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‘Why Did George Farquhar’s Work Turn Sectarian After *The Constant Couple*?’

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Surveys of Irish literature often ignore or marginalise the Derry-born playwright, George Farquhar, due to what Christopher Morash has justly called the ‘vicious anti-Catholicism’¹ in his plays. For example, Farquhar is not even mentioned in celebrated surveys of Irish literature, such as Declan Kiberd’s *Irish Classics* (2000), Norman Vance’s *Irish Literature: A Social History* (1999), and Daniel Corkery’s *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (1931). Likewise, he is only mentioned once or twice in passing in seminal studies such as Nicholas Grene’s *The Politics of Irish Drama* (1999), Malcolm Brown’s *The Politics of Irish Literature* (1972), and Vivien Mercier’s *The Irish Comic Tradition* (1962). When critics of Irish literature do engage with his work, it is often to praise the first two plays (*Love and a Bottle* and *The Constant Couple*) for their perceived Irishness, and to worry over the sectarian portrayals of Irish Catholics – and Catholics in general – in his last three and best-known plays (*The Twin Rivals*, *The Recruiting Officer*, and *The Beaux Stratagem*).² Despite this privileging of the early work over the later classics, such critics have (curiously) not explained why there is a distinct increase in Farquhar’s sectarianism after his first two plays. This increase can be traced directly to the negative responses by jealous English playwrights and critics to the extraordinary popularity of *The Constant Couple*.

Love and a Bottle (1698), Farquhar’s first play, is also his most Irish. According to most accounts, he wrote the play while still living in Dublin and then brought it with him to London at the suggestion of his friend, the Irish actor Robert Wilks (who worked between the English and Irish capitals). The play premiered at London’s Drury Lane, where it was well-received, though not wildly successful. It is a noteworthy play in the Farquhar canon for two reasons. First, in contrast to

¹ Christopher Morash. *A History of Irish Theatre, 1601-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. 37. I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Irish Research Council, as well as the Moore Institute at the National University of Ireland, Galway, for assistance during my research for this article.

² See, for example, Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre, 1601-2000*, 36-37; Seamus Deane. *A Short History of Irish Literature*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994. 119-121.

his later, anti-Catholic work, the characters in *Love and a Bottle* mention nuns and the papacy without disparagement.³ Second, while three of his post-1699 plays feature a single, dim-witted, Irish Catholic character, this play – despite being set in London – features multiple Irish characters from diverse class and religious backgrounds. These include a middle-class Irish Protestant character (the hero, George Roebuck, modelled on the author), a lower-class Irish Catholic character (Mrs Trudge, the woman whom Roebuck impregnated back in Ireland but who he does not want to marry), and two ‘Big House’ Irish Protestant characters (the Lovewell siblings, who are ‘Anglo-Irish’ in the truest sense of the term, since they split their time between estates in England and Ireland).⁴

Roebuck is an Irish gentleman scoundrel in the Jonah Barrington vein, and he is hard to hate, despite his frequently despicable behaviour. This is interesting characterisation by Farquhar, because it is a ‘warts and all’ portrait of an Irish Protestant, and not an idealised one. Similarly, Mrs Trudge, whose Catholicism is signalled by a humorous Irish song she sings about flirtation after Mass,⁵ is unique among Farquhar’s Irish Catholic characters in that she is presented in a relatively dignified and ultimately sympathetic way. It is true that Mrs Trudge, in keeping with the ‘Stage Irish’ stereotype, is rather dim intellectually. (For example, she forgets what she is supposed to say when taking part in a scheme of deception, and only manages to redeem herself by lucky verbal dexterity.) However, Farquhar clearly wants us to sympathise with her, if only for the appallingly heartless – if darkly comical – way in which she and her son are treated by Roebuck. Indeed, at the end of the play, Farquhar *openly* reveals his sympathy for Mrs Trudge by having Roebuck (and a poet called Lyrick) pull a rouse which ensures that she and her son will be financially comfortable for the remainder of their lives.

