

# The Irish Contribution to British Drama in the Eighteenth Century

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It is widely accepted that with the restoration of King Charles II to the throne of England in 1660, English drama underwent a new and historically important phase of development. For the first time, actresses appeared on the English stage, now modelled on the French tennis-court style, and painted scenery in perspective laid the basis for a more realistic portrayal of life. In these new theatrical conditions, whereby the proscenium stage slowly developed into the nineteenth-century picture-frame style, tragedy received the kiss of death, comedy the kiss of life. This is not to say that tragedies were not written after 1660. On the contrary, tragedy as an art form had such a high cultural profile that its continued existence was guaranteed up to the end of the nineteenth century. Thus the five-act tragedy in blank verse, with a setting in remote times and places, carried on the Shakespearean tradition right up to Alfred Lord Tennyson. But Restoration tragedy is lifeless and artificial in contrast to the liveliness and sheer zest of Restoration comedy. Even the best of the Restoration tragedies, by Dryden, Congreve or Southerne, make dull reading today, and as the eighteenth century advanced the only spark of originality in tragedy came when the domestic, prose tragedy was introduced, in plays such as Lillo's *The London Merchant* (1731) and Moore's *The Gamester* (1753), plays which had as their main purpose the teaching of some lesson to the youth of the day. These domestic tragedies were to pave the way for French and German drama of ordinary life, and eventually for the social dramas of Henrik Ibsen. But in the meantime English tragedy in its mainstream form remained remote and artificial, having little or nothing to do with real life. Comedy, on the other hand, which is always more closely related to realism, rapidly developed as a witty and daring reflection of the manners and morals of an aristocratic society. The comedies of Dryden, Etherege, Wycherley and Congreve were heavily indebted to the French theatre, especially to the theatre of Moliere, but they managed to transport this form to London with such success that a new genre was invented: the English comedy of manners (cf. Muir).

Historically, Restoration comedy flourished until 1700, the date of the last great play in this mode, Congreve's *The Way of the World*. By this time a reaction had set in, a hostility to the sexual frankness and cynicism of the plays. With the rise of the new merchant class in London came also a resurgence of Puritanism and a demand that literature have as a main part of its function the moral improvement of its audience. Thus the strong attack on theatre and drama mounted by the Puritan Jeremy Collier in 1698, under the title *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, soon led to the demise of Restoration comedy and the growth in its place of what is rather loosely called sentimental comedy, by which is meant comedy with feeling and purpose. The history of English comedy in the eighteenth century, accordingly, is side-by-side with the growth of the English novel, bound up with the rise of the middle class on the one hand and a moral reaction against satirical realism on the other. Realism grew, indeed, but it was a realism controlled and censored. The hegemony of middle-class values was reinforced by political interests. In 1737 the Licensing Act was passed which limited the number of theatres in London to two, Drury Lane and Covent Garden (the Haymarket was later allowed as a summer theatre). The act therefore suppressed those theatres which satirised the government, such as Lincoln's Inn Fields, and also introduced a severe censorship arrangement under the Lord Chamberlain's office. According to the Licensing Act every play staged had first to be approved by the Lord Chamberlain, who could either reject it outright or call for cuts and deletions on moral and political grounds. Thus the theatre was firmly under official control even though it received no form of subsidisation and remained an entirely commercial organisation. The implications for drama were immense. Satires of the kind John Gay and Henry Fielding had been mounting disappeared, and comedy became rather harmless and written to formula. The emphasis shifted from holding the mirror up to society, as in Restoration comedy, to presenting vehicles for the actor and actress. The most successful English comedies of the eighteenth century were written by actors such as David Garrick or theatre managers such as George Colman, and revelled in their own artificiality.

The contribution of Irish writers to the development of English drama in the eighteenth century was of a different order. Ireland was, of course, a British colony at this time, with most theatrical activity centred in the capital Dublin, where the British viceroy lived and held court. A Protestant, occupying presence naturally imposed a colonial culture in Ireland, where the vast majority of the people were Roman Catholic and deprived of rights to land, full legal rights and official use of the Irish language. Matters were suddenly to get worse, however. Following the Revolution in England in 1688, which arose because King James II was Catholic and not Protestant and, having no legitimate son, was likely to hand over the crown to a Catholic outsider, the Irish welcomed him to Ireland and fought on his behalf against the Protestant William of Orange (Dutch husband of James's daughter). The result of that struggle

still affects Irish-English relations more than 300 years later. In 1689 the Protestants of Derry in the North of Ireland shut their gates on James and successfully endured an extensive siege in opposition to James's legitimacy as king. That moral victory is still celebrated every year in Derry, where the catchcry "no surrender!" has become a gesture of triumph over Popery. By 1691 James had been completely routed from Ireland and fled in disgrace to France, leaving the native Irish who had fought on his behalf to the mercy of the new William the Conqueror. The treaty of 1691 which brought peace to Ireland also brought a succession of harsh laws dedicated to the total subordination and disenfranchisement of the native people. What followed was the establishment of what is called the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, a propertied class, Protestant in religion and royalist in politics, which governed Ireland until the year 1921. The paradox is that it was this class, the colonisers, which was to create the body of literature in English destined to carve out an Irish identity.

