

## INTRODUCTION

I went over to *Amsterdam* in a *Dutch Ship*; I there had a *Dutch Whore* for five Stivers; I went from thence to *Landen*, where I was heartily drub'd in the Battle with the but-end of a *Swiss Musket*. I thence went to *Paris*, where I had half a dozen Intreagues, bought half a dozen new Suits, fought a couple of Duels, and here I am agen in *statu quo* (Sir Harry Wildair, *The Constant Couple*)

Sir Harry Wildair – a bumbling, grandiose, yet likeable character – and his various misdeeds in George Farquhar's *The Constant Couple* (1699) were representative of the beginning of a new era in English comedy. Audience's theatrical preferences were changing, and the overtly sexual, bawdy plays of the 1670s and 1680s were quickly falling out of favour in the 1690s. Farquhar's Sir Harry was the introduction of a different type of character – one whose humanity and three-dimensionality were clearly evident through his actions and dialogue. Throughout the course of approximately thirteen years (c. 1695–1708), stock characters and plots that were popular in the previous thirty years were slowly replaced by new, inventive, interesting and highly original theatrical elements.

This book argues that experimentation was the driving force behind the change in comedy at the turn of the eighteenth century, as playwrights experimented with what worked and what did not work on stage. Levels of success and failures are determined by historical facts: how many nights a play ran, how many times it was revived throughout the course of the century, how people commented upon a play (positively/negatively) in letters, journals, etc. By looking closely at the theatrical seasons over the course of approximately fifteen years, and by examining the new plays written by the major playwrights of the period, a pattern of experimentation arises. Playwrights, in an attempt to write a successful play, experimented with combining elements from older comedies (for example, a standard marriage plot) with new and unique elements (for example, characters who defy stereotyping). This pattern of experimentation with old and new elements can be found in virtually all of the plays written by the playwrights of this time. The distribution of old vs new elements varies greatly from playwright to playwright and even within the plays of a single author, but by tracing

out the process, we can see how the authors used experimentation in an attempt to write plays that would please the audience.

In order to determine what the major changes were in both plots and characters, I rely upon a close reading of the plays in conjunction with a comparison of plots/characters/dialogues in new plays with those elements in the old plays written in the 1670s and '80s. As a result, I have found that the plays written at the turn of the eighteenth century either contain more well-rounded and human characters, plots that vary in new and interesting ways, new character types that were not present in past plays, or dialogue that is frequently character building, as it gives us insight into the psyche and personality of the character instead of just forwarding the plot. By far, the biggest difference in the new plays written at this time is characters who, at first glance, seem to mimic character types of the past (for example, the naïve young girl, the rake, the oppressive father, the bumbling servant) but who are different from their ancestors in a significant way (behaviour, thought process, inner motivation, etc.) Frequently, the new iterations of these stock characters do not end up doing things or behaving in a way that would be expected, which has the effect of breathing new life into a play that would have otherwise been a standard rehashing of old themes and tropes. Over the course of fifteen years, the experimentation becomes more and more pronounced, with the end result being such original (and financially successful) plays as Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* (1706) and *The Beaux Stratagem* (1707). This change is gradual, however, as playwrights fight against audience's tastes. Too much experimentation at once produces a play that the audience condemns, and too little experimentation produces an 'old style' play that the audience does not want to see. To use an analogy, the relationship between the playwright and the audience is akin to that of lovers – one constant and one fickle. The playwright (the constant lover) is searching for what will make the fickle lover (the audience) happy. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, many playwrights, including Farquhar, Steele and others, had found the elusive formula that they had been seeking and wrote wildly successful plays that quickly entered into the repertory and were performed frequently throughout the rest of the century. These experimenting playwrights also opened the door for the audience to accept extreme innovation, which paved the way for later plays like John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728).

This book focuses upon the approximate years of 1695 to 1708 for several reasons. First, despite the disagreement over how the comedy changed, all critics do agree that there was a change at the turn of the eighteenth century. Second, 1695 marks the year the United Company actors rebelled, which resulted in a split in theatrical companies and the granting of a new licence. One company became two, fostering hot competition between Drury Lane and Lincoln's Inn Fields. This competition drove the desire for new plays, as each theatre tried to

discern what would bring a bigger audience. Finally, I picked 1708 as a terminus because the production of new comedies greatly decreased after 1707, largely on account of events following the theatrical union of 1708, which virtually eliminated competition by declaring that all comedies and tragedies were to be performed at Drury Lane, and opera (which, by 1708 had increasing popularity) was to be performed at Sir John Vanbrugh's new Queen's Theatre in the Haymarket.