In Farquhar’s second play, *The Constant Couple* (1699), no Irish characters appear, but many critics have noted that the hero, Sir Harry Wildair, can be seen as Irish.⁶ Wildair’s education in France means he approaches English society at an angle. Moreover, the role of Wildair was, until 1740, strongly associated with two Irish actors: Farquhar’s friend, Robert Wilks, and Peg

³ George Farquhar. *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume I*. Edited by Shirley Strum Kenny. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988. 96, 107.

⁴ Although these two siblings, Edward and Leathe Lovewell, are played as English in most productions, Farquhar demonstrates that they are, at least on some level, Irish. For example, Leathe is able to pass herself off as a lower-class Irish servant boy for much of the play, and Edward wants to have ‘an *Irish* entertainment’ at his wedding, which his sister subsequently arranges. (Farquhar, *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume I*, 108. The italics in this quote – and in subsequent quotes from Farquhar’s works in this essay – are present in the original texts. It was common to italicise proper nouns in Farquhar’s time.)

⁵ The song, although performed during the first run, was not included in the first edition of the play. It was, however, published as a separate broadsheet. Because of its unusual publication history, it is not always included in editions of the play. (For more on this, see Shirley Strum Kenny. Notes. *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume I*. By George Farquhar. Edited by Shirley Strum Kenny. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988. 11-12, 16-17.)

⁶ See, for example, Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre, 1601-2000*, 37; Christopher Murray. ‘Drama, 1690-1800’. *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Volume I*. Edited by Seamus Deane et. al. Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991. 500-507. 503, 505.)

Woffington (who, naturally, played the part in a girdle). Although the play is ostensibly a satire on the pilgrimages to Rome made by fashionable Catholics, and even non-Catholics, in Jubilee Year, the Jubilee itself is not discussed much in the play. Likewise, while the pope is mentioned a few times, he is not abused with nearly the same venom that one would expect from an English or Irish Protestant play of the period – especially from a writer like Farquhar, who, in his later plays, attacks Catholicism with such obvious relish. An example of the mildness of the play’s anti-Catholicism is an exchange between Clincher Senior’s servant and brother, in which the two men discuss Clincher Senior’s determination to attend the Jubilee in costly, regal style:

Dicky. Ay, sir, he’ll spend his whole estate at this same Jubilee. Who d’ye think lives at this same Jubilee?

Clincher Junior. Who, pray?

Dicky. The Pope.

Clincher Junior. The devil he does! My brother go to the place where the Pope dwells! He’s bewitched, sure!

Enter Tom Errand, in Clincher Senior’s Clothes.

Dicky. Indeed, I believe he is, for he’s strangely altered.

Clincher Junior. Altered! Why, he looks like a Jesuit already.⁷

As noted above, Farquhar’s decision to start attacking Catholicism – and Irish Catholics in particular – can be traced to the negative reactions of English writers and critics to the popularity of *The Constant Couple*. The play’s success displeased them for two reasons: Farquhar’s revolutionary approach to theatrical form and his nationality. *The Constant Couple* achieved wide popularity despite the fact that its author did not pay heed to the classical unities of Aristotle. While Farquhar’s supporters appreciated the way in which he played fast and loose with conventional dramatic structures, his critics believed that *The Constant Couple*’s popularity signalled a new low in the taste of London theatregoers. Of course, the playwright’s neglect of dramatic conventions was deliberate: as he explains in ‘A Discourse upon Comedy’ (1702), he is more interested in keeping the audience entertained from moment to moment than in being perceived as having written a ‘well made’ play.⁸

The second cause for resentment among English writers and critics was Farquhar’s Irish background. Denunciations in the wake of *The Constant Couple* repeatedly mention his Irishness. A survey of the anti-Farquhar prologues, satirical poems, and reviews of the period demonstrates the severity of the anti-Irish prejudice he faced. John Oldmixon’s prologue to Charles Gildon’s 1700

⁷ Farquhar, *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume I*, 200-201.