The tendency among literary historians is to see no difference between this Irish literature and the English literature of its day, as if Ireland were a mere province of England. Thus J. C. Beckett writes:

Ireland and England formed, in fact, a single literary world, of which London was the natural capital; and critical judgements promulgated there were equally current on both sides of the Irish Sea. People with a taste for what the eighteenth century called 'polite literature,' whether they lived in Ireland or England, read the same books, admired the same authors and saw the same plays in their theatres. It is hardly suprising, then, that the Irish writer of the period, whether he aimed at reputation or profit, should have his eyes fixed on London. It was on the judgement of the London critics that fame depended; it was in London that the best chance of fortune lay. . . (Beckett 79)

The difficulty with this view is that it is proposed from the point of view of the Anglo-Irish themselves. It omits the native 'Hidden Ireland' which had nothing whatever to do with this culture and which was deprived of a voice and a wide audience. Accepting, however, the historical fact of Ireland's colonial position, and the emergence of what Yeats was to call "no petty people" (99) who contributed the best of Irish literature from Swift to Shaw, it remains to clarify where the drama fits into this contribution. Let me begin to answer that question by saying that the professional Irish theatre, which existed only in Dublin, developed a Restoration theatre very much along the lines of the two London theatres given a royal patent in 1660. In fact, Dublin's Theatre Royal patent was the only other one to be awarded by Charles II in the entire British Isles, to use that convenient phrase. This theatre tended to present plays drawn

from the London stage, and as it was under the patronage of the Viceroy it tended to be what the theatre historian W. J. Lawrence has called "a semi-governmental institution" (qtd. in Stockwell 47). That is, it was highly conservative politically. Yet as it did not come under the Licensing Act of 1737 the Dublin theatre actually had an advantage it rarely if ever exercised until the end of the nineteenth century; it was not censored officially. Whether or not this freedom encouraged Irish writers to be more daring than their English colleagues is difficult to say. What may be said is that with the first important playwright to emerge from this theatre, George Farquhar, certain characteristics can be seen. These include a sense of country, use of autobiography, wit, and exploitation of the stage Irishman.

George Farquhar (1677-1707) is now commonly regarded as the last of the great writers of Restoration comedy. His career was fairly typical of Irish playwrights of this period. He attended Trinity College in Dublin, acted at the Theatre Royal and then headed off for the bright lights of London, where he proceeded to both delight and scandalise audiences through his comedies of wit, scurrility and self-mockery. In his first comedy, *Love and a Bottle* (1698), Farquhar admits that "the Hero in Comedy is always the Poet's Character. . . A Compound of practical Rake, and speculative Gentleman, who always bears off the great fortune in the Play" (Farquhar I, 51). He gives this hero his own first name, George. In other words, Farquhar wrote autobiographically, and exploited the details of his own life ironically. Down as far as Shaw and even Brendan Behan, this turns out to be a characteristic of the Irish playwright in London. He plays the London game, but uses his own personality outrageously in the process. The hero of *Love and a Bottle* is the Restoration rake as Irishman who flies to London to escape his moral responsibilities. She pursues him, nevertheless, with her bastard. The hero is seen to be in fashion in London, and yet his barbarity is mocked. The woman he sets about seducing in London cries out, "Oh horrible! and Irish-man! a meer Wolf-Dog, I protest" (I, 14). She then proceeds to make fun of Ireland and cites a rumour that the people there are so barbaric they wear horns and hooves. To which George replies wittily, "Yes, faith, a great many wear Horns: but we had that among other laudable fashions, from *London*" (I, 14-15). This form of wit, cool and intellectual, is a hall-mark of Farquhar's dramatic style. It often contains a sting, marking the revenge of the outsider in London whose main resource is his skill with the language.

