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GEORGES FEYDEAU AND THE AESTHETICS OF FARCE

by

STUART E. BAKER

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE AESTHETICS OF FARCE

God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to
confound the wise. I Corinthians 1:27

Every more general principle of aesthetics founders
on the farce. Kierkegaard¹

The Missing Standards of Farce

Before one can begin to examine the plays of Feydeau as farces it is necessary to discuss the nature and purpose of farce. Such a theoretical introduction would be unnecessary, if not tediously pedantic, were tragedies or comedies under consideration. The more respectable dramatic genres have already been thoroughly discussed and analyzed. There is disagreement among theoreticians, but the major premises and arguments are familiar. Farce, on the other hand, has rarely been subjected to theoretical analysis. The scarcity of farce theories alone would not make a new one necessary. One might even argue that this apparently unfortunate lack is really a boon to criticism by citing L. C. Knight's contention that such theories are lazy generalizations that

¹Sören Kierkegaard, "Farce is Far More Serious," Yale French Studies 14 (Winter, 1954-55):3.

serve only to hinder the criticism of individual plays.¹ But traditional farce, with its frivolous devotion to amusement and its apparent irrationality, is less susceptible to the tools of literary criticism than is the more respected genre of comedy. The criticism of individual plays may not require the formulas of the comic theorists, but it does depend upon at least a general agreement as to the purpose of this form of dramatic literature and the standards by which it should be evaluated. Such an understanding does not exist with respect to farce. It is judged by the standards of literary comedy and, not surprisingly, is usually found wanting. Before farce can be judged on its own terms, there must be some agreement as to its particular aims and the means by which it achieves them.

Kierkegaard, in support of the statement quoted at the head of this chapter, said that farce "is totally incapable of producing a uniform mood in the more cultured audience."² Traditionally a popular entertainment, farce has had difficulty gaining appreciation or understanding from the "more cultured audience" which includes its

¹"Notes on Comedy," in Comedy: Meaning and Form, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1965), pp. 181-83. Samuel Johnson made a similar observation in The Rambler (No. 125, May 28, 1751), reproduced in Paul Lauter, Theories of Comedy (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1964), pp. 253-58. Johnson discussed the hazards of defining or prescriptive criticism in two other Rambler essays (No. 156, September 14, 1751, and No. 158, September 21, 1751).

²"Farce is Far More Serious," p. 3.

self-appointed judges. The critics have usually seen farce in a negative light, describing what it lacks by comparison with literary comedy. Such assessments often lead, not illogically, to an attack on farce as undisciplined, vulgar, grotesque, or irrational. The attacks are frequently accompanied by some expression of bewilderment that their target, so obviously deplorable and unpleasant, should be so popular. Farce's ability to please is commonly assumed to spring from the ignorance, folly, or viciousness of the public. Dryden's comparison of comedy and farce is an excellent illustration of the literary point of view:

Comedy presents us with the imperfections of human nature: Farce entertains us with what is monstrous and chimerical. The one causes laughter in those who can judge of men and manners, by the lively representation of their folly or corruption: The other produces the same effect in those who can judge of neither, and that only by its extravagances. . . . But, how it happens, that an impossible adventure should cause our mirth, I cannot so easily imagine. Something there may be in the oddness of it, because on the stage it is the common effect of things unexpected, to surprise us into a delight: and that is to be ascribed to the strange appetite, as I may call it, of fancy.¹

Even many of those more sympathetic to farce see it as debased and undisciplined comedy. According to Lea, "when we care for neither character nor motives, but are content to be amused by whatever absurdity may be trumped

¹John Dryden, Preface to An Evening's Love, in Bernard F. Dukore, Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), p. 334.

up, it is farce."¹ Like Lea, Hughes sees farce as devoted to exciting laughter at any cost, and concludes that neither plot nor any other form of overall, unifying structure is important to farce:

Clearly enough, the structure of farce is readily divisible into two phases or levels: the framework and the details or, an even better figure, the thread and the separate beads. Of the two the former has little interest for us. Almost any form of intrigue or chain of incidents will serve to link the lazzi which are the real stuff of farce.²

The negative, reductive approach is carried further by Stephenson, who claims that farce has so little which really belongs to it that it is only a "method" and cannot properly be called a genre at all. His argument is circular, since it starts with the assumption that early farce was "inchoate vis comica in search of a body," and concludes that farce, being formless and protean, "indifferently assumes the shape of its materials."³ Despite his own faulty logic, his description of farce as "inchoate vis comica" represents the logical result of describing farce only in terms of what it is not.

Farce presents difficulties beyond its indulgence in apparent irrationality and formlessness. There is much

¹Kathleen Marguerite Lea, Italian Popular Comedy, 2 vols. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), 1:185.

²Leo Hughes, A Century of English Farce (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), p. 24.

³Robert C. Stephenson, "Farce as Method," in Corrigan, Comedy: Meaning and Form, pp. 318, 321.

in both the subject matter and the treatment of farce that many find disturbing. Farce is not gentle. "One of the hallmarks of farce," as Albert Bermel writes, "has been its pitilessness."¹ Although Bermel writes of farce in sympathetic and positive terms, many of the qualities he describes have caused others to see farce as even worse than irresponsible and frivolous. It is destructive; "it strives to reduce the pillars of society to ruins." It frequently employs physical violence: "Some or all of the characters in farce undergo physical damage." It is indiscriminate in its violence; the innocent suffer equally with the guilty. It does not confine itself to ridiculing correctible faults and vices, but invites us to laugh at "blindness, deafness, speech defects, goiters, and sundry other disfigurements and deficiencies." The characters themselves often seem less than human, or at least subnormal. "They are not equipped for reflection; they do not appear to lead self-conscious, independent lives nor think interesting thoughts." Bermel points out that it is unreasonable to object to the limited characterizations in farce, for if they "seemed more like human beings, we would be less able to laugh at their misfortunes."² But this may not be justification enough for

¹Albert C. Bermel, "Farce," in The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama, ed. John Gassner and Edward Quinn (New York: Thomas Crowell Co., 1969), p. 263.

²Ibid., pp. 263-65.

some, particularly those who, in the tradition of Hobbes, assume laughter is always derisive. Shaw, who attempted to "humanize" both melodrama and farce, argued that conventional farces produced "base laughter" by turning "human beings on to the stage as rats are turned into a pit, that they may be worried for the entertainment of the spectators." Such laughter, he felt, meant the "deliberate indulgence of that horrible, derisive joy in humiliation and suffering which is the beastliest element in human nature."¹ Even Eric Bentley, who strongly defends farce, finds its basic appeal in the enjoyment of violence and aggression, which he justifies as a harmless outlet for hostile, anti-social feelings.² But by itself this is a weak defense, for it puts farce in a class with pornography. It is properly an argument against censorship, but it cannot justify calling farce an art, however humble. One may instinctively feel that there is a great difference between the violence in farce and the dehumanized sex and sadism of pornography, but to understand farce and to defend it as an art, one must define the nature of that difference.

¹George Bernard Shaw, Our Theatres in the Nineties, Standard ed., 3 vols. (London: Constable and Co., 1932), 2:118-19.

²Eric Bentley, "The Psychology of Farce," in "Let's Get a Divorce!" and Other Plays, ed. Eric Bentley (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958), p. xiii.

Literary Bias and
Scornful Laughter

Surely the key to the difference is in laughter. But to discover the nature and meaning of farce laughter, it is necessary to dispel a long-established prejudice regarding the function of laughter in art. Of the numerous and varied theories of laughter which have been offered since the time of Plato, one theory, or group of theories, has found especial favor with literary critics: those formulas that see the source of laughter in derision or a sense of superiority. These theories offer them something the others do not provide: a rational basis for comedy. Corrective comedy, founded on derisive laughter, not only has a useful social function, it puts laughter firmly on the side of reason. To the advocates of superior or derisive mirth, the person laughing always maintains a view consistent with his rational or serious perception of the thing laughed at. He shares the judgmental bias of the critic. Comedy can then be defended as fundamentally serious, with laughter serving to reinforce its rational content. The theory of scornful laughter provides comedy with an admirable defense against the charge of triviality, but this defense has certain disadvantages. It effectively limits the scope of comedy in two important ways. First, to the extent that it elicits laughter, comedy must be a representation of reality. Comedy must direct laughter beyond itself and

focus on the abuses of the world. If it presents objects or events that cannot reasonably be said to represent absurdities in the real world, then comedy itself becomes the target of laughter, and the comedian is open to the charge that he is debasing himself for the derisive pleasure of the spectators. Moreover, such laughter would be pointless. Feeling superior to imaginary and impossible absurdities can hardly be an edifying or artistic experience. The spectator is in the absurd position of priding himself on his superiority to nothing. Second, comedy must be limited in the kinds of reality it represents, avoiding all objects unworthy of derision. The physical deformities and violent abuse characteristic of farce must be shunned, for the comic portrayal of such things invites the audience to mock that which they should pity. The theory of scornful laughter, by the same criteria with which it affirms the value of comedy, must condemn farce as either worthless or harmful.

Modern critics, less defensive about the value of comic art than those of earlier periods, are also less insistent that comedy be corrective. They may even be embarrassed by the idea, perhaps fearing that if comedy were judged on its effectiveness in mending the ways of men, it could logically be dismissed as a waste of effort. But the underlying assumption of corrective comedy, that laughter implies censure, is still the basis of most literary discussions of comedy. If today's critics are hesitant to

affirm the moral usefulness of comedy, they still cling to the idea of laughter as a rational judgment of worth. It is a notion that greatly simplifies their task. To discover the meaning of a comedy, one need ask only who or what is being mocked. Nonrealistic comedies present a greater challenge and a wider selection of interpretations, but the aim of the critic is the same: discover the author's target and the mystery has been solved.

Even if false, the assumption that laughter is always derisive probably causes little serious misinterpretation in the case of literary comedy. Most such plays can be properly regarded as portrayals of the absurdities of life, whether they are presented realistically, symbolically, or in exaggerated form. More importantly, there is much in literary comedy that is not directly related to provoking laughter. The vision of a critic biased toward scornful laughter may be limited by his prejudice, but it need not be distorted. In farce, the opportunity for misunderstanding is much greater. When farce is noticed by the critics, it is apt to be treated, like comedy, as a critical commentary on the real world. Pierre Pathelin is praised for its portrayal of the roguery of lawyers, Labiche admired for his exposure of bourgeois pompousness. Feydeau is esteemed for his observation of the foibles of his time or for anticipating the Absurdist vision of the universe.¹ Specifically

¹ See p. 229 below.

farcical elements may be mentioned, often by way of apology, but are rarely discussed or analyzed. The assumption of most is that laughter, whether in comedy or farce, must be critical in order to be defensible.

Philosophical Laughter

But it is not necessary to assume laughter is derisive in order to find that it plays a significant role in the meaning of even acknowledged classics of literature. The spirit of festive or carnival laughter found by Barber in the comedies of Shakespeare, by Segal in the plays of Plautus, and by Bakhtin in the works of Rabelais is not simply a matter of gaiety and lightness of tone.¹ It is part of the philosophy or view of the world contained in those works. According to Bakhtin, Rabelais embodies a Renaissance concept that sees laughter as "one of the essential forms of truth concerning the world as a whole."² One of the principal sources of this view was the popular tradition of carnival laughter, laughter that is universal in scope, taking the entire world as its object. It is ambivalent, not wholly negative. "It asserts and denies,

¹C. L. Barber, Shakespeare's Festive Comedy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959); Erich Segal, Roman Laughter: The Comedy of Plautus (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968); Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1968).

²Rabelais and His World, p. 66.

it buries and revives."¹ It celebrates all that is relative, incomplete, and changing.

Modern psychological investigations have developed insights which are sometimes similar to the earlier, non-scientific views of laughter described by Bakhtin. Central to the Renaissance concept of laughter is Aristotle's observation that laughter is unique to human beings.² To the Renaissance, "laughter was seen as man's highest spiritual privilege, inaccessible to other creatures."³ In this century, several psychologists have seen a relationship between the processes involved in humor and those characteristic of productive thinking.⁴ They see laughter as a sign, not of animal aggression or hostility, but of that which distinguishes us as human beings: our creative imaginations. While eminent literary critics continue to see laughter as the expression of sexuality and aggression, motivational psychologists--who study sex and aggression--are beginning to view laughter and play as aspects of those mental processes which have freed us from the tyranny of primitive drives and

¹Ibid., p. 12.

²De partibus animalium 3. 10. 673^a28.

³Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, p. 68.

⁴See N. R. F. Maier, "A Gestalt Theory of Humor," British Journal of Psychology 23 (1932):69-74, and D. E. Berlyne, Conflict, Arousal, and Curiosity (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1960), pp. 253-261.

made us the most flexible and adaptive of animals.¹ Play and humor are manifestations of the process by which old patterns of behavior, thought, and feeling are broken down and new ones established. Bakhtin's description of the medieval carnival, whose vital principle was laughter, seems even more appropriate in this light. It was, he says, "the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed."² Laughter is a sign of our freedom from automatic, unchanging responses to the world. Bergson may have been right in thinking that laughter is the enemy of rigidity, but it is our own inflexibility that is attacked when we laugh, not that of others.

To say that laughter is somehow related to creativity, that the mirthful delight in novelty, incongruity, and complexity is much like that which leads to discovery and invention, is to acknowledge that humor often has an important intellectual component, that the "fancy" Dryden saw as a mental aberration has a positive aspect. But what of the emotional element in laughter? The laughter in farce often originates in images usually associated with strong, often

¹On the relationship between humor and play and the function of play in the adaptive and learning processes of higher mammals, see N. J. Ellis, Why People Play (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), pp. 83-100.

²Rabelais and His World, p. 10.

unpleasant, emotions. What is the relationship between laughter and emotion? The obvious answer, supplied by common experience, is that laughter is the enemy of emotion. Even Freud, famous for his views on "tendency wit," acknowledged that the function of some forms of laughter is to reduce, rather than to express, emotion.¹ It is obvious that hostility and feelings of aggression play a part in many jokes and witticisms, but such expressions of ill-will are of a different order than direct expressions of the same emotions. An insult in jest is not the same as an insult in earnest, although the motivation for each may be identical. Even when hostility is clearly present, laughter is less an expression of strong emotion than a release from it. There is at least some truth to Koestler's assertion that laughter represents "emotion cast off by the intellect," making it one of the most valuable of human possessions. "Laughter rings the bell of man's departure from the rails of instinct. He has emancipated himself from the humourless laws of the biological urge, from the fanaticism of purposeful single-mindedness."² Laughter and a sense of humor have endowed humans with a degree of objectivity and control even over

¹Sigmund Freud, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1960), pp. 128-33. These are the situations Freud classifies as "humor," as opposed to "jokes" or the "comic."

²Arthur Koestler, Insight and Outlook (New York: Macmillan Co., 1949), pp. 69-70.

their own passions, something which no other animal possesses.

One wonders why so many have attempted to associate laughter with the worst in human nature, why they have sought to find the source of all wit and humor, as did one theorist, in the "roar of triumph in an ancient jungle duel."¹ Rather than speculating about our anthropoid ancestors, they would do well to look at a study done at Yale University on laughter in babies. The researchers found that the most consistently successful "joke" was "swinging the subject out as if to throw him to his mother and then rapidly withdrawing him again."² If a single, archetypal image of laughter is wanted, it is here in the laughter of babies, not the victory howl of a jungle primate.

There is no need to find excuses for the "cruelty" found in farce. The unpleasant aspects of farce are there in order to be annihilated by laughter. If there is triumph in farce laughter, it is the elation of victory over pain, disgust, anger, and humiliation. The characters in farce are often quite ordinary; which is to say, very like ourselves. The pain and humiliation they endure could be ours. But in one way they are strangely unlike us, for they are seemingly impervious to suffering. Bentley has noted that

¹Albert Rapp, The Origins of Wit and Humor (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1951), p. 21. Italics in the original.

²Cited by Max Eastman, Enjoyment of Laughter (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936), p. 31.

one of the characteristics of farce violence is its abstractness.¹ The violence is robbed of its consequences, and therefore of its pain. Farce characters are enormously resilient; they are always bouncing back from situations that would destroy real people. They may be bruised, battered, kicked, and humiliated, but they always emerge whole. The pleasure they give the audience is not derived from the enjoyment of the suffering of others, but in the freedom from pain and defiance of fear that laughter provides. It is not a quibble to say that this laughter is pitiless but not cruel. Farce may still be too strong for some, not because it asks them to feel aggressive or hostile emotions, but because of the feelings of pity and compassion it asks them not to feel.

Reality and Unreality

This is not to say that farce is never satirical, or that it never provides an outlet for aggression and hostility, or is never even deliberately cruel. At times it may be all of these things. But satire, aggression, and cruelty are not its essence. The mistaken impression that these things are at the heart of farce stems from a literary prejudice which has been conditioned by centuries of analyzing only comedy. Farce, as Bermel points out, deliberately seeks an

¹Eric Bentley, The Life of the Drama (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p. 222. Bentley, however, feels that the abstractness of the violence is symptomatic of farce's cruelty.

"unreality of mood," while comedy "remains grounded in reality."¹ Comedy is founded on the convention that its characters and events have, at some level, their counterpart in reality. The audience is encouraged to think of the characters as they would of real people, and of their problems as real problems. In this sense, comedy is always serious. But farce dissociates itself from the real world. Its situations are no longer bound to real people outside ourselves, whom we might hate, fear, love, or pity. They are wrenched free of reality to become detached and somewhat abstract.

Farce does not avoid reality altogether or confine itself to fantasy alone. In order to achieve a mood of unreality

. . . the playwright will generally begin his farce in commonplace, credible circumstances and surroundings. Then by means of theatrical logic he will shift it gradually into improbability and beyond that into the realm of nonsense.²

It might be said that comedy both begins and ends in reality, even if it employs nonrealistic means along the way, while farce begins in reality and ends in unreality. Ian Maxwell concludes his examination of medieval French farce with this observation:

The genius of farce lies in two rival virtues. The one is a keen sense of fact, which includes awareness

¹"Farce," p. 265.

²Ibid.

of the normal background of life as well as an eye for its humours. The other is that light-hearted fancy which delights to stretch its credit with the audience, to touch the limits of conceivable absurdity, to crack the wind of a phrase and caper a yard above the highway of meaning.¹

The best farces, he goes on to say, contain a balance of the two qualities. Walter Kerr, examining silent film farce, finds an inherent combination of fact and fantasy had much to do with the success of that form. The medium itself contains an "interior tension" between those two "contending forces [which] have to be kept in balance or the form breaks apart."²

Both reality and fantasy are necessary to farce. But if farce does not, like comedy, refer back to reality, then how is it to be understood and evaluated? Comedy can be judged by how well, how profoundly, or how cleverly it portrays the real world. In comedy, unreality may be a means, but in farce it is an end, a necessary part of the final result. Farce may even, as Bermel says, enter "the realm of nonsense." By what rules or principles is this world of nonsense to be judged, and what is the nature of its relation to reality?

Farce and Games

A partial answer to these questions is provided by

¹Ian Maxwell, French Farce & John Heywood (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1946), p. 47.

²Walter Kerr, The Silent Clowns (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), p. 64.

the earlier discussion of violence in farce. Farce presents unpleasant or violent images of reality, then uses improbability, absurdity, and nonsense to demolish them with explosions of laughter. But the reality of farce is not limited to unpleasantness and violence, and its absurdities, however nonsensical, are not without form. Nonsense itself need not be without order or meaning, as Elizabeth Sewell has shown in her study of the works of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. Her use of the term "Nonsense" is limited to the imaginative works of those two men, but her findings are relevant to farce. Nonsense, she says, can be understood as a game involving two contending forces of the mind. One of these is a force toward disorder, represented by the dream and the nightmare, and the other is the mind's tendency to order and logic. Sewell emphasizes the latter, for "true Nonsense . . . sides with order against disorder," but both are necessary. "Nonsense is a game which requires opposition between the two forces, not the reconciliation of the two nor the complete suppression of one or other."¹ If farce can also be seen as a game, the "interior tension" between fact and fantasy might involve a similar opposition of contending forces.

The idea of farce as a game is especially apt for

¹Elizabeth Sewell, The Field of Nonsense (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952; reprint ed., Folcroft, Pa.: Folcroft Library Editions, 1973), p. 163

the farcical tradition of the vaudeville in which Feydeau wrote. Successful writers of vaudevilles were often likened to jugglers or to chess players.¹ Sarcey wrote of the vaudeville as a game that grew in sophistication as the audience became more familiar with the rules.² Bergson begins his discussion of the comic in situations by drawing analogies from the playthings of children, and he concludes the section by saying that the vaudeville, like such toys, is nothing but a game.³ Games, like farce, can be engaged in for their own sakes, not for their usefulness or possible relevance to serious endeavors. They may bear resemblance to situations arising in real life (as chess resembles the strategies of battle), but once established, they operate according to rules and conditions which isolate them from outside considerations. Like farce, they may originate in reality, but in the end refer to nothing but themselves.

There are other characteristics of the game which should apply if it is to provide a useful comparison. Games imply not only an opposition of contending sides, but also

¹Feydeau, for example, spoke of controlling his characters as a chess player does his pieces. Adolphe Brisson, Portraits intimes, 5 vols. (Paris: Armand Colin, 1894-1901), 5 (1901):15.

²Francisque Sarcey, Quarante ans de théâtre, 8 vols. (Paris: Bibliothèque des Annales, 1900-02), 4:402. See p. 75 below.

³Henri Bergson, Le Rire (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1940), pp. 53-63, 78.

some degree of manipulation or conscious control. The clash of blind forces does not constitute a game. This element of games is the principal reason Sewell maintains that Nonsense takes the side of order against disorder. The orderly side of the mind (numbers, logic) is subject to conscious manipulation. It can be played with. The disorderly side (dreams, nightmares) cannot, at least not directly.

Dream vision is essentially fluid; nothing is reliable, anything may change into anything else. . . . The result is that dreams cannot be controlled and so cannot be played with. From this something rather alarming seems to follow: that dreams play with the dreamer, who is our self. Perhaps this holds good of all the things in experience which we cannot break down and control and play with. They may play with us.¹

The dream element of the mind can be played with only as an opponent, an antagonist whose moves cannot be predicted. It can be countered through the manipulation of logic and number, but not directly controlled. If farce is considered as a game, reality and fantasy differ in the same way. Reality corresponds to the "dream" of Nonsense, and fantasy to the "logic," insofar as the one cannot be controlled while the other can. The game of farce, like that of Nonsense, pits "the things in experience which we cannot break down and control and play with" against those we can.

There is another level to the game of farce that is even closer to that of Nonsense. In order to sustain the game, its fantasy side must always be under control. Fantasy

¹Sewell, The Field of Nonsense, pp. 36-7.

is like Nonsense in that it is made up of order and disorder, of logic and dreams. Many of the techniques used by farce to defeat reality are themselves disorderly and must in turn be countered by logic and order.

The plots of farces generally appear to be anarchic. Everything gets out of the characters' control, although, in French farces especially, this effect can be realized only because the dramatist has maintained a tight control over the sequence of events.¹

Feydeau, for example, is noted both for a sense of madness and for the geometric precision of his plots. Some forms of farce may emphasize the dialectic of order and disorder over that of fact and fantasy. The plays of N. F. Simpson are less firmly rooted in reality than those of Feydeau, and concentrate instead on the opposition of apparent chaos to underlying logic. Simpson is sometimes called a disciple of Ionesco, but logic is important to the English writer, while Ionesco defies it. From the point of view of farce as a game, the difference is crucial. The loss of clearly defined order or logic (and therefore of control) provides a purely technical reason that a farce such as Les Chaises must be qualified as "tragic." For when we lose control of the fantastic in farce, it deserts us to side with reality, where it becomes an even more formidable, because less predictable, opponent than reality alone. When this happens, the game ceases. Until the final moments, the action of Les Chaises is much like that of a game. Only then is

¹Bermel, "Farce," p. 264.

control completely lost, through the finality of death and the incoherence of the speaker. While a traditional farce, like Pathelin, might use the lack of speech to prolong the game, here it signals that play is no longer possible. When the players have died, the playthings die also.

The obdurate world of reality, of which the inanimate realm of things is a part, cannot be said to play with us unless we can make it do so. The same is true of fantasy out of control. Like the playthings Bergson offers as comic paradigms, these forces outside ourselves cannot come alive and join in the game unless we are capable of playing with them. Their playfulness is an illusion that disappears when we lose control. Because they are not conscious and rational they cannot be thought of as playing even when they control and manipulate us. The analogy of the game becomes less relevant. For this reason it is not as useful in dealing with Ionesco and many other modern writers of farce. But when farce loses its playfulness, it is in danger of becoming something else. Les Chaises is labeled a tragic farce, and many of the plays of Pinter might be seen with equal validity as either farce or melodrama. There might be other ways as well in which farce may put the game aside and become momentarily serious, but the spirit of play cannot be abandoned for long.

Rules of the Game

The object of this game would not be to defeat

reality, but to play with it and perhaps force it to play back. To defeat reality would be either an impossible or trivial and shallow victory. It would be impossible in the case of actual physical reality: the flesh and blood of the actors and the physical conditions of the stage. And to destroy completely the reality represented on the stage by creating pure fantasy would be trivial.¹ Farce is capable of playing with both the imitated and actual reality, sometimes simultaneously. It often acknowledges both levels of reality through the device called "breaking the dramatic illusion," although the term "illusion" is misleading to the extent that the convention it refers to is not limited to realistic or representational drama.² Serious drama may employ conventions such as narrators or choral addresses which acknowledge the presence of the audience, but it usually expects the audience to regard the performance as if it were real. The integrity of the presentation, however conventional or nonrealistic, is not violated. But the actors in farce speak to the audience in order to expose their own performance as a sham. They may break character, referring to themselves

¹This is not to imply that fantasy is in any way inferior to farce. Fantasy might also be regarded as a game, but its rules would be quite different.

²This is the term used by George E. Duckworth in The Nature of Roman Comedy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), pp. 132-36. K. J. Dover refers to the same device as "rupture of dramatic illusion." Aristophanic Comedy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 55-59.

as actors, or make jokes about the artifice of the stage and its machinery. Yet while they call attention to the fact that they are "only playing," they do not usually step entirely out of character. They will continue playing their roles in apparent earnest, even as they admit the pretense of the performance. They simultaneously inhabit two worlds: a world of actuality and a world of imagination. The point is not that they may alternately occupy each realm (an actor in a serious drama may easily speak to the audience ex persona between the acts), but that they can do both at the same time, playing with both levels of reality by balancing them against each other.¹

Not all creators of farce make use of this device. Those most intensely concerned with developing their form's potential often deliberately avoid it. They do so not out of respect for realism for its own sake, but because the device is too easy. For the game to be meaningful it must not be so effortlessly won. They respect the representational reality of the performance in order to increase the challenge, to avoid easy victories. Buster Keaton is an example of those who usually maintained the division between the audience and performance. According to Kerr, Keaton regarded the camera lens as an absolute barrier between himself and the public and avoided the references to the

¹Like other devices of farce, the frank admission of theatrical pretense may be used for serious purposes, as it is at the end of The Beggar's Opera.

audience other comedians employed.¹ He played the game by strict rules. He insisted, for example, that stunts be shot whenever possible in a single, uninterrupted sequence. The stunt would have to be performed as it would for a live audience. The camera was thought of as an objective recorder of actual events, and Keaton did not wish to undercut that reality with simple cuts. It was not the realism of the result that he respected, for there is much that is impossible in his films. He respected the conditions of reality imposed by the nature of film. He wanted to play the game honestly.

Feydeau was another who respected the barrier between audience and performer, but he worked in a medium which imposed different rules. Norman Shapiro, writing of the film version of Hotel Paradiso, said

Feydeau's comedy does not, I fear, translate well into the film medium. It thrives on the restrictions of a proscenium stage, where the very limitations of space impart a focus and an intensity that the camera destroys with its limitless virtuosity. . . . A thousand things happen in a Feydeau play. Much of their comic strength lies precisely in the fact that, on stage, they all have to happen in the same place.²

An extreme example of this occurs in La Puce à l'oreille, in which an actor must play two roles. Part of the comic effect results from the difficulty the actor must overcome

¹Kerr, The Silent Clowns, p. 131.

²Introduction to Four Farces by Georges Feydeau, trans. Norman Shapiro (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. xvii.

in appearing to be in two places at once. In film the difficulty disappears and the effect is lost. Each game must be played according to its own rules. Feydeau was fastidious about complying with the rules of realism, but when those rules permitted, he was willing to play with the obstacles presented by the physical nature of the stage.¹

There are many different types of farce and consequently many sets of rules. One way to begin categorizing types of farce would be to look at the conditions imposed by the medium and the conventions of the form. But there is another way of grouping farces, one that helps to explain the great diversity of style and method found in farce.

Modes of Farce:
Who Is the Farceur?

One of the things said of farce is that it turns its characters into puppets, helpless marionettes subject only to the will of their creator. It might be objected, first, that the playwright never has quite as much freedom as is

¹Although Feydeau respected the "dramatic illusion," he sometimes called attention to the stage and its artifice in more subtle ways. Twice in La Puce à l'oreille and once in Occupe-toi d'Amélie, for example, characters explain their present situations with examples drawn from the theatre, indirectly reminding the audience that they are watching a play. In Occupe-toi d'Amélie, an earlier play by Feydeau is specifically mentioned, and in La Puce à l'oreille, the example comes from a play that had been presented in the same theatre as La Puce à l'oreille only a few months before. Georges Feydeau, Théâtre complet, 9 vols. (Paris: Editions du Béliet, 1948-56), vol. 1: Occupe-toi d'Amélie, act 3, 2nd tableau, sc. 4, p. 149; vol. 4: La Puce à l'oreille, act 1, sc. 4, p. 131; sc. 8, p. 140.

implied by that metaphor. Furthermore, there are many farces in which it is totally inappropriate. Harlequin and Pantelone may not be precisely like real people, but they are certainly not puppets in the hands of a playwright. Another generalization made about farce is that it is unconcerned with form or structure. Yet one of the chief complaints made about the French farces of the nineteenth century is that they are dominated by their structure--they are "all plot."¹ That these generalizations appear valid in some cases but flatly inappropriate in others suggests the possibility of different categories of farce, the nature of which can be seen by turning once again to the game. If farce can usefully be regarded as a game, there is one important question yet to be asked: Who are the players? The world of reality has been described as in some way the antagonist, but it is a "player" only to the extent that it is played with by a human agent. That agent cannot be the audience, which participates only passively. There are only two real possibilities: the actors or the playwright. Which of these it is makes considerable difference to the nature of farce, because to be a player, one must have autonomy. One must be free to manipulate, and cannot be wholly subject to the will of another. So there are two possible modes of farce, depending on whether actors or playwrights are the principal players in the game. Which

¹Cf. Bentley, The Life of the Drama, p. 247.

of these modes is employed determines the organizing principle of farce and the basis of its unity. In the one, controlled by the actor, farce is organized around the special nature of its principal characters; while in the other, where the playwright prevails, farce is dominated by "plot," "structure," or the ordering of the incidents, for it is by these that the dramatist shows his manipulating hand. In practice, the two methods are not mutually exclusive. Farce generally employs both modes, but to the extent that one prevails, the other becomes much less conspicuous, so that the more farce is dominated by "character" the more formless it might appear. Likewise, the more important structure becomes, the less important are the characters.

The first of these two modes is that which is dominated by the special theatrical nature of the clown: the world of Harlequin, Pantalone, Gros-Guillaume, Hanswurst, and the Marx Brothers. Where such characters reign the text is diminished in importance, sometimes to the point of disappearing, because the clowns shape their materials to suit themselves. The second mode or method of farce subjects its characters to the whims of a theatrical, mechanized universe and converts the world into a kind of plaything controlled by the playwright. Here structure becomes increasingly evident, but it is not an organic structure generated by the wills and conflicts of the characters; rather, it is imposed upon them by the hand of the playwright, who juggles

them as he pleases in the theatrical world he has created. The aim of both modes is the same: the interplay of reality and fantasy and the metamorphosis of the world of existence into the world of theatre. Both forms can be destructive and love to turn the world of reality in chaos, but both oppose disorder with their own kind of theatrical order. In the first mode, order is represented by the enduring personality of the clown, in the second by the ever present and controlling hand of the playwright.

The Independent
and Constant Clown

The oldest and perhaps most primitive of these modes has the figure of the masked clown at its center. He is more real than the clown of the modern circus, who is in some ways a parody of the primitive clown, yet he is always essentially theatrical. His mask is the badge of his theatricality, but it is not simply an artificial symbol or convention. It lies at the heart of his essence and is a vital part of his nature. Because it is essential and not superficial, it need not always be literally a mask. The clown's mask may take many forms, but in all of its forms it retains the function and the special symbolic significance contained in the masks worn by the actors of the Commedia dell'arte, whose characters are often referred to as "masks." The term acknowledges that what would be superficial and external to a real person is essential to the clown. In

this sense the word "mask" can refer not just to a face or head covering, but to all those trademarks of costume, gesture, or mannerism that define the clown's existence. His mask is that combination of external signs that give him identity. He cannot change them with the fashion, or to suit a new image of himself, as a real person might. For him they are vital, without them he does not exist, for he is a creature of the theatre.¹ The masks are symbols of the characters' permanence and immutability. The fixed nature of their characters, their imperviousness to change, is not simply a reflection of their comic limitations (although that is partly true); it is what enables them to transcend normal limitations, to defy the impermanence of the world and the inevitable decay of all real things. Citizens of a special theatrical world, they are not bound by the limits of an individual play, but often move from one to the other, taking on new roles while always maintaining the integrity of their innate personalities.

The world of farce is made up of contrasts and contradictions. Beneath the mask, the symbol of permanence and freedom from the restraints of reality, is a body which epitomizes the eternal decay and intransigence of corporeal substance. Age, impotence, senility, obesity, deformity,

¹For a discussion of the theatrical nature of the mask and its relation to farce, see Vsevelod Meyerhold, "Farce," trans. Nora Beeson, in Corrigan, Comedy: Meaning and Form, pp. 313-16.

ugliness, incontinence, constipation, poverty, hunger, pain, greed, fear, gluttony, stupidity, lust, madness: these are the realities with which the mask is fused. It is not a simple opposition between the reality of the body and the fantasy of the mask which is at the heart of the clown's existence. If so, the two could be separated, the mask removed to reveal the body in all its distressing reality. Both mask and reality must be bonded together in every aspect of the clown's dress, behavior, and personality. Without the mask of fantasy, the gross body would revert to what it is in fact: a heavy and oppressive weight, depressing and unpleasant. The fantasy, too, would lose its force, because it is empowered by the grotesque reality from which it is inseparable. It is the genius of the clown to transform pain into pleasure, discord into harmony, and to find order in chaos and gaiety in the grotesque. Contradiction is essential to his nature, for it is the means by which he plays with reality and transforms it into his own theatrical substance.

There are many kinds of clowns: cowards, old men, pompous professionals, knaves, beggars, and slaves. But the quintessential clown is the motley-clad fool, and all clowns (perhaps even all comic characters) share in the ambiguous character of the fool, described by Enid Welsford in her book The Fool:

Fundamentally the clown depends . . . upon a certain inner contradiction in the soul of every man. In the first place we are creatures of the earth, propagating our species like other animals, in need of food, clothing and shelter and of the money that procures them. Yet

if we need money, are we so wholly creatures of the earth? If we need to cover our nakedness by material clothes or spiritual ideals, are we so like the other animals? This incongruity is exploited by the Fool. The Fool is an unabashed glutton and coward and knave, he is--as we say--a natural; we laugh at him and enjoy a pleasant sense of superiority; he looks at us oddly and we suspect that he is our alter ego; he winks at us and we are delighted at the discovery that we also are gluttons and cowards and knaves. The rogue has freed us from shame. More than that, he has persuaded us that wasted affection, thwarted ambition, latent guilt are mere delusions to be laughed away. For how can we feel spiritual pain, if we are only animals? But even the primitive joke about the human body has its complexity. We laugh to find that we are as natural as the fool, but we laugh also because we are normal enough to know how very unnatural it is to be as natural as all that.¹

The Fool exploits as well, as Welsford goes on to say, our ambivalence toward the things of our own creation by which we distinguish ourselves from our fellow animals: our laws, machines, and social systems. When the clown defies and defeats these restraints of our own manufacture we feel "a sudden sense of pressure relieved, . . . a birth of new joy and freedom."²

The fool is, as it were, a natural clown. But the fool also has his limitations, and these the professional clown can transcend. There are forms of human folly of which the real fool is incapable, but the clown can transform even villainy into folly and endow it with the same ambivalence the fool brings to his more simple and universal forms

¹Enid Welsford, The Fool (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p. 318.

²Ibid., p. 319.

of folly. The traits of a clown, including his vices, are fixed and permanent. He cannot renounce them because they are at the core of his existence. They define him and give him his life. His characteristics have the abstract and essential quality which Lionel Abel refers to in saying of Tartuffe that "he is hypocritical in order to be himself: when he is most hypocritical, then he is most Tartuffe."¹ The world of the clown, existing between reality and fantasy, does not obey the same laws as our own. The qualities which, when seen from our own realistic point of view, would seem to deprive him of life and make of him a mere puppet, are the very characteristics which ensure his theatrical life and give him freedom from the restraints and responsibilities of reality. The clown, like the fool, can transform his liabilities into advantages. His limitations provide him with a life that is in some ways more free and permanent than our own. And like the fool, he is often blissfully unaware of his moral defects. His amorality is not accidental. To judge himself by the standards of the real world would be to risk slipping back into it, and that would mean the end of the game. To maintain control he must be able to make playthings of everything he encounters, including the real world's criteria of morality and decency.

¹Lionel Abel, Metatheatre (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), p. 61.

Players and Playthings

The need to make a toy of the world determines the special nature of everything within the clown's sphere. Something curious can happen when one plays with things. They may appear to play back. Inanimate objects seem suddenly endowed with life. Play is limited with things that do not respond to being played with, which is why so many children's toys, be they simple as a rubber ball, have properties that let them come alive in the child's hand. In demonstrating his ability to play with the world, the clown acquires the magic capability of bringing dead things to life. Precisely the opposite occurs when the objects of play are other living beings. The clown does not always play with others as equals. He prefers, if he can, to treat them as toys. He delights in making others behave like mechanical dolls.¹ As playthings, the animate and the inanimate meet on common ground in the clown's world.

The clown's preference for treating others as playthings rather than playmates does not stem from arrogance. He is not quite like the child, who can play with friends on equal footing. Endeavoring to make a toy of the entire world, the clown begins with himself. He is himself a kind of living marionette, who is paradoxically both puppet and puppeteer. His is a toy world, and all in it, himself

¹Recall Harpo Marx's trick of extending his knee in such a way that another person would grab it in an automatic, unthinking gesture.

included, must be given the status of toys. The most important reality in one's existence is one's own body, and the clown continually demonstrates that he can make a plaything of his own substance. The fat clown dances with incredible grace; the skinny one performs amazing feats of skill and strength. The bond between the exterior mask and the real body results from his need to make a toy of himself, which in turn gives more reality and permanence to the mask than to the corporeal substance. "We cannot see Chaplin," writes Kerr, ". . . without the trademarks [eyebrows and mustache]. They are birthmarks." When temporarily deprived of them in a Sennett film, "the comedian's face simply vanishes."¹ In order to escape the weight and decay of flesh, the clown's soul takes residence in his mask, transforming itself into the soul of a toy. To become more than human, the clown must first become less.

Although farce may play with either actual physical reality or the reality imitated on stage, the nature of the clown inclines him to the former. As a creator of farce, he begins with his own physical being, which he opposes with a fantastic mask, as if to expose his own reality as a sham. His lazzi, his conjuring and acrobatic tricks, serve to demonstrate his power over both things and events. His magic touch converts falls into somersaults and iron into rubber,

¹The Silent Clowns, p. 72,

The hard intransigence of reality is an illusion, he seems to be saying; it is nothing but an infinitely pliable toy. Represented reality may be too fragile for such techniques, for it is obviously unreal in the first place. To expose it is again a case of victory too easily won. But in order to maintain his own theatrical life, the clown is apt to demolish any form of reality imposed on him from outside. Clowns prefer to destroy and re-create in their own image. The improvisation of the Commedia dell'arte was not simply a device by which the performers could demonstrate their skill. It helped to maintain and to illustrate the independent existence of the masks. The clown does not depend on the text for his life. His special theatrical existence is rooted in his own nature. It is he who gives form to his materials, not the other way around.

The special nature of the clown may be used in different ways; it need not always destroy the conventions on which represented reality depends. The cinema provides many examples of the clown's versatility. Much of the quality which sets Chaplin's films apart results from his calling attention to the separateness of the clown. His inability to join or fully participate in the real world has a positive as well as negative side, for it is the source of the clown's endurance. The "little man," whom Chaplin's Tramp symbolizes, will go on in spite of the myriad disasters and humiliations he experiences. But Chaplin also derives pathos by having

his clown envy the real world of which he can never be a part. He is excluded from the cycle of renewal which includes birth, reproduction, and death by virtue of the very qualities that give him his resiliency and permanence. He cannot "get the girl" because he is a clown, yet because he is a clown he can ride over whatever troubles he encounters.

