

JOE ORTON AND THE SUBVERSION OF THE FRENCH FARCICAL TRADITION *

Ignacio Ramos Gay

Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha

Ignacio.Ramos@uclm.es

Joe Orton's plays represent a swing between the influence and the subversion of nineteenth-century farcical formulae, as they were popularised by French *vaudevilliste* Georges Feydeau. The aim of this paper is to explore the use Orton made of the external structure of farce and vaudeville so as to conceal a fierce criticism of a decadent society. The classical comic molds, as they were displayed in France by playwrights such as Eugène Labiche and Georges Feydeau, are but a subterfuge veiling burlesque and farcical comedy, those two revolutionary artistic forms which lead to social subversion. In this sense, not only was Orton acknowledging the freedom the artist had in France but, also, rejecting the process of softening and bowdlerization by which English farce had become throughout nineteenth century a commodious and pleasant social device in the service of the bourgeoisie, and reclaiming a farcical formula capable of demolishing by means of laughter the convenient complacency of the audience.

Key words: *Comedy, Farce, Vaudeville, Joe Orton, Subversion*

La dramaturgia de Joe Orton muestra una perpetua oscilación entre la influencia y la subversión de las fórmulas clásicas de la farsa decimonónica, popularizada por el vodevilista francés Georges Feydeau. El objetivo de este artículo es analizar el recurso a las estructuras dramáticas tradicionales de la farsa y el vodevil con el fin de velar una feroz crítica contra una sociedad en decadencia. Los moldes cómicos

convencionales, tal y como fueron aplicados en Francia por dramaturgos como Eugène Labiche y Georges Feydeau, constituyen así un subterfugio capaz de enmascarar bajo la apariencia de la comedia y de la farsa tradicional dos formas artísticas revolucionarias subversivas. En este sentido, por cuanto hizo uso de los esquemas dramáticos franceses, Orton no sólo reveló la libertad artística del dramaturgo en Francia, en contraposición con la rigidez moral británica, sino que rechazó el proceso de censura y expurgación que convirtieron a la farsa en un género al servicio de la burguesía en Gran Bretaña reclamando una fórmula capaz de socavar los cimientos sociales del público por medio de la comicidad.

Palabras clave: *Comedia, Farsa, Vodevil, Joe Orton, Subversión*

Although often considered an inferior or second-rate genre similar to vaudeville, melodrama, *burlletta* or *extravaganza*, during the last quarter of the century farce has been established as one of the most profitable and successful genres. This is evident from the recent academic interest concerning French vaudeville writers such as Georges Feydeau and Eugène Labiche, and British farceurs such as Noël Coward, Ben Travers, Alan Ayckbourn or Joe Orton, whose plays are constantly performed both in London and Paris.

Throughout the 19th century, farce and vaudeville had been intimately related to each other, particularly after the disappearance of rhyming couplets within the structure of the latter, so that by the turn of the century the terms farce and vaudeville had become almost synonymous. In fact, nowadays it would be impossible to tell the structural difference between, for instance, on the one hand, Alan Ayckbourn's or Ben Travers' marriage farces, and on the other, Feydeau's cycle *Du mariage au divorce*. Furthermore, at present both playwrights are generally typified as representatives of high comedy, although they had been previously despised for a long time by an academic tradition which insisted on ignoring the fact that farce is

primarily a visual medium, rather than a genre based on literary paradigms. According to Henri Gidel, vaudeville has been traditionally considered a stigmatised genre « dont il fallait bien constater son existence mais qui ne méritait le moindre examen sérieux » (1986:1). Today, recent stage directors such as Patrice Chéreau, Jacques Lassalle, Jean Pierre Vincent, Gaston Baty and Bruno Bayen, together with scholars such as Jacqueline Atrousseau, Henri Gidel, Leonard Pronko, Arlette Shenkan, or Stuart Baker both in Europe and the United States, have not only revived the study of farce and vaudeville owing to their success on the modern stage, but also the study of drama according to its visual elements, rather than on textual and literary standards. As Ann Ubersfeld has stated, « contrairement à un préjugé fort répandu et dont la source est l'école, le théâtre n'est pas un genre littéraire. Il est une partie scénique » (Ubersfeld 10)¹. The paradigms of theatrical sociology, based on performance and on the interaction between the audience and the actors, have been regarded as key factors in the evaluation of the dramatic quality of several genres traditionally disdained or considered « infraliterary ». This perspective has been reinforced by current semiotics of drama, notably by theorists such as Ann Ubersfeld, Jean Marie Thomasseau, Michael R. Booth and George Rowell, who have insisted on reformulating the history of the theatre according to the evolution of the audience's taste.

