublin setting, complained in advance that the playgoer, far from giving his novel piece an attentive hearing, would

whisper dull Remarks in's Neighbour's Ear.
Chat the whole Play, then Judgment give at Guess, . . .
Strut in the Pit, Survey the Gallery,
In hopes to be lur'd up by some kind She.

Farquhar made no such complaints, for indeed he was given to just such practices himself; and he was all the better equipped to be a successful dramatist for having sympathetic understanding of the audience and its ways. Many people have written of the world of fantasy behind the footlights; not many of the world of fantasy in box and pit. Farquhar did, in the rhapsody of Young Mirabel in *The Inconstant*:

The Play-house is the Element of Poetry, because the Region of Beauty, the Ladies, methinks have a more inspiring triumphant Air in the Boxes than any where else, they sit commanding on their Thrones with all their Subject Slaves about them. Their best Cloaths, best Looks, shining Jewels, sparkling Eyes, the Treasure of the World in a Ring. Then there's such a hurry of Pleasure to transport us, the Bustle, Noise, Gallantry, Equipage, Garters, Feathers, Wigs, Bows, Smiles, Oggles, Love, Musick and Applause. I cou'd wish that my whole Life long were the first Night of a New Play.

Plainly he was in love with the theatre. The gay, gallant, unruly, philandering yet critical audience was his element. It was all part of the game of play writing, one of the rules, indeed, of the game. As he tells his spectators, speaking of himself:

You are the Rules by which he writes his Plays. . . .
He hates dull reading, but he studies You.

Wine, women, and the theatre—these, in ascending order of importance, were Farquhar's leading interests in life. If women for him possessed the intoxication of wine, the theatre possessed as well the fascination of women, and he brought to the conquest of the theatre the same gay, rapid, impudent, inclusive assurance that with far less lasting success he brought to his other adventures in gallantry.

Farquhar had that in his behaviour, he said, that gave strangers a worse opinion of him than he deserved, and in an age of patronage he had to make his career without the

influence or support of the great. The inclusiveness of his aptitude for wooing an audience was therefore most fortunate, especially as the composition and tastes of the audience were in a state of transition. Etherege, intellectual, cynical, urbane, had in the 1660's and '70's written for a uniform audience, measuring smart society for smart society by the yard-stick of smart society. The tone of that society had, however, already altered perceptibly by the early 1690's, when Langbaine, writing of a comedy over twenty years old, observed that in it Etherege 'drew his characters from what they called the *beau monde*; from the manners and modes then prevailing with the gay and voluptuous part of the world'; and though Congreve was for several years after that to establish his reputation upon plays perfecting the manner of Etherege, he abandoned comedy after 1700, when he published *The Way of the World* with the remark—

That it succeeded on the Stage, was almost beyond my Expectation; for but little of it was prepar'd for that general Taste which seems now to be predominant in the Pallats of our Audience.

Fashionable taste in the theatre was no longer uniform or in undisputed control: a play had now to widen its appeal so as to please the middle class as well. On the one hand a comedy might still be expected (though with less insistence) to combine style, wit, polite detachment with that 'spice of wickedness' which, as Hazlitt was to put it later, 'was a privilege of the good old style of comedy', and allowed to assume as valid the rakish postulates that pleasure is the prime end in life and love a game of thrust and parry to be played without emotional involvement. On the other hand there was a growing demand not for style and wit but naturalness, not for polite detachment but serious involvement, not for bawdry but morality; for the bourgeois mind tends always to confound drama with real life, and in the very act of doing so to confound life as it is with life as it ought to be. Since 1695 London

could again support two playhouses (one had sufficed for some years); but the advent of a larger public to the theatre was not an unmixed blessing, for it meant that the prosaic and anti-intellectual elements of society were to gain more influence than was good for either them or the drama. Clear thinking and exact statement would yield place to flabby sentiment and verbose pomposity, aimed not at defining thought but at catching the applause of the audience, and so known technically ever since as *claptrap*.

Such was the direction things were taking when the new dramatists Cibber, Vanbrugh, Farquhar and Steele started to write near the turn of the century. Let us glance at Steele, half rake, half reformer. In his *Lying Lover* (1703) the hero, to quote from the preface,

makes false love, gets drunk, and kills his man; but in the fifth Act awakes from his debauch, with the compunction and remorse which is suitable to a man's finding himself in a gaol for the death of his friend, without his knowing why.

The anguish he there expresses [Steele goes on], and the mutual sorrow between an only child and a tender father in that distress, are, perhaps, an injury to the rules of comedy, but I am sure they are a justice to those of morality.

The play, as Steele afterwards acknowledged, was 'damned for its piety,' but it shows what was in the air: in reaction against the moral obliquities of recent drama contrary and artistically more dangerous obliquities could be offered for approval—pathos not wit as the stuff of comedy, and morals not dramatic truth and fitness as the standard by which conduct, character and situation were to be judged in a play.

Formidable dangers, then, beset the artistic sense and integrity of the dramatist; and other considerations stood in the way of his material success: the small reward that could at best be obtained, the appearance of new and popular rivals in the theatre—opera, pantomime, French tumblers and singers. In these circumstances no one would seem to have been in a more precarious position than Farquhar. Vanbrugh and Steele had other professional

interests and other sources of income. Cibber was an actor and theatre manager, profiting from other men's plays besides his own. Farquhar, alone of the leading playwrights of his time, made dramatic writing his sole profession. And yet his capacity for giving the public what it wanted did not impair the quality of his work. For he had the happy gift of pleasing both sections of his audience by pleasing himself. He could appeal to the beaux by his gaiety and freedom, his attitude of detachment from the compulsions of everyday life; he could appeal to the cits because he was sincere and natural and fundamentally a man of feeling; he would appeal to all by his good humour, a quality in which he is unequalled perhaps in English drama between Shakespeare and Goldsmith.