Keaton, on the other hand, achieves a high degree of integration with the world in which he exists. Walter Kerr calls him the "most silent, as well as the most cinematic, of silent screen comedians" because he most fully exploits the inherent contrast of fact and fantasy that stems from the documentary objectivity of the camera and its unreal silence.¹ This characteristic of Keaton's begins with the simple "mask" he has chosen: his deadpan face. The mask has the reality of a photograph; it is the face that stares out from a thousand family portraits. Yet it is strangely "silent" and unreal, refusing to reflect the infinite variations of emotional life, treating joy and sorrow, disaster and good fortune alike. The subtlety of Keaton's mask harmonizes with the world he has created, a world which combines reality and fantasy in the precise measure established by the clown.

Less subtle than Chaplin and Keaton, the Marx Brothers use the destructive qualities of the clown, his tendency to subvert all he encounters to his own purposes, as a kind of

¹Ibid., p. 117.

principle of farce construction. Like parasites, the Marx Brothers invade the body of a conventional comedy, graft themselves onto a stereotypical comic plot, and systematically convert it into an elaborate plaything. They remain apart from the characters who surround them. Like creatures from a strange planet, they are aliens beside the more realistically conceived characters with whom they share the plot. The contrast is deliberate and pointed because it reveals that the others are really the aliens. This is not the real world, it is the theatrical and fantastic world of film farce, the world which gives clowns their breath and being, and in this world all but clowns become cardboard stereotypes. Genuinely realistic and honestly observed characters could not exist in a Marx Brothers film because such characters depend on the convention that the theatrical world is a reflection of the real world and is in this way controlled by reality. It is the business of the clowns to destroy that pretense and expose it as a sham. The ease with which Groucho, Chico, and Harpo dismantle the affluent, upper-class worlds they invade is based on the fact that they are in their own theatrical element. The outcome of the battle is foreseeable as soon as the clowns walk in, the moment the roles they are playing are accepted at face value. By accepting Groucho as a genuine doctor or impresario, his rich and pompous adversaries expose as a fraud their own claim to reality and seriousness.

The technique of the Marx Brothers is very similar to that of the Commedia dell'arte and helps to explain why the Commedia, although it did not exclude any genre--even tragedy--from its province, is associated so closely with farce. Lea comments on the Commedia's affinity to farce:

Farce was its element, farce kept fresh only by the continual absorption of alien dramatic material. The action of the farcical spirit upon these acquisitions constitutes the history of improvised comedy. The new wine bursts the old skins. The Commedia dell'arte begins with Zanni and virtually it ends with Pulcinella. Farce it is and to farce it must return.¹

When the clowns take over another dramatic genre, they convert it, like all else they encounter, into a toy, and cause it to lose its own life and autonomy. Once organic forms lose their original function they become lifeless structures which the clowns can transform into temporary dwellings, much as a hermit crab inhabits the dead shell of another creature.

Form and Pattern

But it is not true that farce has no structure of its own. While it sometimes acts as a parasite, wearing the shell of another dramatic form while it feeds on the contents, it may as easily develop its own characteristic forms. Where the importance of the clown is diminished in farce, a special kind of structure becomes correspondingly prominent. It preserves the playful farce aesthetic of the clown, but

¹Lea, Italian Popular Comedy, 1:196

wrests control of the dramatic situation from him and returns it to the playwright. There is evidence of this particular sense of form in the popular drama of medieval France which gave farce its name. The attempts of medieval farce to develop its own form were tentative and not always successful, and they did not mean that the influence of the clown was absent. The farce developed side by side with the sottie, which was essentially a comedy played by "fools" in their traditional costumes.¹ Sometimes the characters were simply listed as "le premier sot," "le second," etc., or sometimes they were given fantastic names, but as Maxwell says, "they never become real men in a real story."² The exact boundary between farce and sottie is hazy, partly because the sotties gradually acquired many of the characteristics of farce, and partly because the companies of fools who specialized in the sottie did not restrict themselves to a particular repertory. They might transform even the most pretentious farces to suit their style.³ In spite of this area where the two forms overlap, there were definite characteristics which served to distinguish the two. Besides the prominence of the uniformed fool in the sottie, there

¹Grace Frank, The Medieval French Drama (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 244.

²French Farce & John Heywood, p. 19..

³Frank, The Medieval French Drama, pp. 244; Maxwell, French Farce & John Heywood, pp. 18-19.

was a unity of structure which was strong in the farce, but was lacking in the sottie.¹

The importance of form in French farce has been thoroughly discussed by Ian Maxwell. In spite of considerable variety in the plays, he finds that there are two common traits: a tendency toward symmetry and structural balance, and a strong "sense of point" which seeks unity by weaving the action around a single object, theme, or repeated phrase.² There is often a marked symmetry in the major phases of action, and a similar sense of balance in the pairing of characters, in dialogue, and in the arrangement of the incidents. The "point" around which the farce is organized may be a commonsense moral, but it may as often be simply an object.³ The use of verse also displays this feeling for form. A rhythmic pattern of dialogue, maintained

¹Maxwell, French Farce & John Heywood, p. 19.

²Ibid., p. 38. Le Cuvier, one of the better known farces, provides a good example of these characteristics. The "point" about which the action revolves is the rollet, or list of household chores, dictated to the husband by the domineering wife in the first phase of the action. The second begins when the wife falls into the washtub and is in danger of drowning. The husband answers her frantic pleas for help by reading the list aloud and interjecting variations of the phrase, "Cela n'est point à mon rollet." Part of the sense of balance comes from the fact that only material circumstances have altered their relationship in the second half. Until the closing lines, the wife is aggressive even in her distress, and the husband is passive in victory.

³"It is in the nature of farce to weave itself round some concrete thing" (Ibid., p. 38).

by short speeches and an inventive use of variety in meter and rhyme, often exhibits a marked "sense of rhythm and arrangement."¹ The importance of verse in these plays is often overlooked. It is a common assumption that verse is appropriate only to the more serious forms of drama, and that when verse is used in farce, as it is in medieval farce, it is of little consequence--merely an unnecessary convention. But in truth, much of the vigor and life of these plays is a result of their lively use of verse.

¹Ibid., p. 46. Maxwell lists some of the artificial devices used by farce writers: "sequences . . . of single-word speeches or split lines in which the close answers or completes the opening, comic litanies, monosyllabic answers falling on the rhyme word, and the like" (pp. 43-44). Another favorite device was the triolet. Maxwell gives an example from the Farce de arquemination in which the rigidity and artifice of the verse form serve as counterpoint to the frantic sense of disorder. In an experiment, the three characters in the scene blow up a furnace under a mess of dairy produce:

"FIRST PAGE: Fais comme moy.
 SECOND PAGE: Souffle!
 BADIN: Tout beau!
 [La!] Le feu me brusle le nez.
 FIRST PAGE: A coup!
 BADIN: Je brusle!
 SECOND PAGE: Desine.
 FIRST PAGE: Faictz comme moy.
 SECOND PAGE: Souffle!
 BADIN: Tout beau.
 FIRST PAGE: La!
 BADIN: La!
 SECOND PAGE: A tout.
 FIRST PAGE: Argent nouveau.
 BADIN: Bon ha!
 SECOND PAGE: Bon ha!
 FIRST PAGE: Il boult, tenez.
 SECOND PAGE: Faictz comme moy.
 BADIN: Souffle!
 FIRST PAGE: Tout beau.
 BADIN: [La!] Le feu me brusle le nez" (Ibid., pp. 44-43).

Verse is not intrinsically more "elevated" than prose. It is simply more artificial, patterned, and abstract. These are qualities which can be as important to farce as they are to the tragedies of Racine. Stark Young saw just such a bond between farce and poetic tragedy:

In a sense, all drama moves toward a condition of farce. This is because the theatre's very essence consists in the heightening of its material. Heightening that is free, fluent, almost abstract, unless it has the restrictions of character and rational measure, floats off into farce; which is closer to poetic drama and serious tragedy than to plain everyday prose realism.¹

The subject matter of farce is often drab and unpleasant, material which might as easily serve the needs of the starkest naturalism; its farcical character is derived from the treatment of these materials. It is not enough to say that farce is unrealistic; any distortion of reality must obey some set of rules, have some meaning or rationale, or it would be merely chaotic and pointless. It must, in short, have form, and farce sustains its flights into unreality with a positive affirmation of form and pattern. Far from being formless, many farces are dominated by their structure. Rather than being dictated by meaning or character motivation, development in farce often acquires a logic which is pursued for its own sake and to which character and meaning are forced to submit. Organic structure is replaced by mere pattern, and the logic of reality gives way to a more

¹Stark Young, Immortal Shadows (New York: Hill and Wang, 1959), p. 177.

abstract logic which controls events and destroys reality. The formal structure of tragedy, no matter how rigid, must express in some way the inner life of the play in order to remain valid. In Racine, for example, the strict and unyielding form echoes and reinforces the rigidity of the society in which the characters are trapped and thus helps to focus on their humanity and their attempts to resist their fate. But the pattern of action in a farce, although it may originally be derived from reality, soon achieves a life of its own; and the characters, unable or unwilling to resist, abandon themselves to the logic of events and seem in the process little more than puppets.

The reduction of characters to puppets in farce goes hand in hand with its fondness for rhythmic but often artificial patterns. This is reflected even in the titles of the farces of J. M. Morton. Titles such as Box and Cox, Grimshaw, Bagshaw, and Bradshaw, and Slasher and Crasher announce the fact that their principal characters are nearly interchangeable marionettes before they ever appear on the stage. There is often logic in farce, but it may be a logic of theatrical convention which operates free from the restraints of reality and which overwhelms the characters who are subjected to it. Charlton finds that The Comedy of Errors is successful as a farce because it demonstrates almost mathematically the logical possibilities inherent in

the confusion of two sets of twins.¹ But this is logic pursued abstractly, for its own sake. It has nothing to do with the demands of reality or the wills of the characters. Or rather, it is like a game in which reality--including human will--is manipulated into a logical but abstract pattern. The demands of reality are relevant, but only as the initial conditions of the game, the rules by which it must be played.

The imposition of artificial patterns--whether with verse forms, interchangeable names, or an exercise in mathematics and logic--has the effect of making a toy of the world and marionettes of its living inhabitants. The reduction of human beings to the status of puppets by subordinating them to the logic of situation and form has never been carried further than by the French farce writers of the nineteenth century. Before them farces tended to be short, centering in a single situation.² The dominance of situation over character had undoubtedly limited the length of farces. The usual basis of full-length plays--the attempt of characters to overcome obstacles and attain certain ends--calls attention to the characters as human beings endowed with free will and the capacity to influence their own fates. The

¹H. B. Charlton, Shakespearian Comedy (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1938), p. 66.

²Maxwell describes medieval farce as concerned "rather with the accidents of a moment than with permanent relations and matters of weight" (French Farce & John Heywood, p. 17).

formula of the well-made play gave farce the means to expand into the longer form.

The Manipulating Playwright

Gerould has shown that the qualities of the well-made play that make it so ill-suited to serious drama (including serious comedy) are distinctly appropriate to farce:

The farce writers adopted from the well-made formula the drama of things in which objects dominate and become the organizing principle of life. . . . Already in the well-made play, a human being qua human being is nothing, is in fact non-existent; it is only his class, his clothes, his money, his social world that count and make a person what he is. . . .

In Labiche's play [Le Chapeau de paille d'Italie] this process of exteriorization through clothes is carried one step further; the straw-hat becomes the center of attention, the principal character, and the source of all motion. The disorder to respectability threatened by the loss of the hat is almost forgotten in the pursuit of an object which has taken on an absolute meaning and importance of its own. Labiche develops the pursuit of the hat for its own sake, almost abstractly . . .¹

Like medieval farce, the well-made farce assigned great importance to physical objects. Even more than the older farce, it subordinated human beings to a theatrical logic of things and circumstances developed into abstract patterns and rhythms which virtually become their own justification. The well-made play offered to farce a means of organization which was not dependent on human will and gave the playwright an essentially

¹Daniel C. Gerould, "The Well-Made Play and Its Heritage" (Manuscript in the possession of the author), pp. 43-44.

external and mechanical method of linking situations.¹ The playwright becomes a manipulator of circumstances and the play is seen as a kind of game in which the object is to overcome material difficulties.² Like the chess problems in which one side is expected to win in a designated number of moves, the play is valued for the ingenuity of its solution and for the clever way in which all of the pieces on the board are made to play a role--preferably several roles--in the problem.

The serious "well-made" playwrights insisted on pretending that their elaborate constructions were actually a reflection of reality, and criticized the writers of farce for their frivolity even though they admired their "technique."³ The writers of farce were simply being honest in treating the theatre as a game and the playwright as a manipulator of events. In the hands of the farce writers this manipulation was enjoyed openly for its own sake.⁴ As a juggler of events the playwright assumes a function analogous to that of the acrobatic clown, for he is endowed with the ability to transform reality into a game or demonstration of skill. Just as the clown is capable of transforming the awkwardness and humiliation of a fall into a

¹Ibid., p. 55.

²Ibid., p. 57.

³See William Archer, Play-Making: A Manual of Craftsmanship (New York: Dover Publications, 1960): p. 119.

⁴Gerould, "The Well-Made Play and Its Heritage," pp. 53-54.

complex and strangely graceful acrobatic stunt, the well-made farce turns the world into a complex toy, full of surprises, but always under the control of the master juggler.

In both cases some spring or initial impetus is required to set the game in motion. Usually it is a threatening image or symbol of disorder in the normal pattern of events. The clown often takes off from a springboard of physical buffoonery and violence, but the "well-made" playwrights preferred images of sexual impropriety and threats to the stability of bourgeois decorum. Like the straw hat in Labiche's play, such symbols were often concrete things which once let loose in the world seem to acquire a life of their own and spread disorder about them in widening circles. The increase in disorder is accompanied by a concomitant movement from the world of reality into the fantastic world of theatrical logic where the increasingly obvious hand of the playwright manipulates all. The spreading disorder goes hand in hand with a special kind of theatrical order which transforms the original threat into a plaything. This is not to say that the threat disappears, for then the game would lose its excitement and the source of its appeal. The images of disorder and violence are kept alive by means of new complications and surprising twists which provide the game's source of energy and verve. The well-made farces--particularly those of Feydeau--are often likened to complex and ingenious machines. The continual addition of fresh images of sex and violence helps to keep the machine running.

Clowns and the Mechanized World

Farce may have begun with the masked clown, alone on a stage, demonstrating in his fantastic way that everything solid and oppressive can be made to dissolve, that everything enduring and unalterable can be twisted, changed, and played with. When the playwright takes over, the techniques change and the rules are altered. But the spirit of the clown cannot long be excluded from the world of farce. It is possible for farce to create a mechanized universe--the films of Mack Sennett are examples--in which the characters are soulless objects, so many bowling pins to be knocked down at the will of their creator. But such farce has a limited range, rarely moving beyond the most obvious images of speed and violence. It is a world of things which finally excludes people entirely. Only the clown has the power to transform our lives as well as the universe in which we live. Yet when the clown is in command, he may leave our world behind and enter his own realm of theatrical fantasy. In either case, farce moves further from the reality which initiates its flight into fantasy and supplies the energy for its theatrical games. Thus most farce--probably its best examples--seeks not only to combine fact and fancy, but to blend the two farcical modes--that of the irrepressible clown and that of the mechanized, toy-like universe. At its best, the world of farce, no matter how fantastic and mad, is always recognizably our own, and in

its fools we can always see ourselves. Its dedication to laughter and its insistence on making a game of life do not mean that it is unobservant. Feydeau is in the best tradition of farce because he derives his fantasy from shrewd observation of life. He creates characters that have many of the fantastic qualities of the masked clown, yet are drawn from the society in which he lived. His frivolity could at times be more trenchant and honest than the observations of his more serious contemporaries. He excelled in making a game of reality by first demanding that it be as real as possible.

Games may be frivolous, but they need not be trivial. This is true also of farce, a game of laughter which, like that of the medieval carnival, is directed at the entire world. Such laughter is neither liberal nor conservative, for it is directed as much at serious proposals for change as at that which is established. To act in the world, or to change it, one must be serious. But by calling all into question, including prejudice, hate, anger, and fear, laughter opens a door to renewal and understanding. To laugh at the world as at a game may even allow a clearer view of it than our serious vision could permit.

CHAPTER II

PLOT AND ACTION: THE MECHANICS OF MISUNDERSTANDING

Consistency and Conventionality

Not all of the thirty-nine plays included in the nine volumes which comprise Feydeau's Théâtre complet can properly be called farces, but the exceptions are few, and most of these contain farcical elements. The great majority of the plays are remarkably consistent in the tone, subject matter, and methods which have caused Feydeau's name to be linked so firmly to the expression "French farce." His consistency and rarely faltering devotion to le fou rire provide an excellent opportunity to study the nature and methods of one particular variety of farce in its pure form.

Feydeau was neither an experimenter nor an innovator; his talent lay not in originality--whether in subject matter, dramaturgy, or psychological insight--but in his ability to exploit fully the farcical possibilities inherent in the dramatic conventions which he adopted. He took standard themes, methods, and situations, and pushed them to their comic extremes. His originality lay in the wealth of his comic invention and in the comic tricks and devices with which his plays abound, but this is precisely the area in

which a vaudeville was expected to be original. When Feydeau complained of plagiarism by others he was thinking of such trucs and devices. Accused of using a standard device to deceive his wife, one of Feydeau's erring husbands declares indignantly, "Je ne suis pas vaudevilliste, moi! Je n'ai pas besoin des idées des autres pour faire des pièces nouvelles!"¹ Even if this represents Feydeau's own indignation, many of his ideas were simply new twists given to previously employed comic devices. For example, the method used by the gentleman above to deceive his wife--hypnotism--may have been an original way to be unfaithful, but it had been used as the central device of at least one other vaudeville four years earlier.² Feydeau himself was to use the same trick, with yet another twist, several years later in Dormez, je le veux!

The course of Feydeau's career and the evolution of his style reflect his inclination (and that of his audience) toward the familiar. The same situations, character types, and problems recur again and again in different combinations and in different variations. His plays were often constructed

¹Théâtre complet, vol. 2: Le Système Ribadier, act 1, sc. 4, p. 72. Subsequent references to the plays contained in the Théâtre complet will give only the volume number followed by the name of the play and act, scene, and page numbers.

²Hypnotisé, by Emile de Najac and Albert Milland. A hypnotist is hypnotised by the husband of the woman he was pursuing and is given a desire to be deceived by his own wife. Described in Edouard Noël and Edmond Stoullig, eds., Les Annales du théâtre et de la musique, 41 vols. (Paris: Charpentier et Cie, 1875-1916), année 14, 1888, pp. 245-46.

according to standard plot formulas or patterns which allow them to be grouped into simple and logical categories. The largest and most important of these groups consists of eleven three-act plays which involve some form of deception practiced upon a husband, wife, lover, or mistress. In many ways these plays form the core of Feydeau's work. They include nearly all of his most successful and enduring full-length plays, while those plays which stray furthest from this pattern are usually those least successful originally and those least often revived.

The Deception Formula

Because of its importance to Feydeau's work, a brief outline of the basic plot formula should be useful. In the first act one or more deceptions are planned, started, or revealed. Events are then arranged by the playwright so as to bring all the characters together in the second act in a manner designed to produce the most embarrassing situations and the maximum threat of exposure. The threat of exposure throughout the second act results in a desperate series of lies, evasions, and frantic attempts to hide or escape. A bewildering profusion of quiproquos develops, producing such confusion and misunderstanding among the characters that the misunderstandings continue even after the real or apparent exposure which typically ends the act. A variety of means might be used to continue the complications into the third act until the problems are more or less settled.

Occasionally an erring husband is forced to admit guilt and is forgiven (as in Le Dindon). More often the lies and deceptions continue, new excuses are contrived which, although usually more or less improbable, are accepted; and the play ends with continued ignorance of the true situation on the part of at least some of the characters. The situation is not so much unraveled as it is stabilized, the threat of exposure is eliminated and there is an apparent return to stasis.¹

The eleven plays in this group are: Tailleur pour dames, L'Affaire Edouard, Monsieur chasse!, Champignol malgré lui, Le Système Ribadier, Un Fil à la patte, L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange, Le Dindon, La Dame de chez Maxim, La Puce à l'oreille, and Occupe-toi d'Amélie. These are not the only plays in which deception is used (in nearly all some form of deception plays a role), but because of the particularly large role it plays in these plays I shall refer to them as "deception formula plays."

The second major classification is the group of five "late one-act plays" which represent a major break in style and method from both his earlier one-acts and his full-length plays (Feu la mère de Madame, On Purge Bébé!, "Mais n'te promène donc pas toute nue!", Léonie est en avance, and

¹Martin Meisel describes the English farcical comedy--mostly adaptations of French originals--as following this basic pattern in Shaw and the Nineteenth-Century Theater (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 256-57.

Hortense a dit: "Je m'en fous!"). All of the plays in these two groups involve difficulties between husband and wife, or between lover and mistress. Feydeau also wrote a few plays based on another ancient theme: that of young people who want to marry in the face of parental objections. This group of "ingénue plays" contains only three examples: La Lycéenne, Le Ruban, and Le Mariage de Barillon. It is interesting because it illustrates Feydeau's treatment of one of the oldest themes in comedy and perhaps sheds some light on its relation to farce. These three groups contain all of the best known plays with the exception of La Main passe!, which is similar to the deception formula plays but is significantly different in structure and treatment.

In addition to these, Feydeau wrote two full-length plays early in his career which are based on mistaken identity (Chat en poche and Les Fiancés de Loches) and ten early one-act plays (from Par la fenêtre to Dormez, je le veux!) which are largely built on individual situations involving deception or mistaken identity. Two of these one-acts (Fiancés en herbe and Notre futur) are not really farces, but share some characteristics of the other plays. In the later part of his career he began two full-length plays which show a marked departure from his earlier methods and were left unfinished; he collaborated on two plays to which his contribution seems to have been relatively small; and he wrote a farcical fantasy (L'Age d'or) and his most pretentious and

serious comedy, Le Bourgeon. Even this play, the least farcical of his full-length plays, contains elements of farce and is interesting because it deals seriously with themes which were treated quite differently in his farces.

Evolution of His Style

The plays cannot be neatly divided into precise chronological periods, but it is possible to detect gradual changes in his work over the thirty-six-year span of his career. It is difficult to know how much such changes were due to the evolution of the author's attitudes or to changes in society and theatrical tastes; they are probably a reflection of both. There are two major trends. The first is a movement toward greater verisimilitude in certain aspects of the plays, particularly in the initial premises, dialogue, and characters. Standard theatrical conventions which had been staples of the vaudeville form, such as the opening expository monologue, were gradually eliminated. The theatrical buffoons and improbable fools who inhabit the earlier plays were gradually replaced by characters much closer to reality. The language became more realistic, taking comic advantage of the idiosyncrasies of speech to be heard among the various inhabitants of Paris. Feydeau, always attentive to detail, even included lengthy foot-notes admonishing his actors to use a more realistic style of acting.¹ The second

¹E.g., vol. 3, La Main passe!, act 2, sc. 2, p. 73; and vol. 7, La Dame de chez Maxim, act 2, sc. 8, p. 175.

trend was toward a more intense and almost savage comic vision. Both in treatment and in his choice of targets for laughter, the comedy of his later plays often borders on--but never crosses into--bitterness and cruelty. One of the last of the many monologues he wrote, Un Monsieur qui est condamné à mort, ends, as the title suggests, with the innocent and completely bewildered narrator condemned to the guillotine.¹ Suffering has always been a favorite subject of farce, but in his later plays Feydeau often goes well beyond the conventional cuckolds, pratfalls, and blows to focus on pains that are both more real and more extreme.²

These tendencies contributed to the value of his work, not by elevating it above the level of farce, but by intensifying its farcical quality. A sense of the reality of life as it is lived--or better, as it is felt--is a vital element of farce. This is particularly true of the more unpleasant realities. Feydeau's inclination toward the familiar is not irrelevant here. The reality of farce does not consist of discoveries or truths to which the audience must be educated; it is the reality of the familiar and the commonplace, of those things which are already known or believed

¹Un Monsieur qui est condamné à mort (Paris: Ollendorff, 1899).

²For a thorough treatment of this aspect of Feydeau's work, see Norman Richard Shapiro, "Suffering and Punishment in the Theatre of Georges Feydeau," Tulane Drama Review 5 (September 1960):117-26.

to be true.

The Comedy of Misapprehension

Counterbalancing the unpleasant realities and the familiar pains is a sense of fantastic madness which is present in all of Feydeau's plays. In the majority of his plays the madness is achieved by subjecting his characters to a world which has all the characteristics of a fun-house in which well-oiled machinery propels its victims through a series of mirrored mazes, expected surprises, and absurdly frightening experiences. It ushers them past distorting mirrors and threatening apparitions, but it never abandons them and usually delivers them safely out on the other side.

To achieve this effect, Feydeau refined and developed the techniques already characteristic of the nineteenth-century French vaudeville. This form, which has nothing in common with the American vaudeville, was a mixed genre that could range from sentimental to savagely farcical. The term dates to the fifteenth century, when it referred to satirical songs that originated in the Vire valley of France (val or vau de Vire). As the popularity of the songs spread, the term was corrupted to vaudeville. Toward the end of the seventeenth and into the eighteenth century, it became associated with the theatre as vaudevilles were incorporated into the plays of the fairs. These "comédies à vaudevilles" or "comédies mêlées de chants" eventually gave rise to two different forms: the opéra-comique, emphasizing original

music and subordinating prose, and the comédie-vaudeville, with developed plots and songs adapted to known airs. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the comédie-vaudeville was established on the Boulevard, where it was noted for extensive use of the quiproquo, broad physical humor, and a fondness for satirical and often risqué themes. Like the early farce, it combined a sense of actualité with extravagant buffoonery. This was the genre that Scribe "reformed" by creating the well-made play.¹

Under the influence of Scribe and his successors, the songs diminished in importance and were often dropped altogether. In their place, Scribe gave the vaudeville greater verisimilitude and more logically constructed plots. This regularized vaudeville shared in broad outline many of the general methods and aims of the New Comedy of Plautus and Terence from which it was descended. Despite important differences between the two forms, they share a common method of comic dramaturgy: a technique of creating plots and comic action which is largely dependent on misapprehension or misunderstanding. Duckworth finds that the single feature all the plays of Terence and Plautus have in common is "mental error, or misapprehension." He concludes that "a general

¹Neil Cole Arvin describes the historical development of the vaudeville in Eugene Scribe and the French Theatre, 1815-1860 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924; reprint ed., New York: Benjamin Blom, 1967), pp. 33-37.

atmosphere of misapprehension seems by far the most essential factor in developing the action and producing the complications in comedy."¹ Misapprehension has two principal values to the creator of comic plays. It can provide a rich source of comic effects and can form the basis of a versatile yet simple method of creating comic plots. It is useful in the construction of plots because it offers a method of creating complications which, when the playwright chooses, can easily be dismantled or unraveled. In the simplest use of this technique, best exemplified by the formulas of New Comedy, the dénouement is provided in the standard final recognition scene. The dilemma in which the characters find themselves has often been resolved when the play opens. It is necessary only to inform them of the true situation in order to end the play. The audience is usually aware of the probable outcome shortly after the first scene. Only the characters remain ignorant until the dénouement.

In this kind of play the plot complications are more apparent than real because they result from mistakes or ignorance. Because the course of events is determined largely by misunderstandings or lack of knowledge, which in turn can be controlled by external circumstances, the most significant aspect of this form of dramaturgy is its manipulation by the playwright. In New Comedy, the prototypical comedy of

¹The Nature of Roman Comedy, pp. 140-41.

misapprehension, the various schemes and counter-schemes often have no real effect on the final outcome. The play ends when the playwright chooses to reveal the facts. If the sole aim of the author is to amuse his audience, this method has a certain harmony of form and content. Both the substance of the play--a series of amusing incidents--and the structure of the plot are created out of mistakes and misunderstandings. Such plays may not fulfill the loftiest aspirations of the drama, but their means are consistent with their ends, and the recognition scene, which in New Comedy makes it all possible, has the virtue of being a simple and straightforward convention.

The convenience and adaptability of this method of dramaturgy may account for the continuing popularity of the many descendants of Roman Comedy. Shakespeare and Molière, among others, were able to use the methods and conventions of the comedy of misapprehension to create plays that go well beyond the simple popular entertainments which were their ultimate source. But the comedy of misapprehension has remained a staple of popular comic entertainment, not only because of the advantages which it offers the playwright, but also because it ultimately avoids the logical outcome of the situations with which it appears to be dealing. The playwright, always in control, can avoid unpleasant consequences which the behavior of his characters might produce were they left to their own devices. It permits, if not a return to

the status quo, at least an outcome which is acceptable and not disturbing to the audience--a conventional happy ending.

The same factors which account for the popularity of the form are also largely responsible for its most insidious effect on Western dramaturgy: an emphasis on manipulation by the dramatist rather than the "natural" development of the action through the characters. This emphasis became explicit, both in theory and practice, only in the nineteenth century, but it was inherent in comedies of intrigue which flourished from the Renaissance through the eighteenth century. The well-made plays of Scribe and his followers are direct descendants of Roman New Comedy, not simply because they use the same devices employed in the classical plays, but because they share the dramaturgy of which those tricks are an integral part. But what was a set of simple conventions for the Roman playwrights became for the well-made playwrights a complex game of skill.¹ The simple recognition scene of New Comedy was unacceptable, not because it was false, but because it was too easy. Where Plautus simply lays his resolution baldly before the audience, the new rules demanded that the writer proceed by hints and suggestion.

H. A. Smith wrote of Scribe that

he hinges the most important developments on pure accident, but we have been so carefully prepared to expect this accident, or our eyes have been so

¹See Gerould, "The Well-Made Play and Its Heritage," p. 31.

persistently attracted to the spot where something should occur, that, when it comes, it seems only a part of the natural train of life.¹

Although the vaudeville benefited from the techniques of the well-made play by giving the vaudevillistes greater opportunities for juggling their characters into amusing situations, it always remained theatrical and frankly conventional. Unlike Scribe and the serious practitioners of well-made playwriting, most vaudevillistes practised their craft openly. They did not try to carefully conceal their tricks in order to give an illusion of reality. One of the reasons the serious bourgeois drama of the nineteenth century seems so wooden and cumbersome is the amount of time needed to make the plot manipulation seem "natural." Because their plots are so often based on secrets which must be kept from other characters but revealed to the audience, enormous amounts of time are spent in trivial dialogue, the sole purpose of which is to motivate exits or entrances and to provide exposition.² The unpretentious writers of vaudevilles, less concerned with such questions of apparent naturalness, were free to spend more time on the real substance of their plays, however trivial that substance might

¹Hugh Allison Smith, Main Currents of Modern French Drama (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1925; reprint ed., Freeport, N. Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1968), p. 117.

²William Archer devotes two pages to defending the plausibility of just one such exit in Playmaking (pp. 78-79). See also Gerould, "The Well-Made Play and Its Heritage," p. 37.

have been.

That is not the only advantage which the vaudevil-
listes had over their more serious colleagues. The well-made play evolved from the comedy of misapprehension, and the techniques which it developed continued to be more appropriate to the traditional comedy of intrigue and deception than to serious drama.¹ The plots based on secrets, the demand for an artificial order and "logic," the manipulation of events for the sake of theatrical effects, the emphasis on physical objects as determinants of human events--all these were ideally suited to the creation of farce based on misunderstanding. Even the subject matter of much of nineteenth-century drama would seem tailor-made for farce. The theme of sexual impropriety so dear to the nineteenth century had been a staple of farce since the Middle Ages. When Feydeau began writing he was able to build on a system of dramaturgy which was as perfectly suited to his style as if it had been designed for him specifically. The machine-like constructions of the well-made play were ideal containers for his natural sense of madness and fantasy. They imposed an almost abstract discipline of form which served both to contain and to heighten the lunacy.

¹See Stephan S. Stanton, ed., "Camille" and Other Plays (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), p. xxviii.

The Logic of Vaudeville

His first three one-act plays give little hint of the elaborate constructions which he was to create later. His first play, Par la fenêtre (1882), is a simple confrontation between two people. The comedy is based on their interaction, and the surprise twist of plot is simply a device to end the play. Both Amour et piano (1883) and Gibier de potence (1883) are relatively simple situations fabricated from cases of mistaken identity. Amour et piano, however, displays Feydeau's skill at cleverly prolonging a quiproquo and exploiting its full comic potential. The juggling of various misunderstandings was to become one of the principal features of his plays, and it plays a large role in his first full-length farce, Tailleur pour dames (1886). This was the first of the deception formula plays, and its warm reception may have been the reason he was so fond of the formula which was to provide him with many more successes. But his plays were not always so well received. The five major plays which followed Tailleur pour dames were greeted with only a lukewarm response from both audiences and critics.¹ Interestingly, only one of these five utilized the deception pattern, while the string of successes which followed Monsieur chasse! (1892) until 1900 were (with one exception) all of the deception type. The

¹Jacques Lorcey, Georges Feydeau (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1972), pp. 92-94, 96-98, 100-101, 105-6.

principal objection to those five unsuccessful plays seems to have been that they were too wild and extravagant, that both characters and situations were improbable and illogical. Auguste Vitu of the Figaro, in appraising the original production of La Lycéenne (1887), suggested that the young author take the trouble to link his absurd situations together with some sort of logic, even if only apparent logic.¹ Edmond Stoullig complained of Chat en poche (1888) that "ce jeune auteur se moquait décidément du public et celui-ci lui fit comprendre qu'il existait des bornes qu'il ne fallait pas dépasser." His reaction to Les Fiancés de Loches (1888, with Maurice Desvallières) was similar:

Ces deux jeunes gens voulaient, à la vérité, nous la bailler belle et ils s'étaient trop facilement lancés dans le domaine d'une fantaisie inadmissible. . . . le quiproquo . . . donne lieu aux scènes les plus invraisemblables et aux mots les plus risqués. Les auteurs ont abusé de la permission. Ils sont allés trop loin.²

Looking back on these plays from a distance of nearly a century, it is difficult to understand why the same audiences which so easily swallowed the absurdities of Tailleur pour dames objected to these other plays on the grounds of implausibility. To understand the kind of logic that was being demanded of Feydeau, one should look at some of the enormously

¹Figaro, 24 December 1887, p. 3.

²Noël and Stoullig, eds., Les Annales du théâtre et de la musique, année 14, 1888, pp. 300-301, 363.

successful plays he wrote later. Such a play was L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange (1894), built on essentially the same plan as Tailleur pour dames and several other plays in between. In writing of that play, Francisque Sarcey, one of the most influential and conservative critics of the time, provides insights into the nature of vaudeville logic:

Autrefois M. Georges Feydeau, quand il était à ses debuts, se laissait emporter à cette folle du logis, il s'abandonnait à sa verve, perdait son sujet de vue et s'égarait dans des fantaisies qui finissaient par fatiguer. Il avait l'air de jouer au propos interrompus. Soit qu'il ait appris son métier, . . . il a aujourd'hui une sûreté de main et une certitude d'effets vraiment incroyables.

Toutes ces fantaisies dont la pièce abonde, et qui semblent jaillir à l'improviste d'un à-coup d'imagination, sont préparées et amenées de loin; elles surprennent, mais elles n'affolent point, car on aurait pu les prévoir; on les attendait presque. Elles sont réglées par un infailible géomètre, . . .

Il n'y a pas dans la pièce un détail, si indifférent qu'il paraisse, qui n'ait sa raison d'être, qui, à un moment donné, ne serve à la situation. . . .

.
Sachez-le: dans une pièce de Feydeau, on ne pose pas, en entrant, son chapeau sur une chaise, que je ne me dise: Bon! ce chapeau n'est pas mis là pour des prunes.

. . . Chacun de ces détails entre, sans que vous sachiez comment, dans votre mémoire, s'y enfouit et en remonte juste au moment précis où la situation exige que vous vous en souveniez.

Ça, c'est le don du vaudeville. Tel écrivain répète trois fois, quatre fois un détail qu'il veut enfoncer dans votre souvenir. Vous n'y prenez pas garde. Feydeau l'indique d'un trait, d'une main rapide et sans avoir l'air d'y toucher, c'est fait; vous ne l'oublierez plus . . .¹

He continues in the same vein throughout the entire review. The mathematical logic justifying every event, which

¹Francisque Sarcey, Quarante ans de théâtre, 8 vols. (Paris: Bibliothèque de Annales, 1900-1902), 8 (1902):180-83.

Sarcey admires so, is essentially the "logic" of suggestion mentioned earlier in connection with Scribe, but here it has acquired the nature of a theatrical convention. It is an almost abstract game played by the author and audience, with precise rules understood by both. It is "chess problem logic" demanding economy in the use of all the pieces on the board.¹ The theatrical game is not so rigorous as that of chess, for the rules are rather simple. The first rule, as Sarcey suggests, is that everything which is introduced or mentioned must play a role in the action. In addition all such determinants of the action should be introduced as early as possible, preferably in the first act, so that they do not appear to have been invented for the occasion. They are among the original "givens" of the problem. Although Sarcey implies that tremendous skill is demanded of a playwright by this game, in some ways it makes his job simpler. Because the audience expects everything to be used, all the author need do to justify an event is to introduce its "cause" earlier in the game. The improbable becomes probable solely by virtue of theatrical convention.²

This game of chess problem logic is the fundamental means by which Feydeau manipulates his puppets both into and out of their many difficulties, particularly in the deception

¹ See pp. 46-47 above.

² See Gerould, "The Well-Made Play and Its Heritage," pp. 65-67.

plays. He simply places his pieces in position in the first act, then propels them through a series of successive moves until the final curtain. As with the chess problem, economy in the use of the pieces is valued. In L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange many characters and objects have more than one function. Pinglet's sooty face prevents him from being recognized in the second act and helps to provide the dénouement in the third. And it does so because a towel which Pinglet uses to wipe his face is later used by Maxime, dirtying his face and causing him to be taken for Pinglet. Pinglet's illness at the hotel motivates a necessary exit, but it also gets rid of Marcelle's hat, forcing her to wear the veil which is vital to the outcome. Paillardin's dismissing of his servants provides a reason for Maxime and Victoire to be together at the hotel, and it also prevents Paillardin learning of his wife's absence. This economy of means is part of the "logic" by which the plays operate. It provides an almost abstract and purely external means for drawing the various elements more closely together.

Tools of Manipulation:
Objects and Appearances

These causal links between events are likely to be physical objects rather than human beings. For the playwright who juggles events, things are preferable to people as causal agents because they are much more easily manipulated. They can be lost or mislaid (like the keys in Un Fil à la patte);

manufactured in identical copies (the trousers in Monsieur chasse!); or transferred from one person to another (like Marcelle's dress and the soot on Pinglet's face). Most versatile are the letters and other bits of paper which can be forged, misdirected, mislaid, and reproduced. If unaddressed, they can even find their way to more than one recipient, as in Chat en poche.¹ But even in farce objects have obvious limitations as agents of human events. The battle of people against things is properly the special province of farce, but the demand for logic and a degree of verisimilitude, however superficial, inhibited the fanciful tendency of farce to give objects special powers, to make them seem almost alive and capable of taking the offensive against their human adversaries. Yet there was one area in which, by social and theatrical convention, things were assumed to have extraordinary power over the lives of people: the business of deception and adultery.

Deception is standard fare in plays of intrigue and in the comedy or farce of misapprehension, but in the nineteenth century, deception in sexual matters was a major topic of serious as well as farcical plays.² By basing the majority

¹The best known use of this device is in Pailleron's Le Monde où l'on s'ennui. The plot hinges on the numerous interpretations given to an unaddressed, unsigned note.

²No one exploited this theme in a serious vein more than Porto-Riche. Frank Chandler observed that "deception. . . is the normal expectancy of every man or woman in the plays of Porto-Riche." Modern Continental Playwrights (New York: Harper & Row, 1931), p. 171.

of his plays on infidelity, Feydeau had chosen a subject which was not only distinctly appropriate for farce, but was regarded as acceptable in more serious (and presumably more logical) plays. Critics who objected to the implausibility of the unashamed fools in Feydeau's early plays apparently had no difficulty believing that anyone faced with the threat of scandal would be terrorized into behaving like a perfect madman. This became the principle by which Feydeau could convert his bourgeois characters into lunatics. The dread of scandal, rather than concern with moral values as such, is at the heart of even the serious plays written on this theme. Scandal, even more than adultery, is suited more to farce than to serious drama, not only because scandal is in itself a trivial concern, but because it hinges on appearances rather than realities.¹ In a world dominated by a concern for bourgeois decorum, appearances become more important than facts. They are that world's most important reality. But appearances are easily manipulated and managed, and farce, ever fond of transforming and playing with reality, is totally at home in a world with such an insubstantial notion of what is real.

Thus the fear of scandal not only provides Feydeau with a motive which transforms his characters into fools, it gives him a tool for turning their world into a madhouse.

¹See Gerould, "The Well-Made Play and Its Heritage," pp. 40-41.

His characters are so preoccupied with appearances that they continually attempt to manipulate and control them. All that is necessary is to point them in the right direction and see to it that they always work at cross-purposes with each other. Once he has set them in motion he simply provides them with a setting that both encourages their intrigues and increases the danger of being caught. Most of the ludicrous and embarrassing situations in which Feydeau's characters find themselves would not be possible without their own constant efforts at manipulating and deceiving.