Farquhar's *The Constant Couple* (1699) was an enormous success in London because of its hero, the dashing Sir Harry Wildair, who at one point refuses a duel because his opponent is a professional soldier. He thus puts common sense before honour in a way Bernard Shaw would have admired. But Farquhar's two best-known plays, still popular on stage, are *The Recruiting Officer* (1706) and *The Beaux' Stratagem* (1707). The original thing about these plays is that they were set in the countryside. Up to this point, comedy was city-based. Ever since Ben Jonson—



far more a model for Restoration comedy than Shakespeare—the city was the centre of sophistication and gallantry; the countryside was seen as fit only for yokels and fools. “Whate’er you say, I know all beyond High Parks’s [Hyde Park] a desert to you, and that no gallantry can draw you further.” (136) the heroine of Etherege’s *The Man of Mode* (1676) says to the fashionable gallant Dorimant. This was the standard view. But in *The Recruiting Officer*, which is set in rural Shropshire, Farquhar showed how a country setting can be every bit as entertaining as the world of fashion. He thereby shifted the balance of comedy of manners from artifice to nature. Likewise, *The Beaux’ Stratagem*, which many regard as his best and funniest play, although Farquhar was dying when he wrote it, is set in the countryside and makes its comic points by reversing many of the conventions of Restoration comedy. For example, the two rakes or unscrupulous seducers/fortune seekers, repent in the last act, confess all to the women they were deceiving and reap the reward of virtue instead of vice. Of course, Farquhar was here bowing to the change of taste at the time and acknowledging the force of the Puritan argument in favour of a moral stage. At the same time, Farquhar has a subtle argument in this play in favour of divorce, based on the argument proposed by John Milton in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, in which he had argued that “Consent is Law enough to set you free” (qtd. in Connely 292). Never before on the English stage was there a scene in which husband and wife pleasantly agree to part for ever and ever. This makes room for the hero Archer to marry the wife in question. In these various ways Farquhar modified the form and content of Restoration comedy and opened up the possibility of sentimental comedy on the one hand, a comedy of ideas on the other.

Dublin-born Sir Richard Steele (1672-1729) is credited with really launching sentimental comedy in England. The term needs some explanation since to our modern ears it has nothing but a negative sense. We tend now to dismiss anything we call sentimental, be that *The Bridges of Madison County* or perhaps the music of the Pet Shop or Nancy Griffith. But in the eighteenth century sentimental had a more positive ring to it. The idea spread from France—why is it so many of the literary and philosophical ideas of the time come from France?—that feeling was in itself a value. Tears were to be the measure of feeling. The drama that could move an audience must be of greater value than the drama which merely amused. There is an idealism behind this notion, a sense that it was the function of art to show man and woman at their best rather than, as Restoration comedy tended to do, at their basest, if wittiest. As Ernest Bernbaum puts it, “Confidence in the goodness of average human nature is the mainspring of sentimentalism” (2). We are thus already on the road leading to Rousseau and the beginnings of Romanticism.

In England this movement towards a literature of sensibility was bound up with the rise already mentioned of the new merchant or middle classes, for whom the English novel was invented. A major form of communication for this new class was the literary essay, as written by Steele

and his friend Thomas Addison in *The Tatler*, a magazine which they founded together in 1709; a few years later they replaced this with *The Spectator*, and both magazines were enormously influential in shaping public taste. The idea of correctness became dominant. As part of this idea, a proper kind of comedy was approved, and Steele himself wrote it. The best example is his *The Conscious Lovers* (1722), which was both popular and influential. Loosely based on a comedy by the Latin playwright Terence, *The Conscious Lovers* takes great care to present models of good behaviour. There is a scene in it where the hero refuses to take part in a duel, not out of common sense as was the case in Farquhar but out of moral scruple over the wrongness of duelling. Steele said he wrote the play for the sake of that one scene. He was thus turning drama into a didactic direction and robbing it of the boisterous and, not to mince words, randy energies it had formerly celebrated. *The Tatler* condemned duelling as dangerous and foolish, and Steele used the stage to make the same point. It is perhaps rather sad to have to confess that an Irish playwright should have conferred upon comedy this responsible role as arbiter of taste and corrector of public morals (Kenny 283). But there it is, and we have to remember that Steele was a man of his time, a leader of the movement which was to lead to the novels of Samuel Richardson and the weeping comedies, *comédies larmoyants*, which were very popular from 1740 on. The man of feeling became the modern hero.

Among the playwrights who succeeded Steele in this genre was another Irishman, Hugh Kelly (1739-77). Kelly's most successful play was *False Delicacy* (1768), which was a great favourite and still remains a good index of eighteenth-century taste. It is sentimental in the sense that it deals with lovers so refined that neither will give the least sign of affection, in case this should be inappropriate. The audience is meant to admire and be moved to tears by the delicacy. It is all, of course, highly artificial, but this is what sentimental comedy essentially is.