* * *

That the Irish are a nation of born dramatists, naturally witty and entertaining, is an idea that is widely held to-day—at least outside Ireland. But it has not always been held. It was not held before Farquhar's day. It was he who, by his example and fame, laid the foundation for that belief. He was the first dramatist to exploit in his life and plays qualities of character regarded both at the time and since as Irish rather than English.

He was not, of course, the first Irishman to write for the London stage, nor the first Trinity man to do so. Tate, Southerne and Congreve, though destined to outlive Farquhar, had all finished the bulk of their dramatic work before he began. But their Irish breeding and education left no distinctive mark on their character and writing. With Farquhar it was quite otherwise. He was self-consciously Irish, self-consciously a Trinity man (none the less so for having little good to say of the place), and he constantly drew on his own character and experience for the raw material of his art. He, therefore, rather than his elder contemporaries from this college, may claim to be the first considerable Irish dramatist.

The part which he played on the stage of life and which

with successive degrees of refinement he gave the heroes of his comedies was that of the wild, breezy, rollicking, gay, irresponsible, impudent, pleasure-loving, endearing, devil-may-care young scapegrace with a heart of gold. How far the man and the mask are to be identified is not a profitable speculation, for we know Farquhar mainly through his plays. He did not consort with people of rank and fortune and is not much mentioned by his contemporaries. Nothing remains in his handwriting. His only surviving correspondence he published himself, and may, therefore, have edited for the press. Biographical accounts prefixed to posthumous editions of his works are sketchy at first and become increasingly unreliable as time surrounds his memory in an aura of sentiment. We know from the records the dates of his entry into College and of his burial, but the dates of his birth, marriage and death are matters of inference and cannot be determined exactly. Documentary evidence was indeed very scanty until recent years, when two important finds were reported, throwing light on Farquhar's early life. The first was twenty years ago, when Professor J. R. Sutherland found among the Portland papers the attestations of Farquhar's widow (whose very name had been unknown before) in pressing for a royal pension; the second was Provost Alton's discovery in 1945 of entries in the private register of the College concerning an occurrence at Donnybrook Fair (forgotten for two hundred and fifty years) which came to the serious notice of the Board of the time, and in which Farquhar was involved. But in spite of these additions to our knowledge the plays still remain our chief source of information. These certainly reflect aspects of their author's character, and indeed contain much else of an autobiographical kind; but it is a precarious though fascinating task to disentangle fact from fiction and to translate out of artistic terms into terms of actual life. Any account, therefore, of Farquhar's life must be to some extent hypothetical.

George Farquhar was the product of turbulent times and

places. What were probably his most impressionable years were spent in an atmosphere of excitement and adventure, impending or actual, tinged with whatever the boy may have sensed of the peril, loss and suffering that were involved. The respective parts played by nature and nurture in framing his character we do not know; but it is very likely that boyhood experience helped to form his resilient mind, his empirical approach, and his readiness to take life as it came. The name Farquhar implies Scottish stock; George's immediate forebears for several generations had been North of Ireland clergymen; and he himself was born and bred in the North. This groundwork for the making of a sturdy, steady-going lad was by no means stable, however, and was early upset. He was born in 1677 in Derry, whither his mother had gone to seek 'superior medical assistance,' and he went to school at the Free School in that city, certainly after and probably before the siege. It is likely, therefore, that his schooling was interrupted. It is even said that he followed the wars and carried the colours at the Battle of the Boyne. This story is hardly credible and may have simply grown out of the fact that he wrote a Pindaric Ode on the death of Schomberg, no doubt after he returned to school. The siege of Derry and the Battle of the Boyne were not the only disturbances of his boyhood. His father's rectory at Killymard near Donegal town (whither no doubt the boy had been withdrawn when his school closed) was destroyed by James's troopers; and his father, 'burnt out of all he had,' soon died of grief, leaving his three children certainly poor and possibly complete orphans; for of the mother we hear not a word, except the phrase that suggests that she had a difficult confinement with George. Capel Wiseman, Bishop of Dromore, who may have been a distant relative of hers, interested himself in the boy, hoping that he might take orders, and it was perhaps due to his directing hand that he came up to Trinity as a sizar, entering in July, 1694, at the age of 17. Two months after this Wiseman died, and the young man was left without any means of

family guidance or support that we know of, unless we count his brother Peyton Farquhar, who was already apprenticed to a Dublin stationer, and a sister, whose name and age we do not know, afterwards living in Chelsea. At this period, then, George Farquhar was a country boy, brought up interruptedly in dangerous, uncertain and (to a boy) exciting times, with no resources worth speaking of but his own wits—a rough and ready boy, whose headmaster, Ellis Walker, believed, we are told, in giving his pupils ‘much of letters and not too much of manners.’ But ‘much of letters’ included, I believe, not only book learning but also practical if rudimentary experience in creative writing, and, what is more, in acting. The ode *On the Death of General Schomberg* was probably written under Walker’s encouragement and direction at the very time when Walker was himself turning the *Encheiridion* of Epictetus into heroic couplets. Further, when a few years later John Dunton visited Walker at Drogheda Grammar School, where he was then headmaster, Dunton noted that the ‘Scholars were acting Henry IV. and a Latin play out of Terence.’ If Walker got the boys at Drogheda to act Shakespeare, he may very well have done the same with his boys at Derry. Farquhar, I may say, venerated Shakespeare, and *Henry IV* is one of the few plays that he mentions by name. There are reasonable grounds, therefore, for conjecturing that the seeds of Farquhar’s enthusiasm for the drama were sown in practical schoolboy experience at Ellis Walker’s school. Let us, then, pay passing tribute to this enlightened schoolmaster, who in his day was a Scholar of this House.