The reason that things can acquire such incredible importance in Feydeau's world is that objects can constitute material evidence. Where appearances count for so much, objects which would otherwise be harmless become threatening simply because they have the power to incriminate. Although Feydeau never wrote an entire play around a single such material symbol of scandal as did Labiche in Un Chapeau de paille d'Italie or Sardou in Les Pattes de mouche, most of the objects in his plays which seem so to dominate the characters derive their power from an ability to create or avoid scandal. Sometimes such things both threaten scandal and provide the means to avoid it. Examples are Marcelle's dress and the incriminating trousers in Monsieur chasse! Sometimes, like the torn clothing in Le Système Ribadier, they simply provide the dénouement, although incriminating objects--such as the Figaro of Un Fil à la patte--might appear at

anytime to harass and bewilder their victims. Obviously, articles of clothing (or their lack) are especially important. There are few plays in which clothing does not play some role, either by its presence or absence. Clothing is a vital issue in a world which demands the appearance of respectability, and disputes over it can lead to desperate measures. In three of the plays (Un Fil à la patte, La Main passe, and Occupe-toi d'Amélie) questions of clothing drive Feydeau's normally non-violent heroes to the point of brandishing revolvers.

The characters are often harassed by objects which threaten to expose them, but they can also be led astray by their preference for the evidence of physical objects over the testimony of their fellow creatures. Their lack of trust in each other is understandable in view of the tendency they all have to lie, but objects too can be unreliable witnesses. They can be misinterpreted in many different ways, forged, altered, destroyed, and planted on others. They are dumb and cannot correct the interpretations put on them, nor can they stand for cross-examination.

Not all the objects which control the action do so through the threat of scandal. The concern with appearances creates an atmosphere in which things seem to be intrinsically more important than human beings. It is virtually a convention of the well-made form that objects have greater power than people to influence events. Camille's silver palate

(La Puce à l'oreille) is an example of the natural dependence of people on things. Its absence not only inhibits him as a person, but influences the action when he is unable to convey an important piece of information.¹ But at times Feydeau seems to prefer objects when human beings would do just as well. Homenidès' mistaken belief that his wife is unfaithful could easily be corrected by a simple explanation (as it ultimately is), yet Homenidès must first find physical evidence in the form of a letter which had been carefully prepared in the first act.² Anything written down is regarded as more reliable than human conversation. In L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange, Feydeau finds it necessary to prepare for Mme Pinglet's wild story about her nightlong adventure with a telegram which arrives only minutes before Mme Pinglet herself.³ When Ferrailon is told, in the second act of La Puce à l'oreille, that he might get life insurance at Chandebise's place, Ferrailon notes the address on his cuff, and the audience knows where to expect him in the next act. He does arrive, but his appearance has nothing to do with insurance or the address on his cuff. He is there only to return Camille's palate, which had also been inscribed with the

¹Vol. 4, act 1, sc. 8, p. 155.

²Ibid., act 3, sc. 14, p. 226.

³Vol. 4, L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange, act 3, sc. 5, p. 103.

address.¹

The Inverted Pyramid

Such examples of wasted motion are infrequent, but they suggest how important the conventions of his "craft" are in Feydeau's work. As Sarcey said, he does not usually waste time giving elaborate hints to the audience about what is going to happen. He relied on the probabilities established by the convention itself. Because he worked within the conventions, the audience knew what to expect.² Unlike Scribe, who often spent the entire first act on elaborate exposition and ordered a complex array of facts and circumstances before setting them in motion, Feydeau starts his plays rather simply and creates the complications later. He once said of his method:

Si vous comparez la construction d'une pièce de théâtre à une pyramide, on ne doit pas partir de la base pour aboutir au sommet, comme on a fait jusqu'ici. Moi, je retourne la pyramide: je pars de la point et j'élargis le débat!³

The disadvantage of Scribe's method of building an enormous base to support a tiny pinnacle is that all the complications,

¹Vol. 4, act 2, sc. 4, p. 166; act 3, sc. 12, p. 221.

²Sarcey felt that it was a great advantage to the modern writers of comedies to have established "entre les vaudevillistes et le public une stratégie convenue de mouvements et d'effets. . . . Nous devinons tous à demi-mot; car nous savons le jeu." Quarante ans de théâtre, 4:402.

³Quoted in Michel Georges-Michel, Un Demi-siècle de gloires théâtrales (Paris: Editions André Bonne, 1950), p. 124.

which form the bulk of the play, are designed to make possible the scene à faire.¹ In Feydeau's method the complications exist for their own sake, or rather for the madness and frenzy they produce. He was able to accomplish this because, rather than directing all his efforts toward a predetermined conclusion, he merely returned to his place of departure, to the point of his inverted pyramid.² But a pyramid that can be made to stand on its head may not be weighty, and Feydeau's is constructed of little more than air. The problems in the deception plays are never very real, they are built on appearances. The planned adultery rarely takes place, and from a situation of apparent crisis and scandal his heroes are returned to an equally apparent situation of stability. The threat is easily removed because it was largely illusory in the first place.

The major obstacle Feydeau faced in using the deception formula was not in finding a logical way to get his characters out of their predicaments, but in preventing the apparent crisis from developing into a real one. For Feydeau's people, that means only avoiding a situation that precipitates an actual scandal. Their overriding concern

¹Gerould compares the construction of a well-made play to "building an entire house for the sake of the roof." "The Well-Made Play and Its Heritage," p. 35.

²Feydeau was not original even in this inversion of popular dramatic theory. Labiche had used the same technique in Un Chapeau de paille d'Italie.

with scandal makes the deception formula a particularly appropriate use of the comedy of misapprehension and the techniques of the well-made play. Despite the impression one may receive from watching or reading the plays, Feydeau's characters are largely the architects of their own destinies. The recognition scene of New Comedy provided an arbitrary dénouement which was imposed upon the characters, and the well-made play technique of preparing for the outcome with hints and suggestions did not make it any less arbitrary. But Feydeau's heroes are usually responsible for both complications and dénouement. They create the crisis when they are tempted into a scandalous situation, and produce the outcome by their successful flight from scandal. By manipulating them into a situation in which exposure seems inevitable, Feydeau only increases the probability of something that is always possible whenever one attempts deception. He uses the suggestive techniques of preparation primarily to bring the deceivers and the deceived together in an incriminating locale. Once he has them there, he merely guides their efforts as they do the work of manipulating for him.

Order and Chaos

The deception formula provided Feydeau with the means to create a fantasy of bizarre situations by starting with premises that his audience could accept as reasonably "realistic," that is, with characters motivated by fears

like their own. It was also a formula in which the machine-like logic and materialistic aesthetics of Sarcey could be satisfied without becoming an end in themselves, while providing the necessary discipline and order to counterbalance Feydeau's natural tendency to fantasy and lunacy. The chaos which is produced by the desperate flight from scandal is balanced by a sense of overall order and a feeling that the playwright always has control no matter how chaotic things may seem. Like the clown's pratfall which combines apparent abandon with perfect control and precision timing, events which seem most abandoned often betray the skillful hand of the playwright. Apparently chance happenings always manage to fit into an overall and somehow logical pattern. When Pinglet and Marcelle are caught in a police raid at the Hôtel du Libre-Echange, they each give the other's name as their own in an attempt to pass as man and wife. This naturally results in their arrest, but it later has the effect of throwing the blame on to their innocent spouses. An equally fortuitous series of accidents shifts the responsibility to the maid and schoolboy, but the net result of all these accidents is the impression that the playwright could lift the guilt and place it with almost mathematical precision on whichever shoulders he pleases.

The feeling of order in the midst of madness is increased as well by the nearly symmetrical arrangement of many of the plots. Starting from a situation of bourgeois

stability and order, they move to a point of maximum disorder and impropriety in the second act and return to a situation of stability in the final act. Such symmetry is often reflected in the settings. In L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange and La Puce à l'oreille the setting of the third act is the same as that of the first, and the second act of both plays takes place in a disreputable hotel. The plays end as they began, with at least relative order restored to the household.

In some of Feydeau's earliest one-act plays there is less emphasis on this kind of order and symmetry, but in others, particularly those involving infidelity, it is even more striking than in the full-length deception plays. C'est une femme du monde and Séance de nuit both take place in a cabinet particulier of a restaurant--a favorite setting for indiscretions--and in both the characters are brought together through a series of maneuvers and relationships which have the precision and economy of a mathematical formula. In C'est une femme du monde two men who are being unfaithful to their mistresses agree to share the same private dining room in order to show off to each other their latest conquests. The women, who are posing as femmes du monde, turn out to be identical with the deceived mistresses and are also both former wives of the maître d'hôtel. Everyone in the cast has a relationship with at least one other person which is not discovered until the end. Séance de nuit, although even more complex, has the same sort of ingenuity and economy in its

use of characters to serve more than one function. Even more than the full-length deception plays, these two short pieces illustrate the kinds of abstract patterns which can be developed from the use of plots based on misapprehension.

In nearly all of the plays Feydeau wrote before 1908, misapprehension, whether the result of deception or innocent mistakes, is both the basis of plot development and the source of most of the fun. Even in Fiancés en herbe, a simple vignette in which the usual plot complications are absent, the humor arises almost entirely from a special kind of ignorance: the naïveté of children discussing adult matters without understanding the implications of their words. But the use of misapprehension is not always as appropriate to the action and the characters as it is in the deception plays. Amour et piano is more successful than many of his early plays in this regard. The action, which develops from an innocent young girl being mistaken for a courtesan, ends with the implicit suggestion that this young man would have been better off courting a proper young lady than attempting to get involved with an "actress," so the mistake is given some significance. On the other hand, Chat en poche and Les Fiancés de Loches, two longer plays which are also based on mistaken identity, are sustained by a largely mechanical prolongation of the original error. The latter play, which seems primarily an exercise in developing the utmost madness from a single mistake, ends appropriately in a lunatic asylum.

Variations on the Theme

The deception formula was successful partly because the plot was so suited to the theme, but since this implies that both theme and presentation were essentially the same, it supports the charge that the deception plays are all simply variations on a single play. This is largely true, but not all of the deception plays follow precisely the pattern outlined for L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange. In Champignol malgré lui, for example, the action moves in the second act to a military base rather than a hotel or other trysting place, and in Le Système Ribadier the threat of scandal is brought right into Ribadier's home in the person of an enraged husband. Such differences are not entirely mechanical. They are usually accompanied by certain differences in tone and theme. In Le Dindon the principal threat of scandal is Vatlin's one-time mistress, Maggy. By not introducing her until late in the first act and not having her appear at all in the third, Feydeau is able to devote more time in the first and third acts to confrontations between people and less to the usual complications and misunderstandings. On the other hand, La Môme Crevette, a woman whose very presence threatens scandal, is onstage through most of La Dame de chez Maxim and dominates nearly all of the action by creating one disruption after another in Petypon's life. The former play stresses the frustrations of marriage and devotes much time to the conflict of husband and wife over questions of

sexual morality, while the latter, presided over by the insouciant figure of La Môme, acquires something of a festival atmosphere from her carefree disregard of all normal conventions and restraints.

Un Fil à la patte and Occupe-toi d'Amélie differ significantly from the other deception plays because they have different starting points. Both begin in the salon of a cocotte rather than a respectable bourgeois home, so that the usual procedure of introducing nominally respectable people into a scandalous situation and then returning them shaken but safe to the stability of their homes cannot apply. The cocotte, as a walking symbol of impropriety, has great power to disrupt the façade of respectability and create general panic when thrust into a bourgeois setting. She is more than immune to the scandal she produces; she thrives on it and uses it to her advantage. Thus the action of Un Fil à la patte reverses the usual pattern by moving the disreputable characters of the first act into a respectable home in the second. Bois d'Enghien is not a husband trying to escape his wife in order to enjoy an extramarital fling, but a lover who wants to leave his mistress in order to marry a wealthy young woman. Rather than running into his spouse at his trysting place, he meets his mistress at the signing of the wedding contract, where she outrages the future mother-in-law and causes the marriage to be cancelled. The action does not return the characters to their starting

positions, however, because the young lady forces her mother to accept the marriage by herself causing another scandalous situation. Scandal is again the key to both complications and outcome, but instead of resulting from the flight of the main characters, here two characters--first the cocotte and then the ingénue--use the threat of scandal to obtain their own ends.¹

Occupe-toi d-Amélie moves even further from the standard formula because it revolves almost wholly about the world of the cocotte. It has the usual second act bedroom scene with its frantic attempts to prevent the discovery of infidelities, but instead of being the focal point of the play and the pinnacle of complications which must be unraveled in the final act, it produces additional complications and a fourth tableau in which to straighten them out. As a result the play lacks the geometrical symmetry and economy of his earlier deception plays. By the standards of the latter, it is loosely constructed, but it follows the logic of farce in carrying a situation to an unendurable extreme. Marcel's attempt to avoid marriage while reaping its benefits (the benefits of marriage being financial, not sexual) results in the most horrifying situation one of

¹Feydeau often portrays women as quite cavalier in their attitudes toward les convenances. A characteristic shared by the ingénues, wives, and cocottes of Feydeau's world is a willingness to use scandal as a weapon. Bois d'Enghien's fiancée uses essentially the same trick employed earlier by Finette in La Lycéenne (vol. 8, act 3, sc. 7). On scandal used as a weapon by wives, see pp. 142-43 below.

Feydeau's males could imagine--marriage to a cocotte.

New Directions

Occupe-toi d'Amélie is the last full-length play Feydeau finished without collaboration, and it is one of several attempts in the later part of his career to break away from the mathematical rigors of the deception formula. It is usually regarded as one of his finest plays, and its success may be due in part to the fact that it is less dependent on the formula than others.¹ After the success of La Dame de chez Maxim in 1899, he tried several times to move in new directions, but not always with happy results.

Some of these ventures departed radically from his usual practice. Le Bourgeois is a comedy which treats seriously many of the same themes on which his farces are based: sex and marriage, hypocrisy, and the role of the cocotte in (or out of) society. Because of the serious tone, it appears from our vantage point rather embarrassing in its commitment to an outdated code of sexual morality. L'Age d'or is a

¹The first act illustrates this "looseness" of construction. The opening scene with the phonograph, the argument between Amélie and her brother, and several other scenes are there for their own comic sake, not to provide exposition or preparation for later events. These scenes are not irrelevant to the play, for they reveal the nature of Amélie's world and the people who inhabit it, but they do not provide preparation in the well-made play sense of the word. The only hint Feydeau gives that Amélie and Marcel will be discovered together in bed when the curtain rises on the second act is Etienne's admonition to "look after Amélie." The hint is effective only because the audience already knows what kind of people they are.

time-travel fantasy framed by a conventional plot of paternal objections to a daughter's marriage. Unlike Le Bourgeon, in which farce is largely relegated to a sub-plot, the general atmosphere in this fantasy is farcical, particularly in its treatment of sex and violence.

La Duchesse des Folies-Bergère differs primarily in its development of the plot. This play weaves several threads of action together through five acts, and was understandably criticized as being "made up of several vaudevilles."¹ Although there is a kind of loose thematic unity which holds the various strands together, it lacks the economy and focus that were so highly regarded by Sarcey and others. Another play, La Main passe!, is interesting because it is superficially like the other plays that hang on the eternal question of adultery. Women often threaten adultery but are prevented from actually committing it. Even when husbands or wives are caught in compromising situations, they are the victims of mistakes and appearances. But in La Main passe! adultery is committed, and the guilty couple is discovered. Shaw once complained the "conventional farcical comedies are always finally tedious because the heart of them, the inevitable conjugal infidelity, is always evaded."² It

¹Emile Faguet, Journal des débats, 12 December 1902, p. 1128, quoted in Norman Richard Shapiro, Introduction to Four Farces by Georges Feydeau, trans. Norman Richard Shapiro (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. xxxvii. Lorcey makes a similar comment in Georges Feydeau, p. 166.

²George Bernard Shaw, Complete Plays with Prefaces, 6 vols. (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1963), 6:343.

is not evaded here, but the result is not especially fortunate. In spite of Shaw's objection, evasion is appropriate to a play such as L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange because it is consistent with the characters' attitudes. They ultimately avoid both adultery and its consequences because they fear scandal above all else. La Main passe! involves an actual breach of the moral code which Feydeau seems to have regarded seriously, for the lovers are duly punished.

The method of punishment is clever, amusing, and actually quite appropriate, but it is followed by a fourth act devoted to almost melancholy reflections on the consequences of adultery.¹ After these pious thoughts, Francine's running off to find yet another lover seems motivated by little more than the convenience of the plot. Since her sometime lover (now her husband) is allowed to rejoin his forgiving former wife, it seems clear that Francine is forced to pass from one man to the next because of the convention that an unchaste wife is forever "unclean," and not because of her arbitrarily "flighty" character. Having weighted down the main action of the play with the demands of conventional morality, Feydeau lightens the tone for two and one half acts with the antics of Hubertin, a broadly comic character whose actions, unfortunately, are only peripherally related to the

¹Their punishment contrasts with the harsh fate which awaited most adulteresses in drama. See p. 144 below.

main plot.

La Main passe! and Le Bourgeon suggest that Feydeau was searching for a way to deal with the real problems which arise between people because of the frustrations of sex and marriage rather than to continue manufacturing artificial crises of misunderstanding and confusion, but both these plays are marred by the necessity of warping the plot so as to demonstrate the validity of a code of sexual ethics. Only when he abandoned the question of extramarital sex was he able to find a satisfactory way of dealing with the conflicts of husband and wife without relying on intrigue and misapprehension. In his late one-act plays, beginning with Feu la mère de Madame, Feydeau abandoned the comedy of misapprehension and developed what was for him a new dramatic method. Misapprehension plays a role in these plays, as it is apt to in any farce, but it is no longer the principle on which they are organized. Instead they are based on a fundamental incompatibility between two persons which is steadily aggravated until it reaches a nearly explosive state. It was not an original method, Courteline had shown the farcical possibilities of putting two characters in conflict, each resolutely pursuing his own form of irrational logic.¹

¹Unlike Feydeau, Courteline does not limit his use of this basic method to domestic conflict. In Le Commissaire est bon enfant, one of the antagonists is an actual lunatic. In others (e.g., La Paix chez soi, L'Article 330), one combatant seems to have made a conscious decision to use irrationality as a weapon against a mad world.

Throughout his career, Feydeau had himself often used direct conflict between husband and wife in individual scenes, but not through an entire play. The complications in the late plays are at a minimum, serving primarily to heighten the conflict and bring the differences between the two into the sharpest possible focus. The characters are more realistic than in his early short plays, but they seem scarcely less mad. In many ways quite ordinary and conventional, they exist in their own separate worlds, as firmly cut off from one another as if they were creatures from separate planets. Brought together by the unpredictable accident of marriage, they remain foreign and incomprehensible to each other. Incapable of communicating, they can only destroy one another.

This is a simpler, more direct, and perhaps more honest method of creating comic action, but it too proved limited in scope for Feydeau. He was only able to use it successfully in short plays where the steadily increasing tension is not broken by act divisions or obscured by complicating events. It is possible that if Feydeau had lived longer and retained his health, he might have written longer plays that were free of reliance on mistakes and misunderstandings, yet (unlike Le Bourgeon) wholly within his usually intensely farcical mode. As it is, two plays which seemed to be going in that direction were abandoned, while he went on to write several more short plays.

At the point at which each of these attempts break

off, there are none of the misunderstandings or deceptions which sustain the plots of his earlier plays. Cent millions qui tombent exists as the first two acts of a three act play. There are a few scenes in the beginning of the first act involving the familiar business of hiding a lover, but this is soon passed over, and the characters quickly turn their attention to money, which is their preoccupation and the focus of the play. This is Feydeau's most savage portrayal of cupidity and one of the plays most dependent on the idiosyncrasies of character types for its comic effects. The plot is simple and straightforward. Paulette and her friends shamelessly try to flatter, pamper, or wheedle the formerly despised servant Isidore out of a share in the vast fortune he has apparently inherited. A reference to the brief duration of the Saturnalia suggests that Isidore's good fortune would have proved temporary in the third act, but there is little else to predict the outcome.¹

In On va faire la cocotte (a two-act play, of which only one act exists), Feydeau returned to the theme of marital infidelity. The situation is similar to that of several other plays. A philandering husband is found out by his wife, who then plans revenge in kind. The state of affairs at the end of the act is parallel to that at the end of the first act of Monsieur chasse!, but in the earlier play the husband does not know that he has been discovered,

¹Vol. 6, act 1, sc. 1, p. 215.

and the wife has no intention that he should find out about her "revenge." This atmosphere of misapprehension becomes the basis for the frantic evasions and lies which make up the action of the remainder of the play. But when Emilienne learns, in On va faire la cocotte, of her husband's infidelity, she confronts him with the truth in a way that makes it impossible to deny. Both of them know exactly where they stand. Trévelin defies his wife and goes out with his mistress on his arm as Emilienne declares to his face, "Puisque tu n'en as que pour les grues, en bien! je me conduirai comme une grue."¹ We have little more than a cast of characters to tell us what Feydeau planned for the second act, but one can easily imagine an outcome consistent with the situation and the personalities of the characters involved: Trévelin forced to admit that he fears cuckoldry and scandal more than he desires the pleasures of sin, and Emilienne made to realize that the life of a "grue" is not precisely what she had romantically imagined. Yet Feydeau, the creator of such ingeniously complex puzzles, was unable to bring this relatively simple action to a conclusion, although he was still hoping to complete it six years after the first act was finished.²

¹Vol. 7, act 1, sc. 6, p. 282.

²Lorcey, Georges Feydeau, p. 251.

Wisdom and Folly

The forms which Feydeau used were successful because even in conforming to the social and theatrical prejudices of his culture, they were supremely suited to portraying the folly of those attitudes. This is not to say that Feydeau was criticizing or mocking the mores of his age. There can be little doubt that his attitudes were essentially conservative, and that he shared the prejudices of his contemporaries. If so, one might ask, how was he able to portray so accurately the folly of a scandal-obsessed society, if, as it seems, he did not really regard those obsessions as foolish?

In objecting to the evasions of bedroom farce, Shaw was asking that we critically examine our attitudes toward sex and scandal, but the play he offered as a "demonstration" of the proper role of farcical comedy actually demonstrates that people really need not be so foolish about these things, and so is not farcical at all.¹ Farce will not admit the possibility of an alternative to folly, for to concede the polarity of wisdom and folly implies the need for judgment, and farce abjures all judgment, whether rational or moral. It gives the only accurate picture of the region beyond good and evil, where the inhabitants are not supermen, but unashamed fools. Entering the spirit of farce is a declaration

¹Overruled. Shaw details his objections to the lies, evasions, and stratagems of farcical comedy in the preface to this play. Complete Plays with Prefaces, 6:343-44.

of irresponsibility, a temporary renunciation of the duties of wisdom and the right of judgment. It is an abdication which might justly be deplored if we could only be certain that our wisdom were real and our judgment sound. But we know that prejudice often takes the mask of wisdom and that judgment can be a cloak for hate or fear; so when farce insists that beliefs, prejudices, reason, and fear all shed their graver disguises to wear the cap and bells, its folly may be wiser than we know.

The irresponsibility of farce does not imply that it is simple. We are not easily seduced into discarding our serious attitudes toward ourselves and our feelings, and for every age and culture there exist limits which cannot be crossed. Feydeau's limitations were those of his age, and he accepted them even while--by exploiting their farcical possibilities--he portrayed them. If they prevented him from writing certain kinds of plays, they were the mainspring of others. The deception formula and the one-act plays of domestic conflict enabled him to probe the lives and feelings of his audience without straying from the path of folly. Both methods provided a distorting mirror in which they saw their lives reflected with a calculated degree of unreality. The nature of the reality shown in the mirror and the techniques by which it was distorted will be the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

THE INNER STRUCTURE

La mécanique--même impeccable--n'explique pas tout. D'autres ont su agencer habilement des péripéties et leur oeuvres ne sont plus jouées. Ils n'étaient que de bons fabricants. Ce qui rend le théâtre de Feydeau exceptionnel, c'est la démesure et surtout le grain de folie qui le parcourt.¹

Probabilities and Progressive Madness

Like Sarcey, many modern critics have commented on Feydeau's elaborate constructions and intricate machinery. But Feydeau himself had this interesting comment on the way he created his plays:

Je n'écris jamais de scénario. Je vois une situation, je la prends; puis je pars sans savoir où, au hasard. . . . Arrivé devant l'obstacle, je le saute, sans jamais l'éviter, sans tricherie et sans expédients: j'ai posé en principe qu'on se tire de tout!²

Feydeau implies that to have everything worked out in advance, to leave nothing to chance, would somehow be "cheating."

¹André Roussin, "Le Cas Feydeau," World Premières Mondiales, February 1963, p. 4.

²Quoted in Lorcey, Georges Feydeau, p. 198. Adolphe Brisson reports a conversation in which Feydeau told him: "Mes pièces sont entièrement improvisées; l'ensemble et le détail, le plan et la forme, tout s'y met en place à mesure que j'écris. Et pour aucune d'elles je n'ai fait de canevas." Portraits intimes, 5:14.

He would not be playing the game honestly. The game of farce requires spontaneity, a feeling of improvisation. However much planning he actually did, he recognized that the vitality of his plays depended on a feeling of uncertainty and unpredictability that planning could not provide and might destroy. The wild air of improvisation which does so much to provide the buoyancy and gaiety of his plays would not seem to be the product of a detailed blueprint. His repeated use of the same formula, with its "inverted pyramid," allowed him greater freedom to improvise than might at first appear, so that his plays create more the impression of an improbable and unpredictable juggling act than of a precise, well-oiled machine. This sense of unpredictable madness is at the heart of Feydeau, but even the madness is not without its rules and logic.

Elder Olson points out that even when comedy departs from normal or everyday probabilities it still follows understood patterns of rules, and he classifies the probabilities of farce as usually being what he calls "hyperbolic."¹ The probabilities of exaggeration are generally the rule in Feydeau's farces as well, but they are complicated by additional rules. To some extent the probabilities are established by the conventions already discussed. The well-made play's demand for economy increases the "probability" that a character introduced in the first act will appear again in the second

¹The Theory of Comedy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 63.

and third if he has the least excuse for doing so, although such an appearance may represent an extraordinary coincidence by normal standards. Bousin mentions in the first act of Un Fil à la patte that he is a notary's clerk. Thus, of all such clerks in Paris, it is he who fulfills that function in the next two acts.¹ In Champignol malgré lui, a maid who was fired in the first act just happens to find her next job in the home to which everyone is invited in the third.² Characters may behave in ways which violate patterns of real life if there is a precedent in convention or tradition. Husbands blind to the attentions paid to their wives by other men were a firmly established tradition in vaudeville, and Feydeau carries such blindness to extremes. Vatelín, for example, is not the least suspicious when he finds a man nearly prostrate before his wife in Le Dindon, despite the fact that it is the third such occurrence.³ His indifference is the more striking since similar scenes in Feydeau are often the cause of general panic.

"Probabilities" of this kind are artificial and conventional, but they are an important part of the way Feydeau makes the improbable and bizarre seem logical and somehow acceptable within an atmosphere of accelerating madness.

¹Vol. 6, act 1, sc. 8, p. 123; act 2, sc. 14, p. 168; act 3, sc. 4, p. 182.

²Vol. 6, act 1, sc. 15, p. 50; act 3, sc. 5, p. 98.

³Vol. 2, act 1, sc. 8, p. 135.

The acceleration is itself a part of the method. Feydeau once described his method of making a character seem more probable: "Quand j'ai un premier rôle qui pourrait paraître invraisemblable, je prends soin de lui donner pour compagnon un personnage secondaire, mais qui, . . . est plus invraisemblable encore et, par opposition, fait paraître le premier presque logique."¹ The reverse is equally true: if a somewhat improbable character is made acceptable, he will prepare the way for the more fantastic one who follows him. Each step of the progressive lunacy in Feydeau's world builds on the previous one. However wild and improbable the action becomes, it usually begins in rather normal circumstances and everyday settings: "Je pars toujours de la vraisemblance. Un fait--à trouver!--vient bouleverser l'ordre de marche des événements naturels tels qu'ils auraient dû se dérouler logiquement."² From this point the action becomes increasingly more complex and frantic until it finally seems that anything at all could happen. A simple mistake can snowball into disastrous consequences. The simple provincials of Les Fiancés de Loches mistake an employment agency for a marriage bureau and are led through a bewildering series of situations to confinement in an insane asylum. Lemerancier's

¹Quoted in Georges-Michel, Un Demi-siècle de gloires théâtrales, p. 124.

²Ibid. Cf. Bermel, "Farce," p. 265: (quoted on p. 16 above).

weakness for actresses results eventually in his being taken for a desperate murderer in Gibier de potence. The entire action of a play may be built on a mistake such as Saint-Florimond's assumption of Champignol's identity, but even a minor character can be sent by an ill-timed move into a whirlpool of events beyond his control or comprehension.¹ Bousin's vain and foolish act of dropping his card into an anonymous bouquet leads ultimately to his arrest for indecent exposure in Un Fil à la patte. Like so many of Feydeau's victims, Bousin never quite comprehends what is happening to him and understandably concludes that he has fallen among a pack of lunatics.²

One of the reasons Feydeau can raise the level of acceptable madness so high is that the situation is nearly always more comprehensible and logical to the audience than it is to the characters involved. They cannot see the threads which weave events together, they are aware only that their stable world has been converted into a madhouse. They, even more than the audience, are ready to accept the proposition that "anything can happen" for they can make little sense of what has already occurred. When Tournel and Raymond see Camille appear from the revolving bed of La Puce à l'oreille, miraculously speaking with the help

¹Vol. 6, Champignol malgré lui.

²Vol. 6, act 1, sc. 20, p. 145.

of his silver palate, they refuse to believe their eyes. After all, they had just seen the exact double of Chandebise appear magically from the same bed, and they assume this must be yet another magical twin.¹ In this world the improbable is expected and madness becomes the norm.

Once the playwright has lifted his audience and his characters to the highest possible level of madness, he must decide what to do with them--how to end his play. As with flying an airplane, coming down to earth may not be the most interesting part of the flight, but it is one of the most difficult. Lea wrote that the weakness in most farces is "at the end when the knots are cut and not untied."² She was referring specifically to the Commedia, but the same weakness can be seen in some of Feydeau's early plays. Plays like Gibier de potence, Chat en poche, and Les Fiancés de Loches, which are based on a central case of mistaken identity, end quite abruptly and with many questions left unresolved once the misunderstanding is cleared up. In farce we are not really interested in resolutions. We did not take off just to prove that we could come down again. Rather, we want to enjoy aerial acrobatics in the rarified atmosphere of fantasy and to defy the forces that would pull us back to reality. Yet it cannot be said that such abrupt endings are satisfactory, even for farce. Thrust suddenly back into

¹Vol. 4, act 2, sc. 8, p. 182.

²Italian Popular Comedy, p. 195.

reality, we become sharply aware that the fantastic world into which we had been gradually seduced was only an illusion. We had been secretly pleased at how much that mad world resembled our own, but the sudden ending makes us aware of the gulf between them.

Another of the advantages of the deception formula is that it restores order by means of the same logic which had created disorder. The resolution is a continuation rather than a denial of what had gone before. Stability is restored, but it is just as insubstantial and often nearly as mad as the chaos that preceded it. Sometimes, as in Le Dindon and La Puce à l'oreille, the misunderstandings are cleared up and the characters are allowed to forgive one another and possibly to profit by their experience. In such cases the resolution brings us down from the level of farce and closer to conventional comedy, but just as often the madness continues to the end. Moulineaux, in Tailleur pour dames, persists in concocting new lies to the last line of the play, and stability returns in L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange only when Pinglet has driven the last incriminating witness from his home. In Un Fil à la patte, Bois-d'Enghien does finally get rid of his mistress and wins the young bride he wanted, but only because his fiancée found the sinful past he was trying to discard irresistibly glamorous.¹ Such

¹Vol. 6, Un Fil à la patte, act 3, sc. 8, p. 194.

characters may find the "happy" endings which they sought, but their newly found paradise is as appropriate to their foolishness as was their recently endured hell.

Happy endings are not required, but endings which are consistent with the original premises are. The late one-act plays have their own form of accelerating madness, but there are no tricks to elevate us into a world of fantasy. There is only an increasing tension between two people that usually ends as the distracted husband leaves the field of combat in an impotent rage. There is no resolution of the crisis or return to stability because there is no need for one. There are no intrigues or misunderstandings to be resolved and the conflicts, although essentially trivial, are as real at the height of the madness as they were at the beginning. The crises in the deception plays are like a magician's tricks. They are the product of mirrors and sleight of hand. The transition back to reality is necessary to complete the illusion. In the late one-act plays the same level of reality--the same degree of "hyperbolic" probability--is maintained throughout, and the conflict is carried through to the inevitable explosion.¹

¹This is also true of the unfinished On va faire la cocotte (vol. 7). The conflicting attitudes of the protagonists regarding sex and marriage are brought into direct, explosive confrontation.

Exaggeration and Truth

The exaggeration of reality in Feydeau's plays varies both in kind and degree. Exaggeration is not always comical. As Eastman says; "It is the too much--always and absolutely--not the much, that is funny." In order to be comic, exaggeration must go "beyond some humanly reasonable bounds."¹ This does not mean that the greater an effect or a character is exaggerated, the funnier it is likely to be, or that it need be gross to be effective. At times such "reasonable bounds" lie remarkably close to actuality. Domestic strife, such as that portrayed in Feydeau's late work, is a favorite theme of comic writers because such situations find even the best of us approaching our limits of petty and selfish stupidity. Feydeau goes just beyond these limits in making his married combatants--especially the wives--totally blind to all but their own interests and points of view. Comic exaggeration is usually most effective when it most successfully welds together reality and unreality, when the traits it draws manage somehow to appear at once strikingly true to life and absurdly impossible. The couples in Feydeau's late plays are extreme without departing far from reality. One of them at least may have re-created events that actually took place in the Feydeau household. His son Jacques claimed that he was the original hero of On purge Bébé! and that "les choses se

¹Enjoyment of Laughter, p. 150.

sont passées à très peu de chose près comme dans la pièce."¹

In Feydeau's earliest plays the exaggeration is much more heightened and lifts us immediately into a fantastic world that derives its comic power from its blissful unconcern with the standards of our own. The opening line of Gibier de potence tells us the sort of world we are entering. Plumard is just finishing writing a letter which he signs, "un anonyme . . . qui ne dit pas nom." Plumard, who lives appropriately at 7, rue aux Anes, later explains how he came to marry an actress:

J'étais herboriste, monsieur, et de moeurs honnêtes. Un jour, mademoiselle Lamballe m'envoya chercher parce qu'elle était souffrante. Elle avait des étourdissements; grâce à mes soins, . . . le lendemain elle se portait à merveille et quinze jours après, je l'épousais . . . Cinq mois plus tard, monsieur, j'étais père de famille! Ma femme me donnait un gros bébé parfaitement constitué. . . . C'est même un cas très rare! vous savez. J'ai voulu, dans l'intérêt de la science, adresser un rapport, à l'Académie de médecine, mais ma femme s'y est opposée.²

Plumard is more an exaggeration of an ancient theatrical type character, the happy cuckold, than he is of observed reality. Thus twice removed from reality (like the other characters in the play), he seems less an exaggeration than an inhabitant of some land of happy fools whose only relation to real life is their obvious freedom from its restrictions.

Extreme forms of exaggeration are not always of this

¹Jacques Feydeau, quoted in Lorcey, Georges Feydeau, p. 203.

²Vol. 6, sc. 5, p. 13.

kind. Bentley suggests that the exaggerations of farce, although apparently excessive, still maintain contact with reality because although "the external facts are distorted," farce is always faithful "to the inner experience."¹ As he sees it, farce shows not what we do, but what we would like to do. It expresses, usually by direct physical action, what we feel but usually keep to ourselves. Like Freud, Bentley stresses the expression of feelings of aggression and sexual desire. While these are present in Feydeau's farces, they are not the only aspects of the "inner experience" that are exaggerated. The most common and most often exaggerated mental state for a Feydeau character is fear of exposure. Discovered in a compromising situation, as they always are, they run like frightened rabbits. Their fear is instantly translated into flight--into direct physical action. The reaction is automatic and unthinking. Confronted with exposure, they can think of nothing else. When his wife surprises him with his mistress in Je ne trompe pas mon mari, Plantarede's terrified impulse to flee is so great that it never occurs to him until later that his wife had made her startling appearance from under the covers of another man's bed!² Feydeau's heroes will do anything to escape scandal. If the door is not free, they may go out the window. If that is not

¹"The Psychology of Farce," p. xv.

²Vol. 3, act 3, sc. 4-5, pp. 280-83.

possible, they will look for someplace, however ridiculous and improbable, to hide. When finally cornered, they will manufacture desperate and absurd lies.

The exaggeration of fear is complemented by exaggeration of the joyful relief of having fear removed. Terrified at the thought of Jambart's return, Barillon's household is suddenly comforted with the reminder that Jambart must be dead. He was devoured, they assure themselves, by a man-eating fish. Dancing and singing for joy, they shout, "Il a été mangé! il a été mangé!" (Le Mariage de Barillon).¹ After Yvonne learns that the messenger who had brought news of her mother's death (Feu la mère de Madame) had actually come to the wrong door, she jumps for joy as she hears the fateful bell ringing at the door of the adjacent apartment: "C'est les voisins qui ont perdu leur mère!"² As Bentley suggests, such reactions are likely to be physical. Many a guest whose appearance is inopportune finds himself shoved unceremoniously into the next room, and Barillon picks up an insulting telegraph boy and has him carried bodily off stage.³ If they are prevented by the situation from reacting physically, they are apt to betray their anxiety by becoming so distracted that they appear mad. In Le Dindon,

¹Vol. 5, act 2, sc. 10, p. 44.

²Vol. 7, sc. 3, p. 259.

³Vol. 5, Le Mariage de Barillon, act 2, sc. 8, p. 41.

Pontagnac is so upset when he learns that the husband of the woman he has been pursuing is an old friend that he gives her money to keep quiet, apparently thinking for the moment that she is a servant.¹ Later in the same play, Vatelín is surprised in his hotel room by Soldignac, an Englishman (despite his name) who is trying to obtain evidence of his wife's adultery. Knowing that the unsuspecting wife is in the bathroom, Vatelín becomes nearly incoherent:

VATELIN.--. . . Elle n'est pas ici! Elle n'est pas ici!...

SOLDIGNAC.--Qui! Ma femme? je sais bien. . . . Le commissaire doit être en train de la surprendre en ce moment.

VATELIN.--Oui, oui, oui, oui.

SOLDIGNAC.--Pour plus de sûreté, il la fait filer depuis ce matin. Ça ne vous intéresse pas ce que je vous dis?... .

VATELIN.--Si! si! si!... Vous me disiez: "Malade... elle est malade..."

SOLDIGNAC.--Aoh! no, plus maintenant.

VATELIN.--Ah! elle est morte!... C'est toujours un pas de fait!...

SOLDIGNAC.--Mais no!... Je disais "ma femme"...

VATELIN.--Ah! oui, votre femme!... qui est là!...

SOLDIGNAC.--Comment?

VATELIN.--...Qui est là-bas... rue Roquépine!...

SOLDIGNAC.--Yes!... il la fait filer!...

VATELIN.--Elle est partie!... Elle a filé!...²

If the characters' reactions are exaggerated, so often are the stimuli which produce them. As the play progresses, their troubles grow beyond all reasonable bounds.

¹Vol. 2, act 1, sc. 2, p. 123.

²Ibid., act 2, sc. 12, pp. 173-74. In addition to material indicated by ellipses, all stage directions have been deleted, as they will be in subsequent quotations of dialogue unless essential to the meaning or the point being illustrated.

They are haunted by the things they dread most, and their most secret fears materialize before their eyes, like the newspaper in Un Fil à la patte which reappears with the magical certainty of a hydra's head. Feydeau's often quoted "rule" of always bringing together people who should on no account meet applies to things as well as people.¹ The demons who haunt these people usually are created by their own attempts at deception, but they need not be. Barillon's troubles only partly stem from a deception, yet he seems to be caught up in a nightmare in which his worst imaginings are realized. It is not enough that he is married to the woman who was to be his mother-in-law (and whom he finds physically repulsive), or that her husband's return from the dead makes him first a party to bigamy and then a cuckold; the world seems to have conspired in nightmare fashion to remind him of his shame and humiliation. He barely learns himself of the mistake that makes Mme Jambart his wife when all Paris seems to have heard of the man who married his own mother-in-law. When the "family" flees to the country to escape the growing scandal, they are followed by children singing mocking and obscene songs, and a theatre manager gives them free passes in order to boost sales with a sign reading "La Bigame de

¹E.g., Sarcey, Quarante ans de théâtre, 8:179; Léon Treich, "Le dixième anniversaire de la mort de Georges Feydeau," Les Nouvelles littéraires (Paris), 30 May 1931, p. 5; Marcel Achard, Introduction to Théâtre complet by Georges Feydeau, 1:14.

Bois-Colombes assistera à la représentation."¹

Fatalism and Farce

Bentley suggests that the structure of coincidences in farce becomes the equivalent of fate; a force outside ourselves to which we (or the characters in the play) must submit.² Such a concept of fate seems particularly appropriate for Feydeau, because his characters are often governed by a destiny which has its own inexorable logic quite beyond the conventional "logic" of manipulated events which was discussed earlier. The nature of this irrational logic is suggested in remarks made by Jean-Louis Barrault. Calling attention to the dream-like quality one sometimes finds in Feydeau, he said that one of the characteristics of his work "est de concrétiser l'association d'idées. Quelques idées s'enchaînent-elles et s'associent? immédiatement la chose existe."³ The association of ideas transformed into concrete images sounds more like the experiments of the surrealists than nineteenth-century farce, yet there is a certain similarity between the surrealist attempts to make manifest the life of the unconscious and the tendency of farce to express the "inner experience" in physical terms. It is not simply

¹Vol. 5, Le Mariage de Barillon, act 3, sc. 5, p. 58.