⁸ See George Farquhar. *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume II*. Edited by Shirley Strum Kenny. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988. 364-386.

adaptation of *Measure for Measure* claims that Farquhar's 'Irish pen' is in a 'dreadful War, with Wit and Sense', and he dismisses Farquhar's anarchic work as 'non-sense'.⁹ Since Farquhar had only recently provided a prologue for an opera by Oldmixon, the Irish playwright felt (as he said in a letter) 'scurrilously ... abus'd'¹⁰ by the Englishman. Farquhar quickly answered Oldmixon's charges by writing a new prologue to *The Constant Couple*, in which he defended his honour as a writer, but, tellingly, he did not rise to Oldmixon's bait regarding his Irish nationality.¹¹

Another attack on Farquhar that references the playwright's Irishness is Daniel Kenrick's satirical poem from 1700, *A New Session of the Poets: Occasioned By the Death of Mr. Dryden*, in which he is appalled that an Irishman is having such success. He writes:

That it would much disgrace the Throne of Wit,
If on't an Irish Deputy should sit;
And wonder'd why he'd longer here remain,
Who in his native Boggs might justly reign.¹²

Kenrick also claims (without significant foundation) that Farquhar plagiarised the character of Sir Harry Wildair from the English Restoration playwright, George Ethredge – a claim echoed by many anti-Farquhar critics of the time.

In Alexander Pope's poem from 1700, 'The First Epistle of the Second Book of Horace, Imitated', he famously criticises Farquhar for his 'pert, low dialogue'.¹³ Although Pope doesn't specifically mention Farquhar's Irishness in the poem, it is arguably implied in the insult – especially since Farquhar is insulted during the part of the poem that also critiques the Irish-educated William Congreve. Attacks referring to Farquhar's Irishness continued into the following years, with an anonymous prologue from 1703 dismissing his comedies as 'Irish Farce'.¹⁴ In Kenrick's 1704 follow-up to *A New Session of the Poets*, his criticisms of Farquhar become even more extreme (and even more anti-Irish). At one point, he actually calls the Protestant Farquhar a 'Teague'.¹⁵

Farquhar's reaction to being regarded by English writers and critics as an Irish 'Teague' was perhaps not unexpected for a Derry Protestant who – according to legend – was inside the walls during the Siege of Derry, fought for King William at the Battle of the Boyne, and had his childhood home (his father's parsonage) burned to the ground by Catholic rebels: he elected to

⁹ As quoted in Kenny, Notes, *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume I*, 131.

¹⁰ As quoted in Kenny, Notes, *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume I*, 132.

¹¹ He also rebutted Oldmixon's criticisms again in a Prologue to *The Twin-Rivals*. (See Farquhar, *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume I*, 475-476.)

¹² As quoted in Kenny, Notes, *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume I*, 133.

¹³ Alexander Pope. *The First Epistle of the Second Book of Horace, Imitated*. London: T. Cooper, 1737. 17.

¹⁴ As quoted in Kenny, Notes, *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume I*, 325.

¹⁵ As quoted in Kenny, Notes, *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume I*, 133.

distance himself from Irish Catholics in his subsequent works.¹⁶ Indeed, in all of Farquhar's plays that follow *The Constant Couple*, he either aggressively criticises Catholicism or features an offensively stupid Irish Catholic character. It was only after he had eventually convinced English audiences of his doctrinaire Protestantism and his loyalty to the English crown that the anti-Irish jibes stopped (or at least, slowed down).

The anti-Catholicism starts with the sequel to *The Constant Couple*, the relatively unsuccessful *Sir Harry Wildair* (1701). The play is dedicated to William of Orange, and Farquhar ostentatiously praises the sovereign, insisting that he 'asserted our Liberties at home against Popery and Thralldom, headed our Armies abroad with bravery and success, gave Peace to *Europe*, and Security to our Religion.'¹⁷ In the opening scene of the play itself, we are told that when Sir Harry's wife died in France, the French Catholics would not bury a 'Heretick' Protestant in their Catholic graveyard; therefore, Harry took his revenge by dressing up in his finery, going to a Nunnery, and 'getting six Nuns with Child, and [leaving] 'em to provide for their Heretick Bastards'.¹⁸ The grim implication is that the usually loveable rogue, Sir Harry, raped these women.