But however much we may attribute to earlier influences, it was in the Dublin of 1694 to ’97 that Farquhar’s character and habit of life took permanent shape. College had a hand in the process, mainly as an irritant, but its part was none the less important for that. It taught Farquhar a hatred of pedantry and theory, and confirmed him in his taste for the modern and actual which he acquired while haunting the town. What formed him, then, were the

contrasting lives of gown and town, of restraint and unrestraint, of sobriety and recklessness, of idealistic remoteness and desperate actuality which he led during his eighteen months' residence as an undergraduate in this College, and in his association with the Smock Alley theatre, which he early frequented as a spectator and where he spent a year as an actor. These contrasts were probably an excellent preparation for the future dramatist, sharpening his wits and developing his comic sense.

The story is told by Chetwood, that while living in College rooms Farquhar sent one day to a neighbour to borrow Burnet's *History of the Reformation*; 'but,' says Chetwood, 'the Gentleman sent him Word, *he never lent any Book out of his Chamber, but if he would come there he should make use of it as long as he pleased.*' This civil if cautious offer Farquhar evidently refused; for 'A little while after the Owner of the Book sent to borrow Mr. *Farquhar's Bellows,*' and 'he returned him the Compliment, "I never lend my Bellows out of my Chamber, but if he be pleas'd to come there, he should make use of them as long as he would"'—the sort of quick answer that will raise a ready laugh in the theatre but can incur a deal of wrath in actual life. The eighteenth-century biographers report that Farquhar quarrelled with his fellow-undergraduates, but it seems far more probable that, irked by his unseasonable smartness, they quarrelled with him.

Those were exhilarating times in College. Indeed while Farquhar was in residence there was a riot, 'the worst in all respects' in the history of the College, it was afterwards affirmed, 'except that no Blood was shed.' In the course of the proceedings, the Provost, George Brown, seeking by laudable but foolhardy personal intervention to quell the disturbance, was knocked out by a blow of a brickbat on the head. It is most unlikely that Farquhar was involved, for by that time he was in disgrace with the Board, and had been warned that if he offended again he would be removed from the College. He had started his undergraduate career very promisingly by winning an

exhibition of £4 a year within a few months of entering; and then after another few months the exhibition was suspended in consequence of a scrape he got into at Donnybrook Fair. In this he seems largely to have been the victim of bad luck. He was one of a band of five undergraduates of his own age, subsequently joined by a sixth (only one of them, I may say, proceeded to a degree), who, as the decree of admonishment puts it, 'on their first appearance at the Fair provoked disputes,' and 'armed with clubs and daggers seriously wounded one of the yokels.' Farquhar's companions were publicly admonished, made to confess their crime in Hall on bended knees, and fined or deprived of all their emoluments. His own sentence was lighter, for he had taken no active part in the affair, but 'because being one of their number he had been prepared to further their designs,' he was admonished and had his emoluments suspended. These were restored some eight months later on 1 February, 1696. But it was too late. Poverty or annoyance or both had disinclined him for further College life. His brother was a printer's apprentice in the town, and through him he may at once have sought part-time work reading proofs. At any rate, it is as a proof-reader that, shortly after his exhibition was restored, we find him turning actor at the Smock Alley theatre, to be heard of no more in Trinity.

In 1694, the year in which Farquhar entered College, Archbishop King reported that the young men of the metropolis 'attended more to the Playhouse than to their studies.' There was strong temptation for them to do so, for Smock Alley was a well-appointed theatre where the latest London plays were performed; and there was free interchange of actors between the theatres of the two capitals. In particular there was Robert Wilks, an Irishman, twelve years older than Farquhar, who had made his début at Smock Alley in 1692 when the theatre was reopened, had acted for a time with Betterton in London, and on his return in 1696 immediately befriended the impoverished and disgruntled undergraduate proof-reader

who haunted the theatre. Doubtless through his influence, Farquhar was given a place in the Smock Alley company at twenty shillings a week, a higher salary than Wilks had got from Betterton, even after two years' experience in Dublin. This friendship was to be of mutual benefit, for if Wilks helped Farquhar with presents of money, paid for his funeral at St. Martin's in the Fields and looked after his orphan daughters, Farquhar, having gone to try his fortune in London, induced his friend to return there, with the result that Wilks took the leading part in all his plays except the first, and thus through Farquhar laid the foundation of one of the most brilliant stage careers of his time.

No doubt Farquhar's experience on the professional stage stood him in good stead as a dramatist; but the plain fact is that he had no great talent for acting. He had 'the advantage of a very good person,' we are told, but had 'a weak voice'; and the warmest praise accorded him was that he 'never met with the least repulse from the audience in any of his performances.' History has a curious way of repeating itself, and it was again through bad luck in being involved in a wounding that Farquhar came to another crisis in his career. While playing the part of Guyomar in Dryden's *Indian Emperor* he forgot to exchange his sword for a foil, and wounded—at first it was thought dangerously—the actor with whom he was engaged in a stage duel. This so affected his nerve that he decided to quit the state at once. Ashbury, the theatre manager, treated him very generously, giving him a benefit 'free from the expenses of the house'—a most unusual concession—and with the proceeds, £50 or so, and a gift of £10 from Wilks, he departed for London in 1697 at the age of twenty.

* * *

In London Farquhar soon made himself at home in the taverns and theatres, as is evident from the ephemeral, pot-boiling novella, *The Adventures of Covent Garden*,

which he wrote while recovering from one of his recurrent fits of sickness and published at the end of the following year. This swift-moving narrative of amorous escapades, obviously founded on personal experience, contains some incidental and highly perceptive observations on the war of church and stage (between Collier and his opponents), some critical remarks, lively and practical if unsubtle, on the drama and its function, and at least one passage of acute self-analysis. His first play, *Love and a Bottle*, however—a forceful but somewhat crude and ill-constructed piece—which was produced at about the same time, deserves more note on this occasion. In later plays we learn of Farquhar's distaste for 'Mutton-Commons,' 'small Beer, crabbed Books and sour fac'd Doctors,' and hear him say through one of his characters, 'Tho' I have read Ten thousand Lies in the University, yet I have learn'd to speak the truth my self'; but the glimpses *Love and a Bottle* affords of his response to College life and discipline are more ingenuous and exact.