²Bentley, The Life of the Drama, p. 245.

³Jean-Louis Barrault, Une Troupe et ses auteurs (Paris: Vautrain, 1950), p. 52.

that the characters openly and often violently express normally repressed emotions; the world in which they live seems to reflect those thought processes, much as the dream world is created by the mind of the dreamer. In Feydeau, the pattern of coincidences which controls the fate of the characters is not random, nor as arbitrary as it might seem. It is so closely related to the desires and fears of the characters that it seems at times to be produced by them.

Sometimes, particularly in the opening scenes, fate seems to be working in their favor. Pinglet, in L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange, barely mentions his lust for his neighbor's wife and chance conveniently arranges to throw her into his arms. He searches for an appropriate maison de rendez-vous and several circulars of such an establishment appear almost magically--in his wife's hands.¹ That perhaps should have given him a hint as to what was in store for him, but like the other would-be lovers in Feydeau who find themselves suddenly fortunate, he learns only later that the gods were tempting him to a comic hell. If it seemed for a short while that fate was responding like a genie to his every wish, the illusion was temporary. But fate is not indifferent to him, nor is he without influence on his destiny. On the contrary, like most of Feydeau's characters, he seems to have a knack for calling disaster down upon his own head.

¹Vol. 4, act 1, sc. 11, p. 55.

Fools as well as tragic heroes seem to have a special relationship with fate. Welsford argues that the privileged place of the court-fool to say what he pleased and the prominence of fools and folly in certain religious and folk festivals both had their origins in the ancient practice of deliberately inviting vituperation in order to bring good luck. It is, she says, "a form of that universal human instinct, the dread of . . . the sin of 'hubris' or presumption."¹ It can be seen even in educated people who insist on touching wood whenever they happen to mention their own good fortune.

The malign power of the Evil Eye . . . exists in a vague, undefined way suffused throughout the universe . . . To praise oneself or be praised by others is a sure way of attracting this queer, cosmic jealousy, and conversely the surest way to evade its unwelcome attraction is to depreciate oneself or be mocked by other people.²

The role of the fool was to draw this "cosmic jealousy" onto his own shoulders, and possibly, because fools were often regarded as immune to the Evil Eye, to transfer some of his own good luck onto those he mocked. Feydeau's fools serve also to draw the jealousy of fate onto themselves, and they too are immune from its worst effects.³ They tempt fate as

¹Welsford, The Fool, p. 66.

²Ibid.

³Feydeau was not unique in using this kind of comic fatalism. The hero of another vaudeville escapes his despised mother-in-law through divorce only to acquire two mothers-in-law when his ex-wife marries the father of his new wife.

surely as Agamemnon treading on the red carpet, but being fools, they escape the catastrophe reserved for kings, and are ultimately allowed to return to their folly.

With this strange power watching over Feydeau's world, to boast of one's prowess is to bring certain impotence, and to declare with confidence that something is impossible is to guarantee that it will occur. We need only hear Chanal, in La Main passe!, dismiss as totally absurd the idea that his wife might have a lover, to know that he is, or soon will be, a cuckold.¹ When Pinglet assures Marcelle that the seedy hotel (L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange) to which he has brought her is the perfect place for their rendez-vous because "ce serait bien la guigne si nous rencontrions quelqu'un de connaissance," her husband sneezes in the next room, and Pinglet jovially answers the hidden voice with "Dieu vous benisse."² The same malicious Providence insures that Follavoine's "unbreakable" chamber pots will be smashed into pieces (On purge Bébé), and that Brigot's boast of his sexual exploits will cause his nephew to be threatened with a cuckold's horns (Le Mariage de Barillon).³

When the discovery is made, the former mother-in-law declares triumphantly, "C'est le doigt de Dieu!" Alexandre Bisson and Antony Mars, Les Surprises du divorce (Paris: Editions Stock, 1947), act 2, sc. 15, p. 105.

¹Vol. 3, act 1, sc. 2, p. 40.

²Vol. 4, L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange, act 2, sc. 5, p. 71.

³Vol. 3, On purge Bébé, sc. 4, p. 183; vol. 5, Le Mariage de Barillon, act 1, sc. 4, p. 15.

A closely related superstition holds that if one speaks of the devil he is sure to appear, so if one wishes to doubly defy fate, one need only declare that his appearance is impossible. There is nothing more certain in Feydeau's world than the imminent arrival of anyone whose presence is declared unlikely, especially if that person's entrance will destroy an alibi. In play after play, all that is needed to bring a character on stage is another character's insistence that the absent person is hopelessly ill, never leaves his remote country home, or is confined to a wheelchair by crippling rheumatism. The audience knows this and expects the new arrival, but the characters never seem to learn what disastrous effect their words have. Duchotel is caught twice in Monsieur chasse!. He has been visiting his mistress under the pretext of going hunting with a friend in the country; a friend, Duchotel tells his wife, who never comes to Paris. The minute he leaves, the friend walks in the door. The wife soon learns that the two have not seen each other in months, and that Duchotel's hunting companion has never been hunting in his life. Later, when his wife confronts him with his lie, he continues to bluff, thinking his reluctant alibi has returned safely to the country:

Ah! bien, par exemple!... c'est parce que Cassagne t'a dit... qu'alors tu crois?... Mais tu ne connais donc pas Cassagne? C'est son coup de soleil... Tu ne sais donc pas qu'il a attrapé un coup de soleil en Afrique, et depuis, ça lui a enlevé la mémoire?... alors, n'est-ce pas, tu lui demandes s'il va à la chasse... il te dit

"non"... parbleu! il est sincère! il ne se rappelle pas!... Pas chasseur, lui!... Ah! bien, je voudrais qu'il fût là, tiens! pour le dire devant moi!... Je voudrais qu'il fût là.¹

One scarcely need say that the next line belongs to the servant, announcing the arrival of M. Cassagne.

This vein of comic fatalism and the note of bitterness some have detected in his plays have caused certain critics to see an almost tragic undercurrent in Feydeau. As early as 1913 Nozière wrote that his plays had the

rigueur mathématique d'une tragédie. Une sorte de fatalité mène l'action et contraint le héros à subir tous les effets d'une faute ou d'un hasard. Certes, Feydeau adore la fantaisie. . . . Mais ensuite il est asservi à une loi supérieure, comme Wotan obéissait aux Nornes. Le dieu du vaudeville est, lui aussi, l'esclave d'une force suprême et raisonnable.²

There is a danger that this sort of observation may lead one to discover more profundity than exists in these farces, so it is well to seek the meaning of this sense of "fatality" in Feydeau's work. Welsford does not speculate on the origin of the "universal instinct" she describes, but it is not unreasonable to conclude that, like so many superstitions, it represents an attempt to impose order on an uncertain universe, an attempt that creates a picture of the cosmos which more accurately reflects our own mental processes than the unpredictable workings of the external world. We create an avenging destiny by projecting our jealousy and outrage at

¹Vol. 5, Monsieur chasse!, act 3, sc. 4, p. 135.

²Fernand Weyl [Nozière], "Georges Feydeau," Gil Blas (Paris), 4 June 1913, p. 1.

the lies and presumptions of others onto an indifferent universe. But the idea of destiny confirms our fears as well as our sense of justice. We cannot mention our good fortune without fearing to lose it, and the more we fear, the more apt we are to see the cause of our fear in some unseen force waiting to take away what is precious to us. What we fear most is uncertainty, so we perversely convert chance into a positive force which is increasingly tempted to rob us the more we have to lose, and we create from our imaginations a cosmic tendency to produce order through the operation of chance. In Feydeau, this transformation of chance into certainty has almost mathematical precision.¹

There is nothing mystical about this comic sense of fate. It stems from a theatrical convention that is used by many comic writers to create a sense of expectancy in the audience. But this is not a purely arbitrary convention. It has a basis in human psychology that makes it particularly appropriate for farce. When the convention is used by a playwright such as Scribe to make a coincidence seem somehow more "natural," or simply to create a dramatic coup de théâtre, it may rightly be criticized as artificial or false.² In

¹Cf. James Kern Feibleman, In Praise of Comedy: A Study of Its Theory and Practice (New York: Russell & Russell, 1939), p. 180: "Comedy is always illustrative of the principle . . . that chance begets order. It is indeed a principle upon which instinctively the great comedians depend."

²E.g., Scribe's Le Verre d'eau (act 2, sc. 7-8), in which one of the characters dramatically appears the moment he is declared safety out of the country.

Feydeau's hands, the improbability of the device is flaunted, not hidden. It becomes part of the method by which the disorderly world of dream fears is made both concrete and precisely predictable, and by which the improbable is made certain.

Conflicts, Contradictions,
and Transformations

The actualization of submerged mental states through the association of ideas is a major part of the dream-like quality which critics like Barrault find in Feydeau's plays, but it is not the only one.¹ The irrational logic of farce, like that of dreams, depicts the world (including the world of our imaginations) in a changed aspect. The Freudians maintain that the true content of dreams is disguised to escape the psychic censor. In much the same way, Feydeau presents brutality, catastrophe, and humiliation transformed by absurdity. Many of the situations in Feydeau's plays, if encountered in life, could be as painful as those of tragedy. Our suffering is always lessened if we are allowed to suffer nobly and grandly. What we truly cannot bear is humiliation, being exposed to the world as the petty, weak, and pitiful

¹Many critics have noted similarities between dreams and extreme or farcical forms of comedy. K. J. Dover discusses the dream-like quality of Aristophanes' plays in Aristophanic Comedy, pp. 41-45. Bermel says that the atmosphere of farce often "approximates the condition of a dream world or, rather, of a nightmare: . . ." "Farce," p. 264.

creatures we fear we really are. It is this sort of nightmare world to which Feydeau's creatures are subjected. Like a nightmare, it becomes increasingly absurd and impossible as it becomes more terrifying. What would be painfully embarrassing is transformed into laughter and fantasy, because, although we may recognize our nightmares, they have been stretched beyond the limits of the possible.¹ The distortion takes many forms, but one of the most common is the inappropriateness of a character's response to a situation. When threatened with exposure, their reaction is usually an exaggerated, headlong flight. Yet when actually caught in an embarrassing situation, they often try to act as if nothing at all were out of the ordinary. When Lucette, in Un Fil à la patte, discovers Bois-d'Enghien hiding in a closet, he calmly explains, "Tu sais quelquefois, dans la vie, on a besoin de s'isoler... Et ça va bien depuis tantôt?" Later he is trapped in his underwear on the landing of his apartment just as a wedding party descends from the floor above. With nowhere to run or hide, he gallently bows and offers his best wishes to the scandalized bride.²

¹Cf. Bermel, "Farce," p. 265: "Dream fears [such as those realized in farce] are familiar to audiences. As they recognize them, consciously or unconsciously, they laugh; they are relieved witnesses of somebody else's nightmare." Léon Treich quotes Feydeau as saying that a vaudeville should be based on a situation "la plus tragique qui soit, une situation à faire frémir un gardien de la Morgue, et vous essayez d'en dégager le côté burlesque." "Le dixième anniversaire de la mort de Georges Feydeau," p. 5.

²Vol. 6, act 2, sc. 7, p. 160; act 3, sc. 6, p. 189.

Both the frantic flight and the affectation of non-chalance which follows are reactions to the same typical nightmare fear: the threat of exposure. Both reactions emphasize the fear while placing it in a slightly unreal context. When exposure is merely threatened, the reaction is extreme and physical, drawing attention to the fear itself in a way which appears out of proportion to the threatened cause. Quite often (as in the scene in which Bois-d'Enghien frantically hides newspapers that everyone else regards as innocuous) the threat appears in the guise of a perfectly ordinary object or event, and is not seen as threatening by most of the characters on stage. But when the threat is realized in all its enormity, the reaction is to ignore it completely. Either cause or reaction is given complete, physical expression, and the other is proportionately diminished. Each situation is an example of what Bentley calls the farcical dialectic: the bringing together of "wild fantasies and . . . everyday and drab realities."¹ The fantastic improbabilities of a nightmare come into direct conflict with the bland surface of everyday life in an explosive collision of the ordinary and the extraordinary.

The quiproquo provides an excellent means of exploiting such conflicts by presenting two versions of the same event, one bizarre or shocking and the other bland and

¹The Life of the Drama, p. 241.

ordinary. It may simply be a question of a character acting in ignorance of the true situation. Moricet, in Monsieur chasse!, unknowingly duplicates the scene with Bois-d'Enghien on the stairway. Alone in his apartment with another man's wife when he hears the voice of the law demanding entrance, he dresses hurriedly--including gloves and hat--in order to have an irreproachable appearance when he opens the door. Unfortunately, he forgets in his panic to put on his trousers, so that from the waist up he is dressed to go out, and from the waist down he is undressed for bed.¹ This is another instance of farce's tendency to express its themes and situations in strongly physical terms. Moricet's appearance is a striking visual metaphor for the situation in which he finds himself: in spite of his attempts to "cover up," he is literally "caught with his pants down."

Moricet's neglect of his trousers is a simple mistake by comparison with many of the elaborate quiproquos for which Feydeau is famous, but it shares with them the characteristics which make mistakes and misunderstandings such fertile devices for the writers of farce. In the first place, mistakes provide a bridge between the ordinary and the bizarre by permitting ordinary characters to behave through ignorance in an extraordinary or fantastic manner. Whether or not the mistake itself was foolish (they are often quite natural and

¹Vol. 5, act 2, sc. 17, p. 125.

reasonable under the circumstances) they cause their victims to look and behave like fools. Just as misapprehension gives the writer of the second, or "mechanical," type of farce a means of controlling events and shaping the plot, it also allows him to control his characters' foolishness. A simple mistake can induce an otherwise ordinary character to behave with the apparent abandon of the most irresponsible and improbable zanni while always maintaining the necessary link with reality. There is no shortage of fools in Feydeau, but most of the outrageous and foolish behavior with which his plays abound is the result of characters' operating on false assumptions. Occasionally such ludicrous behavior is the result of deliberate trickery on the part of other characters. Such is the case in La Dame de chez Maxim when M^ome Crevette convinces the credulous Gabrielle to rush to La Place de la Concorde to receive the "word" through which she will conceive the future savior of France.¹ The best known example of such trickery is the famous wedding scene in Occupe-toi d'Amélie in which Marcel finds himself married to a notorious cocotte in spite of his plans to avoid marriage altogether.

Such cases of a character deliberately and successfully making a fool of another are comparatively rare. More often the mistakes and misunderstandings seem to arise from apparently random accidents in an atmosphere of general

¹Vol. 7, act 1, sc. 8.

confusion. Often a character is caught in a ludicrous situation as a result of his own attempts at deception having backfired. Moricet's overlooked trousers and Marcel's wedding are examples. Another occurs when Duchotel tries to convince his wife that he has really been hunting. He habitually returns from his escapades with "game" he has picked up at the local butcher, but this time the slightly deaf merchant supplied him with several pâtés which Duchotel unwittingly presents to his wife as proof of his honesty.¹ Duchotel's lies are typical in that they rarely have the effect intended. If they don't result in making the perpetrator himself look foolish, as in this case, they are apt to cause entirely unforeseen misunderstandings and confusions. Another inveterate liar, Moulineaux, produces nearly all of the multiple misunderstandings in Tailleur pour dames by his constant and often desperate fabrications. His intention is merely to deceive his wife, but in the process he inadvertently makes fools of everyone in the cast, himself included. But characters seem to be led into the greatest absurdities through the operation of blind chance and innocent mistakes. It is chance that leads Tournel and Raymonde to get on their knees to an alcoholic hotel porter in La Puce à l'oreille, kissing him and begging his forgiveness.² Their confusion is the

¹Vol. 5, Monsieur chasse!, act 3, sc. 4, p. 134.

²Vol. 4, La Puce à l'oreille, act 2, sc. 7, pp. 176-77.

result of the age-old device of exact physical resemblance, but a much more complex series of accidents causes Duc Pitchenieff (La Duchesse des Folies-Bergère) to unwittingly act as a procurer for his own wife.¹ The unfortunate duke is in much the same position as Charançon in L'Affaire Edouard, although the consequences for the latter not as severe. He merely defends an unknown woman (who happens to be his wife) from charges stemming from an illicit encounter, and unknowingly directs several insults at himself in the course of his eloquent plea.² These and many more are fools by circumstance more than by nature. They are ordinary people thrust by the playwright into extraordinary situations.

The ability to turn ordinary people into fools is not the only advantage of the quiproquo. It has other transformational possibilities as well. Part of the persistent popularity of the quiproquo and its verbal equivalents--the double meaning, the pun, and the play on words--lies in the illusion they create that things and ideas can be made so malleable. They create the intriguing and fantastic impression that meanings, ideas, and even things need not be constant, that they can be altered, twisted and transformed at will. They weld together normally incompatible images into strange new shapes and invite our imaginations along unexplored

¹Vol. 8, La Duchesse des Folies-Bergère, act 4, sc. 9, pp. 219-20.

²Vol. 1, L'Affaire Edouard, act 3, sc. 9, p. 201.

paths. Even a simple mistake, like that of Moricet, provides the opportunity to bring together two jarringly incompatible images to create a kind of sartorial chimera: part impeccable and elegant, and part humiliating and ridiculous.

But many of the mistakes in Feydeau, particularly the extended misunderstandings in the early plays, are even more bizarre. The prolonged quiproquos of Chat en poche and Les Fiancés de Loches and the multiple misunderstandings woven through the plot of Tailleur pour dames have little meaning other than to raise the level of madness to a point at which the normal laws of probability seem to have been suspended. We sense that we have entered a kind of wonderland, a world of imagination. It is not the kind of fantasy world presented in Lewis Carroll's famous story, where events can be understood only as part of a dream or fantasy. But imagination clearly precedes reality because it is the characters' false concepts of the situation which are the primary determinants of the action. We are encouraged to view the world through the eyes of the character while at the same time being constantly reminded of how far that view is from reality. Pure fantasy allows us to enter a world in which the normal laws of existence have been suspended, but in this case we are introduced into a world of imagination which operates in direct defiance of those laws, which skips lightly across the face of reality like a flat stone across the surface of a pond. Like the stone, its repeated collisions with the

surface allow it to gain new elevation and continue its precarious flight through the air, rather than causing it to sink abruptly beneath the surface, as we had feared. This world of imagination, created through misunderstanding, is even more versatile than the skipping stone, for it can unexpectedly change its shape or direction. It does not achieve the heights of pure fantasy, which soars free of reality. It is restricted, however loosely, by the laws of natural probability, and thus acquires the air of a game of skill in which the playwright must increase the atmosphere of fantasy while constrained by the laws of reality.

Such manipulation and perpetuation of misunderstandings were among Feydeau's special skills. Especially in the early plays, there are a number of misunderstandings at once, sometimes within the same scene, which will combine to create new misunderstandings even as some of the first ones are being cleared up. A complex web of mistakes is spun in which each individual's misinterpretation of the situation indirectly influences the others in a logically evolving pattern of confusion. In the majority of the plays the mistakes result largely because of attempts at deception, but in a few cases the entire plot is a tissue of misunderstandings created from innocent mistakes. In Chat en poche there is one central misunderstanding which becomes the foundation for all the further mistakes and complications. The central error is Pacarel's belief that Dufausset is a famous young tenor from

the country whom Pacarel hopes to exploit. The confusion is sustained through the three acts by a series of additional mistakes which help to bolster the original error just as it seems inevitable that the truth must come out. At one point Dufausset mentions having heard the choir of the Sistine Chapel. Because of the phrasing of Dufausset's remarks, the others think that he became a member of the choir and are shocked at the thought of the surgery required for such membership. Everything Dufausset says seems to confirm their conclusion, including his explanation that he visited the Chapel because he was feeling depressed as the result of an unhappy love affair.

DUFAUSSET.-- . . . Je puis dire que j'ai éprouvé là une des plus grandes secousses de ma vie.

LANDERNAU.--Je vous crois.

DUFAUSSET.--Je n'étais pas plus tôt entré, monsieur, que je me sentais pris par tous ces chantres à la voix céleste, . . . terrassé, démonté. . . Je n'étais plus un homme, monsieur! . . . J'étais. . . Ah! je ne sais pas ce que j'étais. . .

PACAREL.--Ne cherchez pas. . . (A part.) Pauvre garçon!

DUFAUSSET.--Enfin, me croirez-vous quand je vous dirai que j'ai pleuré, oui monsieur. . . comme un veau, a ce moment-là.

PACAREL.--Ah! je ne savais pas que les veaux à ce moment là. . .

LANDERNAU.--C'est sans doute là perspective du pot-au-feu.

DUFAUSSET.--C'étais de l'extase, quoi. . . au point que je n'ai même pas fait attention à ce qu'on m'y a exécuté.¹

As both Pacarel and Landernau had thought that Dufausset was trying to seduce the other's wife, this new misunderstanding

¹Vol. 2, act 3, sc. 3, p. 49.

adds an additional complication, one which is compounded when Dufausset later asks to marry Pacarel's daughter.

Throughout the play an atmosphere of fantasy is maintained by a perpetual discrepancy between fact and interpretation. Our imaginations are invited to play with meaning and see how long we are able to dance lightly above the face of reality. The mistaken interpretations need not always be bizarre or extraordinary, but they are made to seem so because of the marked contrast with the true state of affairs and sometimes with other, equally mistaken interpretations. Because the fantastic atmosphere so often depends on this tension between reality and appearance, the playwright is often at pains to keep the contrast before the audience. The principal function of the aside in Feydeau's work is to heighten these contrasts. He uses it to call attention to the difference between a character's true thoughts and feelings and those he expresses to others, and also to make clear to the audience his misinterpretation of events when it would not be plain from what he says aloud.¹

Although it is typical that at the height of the confusion every character on stage may be acting under one or

¹Evidence of the importance of the aside in this function is the fact that it continued to play a large role even as Feydeau's work became more "realistic," and as he ceased using other conventional devices such as the opening monologue to the audience. In the late one-act plays, in which misunderstandings play a very minor role, the use of the aside is minimal.

more delusions, Feydeau is usually careful that the audience be able to keep the various misunderstandings separate. Even when the audience is momentarily kept ignorant of the facts, the effect is to heighten the sense of the fantastic and the feeling that anything can happen. A good example of this technique is the scene between Amélie and Adonis in the opening of Occupe-toi d'Amélie.¹ The audience is as surprised as the guests when she takes her attractive servant onto her knee and kisses him, and they are surprised again at the dramatic announcement that Amélie and her servant are brother and sister. The temporary illusion that Amélie may be sleeping with her young servant was acceptable because it did not far exceed the limits of what the audience would deem possible under the circumstances. The world of the cocotte was, by bourgeois standards, a fantastic place where normal standards and values were flouted or ignored, and Amélie's shocking behavior just seems to flirt with the limits of the audience's expectations. Here, as elsewhere, Feydeau builds his mad world on a foundation of realism, stretching to its limits his audience's perceptions of what is possible by displaying reality in its most fantastic light.

The Playwright as Magician

The paradox of these elaborate misunderstandings is

¹Vol. 1, act 1, sc. 2-5.

that they combine an atmosphere of extravagance and abandon with an awareness of the skill and precise manipulation required to keep the confusion from collapsing. Quite often mistakes depend on exact phrasing which seems natural and spontaneous enough in the situation, but which is capable of more than one interpretation. Feydeau calls attention to this need for precision in a footnote to a speech in La Dame de chez Maxim which warns the actress playing Gabrielle against inserting a single word which would make the speech unequivocal and end the confusion.¹ It is not only a matter of manipulating people and events for the purpose of shaping the plot--the conventional aim of the well-made playwright--for its real purpose is the transformation of reality through the distortion of images and meanings. The farce playwright is not merely a juggler, but something of a magician. He is an alchemist who transmutes base reality into the bizarre.

The writer of well-made farces differs from the stage magician in that he is not trying to create illusions by means of secret tricks. He is playing with images, showing how one thing can be made to appear like another, rather than pretending that he can actually bend the laws of nature. Yet some of his appeal is drawn from the same sources as those of the magician. Using different kinds of "sleight of hand," each attempts to delight us with surprises, make us expect

¹Vol. 7, act 3, sc. 7, p. 204.

the unexpected, and create the charming sensation that facts can be manipulated and changed. The image of the magician is particularly apt for Feydeau. While most of his tricks and transformations, like those of other vaudevillistes, are based on various forms of misapprehension, his plays are filled with devices which are much like those of a professional conjurer. In L'Age d'or, one of the principal characters is a magician who uses his art to extract the Follentin family from numerous difficulties. Although Gabriel is the only real magician among Feydeau's characters, there are many others who have plans for making people vanish. The best known of these tricks is the revolving bed thoughtfully provided to its customers by the management of the Hotel du Minet Galant. Designed to transform an amorous couple into a sick old man in the event of unwelcome visitors, it serves to produce a number of surprising appearances and disappearances throughout the second act of La Puce à l'oreille. A similar device is the trick cabinet and moaning horn of La Duchesse des Folies-Bergère which permits the Duchess to be in two places at once.¹ Other devices, designed to trap rather than conceal lovers, also produce surprising results. A secret chamber in an old castle turns out to have been provided by its builder with a system of mirrors which permit those outside to view

¹An example of Feydeau's use of ancient theatrical devices in more elaborate form. This one is essentially the same as the tunnel between the houses in the Miles Gloriosus of Plautus.

the hidden room without being seen (Le Circuit), and the ingenious plan in Le Dindon to trap a pair of guilty lovers with electric bells also produces unexpected excitement in the lives of an elderly couple.¹

His fondness for tricks and gadgets was not the only way in which Feydeau demonstrated his affinity to magical effects. He also made use of the magical qualities inherent in two apparently contradictory trends of his time: the rising popularity of mysticism and the supernatural on the one hand, and that of science and technology on the other. However opposed they might be philosophically, science and mysticism each have a similar hold on the public imagination: the fascination with the wondrous and extraordinary. The scientific fantasies of Jules Verne had exploited and propagated the image of the scientist as a creator of miracles, an image helped even more by the stream of discoveries and inventions which brought science and its wonders into the daily life of nineteenth-century Europeans. Feydeau explored the comic side of scientific fantasy in the third act of L'Age d'or, but he was also fond of the startling effects which could be produced by more commonplace wonders of science, such as the phonograph in La Main passe! and the previously mentioned electric bells of Le Dindon.

Feydeau also exploited the surge of interest in the

¹Vol. 5, Le Circuit, act 2, sc. 17, p. 207; vol. 2, Le Dindon, act 2, sc. 15, pp. 179-80.

occult and the supernatural which swept Paris in the last decade of the nineteenth century.¹ Like most Parisians, Feydeau undoubtedly had more faith in the miracles of science than in the power of the occult, but he was more than willing to use public awareness of the supernatural by creating comic apparitions of his own in L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange, La Dame de chez Maxim, and Occupe-toi d'Amélie. In these cases Feydeau would seem to be mocking the belief in otherworldly powers, but there was another area of mysterious power which generated intense interest and which Feydeau--whether because he believed in it or because it suited his purposes--accepted at face value. The intensively debated and dimly understood practice of hypnotism became the core of two Feydeau plays: Dormez, je le veux! and Le Système Ribadier. In some ways hypnotism was an area in which science and the occult overlapped. It was seriously studied by reputable doctors, yet its strange powers over people did not quite fit the largely physical and materialistic image of nineteenth-century science. The wonders of hypnotism and the marvels of physical science were useful to Feydeau separately, so it is not surprising that in La Dame de chez Maxim he combined them to create the "fauteuil extatique," a machine which induces an hypnotic trance at the touch of a button. As usual with Feydeau,

¹Raymond Rudorff describes many manifestations of this interest in The Belle Epoque (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1973), pp. 185-205.

fantasy was based on reality, and even this extraordinary machine was not entirely the product of his imagination. It was based on the invention of a Dr. Moutier, a specialist in electrotherapy. As if to authenticate the imaginary invention, Feydeau credited the real doctor with its creation in the original version of the play, although the name was later changed at Dr. Moutier's insistence.¹

The touches of stage magic, the scientific gadgets, and the toying with the supernatural are all a part of a larger tendency toward the surprising and the bizarre. His plays produce one surprise after another in the manner of a magician's act. His settings, with their many doors (nearly all are interiors), resemble those boxes used by illusionists to produce rabbits and make goldfish and people vanish. But in Feydeau's plays it is the characters, not the audience, who are bewildered by the transformation the playwright makes in their circumstances. As Claude Berton has pointed out, even Feydeau's language has some of the quality of a magician's performance:

Il est haché, cahotique, argotique, elliptique, bourré de rencontres d'idées saugrenues et ahurissantes, comme un habit d'escamoteur qui fait sortir de ses manches, de ses poches ou de son col, des poissons, des fleurs, ² une omelette, des bulles de savon ou un boulet de canon.

¹Lorcey, Georges Feydeau, p. 200.

²Claude Berton, "Georges Feydeau et l'âme de chez Maxim's," Les Nouvelles littéraires (Paris), 5 April 1924, p. 4.

The Familiar and the Exotic

In addition to using theatrical tricks to transform reality into strange new shapes, Feydeau chooses wherever he can subjects which themselves combine the qualities of the real and the strange. Hypnotism, spiritualism, and wonderful new inventions were all a part of the world that was familiar to Feydeau's audience, yet they also seemed exotic and strange. The same combination of the familiar and the exotic can be found in many of Feydeau's characters. This is particularly true of the many foreigners, who are among the most extravagant personages in Feydeau's assortment of fools. Foreign visitors were a common sight in Paris, especially during and after the 1889 Exposition, and Feydeau probably expressed the feelings of many Parisians when he wrote to a journalist, "Où je suis? Depuis huit jours à l'étranger, à Paris! Mais pas pour longtemps car j'ai peur d'y oublier le français,"¹ Like many comic writers, Feydeau allows himself considerable latitude in portraying the strange behavior and bizarre manners of foreigners, treating them all as more or less mad. Still, he was exaggerating less than might first appear in depicting some of these characters, for the reputation Paris had acquired as a center of pleasure and licentiousness drew a large number of well-publicized eccentrics and adventurers. At least one of Feydeau's most extraordinary foreigners was

¹Jules Huret, Loges et coulisses (Paris: Editions de la Revue Blanche, 1901), pp. 289-90.

inspired by a real person.¹

Another of Feydeau's sources of real yet extraordinary characters was the demi-monde. No other aspect of life under the Third Republic was as inherently theatrical and fantastic. The grandes cocottes, who were the heart and soul of this illicit world, were creatures who lived on notoriety and publicity. Theirs was a theatrical world, not just because many were actresses and singers, but because success depended less on beauty than on the aura of glamour and excitement they generated through extravagance and scandal. Like certain modern film stars, they lived on legends of their own creation and traded in fantasy as well as sex. They created a world well suited to Feydeau's purposes because it strove for outrageousness and deliberately defied the normal restraints of respectable society. It cultivated, in short, much the same kind of freedom from civilization's rules that fools have always enjoyed, and turned itself into the kind of topsy-turvy world on which farce thrives.

These examples illustrate the tendency of farce to establish its excursions into the fantastic firmly in contemporary reality. With one exception, all of Feydeau's plays take place at the time they were written and deal with familiar characters and themes.² The exception, L'Age d'or,

¹See p. 216 below.

²Its reliance on the familiar and the everyday tends to make farce dependent for its effects on the specific culture which engendered it, making translation difficult. The

actually begins in a contemporary setting, then moves into the past and future in a series of dream sequences. Yet even here the familiar and the exotic are combined in a way that is characteristic of farce. When farce goes beyond the realm of everyday living and treats exotic or historical subjects, it is apt to do so on a level which is thoroughly familiar to its audience. Rather than using history or foreign lands as a background, it is inclined to give farcical treatment to well-known characters and incidents from novels, films, or legends, and so slips easily into parody or burlesque. Here the usual movement from the commonplace to the unusual is reversed. Starting with material that is more exotic than familiar (although it contains elements of both), it often draws further into the realm of the commonplace through the easy expedient of anachronisms.¹ In L'Age d'or both the familiar story and the anachronisms are a logical consequence of the use of dream sequences. Follentin falls asleep while reading Dumas's popular novel La Reine Margot and his dream loosely resembles incidents from the novel. In the second act Follentin is transported into the reign of Louis XV, but again the major characters are those made familiar through popular fiction. The anachronisms are limited to those that

importance of the familiar seems to have been instinctively understood by British and American adaptors of French farces who usually transplanted the action to London or New York.

¹There has been a recent increase in this type of farce. The technique is used extensively by Mel Brooks, notably in his recent television series "When Things Were Rotten."

would naturally result from traveling backward in time. As usual, Feydeau bases his absurdities in logic, but the technique of combining the exotic and the everyday is the same as that of modern "spoofs" and parodies.

The Two Sides of Sexual Fantasy

If Feydeau's treatment of familiar reality is part of a system of conflicting extremes, so too is his treatment of the "inner experience" of which Bentley speaks. In Bentley's Freudian view, farce depends on tendentious joking, on the desire to attack and expose. Sex and violence are mainstays of farce and, in farce, they both assume the form of aggression. Certainly sex and violence are an important part of Feydeau's plays, but the treatment is more complex than that suggested by Bentley. Of the two, sex is by far the more important to Feydeau, as illicit sex is the basis of most of his plots. Bentley may have had Feydeau in mind when he wrote that farce

offers a special opportunity: shielded by delicious darkness and seated in warm security, we enjoy the privilege of being totally passive while on stage our most treasured unmentionable wishes are fulfilled before our eyes In that application of the formula which is bedroom farce, we savor the adventure of adultery . . . without taking the responsibility or suffering the guilt.¹

Yet this description gives an incomplete idea of what actually takes place in a Feydeau farce. It is true, as Bentley suggests, that Feydeau's plays and other bedroom farces can be

¹The Life of the Drama, p. 229.

seen as elaborate jokes on the frustrations and trials of marriage. But having forbidden desires expressed on stage is not the same as having them fulfilled. Farce thrives on evoking strong emotions and converting them into laughter, not on vicariously satisfying illicit desires. And repressed sexuality represents not just one emotion, but a conflict of opposing emotions. Sexuality is repressed where it is feared, and Feydeau gives full physical expression to both sides. In his plays sex is both a temptation and a terrifying threat. In Freudian terms, the super-ego is given equal time with the libido.

This dual attitude toward sex is inherent in plots in which attempts to fulfill illicit desires are met with frustration, exposure, and humiliation. Feydeau does not attempt to moralize or to demonstrate that humiliation is the inevitable outcome of violations of the moral code, but he does dramatize the conflict of desire and fear, carrying both to extremes to produce the most effective collision between them.¹ As in a dream, the conflicting emotions have a way of materializing through a process of association, assuming grotesque and exaggerated shapes, but unlike a dream, where nothing is certain or predictable, here everything is controlled and justified through the well-made logic of material causation.

¹A pointed moral or lesson was not uncommon in the vaudeville. Divorçons, by Victorien Sardou and Emile de Najac, is an example of a farcical play which delivers an obvious lesson in conventional morality.

In the deception plays, this conflict is apt to culminate in an establishment such as the Hôtel du Libre-Echange, where a woman might casually request a pack of cards from a bellboy, unconcerned with the fact that she is stark naked.¹ Such suggestions of licentiousness soon dissolve into images of fear and humiliation, and erotic freedom becomes scandalous anarchy. Sexual fantasies materialize only to be transformed into nightmares which drive the frightened bourgeois back to the safety of their homes. The formula of the deception plays permits a retreat from the world of dreams and nightmares, but the action of farce does not always offer such a logical means of escape.

Le Mariage de Barillon illustrates even more clearly than the deception plays how the action of farce can make manifest inner frustrations and secret terrors and give them nightmare proportions. Barillon is a middle-aged man who plans to take an eighteen-year-old bride, and is opposed by a young rival whom the girl greatly prefers. The contrast of Feydeau's play with Molière's L'Ecole des femmes, perhaps the most famous expression of this ancient theme, helps show the difference between the logic of farce and that of comedy. Molière's play is grounded in reality throughout. Given the natural psychology of the characters involved, it logically demonstrates the folly of Arnolphe's plan to marry a young girl yet avoid the dangers of cuckoldry. But the action of

¹Vol. 4, L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange, act 2, sc. 1, p. 67.

Feydeau's play, while it begins with a similar premise and reaches much the same conclusion, takes a course in which the logic of reality is left far behind. Although Barillon looks forward to his marriage with the lovely young Virginie, he cannot stand his future mother-in-law. It is not that she is hostile to him; on the contrary, she is much too affectionate. She is forever kissing him, forcing him to hide the fact that he finds her repulsive. Then, through a ridiculous but apparently unalterable mistake, he finds himself married to the mother rather than the daughter. As absurd as this situation is, he is constantly reminded that it is in some ways quite appropriate, for the mother is close to his own age. The girl even begins to call him "mon petit papa."¹ But Barillon fails to see any justice in this development and complains loudly of his predicament: "D'un côté, aimer une femme que je ne peux pas épouser, et de l'autre, avoir épousé une femme que je ne peux pas aimer! Ah! non, c'est trop!"²

Barillon's plight is an absurd caricature of the situation in which many middle-aged men find themselves. They resent the fact that the women they married many years earlier are no longer youthful and attractive, and they yearn wistfully after lovely young women who are beyond their reach. Barillon's strange predicament is in one way quite normal.

¹Vol. 5, Le Mariage de Barillon, act 2, sc. 6, p. 39.

²Ibid., sc. 7, p. 40.

But his troubles do not end there. At the beginning of the play, he was threatened with cuckoldry by his youthful rival. Even after he is married to the mother, he is in danger of wearing horns, but the threat has undergone a bizarre transformation appropriate to this nightmare world. Jambart, his new wife's rightful husband, materializes from the dead, and now either husband will become a cuckold should the other exercise his conjugal rights.

When an annulment is granted at the end of the play, Barillon resolves to remain a bachelor, just as Arnolphe is advised to stay single at the close of Molière's play. But in Arnolphe's case the advice is a logical conclusion drawn from the action of the play, which in turn was a direct consequence of Arnolphe's own foolish plan. In L'Ecole des femmes the initial situation contains the premises of a logical argument which is developed through the plot. The situation which begins Feydeau's play gives rise to a host of associations that materialize into grotesque and changing shapes. The oppressive mother-in-law fuses with the unattractive wife, the reluctant bride becomes a rebellious daughter, and the rival in love re-emerges as a suitor for the daughter's hand. Assuming the role of wronged husband, Barillon is twice threatened with cuckoldry, but in both cases it is he who emerges as the usurper when at the end of the play mother and daughter both claim their "rightful" husbands. Barillon's rivalry with Jambart becomes a grotesque parody

of his claim to Virginie because the young man's right to Virginie is as "natural" as Jambart's right to be Mme Jambart's husband.

Sexual fantasies in Feydeau's plays, whether of adultery or a lovely but inappropriately young bride, always have a dark side that evokes associations of fear, frustration, or scandal. While the plots dramatize this conflict of desire and fear, there is one character who, more than any other, personifies it. She is the cocotte, the glamorous symbol of sensuality and license, a personification of erotic fantasies. But she is also a destructive threat to society and respectability, a wrecker of marriages and fortunes. Like Astarte, she represents both sensuous pleasure and forces of terrible destructiveness. This dual role is seen clearly in La Dame de chez Maxim. La M^ome Crevette is charming, attractive, clever, and vivacious, yet her mere presence is enough to turn Petypon's life into a nightmare. His association with her is made as suggestive as possible. First she is discovered in his bed, and then he finds himself inadvertently "married" to her. But Petypon is permitted no pleasure from the relationship. While she was in his bed, he spent the night under an overturned sofa, and, when he remembers nothing from the evening before, she assures him that nothing took place between them.¹ The pretence that La M^ome is his wife helps

¹Vol. 7, La Dame de chez Maxim, act 1, sc. 17, p. 120.

to bring out the ambivalence in attitude toward the cocotte. When he objects to her posing as his wife, she mocks him with "tu ne t'embêtes pas!"¹ If that were not enough, his uncle, who is unaware of the deception, keeps reminding him of the contrast between La Môme and his real wife by calling the latter a "vielle toupie."²

Ambivalence toward sex shows up in more subtle ways, as when Armandine is made to think that the love-sick bell boy is afflicted with a serious illness--a disease called puberty.³ The joke acknowledges the fact that the awakening of sexual desire in a young man is sometimes a mixed blessing. Sexuality in young women could not be treated so directly because of the convention that young women were innocent of such desires, or at least of any real knowledge of sex. Yet in Feydeau's plays there is at least a hint of ambivalence toward this common assumption. For one thing, his young heroines are often more forward and knowledgeable than was acceptable. One of them goes so far as to insinuate to an undesirable suitor that he will become a cuckold if he insists on marrying her.⁴ Where the young women are conventionally innocent, their innocence is often the source of sexual jokes based on

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., act 1, sc. 15, p. 118.

³Vol. 2, Le Dindon, act 2, sc. 4, p. 157.

⁴Vol. 8, La Lycéenne, act 1, sc. 6, p. 18.

their naïveté regarding the real nature of marriage.¹ The plot of Amour et piano is a joke of this kind, although it is not based on naïveté, but on the fact that the young lady is mistaken for a cocotte. These jokes do not go so far as to suggest that young innocence is a sham, but they do call attention to the fact that in spite of their purity young women do have a sexual nature, if only as the object of sexual desire.