I focus my attention on six major playwrights writing during this time – Congreve, Cibber, Vanbrugh, Steele, Centlivre and Farquhar. By 'major' I mean playwrights who had an established career of both commercially successful plays and failures. Farquhar is the main focus because the scope of his career serves as a marker for understanding the nature of the change in comedy at the end of the seventeenth/beginning of the eighteenth century. His first play, *Love and a Bottle* (1698), relied (unsuccessfully) on outdated plot devices and character types. His last two plays, *The Recruiting Officer* and *The Beaux Stratagem*, used creatively new elements to connect with English audiences, and subsequently became two of the most popular plays in the eighteenth century.

In the early to mid-twentieth century, critics had often divided the comedy written between 1660 and 1800 into two camps, 'Restoration' and 'sentimental', and much of the criticism can be summarized in one sentence: 'Restoration comedy' was bawdy and vulgar and existed from 1660 until the turn of the century, when Collier/the ladies/Shadwell (insert any number of reasons here) forced a change, creating 'sentimental comedy' in the eighteenth century. This blanket statement is highly generalized and rests on many assumptions, including the idea that uniform labels can be applied to all comedy produced from 1660 to 1700 and from 1700 to 1800. Fortunately, in recent times critics have tried to break away from these categories and trouble previous suppositions.

When looking at the overall critical conversation, a trend is evident in the way critics have divided the comedy written from 1660 to 1800. There seem to be two major camps – those who believe that there was a shift from 'Restoration' to 'sentimental comedy' (and subsequently give definitions for these terms), and those who abandon this dichotomy and instead offer different ways of categorizing and understanding the comedy. The first camp includes earlier scholars, for example, Ernest Bernbaum, Henry Ten Eyck Perry, Allardyce Nicoll and Arthur Sherbo,<sup>1</sup> while the second group includes scholars writing in the second half of the twentieth century, for example John Loftis, Frank H. Ellis, Shirley Strum Kenny and Robert D. Hume.<sup>2</sup> With a few exceptions, there is a correlation between early twentieth-century scholarship and the belief in rigid 'Restoration' and 'sentimental' categories, and post 1960s scholarship and the belief in numerous and more fluid ways of investigating the comedy.

The critical conversation in the twentieth century begins, in large part, with Bernbaum. He was one of the early critics to promote the comedy written in the eighteenth century as 'sentimental'. In *Drama of Sensibility*, Bernbaum's basic definition of this term is simple: 'Confidence in the goodness of average human nature is the mainspring of sentimentalism',<sup>3</sup> and he lists what he feels to be the attributes of this kind of comedy:

Though they worked somewhat blindly, the founders of the school accomplished between 1696 and 1704 work of lasting importance. They destroyed forever the tradition that the pathetic must be excluded from comedy, and that virtuous characters must be confined to romantic drama. They created several characters which were in the future to be copied, with slight variations, again and again – the abused yet loyal wife, the maiden faithful to her absent lover, the pitiable forsaken mistress finally restored to respect, the repentant young prodigal, the nobly generous friend and the wayward but reclaimable husband.<sup>4</sup>

Bernbaum makes numerous other arguments, which I will not go into detail here; suffice it to say that his text largely served as a catalyst for critical discussion in the twentieth century. Many of the later critics responded, in some way, to Bernbaum's arguments. For example, almost a decade later, Nicoll offers his definitions of both 'Restoration' and 'sentimental comedy' in *A History of Early Eighteenth-Century Drama, 1700–1750*. Perry, in *The Comic Spirit in Restoration Drama* (1925), defines 'Restoration comedy' as 'comedy of manners', and Arthur Sherbo gives several definitions of 'sentimental comedy' in *English Sentimental Drama* (1957).

