

Servants' Language in Eighteenth-Century English Comedies

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I

In the eighteenth-century English comedies, there are more than a few impressive scenes where servants appear and play a very significant role, like a one-time clown waiting on his king and queen. In the plays, servants often behave humorously and facetiously, but are clever and witty enough to assist their masters; this provides a pure and important comic relief of tension between scenes. The aim of this thesis is to show the language and social situation of servants in the following eighteenth-century English comedies: George Farquhar's *The Beaux Stratagem* (1707), Richard Steele's *The Conscious Lovers* (1722), and Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773).¹

At the dawn of the eighteenth century, English society was highly differentiated. Roy Porter comments on the eighteenth-century English social structure:

An eighteenth-century Englishman acquired his sense of public identity in relation to his birth, his property, his occupation and his social rank. Most women were defined by the honour of their presiding male. The power conferred by wealth, rank, office and status created tensions with people's basic equality under common law and within the family of man.²

The system created a pyramid of inequality, "with few at the top and many at the bottom."³ The people were highly sensitive to their position in society: "The distinctions between being a servant in or out of livery, a kitchen maid or a lady's maid, below or above the salt, lower deck or quarter-deck in the navy, between being called Mrs or Madam, were delicate."⁴ All these remarkable distinctions and their supercharged snobberies formed a certain social class

"whose gross inequalities were landscaped in gentle gradients rather than in giant steps." ⁵

In the pyramid, domestic or out-servants exist as a specific class of no small population. *The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* ⁶ gives the word "servant" the following definition:

A person or domestic servant; one whose duty is to wait upon his master or mistress, or do certain work in his or her household. (The usual sense when no other indication by the context; sometimes with defining word, as *domestic servant*.)

The *OED* also gives the first citation in the thirteenth century. In the earlier times of English society, the possession of servants was confined to the people going to Court such as baronets and earls. With the social order still left, however, the English modern period found a considerable mobility in the English social station, for wealth broke the traditional law or bloodlines that had traditionally divided the common from the noble. Then, the persons with power both in politics and in wealth could afford to have servants. George Macaulay Trevelyan notes about the socio-economic change in the eighteenth-century English society:

In the course of the eighteenth century the accumulation of great consolidated estates by the nobility and wealthier gentry, and the developments of capitalist agriculture, led to the general disappearance of the small squire of £100 to £300 a year, who worked his own land or let a couple of farms. This particular type of man, once so important in the life and government of the countryside, was now much less in evidence. But his place was in some respects taken by an increased number of gentry and professional men living on various kinds of small incomes in the country, but less rooted in the soil than the old rustic squire. ⁷

The new type of "gentry and professional men", forming the eighteenth-century middle classes, came to hire servants as well. Trevelyan mentions that "Parson Woodforde, the diarist, had only £400 a year, but on that he was able to keep five or six servants indoors and out," ⁸ and Dorothy Marshall says "On average, very ordinary families without any pretensions to gentility kept at least one manservant to look after the master, as well as a cook-maid and one or two other female servants". ⁹

Sir Walter Besant notes the situation of servants in the eighteenth-century English nobility and gentry's houses:

Every great house maintained a small army of servants. There were my lord's valet, the butler, the hall-porter, the steward, the housekeeper, my lady's maid, for principal servants.¹⁰

He also cites other servants: the footmen, the coachmen, the gardeners, the grooms, the cooks, the women-servants for the kitchen, pantry, still-room, and the spinning-wheel.¹¹

The eighteenth-century English comedies had a wider range of characters; that is, they were not "written any longer solely from the point of view of the rakish gentleman about town; the country wife became more than a deceitful ingenue, and the country squire more than a mark for rail-lery."¹² The dramas can be called "Realistic Domestic Plays." In these plays, the servants are "far more than the butts of their masters,"¹³ and part of "the low characters who are always in the spotlight."¹⁴ In reality, the servants were of great importance and relief to their masters. In *The Conscious Lovers*, the obedient servant Humphrey often assists his master, and he is told "Honest *Humphrey*, continue but my Friend, in this Exigence" (1.2). Trevelyan makes an important statement on the situation of the eighteenth-century gentries' servants:

The best type of domestic or outdoor employee cost only £10 a year and his keep: many were content with much less. On these conditions, armies of servants, male and female, filled the households of the gentry. Not a few became 'old servants,' privileged and intimate, whom their masters and mistresses never dreamt of turning off; it was an important and humanizing element in old English life. The floating population of maids, who soon went away to be married, learnt during their term of domestic service many arts of cooking and housekeeping, that afterwards served them well as wives and mothers.¹⁵

At the opening scene of *The Conscious Lovers* (CL), the deep relationship between Sir John Bevil and his old servant Humphrey exemplifies the above statement:

Sir J. Bev. : Have you order'd that I should not be interrupted while I am dressing?

Humph. : Yes, Sir: I believ'd you had something of Moment to say to me.

Sir J. Bev. : Let me see, *Humphrey*; I think it is now full forty Years since I first took thee, to be about my Self.

Humph. : I thank you, Sir, it has been an easy forty Years; and I have pass'd 'em without much Sickness, Care, or Labour.

Sir J. Bev. : Thou hast a brave Constitution; you are a Year

or two older than I am, Sirrah. (1.1)

Humphrey has his master's great intimacy and trust to the extent that Bevil tells him "Well, *Humphrey*, you know I have been a kind Master to you; I have us'd you, for the ingenuous Nature I observ'd in you from the beginning, more like an humble Friend than a Servant" (CL 1.1). Humphrey is in his turn pleased to serve his master, saying "my All should be engag'd to serve you" (CL 1.2).

However there was still a wide gap between servants and their masters. In CL, the dialogue between Phillis and her mistress Lucinda points out this undeniable distance. Phillis is turning her boyfiend Tom away when her mistress appears and asks what her kissing him means.

Luc.: But, I thought, I heard him kiss you. Who do you suffer that?

Phil.: Why, Madam, we Vulgar take it to be a Sign of Love; we Servants, we poor People, that have nothing but our Persons to bestow.... (3.1)

Phillis successively uses the phrases "we Vulgar," "we Servants," and "we poor People," which shows clearly how she perceives her world to be very inferior to her mistress's world. After her maid's response, Lucinda regretfully confesses "My Mother says I must not converse with my Servants" (CL 3.1).

II

I will show servants' language in some respects. Servants have two kinds of speech according to their addressees: one to their masters and the other to their class fellows. The use of the language depends on the relationship between the participants in any dialogue. David Crystal comments on the language social variable:

The socially 'inferior' person will show deference to the 'superior' in various ways, for example by the form of address, or by avoiding the more slangy words and constructions which might be used in informally talking to social equals; and other linguistic correlates can be found to indicate the dominance of the superior.¹⁶

The language varies according to its situations. In the eighteenth-century English society, the speakers used a different form of the language, and "in each area there was

a speech-hierarchy corresponding to the class-hierarchy, differing from Standard English not only in accent but also in grammar and vocabulary."¹⁷ Servants were professionally inferior to their masters, so they restrained themselves, linguistically, and respected the constructions and words which they knew were expected--they spoke the courtly language in the presence of their masters.

Carey McIntosh describes how the lower middle class' learned this language to improve their social rank:

Shopkeepers and lower-rank servants might be confined in their everyday existence to English identical to that of illiterate speakers, but they had access to higher dialects, perhaps in school or from their superiors, perhaps through one of the thousands of handbooks and pamphlets sold to the lower middle classes to enable them to become more upper class.¹⁸

When servants address themselves to their masters, they use the respectful appellatives such as "Sir," "Madam," and "Ladies," to mark greater politeness. In *The Beaux Stratagem* (BS), Lady Bountiful's daughter Dorinda tells her servant Scrub to detect a gentleman's character. He consistently repeats "Yes, Madam" in response to his mistress's orders, which sounds off his everlasting, almost militaristic, loyalty.

Dor. : ----Scrub.

Scrub: Madam.

Dor. : We have a great mind to know who this Gentleman is, only for our Satisfaction. (3.1)

Scrub: Yes, Madam, it would be a Satisfaction, no doubt.