Mockmode, a young squire setting up for a beau, becomes for a moment the author's mouthpiece. (He is aged twenty-two, as Farquhar almost is, and like him is 'come newly from the University.') 'But,' says the widow Bullfinch, 'I thought all you that were bred at the University shou'd be Wits naturally.' 'The quite contrary, Madam,' Mockmode replies, 'there's no such thing there. We dare not have Wit there, for fear of being counted Rakes. Your solid Philosophy is all read there, which is clear another thing.' Elsewhere, however, Mockmode is a fool, and the butt of George Roebuck (the embodiment of Farquhar), 'An *Irish Gentleman*, of a wild roving temper; newly come to *London*.' Roebuck calls him a coward.

Mock. Coward, Sir? . . . Have a care what you say, Sir.—
My Father was a Parliament Man, Sir, and I was bred at the College, Sir.

Roeb. Oh then I know your Genealogy; your Father was a Senior-Fellow, and your Mother was an Air-pump. You were suckl'd by Platonick Idea's, and you have some of your Mothers Milk in your Nose yet.

Mock. Form the proposition by Mode and Figure, Sir.

Roeb. I told you so.—Blow your Nose Child, and have a care of dirtying your Philosophical slabbering-bib.

Mock. What d'ye mean, Sir?

Roeb. Your starch'd Band, set by Mode and Figure, Sir.

Mock. Band Sir?—This fellow's blind, Drunk. I wear a Cravat, Sir!

Roeb. Then set a good face upon the matter. Throw off Childishness and Folly with your hanging-sleeves. Now you have left the University, learn, learn.

Mock. This fellow's an Atheist, by the Universe; I'll take notice of him, and inform against him for being Drunk.

That pungent piece of satire is remarkably informative. The reference is, of course, to Trinity, which at that time was known in Dublin simply as 'the College.' To Farquhar its education was too formal, its prevailing spirit too puritan, its life too narrow and restrictive. The attitude of the writer is that of the bright young man, deliberately neo-Cavalier in outlook, for whom Senior Fellows indiscriminately represent the old discredited spirit of the Roundheads, repressive, obscurantist, opposed to progress. To say that a man's father was a Senior Fellow sounds like an undergraduate joke casting doubts on his legitimacy. To be sure Provost Ashe had put Locke's *Essay on the Human Understanding* on the course shortly after it was published, and he and a respectable number of the Fellows were Fellows of the Royal Society or members of the Dublin Philosophical Club, in close touch with modern intellectual movements; but almost inevitably undergraduate instruction at the time was cast in the mould of the past ('Form the proposition by Mode and Figure, Sir.'). To say that Mockmode was suckled on Platonic ideas is the jibe of the up-to-date young man, for whom Hobbes and an enlightened hedonism are the latest thing and idealism insufferably old-fashioned. For Roebuck the band (part of the academic dress of the day, which with more force than delicacy he calls a 'Philosophical slabbering-bib'), symbolizes at once

the immaturity and the restrictiveness of College life and teaching. And, finally, Farquhar asserts, to suggest that this starched pseudo-education is out of touch with life and that true learning can begin only when one leaves the University is a sure way to get oneself branded as an atheist and drunkard by the good little boys of the College. 'This fellow's an Atheist, by the Universe; I'll take notice of him, and inform against him for being Drunk': these words, which sound like a direct transcript from life, express with characteristic humour Farquhar's contempt for one section of the studentry. And they may contain a clue to how the story of his atheism got about; for though he was, no doubt, careless with his tongue, his letters show him to have been not only better grounded in theology than most laymen but more seriously concerned about Church matters.

* * *

'Wild Fowl is lik'd in Playhouse all the year.' So wrote Motteux in 1702, after Farquhar had stimulated the public appetite for that type of character. It was with Sir Harry Wildair, the hero of *The Constant Couple, or The Trip to the Jubilee* (1699), that Farquhar made his name. Roebuck — 'Wild as Winds, and unconfin'd as Air' — was, like Farquhar himself, a penniless adventurer, jauntily self-conscious about his provincialism, quick to denounce pedantry, uncertain in his manners, and as for bodily habit, frequently ill and easily tired on a journey. His successors, though still to a man wild and airy, show a change. This is most evident, perhaps, in Sir Harry Wildair. He is 'a Gentleman of most happy Circumstances, born to a plentiful Estate, has had a genteel and easy Education, free from the rigidness of Teachers, and Pedantry of Schools' — far indeed from the hampering circumstances of Farquhar's own case. From boyhood Farquhar had been 'of a tender constitution.' Not so Sir Harry. 'His florid Constitution,' we are told, 'being never ruffled by misfortune, nor stinted in its Pleasures, has render'd him entertaining to others, and easy to himself — Turning all Passion into Gaiety of

Humour, by which he chuses rather to rejoice his Friends, than to be hated of any.' Clearly in Wildair and his like Farquhar is compensating for the pains and shortcomings of his own condition. In Sir Harry's crude hedonism he expresses his own ideal:

I make the most of Life, no hour mispend,
Pleasure's the Means, and Pleasure is my End.
No Spleen, no Trouble shall my time destroy.
Life's but a Span; I'll every Inch enjoy.

Farquhar did not brood on what might have been, was not given to self-pity. But to us it is pathetic to see this gay young consumptive straining without avail to enjoy every inch of his short span of life and vicariously enjoying instead the imaginary existence of those whose florid constitution is never ruffled by misfortune or stinted in its pleasures.