Oliver Goldsmith put about the idea that this sentimental comedy drove genuine or what he called "the laughing comedy" off the English stage. Historians for a long time tended to take Goldsmith at his word, and therefore to regard Goldsmith's own comedies as rescuing English comedy from a fate worse than death. In fact, as modern scholars such as Robert D. Hume and John Loftis have clearly shown, the comedy of the later eighteenth century by no means drove out laughing comedy, which persisted alongside its sentimental brother all through this time. Therefore the picture is not as simple as historians once liked to think. Among those writers who kept alive the laughing comedy was another Irish playwright, Arthur Murphy (1727-1805). Murphy wrote well-made comedies of intrigue, the best of which are probably *The Way to Keep Him* (1760) and *All in the Wrong* (1761). But another was Frances Sheridan (1724-66), who tends to get forgotten perhaps simply because she was a woman. She is too often referred to as the mother of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, perhaps the most famous of the eighteenth-century Irish playwrights, but she deserves credit in her own right, without such

patronising. She wrote three plays which have been edited by Robert Hogan and Jerry C. Beasley in an edition published in Delaware in 1984. I want briefly to write about two of these, and to urge the reader to see her as an unjustly neglected figure.

*The Discovery* (1763) was described by the actor David Garrick, who played in it, as the best comedy of the age. It concerns the manoeuvres of a rather villainous father, Lord Medway, to marry off his two children to people they do not love in order to make money. This is comedy of intrigue, and is often contrived in the way it works, but the characters are lively and, above all, the dialogue is superb. Frances Sheridan had a style which ignores the pressures of sentimentalism in favour of the energy of pure mimicry. For example, early on in *The Discovery* the young married man Sir Harry Flutter describes to Lord Medway how badly he and his young wife are getting on. It is necessary to know here that Lord Medway is deliberately trying to break up this marriage, and is hypocritically pretending to be showing Sir Harry how best to keep the love of his wife. But just listen to the way Sir Harry can bring to life a conversation he is reporting:

SIR HARRY: Why, I came home at three o'clock (in the morning), as I told you, a little tipsey too, by the by; but what was that to her, you know; for I am always good humoured in my cups? To bed I crept, as softly as a mouse, for I had no more thought of quarrelling with her then, than I have now with your Lordship—La, says she, with a great heavy sigh, it is a sad thing that one must be disturbed in this manner; and on she went, mutter, mutter, mutter, for a quarter of an hour; I all the while lying as quiet as a lamb, without making her a word of answer; at last, quite tired of her perpetual *buzzing* in my ear, Prythee be quiet, Mrs. Wasp, says I, and let me sleep (I was not thoroughly awake when I spoke). Do so Mr. *Drone*, grumbled she, and gave a great flounce. I said no more, for in two minutes I was as fast as a top. Just now, when I came down to breakfast, she was seated at the tea-table all alone, and looked so neat, and so cool, and so pretty, that e'gad, not thinking of what had passed, I was going to give her a kiss; when up she toss'd her demure little face, You were a pretty fellow last night, Sir Harry, says she. So I am every night, I hope, Ma'am, says I, making her a low bow. Was not that something in your manner, my Lord?

LORD MEDWAY: Oh very well, very well—

SIR HARRY: Pray where were you till that unconscionable hour, says she? At the tavern drinking, says I, very civilly. And who was with you, Sir? Oh, thought I, I'll match you for your enquiries; I nam'd your Lordship,



and half a dozen more wild fellows (whom, by the way I had not so much as seen), and two or three girls of the town, added I, whistling, and looking another way—  
LORD MEDWAY: That was rather a little, though but a little, too much.

SIR HARRY: Down she slapp'd her cup and saucer; If this be the case, Sir Harry, (half sobbing) I shall desire a separate bed. That's as *I* please, Madam, sticking my hand in my side, and looking her full in the face. No, It shall be as *I* please, Sir—it *shan't*, Madam; it *shall*, Sir; and it *shan't* and it *shall*, and it *shall* and it *shan't* was bandied backwards and forwards till we were both out of breath with passion. (Frances Sheridan 46)

What is good about this is that it is speech, even though it is partly indirect speech. It is dialogic in the way good comic speech should be, whereas a lot of eighteenth-century comedy, including Steele and Kelly, reads like slabs of prose from a novel, with every phrase tidied up and the whole thing quite lacking in the rhythms of actual speech. Frances Sheridan obviously loved gossip, and her plays are often just that: the tittle-tattle of the breakfast table engaged in by characters only partially aware of whom they are confiding in. To move on her plots she has to have recourse to melodrama and unlikely revelations, which rob the plays of their sense of the natural. Thus Lord Medway discovers—hence the title—that the woman he was pushing his son to marry is actually his own daughter, from the days of his wild youth, and the shock is enough to convert him to benevolence. So there is a trace of sentimentalism after all. But it is not enough to quench the joyous spirit in which the play is written.

