

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Recruiting Officer (1706)

George Farquhar (1677-1707)

OVERVIEW

George Farquhar was an Irish dramatist, born in Derry, son of a middle class clergyman, who was found in early youth to be highly gifted with language and poetry. At age 17 he entered Trinity College, Dublin—he had been a restless student, inclined from early on toward acting—and though it was hoped that he would follow in his father's footsteps, he found himself rather drawn toward acting. (The following play will help further to explain that predilection.) For a while he took roles on the Dublin stage, where he was popular, thanks in part to the patronage of the well known Irish actor, Robert Wilks. Shortly after, Farquhar left for England, where in 1698 his first comedy, *Love in a Bottle*, was produced, successfully. He was at that time a young man, in his early twenties. One might say that he was finding his way on the grand stage at just the moment when he himself was being conscripted as a recruiting officer. For the first years in London he was both working as a government official, and writing—plays like *The Recruiting Officer*, about the very occupation in which destiny had placed him. It was though an ironic twist, from one of his plays, had intervened to shape his life.

CHARACTERS

Captain Plume; head recruiting officer for the army, sent to Shrewsbury to whip up new recruits for an impending battle in France. He is also on a personal mission to recruit the love interest of his dear Sylvia, and to do so without letting her know that he wants to marry her.

Captain Brazen; the second recruiting officer.

Sylvia Balance; besought by Captain Plume, she also wishes to win his love, but concludes the best way to do so is in disguise—male disguise—which she does, and as a recruit herself.

Sgt. Kite; aide to Captain Plume, under great pressure to bring in the fresh recruits. Tries offers of money and fame, but failing that turns to astrological predictions.

Melinda; cousin of Sylvia, just come into wealth. She falls under the love attention of Mr. Worthy, but holds him off because she wants marriage and not mistresshood.

Justice Balance; Sylvia's father, magistrate in charge of new recruits. He is in charge of checking vagrancy among recruits. One of the first 'soldiers' brought before him is his daughter Sylvia, disguised as a Mr. Willful. He recognizes her because she is wearing her brother's clothes, and passes on to her the message that he will allow her to marry Mr. Plume.

Mr. Scale; presiding magistrate

Mr. Scruple; presiding magistrate

Sylvia; daughter of Balance, in love with Plume. Forced into recruitment under false name of Mr. Willful.

Lucy; maid of Melinda. Elopes with Brazen.

Rose; a country girl

Constable, recruits
Servants, merchant

PLOT

The Recruiting Officer opens to the drumbeat of a military march. The army is recruiting for a war in France, and two top recruiters have been sent to Shrewsbury to carry out this important action. Captain Plume arrives for the job, in love as he is with Sylvia. He arrives at the same time as Mr. Worthy, who is in love with Melinda, the cousin of Sylvia. (Worthy had wanted Melinda for his mistress, when she was poverty stricken, but now that she has inherited big time he has decided they should get married. This kind of money-before-all philosophy filters through the heart of the whole play. (Would you say that makes this play a satire on the essence of human nature?) Melinda resents this reversal in Mr. Worthy, and boasts of the glamor of her new found money. Sylvia and Melinda argue violently over the question of Sylvia's allegedly new found haughtiness.

Sylvia leaves her father's house, under pretext that she is going to the Welsh countryside, but in fact she returns to Shropshire, under a male disguise and the false name, Mr. Wilful. Plume and Brazen, the two principal recruiters, compete to recruit Sylvia. Kite abducts Mr. 'Wilful' for Plume; Wilful finds himself in magistrates court for suspected assault, and is taken before the three magistrates, of whom one is Sylvia's father. Wilful, in her disguise, is forced to sign up. Meanwhile Melinda is induced to go a fortune teller (Kite in disguise) in order to be guided in her choice of a husband. The multiple disguises and false pretences threaten to get out of control, when a staccato sequence of events brings a resolution to this tale of love rivals and subterfuges; Worthy goes to Melinda, to announce that he wishes her hand in marriage, but on sharing the good news with Plume 'he' learns that Melinda has after all eloped with Brazen, one of the three magistrates; Worthy stops Brazen, who is with a disguised woman whom 'he' thinks to be Melinda, but who is in fact Lucy, Melinda's maid--at which discovery 'Worthy' abandons his impulse to challenge Brazen to a duel; Sylvia, as well as the masked lady with Brazen, drops her mask, upon which Plume agrees to leave the army and marry her; Melinda at last agrees to marry Plume, who compensates Brazen, for the loss of a valuable marriage to Melinda, by turning over his own twenty recruits to Brazen. At no point in the play is it more evident that recruits and wives are commodities, that monetary worth is where it all comes down, or that love and money are mutually exclusive. This satire of Farquhar is across the board, battering at the expense of the dearest assumptions of human society. This is a cynically joyful comedy.

