

Farce

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Main Text

‘A farce-writer may be a great man,’ writes William Hazlitt (1991), ‘for Moliere was but a great farce-writer’(137). In the age following Moliere, as the farce gained its footing on the English stage, its rebellious energies came to represent the upwardly mobile lawlessness of English culture. Its unlikely, extravagant, and improbable situations, flat and exaggerated characters, fast pacing, word play and physical humor might not have earned it literary respect, but its flagrant flouting of rules and propriety made it an appropriate form for a society beginning to question old norms and establish new ones.

Although raucous comedy had been a staple of dramatic entertainment since classical times, the word “farce” only began to take its place in the theatrical lexicon during the Restoration (Hughes 1940). Uses before 1660 tended to be closer to the word’s root in the Latin verb *farciare*, to fill or stuff -- as in a cookbook from 1430, which instructed cooks to ‘broach thine pig, then farce him,’ or Chaucer, who spoke of ‘words farsed with pleasaunse’(Holland, 109). Some Restoration-era uses of the term carry the same flavor -- an entertainment that filled out or was stuffed into a play – as in Samuel Pepys’s reference to a boy who “for a farce, doth dance Polichinelli”(Holland, 111). The use of the term was far from consistent in the eighteenth century; as Leo Hughes (1956) has shown, a play might be labeled one way on the title page and another in the preface, prologue or dedication (4). But the word fairly quickly came to define a particular type of stage action, usually involving physical stage business, practical jokes,

or the gulling of the gullible (Holland, 111). It also came to represent a certain kind of play – usually, as its roots in *farciere* would suggest, a short comic afterpiece or interlude offered to supplement the evening’s main entertainment.

Around the same time, farce also acquired a usage beyond the theater to suggest any sort of ludicrous, empty show. It was particularly used to make the government theatrical: an Interregnum-era prologue arguing against the suppression of the theater inveighed ‘[They] silence’t us that they alone might *act*; / . . . Ours were the *Moral Lectures, theirs the Farse*’(Holland 111). As Jane Moody (2000) and others have shown, this analogy between theater and politics performed a good deal of work through the revolutionary period. Edmund Burke (1881) wrote that the French Assembly acted a ‘farce of deliberation’(81); William Hazlitt (1823) would opine that ‘Tyranny . . . is a farce got up for the entertainment of poor human nature; and it might pass very well, if it did not so often turn into a tragedy.’

But while the term “farce” might be used as an insult, farces were actually moving from their roots in low and popular culture as they entered the professional London stage. On the English side, farces came most immediately from a popular tradition of brief plays performed at fairs, closed-down theaters and other venues during the interregnum; even on the French side, with the pedigree of Molière, the French often shied away from the term “farce,” preferring the terms “petit divertissement” or “petite comédie”(Holland, 110). But during the Restoration, farce began obtaining a more respectable following. Samuel Pepys reports going to a farce where the ‘King and his court [were] all there, and mighty merry: a Farce’(Holland, 112). While Alexander Pope, in his *Imitations of Horace*, might imagine the ‘many-headed monster of the pit’

‘Clatt’ring their sticks before ten lines are spoke, / Call [ing] for the farce, the bear, or the black-joke,’ he would conclude, ‘What dear delight to Britons farce affords! / Farce once the taste of mobs, but now of lords’ (Pope, ll. 304-313).