*A Journey to Bath* (1766) exists only in a three-act fragment, as the play seems never to have been staged, but once again it is full of lively talk and eccentric, gossipy characters. It is often said that this play must have influenced her son Richard Brinsley, whose *The Rivals* is set in Bath likewise, a spa in the west of England, and contains some characters rather like those in his mother's play. Obviously, since it was a theatrical household, the father being an actor and playwright also, the young boy must have heard his mother read from *A Journey to Bath*, and must have heard too why David Garrick rejected it and how his mother was enraged by this and tried to get Garrick to change his mind. It seems clear that young Richard Brinsley simply picked up several hints from his mother's comedy and re-worked these for his own comedy *The Rivals* thirteen years later. Mrs Malaprop is one of Sheridan's great creations in that play: a portrait of a woman of imperious presence but with a most uncertain grasp of the English language. Indeed, as her name implies, she is perpetually misusing words in an absurd fashion. Well, listen to Mrs Sheridan's character in *A Journey to Bath* and you will hear the first, glorious intimations of Mrs Malaprop. On being asked why she



did not attend a certain fashionable breakfast that morning Mrs Tryfort replies: "It was not for want of being *askd* I assure your ladyship; but I was so ill! ha ha ha! lord it isn't long since I got out of bed. —I declare this is a fatiguing life one leads, and exhilerates (sic) one's spirits so much, that I have scarce strength enough to rise in a morning; but then one keeps such good company ha ha that it makes amends for the bad hours" (Frances Sheridan 174). The diction is entirely natural and the rhythm of the prose delightful: one can hear this gossipy woman as if she were real.

Mrs Tryfort is described as "that fat woman, that lyes abed one half of the day, and laughs the other half" (161). Her purpose is matchmaking for her daughter, and so much of her conversation centres on the men she sees around her. In trying to impress she makes many mistakes in the words she chooses, usually saying the opposite of what she means. Thus she says 'exhilarates' for 'enervates,' 'illiterate' for 'literary,' a 'perfect progeny' for 'prodigy,' 'contagious countries' for 'contiguous,' etc. Many of these same mistakes were to be used again by Mrs Malaprop. In a way the joke is a refinement on the Irishman's misuse of speech, first heard on the English stage in Shakespeare's *Henry V* (1599), when Captain Macmorris appears as the first stage Irishman. Frances Sheridan's husband Thomas had created a character called Captain O'Blunder in a farce entitled *The Brave Irishman* (1743), and part of the comic effect this soldier makes in London is through his Irishisms and inadequate mastery of English. Frances Sheridan went beyond this simple ethnic joke and created a character who is funny because of her natural absurdity.

The stage Irishman was an obvious manifestation of colonialist superiority. Irish playwrights tended to make use of the type simply because it was very popular on the London stage, this portrait of the Irish as a blunderer, a booby, but good-hearted and generous as well. It was, of course, entirely patronising. The stage Irishman could either be a soldier, in which case he was usually a boaster or braggart, or else he could be a servant, in which case he was woefully stupid but with a heart of gold and generous to a fault. It was always a good acting role and usually, oddly enough, played by an actor who was not Irish at all. At least one playwright, however, made it his business to write against the grain and to attack the idea of the stage Irishman. This was Charles Macklin (1699-1797), a most interesting figure in the history of the English theatre. Born McLaughlin in the Inishowen peninsula in the northernmost part of Ireland, Macklin seems to have first been Catholic and Irish-speaking before his talents brought him to London and he re-created himself as one of the best actor-playwrights of the age. As actor, he is best remembered for his portrayal of Shylock, a role played as a buffoon before Macklin re-interpreted it as tragic. It can be said that Macklin's interest in deconstructing the stage Jew was then extended into a dedication to challenge the stage Irishman.