What later critics (most noticeably, Robert D. Hume and Shirley Strum Kenny) have rightly pointed out is that the fundamental problem with the Restoration/sentimental categorization is that 'Such a system of categorization obscures as much as it clarifies the playwrights' aims and methods.'<sup>5</sup> With the opening up of the canon and the publication of *The London Stage*, critics have taken a closer look at the variety of plays produced during that time. Over a 140-year period, hundreds of new plays were produced and hundreds more old plays were revived. To divide the drama up into two categories that split nicely at the turn of the century is a bit too convenient. Hume illustrates the diversity of the drama written in a half-century (from 1660 to 1710) by taking a sample of eight highly successful comedies written during this period. These plays include Etherege's *The Country-Wife* (1675) and Wycherley's *The Man of Mode* (1676) as well as Howard's *The Committee* (1662), Shadwell's *The Squire of Alsatia* (1688) and Congreve's *Love for Love* (1695). All of these plays are significantly different from each other, and lumping them all together under one term produces ludicrous results. Hume revisits the 'Restoration' versus 'sentimental' debate in *The Rakish Stage* (1983). He reminds us that "'Restoration comedy" gives precious little support to libertinism',<sup>6</sup> and 'The whole concept of sentimental comedy is

in fact merely a distraction and a red herring. Anyone who has read a reasonable number of plays usually dubbed sentimental know that in fact they are too disparate to constitute a definable genre.<sup>7</sup>

Kenny, like Hume, abandons the old terms and offers her own. Kenny uses 'humane comedy' to describe the type of comedy that was written at the turn of the eighteenth century, and in her 1977 article of that title she states:

In characterization the writers of humane comedy are more amiable than their Restoration forebears; heroes and heroines as well as fools are treated with less extravagance, more gentleness and good humor than were their ancestors. The hero and heroine of the Restoration, wittier, handsomer, more debonair than anyone ever was in real life, disappear, replaced by the likes of Sir Harry Wildair and Mrs. Sullen. No longer paragons of wit and style, the young lovers of these plays are believably human, young, fallible and funny.<sup>8</sup>

Kenny believes that the plays of Cibber, Farquhar and Steele exhibit many of these qualities, which makes their work different from the 'comedy of manners' and the 'sentimental comedy'. The heroes of humane comedy are likeable descendants of the rakes of Restoration comedy. They make mistakes, they find themselves in embarrassing positions, and they do not have as much control over their situations as do their predecessors. They are also able to laugh at themselves, and subsequently we laugh with them.<sup>9</sup>

Kenny's descriptions of what makes the plays of Cibber, Farquhar and Steele different from their predecessors are very astute. The characters are, indeed, 'believably human, young, fallible and funny'. In addition, the standard plot lines that were so popular in the past – usually a marriage plot with a blocking figure – were also beginning to change in very interesting ways. Kenny's assertions that humane comedy is full of good nature, with plots that weave together very human characters and physical action with more realistic dialogue, pinpoint key characteristics in most of the comedy written by Farquhar, Cibber, Vanbrugh, Centlivre and some of their contemporaries.

Elements of humane comedy can first be seen in Congreve's *Love for Love* (1695) and Cibber's *Love's Last Shift* (1696), but a very different form of comedy did not fully emerge until Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* (1706) and *The Beaux Stratagem* (1707). *The Constant Couple* (1699) was the beginning of Farquhar's experimentation with humane comedy. He took risks with this play and created different types of characters with which the audience connected. The result was a successful and memorable play that launched a new form of comedy. Farquhar is foregrounded in this study as successfully writing humane comedies because his career clearly illustrates how a playwright uses humane comedies to move from one formerly popular style of comedy to something that is new and different. Over the course of ten years, Farquhar experimented by slightly chang-

ing and updating old stock characters and plot lines, and combined them with new, imaginative elements before finally hitting upon a formula that worked. As a result, *The Recruiting Officer* and *The Beaux Stratagem* became two of the most popular plays of the eighteenth century. As Farquhar's plays are discussed, several key elements emerge as being successful factors in his humane comedies. His comedies differed from his predecessors in that they reflected a lighter tone, and included a good natured sense of humour, characters who were multi-dimensional and more human, and dialogue that focused on building the personality of the characters instead of displaying wit.