* * *

The Trip to the Jubilee was an instant success, being performed fifty-three times in five months, an unparalleled achievement. Farquhar was delighted with himself. 'I am very willing,' he said, 'to acknowledg the Beauties of this Play, especially those of the third Night,'—the author's benefit night (later he got three more)—'which not to be proud of, were the heighth of Impudence. . . . When I find that more exact Plays have had better success, I'll talk with the Criticks about *Decorums*, &c.' In this mood, surely excusable in a young man of twenty-two, he probably lived expensively while he could, and what with love affairs, a trip to Holland, illness and doctors, no doubt got through all he gained pretty quickly. Accordingly in the next two years we find him scraping together letters he had written and received—mostly love letters of no great worth, but some of them highly perceptive critical accounts of life and affairs in Holland—and publishing them along with the odd scraps of undistinguished verse he had composed in his Irish days and since. After the triumph of *The Jubilee* he probably hoped for an easy success with *Sir Harry Wildair* (1701), but whether because

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like most sequels it was something of a réchauffé or because of the sharp edge of its satire, it failed to please the town. *The Inconstant* came next and was likewise a failure. This ingenious rehandling of Fletcher's *Wild Goose Chase* deserved a better fate and indeed became a firm favourite later; but unfortunately it was first put on just before the Lenten closing, and was passed over when the Theatre Royal reopened. So Farquhar, left, as he said, 'without one farthing, for half a years pains that he had taken,' got down to work again, and before the end of the same year (1702) *The Twin-Rivals* was produced. It ran for only thirteen nights. However much we may dislike the tone of this piece with its midwife-bawd Mandrake, its hunchback-villain Young Wou'dbe (who hates his brother and plots to supplant him), its sentimental last-minute reformation of the cad Richmore, and its general leaning in the direction of the melodramatic play with a purpose, *The Twin-Rivals* is an original and sincere, if perhaps wrong-headed, attempt to mark out a zone between comedy and tragedy and to depict 'a middle sort of Wickedness, too high for the *Sock*, and too low for the *Buskin*.' Farquhar was furious at its ill success. To please the people had been for him a cardinal rule of play writing, justified, he believed, by the applause that had greeted *The Jubilee*. But now, when they rejected *The Twin-Rivals*, a piece of which he was proud, he turned and rent them for their hatred of innovation and their bourgeois habit of 'taking every thing at sight.' For a year and more he nursed his grievance; and when early in 1704 he produced *The Stage-Coach*, a little farce adapted from the French, he printed it with a long and pompous dedication in the style of Ben Jonson, whom he gloried to resemble in this—

that I am assaulted with the Ignorance of partial and prejudicial Readers; as has sufficiently appeared by a piece I lately Publish't, which because it looked upon all with an Impartial Eye, . . . (remote from servile Flattery) . . . is hated for speaking Truth, but those gall'd Camels whom it toucht to the quick, their Anger I as much scorn as pity.

So much for the middle sort of playgoer: Farquhar had broken with them. And he had broken already with the fops. In a letter published three years before, he had inveighed against the ‘flashy, noisy, rhiming, atheistical Gentlemen, who arrogate to themselves the Title of Wit and Sense, for no other Cause but the Abuse of it.’ Further, in his *Discourse upon Comedy*, published at the same time, he had satirised not only the kind of play that might be written by the ‘Square Cap’ ‘Fellow of a College,’ with the help of ‘*Aristotle, Scaliger* with their Commentators,’ but also the performance of

a sort of Gentlemen . . . who coming to Age before they arrive at Years of Discretion, make a shift to spend a handsome Patrimony of two or three Thousand Pound, by soaking in the Tavern all Night, lolling A-bed all the Morning, and sauntering away all the Evening between the two Play-houses with their Hands in their Pockets; you shall have a Gentleman of this size [he goes on] upon his Knowledge of *Covent-Garden*, and a knack of witticising in his Cups, set up immediately for a Playwright. . . . My own Intreagues [says the spark] are sufficient to found the Plot, [and his hero,] being a compound of Practical Rake, and Speculative Gentleman, is ten to one, the Author’s own Character.

Now that (except for the patrimony of two or three thousand a year) was very much Farquhar’s own case when he wrote his first play; and I believe that in those words he is laughing at himself as he had recently been; for the last lines I have quoted are straight out of *Love and a Bottle*, where Lyrick, the budding dramatist, asserts that ‘the Hero in Comedy is always the Poet’s Character’—‘A Compound of practical Rake, and speculative Gentleman.’ Farquhar, then, had grown out of the wits, grown out of the cits, and grown out of his own adolescent self. He was now his own man as an artist. The failure of *The Twin-Rivals* had been good for him.

* * *

Good for his art, yes, but not good for his ultimate happiness; for it was that failure, I believe, that led him to take a disastrous step. Not knowing where to turn for

money, he made a rash and hasty marriage, hoping for ease and plenty but achieving a poverty such as he had never known before. The lady, Margaret Pemell, a widow ten years his senior, caught him, it was said, by giving it out that she had £700 a year. That was not altogether untrue: it was merely a mistake in tense. She had had such a fortune, or would have had if her first husband had had better luck or a better head for business. All she had in the present was three children, two of them at an expensive age; and in due course her second marriage produced two more. In a desperate effort to meet the situation Farquhar secured through his friends a lieutenant's commission in Orrery's newly-raised regiment of foot at three shillings a day. From his early days of poverty in London he had, it is evident, toyed with the idea of making the army his career, as Vanbrugh and Steele had done before him. He was especially 'sensible how far a Lac'd Coat and Feathers usually work upon the Female Sex,' but the accident at Smock Alley and his immediate abandonment of the stage in consequence (besides numerous touches in his plays) suggest that he had little stomach for the grimmer side of a soldier's work; and indeed his repeated attacks of sickness show that he had not the constitution for it. His seeking a commission was, therefore, a last resort. Once he had taken this step he doubtless enjoyed being mistakenly 'call'd Captain, Sir, by all the Coffee-men, Drawers, Whores and Groom Porters in *London*'; and (perhaps because of his poor health) he was not sent to serve abroad but to recruit in the provinces. Even that caused him 'lasting Plague, Fatigue and endless Pain.' But there were compensations. His duties kept him in the country away from his embittered wife, and brought him at Lichfield and Shrewsbury into the society of easy, friendly, unsophisticated country gentry which he greatly enjoyed. It was in this mood and this atmosphere of warmth and good feeling that he wrote *The Recruiting Officer*, drawing heavily on his immediate environment at Shrewsbury for character and incident, with himself as the original for Captain Plume, and his sergeant, Jones, as the model