After the cool reception that greeted *Sir Harry Wildair*, Farquhar decided to try adapting the work of other authors for his next two plays. Scholars have traditionally dated the opera *The Stage-Coach* (a free translation of Jean de la Chapelle's farce, *Les Carrosses d'Orléans* (1681), written in collaboration with the French-born Peter Anthony Mottreux) to 1704, the year of its first verifiable performance and publication. However, there is evidence from Farquhar's letters and other contemporary sources – including internal evidence from the first published text – that it premiered sometime between April 1701 and February 1702.¹⁹ *The Stage-Coach* features the first of Farquhar's offensive, improbably stupid Irish Catholic characters – a man newly arrived in England from Tipperary called Macahone.²⁰ Macahone's speech is riddled with less-than-witty bulls, and, despite many obvious hints, he cannot tell that the woman he is marrying does not have a fortune (as she pretends) but is, instead, an impoverished actor. Macahone provides key evidence that saves one of the main English protagonists, but the English characters remain extremely condescending towards this Irish rustic throughout the play. From an Irish point of view, the only thing that can be said in defence of Farquhar's offensive caricature is that, if the play post-dates his marriage, he may have been mocking himself: in 1703, he married a widow that he was persuaded had an income of £700 per year, when she was, in fact, broke. Since *The Stage-Coach* was almost certainly written prior to Farquhar's nuptials, a much greater motivation for the creation of the character was his

¹⁶ This claim regarding Farquhar's childhood home was made by his widow. See J.R. Sutherland. 'New Light on George Farquhar'. *Times Literary Supplement*: 6 March 1937.171.

¹⁷ Farquhar, *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume I*, 252.

¹⁸ Farquhar, *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume I*, 265; 266.

¹⁹ See Kenny, Notes, *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume I*, 321-323.

²⁰ In the French original, this character is a Dutchman.

desire to distance himself from Irish Catholics and to stress his ardent English loyalty – something he would do in all of his remaining plays. As Eric Rothstein has suggested, the loyalist ‘military fervor’ and ‘anti-Catholic zeal’ of Farquhar’s later plays comforted his London audiences, since ‘such feelings [were] common to a great many middle-class English and Irish Protestants’.²¹

Farquhar’s next play, *The Inconstant* (1702), was based on John Fletcher’s *The Wild Goose Chase* (1621).²² In the Preface to the play, Farquhar conspicuously calls himself ‘*English*’; however, he also dedicates the play to a former classmate from Trinity College Dublin, Sir Richard Tighe, describing him as ‘a person [who] is so much ... a Credit to my Country’ (presumably, Ireland).²³ Thus, Farquhar positions himself very definitively as an ‘Anglo-Irish’ Briton. This is in stark contrast to his preface from the pre-sectarian play, *The Constant Couple*, in which he plays the humble, ‘mere Irish’, outsider; there, he had written that the success of *The Constant Couple* was not due to its excessive merit, but to the fact that ‘I have not been long enough in Town to raise Enemies against me; and the *English* are still kind to Strangers. I am below the Envy of great Wits, and above the Malice of little ones’.²⁴

In Act IV of *The Inconstant*, Farquhar has a character called Bizarre go out of his way to criticise Roman Catholic monasteries and nunneries. During a conversation with Oriana, Bizarre’s lengthy, disrespectful remarks include the following:

I don’t understand this Imprisoning People with the Keys of Paradise, nor the merit of that Virtue which comes by constraint ... Don’t you know that Religion consists in a Charity with all Mankind; and that you should never think of being friends with Heaven, till you have Quarrell’d with all the World[?]²⁵

This is, of course, the orthodox, low-church, Protestant view. Farquhar included it to show London audiences his allegiances; he is making it clear that, as the loyalist son of an Anglican clergyman, he is not to be confused with an Irish Teague.