Macklin wrote many plays, in which he acted also, of which four have lasted the test of time. *Love a la Mode* (1759), which is a farce in two acts, assembles no less than four stereotypes, a Jew, an Englishman, a Scotsman and an Irishman, in a plot of rivalry in love. The Irishman, Sir Callaghan O'Brallaghan, is a soldier in the Prussian army, an outlet Catholics availed of who were barred from promotion in the British army. (One finds this character in the plays of John O'Keefe also.) The other characters expect O'Brallaghan to conform to the type of drunken, boasting Irishman. But when the Jew asks, "how many might you kill in a battle?" and clearly expects a foolish answer, the Irishman replies coolly, "Why, I generally kill more in a battle than a coward would choose to look upon, or than an impertinent fellow would be able to eat" (Macklin 55). We hear of O'Brallaghan's feats of drinking but he never appears on stage drunk, as the Englishman does. Macklin reverses all the clichés about the Irishman, presented as witty, a good singer, urbane and (in contrast to the Scotsman) capable of arguing without coming to blows, and in the end victorious in love. This challenge to the national stereotype is extended in *The True-born Irishman* (1762), another farce in two acts. In recent times Brian Friel adapted this play into one act, under the title *The London Vertigo* (1992), which sums up the theme nicely. Set in Dublin, for a change, Macklin's play satirises the social pretensions of the Anglophile Mrs O'Dogherty, who has just returned from London with a hatred of everything Irish and has altered her very name to Diggerty as being more genteel and fashionable. The plot concerns her husband's attempts to teach her a lesson and cure her of her foolish anti-Irish sentiments. It is interesting that this play was a big success in Dublin but a failure in London, and was taken off after only one performance. It was a costly lesson for the playwright, but it underlines one important point, that the Irish playwright had an easier task in reinforcing national stereotypes than in attempting to overturn them. For the rest of the eighteenth century the stage Irishman, becoming more and more sentimentalised, continued to be a popular character in comedies by authors who, in many cases, were not Irish at all.

A significant figure here was Richard Cumberland (1732-1811), a sentimental playwright who nevertheless reinscribed the Irishman as a character deserving respect. In his most popular play *The West Indian* (1771), Cumberland rehabilitated not just one but two outcasts, the black West Indian and the despised Irish soldier. Nowadays, when post-colonial theory is a strong feature of cultural studies, it is interesting to note how Cumberland aligns the Irish and the West Indian as worthy of assimilation into the British imperialist condition. We can see here the beginnings of liberalism within English cultural attitudes. Cumberland stated that he saw an opening in the theatre for championing marginalised ethnic types, therefore looked into society for victims of prejudice. He was soon to include the Jew in this noble cause (*The Jew*, 1794). Cumberland's general purpose was to get spectators to look upon such outcasts with pity. Thus the Irish character in *The West Indian*, Major

O'Flaherty, is represented as brave and patriotic, sympathetic towards others and generous in every way. Here we see how sentimental comedy can have a valuable political role to play. Cumberland's plays were so popular that they must have affected public attitudes. Yet however sympathetic Cumberland may have made the Irish on the English stage he glamourised rather than helped eliminate the type. It persisted into the nineteenth century where it was further developed and extended into melodrama by Dion Boucicault (1820-90). It was not until the Irish Literary Theatre was founded in 1897 that the stereotyped or stage Irishman began to appear politically incorrect and was abolished.

Undoubtedly, the highpoint of English comedy in the eighteenth century was reached in the plays of Oliver Goldsmith (1728-74) and Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816). Goldsmith wrote only two plays, *The Good Natur'd Man* (1768) and *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773). The former is quite a sentimental piece, autobiographical in the sense that Goldsmith himself was generous to a fault. It is surprising that it is sentimental, because Goldsmith wrote an important essay attacking the vogue for sentimentalism, entitled "An Essay on the Theatre; or A Comparison between Laughing and Sentimental Comedy" (1773). Goldsmith resented the success of Hugh Kelly's *False Delicacy* while his own *The Good Natur'd Man* was a flop, and so one must take into account a certain amount of injured feeling here. Moreover, there is undoubtedly some sentimentalism in both of Goldsmith's own plays, as there is in Sheridan's *The Rivals* also. But his, because sentimentalism or romantic idealism, was very much part of the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age, and drama of its nature provides a structure of feeling, as Raymond Williams puts it, corresponding to the atmosphere or mood of the times (9-12). In any case, here is how Goldsmith ends his essay:

Humour at present seems to be departing from the Stage, and it will soon happen, that our Comic Players will have nothing left for it but a fine Coat and a Song. It depends on the Audience whether they will actually drive those poor Merry Creatures from the Stage, or sit at a Play as gloomy as at the Tabernacle. It is not easy to recover an art when once lost; and it would be but a just punishment that when, by our being too fastidious, we have banished Humour from the Stage, we should ourselves be deprived of the art of Laughing. (Goldsmith, III, 213)