for that admirable comic creation, Sergeant Kite. He had already used a country setting in *The Stage Coach*, and now, two years later, he went further and did what in his age was a new thing—founded the spirit, intrigue and manners of his entire play upon the country rather than the town. The theme was topical; Ormonde and Orrery gave the piece their approval; and Lintot the printer liked it so much that he paid heavily for the copy almost two months before its first production. *The Recruiting Officer* was a resounding success on the stage, both houses putting it on time after time for several months and seeking to outdo one another in the performance of it—a most extraordinary situation.

But still Farquhar could not make ends meet. He besought Ormonde to get him a captaincy. Ormonde said he would see what he could do and advised him in the meantime to sell his lieutenant's commission. This he may have done. In November or December, 1706, illness and want drove him to shun the company of his friends. Unable to pay his rent, he disappeared from his lodging and wrote to Robert Wilks from a back garret in St. Martin's Lane. He told Wilks he was 'heart broken.' Wilks lent him money, persuaded him to start writing again, and a week later saw and approved the plan of *The Beaux Stratagem*. Although he had a settled sickness upon him and perceived the approaches of death before he had finished the second act, Farquhar completed the play in six weeks. Lintot at once advanced him £30 for the copy, almost twice as much as he had given for *The Recruiting Officer*. It was first produced on 8 March, so that there was probably time for revision. In spite of several benefit nights, including one of *The Stage-Coach* for 'a half-starved poet,' Farquhar seems to have continued in poverty until his death at the end of April. He left behind him a letter for Wilks, which read: 'Dear Bob, I have not any thing to leave thee to perpetuate my Memory, but two helpless Girls; look upon them sometimes, and think of him that was to the last Moment of his Life, Thine, G. Farquhar.'

He does not mention his wife, only his daughters; and they cannot have perpetuated his memory with any kindness. Wilks looked after them and apprenticed them to a mantua maker; but one died shortly after her marriage to a low tradesman; and the other had in the 1760's dwindled into a maidservant 'without any knowledge of refinement either in sentiment or expenses,' 'taking no pride in her father's fame,' and her mind 'in every respect fitted to her humble situation.'

* * *

Farquhar owed his success to the rapid action of his plays, his easy, unstudied dialogue, and especially the gift (which he prized most) for 'drawing a gay, splendid, generous, easie, fine young Gentleman.' John Oldmixon, in his obituary notice in *The Muses Mercury*, gave a very just appraisal of his worth:

All that love Comedy will be sorry to hear of the Death of Mr. Farquhar, whose two last Plays had something in them that was truly *humorous* and diverting. 'Tis true the Criticks will not allow any Part of them to be regular; but *Mr. Farquhar* had a Genius for Comedy, of which one may say, that it was rather above Rules than below them. His Conduct, tho not artful, was *surprizing*: His *Characters*, tho not Great, were just: His Humour, tho *low*, diverting: His *Dialogue*, tho *loose* and *incorrect*, *gay* and *agreeable*; and his Wit, tho not *super-abundant*, *pleasant*. In a word, his Plays have in the *toute ensemble*, as the Painters phrase it, a certain *Novelty* and *Mirth*, which pleas'd the Audience every time they were represented; And such as love to laugh at the *Theater*, will probably miss him more than they now imagine.

As Oldmixon implies, Farquhar's mind is swift and direct, not painstaking or subtle. His strength lies not in conscious artistry and wit but in facility and freshness of humour. He is to be compared not with Congreve but Vanbrugh. His closest counterpart, however, is Goldsmith, whose humour, not confining itself to fine society, was likewise branded as 'low.' Oldmixon wrote prophetically when he said that 'such as love to laugh at the *Theater*, will probably

miss him more than they now imagine,' for laughing comedy is what Farquhar stands for in dramatic history, and sentimental comedy, the *comédie larmoyante*, was just about to establish its long ascendancy in the theatre.

Despite the extraordinary success of *The Constant Couple*, Oldmixon refers only to the 'two last Plays.' In this again he shows sound sense; for, though *The Constant Couple* was famous on the London stage for a century and kept a place in the repertory of provincial companies until sixty years ago, none of the early plays but *The Inconstant* can be said to have worn well. They are well meaning rather than good natured, and their heroes' offensive attitude to women, an attitude of impudence and effrontery, however gay, stands between them and the modern reader—I say reader, for (except for *The Inconstant*) they are no longer performed. They possess, what is more, an inner disharmony: head and heart are at odds in them. On the one hand they assume that every woman is fair game; on the other they assert the romantic doctrine (to which the rake at the last minute conforms) that virtue is its own defence and of power to reclaim the wayward—mouthing out this belief at times in discordant blank verse cadences.

In the last two plays, however, there is no occasion for such mouthing, nor for a *cor ex machina* to effect an improbable transformation of character at the end, for the danger of disharmony is either plausibly resolved or avoided altogether. Captain Plume, the recruiting officer, is a rake, but a romantic rake—an inveterate wench, yet genuinely in love with Silvia from the start. That such a character is both credible and laudable is not left to be assumed as an article of faith or deduced from the lady's loyalty to her roving lover: it is demonstrated in no less a person than her father, the good Justice Ballance, who heartily approves of Plume as a prospective son-in-law. 'I was much such another Fellow at his Age,' he recalls, 'but what was very surprising both to my self and Friends, I chang'd o'th' sudden from the most fickle

Lover to be the most constant Husband in the World.' So the way is satisfactorily prepared for Plume to do likewise when the time comes. In *The Beaux Stratagem* the matter is handled differently. The two sides of Farquhar's nature are taken apart and distributed between two characters. Archer is the engaging but hard-headed mercenary, disinterestedly fighting wars of the heart for gain and pleasure; Aimwell is the romantic, the man of honour. The two types of character are kept distinct and presented in dramatically effective contrast.