Farquhar’s next play, *The Twin Rivals* (1702), features a dim, Irish Catholic ‘hero’ in the mould of Macahone from *The Stage-Coach*: a servant named – appropriately and stereotypically enough – Teague. Teague helps foil the plot against his master, but, despite this key role in the play, he possesses Stage Irish stupidity in abundance. For example, after hearing a false report that his master is dead, he asks his master where he wants to be buried.²⁶ Earlier in the play, his comparison

²¹ Eric Rothstein. *George Farquhar: Volume 58 of Twayne’s English Authors Series*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1967. 14.

²² We know that this play definitely premiered after *The Stage-Coach*, because the prologue to *The Inconstant* (written by Mottreux) contains a comic reference to ‘*slender Stage-Coach Fare*’. (Farquhar, *The Works of George Farquhar*, Volume I, 407.)

²³ Farquhar, *The Works of George Farquhar*, Volume I, 405; 404.

²⁴ Farquhar, *The Works of George Farquhar*, Volume I, 150.

²⁵ Farquhar, *The Works of George Farquhar*, Volume I, 444-445.

²⁶ Farquhar, *The Works of George Farquhar*, Volume I, 539.

of Carrickfergus with London (and preference for Carrickfergus) is meant to be foolish, not a subversive criticism of London.²⁷ Also, his extreme, abject loyalty seems like an attempt by Farquhar to say that ‘a good Irishman is a loyal Irishman’. In the play, Farquhar – like another Irish Protestant writer of the period, William Congreve²⁸ – shows disrespect for Irish Gaelic antiquities. He has Teague boast, ‘My Granfader was an *Irish* poet. – He did write a great Book of Verses about the Vars between St. *Patrick* and the Wolf-Dogs’.²⁹ Likewise, Farquhar uses Teague to express his crude, anti-Catholic prejudice; the Irish character says, ‘I did travel *France*, and *Spain*, and *Italy*; – Dear Joy, I did kish the Pope’s Toe, and dat will excuse me all the Sins of my Life; and fen I am dead, St. *Patrick* will excuse the rest’.³⁰

In Farquhar’s next play, *The Recruiting Officer* (1706), the anti-Catholicism, although not as pronounced as in his other post-1699 plays, is still there, laced through the dialogue. The Gunpowder Plot is mentioned, as are Irish Catholic troops fighting for England’s enemies on the continent.³¹ The stupidest, most gullible recruit uses a Roman Catholic expression (‘I have a Month’s mind’, meaning ‘I am determined’),³² most likely making him yet another of Farquhar’s dim, Catholic characters. An Irish Catholic woman is among the wives that Sergeant Kite has abandoned (the others are English and Dutch working-class women, indicating that women of such social standing are not to be respected). The Irishwoman’s Christian name – Sheila³³ – is an indication of her Catholic background, as is her poorly-paid occupation. (We are told that she ‘sells Potatoes upon *Ormond-Key* in *Dublin*’.)³⁴ One could argue that her surname, Snickereyes (meaning, literally, ‘laughing eyes’) is a reference to the supposedly happy-go-lucky but improvident character attributed to Irish Catholics at the time by English and Irish Protestants. Finally, the idea that some people (e.g. Roman Catholics and high-church Anglicans) regard marriage as ‘a Sacrament’³⁵ is mentioned but then implicitly disparaged through Farquhar’s criticisms of the institution throughout the rest of the play – and, indeed, his entire oeuvre. While the anti-Catholicism might not be stressed as obviously in *The Recruiting Officer*, he still distances himself from Irish Catholics and soothes London audiences through his inclusion of jarringly sincere royalist sentiments, as

²⁷ Farquhar, *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume I*, 538.

²⁸ We get a sense of Congreve’s cultural allegiance to his English characters and distance from a proud Irish identity, when, in *Love for Love* (1695), he solicits laughs through Valentine’s remark that a female of his acquaintance is ‘harder to be understood than a piece of Egyptian antiquity or an Irish manuscript: you may pore till you spoil your eyes and not improve your knowledge’. (William Congreve. *The Comedies of William Congreve*. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2005. 269.)