Usually, Goldsmith is given credit for stemming the tide of sentimental comedy which threatened to banish humour from the English stage. His style of comedy goes back to Farquhar, and is usually set in the countryside, where natural values are endorsed. *She Stoops to Conquer* is Goldsmith's masterpiece, and has never been off the stage since 1773. Recently, in spring 1995, the English director Jonathan Miller directed *She Stoops to Conquer* in Dublin, and chose to emphasise the Irish side



of the play, the characters, the humour, and the fact that the central incident actually happened to Goldsmith himself. He asked a local man (Kelly) for directions. Kelly mischievously misdirected Goldsmith to a big house but warned him that the owner was such an eccentric fellow that he preferred not to think of the place as an inn, and that Goldsmith must ignore the fellow's attempts to act the aristocrat with him. So Goldsmith went to the big house and sure enough there was this gentleman who treated his guest very cordially but insisted on sharing his company and speaking familiarly with him. Goldsmith was quite curt with the fellow, went off to bed, and in the morning called loudly for his bill. To his embarrassment, his host informed him that the house was by no means an inn, and Goldsmith realised that a joke had been played on him. The play is subtitled *The Mistakes of a Night* and uses this episode as its central incident. The hero Marlow has a double identity: before women of quality he is too shy to speak or even to look at them, but before barmaids and women of a lower class he is quite the Don Juan. The daughter of the host then pretends to be a barmaid and it turns out that she is the very lady he has come down the country to see, on his father's orders, as a prospective wife. This double personality which makes Marlow so absurd and amusing for an audience can be interpreted as the Irishman in London, split between his own sense of himself and the self of which as outsider he is profoundly unsure. We may recall that Oscar Wilde created the mask of the dandy to protect himself and that Shaw taught himself to be a public speaker to hide his shyness. Thus Goldsmith's play, while remaining a comedy of universal interest, can be read as dramatising the great, indeed obsessive question for the Irish writer, namely national identity.

Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775) is likewise one of the highlights of English eighteenth-century comedy and at the same time something of a parable about the duality of Irish identity. It presents the absurd situation of a young man who creates a second identity and becomes his own rival for a woman his father thinks is someone else. Played now it is enormously funny, but when it was first staged in London it was damned and had to be taken off and re-written. One of the reasons was that the part of Mrs Malaprop was too long and became tedious, another was that the lovers Faulkland and Julia were (though satirised) too sentimental. A third reason was that the Irish soldier in the play, Sir Lucius O'Trigger, caused offence as a stereotype. Sheridan was embarrassed by this reception and insisted that he had meant no offence to his native country. It is clear that on several levels Sheridan had seriously misjudged the contemporary taste. Perhaps this was the result of Cumberland's *The West Indian* (1771). In any case, it is quite extraordinary that in the space of eleven days Sheridan was able to revise the play and convert it into the hit it has remained ever since. Unlike Goldsmith's, Sheridan's is a comedy of wit. In that regard, he returned English comedy beyond Farquhar to the style of Restoration comedy (especially Congreve). For example, the heroine Lydia, who has highly

romantic notions about elopement with the lover she thought was a lowly ensign rather than an officer in the army, speaks in a language as brittle and witty as Congreve's Millimant. Here she is in Act V, when the elopement does not take place and her lover is found to be nobler than she thought:

Why, is it not provoking; when I thought we were coming to the prettiest distress imaginable, to find myself made a mere Smithfield bargain of at last—There had I projected one of the most sentimental elopements'—so becoming a disguise!—so amiable a ladder of Ropes! Conscious Moon—four horses—Scotch parson—with such surprise to Mrs. Malaprop—and such paragraphs in the New-papers! Oh, I shall die with disappointment. (R. B. Sheridan, I, 135)

The use of adjectives such as “prettiest,” “sentimental,” “becoming,” and so on, and the contrasting use of such concrete details as “Smithfield bargain” (where horses were sold) and “Scotch parson” (a reference to Gretna Green), suggesting the realistic detail of a cross-border marriage without a licence, show that Lydia is intelligently aware of the world around her while she is playing the game of romantic heroine. Such deliberate attitudinising, a kind of self-conscious awareness of role-playing, is an actor's or actress's delight, and gives to *The Rivals* a most lively theatrical dimension. The imagination, as well as the style, recalls the Restoration comedy. Indeed, Sheridan adapted a Restoration comedy at this time under the title *A Trip to Scarborough* (1777), based on Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* (1697). But Sheridan's style, while similar to Congreve's in its brilliance and precision of phrase, is more warm-hearted. He goes for a balance between ridicule of folly and witty celebration of humanity. Sincerity and good-heartedness win out over calculation and hypocrisy.