Inspired by Kenny and fuelled by Farquhar, I began asking questions. It is evident that the comedy changed, but *why* did it change? *How* was this change implemented? And *what*, exactly, were the major changes in both plot and character? These three questions are at the heart of this book. Previous answers to the 'why it changed' have been unsatisfactory (for example the ladies/Collier/Shadwell) because, as I will show, they have been based on unsubstantiated claims. And although Kenny begins to give us an explanation of what the changes were – more well-rounded characters, more humane plot lines – she limits her discussion to only a few examples from only three playwrights, and she does not discuss how these changes came about.

The goal of this book is to go beyond Kenny's initial readings of the state of comedy at the turn of the eighteenth century. Why did the comedy change? Because playwrights wrote to make money, and they quickly realized that in the late 1690s the audiences were no longer interested in plays that recycled standard plots and characters popular ten and twenty years before. The question of why the audience's tastes changed is a difficult one to answer. In Chapter 1 I offer several political and social factors that, in all probability, played a major role in affecting the public consciousness. In the end, however, there is no way to definitely say why tastes change, except to argue that they naturally do. Reality TV, which is so popular and pervasive now, was almost unheard of in the 1980s and will most likely (many hope) fall out of favour in the next twenty years. No trend lasts forever, and by the late 1690s the audiences were probably tired of seeing new plays written in the 'old style', although revivals of the old plays were still popular.

*How* was the change in the comedies implemented? Through experimentation. Playwrights combined traditional, time-tested plots and characters with original, innovative elements with the hope of producing financially successful comedies. *What* were the changes in the plays written by the major playwrights during this time? In the following chapters, I explore the changes in detail, but in summation, the plays slowly became more humane in nature. Playwrights like Farquhar borrowed elements from their predecessors and improved upon them in an attempt to make the work more relevant to the current time or to appeal to

the current audience's tastes. Humane comedy playwrights also included experimental elements in the hopes that the new elements would captivate, intrigue, or positively influence the audience. They blended the old and the new assuming that the audience would continue to like the familiar conventions, plot lines, or characters that they had always enjoyed and would be open to accepting variations or experimentations with stock favourites. Writing a humane comedy was a way for a playwright to write a financially successful play without simply rehashing what was popular in the past. A humane comedy also protected the playwright from the audience completely rejecting a play that was too new or too different. As I reviewed the plays that were written and/or performed during the 1695 through the 1708 theatrical seasons, a pattern of audience acceptance and rejection emerged. Overwhelmingly, the humane comedies were far more popular than those that either stuck solely to old formulas or that solely included radical experimentation.

The primary method that informs my research is contextual historicism. Using primary materials I recreate a sense of the conditions in which playwrights were working. Besides the plays themselves, which beyond the actual texts also give an invaluable source of information in terms of casting, these primary materials include prologues and epilogues, early biographies, contemporary works of criticism, memoirs, diaries, letters, political/social tracts and pamphlets and more. By analyzing and synthesizing these materials, I reconstruct the context the writers were working in and demonstrate how the social/political/economic forces influenced them and their writings.

Overall, this book looks chronologically at the theatrical seasons from 1698 until approximately 1708 and argues for the development of what Kenny calls humane comedy based on the practice of experimentation. Chapter 1 investigates the composition of the theatre-going public in the 1690s and argues that their cranky nature and overall fickle tastes were a result of the tumultuous political and social environment they were living in. The fear of a continued Catholic monarchy was ignited with the birth of James II's Catholic son, James Francis Edward, sparking Parliament to invite Mary (James's Protestant daughter) and her husband William of Orange to 'invade' England. The instability of proper claim to the throne, combined with a reign full of high taxes due to William's constant wars on the continent, all contributed to the audience's capricious tastes. Chapter 1 also investigates the theatrical history of the 1690s and posits that the dissolution of the United Company in 1695, combined with the limited ways a playwright could earn income, is what fostered a climate of experimentation among the writers.