The women play an increasingly important part in determining the tone of Farquhar's comedies. At first the heroes engross most of his attention; and the women characters are either female rakes or routine mouthpieces of virtue, objects of intrigue rather than real persons. But starting with *The Inconstant* the heroines become more womanly and interesting, and are handled with greater sympathy and insight. It is not until *The Beaux Stratagem*, however, that they take on instant and continuous life. Even Silvia, the open-air girl in *The Recruiting Officer*, is rather too obviously a dramatic contrivance. She is frank, assured, gay, good-natured and physically tireless (a feminine embodiment of Farquhar's ideal character)—troubled, she says, 'with neither Spleen, Cholick, nor Vapours,' and free, Plume asserts, from the 'Ingratitude, Dissimulation, Envy, Pride, Avarice, and Vanity of her Sister Females.' In short, as he concludes, 'there's something in that Girl more than Woman.' Add to this that, having lost her mother in infancy, she has been brought up entirely in her father's ways and company, and we can see that if in her consistent heartiness Silvia strikes us as something less (as well as something more) than woman, she is the victim of the dramatist's concern that she shall for half the play masquerade convincingly as a soldier—and at the same time temper through her wholesome animation the crudities of innuendo which a 'breeches part' involves, especially in a military play.

One further point should be made about the development of Farquhar's gift for comedy, a point which will

help to modify what has been said about the early plays. *Love and a Bottle* is too firmly grounded in fact: Roebuck's character, standards and circumstances are too plainly the author's own. But in *The Constant Couple* an element of fantasy appears. The quality of wildness, of gay abandon, of unconcern with mundane matters, lightens the sense of actuality. Sir Harry Wildair is Farquhar, of course, but Farquhar freed from his day-to-day cares and anxieties. He, rather than Roebuck, is 'Wild as Winds, and unconfin'd as Air.' He is at once true and untrue to life—Farquhar not as he is but as he would be if he had health and fortune. Moreover, we cannot pin him down: he is now on the side of honour, now of rakishness; and the result, since he is clearly intended to be approved of, is that our concern about both is for the time relaxed, and we inhabit a world of fantasy where everyday compulsions are less compulsive. In *The Inconstant* the reckless heaping of disguise upon disguise by both hero and heroine has the same effect. The two last plays present a breath-taking prodigality of incident, a breadth of comic force, on an altogether different scale from anything Farquhar had attempted before—a virtuosity in the control of action, movement, and display of diverse character that stamps their world as a world of art not nature. The fantasy is cumulative: any one of Kite and Plume's recruiting tricks would perhaps be credible enough, was even perhaps played by Farquhar himself and his sergeant in enlisting recruits: it is the variety and riotous profusion of their devices that charms us with its combined likeness and unlikeness to what is or could be.

The Beaux Stratagem is the summit of his achievement. Its construction is quite beautiful. Persons, plots and incidents are most admirably contrived, interrelated, and controlled, yet presented with an air of artless abandon appropriate to the country setting. All is charm and warmth and good feeling. We have not to make allowances for the manners or dramatic conventions of the time. To only one incident has exception been taken, and surely without justification—Archer's attempt upon Mrs. Sullen.

This is a very different thing from the end-of-scene abduction of Berinthia by Loveless in Vanbrugh's *Relapse*, where the lady, on being carried off, expostulates 'very softly.' Here Mrs. Sullen, in love with Archer, gives vent to a full-throated 'Thieves, Thieves, Murther —,' and thieves indeed there are though she did not know it, and Scrub, the man of all work, rushes in crying 'Thieves, Thieves, Murther, Popery,' and thinking Archer is one of the thieves falls at his feet, begging him to spare all he has and take his life; and the scene continues with bustle and confusion, pistols and dark lanthorns, and the rounding up of the robbers—Mrs. Sullen in her fright all the time holding on to the would-be seducer for protection. That is typical of the force and liveliness of spirit that inform the whole piece.

Aimwell and Archer, knights-errant, as they call themselves, have both gone through a fortune of ten thousand a year, and now are on their last few hundred, playing master and man turn about in one town after another in their search for a rich heiress, and prepared if all else fails to make sail for Holland and fight in the wars. They have now arrived in Lichfield. Archer, who 'fights, loves, and banters all in a Breath,' is Farquhar's old hero (by this time much refined), setting off by mock-heroic comment and contrary example the world of romance, which contains its own correctives of irony, raillery and realism. Aimwell, Dorinda, Mrs. Sullen and Cherry all fall in love at first sight, but only Aimwell and Dorinda can marry: Mrs. Sullen is married already, Cherry is lowly born, and the hearts of both are set on Archer, whose mark is pleasure and fortune not marriage. Nor is the mood fixed for long in the same key. What delicacy and tenderness there are in the delineation of Dorinda's young love as she admits her feelings to her sister-in-law: 'O Sister, I'm but a young Gunner, I shall be afraid to shoot, for fear the Piece shou'd recoil and hurt my self.' But over against that there is the burlesque tenderness of the sentimental highwayman Gibbet—that delightful rogue—whose booty includes two hundred pounds in cash.

Cherry. But who had you the Money from?

Gibbet. Ah! poor Woman! I pitied her;—From a poor Lady just elop'd from her Husband, she had made up her Cargo, and was bound for *Ireland*, as hard as she cou'd drive; she told me of her Husband's barbarous Usage, and so I left her half a Crown.