The renaissance of British farce during the sixties was mostly due to Joe Orton's controversial but ephemeral eruption onto the English stage. His plays represented both a reaction against, and a perpetuation of farcical formulae: on the one hand, they were a continuation of Ben Travers' dramaturgy and paved the way for Peter Barnes, Howard Brenton and Alan Ayckbourn. On the other, his linguistic irreverence and social impudence, which mirrored vaudeville's structure as it had been exported by France, revolutionized the British classical approach to farce. For English farce was a far more sweetened and softened product than its French counterpart. As Michael R. Booth puts it, « charm, sentiment, and a sense of fun, all expressed in the proper moral spirit, are definitively characteristic of nineteenth-century English farce » (Booth 124). This prudish undercurrent may be perceived also during the first half of the twentieth century in the plays of Ben Travers, as well as in Ray Cooney's and John Chapman's *Whitehall farces*. However, Orton's plays

constitute a model of influence and subversion of earlier trends and techniques. For instance, as Christopher Innes states (268), his first major farce, *Loot* (1965), clearly echoed Ben Travers' 1928 classic, *Plunder*, both in its title and in the basic elements of its plot. Yet the traditional robbery becomes an excuse in Orton's play to dismantle the pillars upon which society is based, notably family, love and social justice. Similarly, in his final and most developed farce, *What the Butler Saw* (1969), there are echoes of Traver's *Rookery Nook* (1926) in a husband's fruitless and successive attempts to find a dress for a naked girl, a situation which clearly resembles George Feydeau's *vaudeville*, *La dame de Chez Maxim* (1899). Orton himself admitted to being influenced by classical farce, and to his being a « great admirer of Ben Travers, in particular » (Innes 268). Nevertheless, he rejected the process of softening and bowdlerization by which English farce had become throughout the nineteenth century a commodious and pleasant social device in the service of the bourgeoisie, and worked towards a farcical formula capable of demolishing by means of laughter the convenient complacency of the audience. This formula had to have been modelled upon French vaudevillistes and farceurs, who accomplished a satisfactory balance between a respect towards conventional drama writing, and a derisive and venturesome attitude towards the audience. The aim of this paper is to explore the influence and subversion of the nineteenth-century French farcical tradition in the plays of Joe Orton. By means of analysing the main features present in French farce and vaudeville –quid pro quos, imbroglíos, hectic discourse and body language, sexual connotations as a breach of bourgeois decorum, etc.– I will describe the subversive use this author made of nineteenth-century comic genres. Orton appears thus as a representative of a cultural legacy the essentials of which were pushed to the limit, in an attempt to demolish by laughter the complacency of the audience.

In fact, what Orton did was to apply systematically to the British stage the freedom farce and vaudeville had had in France. As his *Diaries* reveal, through his reading and attending numerous *vaudevilles* by Georges Feydeau, the most important French writer of vaudeville during the first quarter of the twentieth century, Orton became acquainted with the frenetic mechanics of farce. By means of implementing the formula of French vaudeville, he was parodying and

reacting against a recognisable type of theatre. The difference resided in the themes exploited by the different playwrights: while nineteenth-century British farce was morally more conservative, only reproducing the scheme of French farce on a structural level, its French counterpart applied this hectic tempo in order to demolish the conventional conceptions of bourgeois morality. As Michael R. Booth suggests:

Labiche and Feydeau are not sentimental, nor do they write on that level of domesticity concerning the trivia at home, hearth, and daily living that cram the English farce to bursting. One might say the domesticity of French farce is hard and sharp-edged, the domesticity of English farce soft and well disposed. The difference occurs because the farce of Labiche and Feydeau is anti-idealistic and satirical in aim, whereas the purpose of its far less aggressive Victorian counterpart is to amuse in a jolly and properly moral way, to cast a friendly, a vincular eye on the minor vicissitudes of home and family. (Booth 124).