Farquhar's first play, *Love and a Bottle*, was not successful. From the experience, however, Farquhar learned to take risks and experiment in his second play, *The Constant Couple*. Chapter 2 discusses the reception of *Love and a Bottle* and

argues that the formulaic and backward-looking nature of the characters and plot are the reason why the play was not well-received. The chapter then investigates *The Constant Couple*, which ran for an astounding fifty-three nights in London alone, and posits that the success of Farquhar's second attempt hinges upon the character of Sir Harry Wildair and the play's witty and intellectual dialogue. This chapter also argues how early popular humane comedies, such as Cibber's *Love's Last Shift* (1696), Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* (1696) and Congreve's *Love for Love* (1695), influenced Farquhar's *The Constant Couple*, and why Farquhar's sequel, *Sir Harry Wildair* (1701) failed to repeat the success of the original.

Chapter 3 explores the years 1700 to 1705, which saw an explosion of humane comedy, and argues for the continued development in the change in comedy at the hands of Farquhar, Cibber, Steele and Centlivre. I posit that these playwrights, through their own unique form of experimentation and their influence on each other, create a variety of forms of humane comedy. Not all of the plays they write connect with the audiences; in fact, in some cases out of extreme experimentation arise plays that, while brilliant, are commercial failures (for example, Farquhar's *The Twin-Rivals*). The first five years of the eighteenth century are a testing ground for the playwrights, and a period in which they hone their craft and determine what balance of the traditional and the new speaks best to the audience.

The 1705–6 and 1706–7 seasons gave the eighteenth century two of its most popular plays, *The Recruiting Officer* and *The Beaux Stratagem*. These comedies mark the culmination of everything Farquhar had learned, and Chapter 4 argues that *The Recruiting Officer* and *The Beaux Stratagem* are the direct result of Farquhar's earlier successes and failures. Throughout the course of his career, in struggling with his own plays and in watching the struggles of his contemporaries, Farquhar learned what plot devices, character types, and dialogue most intrigued his audience. Chapter 4 argues that it is elements like the britches-wearing, women-wooing, sword-carrying Silvia, the tightly constructed plot of *The Recruiting Officer*, and the serious dealings with marital discontent in *The Beaux Stratagem* that not only make these plays pinnacles of humane comedy, but also catapult them into popularity long after Farquhar's death.

As a struggling playwright, Farquhar was frustrated with his inability to continually anticipate what the audience wanted to see. Farquhar expresses these frustrations in his essay, 'A Discourse upon Comedy', where he challenges the commonly held notion that adhering to Aristotle's unities of time, place and action is the best set of principles on which to base a play. Chapter 5 explores this rarely discussed essay and argues that it can be used to give us insight into the mind of a struggling playwright, and it is also helpful in understanding some of the creative decisions Farquhar made when writing his plays. Chapter 5 also investigates the state of the theatre post 1707, and argues for the contributions

Farquhar made to the eighteenth century. His works became so popular that they entered into the cultural consciousness of many educated Londoners; for example, references to his plays can be found in journals and letters of the period. The evolution of humane comedy virtually stopped after 1707 as a result of the politics of the post-1707 theatre, and the chapter closes with a discussion of the state of the English theatre and posits why the development of humane comedy ceased, and why repertory plays like those by Farquhar remained popular.

Farquhar's influence reached far beyond the English stage, and, in fact, had a large impact on the Irish stage as well. The Conclusion investigates Farquhar's contribution to the history of Anglo-Irish drama and argues that Farquhar subverted the 'Stage Irishman' stereotype that was pervasive in the drama of the time. Through this subversion, Farquhar was able to cleverly satirize the English culture that was invested so heavily in the perpetuation of the stereotype. The Conclusion also argues for the more systematic inclusion of Farquhar in the chronology of other great Anglo-Irish playwrights like Goldsmith, Sheridan, Wilde and Shaw. His plays not only served as an inspiration for these authors, but he was also one of the first Anglo-Irish playwrights to achieve widespread popularity in English and Ireland on both the stage and in print.

The turn of the eighteenth century was an exciting time in English theatrical history, and Farquhar was at the heart of it. As the playwrights found the audience's taste for bawdy, sexual comedy wearing thin, they struggled to find the next big thing that would fill the seats. Eventually, with time and experimentation, Farquhar and his contemporaries learned that blending conventions that the audience recognized with new, innovative elements resulted in a style of comedy that attracted theatre-goers. The humane comedy that arose out of the combination of the old and the new garnered playwrights like Farquhar economic success, and their work is key to the change in early eighteenth-century comedy.