²⁹ Farquhar, *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume I*, 540.

³⁰ Farquhar, *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume I*, 540-541.

³¹ Farquhar, *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume II*, 40, 70. For a discussion of this reference to Irish ‘Wild Geese’ fighting abroad, see William Myers, ed. *The Recruiting Officer and Other Plays*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995. 368.

³² Farquhar, *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume II*, 63.

³³ The name is rendered ‘*Sheely*’ in the text. (See Farquhar, *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume II*, 43.)

³⁴ Farquhar, *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume II*, 43.

³⁵ Farquhar, *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume II*, 105.

characters repeatedly and unreservedly praise Queen Anne and the monarchy.³⁶

In Farquhar's final play, *The Beaux Stratagem* (1707), the sectarian agenda is most clearly evident from his inclusion of the character of Foigard (an Irish priest who is pretending to be a Belgian and whose real name is MacShane). As many critics have noted, the villainous Foigard falls perfectly in line with the traditional Stage Irishman of English dramatic tradition by representing Irish Catholics as deceitful and stupid. William Myers writes: 'Foigard is simply nasty and dull ... [H]e was educated at a famous school in Kilkenny [Kilkenny College, which Swift and Congreve attended], so he must have changed his religion to get an education, but the example of bright, honest Protestant boys has no effect on his irremediable native stupidity, and he returns shiftily to his Catholic allegiance'.³⁷ As Myers suggests, judging by the character of Foigard, the sectarian Farquhar seems to regard Irish Catholics as beyond redemption, as if the handicaps of their racial ancestry and early religious indoctrination are too great to overcome. Given Farquhar's sensitivity to being regarded as just another Teague, it is also noteworthy that he has one of the Englishmen damn Foigard as 'a down-right *Teague*'.³⁸

Farquhar's sectarianism in his later work is highly distasteful to people involved in Irish Studies who are from Roman Catholic backgrounds (or, indeed, to anyone who supports the spirit of tolerance and respect behind the Good Friday Agreement). Ignoring him, however, is a capital error. As a Protestant writer of Ulster Scots and 'Anglo-Irish' descent, his work expresses the sentiments of Irish communities who have too often been dismissed as 'not really Irish' by commentators with excessively narrow definitions of the word 'Irish'. While his sectarianism must be fully acknowledged and condemned, he is still an important Irish playwright. The first two, pre-sectarian plays are landmark works which an Irish theatre practitioner from any background should be proud to produce. (Indeed, the Waterford-based theatre company, Red Kettle, toured Ireland with a popular production of *The Constant Couple* in 1990, and, a year later, the Dublin-based theatre company, Rough Magic, mounted a highly-acclaimed production of Declan Hughes's adaptation of *Love and a Bottle*.) Farquhar's later work is valuable to those involved in Irish Studies if only because its political impetus gives additional insight into the confusion that many Irish Protestant writers (from Farquhar to Beckett) felt when they moved to England and discovered that their 'British' socio-political backgrounds meant nothing to the residents of Old Blighty, all too inclined to regard them as 'Teagues' or 'Paddies'.

³⁶ See, for example, Farquhar, *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume II*, 41, 60. Admittedly, Farquhar does cheekily have one of the characters imply that Queen Anne looks like a man (the character assumes that a picture of her on a coin is actually of King Charles II). (See Farquhar, *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume II*, 60, when the character refers to the image as 'Carolus' – Latin for 'Charles'.)

³⁷ William Myers. Introduction. *The Recruiting Officer and Other Plays*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995. xv-xvi. (For a discussion of Foigard's Irish educational background, see Michael Corder. Introduction. *The Beaux' Stratagem*. By George Farquhar. New York: W.W. Norton, 1990. xviii.)

³⁸ Farquhar, *The Works of George Farquhar, Volume II*, 191.