British farceurs such as Ben Travers imitated French vaudeville in order to provide a comic structure for their plays. Humour in Feydeau, as well as in his forerunner, George Labiche, is meant to demystify all the bourgeois illusions created by the *Second Empire* and *la Belle-Époque*, reflecting the solipsism and alienation of modern times. Sex, marriage, wealth, and moral values in general are absolutely inverted in Feydeau's plays, while Travers' works end by reaffirming the orthodox *status quo* exhibited in the first scenes, as a sign of moral conservatism. In this sense, Joe Orton's black farces can be said to be descendants of the French farcical tradition, rather than that of the British, for in his plays, ethical principles are capsized and moral values are turned upside down, despite his resorting to conventional techniques which had proved successful in the theatre and for the box-office.

The inner structure of vaudeville provides an appropriate dramatic context for the counterbalance of chaos and order displayed in Orton's plays. Formerly a combination of dance, pantomime,

dialogue and song, the genre of vaudeville, after losing its rhyming couplets, retained constant movement and rotations on the stage as its main features, in opposition to the serious gravity of tragedy. A genre mainly based upon comic situations rather than on deep psychology, its characters turned into caricatural players of complicated plots and mere puppets of the dramatist's will. One of the most important features of *vaudeville* which can be observed in Orton's plays concerns their structural complexity, which makes the plays swing between chaos and order. Orton was consciously following the conventional formula for farce modelled by nineteenth-century British playwrights such as Arthur Wing Pinero, Sir Arthur Jones and even Oscar Wilde, who based themselves on the French *pièce bien faite* (well-made play). Its basic structure was made up of synthetic elements such as a sympathetic hero struggling against adversity or dilemma throughout three acts, which were defined by the obstacles he had to overcome. Due to this scheme, characters only existed when in conflict with situations, and they were defined by their reactions to them. The philosophy of composition was based on making antagonistic characters come across one another on the stage systematically. Therefore, the aim of the genre was to place characters on the stage according to a divine or non-human logic, and make them respond to the frantic evolution of events. This inner mechanism dominated the whole play, and since it is a genre, as Henri Clouard defined it, "in which the pitiless logic of the most preposterously unexpected situations requires that they be prepared and polished with impeccable precision" (Pronko 131), its impact on the audience depended on the actors' choreographic movements on the stage and on their interaction with the audience. The stage is specifically constructed so as to allow the frenetic entry and exit of characters, as is accurately described in numerous extended stage directions. Several doors, windows and cupboards derived from boulevard drama permit the characters' ceaseless appearances and disappearances, rapid entries and exits that represent a psychological swing between accepted and proscribed social attitudes. That is why Rance, the government medical inspector in *What the Butler Saw*, metatheatrically wonders « Why are there so many doors. Was the house designed by a lunatic? » (*WBS* 376)². The realistic setting loses its meaning, and lounges as well as living rooms turn into the sphere of madness. Solemn bourgeois attitudes are demolished by frantic discourse and body language.

Orton thus displays a devastating mastery of all vaudeville's trademarks, including the chase, the repetition and mechanisation of words and actions, the use of gadgets and other stage properties, and the hectic movement of actors.