There are other examples of *terms of address*:

Tom: Mr. Myrtle, Sir: would your Honour please to see him? (CL 4.1)

Diggory: Ecod I thank you your worship (SC 2)

Servant: Yes, your honour. They went off (SC 5.1)

Phil. : I shall stay with your Ladyship (CL 4.3)

Scrub: I never refus'd your Ladyship the favour (BS 3.1)

When servants are addressed, they are often called by a title "Honest" or "Good" plus names. When Sir John Bevil's son appreciates Humphrey's doings, he says, "Honest Humphrey, you have always been an useful Friend to my Father, and my self" (CL 1.2). The OED notes that this is "a vague epithet of appreciation or praise, especially as used in a patronizing way to an inferior" (s.v. *honest* '1.c).

Between servants, the form of address are rich in

variety. In *CL*, Bevil junior's young servant Tom loves Phillis. She doubts him and cries about his disloyalty, and the young coxcomb tries to comfort her in a knightly manner:

Phil.: Oh, Mr. Thomas, is Mrs. Sugar-key at home?--Lard, one is almost ashamed to pass along the Streets....
Tom: What! a sad thing to walk? Why, Madam Phillis, do you wish your self lame?
Phil.: No, Mr. Tom, Oh Tom! Tom! is it not a pity....

Tom continues to console her with excessive politeness.

Tom: Mrs. Phillis, I am your humble Servant for that---
Phil.: Yes, Mr. Thomas, I know how much you are humble Servant.

Finally, the young man grows weary, and protests her neurotic jealousy.

Tom: Mistake me not, good Phillis.
Phil.: Good Phillis! Saucy enough. (1.1)

Their vocatives vary according to their feelings and, as it were, battle tactics.

K. C. Phillipps discusses on the phrases peculiar to servants: "Servants and dependants upon the upper classes found it politic to guard their language."¹⁹ In servants' speech, the guarding phrases are often found. They were modest enough to keep themselves from annoying their masters. In *CL*, Humphrey hesitates to state his opinion to his master: "I humbly beg you'll be so tender of me" (1.1). There are other examples:

Humph.: You are not ill, I hope, Sir (*CL* 4.2)
Humph.: You are over-fond, nay give me leave to say (*CL* 4.2)
Archur.: I'm ashamed to offer you a Trifle, Madam: But since you command me-- (*BS* 3.3)
Arch.: That Project, for ought I know, had been better than ours (*BS* 3.3)

Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (*SC*) has some hilarious scenes where several rustic servants play a significant comic role. At the start of Act II, Mr Hardcastle attempts to train his servants, who are unused to having guests in the house. He finds it difficult to show them how to act as normal, well-trained servants. Diggory and Roger are country servants whom the quick-tempered and merry master Hardcastle has brought from the barn and the plough. He directs them to their individual positions at table:

You all know your posts and your places, and can shew that you have been used to good company, without ever stirring from home.

Omnes: Ay, ay.

The servants' response "Ay, ay" is blantly impolite speech. Sterling Andrus Leonard notes that "*I (ay) 'is accounted for rude, especially to our betters'.*"²⁰ The language of the lower classes and of the regions is automatically branded as base. The comic dialogue between the master and his servant follows:

Hard.: You must hear us talk, and not think of talking; you must see us drink, and not think of drinking; you must see us eat, and not think of eating.

Dig.: By the laws, your worship, that's perfectly unpossible. Whenever Diggory sees yeating going forward, ecod he's always wishing for a mouthful himself.

Diggory's above speech sounds much different from that of most servants working for the nobility and gentry, as some non-standard forms of the language are sprinkled in his speech ("parfect," "unpossible," and "yeating".)²¹ Those spellings depict a kind of regional dialect of the language. The mild oaths like "By the laws" (by the lords) and "ecod" (by God) are a sort of swearing and blasphemy, and a servant is usually hesitant to use them in his superiors' presence. N. F. Blake notes that Hardcastle's servants' speeches are "low rather than regional."²² There follows several other non-standard forms of the language in the other servants' speeches:

Dig.: Ecod, your wordhip, I never have courage till I see the eatables and drinkables brought upo' the table, and then I'm as bauld as a lion.

Hard.: What, will no body move?

1st Ser.: I'm not to leave this pleace.

2nd Ser.: I'm sure it's no pleace of mine.