If the innocence of young unmarried women is highly charged with sexual meaning, it may also have produced mixed feelings toward sex on the part of married women. In La Main passe! Francine argues that a bride should have no hint as to what awaits her on her wedding night. She concedes that

Caroline aura peut-être un moment d'estomaquement!
Elle dire [sic] peut-être: 'Eh ben!... Eh ben! quoi donc!' Mais elle aura du moins l'attrait de la surprise et l'effet n'aura pas été raté.²

Francine seems to think that the best the young bride can expect is a disagreeable surprise.

But despite (or perhaps because of) this abrupt introduction to the pleasures of the marriage bed, married women in Feydeau are not immune to the temptations of adultery. Francine herself has already taken a lover when she gives Chanal this illogical advice. But their motives

¹E.g., vol. 6, Un Fil à la patte, act 2, sc. 2, pp. 149-50; and vol. 6, Notre futur, sc. 2, p. 207.

²Vol. 3, La Main passe!, act 1, sc. 1, p. 39.

are usually less frankly sexual than those of their male counterparts, and, because they are more sensitive to the dangers of exposure, they are quicker to back out of an amorous adventure. Francine is the most forthright adultress among Feydeau's heroines. She is the only one to admit that her original reluctance and protestations of virtue were a sham. She concedes that if her lover had not been so persistent she would have been forced to play the part of the aggressor herself.¹ Others, such as Angèle in Champignol malgré lui, are much less candid. She was prevented from having an affair with Saint-Florimond (she had gone so far as to give him her house key) only by an unfortunate chance which threatened their discovery, yet she insists on calling her terrified retreat from infidelity the "triomphe de ma vertu."² With Angèle, as with most of Feydeau's characters, fear of discovery or of reprisal takes the place of genuine moral commitment. But in the case of married women, reprisal can be a motivation as well as a deterrent to adultery. Most of Feydeau's husbands fear cuckoldry far more than they do exposure of their own infidelities. As a result, the wives are apt to see adultery as the ultimate weapon in the battle with their husbands, and they are more easily tempted by rage against their spouses than by the ardor

¹Ibid., act 1, sc. 11, p. 60.

²Vol. 6, act 1, sc. 1, p. 31.

of a would-be lover. Pinglet, who is otherwise not much of a lover, takes advantage of this in L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange by inflaming Marcelle's anger at the insulting remarks made by her husband. She promptly acknowledges the wisdom of his strategy when she tells him, "Ah! Pinglet... Vous êtes laid!... mais vous savez parler au coeur des femmes!" At any other time, she admits, "je vous aurais repoussé avec horreur."¹ Marcelle is merely annoyed by her husband's neglect, but most women resort to this drastic weapon only to retaliate for their husbands' infidelities. But once they have determined to go through with it, they give no more thought than Marcelle to the attractiveness of their chosen avenger. "Et ne croyez pas que je le choisirai!" says Mme Pontagnac in Le Dindon. "Il me semble que ça m'empêcherait de savourer ma vengeance! Non, n'importe qui, le premier imbécile venu!"²

Mme Pontagnac's attitude fairly represents the role played by the adultery of wives in Feydeau. While it is clear that many of these women are less than candid in their protestations of virtue, the principal target is not the exposure of feminine hypocrisy. Feydeau uses their attempts at infidelity primarily for the threat they pose to their husbands' well-being. It is a masculine point of view. The stress is on the danger of cuckoldry rather than the psychology

¹Vol. 4, act 1, sc. 8, p. 53.

²Vol. 2, Le Dindon, act 1, sc. 10, p. 140.

of the women involved. But while the danger is always present, the threat rarely materializes. Feydeau was curiously circumspect in treating the infidelities of women. Nowhere does a ménage à trois have the central role it occupies in Labiche's Le Plus heureux des trois and in numerous medieval farces. Most of his contemporaries viewed the adulterous wife as an extremely serious subject, and Feydeau either shared their view or deferred to their sensibilities. When adultery occurs its effect is carefully diminished by the manner of presentation. The unwritten law of the Boulevard was that although a man might be forgiven for unfaithfulness (and often was), an adulteress must not go unpunished.¹ Only in his last play does the principal female character commit adultery and escape both detection and punishment.² Duchotel's mistress in Monsieur chasse! is never seen, and

¹There were exceptions to this rule, the most notable of which was Le Plus heureux des trois, mentioned above. Labiche avoids the prohibition by stressing (as the title indicates) the difficulties and embarrassments of the wife and her lover, but the play was still considered unusual. During Feydeau's career the Naturalists and others were breaking such conventions in plays like Becque's La Parisienne and Courteline's Boubouroche. But the majority opinion, and certainly that which prevailed on the Boulevard, was not far from that expressed by Brander Matthews. Matthews criticizes the death of the heroine of Frou-Frou as inappropriate to the overall tone of the play, but concedes that the authors had little choice: "To say what fate shall be meted out to the woman taken in adultery is always a hard task for a dramatist." French Dramatists of the Nineteenth Century, 3rd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901; reprint ed., New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968), p. 263.

²Vol. 3, Je ne trompe pas mon mari.

the only woman to be forgiven for adultery also never appears on stage.¹ We never meet Irène's cuckolded husband in Occupei-toi d'Amélie, and Maggy does not appear after the second act of Le Dindon, allowing the audience to forget the probable consequences of her infidelity.

It is interesting that Feydeau, who has a largely deserved reputation for being able to treat any subject in a comic vein, should appear hesitant in dealing with the situation often assumed to lie at the heart of this kind of farce: the scheming wife, her lover, and the cuckolded husband. Until late in his career, when he virtually abandoned the subject of adultery, his plays end with the restoration of respectability and order. This requires that nothing irrevocable happen in the meantime, and to Feydeau's audience a wife's infidelity was an absolute bar to the return of respectability. To forgive her would be shocking and therefore unacceptable, but to punish her while her male accomplice is forgiven could be just as bad, for it would call attention to the injustice of the double standard. The latter situation actually occurs in three of his plays (Monsieur chasse!, Le Dindon, and La Main passe!), but Feydeau is careful to hide the irony of the situation from the audience. In the first two plays the mistress's fate (divorce in both cases) is

¹Even in this case the pardon is not genuine, as the husband is merely afraid of what the scandal would do to his business affairs. Vol. 2, Le Système Ribadier, act 3, sc. 5, p. 110.

de-emphasized so that it is lost from view during the final reconciliation scene. In the third, the woman is made to seem incorrigible, doomed to continue making the same mistake in an endless series of divorces and re-marriages.

Despite this lack of honesty in dealing with the subject, it is still the central feature of many of his plays. It represents the ultimate threat, the supreme disaster, the worst thing that can happen to a bourgeois ménage. Feydeau uses the threat, like all other forms of disaster that menace his characters, to drive the action of his plays forward. The powerhouse which keeps the plot moving and the characters scrambling frantically just out of the reach of catastrophe is fueled principally by sex. In this sense the main role of sex is negative rather than positive. The characters are much less motivated by sexual desire than they are by their fear of its consequences. Even as they are giving in to temptation, foreshadowing clearly draws our attention to the difficulties that their little escapades will cause them. Illicit sex is always fraught with danger and usually ends in frustration. Legitimate unions are plagued with fears of inadequacy and unattractive, unresponsive mates, as well as the perpetual fear of deception. Women are seen as sex objects, but in that role they do more to thwart than to satisfy male desires. The typical married woman manages to frustrate her would-be lover even while threatening her husband with a cuckold's horns. When sex is discussed, as

it often is, it is expressed in terms that are often grotesque or pathetic. When the frustrated Pinglet complains in L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange of his unfulfilled desires, he declares: "Il y a de la lave en moi! de la lave en ébullition!... Seulement, je n'ai pas de cratère!"¹ Pontagnac, the profligate in Le Dindon, has already claimed that his wife is crippled by rheumatism. When he explains his numerous infidelities by describing his spouse as "un roman que j'ai souvent feuilleté," Lucienne remarks, "Oui, sans compter qu'il n'est peut-être plus très commode d'en tourner les pages."²

The Role of Violence

Feydeau's characters may dream of sexual fulfillment, but their fantasies are born of frustration and inadequacy and somehow always reflect their origin. But if sex is viewed at least with ambivalence, the other principal motive force of farce, violence, is shown in an even more negative light. Feydeau's heroes are almost invariably the targets rather than the perpetrators of violence. Feydeau is reported to have said that

dans mes pièces, il y a deux sortes de personnages: ceux qui donnent les coups de pied au cul--et ceux qui les reçoivent. Ces derniers ont le beau rôle, puisqu'ils font rire...³

¹Vol. 4, L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange, act 1, sc. 4, p. 45.

²Vol. 2, act 1, sc. 4, p. 129.

³Lorcey, Georges Feydeau, p. 141.

For the most part such "kicks in the rear" are metaphorical rather than actual. Real blows are infrequent, although threats abound. Violence is itself subsidiary to sex in that it is usually brought on by the general disorder of which sex is the cause. Physical threats are a logical result of the rule that disorder is carried to its extreme, and because the disorder is usually sexual in origin the threat is often that posed by jealous husbands or lovers and the challenge to a duel. Such displays of aggression rarely come from Feydeau's timid bourgeois heroes. Most of the violence, whether actual or threatened, is produced by energetic and unpredictable foreigners, particularly the hot-blooded and jealous Latins. Aggressiveness is a trait common to nearly all of Feydeau's foreigners, regardless of their origin. When they want something they are direct and single-minded in its pursuit, with little concern for the turmoil they produce in the process. General Irrigua of Un Fil à la patte is one of the most violent and extreme, but he expresses the attitude of most foreigners when he explains to the terrified and bewildered Bouzin why he plans to kill him: "Porqué yo n'aime pas qu'il est oun paquette dans mes roues... et quand il est oun obstacle, yo saute pas par dessous!... Yo le supprime."¹

The violence they produce may take rather bizarre forms (such as the duel proposed in La Puce à l'oreille), but to them it

¹Vol. 6, act 1, sc. 19, p. 144.

all seems perfectly normal.¹ When Duc Pitchenieff becomes angry with his butler (as usual in these cases, the fault lies entirely with the master), only the fact that he is not in his own country prevents him from applying the knout to the unfortunate servant (La Duchesse des Folies-Bergère).² The women are less physical. Dotty, the American heiress in Je ne trompe pas mon mari, is well endowed with aggressive determination but is not at all violent. Maggy, the unfaithful English wife in Le Dindon, is more capable of extreme measures. She is not only willing to use the feminine ploy of threatening suicide, but, as an expert boxer, she can effortlessly knock her lover to the floor when he tries to oppose her.³ The only truly violent character who is not a foreigner is Hubertin, in La Main passe! Even he could be said to be under foreign influence, because he is violent only when drunk, and he blames his drinking on his American wife. Consequently, he feels, "on ne peut pas dire que je me pocharde, non, je... je m'américanise!"⁴

The fact that foreigners are the most aggressive characters on the scene does not mean that Feydeau's heroes are incapable of violence, particularly with servants and

¹Vol. 4, act 3, sc. 14, p. 224.

²Vol. 8, act 4, sc. 4, p. 210.

³Vol. 2, act 2, sc. 10, pp. 168-69.

⁴Vol. 3, act 1, sc. 3, p. 42.

others who are not in a position to retaliate. Most of the violence that actually occurs results from the characters' frantic efforts to flee disaster and is thus less a consequence of aggression than of desperation. On rare occasions desperation may drive them as far as it does Pinglet, who is emboldened to punch his friend Paillardin in the eye, but they usually limit themselves to roughly shoving people whose presence is embarrassing into the nearest hiding place.¹ They do all they can to avoid violence, but it seems to haunt them wherever they go. They may feel obligated by social pressures to fight duels, but they will possibly try anything, even devious or dishonorable, to get out of them. Barillon has what he thinks is a foolproof method of avoiding such unpleasant encounters. Whenever he has a quarrel with a stranger, he hands his adversary the card of a famous fencing master rather than his own.² Savinet, in Le Système Ribadier, is no less anxious to avoid combat, but he is not so devious. As a wine merchant, he approaches the question with the directness and rationality of a businessman. Although he has caught his wife in adultery, he demands only that her lover keep silent about the affair: "En somme, pour qui se bat-on? C'est pour la société, Eh bien! du moment que la société n'est pas au courant..." Only if the affair

¹Vol. 4, L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange, act 2, sc. 21, p. 91.

²Vol. 5, Le Mariage de Barillon, act 1, sc. 3, p. 13.

becomes known will he engage in a duel. And in that case his businessman's logic refuses to accept the possibility that he will be the one to be killed: "Ce sont là nos prérogatives, à nous autres, maris offensés! Il faut bien que nous en ayons quelques-uns! L'amant a le devoir de se laisser tuer..."¹ Later he retracts even this limited threat, for business considerations come first. Feydeau's bourgeois simply do not have the temperament for dueling. The ancient aristocratic concept that ties honor to combat is foreign to the souls of these business and professional men. Petypon is a physician, and when his military uncle and others are determined to force him into a duel despite his adamant and repeated refusals, he turns on them: "On veut que je me batte? eh bien! soit! j'ai le choix des armes? je prends le bistouri!"²

One might ask whether Feydeau is mocking the cowardice of these reluctant combatants or is attacking the outdated institution of dueling in these scenes. On the evidence, it seems likely that his sympathies were close to those of the servant who bursts out laughing when she hears that her master is engaged in a duel, and explains: "Moi, ça me fait toujours rire quand j'entends dire: 'Il va se battre.' Je trouve ça si bête!"³ But Feydeau was no more conducting a campaign to

¹Vol. 2, Le Système Ribadier, act 2, sc. 3, pp. 92-93.

²Vol. 7, La Dame de chez Maxim, act 3, sc. 17, p. 223.

³Vol. 2, Le Système Ribadier, act 3, sc. 3, p. 105.

eradicate the custom of dueling than he was consciously promoting chauvinism in his portrayals of foreigners. Duels and foreigners, and mocking, unsympathetic servants as well, are all manifestations of an uncertain and threatening world which is perpetually menacing one's well-being and dignity.

Dignity and decorum are the major casualties of Feydeau's violence. Major threats are avoided, but minor assaults, which leave the body unscarred yet rip away the fabric of self-esteem, are fairly common. In La Puce à l'oreille, Chandebise escapes a bullet in the chest at the hand of Homenides, but cannot seem to avoid kicks in the rear delivered by the sadistic Ferrailon. Petypon manages to get out of the duel his uncle would force on him, but is made to endure the humiliation of numerous slaps in the face. Physical violence exists not for itself, but as a part of the more intangible violence inflicted upon the stability of respectable life, symbolized by the fragile equilibrium of the ménage bourgeois. This sort of violence, directed at order and respectability, is at the dramatic core of nearly all of Feydeau's plays. When his treatment of this central conflict changed, so did the nature of the physical violence in the plays. In the last plays, in which the action ends with domestic catastrophe rather than a resolution of the crisis, the slaps and kicks disappear, but the duels remain. At the end of two of the latter plays, the hero is faced not only with destruction of his domestic peace, but with an armed

confrontation of which the outcome is by no means certain.¹

The Integration of
Conflicts in Farce

Feydeau's plays, like so many other farces, thrive on the exploitation of pain: not just physical pain, but humiliation, deformities, embarrassments, and all of the gross and grotesque realities of life. They also allow for the expression of hostility and aggression--and these different aspects of farce are not unrelated. Penelope Gilliatt, discussing farce in film, makes the paradoxical observation that "brutality can be funny if it is directed at someone whom we all really agree we must protect, such as children and animals."² One need not be a committed Freudian to concede that this sort of brutality in farce acknowledges the feelings everyone has had toward certain exasperating but helpless creatures, or that it can be a healthy antidote for excessive sentimentality. But since farce commonly derives laughter and joy from what is painful and unpleasant, it is reasonable to conclude that farce can employ this particular form of aggression precisely because we would usually find it shocking and unpleasant. Our laughter is not merely a disguise for

¹Vol. 3, On purge Bébé! and vol. 1, Hortense a dit: "Je m'en fous!" His last full-length play, Je ne trompe pas mon mari, is the only one in which a duel actually takes place during the course of the play.

²Penelope Gilliatt, Unholy Fools: Wits, Comics, Disturbers of the Peace: Film and Theatre (New York: Viking Press, 1973), p. 175.

hidden brutality. It is an acknowledgement of opposing forces within our souls, of both the forbidden hostility and the horrified reaction to seeing it acted upon. At this fundamental level of emotional response, farce differs radically from melodrama, its sibling in the family of popular drama, because where farce integrates, melodrama polarizes. Melodrama encourages us to project all that is evil and ugly onto others, and in so doing discourages us from acknowledging traits which, after all, seem to be the exclusive property of villains and scoundrels. It also justifies our aggression and cruelty by portraying their targets as unworthy of sympathy. The amoral atmosphere so often noted in farce does not justify or excuse. It is not a license to act as we please, but an amnesty under which we can admit our faults without fear of guilt. To the extent that the amorality of farce serves to mitigate evil, it does so not by portraying it as virtue, but as folly. Melodrama insists that the evil lies without; in farce we can confront the conflicts within our own souls.

The central conflict in Feydeau's plays is the classically Freudian one of civilization versus the libidinous forces of anarchy, narrowly conceived as the conflict of bourgeois respectability and unrestrained sexuality. The latter is given full and--when confined to the limited world of the cocotte--even favorable expression. But the basic point of view is that of the bourgeois who, however tempted, ultimately views license with alarm and chooses domestic

stability, providing he can find it, in spite of all its restrictions. This theme is inherent in nearly all of the plays but is made explicit in L'Age d'or. Follentin, beset with troubles and frustrations, yearns for an earlier and more violent age in which he could be free to vent his anger with the sword. When he gets his wish in a dream, he quickly becomes the victim rather than the perpetrator of violent attacks. Barely escaping with his life from the mayhem of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, he is transported to the age of Louis XV and is delighted with the sexual license of the court until he realizes that the same moral standards apply to his wife and daughter. He fares no better in the decadent twenty-first century, discovering too late that the orgy he has eagerly attended has assembled to experience the ultimate sensation--in the act of self-destruction. When he awakes to find that his frustrations in the present have vanished, he piously proclaims: "Il est entre nos mains, l'Age d'or."¹

Because it is seen from this fundamentally conservative point of view, the conflict tends to resolve itself along the lines of the basic farce dynamic: the clash of reality and fantasy. As we move from the world of bourgeois stability and frustration into the realms of freedom and anarchy, the world becomes progressively more fantastic. The clear-cut division between dream-world and reality which is

¹Vol. 9, Epilogue, p. 198.

evident in L'Age d'or is exceptional. The change is usually gradual, accomplished partly by means of the action, but particularly by the nature of the characters themselves. Representing the poles of the conflict between anarchy and civilization are the gay abandon of La MÔme Crevette and the timid respectability of le docteur Petypon, but all of the other characters participate in it. The next chapter will examine how the nature of the characters is determined by the role they play in the conflict.

CHAPTER IV

CHARACTER: DISRUPTERS AND VICTIMS

The Community of Fools

One of the most distinctive aspects of the plays of Feydeau is the scarcity of "normative" characters--characters who stand on the side of wisdom and good sense. One of the few examples is the Marquis in Le Bourgeois, Feydeau's only serious comedy. Other than the Marquis and a few of the other characters in the same play, Feydeau's people are all committed, albeit in different ways, to the pursuit of folly. No group or type of character is given favored treatment, Major as well as minor characters, young and old, ingénues and cocottes, young lovers and tired businessmen, masters and servants--they are first of all fools who rarely learn from the difficulties their folly produces. Occasionally the resolution brings a small increase in wisdom to some of the characters, but they are usually slow in accepting the lesson and give little assurance that its effect will be long lasting.¹

The atmosphere of forgiving festivity which concludes many comedies, in which foolish characters admit their folly and join in with the general merrymaking, is uncharacteristic

¹E.g., vol. 2, Le Dindon, and vol. 4, La Puce à l'oreille.

of Feydeau. Even when, as in Monsieur chasse!, the play ends with an admission of guilt and forgiveness, both the confession and the pardon are apt to be the result of coercion rather than the expression of genuine contrition and amnesty. Like Molière, Feydeau did not believe in the possibility of educating fools. Le Ruban offers a good illustration of Feydeau's inclination to see only folly in all of his characters and to sustain that folly to the end. One of the two strands of action in that play parallels that of Labiche's Le Voyage de Monsieur Perichon. In both plays two young men are competing for the hand of a young lady. The one, calculating and cynical, attempts to win approval by appealing to the vanity of the father or guardian. The other, preferred by the girl, is straightforward and ingenuous. The heroine of Labiche's play is conventionally but not excessively demure, and the young man she loves, although naïve, is brave and admirable. But in Feydeau's play, the girl is wild and aggressive; her intended, bumbling and weak. She initiates a number of plans which he merely attempts, unsuccessfully, to carry out. He does not avoid playing on the uncle's vanity because he is above such tricks; he is just not clever enough. For her part, the girl has no qualms about manipulating her guardian's weakness. In Labiche's play the resolution comes about when the father finds out that he was being used, and he appears to learn a lesson about his own vanity. In Le Ruban Dardillon gets the girl only when an accident suddenly

makes him valuable to the uncle.

Rarely in Feydeau is a character what he or she should be according to the conventional standards of behavior or morality. If, as some maintain, comic action typically revolves about the alazon, or imposter, who pretends to be more than he is, and the eiron who claims to be less than he is, one would have to categorize the majority of Feydeau's characters as "imposters."¹ But one would have to distinguish between them and the kind of Plautine imposter or braggart whose claims to self-importance are ridiculously excessive or even impossible. Paginet, the uncle whose pretensions to the Legion of Honor are manipulated by the young people in Le Ruban, is one of the few characters dominated by this sort of comic hybris. He hopes to receive the coveted honor on the basis of his refutation of Pasteur, a paper in which he "proved" that microbes do not exist. The pretensions of most of the characters are considerably more modest. They claim merely to be normal, yet they never quite make the mark. The comic contrast results not from a discrepancy between claim and performance, but from a simple inability to

¹"The contest of the eiron and alazon forms the basis of the comic action, . . ." Northrup Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 172. Cf. Duckworth, "Since persons usually make themselves out better than they are and only rarely does a person pretend to be worse than he is, the imposter and the braggart are far more frequent in comedy than the ironical person who feigns stupidity." The Nature of Roman Comedy, p. 322.

meet basic standards of behavior for someone of their position in society. They may easily be tempted into displaying excessive vanity, but it is not a dominant character trait, merely one of many petty weaknesses. Tartuffe and other outstanding imposters of comic literature, however ridiculous they may be, are still awesome in their audacity. None of Feydeau's characters is nearly so grand. Not one of his bourgeois heroes would have the effrontery to pass himself off as a nobleman, but when an enterprising maître d'hôtel improves his business in Séance de nuit by giving titles to all of his customers, they smilingly accept their new rank without protest.¹ Tournel is greatly pleased, in La Puce à l'oreille, to be described as a ladies' man, but he feels he must demur.

TOURNEL:--Non! j'ai du charme, voilà tout.

CHANDEBISE.--La! il a du charme! Ah! Cocotte, va! je ne te le fais pas dire! Enfin, quoi! il y a des femmes qui se sont suicidées pour toi! Est-ce vrai, oui ou non?

TOURNEL, modeste.--Oh!... une!

CHANDEBISE.--Ah!

TOURNEL.--Et encore, elle va très bien.²

Despite his vanity, he cannot help but reveal the truth.

Vanity is one of the most common failings of Feydeau's people, but it is never their single defining characteristic. There are no "humors" in Feydeau, no grand comic obsessions. There are also few "comic professionals," characters whose role in the play is dominated by their calling and whose comic

¹Vol. 2, sc. 2, p. 230.

²Vol. 4, act 1, sc. 9, p. 146.

failings are associated with a profession. Except for police commissioners and a few others, we seldom meet Feydeau's characters in their professional capacities. Their professional failings are not ignored. They are included with all of their many other idiosyncrasies. The doctor Landernau complicates a simple question of cuisine by describing the killing of a bird as an involved surgical operation, but the fact that he is a doctor has little else to do with the action of Chat en poche or his character development.¹ There are a few genuine comic professionals, such as a self-important midwife who browbeats the expectant father with technical terms, and the police commissioner who is openly delighted at a family's tragedy because so few exciting crimes occur in his district.² But these are relatively minor roles, and we see them only in their professional functions. We might surmise that they do not carry their professional "tics" into their personal life from the comments of another police commissioner. Bridois, in Monsieur chasse!, makes a careful distinction between his official attitude toward adultery and his attitude "comme galant homme."³ There are a few whose personalities are strongly flavored by professional

¹Vol. 2, act 1, sc. 1, p. 9.

²Vol. 4, Léonie est en avance, sc. 7, pp. 255-56; vol. 3, La Main passe!, act 3, sc. 4, p. 96.

³Vol. 5, act 2, sc. 17, p. 126; act 3, sc. 11, p. 148.

preoccupations, such as the actor Snobinet, whose wardrobe and conversation both come from the theatre.¹ The only one whose life is dominated by professional obsessions is the wine merchant Savinet of Le Système Ribadier, who even sells a cask of cognac to his adversary in the midst of discussing a duel.²

Feydeau uses professions primarily as marks of identification which can be manipulated in a confusion of persons and roles (e.g., the doctor taken for a dressmaker in Tailleur pour dames and the salesman passed off as a lawyer in L'Affaire Edouard), but they may also be given symbolic or thematic significance. In L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange the contrast between the personalities of Paillardin and Pinglet parallels the difference in their occupations. Pinglet, the builder, complains that his friend and associate, like all architects, is impractical. He drafts beautiful plans which ignore the physical requirements of buildings.³ Paillardin also has a beautiful wife whose physical attractions he ignores, and Pinglet regards this neglect as a shameful waste. The same thematic contrast is seen in the scene between Maxime, the philosophy student who studies love in the pages of Descartes,

¹Vol. 6, Cent millions qui tombent, act 1, sc. 9, p. 224; act 2, sc. 2-3, pp. 246-48.

²Vol. 2, act 2, sc. 3, p. 93.

³Vol. 4, act 1, sc. 3, p. 43.

and a soubrette whose knowledge of the subject is considerably more down to earth.¹ In La Puce à l'oreille, Chandebise's occupation, assurance (insurance), is significant in that all of his difficulties stem from problems of assurance (self-assurance, confidence).² Professional concerns are often important in the late one-act plays because they point up the husband's role as breadwinner in the battle of the sexes. Because Follbraguet (Hortense a dit: "Je m'en fous!") is a dentist we see vivid evidence of the effect his losing battle has on his vocation. The suffering of his patients increases visibly as his wife's tyranny becomes progressively more insupportable. There may be thematic significance as well. In "Mais n'te promène donc pas toute nue!", Ventroux is a politician whose concern with favorable public exposure is undermined by his wife's fondness for self-exposure of a very different sort. And Follavoine, in On purge Bébé!, is thwarted in his attempt to sell chamberpots by Julie's obsession with her son's constipation.

The names Feydeau gave his characters often suggest their clownish roles and set the tone of the play. Many of his names, particularly in the early plays, are comic without

¹Ibid., sc. 6, pp. 47-49.

²Chandebise is unusual in his lack of self confidence, an exceptional characteristic for a figure in farce. This may be why he becomes identified in the second act with Poche, who is the opposite of Chandebise both in lacking any trace of pride and in being completely unaware of his deficiencies. See pp. 167-69 below.

being symbolic or meaningful. Some, like Pinglet, simply have a comic sound. One of Feydeau's favorite devices was to use names derived from, or sounding like, common nouns, identifying his characters with animals or objects. The hero of Champignol malgré lui, whose name suggests champignon, or mushroom, is the most famous of these unfortunate characters, but there are many others. Lanoix de Vaux, the reluctant young suitor in Chat en poche; Charançon (weevil), Gratin (crust), Baloché (village fair), and Pinçon (bruisse) in L'Affaire Edouard; and Poche in La Puce à l'oreille are only a few. Some names have comic associations with a character's occupation. Bousin, in Un Fil à la patte, writes the kind of vulgar songs that are sung in the cheap taverns his name suggests. Saboulot, whose name sounds like sabouler (to scold), is the schoolmaster in La Lycéenne, and the midwife in Léonie est en avance is Mme Virtuel. Hochepeaix (pronounced Hoche pet) and Ventroux, the two politicians in "Mais n'te promène donc pas toute nue!", have appropriately "windy" names. A few names are ironic. Paillardin (L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange) is a sexless homebody, not the libertine his name implies. Angélique, in the same play, and Angèle, in Le Système Ribadier, are among the most shrewish of Feydeau's wives. Others have names more appropriate to their personalities. Two of Feydeau's most ironic characters have similar names: the sharply sarcastic Finette in La Lycéenne, and Finache (fine hache), the sardonic doctor in La Puce à l'oreille. True to his name,

Rigolin is looking for a good time on the town in Séance de nuit, and his friend Fauconnet brags of his ability to hunt down female prey. The list could go on, from the false tenor Dufausset in Chat en poche to the effervescent Mme Giclefort of Je ne trompe pas mon mari. Toward the end of Feydeau's career, as his lunacy became less playful and increasingly fierce, names suggesting madness began to appear: Follavoine in On purge Bébé, and Follbraguet and Mme Dingue in Hortense a dit: "Je m'en fous!" These names reflect the greater intensity of Feydeau's later farces, but like so many of the earlier names, they also accent the weaknesses, inadequacies, and victimization of the majority of Feydeau's characters.

The Disabled in Body and Soul

The name of Toudoux, the meek husband in Léonie est en avance, would be suitable for many Feydeau characters. Along with other names, like Charançon (an insect) and Champignol (suggesting a mushroom), it stresses the characteristic of Feydeau's personages that has made some critics feel he was uninterested in character psychology: their insignificance and weakness.¹ It is not simply that his characters are dwarfed by the avalanche of events; they are small from

¹E.g., Pierre Voltz, "Ce vaudevilliste . . . n'a . . . aucun sens de la vie des personnages, qu'il sacrifie délibérément à la gaieté la plus mécanique." La Comédie (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1964), p. 159.

the start. Feydeau's people are little people. Except for the foreigners and cocottes (who will be discussed at length later), there are no grand comic personalities drawn in broad, bold strokes, who can dominate the stage and the action and leave an indelible impression on the memory. They are victims not only of circumstances, but of their own many inadequacies. Elizabeth Nusbaum Smith, using many examples from Feydeau, described the milieu of farce as the "society of the incomplete."¹ Even when Feydeau's characters are broadly and implausibly painted, as they are in the early plays, they are outstanding only in their inability to meet the most minimal standards for sane, rational human beings. They are fools masquerading as normally functioning members of society. These mental incompetents may have their own sort of logic which they follow with great confidence. Brigot, in Le Mariage de Barillon, describes himself as "l'exactitude même" because he arrives an hour early for every appointment. And if the person he was to meet does not arrive within thirty minutes, he promptly leaves.² Plumard thinks he is rather clever, although his wife's most flagrant behavior did not arouse his suspicions until he had read Othello ("Un drame d'un Anglais, ... qui écrit même très bien le français pour

¹"The Society of the Incomplete; The Psychology and Structure of Farce" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1969).

²Vol. 5, act 1, sc. 2, p. 12.

un étranger..."). Then he immediately thinks of suffocation, but finds that a bit too English for him.¹ In the later plays such gross mental defects disappear, at least in the major characters, and are replaced by a multitude of more plausible failings.

The most prevalent of these shortcomings are moral in nature, but they are not limited to ethical myopia. Feydeau's characters are not simply amoral; they are defectives--morally, mentally, and physically. Feydeau does not single out moral faults for special comic treatment. One of the reasons for the consistently farcical tone of the plays is that all of these different types of defects are treated with a similarly detached comic objectivity.² Feydeau achieves this objectivity partly through another kind of defect in the characters, for there is another way in which the term "incomplete" is particularly appropriate for these creatures. While their primary defects may be quite common and human, they are accompanied by another which is not altogether natural. It is as if something had been surgically removed from their personalities. Penelope Gilliatt describes this crucial

above. ¹Vol. 6, Gibier de potence, sc. 1, p. 10. See p. 102

²Feydeau described his attitude toward his characters and his work as extremely objective. While working, he said, "je n'en suis pas égayé, je garde le sérieux, le sangfroid du chimiste qui dose un médicament." Quoted in Adolphe Brisson, Portraits intimes, 5:16.

omission while reviewing a production in English of La Puce à l'oreille;

The houseboy [Poche] is incessantly victimized and bawled at, but nothing shakes him. Like all figures in farce his self-esteem is impregnable. In the stylizing process his capacity for pain has been cut away. Another character achieves the unlikely task of making a cleft palate hysterically funny for exactly the same reason; unlike many afflicted men, he luckily has no idea of the way other people see him. To his own loving mind he is a perfect enunciator, and it is other people's ears that need cleaning out.¹

The quality that sets all of these characters apart is their fortunate oblivion with regard to their defects. Their imperfections may be very like our own, but their blindness is superhuman. They are literally "shameless." The oblivion need not be total in the way an outright fool is oblivious to the standards that govern normal people, but within its limits it is absolute.² It is the only aspect of their personalities that could properly be called "perfect." Distinctions must be drawn, for they are capable of humiliation. But the source of their humiliation is invariably external, usually the result of a preposterous mistake. It is shame,

¹Unholy Fools: Wits, Comics, Disturbers of the Peace: Film and Theater, p. 184.

²Oblivion in farce (blindness to what should be obvious) is not limited to personal defects. Chambers notes a "singular kind of oblivion" in The Comedy of Errors which allows the characters to be unaware of their twins and to accept so readily appearances for reality. Shakespeare: A Survey, p. 30. There is the same kind of oblivion in Shakespeare's source, especially in the final scene when the brothers, although face to face, require a lengthy argument to convince them of the obvious.

the awareness of their own failings, of which they are incapable.

Fools like Poche who are impervious to any form of humiliation are not uncommon, but they are usually relegated to the minor roles. The primary imperfections of the major characters are usually quite common. Bassinet (Tailleur pour dames) is simply a crushing boor. At one point in the play, he enters a room and everyone flees. His wife is furious, but he cheerfully replies, "Mais non, ça m'arrive tous les jours."¹ The violence which Irrigua, in Un Fil à la patte, inflicts on the French language is greater than that with which he threatens his enemies, but this might be expected of a foreigner. Then he reveals that he once taught the language. When this announcement is greeted with surprise, he explains that "dans moun pays, yo le parlais bienn; ici, yo no sais porqué, yo le parlé mal."² Understandably numerous are those faults, such as lust and selfishness, which are quite common, but which morality demands be suppressed for the sake of society's preservation. Thommereux (Le Système Ribadier) defends himself when he is castigated for trying to seduce his host's wife: "C'est infâme! Oui! Mais c'est humain..."³

¹Vol. 9, act 3, sc. 12, p. 61.

²Vol. 6, act 1, sc. 16, p. 138.

³Vol. 2, act 2, sc. 2, p. 87.

The amorality of farce characters is a function of the same sort of blindness which allows Poche to be impervious to every assault on his dignity. It allows them to treat every sort of defect, moral or otherwise, as if they did not exist. Moral and mental defects often go hand in hand when rationalizations and twisted logic are used to excuse blatant violations of the moral code. Clarisse, the heroine of "Mais n'te promène donc pas toute nue!", can see nothing wrong in undressing in front of her son. That, she claims, is more appropriate than that her husband should see her unattired:

... je ne te connaissais pas; et, crac, du jour au lendemain, parce qu'il y avait un gros monsieur en ceinture tricolore devant qui on avait dit "oui", c'était admis! tu me voyais toute nue. Eh! ben, ça, c'est indécent. . . .

Landis que mon fils, quoi? C'est ma chair! C'est mon sang! Eh ben!... que la chair de ma chair voie ma chair, il n'y a rien d'inconvenant!¹

Clarisse's argument at least sounds logical, but often such reasoning is supported by nothing but selfish emotion. When Cassagne's inopportune arrival destroys Duchotel's alibi in Monsieur chasse!, Duchotel puts all the blame on Cassagne, as if common sense dictated that he check such things before a visit.² Duchotel's selfishness becomes even more blatant a little later when he refuses to exonerate a friend who was arrested by the police for a violation committed by Duchotel.

¹Vol. 8, sc. 2, p. 246.

²Vol. 5, act 3, sc. 6, p. 137.

When his feeble excuses for not helping fail to satisfy the friend, he declares flatly, "Moi, je ne connais qu'une chose, je n'ai pas été pincé, je ne suis pas pincé! je ne sors pas de là."¹

Selfishness may even be masked as morality. Ferrail-
lon, who runs a hotel that is lovingly designed to encourage
adultery, condemns the local bistros as an offense to public
morals because his employees have a disposition to get drunk.²
It is typical of Feydeau that the persons most likely to be
frank about their selfishness are those in the professions
who are ideally obligated to serve the public. Most of Fey-
deau's professional humor comes from the cavalier unconcern
of those in service occupations for the people in their
charge. Doctors, not surprisingly, head the list. Their
attitude toward their patients is neatly summed up in La
Dame de chez Maxim by the surgeon Mongicourt. Although an
operation he performed could not have saved his patient from
death, he objects to having it called useless. An operation,
he calmly argues, is never useless; if it does not profit
the patient, it always profits the surgeon.³ Other characters
take this attitude in doctors for granted. In Tailleur pour
dames, Bassinet hopes that his physician friend will recommend

¹Ibid., sc. 7, p. 141.

²Vol. 4, La Puce à l'oreille, act 2, sc. 1, p. 160,

³Vol. 7, act 1, sc. 2, p. 89.

his vacant apartments to the doctor's patients. The apartments, he assures the good doctor, are very unhealthy and should help boost his practice.¹ Politicians are also excellent targets for this sort of humor. When his wife observes that the country is always more peaceful when the legislature is not in session, the Deputy Ventroux, exasperated at the female inability to understand practical matters, declares, "Mais ma chère amie, nous ne sommes pas à la Chambre pour que le pays soit tranquille!"² But professional callousness is not limited to the loftier occupations, as Séraphin proves by the brutal disregard with which he treats the clients of his domestic employment agency in Les Fiancés de Loches.³

Blindness to one's defects is often itself the result of human selfishness and vanity. When Raymonde worries, in La Puce à l'oreille, that the fake love letter she is composing might be exaggerated, Lucienne touches on a basic principle of Feydeau's characterization by replying that such things always seem exaggerated to others, but never to oneself.⁴ Another reason why these people fail to live up to

¹Vol. 9, act 1, sc. 8, p. 16.

²Vol. 8, "Mais n'te promène donc pas toute nue!", sc. 2, p. 245.

³Vol. 7, act 1, sc. 1, pp. 27-29.

⁴Vol. 4, act 1, sc. 5, p. 135.

the highest moral ideals is that they are following other standards, unacknowledged publicly, but much closer to those practiced in society at large. When Pontagnac arranges, in Le Dindon, to reveal a friend's infidelity in order to take advantage of the wife's "revenge," he admits what he is doing is a rather low trick. But, he concludes, "j'ai une excuse, c'est pour avoir sa femme."¹ This is not just pointless cynicism. It acknowledges the code that secretly admires the philanderer who successfully seduces a married woman, but condemns absolutely the traitor who betrays that philanderer to his wife. Theoretically, adultery is condemned in both men and women, but the practice is quite different. A sympathetic friend tries to explain to Massenay his wife's unforgiving attitude toward his adultery in La Main passe! Young girls, he consoles him, receive a lot of false ideas: "on leur parle de la fidélité conjugale... alors, elles s'imaginent que c'est fait pour le mari."² A character in C'est une femme du monde turns infidelity into a principle of behavior. He feels that he should have the same respect for his mistress as he would for a wife; therefore he cheats on her.³

¹Vol. 2, act 1, sc. 17, p. 150.

²Vol. 3, act 4, sc. 7, p. 148.

³Vol. 4, sc. 4, p. 26.

Money and Appearances:
The Basic Values

The standards of sexual morality followed by men are quite different from those demanded of women, but there are other standards which apply equally to all inhabitants of this world. The twin values of money and appearances dictate the rules by which they all really live. Scandal is a major preoccupation, but the concern with appearances goes well beyond the fear of scandal. The reason Angèle gives for not being unfaithful to her husband in Champagnol malgré lui is that he is one of the foremost painters of his time.¹ She does not value him personally; she does not even care for his paintings; it is his name that matters. But even this is a pretext; the real reason she insists on remaining faithful is her fear of being caught. Guilt is purely a matter of being found out, as Suzanne acknowledges in Tailleur pour dames: "C'est que si on nous voyait!... je serais bien coupable!"² Moricet (Monsieur chasse!) expresses the same thought more cynically in his attempt to seduce a less willing wife, and Madame Latour, who has learned by experience the rules of the world, says later in the same play: "Le monde, il vous pardonne une mauvaise conduite, il ne vous pardonne

¹Vol. 6, act 1, sc. 1, p. 32.