This frenzied motion of the characters deprives them of their personality, turning them into mere objects, subject to the law of dramatic fate. Throughout a succession of surrealistic scenes we are constantly reminded of the purely physical existence of Orton's characters, heirs to the objects and rhythms of Labiche's *Chapeau de Paille d'Italie* (1851), Feydeau's « fauteuil extatique » (*ecstatic armchair*) in *La dame de Chez Maxim* (1899), and of Sardou's *Les Pattes de Mouche* (1860). For this frantic mechanism, dominated by living objects that provoke the actors' movements, reflects a universe ruled by purely material and inanimate beings, as well as the hopeless human subjugation to them. Stage properties themselves drop their purely ornamental nature as part of the setting and acquire human qualities. Turning into malefic or benignant objects, they tame the characters' will so that they lose their human substance. For instance, in *Loot*, Hal does not hesitate to remove the corpse of his dead mother in order to make room within the coffin to hide the booty, displaying no feeling of distress. Similarly, in the following scenes Hal's mother's corpse is metonymically identified with the wooden box when he wonders about the consequences of the car accident. Obviously, the son's concern centres on the money concealed in the coffin, while the policeman identifies container and contained:

HAL: Was the actual fabric of the coffin damaged?

MC LEAVY: No. Your mother is quite safe. (L 238)

Characters lose their human properties, both metaphorically and literally speaking. In the same play, Hal suggests burying his mother's fake eye separately from the rest of her body after noticing its loss, while in *What the Butler Saw* (1969), Winston Churchill's penis is actually ablated and stolen from his life-size bronze statue. Again, the human body is but an object, and this penis is irreverently identified with Churchill's famous cigar. As the amazed government medical inspector notices when he compares both:

RANCE (*with admiration*): How much more inspiring if, in those dark days, we'd seen what we see now. Instead we had to be content with a cigar –the symbol falling far short, as we all realize, of the object itself. (*WBS* 447)

The characters, being deprived of the objects defining them (eyes, teeth, etc.), and subjugated to a rhythm following a snowball effect, consequently lose their identity, turning into simple puppets tied to the dramatist's strings. Most of Feydeau's and Labiche's vaudevilles revolve around a character whose identity has been mistaken, thus entailing a succession of *quid pro quos* revealing a double existence of the character. This double existence actually reflects his inner desires and his wish to be free by means of getting rid of the constraints strict morality imposes on the individual. *Quid pro quos* and mistaken identities are perfectly combined in Orton's *What the Butler Saw*, a play whose title displays from the very beginning its connections with exhibitionism, the title making a reference to the mutoscope, a well-known seaside machine showing obscene images through a keyhole. The social microcosm of the play, being a psychiatric clinic where madness is exploited rather than cured, oscillates between chaos and order. Each of the characters projects his and her own insanity on all the others, despite their persistent and sterile allegations that everything can be logically explained. The play takes off from a typical French boulevard situation: a debauched doctor ordering his would-be secretary to undress in order to examine her « intellectual » skills. However, his dissolute intentions are disrupted both by the entrance of his wife and, later, by the appearance of a government medical inspector, who takes the naked secretary for a patient. The initial imbroglio is complicated by the arrival of a young man who is blackmailing the doctor's wife for having had sexual intercourse with him the previous night. Confusion increases with the advent of a police sergeant in search of a woman who has stolen an essential part of Winston Churchill's public statue. As in Feydeau's *vaudevilles*, every character has a vital reason to conceal his identity; they impersonate another being so as to avoid social responsibilities. Moreover, all the characters are surrounded by numerous doors, rooms and corridors, yet there is no possibility of escape. They have to be shut or kept in a small or enclosed space, reflecting thus social and

individual confinement. Fate can not be avoided, and as Sartre declared, « l'enfer c'est les autres » (*Hell is other people*). The difference with traditional *vaudeville* resides in the fact that social constraints and rules, represented by the police sergeant and the government medical inspector, are themselves as insane and devious as those characters whose behaviour they are intending to correct. The effect of such an accelerating confusion of roles and identities discredits the logic behind it. Reason and madness merge, and social power is just a synonym of gross indecency and not a symbol of equity or justice.