SCENES

Plot, you might say, is the organized structure of a literary narrative, while the 'events' of the narrative are looser, provoke more lateral offshoots, and thrive—when it works—on cascades of self-revelation. For instance, the plots of many of the comedies we are addressing are linear, though intricate—like the present play—unlike Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, or *The Tempest*, which feed and regenerate themselves on their own substance, and emerge from a place unexpected onto a distant prospect. The linearity of the Restoration comedy, however, is not mechanical—as in a sense an Aristophanic comedy is—like the *Birds*—with lots of local ingenuity but a straightforward narrative line. The linearity of the Restoration comedy is intricacy, plots and sub plots, as in the case of the love letter to Brazen, which comes to light as part of a hidden amour, and opens out an entirely new dimension of the play.

The brilliance of Farquhar's work—like that Ben Jonson displays in his finest comedies—*The Silent Woman* or *Volpone*—shows forth from the loose and easy moving style of the beginning. The fake grand declamation of Kite, pronouncing the nobility of the national cause and the rightness of recruitment, follows with perfection of nature into the rough speech of the costermonger, who can do a conversation redirect with grace, taking advantage of Kite's speech about 'the bed of honour' which is so large that 'ten thousand people can lie in it together and not touch,' to remark that such a bed would be just right for him and his wife. The advent of Kite and Plume, at just this moment, flows comfortably into the military theme, and presses the play organically onward.

The next stage involves the quarrel which emerges, between Melinda and her maid Lucy, who is competing with Melinda for the attention of Captain Brazen, one of the two recruiters. This deftly

introduced point of conflict opens the way for Sylvia to adopt a fake identity, that of Mr. Wilful, in which role she is interviewed by her father, ignorant as he is of who she is, briefly to find herself in trouble with the law, charged with assault. At the same time Melinda continues to evade the advances of Worthy.

Events, as they compose this play, flow from out of each other in the fashion they assume in the course of doings that in the above case lead Sylvia and Melinda to play out their masked love lives—a topic which appears to have superseded the theme of recruitment. Love and recruitment dance subtly in one another's arms.

A break in the events-flow is needed, to interrupt the sterile dissension between Melinda and Sylvia, as between Pike and Brazen, between whom events have established a series of landmines. It might be said that the fortune teller gives the final twist to the sequence of events.

The fortune teller comes out of left field, by a stroke of the playwright's genius. Worthy is behind the convincing of Melinda to visit a fortune teller (Kite in disguise) who convinces Melinda to accept her tireless suitor. Worthy goes to visit Melinda, to conclude matters, but to his amazement finds that she has eloped with Brazen. He naturally challenges Brazen to a duel, but before the action can begin, Melinda drops her disguise, and reveals herself as Lucy. Sylvia does the same. Plume agrees to leave the army and marry Sylvia. The drama ultimately swallows its own tail.

THEMES

Universal names The three magistrates—Messrs. Brazen, Baiance, and Scruple—are in fact fairly down to earth in the present play, though their universal names might seem to qualify them for sanctity. The practice is of naming by abstractions, which was based on classical practice, and dominates writing orthodoxy in the western tradition. The involvement of abstract names with a class society, such as we find in the present play, is deep and subtle. Can it run like this? As roles grow stratified socially—the baker, the magistrate, the candle maker—the names applied to each of those professions grow fixed, represent the activity they cover, 'take its place,' at least in usage. These names come increasingly to empty of local content and to take on the social, and logical, function of the activity covered by them. In the case of the class conscious Restoration, it was a piece of cake to think in terms of stable and static social roles.

Love As we see throughout the play, love is closely allied to money. When Sylvia comes into her inheritance, her value to Mr. Worthy climbs immediately. Whereas previously he had wanted her for his mistress—a fact she heartily offended her—now he wanted, and eventually got her—as a wife. (In the process, however, Sylvia had a fling at Captain Brazen, one of the magistrates, in order to punish Worthy.)

Military recruitment The play follows the fortunes of two military officers, who are sent on a recruitment mission. We are shown the central differences in the character of the two men. Both officers, despite their differences, are venal to the fingertips; they are portrayed not only as different in character but at the same time as representatives of a type, the type of the person in power, in a given situation, who exercises that power to gain his or her own advantage. This is the kind of thematic that becomes the raw material of Restoration comedy, springing as it does from a post-Shakespearean century, in which the Greco Roman classical resurges into the early modern world.

Class The whole play, of course, is a satire (or critical commentary?) on the class system. The humor turns largely around the rival and competing efforts to make the best match, or to do what is advantageous for one's own kin. (Plume eventually gets Sylvia, who complements his ambitions; Worthy eventually marries Melinda, though not without having struggled with her pride and his own insensitivity.) None of the characters involved is drawn by any sympathy for suffering or by any appeals to warm heartedness.

Elite society we do not consider in the present play. (This is not the world of Congreve or Etherege, but rather the middle class world of Troilus and Cressida, say, in which raw emotion is regularly barking at the

shins of pretense.) Farquhar writes as a rebel from society, who is already coopted by the society. Perhaps he did not live long enough—29 years—to mount a full gun rejection of the social framework.

The Folly of War We are aware from the start that a major military conflict with France is at hand for the British, and that it is of top importance to beef up the army. Two senior recruit officers have been sent to Shrewsbury for that purpose. As it turns out, though, the whole emphasis of the present play is on the romantic and power-play, shenanigans that spring up from the hustle and bustle of the recruiters.