²Vol. 9, act 2, sc. 2, p. 32.

pas un scandale!"¹

Appearances can replace earthy as well as idealistic values. Raymonde is the stylish, chic young woman of La Puce à l'oreille who thinks it would be exciting and romantic to have a lover, but she is not interested in going to bed with him.² The sixteen-year-old Catulle yearns for a liaison with a cocotte in Un Bain de ménage, but his primary motivation is not sex. He is anxious to show off to his schoolmates, particularly to one who has already acquired that most sought after badge of prestige,³ There are those who are quite cynical about their pretenses and wear their hypocrisy easily, Hochepeaix, a politician who has publicly called his opponent the worst names he could think of, hastens to assure him (now that he has use for him), "Ça n'enlève rien à l'estime, croyez-le bien!"⁴ But their main concern is with the face that they show to the world. Vatelín, in Le Dindon, admits that he is not bothered by a lecher who follows his wife in the streets. He would be upset if it made him look foolish, but as long as it is the other fellow who looks silly, he does not mind.⁵

The face they show to the world is greatly dependent

¹Vol. 5, act 2, sc. 4, p. 103; sc. 6, p. 108.

²Vol. 4, act 2, sc. 6, p. 172.

³Vol. 7, sc. 1, p. 10.

⁴Vol. 8, "Mais n'te promène donc pas toute nue!", sc. 5, p. 255.

⁵Vol. 2, act 1, sc. 2, pp. 125-26.

on money, and finances are never very far from their thoughts. Money is not usually the principal concern of the plot, but when it is, as in Cent millions qui tombent, the characters display their greed in its brightest colors. In that play the characters range from Serge, the ruined aristocrat whose cavalier attitude toward money represents a love of ostentatious spending rather than indifference, to Mittwoch, the Jewish entrepreneur whose ability to make money earns him epithets like "crapule" and "fripouille" as well as grudging admiration. Serge is willing to throw his money away at the roulette wheel, but holds people like Mittwoch, who own the tables, in contempt. Mittwoch thinks Serge rather foolish, but since people insist on gambling, he wishes they would do it at his casino rather than at Monte Carlo.¹ However the others look down on Mittwoch and the "filthy" business of making money, they soon demonstrate that there are few limits to their own willingness to debase themselves for the sake of money.

The scale of values that sees extravagance as a sign of nobility has some curious results. When Serge's mistress finds out that he has lost all of his money, she is delighted. She loves him all the more now, not in spite of the fact that he is penniless, but because of it. What excites her is the thought that he ruined himself for her. But it goes without

¹Vol. 6, Cent millions qui tombent, act 1, sc. 14, p. 236.

saying that she will now have to find someone who can pay.¹ Serge, however, is an exception; ordinarily the esteem due to a person is in direct proportion to the amount of cash he has. When Isidore is transformed from a despised servant into a revered millionaire, he is treated like nobility by all the other characters in the play. Isidore is taken in by their flattery, as well he might be, for they are as sincere as they are capable of being. They have no other values, and for them a man with millions is a great man. A title would be advantageous, for it is important to have the marks of greatness as well as its substance. But that should not be difficult. Isidore might acquire a title through the Pope. After all, Mittwoch asks, if Moïse Guttelbach and Samuel Hofmeyer can do it, why not he?² Isidore is not used to money, and he takes a while to learn its true value. He is surprised when Snobinet makes him a standing offer of free tickets to the theatre, so Snobinet has to explain: "Si les gens comme vous devaient payer au théâtre, à qui donnerait-on les billets de faveur?"³ Isidore must learn that money is not just something with which to buy things; it has absolute value, is respected and esteemed in its own right.

The characters of Cent millions qui tombent have

¹Ibid., sc. 11, p. 228.

²Ibid., act 2, sc. 10, p. 267.

³Ibid., sc. 4, p. 251.

unparalleled opportunities to display their greed, but they are not exceptional. The constant preoccupation with money shows up in many ways, although it is seldom the principal concern of the plot. Most of the plays dwell on questions of love and marriage (or more accurately, lust and marriage), but the two seldom coincide. Marriage is generally a financial affair, and love an activity that takes place beyond its boundaries. Saint-Florimond (Champignol malgré lui) reveals that he is planning to get married even as he is hotly pursuing another man's wife. When asked if his prospective bride is pretty, he exclaims: "Si elle est jolie! Soixante-mille francs de rentes."¹ Saint-Florimond fails to get either bride or mistress, but others are more fortunate. Bois-d'Enghien is forced to give up his mistress in Un Fil à la patte, although he does so in order to acquire a large dowry. Marcel is unusual in that he manages, in Occupe-toi d'Amélie, to use a false marriage so as to obtain his patrimony and keep his mistress.

Even in pursuit of what they feel is the only true (i.e., illegitimate) love, their minds are not far from the cashbox.² Moricet tries in Monsieur chasse! to convince the

¹Vol. 6, act 1, sc. 1, p. 32.

²Feydeau's characters reach their heights of eloquence when describing the only possible true love as that of a lover for his mistress. See vol. 5, Monsieur chasse!, act 2, sc. 4, p. 103; and vol. 2, Le Dindon, act 1, sc. 4, p. 130.

object of his desire that the expression "je vous aime," which had at one time escaped her lips, is like an instrument of exchange, a kind of non-negotiable bond redeemable upon demand.¹ Even the moral question of marital fidelity is expressed in financial terms. There is a lengthy argument in Le Dindon in which love is metaphorically represented as money. Lucienne and Pontagnac debate whether a husband could be rich enough, or have the right, to make "quelques placements en valeurs étrangères."² These people do not do everything for the sake of money, but they do nothing without first considering the cost. Taking this attitude for granted, Lucienne thought she could rid herself of a man who was following her by entering an expensive jewelry store. Unfortunately, the cad was experienced and waited on the sidewalk outside.³ Bois-d'Enghien (Un Fil à la patte) can afford to be generous with the flowers he sends his fiancée, for, as he is quick to point out, he has a flat rate with the florist.⁴ He expects a rich return on his investment in any case; one does not send flowers for nothing. Earlier in the same play, Bouzin was shocked to learn that a beautiful bouquet in Lucette's salon had been sent to her anonymously. Hating

¹Vol. 5, act 1, sc. 3, p. 80.

²Vol. 2, Le Dindon, act 1, sc. 2, p. 127.

³Ibid., p. 125.

⁴Vol. 6, Un Fil à la patte, act 2, sc. 3, p. 151.

waste, he slipped in his own card, "autant que ça profite à quelqu'un!"¹

The Role of the
Physically Impaired

Given the pervasiveness of moral deficiencies among Feydeau's characters, the physical defects seem unimportant by comparison. The actual number of such disabilities is fairly small, but they are among the features of the plays that leave the most lasting impression. Although relegated to minor roles, they do much to establish the atmosphere that distinguishes Feydeau's plays, a feeling of entering a side show in which the freaks are both very like ourselves and impossibly unreal. They began to appear shortly after the extravagant fools of the early plays had disappeared, and it is possible that Feydeau had them in mind when he spoke of using an absurd minor character as a kind of counter-foil to make a more important character seem more acceptable.² The absurd minor figures also serve another important function. They set the tone of the play and establish the light in which the more realistically conceived characters will be seen. They help to guarantee that no note of seriousness will creep in as we observe the more common faults, defects, and sins of the major characters.

¹Ibid., act 1, sc. 8, p. 124.

²See p. 96 above.

The disabilities that spark the gaiety include such standard items as false teeth, bad breath, and deafness, but the most common problems are those afflicting the use of speech. Ever since Pierre Pathelin's bleating shepherd, farce has been fond of debasing that most human of traits, the lack of which does so much to rob us of our distinctiveness and reduce us to the status of animals. In this foreigners are very like those with speech defects, for they are comic primarily because of their inability to use language properly, or their tendency to speak in gibberish which to the native might as well be the bleating of a sheep.¹ Speech problems are of a different order; stuttering and cleft palate are real disabilities that are usually regarded seriously. But when Feydeau portrays speech problems they are made to seem almost illusory and unreal. Not only are the afflicted unperturbed by their problems, but at times the defects disappear. Mathieu's stammer (L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange) is quite severe, but only when the weather is bad; at other times he is fluent and voluble.² Lapige (Le Main passe!) is a jovial mason who is a good deal more eloquent than might be expected of a laborer, until he becomes excited and involuntarily barks like a dog.³ A character in the

¹Lucienne's first reaction upon meeting Camille is to assume that he is a foreigner. Vol. 4, La Puce à l'oreille, act 1, sc. 3, p. 126.

²Vol. 4, act 1, sc. 13, p. 57.

³Vol. 3, act 3, sc. 5, p. 99.

same play stumbles and stammers when around the woman he loves, but is the most poised and confident of men at all other times.¹ They are not just extreme, they alternate between opposing extremes without ever touching the middle ground. It is as if their disabilities could be turned on or off with the flick of a switch.

Camille's cleft palate in La Puce à l'oreille provides the most striking example. Although his speech is incomprehensible to most people, he makes no allowance for others' inability to understand him. He behaves no differently than when, with the aid of a prosthesis, he is able to speak with normal clarity. The contrast is all the more pointed because of the reaction of others. No one listens patiently, slowly trying to make out what he is saying while trying to hide the inevitable embarrassment which accompanies such scenes in life. Either, like the members of the household, they understand him perfectly, or they are bewildered by everything he tries to say. Even his personality accents the contrast. Although at home he cultivates an image of seriousness, he is actually something of a playboy, and his defect has apparently no effect on his amorous adventures.

The more unusual defects receive extravagant treatment, but they set off the more common human afflictions. The most common of all are those associated with one's age.

¹Ibid., act 1, sc. 7, p. 54.

Feydeau does not idealize youth by contrast with age. His young men are often bumbling, rash, or slow, and they are nearly all rather simple or naïve. But the emphasis is on the problems of those no longer young. There are no portraits of extreme old age; these are just middle-aged men and women who yearn for the lost energy and good looks of youth.¹ The men may, like Pinglet in L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange, try to prove their youth by having an extramarital fling, or they might seek youth in the form of a young and lovely wife. They find it impossible to understand why the pleasures of youth should be denied to them. Saboulot (La Lycéenne), although thirty years older than his seventeen year old fiancée, persists in his determination to marry her in spite of the abundant proof she gives him of her ability to make his life miserable.² If a middle-aged man does manage to obtain a young wife, fate conspires to remind him of his age. Ribadier's humiliation is compounded when both his wife and her would-be lover are mistaken for his children in Le Système Ribadier.³ More often they see their own age reflected in the no longer attractive faces of their wives, a constant reminder that youth has left them. Women are not exempt

¹The retired doctor and his deaf wife in Le Dindon (vol. 2) are exceptions.

²Vol. 8, act 1, sc. 6, pp. 16-18.

³Vol. 2, act 2, sc. 3, p. 91; sc. 6, p. 98.

from the folly of forgetting their ages. They never lose faith in their ability to attract men. On the numerous occasions when they are misled into thinking someone is making advances, they are only too anxious to be fooled.¹

Orbits around the
Bourgeois Household

Feydeau's protagonists are endowed with a kind of negative universality; their faults, failings, and sins form a lowest common denominator of humanity which their audience could not fail to recognize. They are unexceptional also with respect to the roles they play in society. At the heart of Feydeau's world is the ménage bourgeois, and his protagonist is apt to be at the center of the household, occupying the role of breadwinner and husband. Most of the other characters are defined by the roles they play in relation to the central ménage: servants, wives, would-be lovers, in-laws, and friends of the family. The farther one moves from this household, the more fantastic is the action and the more extraordinary are the characters, while at its center stands the timid bourgeois, frightened and harassed, desperately trying to preserve his values of respectability and tranquility from the forces he perceives as menacing his fragile domain. Outside the circle that marks the limits of the

¹E.g., vol. 2, Séance de nuit, sc. 10, p. 242; vol. 7, La Dame de chez Maxim, act 3, sc. 19, pp. 225-26; vol. 2, Chat en poche, act 1, sc. 6, p. 20.

bourgeois monde exist two major groups that are the most extraordinary and threatening of all; the foreigners and the cocottes.

There are some figures who are not technically excluded from the circle of bourgeois respectability, but at times assume a role like that of the menacing outsiders. The military men are similar to the foreigners in their propensity for violence, but are considerably different in temperament. They are not hot-blooded or unpredictable. Encountered in a civilian setting they might appear quite amiable, but once they assume their military role, either in the barracks or when considering a duel, they become methodically violent and brutal.¹

But one large class of persons at the heart of the respectable household often shares important aspects of the cocotte's role in the plays. Any member of the female sex, except older or unattractive wives and spinsters, might at times function as a violator of sexual decorum and an instigator of scandal. Even respectable women take advantage of the fact that for this society respectability depends primarily on female, rather than male, behavior. Cocottes, married women, and even ingénues find it easy to create scandal and use it as a weapon against their lovers, husbands,

¹E.g., Général Petypon in vol. 7, La Dame de chez Maxim, act 3, sc. 17, pp. 219-23, and Capitaine Camaret in vol. 6, Champignol malgré lui, act 2, sc. 3, p. 56.

and families.

It was mentioned earlier that most of Feydeau's characters could be classified as "imposters" in that they are less than they should be by normal standards. Where the complementary role of eiron is to be found in Feydeau, it is likely to be fulfilled by a woman. The classic eiron, Plautus's tricky slave, is not actually a self-depreciator. He is one who, through cleverness and cunning, is able to exceed his assigned role in life and prevail over his superiors, an achievement virtually impossible off the stage. He is not more than he pretends to be, but more than he would ever be allowed to be in real life.¹ Although the difference between their assigned role in society and the role they are permitted on stage is not as extreme as in Plautus, Feydeau's women often behave in a similar fashion. As a rule his women are more aggressive, self-confident, and clever than his men. Where trickery is successful, it is likely to have been initiated by a woman. The reversal of the sexes is one of the oldest themes in farce, but Feydeau's women are not just the usual nagging and domineering shrews. Often they are genuinely superior and more sympathetically portrayed than the men with whom they are contrasted. But whether they are

¹Erich Segal argues that the comedy of Plautus should be understood as taking place in a festival or Saturnalian atmosphere, in which the triumph of the slave represents a holiday reversal of normal values and standards. Roman Laughter: The Comedy of Plautus, pp. 99-169.

sympathetic tricksters or insupportable shrews, the trait they are most likely to share is the willingness to blatantly disregard conventional proprieties.

The extremes represented by the bourgeois husband and the cocotte can be seen more generally throughout the plays of Feydeau in the opposition of male and female, and the way in which it is manifested depends considerably on the social roles of the combatants, whether they be husbands and wives, lovers and mistresses, or fathers and daughters. The last mentioned of these, the young lady whose future marriage is in question, is the most neglected of Feydeau's heroines. This is not surprising, for ingénues do not usually play a large role in his plays, and the few plays in which they are featured are not among those which were most successful originally or those most often revived.

The Ingénue as
Trickster, Clown, and Fool

The reason his ingénues were not well received is not difficult to find. Feydeau's young ladies are the least conventional of all his characters. Considering his normally close adherence to social and theatrical conventions, his unusual treatment of marriageable young women might seem at first surprising, particularly because no other stock figure of popular comedy has varied as little throughout the ages as has the ingénue. But Feydeau breaks with tradition only in that his young women are drawn in a manner consistent

with that of his other characters. From the Commedia to the Marx Brothers, where farce has included conventional plots of love and marriage, the young lovers are usually set apart from the other characters; they are non-fools only temporarily involved in the world of fools. The alternative is often to omit the young lovers entirely and concentrate on the problems that follow marriage rather than those that precede it, as in many medieval farces and in the majority of Feydeau's plays.¹ Where Feydeau uses young lovers, they too are portrayed as fools and clowns.

Most of the ingénues in Feydeau's theatre are minor roles, but there are a few notable exceptions. The ingénues who occupy minor roles are apt to be comically simple, naïve, and helpless.² When the ingénue is important to the play, she is aggressive, determined, and quite as willing to shock her guardians as to defy them. Finette, the heroine of La Lycéenne, was the first and most audacious of his unconventional ingénues. La Lycéenne is the only one of his plays devoted only to lovers who wish to get married against

¹Francis de Croisset (who collaborated with Feydeau on Le Circuit) considered the sentimentality of Pailleron and the gaiety of Meilhac and Halévy to be related to the number of young girls in the plays of the former and their absence in those of the latter. La Vie parisienne au théâtre (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1929), pp. 58-59.

²Adrienne, in Champignol malgré lui (vol. 6), is exceptional. The most conventional of the ingénues, she has a scene with Célestin in the third act which is the only such love scene in Feydeau's theatre.

parental opposition. In the typical farce on this theme, the young lovers enlist the aid of clever clowns who, with a combination of foolishness and cunning, help to bring about the happy ending. But Feydeau's innamorati have no need of zanni, for they take those roles for themselves. They are the most irresponsible and irrepressible clowns in the play. Their names indicate the relative nature of their clownish roles. Finette is the clever and aggressive one, taking all the initiatives and making all the plans. Apollon Bouvard, the handsome young ox, makes no plans of his own, but has a talent for making the best of a situation by improvising with wild abandon, even though he may not fully understand what is happening to him. He succeeds in making his opponents look foolish because he is indifferent to looking foolish himself, while Finette, the disrupter, victoriously rides the tidal wave of anarchy and establishes herself as undisputed queen of topsy-turvy land.

Part of her claim to that rank is suggested by the play's title. The law which had provided for the establishment of lycées and colleges for women was only seven years old at the time the play was produced and was still the subject of considerable controversy.¹ The picture of a

¹Norman Shapiro discusses the satiric undercurrent in the play and its relevance to the controversy in "Topical Allusions in the Theatre of Georges Feydeau" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1958), pp. 215-24.

lycée de jeunes filles painted in the second act of Feydeau's play is a realization of the worst nightmares of the opponents of female education. The girls lack any trace of feminine decorum and behave like unruly schoolboys, playing cards, throwing spitballs, and fighting. Finette proves her right to reign over this world in an encounter with the school bully ("Sophie l'intombable") whom she knocks to the floor in an impromptu fight. She takes advantage of the girls' military training by leading an armed rebellion before she flees with Bouvard. As in other Feydeau plays, the second act is set in a place where the normal bourgeois pieties are systematically violated, but here the den of iniquity is an institution of higher learning.

Feminine decorum is not the only quality overturned; feminine virtue is also at stake. Shapiro points out that one of the greatest fears of the opponents of female education was the possibility of sexual encounters between teachers and students, so the pion who both rewards and punishes his charges with kisses had strong overtones for the audience.¹ This concern with the corruption of female innocence is also reflected in Finette's personality, for she delights in violating the taboos designed to preserve virgin ignorance.

¹Ibid., p. 216. Note also that La M^ome Crevette was a lycéenne and lost her innocence while in the pursuit of higher learning. Vol. 7, La Dame de chez Maxim, act 1, sc. 6, p. 98.

Even before she is sent to the lycée she indirectly threatens Saboulot with adultery if he insists on marrying her, and reveals that she was expelled from boarding school because she was carrying on an amorous correspondence with a young man.¹ When she hears herself described as "à peine nubile," she mischievously tries to elicit an explanation of the word by feigning ignorance.² Both the first and third acts are climaxed with the kind of vulgarly risqué songs that are routinely described as "not fit for young ladies' ears."³ Finette is instrumental in causing the first to be sung and sings the second herself in a public performance. In the third act it is Bouvard, not she, who becomes more sober and begins to worry about proprieties.

Finette is one of the few truly ironic persons in Feydeau's theatre. Particularly during the first act she uses her presumed girlish innocence as a cloak for improper remarks and sarcastic attacks on her would-be husband. Although she employs her irony to expose the folly of an "imposter," she does so by exceeding the limits of civilized behavior and so proves herself to be a different sort of fool. The play is a fantasy of overturned values, and the fantasy

¹Vol. 8, La Lycéenne, act 1, sc. 6, p. 17.

²Ibid., sc. 13, p. 30.

³For example, see Bouzin's rationalization for a similar song in vol. 6, Un Fil à la patte, act 1, sc. 8, p. 124.

is accented by the fact that the attack is led by the figure who should normally be the symbol of those values in their purest form. The final song, which requests the indulgence of the audience and asks them to forgive the lycéenne her streak of madness, suggests the festival spirit in which the play was meant to be received, but the words were wasted on the critics. Vitu, after complaining of a total lack of verisimilitude, attacked the heroine as "la plus insupportable des péronnelles mal élevées" without comprehending that the lack of realism was directly related to Finette's freedom from normal social restraints.¹

Henceforth Feydeau's ingénues were more subdued, even when they shared aspects of Finette's personality. Viviane, in Un Fil à la patte, has an unromantic concept of love which, despite her sheltered existence, seems to be based on a surprisingly close observation of the world. Her opening lines show that she is not quite as innocent as decorum demands she pretend to be, and her observations on love and marriage are cynicism in the guise of naïveté.² She is unconcerned that her future husband is handsome, because she has noticed that whenever there are two men in a household, the husband is always the less attractive. She wants a husband who has had plenty of mistresses because the value of a man is

¹Auguste Vitu, Figaro (Paris), 24 December 1887, p. 3.

²Vol. 6, act 2, sc. 1, pp. 147-48.

determined by supply and demand; the more others want the thing, the more valuable it becomes. A husband is like the Legion of Honor, coveted "d'abord pour la distinction dont on est l'objet, et puis,.. parce que ça fait rager les autres!"¹ She is quite willing to act on her beliefs, and in the end she borrows Finette's trick of getting what she wants by creating a scandal.²

Simone, in Le Ruban, does not have Viviane's notion of love based on vanity, but she is matter-of-fact about using the vanity of others. She is willing to accept the world on its own corrupt terms and is never shocked that it is not what it should be. When her uncle tells her that he is giving her in marriage as a quid pro quo for the decoration he seeks, she does not murmur a word in protest. She merely acts accordingly, quickly tricking him into postponing the ceremony by appealing to his vanity and selfishness.³ She always appears in command of the situation, meeting each new unfavorable development with equanimity and a change in strategy. Only when a combination of circumstances and the bungling of her young man brings her trickery to an end does she openly defy her guardian, and then she is fiercely adamant.⁴

¹Ibid., sc. 2, pp. 150-51.

²Ibid., act 3, sc. 8, pp. 196-97.

³Vol. 8, Le Ruban, act 1, sc. 2, pp. 71-72.

⁴Ibid., act 3, sc. 12, p. 122.

The last of Feydeau's ingénues is not a farce character, but she has much in common with those just described. Huguette is not a trickster, but she is the opposite in many ways to the conventional ideal of femininity. She is strong, athletic, resourceful, and unconcerned when others find her behavior shocking. This lack of concern, along with an open and generous spirit, she has in common with Etiennette, the cocotte with whom she shares the plot of Le Bourgeon. Symbolically, the ingénue and the cocotte represent opposite extremes on the bourgeois scale of respectability. Feydeau often explored the comic possibilities of turning that scale upside down. In plays like La Lycéenne and Le Ruban, he assigned the ingénue a role much like that of the cocotte. In others, he used misunderstanding to combine the two roles. In Amour et piano, an innocent young lady is mistaken for a cocotte, and in Occupe-toi d'Amélie, a courtesan poses as virginal bride-to-be. But even when he treats them seriously, as he does in Le Bourgeon, there is a remarkable similarity in Feydeau's portrayal of ingénues and cocottes.

Husbands, Wives, and the Sanctity of the Hearth

Feydeau shows strong and determined young maidens in a favorable light, but the picture darkens considerably after they marry. Marriage is a battleground, and the husband, being the weaker of the pair, is always at a disadvantage. In the opening monologue of his first play, Par la fenêtre, Feydeau

provides a preview of the husbands that would follow. Hector fits the classic pattern for hen-pecked husbands, having traded a dominating mother for a shrewish wife. It was his mother, in fact, who chose both his wife and his career, and he unhesitatingly accepted both decisions.¹ Hector is cheerful about his situation, but the attitude of the weak husband has changed considerably when he reemerges for the last time as Follbraguet, in Hortense a dit: "Je m'en fous!" The hero of Feydeau's last play is the most pathetic of husbands. Like Hector, he is caught in the middle of a dispute between his wife and his maid and loses to both sides. He is easily as pathetic in the ease with which he is manipulated by a few kind words from the maid as he is when being intimidated by his relentlessly shrewish wife. Husbands are not always as thoroughly dominated by their wives as in his first and last plays. The battle between the two can take many forms, but the best a husband can usually expect in any encounter is a hasty and undignified retreat. Even his nominally superior position in the eyes of law and custom does not always work to the husband's advantage. Clarisse is quite willing to use her husband's presumably greater intelligence as a weapon against him in "Mais n'te promène donc pas toute nue!", and Follbraguet's weakness is all the more apparent (and dangerous) because as nominal head of the household his wife's irresponsible actions fall on

¹Vol. 4, sc. 1, p. 9.

him, despite his powerlessness to prevent them.¹

When the issue is adultery, Feydeau's husbands fall generally into two categories: the habitual philanderers, and the more timid types who are not really suited for such adventures, but who are capable of being tempted if conditions are right. The philanderers, less numerous and more likely to play a secondary role, are more enterprising than the other husbands, but they ultimately prove no match for their wives. With the exception of Ribadier, who prides himself on originality, they are neither very clever nor original in their methods of deception.² Their principal talent is an ability to lie no matter how damning the evidence against them, but their fabrications are more notable for the imagination they reveal than their plausibility. It is only in the inventiveness and sheer audacity of their excuses and lies that Feydeau's bourgeois husbands ever exceed their usual mediocrity.

In accordance with the simple, commonsense justice that prevails at the end of Feydeau's plays, the libertines are usually exposed and humiliated. The only exception is Moulineaux, in Tailleur pour dames, although the escapade he attempts during the play is a total failure. He is also exceptional in having a simple and weak wife who requires the

¹Vol. 8, "Mais n'te promène donc pas toute nue!", sc. 2, p. 247; vol. 1, "Hortense a dit: 'Je m'en fous!'", sc. 8, p. 247.

²Vol. 2, Le Système Ribadier, act 1, sc. 4, p. 72.

services of her mother to do battle with her husband. Feydeau's mothers-in-law are conventionally unbearable, but they are not numerous because most of the wives are more than capable of standing up for themselves. The wives of libertines are usually more clever than their husbands, but clever or not, they have one advantage over their husbands; even the most shameless of philanderers is like his more timid brethren in his fear of scandal, and especially of the humiliation of cockoldry. After Tailleur pour dames the threat of horns is always part of the punishment which profligate husbands must incur. The methods by which the punishment is inflicted vary. Léontine, in Monsieur chasse!, soon regrets her first angry impulse to pay her husband back in kind and resorts instead to irony and sarcasm. She finally forces him into involuntary confession by making him believe that his mistress has been unfaithful.¹ Angèle, in Le Système Ribadier, has ample opportunity to be unfaithful, but chooses to make the punishment fit the crime in another way. Since her husband committed his infidelities while she was in a hypnotic sleep, she pretends that some unknown man, or possibly several, took advantage of her helpless state.² Massenay receives his punishment in La Main passe! when his mistress becomes his wife. Because she was unfaithful to her first husband, he

¹Vol. 5, act 3, sc. 14, p. 152.

²Vol. 2, act 3, sc. 6, p. 111.

is tormented by the fear that she will be unfaithful to him.¹

At the heart of the sexual battle between husband and wife is a concept of the nature of marriage and the sexuality of women that makes adultery, if not inevitable, at least a constant threat. In most of Feydeau's plays the causes of the dispute are obscured in the farcical emphasis on its catastrophic effects, but when he re-examined the question late in his career he looked more closely at the psychology and motivations of the combatants. The characters of On va faire la cocotte are more realistic than in the earlier plays, and the comedy results directly from differences between the two spouses in attitude and point of view, rather than the exaggerated portrayal of feared consequences. Watching Trévelin gives us a better understanding of why so many Feydeau husbands find adultery irresistible even when they have young and attractive wives. His wife Emilienne is affectionate and vivacious, but Trévelin still finds it necessary to seek sexual excitement beyond the confines of marriage. In the opening scene she tries to show her affection, telling him that she is unconcerned with the appearance of the room because she wants only to look at him. She is annoyed when he shrugs off this show of affection as if it were only to be expected:

EMILIENNE.-- . . . C'est admirable! Coquette, va!
Tu trouves ça naturel que je te regarde? Ça t'est dû?
TREVÉLIN.--Eh! quoi, madame, c'est le mariage! la

¹Vol. 3, act 4, sc. 4, p. 135.

loi dit...

EMILIENNE.--Oui! oh! bien la loi... tu sais dans ces moments-là... s'il n'y avait qu'elle pour que je te regarde, ah! bien, mon gros!

TREVELIN.--Petite anarchiste, va!¹

Shaw's famous aphorism on the popularity of marriage is invalid in Feydeau's world; sex in marriage is not a temptation but an obligation.² The excitement exists only outside of the legal bond. Trévelin's calling his wife an anarchist is more than a playful or joking rebuke; it reflects his entire attitude toward marriage. Marriage represents la loi, and its formal obligations discourage spontaneity. Trévelin's attitude is much like that of a husband in Je ne trompe pas mon mari (written at about the same time), who explains why his attractive wife has a chilling effect on him: "Dans les moments psychologiques, devant mes yeux se dresse toute l'éducation familiale: Le père, la mère, l'institutrice! Ça me coupe bras et jambes."³ His wife is not frigid or prudish, but the aura of sanctity society has built up around the chastity of respectable women produces the same effect.

Trévelin is not simply deaf to the tender and seductive appeals of his wife; he finds them vaguely threatening

¹Vol. 7, On va faire la cocotte, act 1, sc. 1, p. 264.

²"Marriage is popular because it combines the maximum of temptation with the maximum of opportunity." "Maxims for Revolutionists," Complete Plays with Prefaces, 3:733.

³Vol. 3, Je ne trompe pas mon mari, act 1, sc. 18, p. 232.

and shocking. Qualities that would be attractive and exciting in a mistress are disturbing in a wife. Trévelin is trapped by his notion of what a proper wife should be; although he finds that image unexciting, he is unable to tolerate any deviation from it in his own wife. Emilienne would be content to find excitement within the bounds of marriage, but she is understandably envious of the attentions men lavish upon cocottes while neglecting their own wives. Yet while Trévelin is quick to point out that his wife's ideas about the glamorous life of a courtesan are unrealistic, he is unconscious of the irony that his own behavior justifies his wife's complaints. Between them they present a picture of marriage as an institution which seems almost expressly designed to produce sexual dissatisfaction even in the most compatible of couples.

While both men and women have their reasons for being attracted to illicit relationships, they have even stronger reasons to fear them. Both male and female see sexual license as the supreme threat to the sanctity of marriage, but they have dissimilar views on the nature of that threat. For men, the chastity of their wives has primarily a symbolic function, but in this world where appearances count for everything, the symbolic value of chastity is supreme. Its violation constitutes the ultimate attack on a husband's authority, respectability, and dignity. No action of his own, however foolish, could make him feel as despised and

ridiculous as being publicly known as a cuckold. As their wives are less sex objects than symbols of chastity and respectability, they tend to put the pleasures of sex and the institution of marriage into separate and mutually exclusive categories.

The reaction of wives to the adventures of their husbands is simpler and less artificial. They are motivated by pure jealousy and possessiveness. They simply do not want to share their husbands with anyone else. To maintain their exclusive rights they are willing to violate society's most sacred taboo and create the most feared kind of scandal. Feydeau's men are usually intrinsically weaker than their women, but their greatest weakness lies in the fact that their worst fears are at the mercy of their wives. Thus even in the plays dominated by lecherous husbands, the principal threat to bourgeois morality and fear of scandal comes from women rather than men. Feydeau's women are not content to remain mere passive receptacles of this most treasured symbol of bourgeois values, to be fought over and guarded by fearful males. They are quite capable of holding it for ransom to get what they want.

As if acknowledging that they are faced with superior forces on the domestic battleground, Feydeau's husbands became more timid and less adventurous as his career progressed. Even Trévelin, although he is deceiving his wife, uses the tricks of a weakling to get what he wants, pouting and

sulkily trying to make her feel guilty for making demands on him.¹ If, like Petypon in La Dame de chez Maxim and Pinglet in L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange, they are middle-aged men with unattractive middle-aged wives, husbands can take little comfort from the fact that they are no longer faced with the possibility of cuckoldry. Wives unable to threaten desecration of the household gods set themselves up, faute de mieux, as High Priestesses of marital piety, intimidating their husbands with an excess of prudery. But if the wives have lost the most effective weapon in their arsenal, their husbands are no longer fit for the battle. Free from his wife on a rare spree, Pinglet revels in the wines, liquors, and cigars which his wife normally forbids him, but a few minutes later he feels ill and wishes his helpmate were present to nurse him.² Other husbands would be glad to forgo extramarital pleasures for the sake of domestic peace. Vatelín, in Le Dindon, would like to be able to forget the momentary lapse from fidelity he suffered while away from his wife, but the past comes back to torment him, and his wife extracts her full measure of revenge.³ Chandebise (La Puce à l'oreille) has no thought of adultery. His only fault is in giving his

¹Vol. 7, On va faire la cocotte, act 1, sc. 2, p. 274.

²Vol. 4, L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange, act 2, sc. 6, pp. 73-74.

³Vol. 2, act 3, sc. 9.

wife some slight reason to suspect him, but that is enough to bring upon him humiliation, degrading physical abuse, and the threat of sudden death.

When the conflict of spouses becomes more direct and intense in the late one-act plays, the values of bourgeois respectability are still at the heart of the dispute, although the issue is no longer adultery. The initial quarrel in Feu la mère de Madame is similar to that in many of the earlier plays, but in a different key. Again a husband seeks excitement outside the home and is countered by a wife who threatens to bring the same kind of "excitement" into his own home. Lucien is a clerk with artistic pretensions. Not ambitious enough for adultery, he is content with voyeurism, seeking "artistic inspiration" by staring at the breasts of a nude model. His wife is furious at this slight to her own bosom, which she threatens to exhibit for evaluation at their next dinner party.¹ Accused of not sufficiently appreciating his wife's torso, Lucien is first menaced with having to share it with the world, and then suffers the ignominy of having his wife's breasts pawed by a male servant.²

The situations in On purge Bébé! and "Mais n'te promène donc pas toute nue!" are similar. Husbands whose professional concerns make them acutely aware of appearances

¹Vol. 7, sc. 2, p. 242.

²Ibid., sc. 3, p. 249.

and the importance of what they deem proper behavior are pitted against wives who are unconcerned with the basic principles of bourgeois decorum. In each case the foolishness of the husband has its exact counterpoint in his wife's madness. Follavoine, single-minded in his role as businessman and breadwinner, fails to see anything absurd or undignified about his dream of selling unbreakable chamber pots to the army; and his wife, who in her role as housewife has a disorderly passion for order, cannot understand why, as a mother, she should not put her son's constipation above all other concerns. Clarisse and her husband have somewhat loftier ideas of themselves. He sees himself as a glamorous politician, courting public acclaim, although he cynically makes deals with those who have publicly insulted him. She declares herself above the petty opinions and prejudices of society, but her fine words are only an excuse for exhibitionism.

In the final two short plays, the wife no longer requires scandalous or shocking behavior to destroy her husband's fragile peace of mind; her domination is now virtually complete. In these portraits of domestic incompatibility we can see how far the evolution of Feydeau's characters has come. These are not the oblivious fools of the early plays, unconscious of their gross defects and amoral in their total lack of a sense of guilt. In the late plays his characters are much more complex and realistic than those simple fools,

but they are still oblivious to their faults and usually incapable of guilt or shame. But in these last two one-acts (as in On va faire la cocotte) guilt and shame are weapons used by one spouse against the other. In Léonie est en avance, Toudoux is alternately blamed for being the cause of his wife's pregnancy and its consequent suffering, and brow-beaten with constant reminders of his uselessness and insignificance in the great drama of childbearing. Then when his wife's condition turns out to be hysterical, he is berated for not having been able to produce an heir. Hortense a dit: "Je m'en fous!" presents the husband as a comic Lear, stripped of all but his title and discovering that rank without power is a dangerous thing. Even as his wife bullies and orders him about, she castigates him for his inability to fulfill his role as protector and head of the household.¹ In each new scene--with his wife, the servants, and his patients--Follbraguet demonstrates a different aspect of his impotence, finally renouncing his title as he is thrown out of his own apartment, the lease to which is in his wife's name.

Puppets and Pawns

The later plays focus so intensely on the conflict of husband and wife that the other characters fade into insignificance, but in the earlier plays others have roles of varying importance within the orbit of the ménage bourgeois.

¹Vol. 1, sc. 2, p. 234.

The first of these is the wife's would-be lover, a figure who, following timeless tradition, is always the best friend of the unsuspecting husband. For the most part they are rather inept and never as brash or enterprising as the philandering husbands. As lovers they have little to recommend them besides persistence, but that they have in abundance. They may have once received some small encouragement from the object of their affections, and that is enough to sustain them, no matter how cold she may subsequently become. Despite their persistence, they are sometimes quite timid. Coustouillu, the eloquent statesman of La Main passe! is reduced to a stammering fool in the presence of the lady he loves, and Thommereux (Le Système Ribadier) even leaves the country out of fear of deceiving his best friend. Yet, each manages to pursue his beloved through two successive marriages. They have few individual traits or characteristics, for their principal function is to create embarrassment for either husband or wife.

The would-be lovers rarely get anything but humiliation and abuse for their efforts, but in this they are like most of the minor characters who exist principally to serve the plot. Often the most victimized of Feydeau's characters have only a small role in the mechanics of the plot but are caught up in the machinery and left bewildered and frightened, not understanding what has happened to them. Some, like the confused and frustrated bridegroom in L'Affaire Edouard, have

no plot function at all.¹ Like innocent pedestrians in the path of a runaway automobile, they merely get in the way as the crazy machine begins to accelerate. Perhaps the saddest of all is Belgence in La Main passe!, a friend of the family whose earnest efforts to be helpful are fruitless. Later, he accidentally brings about a reconciliation of husband and wife. Then, having served his purpose, he is immediately discarded by his ungrateful friends. Feydeau even stresses his role as puppet and victim by referring to him in the cast of characters as "personnage menu, . . . qui n'a pas d'importance."²

Servants and Masters

Among the few purely functional characters, there are understandably many servants. Nevertheless, there is no other single class of Feydeau's characters that is as varied in treatment and personality as the servant. Some, like most of the servants in La Main passe!, are simple yet earnest and dutiful. There are also a number of conventionally self-important butlers who see themselves as the real masters of the household, but there is variety even in these. Samuel, the self-assured butler of L'Affaire Edouard, is quick to point out to everyone he meets that Samuel is not really his name:

¹Vol. 1, act 1, sc. 2, 14.

²Vol. 3, La Main passe!, act 4, sc. 8.

Beaucoup de gens me croient juif, parce que je m'appelle Samuel: mais ça n'est pas mon vrai nom! je ne l'ai pris que parce que ça aide dans les affaires...¹

His pretension is all the more striking because servants often had to change their names to suit the whims of their employers. Bastien, in La Duchesse des Folies-Bergère, had to become an Arnold because his masters already had a dog named Bastien.² Another servant has loftier aspirations. Tiburce, the domestic in Chat en poche, imagines himself in love with his fat and homely mistress, and complains that "on admet qu'un amant aime sa maîtresse, et on n'admet pas qu'un domestique aime sa maîtresse. . . . Où est la nuance?"³ Firmin (La Lycéenne) has no pretensions, but seems over-qualified for his position as servant. Formerly a prize-winning student at his lycée, he was hired by his pompous bourgeois master to give a literary tone to the household, while his classmate, who envied his ability to win all the honors, is now a school-master.⁴ Although often briefly sketched, servants may be more individualized than their

¹Vol. 1, act 1, sc. 3, p. 159. This was a jibe at Fernand Samuel, Feydeau's former employer and director of the Théâtre de la Renaissance, who changed his name from Adolphe Louveau when his family objected to having their name associated with the theatre. See Lorcey, Georges Feydeau, p. 65.

²Vol. 8, act 1, sc. 4, p. 142. Another example is John in vol. 6, Cent millions qui tombent, act 1, sc. 1, p. 215.

³Vol. 2, act 2, sc. 1, p. 27.

⁴Vol. 8, act 1, sc. 1, p. 11.

masters. Rédillon, for example, the conventionally irresponsible fils de famille in Le Dindon, is watched over by a valet whose regard for his employer can only be described as maternal.¹ While the portrait of the valet is not developed, it is more vivid than that of the master.

Even as his plays became more realistic, Feydeau betrayed his fondness for portraying servants as extravagant and irrepressible clowns. Although most of the servants are victims of events as well as scapegoats for their masters' frustrations, Feydeau occasionally allows them a brief Saturnalian triumph over their betters. The only play which employs the Plautine theme of a servant who bests his master through his own initiative is Dormez, je le veux! Unlike the tricky slave of Plautus, Justin is not engaged in a constant battle of wits with his master; the secret of hypnotism gives him effortless control over his employer. He wields his power with great relish and abandon, not only making his master do all the work, but forcing him to make a fool of himself in the presence of his fiancée. On the few other occasions when Feydeau's servants play the destructive clown, they are unconscious of their disruptiveness. Charlotte, a sweet provincial naïf, is unaware of the alarming complications she creates for Angèle and Saint-Florimond in Champignol malgré lui by her cheerful eagerness to please, but in their

¹Vol. 2, act 3, sc. 1, 9.

eyes she is an appalling nemesis whose every appearance brings a new embarrassment. Bretel, the servant-clown who dominates the action of Les Pavés de l'ours, is another naïf. He is considerably more aggressive than Charlotte, but no less cheerful and well-intentioned. And he is just as bewildered when he is angrily thrown out after having demolished his master's wedding plans.