Just as in Feydeau's plays where sex was, even when merely suggested and never shown on the stage, a comic means of provoking the audience's response to the play, Orton continues this tradition, pushing it to the limit. Transvestism and *quid pro quos* permit numerous sexual inferences dealing with marginal or deviant practices. Incest, cross-dressing, nymphomania, homosexuality, lesbianism, exhibitionism, hermaphroditism, voyeurism, necrophilia, paedophilia, sadomasochism, bondage, various fetishes and rape dominate Orton's plays, as for Orton « sexual licence » was the only way to smash wretched civilization and violate conventional taboos. In *Loot*, a son is required to strip his mother's corpse naked; in *Entertaining Mister Sloan*, a woman constantly repeats to the man she wants to have sex with « I'll be your mamma », and in *What the Butler Saw*, a mother is raped by her son. Furthermore, the anagnoristic and almost melodramatic recognition of this last play leads to the revelation of an incestuous marriage between a brother and his sister. Sexual deviation as well as killing are seen as the norm for Orton's characters, who revolve in a sort of social jungle where any rule displays its opposite and justice is based upon power –either linguistic or physical power. In traditional *vaudeville*, sex and unfaithfulness were meant to provoke both laughter and moral indignation in the audience, who recognised in the characters that were ridiculed on the stage a reflection not of themselves but of their contemporaries. At the same time, sexual references in Feydeau's plays undermined a moral establishment based upon conservative and old-fashioned clichés, displaying the playwright's dissatisfaction with his own marriage³. Similarly, Orton's chaotic scenes, which are defined by a constant rejection of all social values and the expression of sexual attitudes utterly divorced from sentiment present his own homosexuality and promiscuity as a norm.

Sex is used in Orton's plays as a means to stir up public outrage and create controversy, a situation which he deliberately exacerbated by condemning his own plays in the press under fictitious *noms de plume* such as Mrs Edna Welthorpe, or Donald H. Hartley.

As in French vaudeville, sex and adultery constitute recurrent topics, reflecting the period's obsession and moral frustration. Sex represents the engine activating the characters' movements, with no ulterior meaning other than its physical sphere. Satisfaction has no point at all, and love and romantic ideals give place to numerous obscene references dealing with incest, paedophilia, *ménages à trois* and homosexuality. Yet sex in *vaudeville*, even when furtive and suddenly discovered by hysterical wives or furious husbands, is always a means for characters to free themselves from oppressive marital atmospheres. However, in Orton's plays, sex is never a symbol of freedom but, on the contrary, it is the most important sign revealing the characters' slavery to traditional moral standards. Marginal sexual practices and nonconventional sexual behaviour are always present in his plays as a means to liberate the subject from his enclosure within the moral establishment. However, even when dealing with marginal sexual practices such as necrophilia or paedophilia, there is always a moral condemnation of these expressed by the characters' concealment of them and by their sexual dissatisfaction. Not only are bestiality and lust the norm, but also frustration, for sex never helps the characters work out a solution for chaos. On the contrary, it emphasizes both their social and physical confinement, burying them alive in their own psychological emptiness. For sex in Orton represents the alienation of the individual, as there is nothing beyond it, neither pleasure or happiness. In this sense, Orton's plays resemble the Marquis de Sade's novels, as sex is never a symbol of sentiment and happiness but the expression of moral and physical domination. Pleasure is not permitted in his plays. It is substituted by rough obligations and the annihilation of the individual. Moreover, just as Justine's and Juliette's circular and stagnated destinies reflect Sade's physical incarceration, so Orton's plays mirror the dramatist's social imprisonment within his homosexual condition. In both cases, provocative attitudes concerning sex are more the expression of lost paradises than a means of achieving self-satisfaction. Furthermore, it is necessary to acknowledge that Orton's alienated perception of sexual relationships was never allowed

the possibility to mature, as his brutal and untimely death at the hands of his boyfriend, Kenneth Halliwell, frustrated any natural evolution of his work.

The surrealistic and chaotic plots contrast with the conventional –even naturalistic– settings of Orton’s plays. As in Feydeau’s pieces, Orton’s characters belong to respectable social spheres –doctors, policemen, government representatives, etc.– displaying through their jobs an authority within society. It is around them that society revolves, since their language and roles express social order and law. However, chaos emerges from the schism between their functions as social representatives and their individual actions. For neither their words nor their gestures are respectable but abnormal and dishonest, and those who suffer as a result of their actions are those who naively believe in them. In Orton’s plays, the main victims of such an anarchic universe are those who obey rules and do not revolt against them. Innocence is a synonym for stupidity, and egalitarian principles only the natural way to self-destruction.