3rd Ser.: Nor mine, for sartain.

Dig.: Waunds, and I'm sure it canna be mine.

Also, we have the contraction "upo'," the dialectal spellings "pleace" (place), "sartain" (certain), "canna" (cannot), and the abbreviated euphemistic oath "waunds" (by God's wounds). We often find such a contraction as "upo'." In *BS*, Scrub uses these vulgar contractions: "She's best on'em, that's the Truth on't" (3.3),²³ and Archur uses "ha'" (have) in his speech "Oons, Man, what ha' you been doing?" (5.4).

Thus Goldsmith depicts a comic situation in which the

country gentry and their servants talk with each other. Blake notes "when dialect occurs it is a sign of the wrong kind of breeding."²⁴ Mr Hardcastle finally loses his temper, uttering "You numbskulls!" and "O you dunces!" Under his terrifying direction, the stupid run about frightened here and there.

Dig. : By the elevens, my pleace is gone quite out of my head.

Roger. : I know that my pleace is to be every where.

1st Ser. : Where the devil is mine?

2nd Ser. : My pleace is to be no where at all; and so Ize go about my business.

Here we have the blasphemy "the devil" and the dialectal form "Ize" (I shall). These also sounds vulgar to some extent. The blasphemous interjection "the Devil" sometimes occurs in Scrub's speech: "Ah, the Devil, there she hampers me again" (4.1). We have other instance of regional dialect in *CL*. At Indiana's house, a foot boy answering Mr Sealand, says "Alack, Sir! I am but a Country Boy--I dant know, whether she is, or noa: but an you'll stay a bit, I'll goa, and ask the Gentlewoman that's with her" (5.2). Here we find some instances of his regional dialect: "dant" (don't), "noa" (no), "an" (if), and "goa" (go).

In the eighteenth century, servants were essential working people in the keeping of the nobility's and gentry's houses. The *OED* gives a citation from 1728: "I am in great concern at your being without a servant" (s.v. *servant* 1). The servants' social situation was that they lived with their masters with power and wealth, and that some of them "took advantage of the fringe benefits of working under the noses of their betters."²⁵ They were of low birth but was able to learn the upper class speech. The unique situation produced two phases of their language, that is, common and courtly language. And, as can be seen, several eighteenth century writers had a good ear for these different degrees of language, and managed to write some truly classic comedies.

Notes

1. Each edition of these works used throughout is W. D. Taylor and Simon Trussler, ed., *Eighteenth Century Comedy*

- (London: Oxford UP, 1969).
2. Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 48.
 3. Porter 48.
 4. Porter 49.
 5. Porter 49.
 6. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, ed., *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1989).
 7. George Macaulay Trevelyan, *English Social History* (London: Longman, 1978), 367-68.
 8. Trevelyan 368.
 9. Dorothy Marshall, *English People in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Longman, 1956), 127-28.
 10. Sir Walter Besant, *London in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1902), 274.
 11. Besant 274-75.
 12. W. D. Taylor, introd., *Eighteenth Century Comedy* (London: Oxford UP, 1929), vii.
 13. Taylor vii.
 14. Taylor vii.
 15. Trevelyan 368-69.
 16. David Crystal, "Style: Varieties of English." *The English Language*, ed. W. F. Bolton and David Crystal (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 208.
 17. Charles Barber, *The English Language: A Historical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 232.
 18. Carey McIntosh, *Common and Courtly Language* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1986), 37.
 19. K. C. Phillipps, *Language and Class in Victorian England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 114.
 20. Sterling Andrus Leonard, *The Doctrine of Correctness in English Usage 1700-1800* (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1962), 172.
 21. N. F. Blake says, in *Non-Standard Language in English Literature* (London: André Deutsch, 1981), "Some of these spellings have northern affiliations and may have been taken from different representations of northern dialects and mixed low forms" (110).
 22. Blake 110.
 23. The *OED* notes about the contraction *O'*: "In *on't* and the like, common in literary use to about 1750; now dialectal and Vulgar. In early times generally an actual difference of idiom, but from and of 16th century due to confusion of *of* and *on*, especially owing to the reduction of both of these to *o'*" (s. v. *O* 27).
 24. Blake 107.
 25. Porter 89.