Dormez, je le veux! and Les Pavés de l'ours were produced about midway in Feydeau's career, following a number of successes which, relying on the mechanics of the deception formula, had employed realistic but bland major characters. In these two short plays Feydeau again freely exploited broadly drawn clowns like those of his earliest plays, but instead of giving all of the characters the same clownish proportions, he reserved the clown's role for the servant, who was allowed to disrupt the more "serious" world in a temporary reign of folly. This ancient theme, in which the rule of disorder is produced or accompanied by a reversal of social roles, was used again by Feydeau in two longer plays. The Saturnalia is specifically mentioned in Cent millions qui tombent, and the action involves a servant who is treated like a king and is waited upon by a Prince.¹ In this case the servant is not an active or disruptive clown.

¹Vol. 6, act 1, sc. 1, p. 215.

Rather, his role in the action is passive, but his sudden fortune gives others an opportunity to debase themselves. The overturn of the social hierarchy is the single theme which runs through the several strands of action in La Duchesse de Folies-Bergère. La Môme Crevette has become a Duchess; a butler whose good fortune permits him a holiday normally beyond his means is first taken for a count and then for a high-ranking diplomat; a young king goes on a spree like a common schoolboy and is physically abused for not paying a bill; and a drunken pion is mistaken for the king and accorded a royal reception. One of the acts is set in Maxim's, a place where both a king and a butler could go on holiday from their respective roles, and the festival atmosphere of Maxim's pervades the whole play.

But the overturn of accepted values and the disruption of order is not normally a question of reversals within the social hierarchy. The opposition of servant and master is as exceptional in the plays of Feydeau as it is common in those of Plautus and Molière. Although the patriarchal society of nineteenth-century Europe bears some resemblance to that of Republican Rome, the threat to social stability in Feydeau arises more from sexual scandal than violations of barriers within the social hierarchy. When such violations occur, they are usually produced by wives and daughters, rather than servants, but the most important forces of disruption come from a world technically excluded from the

accepted hierarchy. Women--the cocottes--naturally dominate this topsy-turvy world, but they have active assistance in their attack on bourgeois values from the other group of disruptive outsiders: Feydeau's energetic foreigners.

The characters considered so far have been primarily the citizens of the bourgeois world. It is they who are measured by their petty inadequacies, and they who are victimized and threatened when the plot's infernal machinery picks them up and carries them helplessly through the maze of sexual intrigue. In Feydeau's own phrase, they are those who receive the "kicks in the rear."¹ The foreigners and cocottes, who deliver the kicks and ride the whirlwind unscathed, are created according to different principles. The members of the bourgeois world are negatively comic--weak, hypocritical, fearfully ridiculous--while the outsiders are positive, strong, aggressive, and self-confident. The outsiders are not without standards of behavior. The standards of the cocotte are those of the respectable world turned upside down and inside out. And the foreigners, unlike the French bourgeois, have no difficulty living up to their own code of conduct, but that code is always bizarre and usually violent.

Foreigners and the
Assault on Civilization

One of the characters in Le Dindon, having nearly

¹See p. 147 above.

been bowled over by Soldignac, refers to him as an "énergumène."¹ It is an appropriate description of most of Feydeau's foreigners. Not only do they seem possessed by some frightful and superhuman force, but at times they are like agents of the darker world, evoked to materialize and scourge the earth whenever humans are tempted to sin. These demons are the shock troops in the assault on civilization that is presided over with queenly grace by the cocotte. They are most often found within her orbit, but they are apt to appear whenever one enters the world of illicit love. Whenever one risks the creation of some kind of scandal, these nightmare apparitions are likely to materialize as if they were physical manifestations of unconscious fears. This is true even of the English, despite their reputation for phlegmatic impassivity. Soldignac and his wife Maggy are like ghosts from a forbidden past who come back to haunt Vatelin in Le Dindon. Soldignac, the businessman from London, is coldly indifferent to the scandal he might create in his businesslike approach to divorce; and Maggy, formidable as a wife and terrifying as a mistress, affectionately calls Vatelin "ma fille" before she knocks him to the ground.² Another Englishman, in La Puce à l'oreille, is like a sex-starved animal waiting by

¹Vol. 2, act 1, sc. 15, p. 148. The word is also used to describe Homenidès. Vol. 4, La Puce à l'oreille, act 1, sc. 13, p. 154.

²Vol. 2, act 2, sc. 10, pp. 168-69.

the entrance to his lair in the Hôtel du Minet Galant for any unsuspecting female who might wander close enough to be pounced upon and dragged into his den.¹ One need not go to a disreputable hotel to be plagued by the foreign menace. Once Hubertin has become sufficiently "Americanized" (i.e., drunk), it seems natural that he should appear in the bedroom of an adulterous couple, terrorizing them with a pistol and throwing their clothes out the window.² The most ferocious of all are the Spanish-speaking gentlemen, figures who bear strong resemblance to the Capitain of the Commedia dell'arte, and for whom murder is one of the most likely consequences of love.

Physical violence is not the only threat foreigners pose for civilization. Their abuse of language is only the most obvious example of their disregard for the forms and conventions that are the hallmarks of civilized society. More important is their blatant lack of concern with scandal. Nothing marks them as savages as clearly as their shamelessness in questions involving sex. Whether they are pursuing someone who has caught their fancy or are seeking revenge on a cheating mate, they are never furtive, but show an energetic disregard for propriety. The two foreign women, Maggy and Dotty, ignore the restraints society has placed on their sex. They go after the men they want with an aggressiveness that

¹Vol. 4, act 2, sc. 7-8.

²Vol. 3, La Main passe!, act 2.

few of Feydeau's men could muster. Their disregard of les convenances is not just a matter of their easy usurpation of the male role in courtship. Dotty, the American millionairess of Je ne trompe pas mon mari, has no concept of those important distinctions between classes upon which civilized society is based. Recognizing her lack of experience in matters of love, she has no qualms about soliciting professional advice on the subject from a notorious courtesan. Far from recoiling in horror from the presence of such a woman (the civilized response), she treats Bichon's profession as blandly as she might a dentist's. For her part, Bichon discovers a common bond with the American girl when she learns that her father made his millions selling pigs:

BICHON.--Faire fortune avec des cochons! oh! ce qu'il faut en falloir!

DOTTY.--Beaucoup.

BICHON.--A qui le dites-vous!¹

Foreigners and cocottes are both outsiders, if for different reasons. But the American and the cocotte have something more in common. They are both parvenus, having found success in defiance of class distinctions and in professions others find distasteful.

The association of foreigners with illicit sex is more than just chauvinism or the convenience of the playwright. The reputation which Paris had acquired as the most sinful city in Europe drew many pleasure-seeking tourists, so

¹Vol. 3, Je ne trompe pas mon mari, act 1, sc. 16, p. 230.

that while Paris was seen abroad as the pleasure capital, foreigners could well be viewed by the Parisians as more than usually prone to the temptations of the flesh.¹ Some, like Soldignac, were businessmen who took advantage of their trips to Paris to sample the city's most important tourist attraction. Soldignac, in his methodical way, has left a standing order with a Paris cocotte for one night of pleasure each time he is in town.² Many of these foreign seekers after pleasure were well publicized, particularly if they were rich or titled. Lorcey says that General Irrigua, the South American adventurer in Un Fil à la patte, was based in part on a real person, the president of a South American country who came to Paris for the purchase of arms but spent the money from his country's treasury in self-indulgence. General Irrigua admits that he is under sentence of death, but the fate of his real-life antecedent was even worse. He was lynched by a mob when he tried to return to his country.³

There were many stories of visiting royalty who sought out the favors of the queens of sensuality--the renowned grandes horizontales--and Feydeau makes use of the

¹See Rudorff, The Belle Epoque, pp. 62-65.

²Vol. 2, Le Dindon, act 2, sc. 4, p. 158.

³Lorcey, Georges Feydeau, p. 106. Vol. 6, Un Fil à la patte, act 1, sc. 16, p. 137. Another foreigner based on a real person is Soldignac, the Englishman from Marseille, who was drawn in part from the actor Max Dearly. See Edwin Daniel Yahiel, "Georges Feydeau et son oeuvre" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1955), p. 149.

royal patronage of cocottes. Bichon even claims to have been assigned to the shah of Persia by the French government.¹ Her story is not implausible; it was said that the president of the Senate kept a list of those cocottes most worthy of presentation to royalty, and was consequently one of the first dignitaries called upon by visiting princes.² Foreign aristocrats do not have quite the same function in Feydeau's plays as ordinary visitors, and are shown in a different light. They are not the scourge of straying bourgeois like so many of the other foreigners, although they know how to make life difficult for their inferiors. Instead, they are found only within the orbit of the cocotte and are the final adornment to her fantastic presence. They complement and legitimize her role as the monarch of her special world. Technically a pariah, she is sought after and virtually worshipped by princes who are only too happy to debase themselves by entering her topsy-turvy world. For while they legitimize her lofty claims, they cast doubt on their own legitimacy and claims to seriousness. Their role in Feydeau's world is that of kings doing homage to the queen of fools.

As a result they are not savages who threaten civilized values, but the holders of genuine claims to a place

¹Vol. 3, Je ne trompe pas mon mari, act 1, sc. 3, p. 211.

²Anne Manson, "Quand les trois grandes régnaient sur Paris," in La Belle Epoque, ed. Gilbert Guilleminault (Paris: Editions Denoël, 1957), p. 165.

at the pinnacle of civilization who have chosen to debase themselves. They maintain the marks of their rank and authority even in absurd circumstances and thus remind us of the extent to which they abuse their real and symbolic position. Their language is evidence of their position. Feydeau's foreign royalty and the members of their entourages speak consistently better French than his other foreigners and are most apt to be comic in their use of language when they attempt colloquialisms or slang. Prince Nicolas of Palestrie, in Occupe-toi d'Amélie, is fond of telling everyone that he dislikes formality even while insisting on the respect that is his royal privilege. He is, as he says, a farceur, and he debases his authority in the pursuit of his "farces," showing no concern that the victim of one of his practical jokes died as a consequence.¹ The conflict between his fondness for playing the clown and the nature of his position is further emphasized when he encourages intimacy with the maid, whom he nevertheless regards as little better than a slave.² Another royal farceur is Serge, in La Duchesse des Folies-Bergère, whose schoolboy pranks are little in keeping with his recently acquired title of king. He might well play the clown, for his royal establishment has already been

¹Vol. 1, Occupe-toi d'Amélie, act 2, sc. 6, pp. 94-95.

²Ibid., sc. 10-11, pp. 102-103.

invaded and undermined by the presence of La Môme Crevette, who is presently married to a duke and will soon become the king's mistress. Even if they did not marry into the aristocracy, many cocottes, both in the plays and in real life, gave themselves aristocratic names. Considering the willingness of many nobles to ruin themselves for a cocotte, she might almost appear to have the right. In one instance at least, a cocotte was given what amounts to a royal license. In 1901 King Leopold II of Belgium wrote to Emilienne d'Alençon, who had risen from poverty to riches as a courtesan, inviting her to join him on a hunting party and suggesting that she call herself "la comtesse de Songeon."¹

The Cocotte, Queen of Fools

The king of Belgium was acknowledging an established fact, that the cocotte was an institution, a recognized symbol of fantasy and outrageousness. As such, she was ideally suited to the use that Feydeau makes of her. She could play the role of Mother Folly, presiding over a festival of overturned values and ranks, because that was much the role that she played in life. When Feydeau assigned the same role to the ingénue in La Lycéenne he was greeted with commercial failure because he was violating convention. Although the reversal of social roles was perfectly in keeping with the spirit of farce, his audience could not accept that sort of

¹Manson, "Quand les trois grandes régnaient sur Paris," p. 163.

treatment of its most sacred symbol of passive purity. Feydeau's use of the cocotte presented no such problem.

This is not to say that Feydeau adopted the cocotte with reluctance. He was clearly fond of her and included her in about half of his plays in both major and minor roles. Even when her role is small, she manages to be among the most colorful of Feydeau's characters. He rarely included characters who were not essential to the action, but when he did, they were apt to be cocottes. Targinette, the dancer in Le Ruban, has nothing to do with the plot, yet is given a lengthy scene with the protagonist.¹ The nameless cocottes in La Lycéenne, who are part of the background against which Finette scandalizes her parents and fiancé, merely provide atmosphere. There is Olympe, the aging former cocotte in La Puce à l'oreille, who was known in her youth as "Culotte de peau" and once had herself served up nude on a silver platter.² Even when she does not appear on stage, the cocotte might

¹Vol. 8, act 1, sc. 9, pp. 78-81. According to Lorcey, Feydeau was obliged for reasons of casting to cut two such unnecessary roles--in this case female circus performers--from the cast of L'Affaire Edouard. Georges Feydeau, p. 100.

²Vol. 4, act 2, sc. 4. It is probably more than coincidence that the initials of her nickname are identical with those of Cora Pearl, the Second Empire cocotte. Mlle Pearl once wagered her guests that she could serve them some meat that none would dare cut. Then she had herself borne in on a large silver salver, unadorned but for a garnish of parsley. Joanna Richardson, The Courtesans (New York: World Publishing Company, 1967), pp. 53-54.

serve as an evocative image of license, as in Amour et piano and Un Bain de ménage. The image of the cocotte is used even in Hortence a dit: "Je m'en fous!" Follbraquet, the dentist who is oppressed in so many ways, is denied even a glimpse of the famous Caroline Otéro when she is treated by an associate.¹ The forlorn hero of Feydeau's last play can only yearn hopelessly for the extravagance, freedom, and fantasy that the cocotte represents.

The cocotte is not always gay and fun-loving. At times she can be an avenging fury, particularly when she is being deserted by a "protector" who wants to get married. She might even be a bad-tempered vixen like Paulette in Cent millions qui tombent, whose nasty disposition, always under control when there is a question of profit, is nakedly displayed in her treatment of the servants. But generally she is a "brave fille," spirited, charming, and blithely content with her role, although she is never sentimental when it comes to business. The most striking thing about the cocottes is that they alone among Feydeau's undeviatingly selfish characters are capable of altruism. Unselfishness is not common even among them; what is unusual is that it should be found at all. The specific form it often takes would also be surprising except for the fact that it followed a well established theatrical convention. In several of the plays the cocotte,

¹Vol. 1, sc. 1, p. 233,

who personifies the antithesis of bourgeois values and is seen as one of the most serious threats to bourgeois stability, actively and unselfishly helps to restore the façade of respectability. In Le Bourgeon, she goes so far as to make a melodramatic sacrifice for the preservation of society's sense of decorum. Writing of that play, Robert de Flers noted ironically that "les demi-mondaines sont, au théâtre, l'un des meilleurs défenseurs de la famille et de l'ordre social," and suggested that the French bourgeoisie should show its gratitude by erecting a monument to Marguerite Gautier.¹ Unfortunately, Feydeau expects us to take the heroine of Le Bourgeon seriously and to accept at face value her resignation to her fate: "Nous sommes ici-bas pour donner du plaisir, pour donner de l'amour, il ne nous appartient pas de donner un foyer. Contentons-nous de notre rôle."²

That "rôle" is acceptable in his farces because we are not asked to become sentimental over the exclusion of the tainted woman from respectable society. She is an irresponsible clown with no desire to join the world that excludes her. If she acquiesces, or even actively helps, in the restoration of respectability, she does so in a way consistent with her role as clown. Miranda can easily afford to volunteer as a scapegoat at the end of L'Affaire Edouard.

¹Quoted in Lorcey, Georges Feydeau, p. 229.

²Vol. 9, act 3, sc. 10, p. 303.

Like the fool who is thought to be immune to bad luck, she is impervious to a scandal that would ruin the respectable woman she is protecting.¹ Although nothing we have learned of her character prepares for her spontaneous gesture, it is essentially that of the fool who cheerfully resigns her throne after her temporary reign of folly and allows the return of order.² Even La Môme Crevette is willing to help save Petypon from scandal, although her behavior is more believable and consistent. She goes along with the scheme in which she plays the role of wife because she thinks it a lark, and is as irresponsible in acting her part as she is when she abandons it. But the transformation undergone by Bichon in Je ne trompe pas mon mari is more inconsistent than that of Miranda. Light-hearted but caustic through most of the play, she suddenly puts her ingenuity and persuasion to work to prevent the rupture of a marriage, even though her action leaves her without a protector.³

The sudden altruism of Bichon follows the convention noted by Flers that has pariahs supporting the very society that excludes them, but inconsistency of a similar sort was

¹See p. 109 above.

²See Segal's discussion of the limited nature of the Plautine slave's misrule and his apparent acceptance of the fact that it must end. Roman Laughter: The Comedy of Plautus, pp. 137-69.

³Vol. 3, act 3, sc. 5-6, pp. 283-87.

actually part of the legend that surrounded the cocotte. Caroline "La Belle" Otéro was one of the most famous and cynical grandes cocottes of the Belle Epoque. Men killed themselves for her and she remained indifferent. She could have had a number of men who were young and handsome as well as rich, but she chose one who was ugly and old, but extremely rich, and she treated him with disdain while taking his money. Yet she was reputed to have helped less fortunate friends, and, much like Paulette in Cent millions qui tombent, remained faithful to one lover for some time after she had ruined him. Manson describes her as "avide et généreuse, pitoyable et cruelle."¹

The variety of her legend enabled Feydeau to make the cocotte and those surrounding her into some of the most interesting of his characters. Occupe-toi d'Amélie is praised by Lorcey as being the most accurately observed of Feydeau's plays because of its picture of the characters in Amélie's orbit, but in describing these people as both "in-vraisemblables et réels" Lorcey suggests why they were so appropriate for farce.² Improbable yet real, they were ideal for Feydeau's mixture of fact and fantasy. The "reality" on which he had drawn was both fact and legend, and the legend had been created both in the theatre and outside of it. The

¹"Quand les trois grandes régnaient sur Paris," pp. 182-86.

²Lorcey, Georges Feydeau, p. 199.

year 1852 had seen both the premiere of La Dame aux Camélias and the establishment of the Second Empire, which gave rise to the famous courtesans who were responsible for the reality behind the legend. For the second half of the nineteenth century the sinful woman, adulteress or courtesan, was to be a common image in theatre and literature.

Whatever a sociologist might say about the nineteenth-century obsession with fallen women, its effects on the drama were mostly unfortunate. It matters little whether the guilty woman was wept over as a sentimental heroine or painted as an unrepentant villain and cast out, the result was to trivialize the drama. It is not true that the nineteenth-century drama of adultery seems trivial merely because our standards of sexual morality have changed. We need not share Sophocles' concept of religious duty, Euripides' view of incest, or Shakespeare's belief in the nature of kingship to be moved by Antigone, Phaedra, or Lear. Rather than engaging in a moral struggle whose proportions we can appreciate even if we do not accept its precepts, these unfortunate women were mere scapegoats, the passive receptacles of collective guilt and fear. Confined to a submissive role or made outcasts by convention, they could be effective neither as tragic heroines nor as villains, for they were not permitted the moral dimension or responsibility required by either of those roles. Feydeau lacked the originality to create a Nora or Hedda who could defy the restrictions of her sex, but he had an advantage over most of his contemporaries in his instinctive

understanding that their conventionally subordinate place in society allowed women to be effective only in the role of clown. The most consequential of his female clowns were the cocottes, because as outcasts they enjoyed the traditional freedom from responsibility of the fool. The most ironic comment to be made on the folly of the society depicted by Feydeau is that the extravagant clowns on which his portraits were based did not require the license of a king or the religious sanction of a Saturnalian festival to assert their dominance. In some ways they did dominate society, commanding the center of attention and dictating its fashions.

The real position of these theoretical outcasts is reflected in the ease with which Feydeau's courtesans rule over their world. His most famous cocottes, La Môme Crevette and Amélie d'Avranches, fill their roles effortlessly and with supreme self-confidence. Although Amélie dominates the action of Occupe-toi d'Amélie, she does so with detachment. She rarely initiates any action, but is content to observe the folly of others and to use it to her profit, cheerfully trimming her sails to whichever wind might blow. She need not work or scheme like the intrepid Plautine slave in order to make fools of others; the fools and schemers alike come to her, and she presides serenely over them all. Confident that she can profit from whatever chance throws her way, she is even tempted by marriage when it is thrust upon her. She soon rejects it, not like Etiennette in Le

Bourgeon, with a deep sigh of regret, but with the realization that marriage can only mean trouble. As an outcast Amélie can never be more than Queen of the Fools, but in a world in which fear of scandal makes fools of all those who claim respectability, that is the grandest title she may hope to have.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: THOUGHTS ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FEYDEAU AND THE VALUE OF FARCE

Me dis tu que dame Folie
Est morte? ma foy, tu as menty;
Jamais si grande ne la vy,
Ne si puissante comme elle est.
Les Sotz nouveaulx,
farcez, couvez

Limitations of Serious Criticism

The differences in the critical assessments of Feydeau have sometimes been extreme. According to Voltz, for example, Feydeau's characters are empty shells who have only the negative virtue of allowing talented performers free rein to create as they please, whereas Jean Morgan has declared that Feydeau excelled other vaudevillistes purely because of his characters.¹ Few of his contemporaries regarded his plays as even worthy of serious comment. In 1901 Brander Matthews was able to write a book about French playwrights of the preceding century without once mentioning Feydeau's name.² Even his admirers saw nothing beyond the laughs and

¹Voltz, La Comédie, p. 159; Jean Morgan, "Georges Feydeau et Francis de Croisset," Le Gaulois (Paris), 28 October 1909, p. 1.

²French Dramatists of the Nineteenth Century.

the mechanics of the plots. Sarcey, while praising one of Feydeau's plays, conceded that "vous le jetteriez dans le creuset de Schopenhauer, il est certain que vous n'en tireriez pas une goutte de philosophie."¹ Modern defenders, on the other hand, claim to have discovered more than a drop of philosophy beneath the gaiety. Feydeau has been hailed by Paul Morand as "le seul héritier de la tragédie grecque" because "il pose le grand problème de la fatalité, contre lequel le temps ne peut rien," yet others have found an affinity in his plays with Jarry or with Shaw, or have seen him as the precursor of Dada, Surrealism, Pirandello, or Ionesco.² Roger Steiner finds that "Feydeau's plays do not grow old because they have nothing to do with particular intellectual trends of the age, particular social attitudes or problems," while others see in him a hidden satirist (Shapiro) or an astute observer of manners and morals (Lorcey).³

¹Quarante ans de théâtre, 8 (1902):179-80.

²Paul Morand, "Champignol parle au nom des dieux," La Parisienne 10 (October 1953):1424-25. The critics who have compared Feydeau to various avant-garde playwrights include Gérard Bauer, "Occupe-toi d'Amélie," La Revue de Paris, April 1948, p. 149; Claude Damiens, "Georges Feydeau, le maître du naturalisme absurde," Paris-Théâtre, no. 150 (1959), p. 3; Gilles Sandier, "Un faux Stendal, un vrai Feydeau," Arts, 13 (22-28 December 1965):39; Renée Saurel, "Une bonne soirée Feydeau," Les Lettres françaises, no. 1197 (31 August-6 September 1967), p. 24; Robert Kemp, La Vie du théâtre (Paris: Albin Michel, 1956), p. 140.

³Roger J. Steiner, "The Perennial Georges Feydeau," Symposium 15 (Spring 1961):53; Shapiro, "Topical Allusions

If the variety of interpretations proves anything, it is that Feydeau's art is much more complex than was suspected by his contemporaries, despite its real limitations. But there is a danger in these attempts to elevate Feydeau to respectability and admit him into the circle of durable artists. The Times Literary Supplement, reviewing Shapiro's translations of Feydeau plays, wondered at the apparent need felt by intellectuals to canonize past writers and performers of farce.

If we are honest, it may be doubted whether the intellectual ever enjoys farce as much as he pretends. He sits through the laughs as a voyeur, watching the pleasure the actors give the audience without taking part himself. . . . Why, then, does the intellectual persist in trying to find some significance in a popular entertainment that has nothing to do with him? . . . Determined to avoid condescension, humbled by untutored achievement, he can only acknowledge some primeval vitality--and hope by absorbing it to rejuvenate energies that may be failing in his own declining culture.¹

If critics are to understand and appreciate farce, they must try to do so on its own terms, or run the risk of distorting it to suit their prejudices. Yet while intellectuals may laud the work of farceurs of other times and other cultures (like the French film critics who revere Jerry Lewis), they are apt to be suspicious of their own creators of farce. Intellectuals can more easily admire the irresponsible gaiety

in the Theatre of Georges Feydeau," pp. 148-50, 224, 263; Lorcey, Georges Feydeau, p. 199.

¹"Forms of Shock Treatment for a World Out of Plumb," Times Literary Supplement, 18 June 1971, p. 689.

of traditional farce from a distance than when the social and moral questions it treats so frivolously are of immediate concern. Shaw was right to be irritated by contemporary farce. It deliberately adopted an attitude of irresponsibility and acceptance toward institutions and beliefs that he was convinced must be examined and changed.¹ The mechanical situations to which he objected because they seemed to deny human will and thought are a prime symptom of the sense of fatality which has been discovered in Feydeau by later writers, but which is nothing more than the kind of common fatalism seen in ordinary people of any time or place: a passive acceptance or resignation to what is or is thought to be. It is not a concept that can be embraced in good conscience by the

¹Shaw's principal objection to farcical comedy was its lack of sympathy and humanity (see p. 6, above). But he also disliked its refusal to deal honestly with the moral and social questions it seemed to be raising. He felt that the "paradoxical wit" of W. S. Gilbert was "morally unjustifiable." Gilbert had to "depend for the piquancy of his ridicule on the general assumption of the validity of the very thing ridiculed" (London Music in 1888-89 [New York: Vienna House, 1973], p. 283; Music in London 2 vols. [New York: Vienna House, 1973], 1:238). He later clarified this point of view:

"The worst thing that can happen in a play is that the people with whom the audience makes friends at first should disappoint it afterwards. Mr Gilbert carried this disappointment further: he would put forward a paradox which at first promised to be one of those humane truths which so many modern men . . . have worded so as to flash out their contradiction of some weighty rule of our systematized morality, and would then let it slip through his fingers, leaving nothing but a mechanical topsy-turvitute. Farcical comedy combines the two disappointments. Its philosophy is as much a sham as its humanity" (Our Theatres in the Nineties, 2:230).

intellectual, particularly the intellectual reformer.

Je m'en foutisme: The Philosophy
of Frivolous Disenchantment

If we are to accept Feydeau on his own terms, we must be willing to accept his irresponsibility. Having said that, it can be acknowledged that his irresponsibility is a crucial factor in his ability to outlive so many of his more serious contemporaries. The issues and problems that Feydeau used are not that different from those dealt with in varying degrees of gravity by his contemporaries. He may be directly indebted to them for some of his basic themes. The incompatible couple in Porto-Riche's Amoureuse (1891), for instance, might be the prototype of a number of Feydeau husbands and wives. Other writers treated adultery, cupidity, vanity, and cynicism, but Feydeau refused to weigh his plays down with the moral judgments that many others could not resist.¹ When he once strayed from his usual practice (in Le Bourgeon) he produced what Lorcey is compelled to call an "affreux mélodrame," although the play is not at all without its strong points.² The plays which have survived are those in which judgment is withheld, in which the vices of the characters and the situations in which they find themselves

¹For a brief survey of contemporary playwrights, see Appendix B.

²Lorcey, Georges Feydeau, p. 188.

are regarded with a good-humored but total objectivity. It would be more accurate to say that Feydeau's longevity is dependent, not on skirting the social and moral questions of his age, but on his refusal to provide them with answers.

Feydeau was careful to avoid offending or shocking the prejudices of his audience, but he also took care not to affirm them.¹ His plays illustrate the negative viewpoint that Dobrée claims is inherent in comedy. Dobrée speaks of three types of comedy: "critical" comedy, which deflates or satirizes; "free" comedy, which is irresponsible; and a third category, which deals with the "disillusion of mankind" and "comes when the positive attitude has failed, when doubt is

¹Although Feydeau attempted to keep his plays just within the limits of good taste, there were times when critics and audiences felt he had strayed over the boundary. The most notable of these instances was the secret chamber scene in Le Circuit, which several commentators found offensive (see Lorcey, Georges Feydeau, pp. 205-208). Another was the climactic scene in the second act of La Dame de chez Maxim, which was amended because it had displeased certain members of the audience. Among those offended by the scene was the Duchesse d'Uzès, at whose request it was altered (Lorcey, Georges Feydeau, pp. 148-50). There may have been a more personal reason, unconnected with that scene, for the Duchesse's displeasure with the play, but she wisely refrained from mentioning it in her letter to Feydeau. Ten years earlier, her son, Duc Jacques d'Uzès, was financially ruined through his attentions to Emilienne d'Alençon, one of the most famous cocottes of the era. His mother broke up the liaison by sending Jacques to the Congo (Manson, "Quand les trois grandes régnaient sur Paris," pp. 166-67). She may have felt that Feydeau's portrait of a duchess whose obsession was to protect her young and susceptible son from courtesans, and La Môme's announcement, at the end of the play, of her coming trip to Africa, were allusions to her family's scandal.

creeping in to undermine values, and men are . . . laughing in the face of it all." Feydeau might be said to combine the last two approaches. He never quite abandons the irresponsible clowning of his earliest plays even when his work more realistically reflects the attitudes of his time. He neither criticizes nor endorses, illustrating Dobree's assertion that "comedy gives us the courage to face life without any standpoint," and allows us to observe without committing us to judgment.¹

Does this mean that the value of Feydeau lies in the undercurrent of disillusionment and melancholy that many critics see beneath the gaiety and irresponsibility?² It is hard to deny that the melancholy is there, for Feydeau himself underlined it in remarks about himself and his work. He told Brisson in an interview:

Ne vous étonnez pas si je suis triste. Telle est, en effet, ma disposition habituelle. . . Je ne ris jamais au théâtre. Je ris rarement dans la vie privée. Je suis taciturne, un peu sauvage.³

He claimed that a good vaudeville should be based on a "tragic" situation, and added, "C'est pourquoi d'ailleurs

¹Bonamy Dobrée, Restoration Comedy: 1660-1720 (London: Oxford University Press, 1924), pp. 15-16.

²Thierry Maulnier offers one of the most extreme statements of this point of view, claiming that the message of Feydeau's characters is that "devant un monde où l'absurde est l'homme même, l'homme ressent au plus profond de lui 'l'horreur d'être conscient'" "La Querelle du Dindon," Combat (Paris), 9 March 1951, p. 2.

³Portraits intimes, 5:11.

les auteurs que vous appelez comiques sont toujours tristes: ils pensent 'triste' d'abord."¹ This underlying melancholy is seen by some to imply hidden depth. Shapiro, for instance, praises Feydeau by asserting that "one does not have to scratch far below the surface of a typical Feydeau comedy to find a fatalistic vision of the human condition and, along with it, an undercurrent of pessimism."²

But fatalism and pessimism do not make a good playwright. Perhaps the most significant thing about Feydeau's pessimism is that it is not obvious in his plays; it must be sought beneath the surface. It is inferred rather than experienced directly. What is manifest is a persistent refusal to take seriously the situations on which his plays are based no matter how "tragic" or "sad" he might have perceived them to be in life. Excepting always Le Bourgeois, there is no attempt to mingle tears with laughter, or even a strong indication of bitterness or heavy irony in his portraits. Feydeau's disillusionment and melancholy are of the kind suggested by Dobrée; they lead him to eschew positive or even definitive standpoints and to seek refuge in laughter. He refuses to take seriously even his own pessimism. His attitude toward the world and its troubles is no more complex

¹Quoted in Treich, "Le Dixième anniversaire de la mort de Georges Feydeau," p. 5.

²"Topical Allusions in the Theatre of Georges Feydeau," p. 375.

than that expressed by Hortense in the title of his last play, an attitude endorsed by Follbraquet when his wife tells him of the maid's insolence:

MARCELLE.--Je lui fais une observation, elle me répond: "Je m'en fous!"
 FOLLBRAQUET.--Eh bien! fais-en autant.
 MARCELLE.--Tu admets ça! Tu admets qu'elle me réponde "Je m'en fous!"
 FOLLBRAQUET.--Ça prouve qu'elle a de la philosophie.¹

This is the "philosophy" expressed in Feydeau's plays: a deliberate comic indifference assumed in the face of the assorted trials of living.

Feydeau and the Absurdists

His renunciation of positive values and attitudes does allow us to see a certain kinship, however distant, between Feydeau and the Absurdists. With hindsight we may see in his gaily anarchistic point of view a premonition of the collapse of traditional beliefs, a sense of a world in the process of disintegration. The sense of kinship is reinforced by the observation that the Absurdists often make use of the techniques of farce. The fact that Beckett uses clowns as the protagonists of Waiting for Godot, and Ionesco calls Les Chaises a "tragic farce" suggests that there is something inherent in the nature of farce that lends itself to their vision of futility and hopelessness. But if they use farce, they also radically alter it. To begin with, expressions such

¹Vol. 1, Hortense a dit: "Je m'en fous!"; sc. 2, p. 234.

as "the human condition" are relevant to the discussion of the Absurdists in a way wholly inappropriate to Feydeau and the generations of traditional farce writers that preceded him. Feydeau's subject matter is nothing so sweeping or abstract as "mankind." His situations and characters are always specific, defined, and limited precisely where Beckett, Ionesco, and Pinter are abstract, inexplicable, and undefined. The Absurdists achieve universality through a lack of specificity. It is difficult to discuss their work without using broad, abstract terms because they often permit no more limited frame of reference. Feydeau's world is carefully limited to specific places, times, and circumstances. No matter how relentlessly foolish the characters that inhabit that world, or how absurdly terrifying the situations in which they inevitably find themselves, there is no reason to conclude that this is the only world possible, or that it represents anything so inescapable as human existence.

The abstract and undefined nature of the Absurdists' world also distinguishes it from that of Feydeau in the treatment of causal relationships, so central to the Absurdist modes. The situations that they portray are often "absurd" in the traditionally farcical sense of being ridiculous or ludicrous. Pinter, for example, often makes use of farcical misunderstandings (although not, like Feydeau, to sustain the plot) and occasionally employs ancient lazzi, such as the quarrel over the bag in the second act of The Caretaker.

But by avoiding answers to questions of causality, he creates an absurdity that is not contingent on specific causes or motivations and is therefore absolute and unconditional. The vision of despair and the sense of menace derive in large part from our inability to define causes for the madness. It seems unavoidable because it is inexplicable and unpredictable. The opposite situation prevails in Feydeau's plays, in which everything that happens, no matter how bizarre, is explained, regulated, and made logical and comprehensible. Even events which in life are subject to chance are made to seem predictable through the logic of theatrical convention.¹ Feydeau's characters may seem to have little control over their respective destinies, but the world in which they exist is ordered and predictable. This contrasts with the worlds of Ionesco and Beckett, whose characters must submit to an unknowable and mindless universe.

The Value of Frivolous Objectivity

Order and clearly explained causal relationships are characteristics Feydeau shared with nearly all of his contemporaries. Like many of them, he presents a strictly defined world that reflects his urban bourgeois audience. He differs from them in his refusal to be taken seriously, in maintaining an atmosphere of frivolity even while treating subjects that others regarded with gravity. Frivolity has its uses,

¹See pp. 111-13 above.

for it allowed him a kind of amoral objectivity that produced a picture of his society more honestly observed than that of many more serious writers.¹ Feydeau's observation of people is exaggerated and extreme, but the distortions are easily recognized as such. They are not the result of attempts to interpret, explain, or philosophize. Beneath the extravagance his audience would recognize characteristics they could have seen in themselves or their neighbors. Only in that atmosphere of fantasy could they see themselves so honestly portrayed without offense. This is true not merely for Feydeau's favorite themes of marriage, love, and adultery. It can be seen even in an atypical play like Cent millions qui tombent. Feydeau's picture of a society that values money, particularly the lavish expenditure of money, as the principal criterion of worth and respectability might almost have been drawn from Thorstein Veblen's The Theory of the Leisure Class. As an observation of human society, Cent millions qui tombent compares most favorably with Mirbeau's Les Affaires sont les affaires and Becque's Les Corbeaux, the two best known plays of the period on the subject of greed. Both of the latter plays have their virtues, but each portrays greed in traditionally moralistic and melodramatic terms, pitting a cynical and consuming passion for money against a virtuous lack of

¹Jacques Charon has commented that "il y a plus d'observation, de sens du réel dans une extravagance comme Un fil à la patte que dans un pesant mélo, pseudo-philosophique comme La Course au flambeau [by Paul Hervieu]." "Le Théâtre de Georges Feydeau," Les Annales, July 1962, p. 26.

concern with material profit. Respectability, it is implied, is on the side of virtue, and the desire for money corrupts both. Feydeau comes closer to the truth when he equates money with respectability and leaves virtue entirely out of the picture. For all his frivolity, Feydeau's portrayal of his society's attitudes toward money is actually more perceptive and honest.

Feydeau and Shaw

Interestingly, the moral objectivity of Feydeau brings him closer, in certain limited respects, to the purported optimist Shaw than to a pessimist such as Becque. Despite his objections to conventional farce, Shaw was not above occasionally indulging in what he called "tomfoolery," a practice he defended by saying that "irresponsible laughter is salutary in small quantities."¹ His clearest example of "irresponsible" foolishness is Passion, Poison, and Petrification (1905), a piece of extravagant buffoonery which is passed over in embarrassed silence by most Shaw authorities.² The farcical treatment of Edward III in The Six of Calais (1934) is less fantastic but equally free of Shaw's more serious concerns. You Never Can Tell (1896) employs themes

¹"Preface: Trifles and Tomfooleries," Complete Plays with Prefaces, 4:723.

²Arthur H. Nethercot, one of the few to mention the play, dismisses it as "the worst farce Shaw ever wrote." Men and Supermen: The Shavian Portrait Gallery (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1966), p. 36.

and devices of conventional farcical comedy in unconventional ways, and The Millionairess (1935) is enlivened by scenes that verge on pure slapstick.¹

Shaw also used farce for his own special ends, attempting to transform it and make it more responsible. Shaw's efforts to "humanize" farce are described by Meisel, who refers to the Shavian "Discussion Play" as a "kind of cerebral farce." According to Meisel, Shaw uses the fastpaced action of farce in order that plot might "keep pace with thought" and help "keep the intellectual pot bubbling."² Shaw's use of farce in this fashion is less unusual than it might seem, because even conventional farce uses action to dramatize "ideas," although such ideas are on a considerably lower plane than Shaw's and are not often actually discussed. Meisel himself cites Divorçons! by Sardou and Najac as an example of a conventional farce in which "discussion" plays an important role, and compares it to Shaw's Getting Married.³ Discussion has a part in the plays of Feydeau as well, but with Feydeau it is limited to the expression of ideas and attitudes

¹On You Never Can Tell as a farcical comedy, see Meisel, Shaw and the Nineteenth-Century Theater, pp. 253-56, and Charles A. Carpenter, Bernard Shaw & the Art of Destroying Ideals: The Early Plays (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), pp. 127-31.

²Shaw and the Nineteenth-Century Theater, pp. xii, 264.

³Ibid., pp. 265-66.

which, however common, are at odds with conventional morality, and he never suggests that attitudes or institutions should be changed. The best example of this type of discussion in Feydeau is in the first act of Le Dindon, which is almost entirely devoted to a discussion of attitudes toward marriage, adultery, and the double standard of sexual morality.

In a limited way, and for his own serious ends, Shaw also takes advantage of the frivolity and consequent freedom from judgment that farce provides. In a review of an English adaptation of L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange, Shaw made note of the "fantastic atmosphere of moral irresponsibility" that is necessary to farce.¹ In a play like Getting Married, the fantastic atmosphere of farce that frees Feydeau's characters to commit outrageous acts permits those of Shaw to express outrageous ideas. The situations in Getting Married could provide plots for several farces if Shaw had his characters act out the difficulties they experience with marriage and divorce.² Instead, the various complications and dilemmas are described, and several unusual ways of resolving them are

¹Our Theatres in the Nineties, 2:121.

²For example, a situation comparable to the triangle in Shaw's play involving Sinjon, Leo, and Reginald provides the plot of Divorçons! The Sinjon--Mrs. George--George Collins triangle is a Shavian version of the happy cuckold theme that is the basis of numerous plays, including Labiche's Le Plus heureux des trois and Becque's La Parisienne. The difficulties that Cecil anticipates if he marries Edith and becomes responsible for her actions are realized in Feydeau's Hortense a dit: "Je m'en fous!"

discussed. In accordance with the Bishop's belief that the devil must be given a fair hearing, even the most bizarre notions can be examined. Addressing an audience as easily shocked by ideas as by action, Shaw uses farce's immunity from judgment to forestall the outright condemnation of unusual proposals and thus permit a genuine dialogue to take place.