Critics are divided over whether *The Rivals* or *The School for Scandal* (1777) is Sheridan's best play. Both of them are well-crafted comedies of manners, with some excellent comic situations, and with a style both polished and lively. Both, too, contain elements of Sheridan's own experience and are permeated by his easy-going Irish humour. *The School for Scandal*, however, strikes deeper in that it confronts the hypocrisy masked by urban sophistication. The framework to the play is the London salon presided over by Lady Sneerwell, where gossip reigns supreme, and as Sir Peter Teazle says, who fears for his wife in this company, “a character dead at every word, I suppose.” The line echoes Alexander Pope's social satire in *The Rape of the Lock*. Through the school for scandal this atmosphere is created on stage by characters with such delightful names as Snake, Candour, Sir Benjamin Backbite, and directed and manipulated by Lady Sneerwell, bent on as much mischief as possible. The plot centres on one of her companions, Joseph Surface, attempting

to cheat his brother Charles out of his inheritance. The play perhaps owes something to Moliere's *Tartuffe* (1668) in this respect. But there is nothing in Moliere's play to equal the exquisite screen scene in *The School for Scandal*, where the hero Charles exposes Joseph. This is rightly regarded as one of the most powerful denouements in English comedy. It works both theatrically and comically as the suspense mounts to the point where Charles finds hidden in the library first Lady Teazle behind a screen and then her unfortunate husband Sir Peter hiding behind a door and hoping to catch Joseph with a French milliner. No words can cover the embarrassment all round when Joseph's liaison with Lady Teazle is exposed instead. As upholder of "sentiments" or moral sermons, Joseph stands revealed as a double-dealer, while husband and wife look at each other and wonder which is the bigger fool. Charles, up to now the outsider, is suddenly the moral victor. It is a truly wonderful scene, an extended moment of truth.

If it can be said that Goldsmith and Sheridan between them rescued English comedy from the dangers of sentimentalism, and brought it to heights unreached again until another Irishman, Oscar Wilde, appeared on the London scene c. 1890, there is one last figure to be mentioned before bringing this survey to a close. John O'Keeffe (1747-1833) is now best and probably only known for one play, *Wild Oats* (1791), rediscovered by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1976 and revived with great success. In September 1995 *Wild Oats* once again won high praise in a revival. Why was it left to the English theatre to re-discover this neglected Irish playwright? Why is it that the Abbey Theatre only staged *Wild Oats* one year after the RSC and could find nothing much in it? Why did the great critic William Hazlitt describe O'Keeffe as "our English Moliere?" (qtd. in Kavanagh 354). These are questions which go to the heart of the colonial problem. So far as O'Keeffe is concerned, the Irish writer simply had to accommodate to the dominant taste in London. He succeeded in making Irish airs and music popular on the London stage in little plays which at that time were classed as comic operas but were hardly more than afterpieces or filler material in a long evening's entertainment. O'Keeffe began to make a reputation as a comic writer with *Tony Lumpkin in Town* (1773), based on the mischievous character in Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*. In this way he signalled his desire to maintain the continuity of a tradition. Ever since George Farquhar treated London to Irish high spirits in *Love and a Bottle* in 1698, the Irish playwrights had continued to challenge and modify the nature of English comedy. John O'Keeffe is here the link between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, for after him comes Boucicault and romantic melodrama. O'Keeffe, a Catholic from Dublin whose family had fought for King James against William of Orange and lost everything, provides a good concluding example of the Irish writer who is happy to serve the cause of English entertainment and is grateful to have in the theatre a world which, by law, had nothing to do with politics. This is the secret of *Wild Oats* and its popularity today: it is pure theatre, for,



having at its centre theatre people and the love of performance, it is a comedy about illusion and re-constructed identity.

The director of the 1976 revival of *Wild Oats* remarked that the hero Rover, the strolling player who is forever quoting from plays, "lacks parents and identity. He is a hero in search of his true inheritance, and until he can find that, not even his speech can be called his own" (O'Keefe 3). Accordingly, *Wild Oats* serves well enough as an example of what English comedy as written by Irish men and women (let us not forget Sheridan's mother!) was in pursuit of: a world elsewhere in which, it may be said, the doubleness of the Irish character, torn between a half-forgotten past and a colonialist present, is forever in search of resolution. Out of that conflict, perhaps, out of that double vision, emerged the strange ease, happiness and delight of comedies written with detachment and a critical eye by Irish exiles in London.

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