Corruption pervades not only characters’ actions but also their speech. As dialogues corrode *bienséance* (*decorum*) and society is deprived of any paradigmatic meaning, language turns out to be pointless, for no communication is achieved. Farce and vaudeville have also been identified as forerunners of surrealism and the absurd drama by numerous researchers throughout the second half of the 20th century⁴. A reader of avant-garde literature and of the theatre of the absurd, as defined by Martin Esslin, Orton pays a tribute to absurdist dramatists in his reconstruction of conversations where linguistic exchange is not only the phonological expression of man’s solipsism, but rather the main manifestation of social aggression. The following conversation between the police agent Truscott and the bank robber in *Loot* exemplifies the emptiness of words and the twisted speech of authority:

TRUSCOTT: Why do you make such stupid remarks?

HAL: I’m a stupid person. That’s what I’m trying to say.

TRUSCOTT: What proof have you that you’re stupid.

Give me an example of your stupidity.

HAL: I can’t.

TRUSCOTT: Why not? I don't believe you're stupid at all.

Hal: I am. I had a hand in the bank job.

FAY draws a sharp breath. HAL sits frozen. TRUSCOTT takes his pipe from his mouth.

(With a nervous laugh.) There, that's stupid, isn't it? Telling you that.

TRUSCOTT *(also laughing)*. You must be stupid if you expect me to believe you. Why, if you had a hand in the bank job, you wouldn't tell me.

FAY: Not unless he was stupid.

TRUSCOTT: But he is stupid. He's just admitted it. He must be the stupidest criminal in England. Unless *–(He regards HAL with mounting suspicion)–* unless he is the cleverest. What was your motive in confessing to the bank job?

HAL: To prove I'm stupid.

TRUSCOTT: But you've proved the opposite.

HAL: Yes. (L 233-234)

Language is just a means to reinforce man's sterile attempts to communicate. Stylistically, verbal refinement is combined with scatological grossness, and pithy aphorisms converge with subversive vulgarity, reflecting thus a two-faced society. Expressions such as « why don't you shut your mouth and give your arse a chance » (*EMS* 74); « have you taken up transvestism? I'd no idea our marriage teetered on the edge of fashion » (*WBS* 373); « I live in a world of top decisions. We've no time for ladies » (*EMS* 90) or « I'm not in favour of private grief. Show your emotions in public or not at all » (*Loot* 198) are reminiscent of Wilde's paradoxical wit and misogyny, and account for the dramatist's desire to subvert the classical formulae of farce by means of projecting onto the stage the natural harshness of the society that victimized him as a homosexual.

In French vaudeville, language was a means of suggestion rather than a crude linguistic expression. Sex and extramarital relationships –as well as any other censored sexual practices- were always insinuated, never revealed through coarse or crude dialogues. Language was a corollary of the scene, as no obscene references, symbols or characters were overtly exhibited on the stage, but were

only hinted at and inferred by the audience. As a result of his intention to shock his public, Orton went one step beyond classical farce and vaudeville. The playgoer of the 1960's was utterly different from the public at the beginning of the twentieth century, despite being outraged by the very same taboos. Thus Orton understood that the representation of the topics traditionally banned from the stage had to be updated and renewed according to an almost medieval explicitness, avoiding any kind of linguistic indulgence. By means of linguistic subversion, he carried out an actual implosion of conventional dramatic dialogue, and of the social attitudes associated with it.