Perhaps as a result of this mixing of high and low culture, the British farce acquired a reputation for going against the laws of nature. ‘Comedy,’ John Dryden writes in the preface to his own farce, *An Evening’s Love, or the Mock-Astrologer* (1671), ‘consists, though of low persons, yet of natural actions and characters. . . . Farce, on the other side, consists of forced humours, and unnatural events. Comedy presents us with the imperfections in human nature: Farce entertains us with what is monstrous and chimerical’(78). Unsanctioned by Aristotle, beyond the bounds of probability, farce was the one form with license to present the impossible and improbable. As Nahum Tate wrote, defending the farce, ‘the business of Farce extends beyond Nature and Probability . . . there are no Rules to be prescribed for that sort of Wit, no Patterns to Copy, ‘tis altogether the Creature of Imagination’(Bolton, p. 145). At mid-century, Samuel Foote, no stranger to lawlessness himself, would write that ‘No unnatural assemblages, no creatures of the fancy, can procure the protection of the Comic Muse; . . . [but to] *Farce* greater liberties are permitted”(Bolton, p. 145). This reputation for liberty – or license – extended well into the Romantic period. In 1789 the *St. James Chronicle* wrote that ‘Aristotle has defined Tragedy and Comedy . . . But in Farce we are left to our own Imaginations and Feelings, if we should happen to have any. Farce is an unlimited Region of Happy Absurdities, Antitheses, Puns, and Repartees. These should be brought together by a Fable as improbable and Characters as extravagant as possible’(Bolton, p. 145). Samuel Taylor Coleridge expressed much the same view in his 1808 *Lectures on*

Shakespeare – ‘a proper farce is mainly distinguished from comedy by the license allowed’ (Bolton, 145).

To excuse this lawlessness, farce was often associated with the foreign. Farce retained its reputation as a “French” phenomenon through the early- and mid- eighteenth century. John Corey’s *The Metamorphosis: Or, the Old Lover Out-witted* (L. 1704) was announced as ‘Written Originally by the Famous Molière’ even though there was no borrowing from the French (Nicoll 1930 2:208), and through the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, farces were often announced as being drawn or translated from French or Italian sources. Even farces which acknowledged themselves as fully British often played with national stereotypes. As this dialogue from Davenant’s *The Playhouse to Be Let* shows, the “foreignness” of farce often provided the British an excuse to laugh at their own follies:

Player But, sir, I believe all *French* Farces are
 Prohibited Commodities, and will
 Not pass current in *England*.

Monsieur Sir, Pardon me; de *Engelis* be more
 Fantastick den the *Fransh*, De Farce
 Bi also very fantastic, and vil passe . . .
 De vise Nation bi for tings heroique,
 And de fantastique, vor de Farce! (Holland, p. 110)

And in fact, the “*fantastique*” seems to have won the day from the Restoration through much of the nineteenth century. Even Allardyce Nicoll, ordinarily no friend of the popular drama, opines in his monumental reference *A History of English Drama*

1660-1900 that 'there can be not the slightest doubt that some of our best farces belong to this period'(Nicoll 1930 3:178). Michael R. Booth (1973) goes so far as to call farce 'mass marketing' – 'In quantity and popularity farce ranked second only to melodrama, and appeared on virtually every playbill until at least the 1870's'(1). Well-known dramatic names like Richard Brinsley Sheridan, David Garrick, George Colman the elder, Elizabeth Inchbald, Mary Robinson, Hannah Cowley, Charles Lamb, Douglas Jerrold, W.T. Moncrieff, and J.R. Planché all wrote farces. Even less-well-known farceurs were well-known in their time – William Halitt compared farceur John O'Keefe to Molière.

There were many reasons for the farce's success. But certainly one was the farce's ability to reflect the complex class and economic world of upwardly-mobile England. As Peter Holland (2000) has observed, farce was one of the few genres (other than the equally-popular Harlequinade) where the Roman comedy trope of witty servants outwitting dull masters played itself out on the eighteenth-century stage. In James Kenney's 1803 *Raising the Wind*, Jeremy Diddler, an upwardly-mobile rogue, poses as the noble Fainwould while two waiters laugh at the plot. In Thomas Dibdin's *Past Ten O'Clock and a Rainy Night* (1815), Harry Punctual and Charles Wildfire deceive the guardian of two clever young women. While the settings and characters of the farce are commonly middle, upper middle, or aristocratic, there was generally a clever manservant or scheming chambermaid to entertain the audiences in the upper galleries. The farce machinery also fit well with the theme of masquerade that Terry Castle (1986) explored in *Masquerade and Civilization*. In addition to the disguises and mistaken identities that formed a standard part of the farce plot, eighteenth-century and Romantic farces often took as their subject the masquerades that formed such an important part of upper-middle

class entertainment. In Pocock's *Cent. per Cent. or, The Masquerade* (CG 1823), for example, Mrs. Pennyfarthing gives a masquerade in which her husband unexpectedly turns up in fancy dress.