True to Archer's ideal, Farquhar kept 'his Five Senses keen and bright as his Sword.' He found enjoyment in the most everyday sights and occupations. This is evident from the images he uses to convey his sense of fun. Take Scrub's account of Archer and the French Count's footman 'Gabbering French like two intreaguings Ducks in a Mill-Pond,' or Archer's of how he

can play with a Girl as an Angler do's with his Fish; he keeps it at the end of his Line, runs it up the Stream, and down the Stream, till at last, he brings it to hand, tickles the Trout, and so whips it into his Basket.

And a similarly realistic image can give comic expression to matter not at all comic in itself, as when Mrs. Sullen talks of her husband to Dorinda:

O Sister, Sister! if ever you marry, beware of a sullen, silent Sot, one that's always musing, but never thinks:—There's some Diversion in a talking Blockhead; and since a Woman must wear Chains, I wou'd have the Pleasure of hearing 'em rattle a little. . . . He came home this Morning at his usual Hour of Four, . . . [and] after his Man and he had rowl'd about the Room like sick Passengers in a Storm, he comes flounce into Bed, dead as a Salmon into a Fishmonger's Basket.

It is its close combination of gaiety and feeling that makes *The Beaux Stratagem* a great comedy and most strikingly displays Farquhar's stature as a humourist. His characters Squire and Mrs. Sullen are, like himself and Margaret Farquhar, unhappily married. Yet he handles this theme without a trace of personal bitterness. He makes the woman—not an embodiment of himself but the woman—the injured party; and yet, though she engages our fullest sympathy, he plays fair by the man—that

sullen, silent, sot—and gives him ‘a natural Aversion of his side.’ The Sullen plot is a plea for the right of divorce for incompatibility of temperament, but *The Beaux Stratagem* is no problem play, for the serious intention of this plot is harmonized with the pervasive comic spirit of the whole. While at work on the play Farquhar went to Milton’s passionate advocacy of *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*—which the poet wrote soon after his own rash and hasty marriage—and turned passages from it into starkly realistic dialogue. Here is a specimen. ‘You’re impertinent,’ says Squire Sullen to his wife. ‘I was ever so,’ she replies, ‘since I became one Flesh with you.’ ‘One Flesh! rather two Carcasses join’d unnaturally together.’ ‘Or rather,’ she rejoins, ‘a living Soul coupled to a dead Body.’ Such snatches of unrelieved realism, discreetly used, give depth and substance to the play; and elsewhere, exercising his superb gift for combining realism and fantasy, Farquhar raises that substance into high comedy. Take this, for instance. A countrywoman enters and mistakes Mrs. Sullen for her mother-in-law Lady Bountiful, a charitable lady expert in cures.

Wom. I come seventeen long Mail to have a Cure for my Husband’s sore Leg.

Mrs. Sull. Your Husband! what Woman, cure your Husband!

Wom. Ay, poor Man, for his Sore Leg won’t let him stir from Home.

Mrs. Sull. There, I confess, you have given me a Reason. Well good Woman, I’ll tell you what you must do—You must lay your Husbands Leg upon a Table, and with a Chopping-knife, you must lay it open as broad as you can, then you must take out the Bone, and beat the Flesh soundly with a rowling pin, then take Salt, Pepper, Cloves, Mace and Ginger, some sweet Herbs, and season it very well, then rowl it up like Brawn, and put it into the Oven for two Hours.

Wom. Heavens reward your Ladyship.

Here Mrs. Sullen’s distaste for her husband and for the country life which he forces her to live receives highly

effective comic expression as she seeks relief for her feelings in the vigour and extravagance of her fancies. Lady Bountiful herself now appears, and hearing that the woman wants something for her husband's leg, asks what is the matter with it.

Wom. It come first as one might say with a sort of Dizziness in his Foot, then he had a kind of a Laziness in his Joints, and then his Leg broke out, and then it swell'd, and then it clos'd again, and then it broke out again, and then it fester'd, and then it grew better, and then it grew worse again.

Mrs. Sull. Ha, ha, ha.

This is sensitive writing. The woman is, of course, altogether serious in her account of her husband's symptoms, but she puts it in a confused and laughable country way. Mrs. Sullen is highly wrought: she needs but a trifling stimulus to make her give vent to her emotion. This the woman's speech provides, and she bursts out laughing. If that speech had not been comic her laughter would have seemed heartless and cruel, as indeed the kind-hearted Lady Bountiful, engrossed in diagnosis, thinks it to be.

L. Boun. How can you be merry with the Misfortunes of other People?

Mrs. Sull. Because my own make me sad, Madam.

L. Boun. The worst Reason in the World, Daughter, your own Misfortunes shou'd teach you to pity others.

Mrs. Sull. But the Woman's Misfortunes and mine are nothing alike, her Husband is sick, and mine, alas, is in Health.

Margaret Farquhar's husband, alas, was by no means in health; and yet he never wrote better in his life.

* * *

Had he lived longer—but it is idle to speculate. Young or old, his achievement was remarkable. No eighteenth-century playwright was more popular in his own century;

and *The Beaux Stratagem* (which has been performed more often than any other piece written within a hundred years of the Restoration) is still assured of an appreciative audience to-day. If only one of his plays has survived on the stage, of how many of the older dramatists can even that be said?

George Farquhar was an Irishman; he fixed for the English theatre a certain type of Irish character, long recognised as such; and in dedicating *The Inconstant* to Richard Tighe, his contemporary at Trinity (in whom he saw a likeness to his own Sir Harry Wildair), he complimented 'the place of [his] Pupilage' on having given 'the seeds of his Education' to 'so fine a Gentleman.' In this first year of the Irish Theatre Festival, while some of his writings are on exhibition in the College Library, it is fitting that we should return the compliment, and do honour on this day to one of our most celebrated dramatists in the two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of his death.

FITZROY PYLE