This denial of politically correct situations is accentuated by the almost naturalistic and boulevard-like surface of the plays. As Christopher Innes states,

The naturalistic setting and the use of sentimental comedy formula for a perverse action that the characters treat as perfectly acceptable behaviour is designed to intensify the shock effect. Instead of nastiness being relegated to the woodshed, it is uncovered beneath the ordinary living-room carpet. (Innes 269)

Despite the fantasy elements extracted from farcical imperatives, realism is intended to identify the bourgeois audience with the theatrical fiction, and to increase the impact on the public. Orton reformulated the relationship between class and sexuality by means of subverting the poetics of daily life. As can be observed in French farceurs like Labiche and notably Feydeau, he resorted to laughter as a means of creating an illusion of reality and of exorcizing its moral essentials. Under the simple external structure of farce and vaudeville he concealed his fierce criticism of a decadent society. Chaos and order in Orton's plays reflect burlesque and farcical comedy as two revolutionary artistic forms leading to subversion for, as Oscar Wilde stated in *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, it was in works of this kind that the artist in England was allowed very great freedom⁵.

NOTE.S

- ¹ “Contrary to an extended prejudice, the source of which is the school, the theatre is not a literary genre. It is part of the stage”.
- ² Quotations refer to *The Complete Plays* edition (London, 1976). Plays have been abbreviated as follows: *Entertaining Mr Sloane* (EMS); *Loot* (L); *What the Butler Saw* (WBS).
- ³ Feydeau’s one-act farces *Feu la mère de madame* (1908), *On purge Bébé!* (1910), *Mais n’te promène donc pas toute nue!* (1911), *Léonie est en avance* (1911) and *Hortense a dit: ‘Je m’en fous!’* (1916) have been regarded by theatre historians (Gidel, 1979; Pronko, 1982; Lorcey, 2004) as the expression of Feydeau’s own disenchantment within marriage. Their generic title, “Du mariage au divorce” (*From Marriage to Divorce*) emphasises the playwright’s understanding of the modern married couple. Written at the time when Feydeau decided to move out the house where he was living with his wife Marianne Carolus-Duran, the plays reflect the failure of communication and the subsequent loneliness of the married man.
- ⁴ In this sense, Henri Gidel (1979 : 337) states that *La Dame de Chez Maxim* is a farce “que ne surpasseront pas les inventions de *Parade*, des *Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*, des *Mamelles de Tiresias*” (that was never surmounted by inventions such as *Parade*, *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*, and *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*”.
- ⁵ In Wilde’s words, “burlesque and farcical comedy, the two most popular forms, are distinct forms of art. Delightful work may be produced under burlesque and farcical conditions, and in work of this kind the artist in England is allowed a very great freedom.”(1998: 909).

WORKS CITED

- Autrusseau, J. 1971. *Labiche et son théâtre*. Paris : L’Arche.
- Baker, S. 1981. *Georges Feydeau and the Aesthetics of Farce*. Michigan: UMI Research Press.
- Booth, M. R. 1980. *Prefaces to English Nineteenth Century Theatre*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Charney, M. 1981. *Joe Orton*. New York : Grove Press.

- Feydeau, G. 1988. *Théâtre complet*. Paris: Bordas. 4 Vols.
- Gidel, H. 1979. *Le théâtre de Georges Feydeau*. Paris : Klincksieck.
- Gidel, H. 1986. *Le vaudeville*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Innes, C. 1992. *Modern British Drama*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
- Labiche, E. 1979. *Théâtre*. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion.
- Lorcey, J. 1971. *Georges Feydeau*. Paris: Table Ronde.
- Orton, J. 1976. *The Complete Plays*. London: Methuen.
- Orton, J. 1986. *The Orton Diaries*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Pronko, L. 1982. *Eugène Labiche and Georges Feydeau*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing.
- Redmon, J. (ed) 1988. *Farce*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rowell, G. 1978. *The Victorian Theatre 1792-1914. A Survey*. Cambridge: C. U. P.
- Sartre, J.-P. 1947. *Huis clos. Les mouches*. Paris : Gallimard.
- Shenkan, A. 1972. *Georges Feydeau*. Paris: Seghers.
- Thomasseau, J. M. 1984. *Le mélodrame*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.
- Ubersfeld, A. 1981. *L'école du spectateur*. Paris: Editions sociales.
- Wilde, O. 1998. *Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*. Ware: Wordsworth Editions.