Farce also took advantage of the British love of caricature. Like so many eighteenth-century and Regency-era prints, farce reduced character to its most exaggerated materiality. High ideals took a back seat to short stature or an oversize chin. *The London Magazine* of October, 1823 would speak of a grimace as ruining the drama:

Liston's *face* [is] a national misfortune. We consider, what we must own to be his happy infelicity of feature, a serious injury to the public stage. We are decidedly of the opinion that by the admirable scenic effect of his physiognomy, he has inadvertently precipitated the fall of drama amongst us, or rather, that the laws blow has been given to English comedy, by the exquisite comicality of his visage. . .

Writers for the stage, depending on this phenomenon of a phyz, neglect all legitimate means of pleasing, all rules whatsoever by which comedy is distinguished from the very lowest species of buffoonery, -- that which depends on grimace (Nicoll 1930, 4:121)

The anonymous reviewer picks up on a cultural sense that the physical was threatening to overwhelm the mental – a sense which, as Betsy Bolton (2001) has shown, female farceuses like Hannah Cowley and Elizabeth Inchbald used to great advantage. In their

hands, farce became the weapon of women and the oppressed, showing the tyranny of bodies and fashions.

Because of its ephemerality, the farce also offered commentary on a wealth of topical subjects. Few farces made it into repertory; most ran only a few nights, and many were “made to order” for the time at hand. Therefore the farce, like pantomime, provides a good index to British fads and fashions. Farces of the 1720’s made fun of the South Sea Bubble -- *The Stock-Jobbers* (1720) and *South-Sea; or, The Biters Bit* (1720). Later in the eighteenth century the farce would address such topics as newspapermen -- *The Spleen; or, Islington Spa* (D.L. Feb. 1776) – female novel-reading -- Colman the elder’s “Dramatic Novel” *Polly Honeycombe* (D.L. Dec 1760) -- Italian Opera – Colman’s *The Musical Lady* (D.L. March 1762) -- and amateur theatricals -- Isaac Jackman’s *All the World’s a Stage* (DL April 1777), James Powell’s *The Narcotic* (1787) and *Private Theatricals* (1787). In *The Divorce* (DL 1781) Sir Harry and Lady Trifle really love one another, but, to gain notoriety, decide to sue for divorce. In keeping with farce’s focus on upward mobility, there was even a farce on stage-struck tradesmen: Arthur Murphy’s *The Apprentice* (D.L. Jan. 1756). Romantic-era farces thus often address topics we would consider Romantic. There are farces which address the dislocations caused by the French Revolution -- in O’Keeffe’s *The Prisoner at Large* (H. July 1788), Lord Esmond, long a prisoner in France, returns to find his beloved and reward his faithful steward. James Powell’s *The Narcotic* 1787 deals with an adventure of Don Juan; Andrew Franklin’s *The Wandering Jew: or, Love’s Masquerade* (DL May 1797) deals with the Wandering Jew. And in *A Romantic Idea* (Lyc. 1849) a young German author who has come to a village

in search of literary material spends a night in a Romantic ruin and has an uncomfortable dream featuring a demon-jester and other spirits.

But the farce's main contribution to literary history may be in its opposition to the sentimental comedies that began to dominate the stage during the eighteenth century.

Although some farces had sentimental plots, its insistence on broad humor and caricature worked against sympathy. It kept an anti-Romantic impulse alive that arguably influenced George Bernard Shaw. In Pocock's *The Omnibus! or, A Convenient Distance!* (CG 1830), for example, Ledger takes up a house in the country to get away from visitors, only to be overwhelmed by a succession of week-enders and the gaucheries of Pat Rooney, a well-meaning but awkward Irish servant. In *Delicate Ground; or, Paris in 1793* (Lyc. 1849) citizen Sangfroid exposes the follies of a pair about to elope. The farce's tendency to mock society kept the force of satire alive through the age of Romanticism and beyond.

Cross References: Comedy, Pantomime/Harlequinade, Sentimental Comedy

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