Limitations to the
"Absolutely Comic"

Shaw, Pinter, and Ionesco, in their diverse uses of farce, demonstrate that it has greater versatility than is generally suspected of this slightly regarded form. But they are serious writers, and in utilizing farce for their own ends, they must necessarily alter it drastically. They include farce in a larger vision that finally transcends farce. By contrast, Feydeau neither adds nor subtracts, but stays entirely within the boundaries of the farcical mode, devoting himself to developing to the fullest the possibilities contained within that circumscribed view of the world. The devotion to the narrow aims of farce gives Feydeau's work a kind of "purity" that has been noted by a number of critics. Yahiel, for example, feels that the essence of Feydeau's theatre is a "notion de comique pur et objectif."¹ And Versini writes that Feydeau's vaudevilles "appartiennent au théâtre pur." They operate, he says, in accordance with

¹"Georges Feydeau et son oeuvre," p. 215.

unchanging laws and have not aged because they are "en dehors de la vie et par là même du temps."¹ Richard Hayes made a similar comment in a review of Hotel Paradiso, Peter Glenville's adaptation of L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange. Hayes refers to the distinction Baudelaire makes "between the 'significantly comic'--an imitation--and the 'absolutely comic, or grotesque'--a creation." He places Hotel Paradiso with the absolutely comic, for "it is a parody of nothing but itself; not even remotely does it suggest an ideal of the useful or the rational."²

The "absolute" or abstract side of Feydeau's art is only one part of his complex method, but it is one that may appear more obvious and important to us than it did to his contemporaries. The mechanical and abstract aspect of farce is but one side of a careful balancing of contrasting elements. Farce needs the constant reference to daily life, to life as it is seen and felt, in order to maintain its vitality. As the context in which they were written becomes increasingly remote, Feydeau's plays will probably appear even

¹Georges Versini, Le Théâtre français depuis 1900 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1970), p. 13.

²"The Mathematics of Farce," Commonweal, 10 May 1957, p. 154. Baudelaire describes an English pantomime in which Pierrot, an incorrigible thief, is guillotined, and true to his thieving nature, steals his own head and stuffs it into his pocket. "The pantomime is the refinement, the quintessence of comedy; it is the pure comic element, purged and concentrated." "On the Essence of Laughter, and, in General, on the Comic in the Plastic Arts," trans. Jonathan Mayne in Comedy: Meaning and Form, ed. Robert W. Corrigan, p. 462.

more dominated by their fantastic, grotesque, and mechanical side. In the process, they will lose a significant part of their power to amuse. Except as an exercise in a certain "style," the "absolutely comic" may turn out not to be very funny.

Feydeau's observations of the society in which he lived are less obvious to us than might be the case because the end result of his theatre is not observation of reality, but its distortion. He was not offering new insights or attempting to make his audience see what they had never seen before. He showed them an image of themselves with which they were already most familiar, but he presented it through a carnival mirror. He could rely on their recognizing their image beneath the distortions, but we, less familiar with the lines and colors of the original, might be tempted to dismiss Feydeau's extravagant rendering of it as sheer fantasy, unrelated to anything in reality. Our confusion could be increased if we do not realize that even many of the distortions themselves would have been recognized by Feydeau's public, for they often parallel the fears, anxieties, and frustrations that change the way the world is perceived. While it represents no "ideal of the useful or the rational," and exists for no purpose greater than or beyond itself, Feydeau's theatre is not created purely of imagination, but is based on a rather sophisticated form of "imitation."

The evaluation of Feydeau's work must rest finally

on the fact that within the context of its determined frivolity, it represents a highly developed art, which, while avoiding serious ends, is nevertheless deeply relevant to an essential part of our human nature. His excellence lies in his ability to choreograph his ordinary characters in a dance of mathematical precision, and to set emotions and motivations worthy of the naturalists into patterns that seem as delightfully artificial as a Gilbert and Sullivan patter song. He did not set out to satirize the world in which he lived, to point out its foibles, but that may have been an indirect result of his efforts. He simply took advantage of what his age provided, of the outlandish foreigners who visited Paris, of the sensational cocottes, and above all of a society whose obsession with appearances and sexual scandal was ideal material for his sophisticated and highly civilized farce.

It is more difficult to say what the study of Feydeau reveals about the nature of farce in general. Feydeau represents a highly developed stage of the art and shows some of the complexity of which it is capable. But despite the complexity that can be seen beneath the surface, there is justification for the view that farce is simple if simplicity is understood to mean a lack of intellectual pretension. Although perpetually scorned by those who would confine our vision to loftier things, traditional farce has maintained its popularity by unashamedly exploiting our most

basic and primitive emotions. It is not afraid to use simple and universal images to reach us at this most elemental of levels, where our responses are strong, automatic, and virtually instinctive. Pratfalls and sudden blows, frantic chases, and lost trousers are all images to which we react almost without the intervention of thought. They are among the most direct and universal symbols of violence, speed, and humiliation. Farce is not limited to such things, but because it is alone in its acceptance of them, they have become its most distinctive and obvious feature. They are basic to farce not because farce is crude and physical, but because it is shameless. It freely accepts all that we dislike, fear, and censor in ourselves. It includes our elementary responses to violence and sex, our basic bodily needs and functions, although it is capable of going well beyond them. It allows us to acknowledge the baser side of ourselves, our laws, and our institutions, and lets us admit how much lower than the angels we really are.

For the Love of Foolish Things

Farce can do this because it is irresponsible. It would be tempting to say, in defense of farce, that it presents a closer and franker look at ourselves under a cloak of irresponsibility, but that would not be quite accurate. The irresponsibility of farce is not a "cloak," an external covering that serves to conceal its true face. Irresponsibility

is at the heart of farce, and it often conceals nothing more penetrating than playful silliness. Like the traditional court fool, farce is granted license to say what it pleases, not because it voices criticisms in a clever or amusing way, but because it is foolish and need never be taken seriously. Farce invites us to join in the foolishness, to expose, even to celebrate, our own folly. It resists all efforts at reform because to make it responsible would be to change its essential nature. Defiantly incorrigible, it perversely offers little assistance to those who would defend it. The defense of farce, like the defense of folly, can never be wholly serious. Erasmus, the most famous defender of folly, is still an excellent guide for those who would accept folly even while maintaining their own claims to seriousness. Although there is a great deal of ironic criticism in The Praise of Folly, Erasmus is not really a crusader against folly. He exploits the ambiguities inherent in the concept of folly, and, in the main, is "inspired by a wise humor that accepts folly as a necessary part of life."¹

It is appropriate that Erasmus wrote The Praise of Folly during a visit to England, because the English have a long tradition of viewing folly and seriousness as part of an

¹Willard Farnham, "The Medieval Comic Spirit in the English Renaissance," in Joseph Quincy Adams Memorial Studies, ed. James G. McManaway, Giles E. Dawson, and Edwin E. Willoughby (Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1948), p. 429.

integrated whole. It is an attitude that can be seen in the combination of farcical and serious elements in the medieval cycle plays, in the plays of Shakespeare, and even in the fond tolerance that the English have always had for their eccentrics. Feydeau belongs to a different tradition, one that by segregating folly from the serious pursuits of life has allowed it the full and unhampered development that produced *Pathelin*, *Pantagruel*, and *La Môme Crevette*. The French decorum, their isolation of the foolish from the serious, has left them uneasy in the presence of their own rich comic inheritance. Trying to understand why his countrymen failed to fully appreciate Feydeau's talent, Nozière observed that the French have always been suspicious of those who make them laugh. "Ils adorent la gaiété, mais ils ne l'estiment pas."¹ They fear that to value comics would imply taking them seriously, and the French are never so comfortable as the English with the notion that the love of foolish things is compatible with, even necessary to, a serious life. Yet the French segregation of the important from the trivial is more apparent than real. It is a matter of aesthetics and literature, not of life; a question of treatment rather than subject matter. If the French are disinclined to see life as simultaneously foolish and serious, they acknowledge the pervasiveness of folly in the unequalled thoroughness, scope, and richness of

¹Fernand Weyl [Nozière], "Georges Feydeau," p. 1.

their greatest comic writers, who are allowed to range unhampered through every aspect of life. Although France could have never produced a Shakespeare, only she could have given birth to Rabelais. Like Rabelais, Feydeau also represents something unique to the French comic genius. The differences between the two, although vast, are in part a consequence of the ages in which they lived. Each encompassed the experience of his epoch in a world limited to folly and laughter. Each has frustrated serious admirers who recognize genius but cannot comprehend the refusal to be serious. Like the theorists who strive to enlist laughter in the service of reason, these sober critics sense wisdom and philosophy in the midst of the frivolity and conclude that there must also be order and reason, if it could only be found. But the wisdom of laughter is that same wise humor of Erasmus, and its philosophy teaches one only to tolerate a world so often unreasonable and incomprehensible. The point is not that we should laugh at the folly of others, nor even that we should laugh at ourselves, but just that we should laugh.

APPENDIX A

ON PERFORMING FEYDEAU

In the preceding discussion of Feydeau and the nature of farce there has been little mention made of individual productions or the contribution of actors, directors, and designers to the final theatrical event. This might seem a surprising lack in view of the acknowledged theatrical and visual nature of farce. Had the discussion centered on the type of farce that is organized around the personality of the clown, such an omission, if possible, would have been inexcusable. But one can conduct a comprehensive discussion of Feydeau's plays primarily on the basis of the texts because they are remarkably detailed, and written so as to permit any intelligent reader, acquainted with the theatre and accustomed to reading plays, easily to imagine the effect intended by the author. The avoidance of the elements of production was made necessary, or at least highly desirable, by the ephemeral nature of the performing arts. The information that may be gleaned about past performances is sketchy at best. When one reads that a given actor was "very natural" or that a certain actress was "charming and vivacious," one probably learns little that could not have been guessed by reading the text. More importantly, the text can be studied and

reexamined; the comments that any critic offers may be questioned or refuted on the basis of evidence to which all have access. The observations of the critic of a performance, once the performance is no more, must be accepted or rejected on little better evidence than the observer's word. For these reasons it was thought wise to keep the discussion of performance separate, even though it is too important a matter to ignore altogether.

One reason it may be assumed that the texts of Feydeau's plays closely reflect their actual performances is that Feydeau, like many vaudevillistes, was nearly always his own metteur en scene. It was a task he enjoyed. He was fascinated with the mechanics of theatrical production and took great pains over the smallest of details. The ample stage directions and notes in his published plays are aimed less at the general reader than at potential producers, and in his notes he attempts to anticipate all major problems of production. In addition to advice to actors and detailed instructions on how to achieve certain special effects, he provided contingency plans in the event that a desired effect failed to work or the theatre was not equipped to produce it properly. He was fond of stage tricks, but was well aware of the effect they had on an audience. In Les Fiancés de Loches he suggests that the bathtubs in the third act be equipped with practical faucets and wrote a section of dialogue which was to be eliminated if real running water could

not be provided. The dialogue, he noted, "n'a été écrite que pour occuper le temps pendant lequel le public, distrait par l'effet de l'eau, ne peut prêter l'oreille à ce qui se dit."¹

Feydeau enjoyed all aspects of production, not just the gimmicks and tricks. Louis Verneuil relates how Feydeau came to his rescue during the staging of Verneuil's first play. The young writer's play was being offered as a curtain raiser, but the director was busy with the main piece and had left Verneuil on his own. Feydeau, one of whose plays was also on the bill, chanced to come into the theatre, noticed his colleague's inexperience, and immediately took over the staging. By the time of the opening he had transformed the play, discovering things in it of which its author was unaware. Verneuil adds admiringly that "après Victorien Sardou, Georges Feydeau fut certainement l'auteur qui savait le mieux mettre ses pièces en scène."² If we are to believe Feydeau's own protestations of laziness and distaste for writing, he was more enthusiastic about staging his plays than about preparing the manuscripts. Those who had never seen him in rehearsal, wrote Robert Dieudonné, "ignorent tout d'un homme que le théâtre transformait; cet indolent animait ses interprètes d'une vie intense, ce sceptique apportait, à l'heure

¹Vol. 7, act 3, sc. 3, p. 72.

²Louis Verneuil, Rideau à neuf heures (New York: Editions de la Maison Française, 1944), p. 92.

de la réalisation, un souci de perfection inattendu."¹

Feydeau was intensely concerned with the production of his plays, but what did he demand of his performers, and what sort of style did he develop? These are much more difficult questions to answer. It is probable that his own style changed in keeping with theatrical fashion, and that he had the flexibility, necessary to all intelligent directors, to utilize the talents of his actors rather than to impose on them an interpretation for which they were not suited. Armande Cassive, the creator of the role of La M^ome Crevette and thereafter Feydeau's favorite actress, described her reluctance to play the role of Léontine in Monsieur chasse!, which Berthe Cerny had originated eighteen years earlier. She had protested to Feydeau that her style was much different from that of Cerny, exclaiming:

Voyons . . . je ne pourrai jamais être calme comme elle."

"Evidemment, sourit mon auteur, mais Cerny ne pourrait pas se remuer comme vous..."

Il paraît qu'il faut se remuer beaucoup en l'an de grâce 1911. C'est ce que se dit Feydeau et il doit avoir raison. Il y a dix-huit ans, quand on a donné pour la première fois Monsieur chasse, on raffolait des acteurs au comique lent. Raimond était un comique lent, Saint-Germain était un comique lent. Mme Cerny, en pareille compagnie, avait un jeu posé. Aujourd'hui . . . il faut jouer une pièce, serait-elle intitulée comédie, dans un mouvement endiablé.²

Feydeau himself may have been partly responsible for the popularity of that "mouvement endiablé"; it is in any

¹Quoted by Lorcey, Georges Feydeau, p. 177.

²Quoted by Lorcey, Georges Feydeau, p. 212.

case a characteristic for which his productions were noted. Even more than his concern with le mouvement (very roughly the equivalent of "pacing," but applicable to plot as well as to staging), Feydeau was known for his attention to detail and his demands for precision. Hervé Lauwick quotes Feydeau as saying, "Je tiens beaucoup . . . aux intentions à leur expression exacte, et au ton de la moindre remarque. C'est pourquoi j'ai noté musicalement tous les oh et les ah . . ." ¹ The last statement, of course, is an exaggeration, but in one instance it was literally true. Not knowing how else to indicate the exact intonation he wanted for an important exchange, he wrote it out on a musical staff. ² His emphasis on precision is echoed by Peter Glenville, writing about the performance of Hotel Paradiso: "However wildly pandemonium may reign in the play, the actors need the control and exactitude of tumblers and tightrope dancers. . . . This precision is a far cry indeed from the inner probings of the actor of the Stanislavski school." ³

There is much more to playing farce than just precision and energetic pacing (as many amateurs have discovered, much

¹"Georges Feydeau, distrait, souriant et mélancolique," in D'Alphonse Allais à Sacha Guitry (Paris: Plon, 1963), pp. 90-91.

²Vol. 1, Occupe-toi d'Amélie, act 3, 1st tableau, sc. 7, p. 134.

³"Feydeau: Father of Pure Farce," Theatre Arts, April 1957, p. 87.

to their chagrin). Unfortunately, Feydeau did not leave a complete analysis of the technique of presenting his plays, but a number of observers have made interesting and helpful comments since his time. Surprisingly perhaps, in view of Glenville's remark about the "Stanislavski school," Stanislavski himself was quite perceptive on the subject of the vaudeville. According to Gorchakov, Stanislavski said that a special "world of feelings" was involved in this particular type of acting.

I intentionally use the word 'world,' because vaudeville is a world of its own, inhabited by creatures whom one does not meet in comedy, drama, or tragedy. There is an accepted notion that vaudeville is a very special kind of symbolic form, and that, as a result, you should not be guided by the laws of logic and psychology in directing vaudeville. The world of vaudeville is a perfectly realistic one but the most unusual incidents occur in it every step of the way. The life in vaudeville flows according to all laws of logic and psychology, but it is constantly interrupted by the unexpected. Characters in vaudeville are ordinary and realistic. One should not consider them strange creatures. On the contrary, they are most ordinary people. Their only strangeness is their absolute credulity about everything.¹

Stanislavski was not referring to Feydeau, yet his remarks apply to the world Feydeau created: a special world which has its own laws and probabilities, inhabited by characters who, despite being quite ordinary and realistic, are disposed to automatically accept appearances as reality. Most important is his observation that the actors should never regard the

¹Nikolai M. Gorchakov, Stanislavski Directs, trans. Miriam Golding (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1954), pp. 204-05.

characters they are playing as "strange," no matter how extraordinary the situations in which they find themselves, or how bizarre their behavior may seem. This cardinal rule of playing any form of comedy is almost second nature to the gifted comedian, but is often forgotten by the amateur, with inevitably disastrous results. Peter Glenville affirms the rule when he says that "the outrageousness of the characters in the play [Hotel Paradiso] requires the utmost sincerity in the playing."¹ And Cassive wrote of the art of playing vaudeville:

La sobriété des gestes est indispensable. Le vaudeville ne demande pas qu'on s'agite autant qu'on le croit. L'essentiel est qu'on reste dans la vérité et qu'on s'approche le plus possible de la vie. . . .

Je crois qu'il faut jouer avec une grande sincérité et que le public ne sente pas le travail du rôle. Pour ma part, j'obtiens de gros effets en disant des énormités avec une apparence naïve. L'effet d'inconscience apparente est un effet très sûr. Je me garde soigneusement pourtant de tout effet grossier. La trivialité, le ridicule du costume, les maquillages outrés: ce sont des procédés que je m'en voudrais d'employer et qui, à mon avis, sont inutiles.²

Naïveté may seem a surprising quality to find in the actress who became famous as Amélie and La Môme Crevette, but it corresponds exactly to the credulity mentioned by Stanislavski. Both are instances of farcical oblivion, that blindness to enormities which would ordinarily evoke either skepticism or embarrassment. This oblivion is what makes

¹"Feydeau: Father of Pure Farce," p. 87.

²Quoted by Lorcey, Georges Feydeau, pp. 253-54.

sincerity especially important in playing farce. If the actress appears to be commenting on, or in any way emphasizing, the enormity, the effect is lost. The more outrageous the situation or behavior, and the greater the discrepancy between it and the performer's reaction, the more important it is that the actor "believe" in his role.

The need for "belief" in farce goes well beyond specific reactions to individual situations. It extends to all those involved in the production, including those who never appear on stage. It creates a particular problem for contemporary stagings of Feydeau, produced at a cultural remove from the climate in which the plays were written. The original production of Look After Lulu, Noël Coward's adaptation of Occupe-toi d'Amélie, provided an example of the major hazard Feydeau faces in the hands of modern directors. The critics were generally unfavorable, but Kenneth Tynan's remarks were particularly perceptive. He complained that Cyril Ritchard's direction and Cecil Beaton's costumes seemed based on the assumption that the play itself "is unactable, and must therefore be parodied. . . . We are encouraged to laugh not so much at the piece itself as at the period in which it was thought funny."¹ Compare Jacques Charon's comment on his successful production of A Flea in Her Ear for the National Theatre: "The aim . . . is to be natural within

¹"Putting on the Style," New Yorker, 14 March 1959, p. 80.

the style; not to turn the style itself into a joke."¹

Eric Bentley is another who stresses the importance of a sense of reality in the production of farce. In his essay on farce psychology he makes it clear that neglect of the reality of farce is often both more hurtful and obvious in the visual aspects of production (recall Cassive's advice against using ridiculous costumes and outrageous make-up). He makes his point by contrasting photographs of modern productions of Labiche (elegant but unreal) with a drawing made of the first production of An Italian Straw Hat. In the drawing

the clothes are clothes--a little drab, perhaps, as is proper to the period and the milieu, yet, with their high collars, their bulgy trousers, their bulbous bodices, full of drama. Here the associations would not be operetta, period charm, "stylization," but realistic plays, immediacy, forthrightness.²

The point could be made perhaps even more strongly with photographs of Feydeau's plays then and now.³ It could reasonably be argued that praising the original productions of Feydeau's plays for their commonplace realism is a clear case of faute de mieux. There were then few alternatives to realistic scenery in the staging of contemporary plays. But such an

¹Quoted by Michael Billington, "A Flea in Her Ear," The Listener, 3 March 1966, p. 315.

²"The Psychology of Farce," p. xviii.

³See the photographs reproduced in the Théâtre complet, esp. vol. 3, La Main passe!, pp. 64, 80. These could be compared to photographs of a 1965 production of La Dame de chez Maxim in Arlette Shenkan, Georges Feydeau (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1972), p. 97.

objection would miss the point. The problem is that modern scenic and costume designers, faced with the receding reality of older comedies and farces, almost inevitably use their art to increase the cultural gap, emphasizing fantasy and unreality, rather than helping to give these plays a sense of immediacy.

It is, however, much easier to point out the common mistakes and pitfalls of producing farce than it is to prescribe a reliably correct formula. The best that can be done is to offer a few basic and somewhat obvious guidelines. It is obvious that the producer of Feydeau should emulate the contrapuntal techniques of the writer; he should balance the chaos of the situations with precision in his actors, match outrageousness and lunacy with sincerity and sobriety, and above all strive to weld a stark sense of felt reality onto all of the extravagant fantasy. The vaudeville, as Feydeau said simply, should be played like a tragedy.¹ It should also be added that the director and actors of farce must not ignore what Bentley calls the "inner experience," the intense reservoir of fundamental emotions from which farce derives so much of its force. But here a note of caution is needed. This is the area that demands the greatest skill and delicacy. Handling powerful emotions is like working with high explosives. Great skill is required to direct the

¹Michel Perrin, "Feydeau, l'impitoyable," La Revue de Paris, July 1963, p. 91.

explosive force into its proper channel--laughter--rather than allowing it to degenerate into unpleasant vulgarity and bad taste. It was this sort of mistake that was obviously feared by one critic of a Feydeau play in English when he noted with relief that the director had "managed to persuade an English cast to present embarrassing situations instead of identifying with embarrassed characters,"¹ Skillful use of the indispensable tool of farcical oblivion is required to control, but not to defuse, the response to a charged situation. The importance of that magical oblivion might prompt one to hazard a final, somewhat riskier, suggestion. It is probable that the difference between the successful actor of Feydeau's kind of farce and the actor in other forms of drama lies less in what is added in performing Feydeau than in what is taken away. The special key to Feydeau's characterization, the thing that sets his people apart from the most ordinary run of humanity, lies in that curious blindness to emotional pain and moral guilt. It is this lack, this deficiency, that paradoxically permits these limited and ordinary creatures to convey the feeling of freedom and abandon that impelled one observer to exclaim: "L'aimable privilege d'être fou avec cette exagération!"²

¹"Buoyant French Farce," Times (London), 11 January 1966, p. 12.

²Jean Morgan, "Georges Feydeau et Francis de Croisset," Le Gaulois (Paris), 28 October 1909, p. 1.

Such a meager list of rules and suggestions will never guarantee a successful performance. Even if the list were expanded, the director must ultimately put his trust in the talents of the performers. Puzzling over what he felt to be the erratic nature of farce, Kierkegaard concluded that while the supporting players in farce achieve their effect "by means of that abstract category, 'the general,'" success depends upon two or three geniuses who abandon themselves confidently to the spirit of laughter.¹ This seems a very apt description of farce in the style of the Marx Brothers, but Feydeau too had a core of players on whose talent he relied. There were three in particular--Cassive, Germain, and his good friend Marcel Simon--whose work may well have given him almost as much inspiration as his writing gave to them. One should never underestimate the importance of a gifted clown in the performance of farce, even farce as disciplined as that of Feydeau. But Kierkegaard's assessment needs to be amended in one important respect. A dancer may be originally inspired by the same vision of effortless grace that is finally communicated to the audience, but the means by which the appearance of light, graceful beauty is achieved in performance involves the straining of disciplined muscles to their limit. Just so the inspired farceur cannot obtain the necessary effect of effortless spontaneity by simply abandoning himself to the spirit of laughter. He conveys

¹Søren Kierkegaard, "Farce is Far More Serious," p. 6.

that spirit to his public through a medium that is as complex, varied, and exacting as any in art.

APPENDIX B

FEYDEAU AND THE FRENCH THEATRE: A CHRONOLOGY

Georges Feydeau was born on December 8, 1862, and died, June 5, 1921. Much of the thirty-nine year period from the production of his first play to his death was marked by intense theatrical activity in France. It was the time of Antoine and the Théâtre Libre, and of Lugné-Poë and the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, a time of experimentation and apparent revitalization in French theatre. The decade of the 1870's had been one of transition. Other than Emile Zola (1840-1902), no major playwrights had appeared to challenge the dominance of Second Empire "Realists" like Alexandre Dumas fils (1824-95) and Emile Augier (1820-89). But between the production of Henry Becque's (1837-99) Les Corbeaux in 1882 and the turn of the century, many young playwrights had emerged, both on the Boulevard and in the experimental houses, to give the theatre a sense of renewed life and innovation. Yet few of those writers are remembered today. Most of them were realists or naturalists who attempted to portray life more honestly than had been done before, but, with few exceptions, the playwrights who are read today did not produce realistic dramas. The best known play of the period is Edmond Rostand's (1868-1918) heroic comedy Cyrano de Bergerac.

Alfred Jarry (1873-1907) and Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949) anticipated the nonrealistic trends of the twentieth century. Paul Claudel became a major figure in modern French drama, but his work went unrecognized during his most creative period. Of the many playwrights who were first produced by Antoine, only Georges Courteline (1858-1929) survives. Others who are still read and performed, at least in France, were thought inconsequential by their contemporaries: Jules Renard (1864-1910), Tristan Bernard (1866-1947), and, of course, Georges Feydeau.

The principal themes dealt with by the realistic playwrights of the time were those of Feydeau: love triangles, adultery, and divorce. The French playwrights at the turn of the century, as Maurice Coindreau has observed, seemed obsessed by the question of divorce.¹ Earlier authors had used the stage to argue for the establishment of a divorce law (e.g., in Dumas's La Femme de Claude [1873] and Augier's Mme Cavelet [1876]), but the issue did not die when the law became a reality in 1883. Paul Hervieu (1857-1915), whose thesis plays were in the tradition of Dumas' films, raised the question of adultery and divorce in most of his works. His Les Paroles restent is about the lasting effects of scandal. In Les Tenailles, a couple finds their legal bond is too strong to break despite the divorce law, and La Loi de

¹Maurice Edgar Coindreau, La Farce est jouée: Vingt-cinq ans de théâtre français: 1900-1925 (New York: Editions de la Maison Française, 1942), p. 24.

de l'homme concerns the double standard of sexual morality. Many of his plays seem to show that divorce is an inadequate answer to adultery. In Connais-toi, two men forgive rather than divorce their wives, despite their conviction that such a choice reveals moral weakness, and in L'Enigme, a husband decides that forcing his faithless wife to continue living with him will be a more severe punishment than killing her.

Less didactic than Hervieu, Georges de Porto-Riche (1849-1930) pictured adultery as the consequence of the different sexual natures of men and women. While men cannot be satisfied with one woman, women are fiercely possessive and become unfaithful in their search for a man whom they need not share. Maurice Donnay (1859-1945) followed the lead of Porto-Riche in creating plays of strong sexual passion. His Amants involves a triangle of a woman and her two lovers in which money wins out over love, and L'Autre danger is based on a rivalry between mother and daughter for the same man. Jules Lemaître's (1853-1914) best-known play, Le Pardon, ends when both husband and wife agree to forgive the other's infidelities. Poliche and Le Scandale by Henri Bataille (1872-1922) are also plays of adultery. In Renard's Le Pain de ménage, two people are tempted by adultery, but finally reject it. The conflict between sexual passion and the bonds of marriage was not monopolized by the realists. Maeterlinck exploited the theme in both Pélléas and Mélisande and Monna Vanna, in each of which a woman is torn between a lover and

her loyalty to a passionless marriage. Other plays took up the theme of Feydeau's Un Fil à la patte and Les Pavés de l'ours: a man leaving his mistress to gain respectability and money. In Bataille's La Femme nue, as well as in La Veine by Alfred Capus (1858-1922), a man becomes successful with the help of his mistress, then leaves her when he finds she is an embarrassment to his newly-acquired respectability.

Renard's Le Plaisir de rompre is a scene of parting in which a man leaves his mistress for an advantageous marriage.

Some writers combined sex with other themes, particularly avarice. In Le Prince d'Aurec by Henri Lavedan (1859-1940), the portrait of a cynical, dissolute prince is complicated by the attempts of a Jewish banker to seduce the aristocrat's wife. In Capus's Brignol et sa fille, an opportunistic father seeks financial gain by exploiting a young man's lust for his daughter. Henry Bernstein's (1876-1953) Le Voleur is about a woman whose theft of a large sum of money causes her to be suspected of adultery when an admirer tries to protect her. In Lavedan's Le Duel, the quarrel of two brothers over a woman develops into a debate between science and religion. The writers least concerned with sexual mores and passions were François de Curel (1854-1902) and Eugène Brieux (1858-1932). Curel dealt with the role of the aristocracy in modern bourgeois society in Les Fossiles and Le Repas du lion. He broached a number of other subjects, including atheism and the ethics of science in La Nouvelle idol

and the effects of guilt and self-punishment in L'Envers d'une sainte. Brieux, more than any other French playwright, was interested in the causes of social ills rather than their effects. In Les Trois filles de M. Dupont, he blames the system of dowry marriages for producing the unhappy bonds whose consequences preoccupied other writers. Some of the many questions he examined were the effects of divorce on children (Le Berceau), syphilis (L'Avariés), and abortion and birth control (Maternité).

The following chronology of the decades from 1880 to 1920 corresponds roughly to the span of Feydeau's career. It lists the premieres of all of Feydeau's plays as well as the important revivals in his lifetime. The list of important events in the French theatre during that time is selective, intended only to illustrate the background against which Feydeau was working. Unless otherwise noted, plays are listed under the date of their first presentation in France. The symbol "R" stands for revival; "NP" means "never published"; and "UF" designates those plays left unfinished at Feydeau's death.

FeydeauFrench Theatre1880

Zola, "Le Naturalisme
au théâtre"

6 Dec. Sardou & Najac, Divorçons!

FeydeauFrench Theatre188125 Apr. Pailleron, Le Monde où l'on s'ennui18821 June, Par la fenêtre14 Sept. Becque, Les Corbeaux
11 Dec. Sardou, Fédora188328 Jan. Amour et piano
1 June, Gibier de potence
5 July, Par la fenêtre (R)188423 Dec. Gibier de potence
(R)26 Dec. Sardou, Théodora188520 Feb. Gibier de potence
(R)19 Jan. Dumas fils, Denise
7 Feb. Becque, La Parisienne188629 Mar. Fiancés en herb
17 Dec. Tailleur pour
dames188723 Dec. La Lycéenne17 Jan. Dumas fils, Francillon
Mar. Antoine founds Théâtre
Libre
24 Nov. Sardou, La Tosca188810 Feb. Tolstoy, The Power of
Darkness (Théâtre Libre)
3 Mar. Bisson & Mars, Les Sur-
prises du divorce

Feydeau

- 13 Apr. Un Bain de ménage
 19 Sept. Chat en poche
 27 Sept. Les Fiancés de
Loches

1889

- 12 Jan. L'Affaire Edouard

1890

- 10 Mar. C'est une femme
du monde
 10 Mar. Le Mariage de
Barillon
 25 Apr. Mademoiselle
Nounou (NP)

- 30 May, Ibsen, Ghosts (Théâtre
 Libre)

1891

- 25 Apr. Porto-Riche, Amoureuse
 21 May, Maeterlinck, L'Intruse

1892

- 23 Apr. Monsieur chasse!

- 25 Jan. Curel, L'Envers d'une
sainte

- 5 Nov. Champagnol
malgré lui

- 1 June, Lavedan, Le Prince
d'Aurec

- 30 Nov. Le Système
Ribadier

- 17 Nov. Hervieu, Les Paroles
restent

- 29 Nov. Curel, Les Fossiles

1893

- 27 Apr. Courteline, Boubouroche
 17 May, Lugné-Poë opens Théâtre
 de l'Oeuvre
 22 May, Maeterlinck, Pélléas et
Mélisande
 27 Oct. Sardou & Moreau, Madame
Sans-Gêne

French Theatre

Claudé, Tête d'or
 (date written)

FeydeauFrench Theatre1894

- 9 Jan. Un Fil à la patte
 11 Feb. Notre futur
 24 Feb. Le Ruban
- 2 May, Champignol
malgré lui (R)
- 24 Nov. Monsieur chasse!
 (R)
- 5 Dec. L'Hôtel du Libre-
Echange

- 26 Feb. Villiers de l'Isle-Adam,
Axél
- 23 Nov. Capus, Brignol et sa
filie

1895

- 11 Feb. Lemaître, Le Pardon
 28 Sept. Hervieu, Les Tenailles
 5 Nov. Donnay, Amants

1896

- 8 Feb. Le Dindon
 26 Sept. Les Pavés de
l'ours

- 10 Dec. Jarry, Ubu roi

1897

- 29 Mar. Séance de nuit
 29 Apr. Dormez, je le
veux!
 10 May, Le Dindon (R)

- 6 Feb. Richepin, Le Chemineau
 15 Feb. Hervieu, La Loi de
l'homme
 16 Mar. Renard, Le Plaisir de
rompre

- Sept. Antoine opens Théâtre
 Antoine
- 8 Oct. Brioux, Les Trois filles
de M. Dupont
- 26 Nov. Curel, Le Repas du lion
 28 Dec. Rostand, Cyrano de
Bergerac
- 30 Dec. Porto-Riche, Le Passé

Feydeau1898

11 May, La Bulle d'amour
(ballet scenario,
NP)

1899

17 Jan. La Dame de chez
Maxim

1 Apr. Un Fil à la
patte (R)

5 Dec. L'Hôtel du Libre-
Echange (R)

11 Dec. La Dame de chez
Maxim (R)

1900

8 May, Champignol
malgré lui (R)

26 July, Le Dindon (R)

14 Nov. Séance de nuit (R)

14 Nov. Tailleur pour
dames (R)

1901French Theatre

16 Mar. Renard, Le Pain de
ménage

19 Dec. Brieux, Le Berceau

28 Feb. Bernard, L'Anglais tel
qu'on le parle

11 Mar. Curel, La Nouvelle idol

16 Dec. Courteline, Le Commis-
saire est bon enfant

2 Mar. Renard, Poil de carotte

15 Mar. Rostand, L'Aiglon

15 Mar. Brieux, La Robe rouge

12 Dec. Courteline, L'Article
330

2 Apr. Capus, La Veine

17 Apr. Hervieu, La Course du
flambeau

5 Nov. Hervieu, L'Enigme

FeydeauFrench Theatre1902

23 Feb. Le Billet de
Josephine (NP)
3 Apr. Dormez, je le
veux! (R)

17 May, Maeterlinck, Monna Vanna

30 Aug. Un Fil à la
patte (R)
3 Dec. La Duchesse des
Folies-Bergère

22 Dec. Donnay, L'Autre danger1903

2 Apr. L'Hôtel du Libre-
Echange (R)

20 Apr. Mirbeau, Les Affaires
sont les affaires25 Nov. Courteline, La Paix
chez soi19041 Mar. La Main passe!9 Dec. Brioux, Maternité1905

1 May, L'Age d'or
5 June, Champignol
malgré lui (R)

Claudé, Partage de
midi (date written)
22 Feb. Brioux, Les Avariés
(perf. at Liège in 1902)
17 Apr. Lavedan, Le Duel

1906

1 Mar. Le Bourgeon
21 Mar. La Dame de chez
Maxim (R)
11 May, L'Hôtel du Libre-
Echange (R)
27 June, Un Fil à la
patte (R)

FeydeauFrench Theatre

7 Dec. Bernstein, Le Voleur
 10 Dec. Bataille, Poliche

1907.

2 Mar. La Puce à l'oreille

17 Oct. Bernard, Monsieur
Codomat

1908

15 Mar. Occupe-toi
d'Amélie

27 Feb. Bataille, La femme nue

15 Nov. Feu la mère de
Madame

7 Apr. Flers & Caillayot, Le
Roi

1909

29 Oct. Le Circuit

29 Mar. Hervieu, Connais-toi
 30 Mar. Bataille, Le Scandale

1910

Cent millions qui
tombent (date writ-
ten, UF)

28 Jan. Feu la mère de
Madame (R)

12 Apr. On purge Bébé!

27 June, La Dame de chez
Maxim (R)

1911

20 Jan. Monsieur chasse! (R)

29 Apr. Champagnol
malgré lui (R)

10 May, Un Fil à la
patte (R)

10 May, Feu la mère de
Madame (R)

12 Oct. Bernard, Le Petit café

23 Oct. Monsieur chasse! (R)

Feydeau

- 25 Nov. "Mais n'te promène
donc pas toute nue!"
9 Dec. Léonie est en
avance

1912

- 26 Apr. On purge Bébé! (R)
17 June, Le Dindon (R)
8 Oct. Séance de nuit (R)

20 Dec. Claudel, L'Annonce faite
à Marie

1913

- Feb. On va faire la
cocotte (date
written, UF)
30 May, Le Bourgeon (R)
1 June, La Dame de chez
Maxim (R)
15 July, Un Fil à la
patte (R)
15 July, "Mais n'te pro-
mène donc pas
toute nue!" (R)

Oct. Copeau opens Théâtre
du Vieux Colombier

1914

- 17 Feb. Je ne trompe pas
mon mari

5 June, Claudel, L'Otage
July, Theatres closed (until
Mar. 1915)

1915

- 8 May, Un Fil à la
patte (R)
18 June, Monsieur chasse! (R)
10 Oct. Séance de nuit (R)
19 Nov. La Puce à l'oreille
(R)

8 Apr. Guitry, La Jalousie

FeyueauFrench Theatre1916

- 14 Mar. Le Dindon (R)
 16 Apr. La Dame de chez Maxim (R)
 30 May, L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange (R)
 14 June, Hortense a dit: "Je m'en fous!"
 9 Sept. Un Fil à la patte (R)
 26 Oct. La Dame de chez Maxim (R)
 9 Dec. Je ne trompe pas mon mari (R)

1917

- 19 Feb. Champignol malgré lui (R)
 30 Oct. Occupe-toi d'Amélie (R)
 24 June, Claudel, L'Ours et la lune (date written)
 24 June, Apollinaire, Les Mamelles de Tirésias
 9 Nov. Bataille, L'Amazone

1919

- 17 Jan. Champignol malgré lui (R)
 16 Apr. La Dame de chez Maxim (R)
 15 Apr. Bataille, Les Soeurs d'amour
 2 Dec. Lenormand, Le Temps est un songe
 22 Dec. Curel, L'Ame en folie

1920

- 16 Apr. "Mais n'te promène donc pas toute nue!" (R)
 28 May, L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange (R)
 2 Feb. Cocteau, Le Boeuf sur le toit
 22 May, Lenormand, Ratés

Feydeau

- 13 Aug. Champignol
malgré lui (R)
27 Aug. L'Hôtel du Libre-
Echange (R)
25 Nov. La Dame de chez
Maxim (R)

French Theatre

- 20 Dec. Crommelynck, Le Cocu
magnifique

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Théâtre complet. 9 Vols. Paris: Editions du Béliet, 1948-56.

All of Feydeau's published plays are included in his Théâtre complet. For the convenience of the reader, they are listed alphabetically below:

Affaire Edouard, L'. Comédie-vaudeville in 3 acts. With Maurice Desvallières. Vol. 1.

Age d'or, L'. Musical comedy in 3 acts and 9 tableaux, With Maurice Desvallières. Vol. 9.

Amour et piano. Comedy in 1 act. Vol. 1.

Bain de menage, Un. Vaudeville in 1 act. Vol. 7.

Bourgeon, Le. Comedy in 3 acts. Vol. 9.

Cent millions qui tombent. Play in 3 acts. Vol. 6.

C'est une femme du monde. Comedy in 1 act, With Maurice Desvallières. Vol. 4.

Champignol malgré lui. Play in 3 acts. With Maurice Desvallières. Vol. 6.

Chat en poche. Vaudeville in 3 acts. Vol. 2.

Circuit, Le. Comedy in 3 acts and 4 tableaux, With Francis de Croisset. Vol. 5.

Dame de chez Maxim, La. Play in 3 acts. Vol. 7.

Dindon, Le. Play in 3 acts. Vol. 2.

Dormez, je le veux! Vaudeville in 1 act. Vol. 3.

Duchesse des Folies-Bergère, La. Play in 5 acts. Vol. 8.

Feu la mère de Madame. Play in 1 act. Vol. 7.

Fiancés de Loches, Les. Vaudeville in 3 acts. With Maurice Desvallières. Vol. 7.

Fiancés en herbe. Comédie enfantine in 1 act. Vol. 1.

Fil à la patte, Un. Comedy in 3 acts. Vol. 6.

Gibier de potence. Comédie-bouffe in 1 act. Vol. 6.

Hortense a dit: "Je m'en fous!" Play in 1 act. Vol. 1.

Hôtel du Libre-Echange, L'. Play in 3 acts, With Maurice Desvallières. Vol. 4.

Je ne trompe pas mon mari. Comedy in 3 acts. With René Peter. Vol. 3.

Léonie est en avance, or Le Mal joli. Play in 1 act. Vol. 4.

Lycéenne, La. Vaudeville-opérette in 3 acts. Vol. 8.

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"Mais n'te promène donc pas toute nue!" Comedy in 1 act. Vol. 8.

Mariage de Barillon, Le. Vaudeville in 3 acts. With Maurice Desvallières. Vol. 5.

Monsieur chasse! Comedy in 3 acts. Vol. 5.

Notre futur. Play in 1 act. Vol. 6.

Occupe-toi d'Amélie. Play in 3 acts and 4 tableaux. Vol. 1.

On purge Bébé! Play in 1 act. Vol. 3.

On va faire la cocotte. Play in 2 acts. Vol. 7.

Par la fenêtre. Play in 1 act. Vol. 4.

Pavés de l'ours, Les. Comedy in 1 act. Vol. 2.

Puce à l'oreille, La. Play in 3 acts. Vol. 4.

Ruban, Le. Comedy in 3 acts. With Maurice Desvallières. Vol. 8.

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