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Chapter 1
What Do the Servants Know?

Paddy Lyons

**Betty.** Well, since Fortune has thrown me in this chamber-maid station, I’ll
revenge her cruelty and plague her favourites.
No fool by me shall e’er successful prove,
My plots shall help the man of sense in love.
(Mary Pix, *The Beau Defeated*, 1700)

To whet the audience’s appetite for displays of wit and ingenuity yet to come,
Betty the chambermaid takes the stage to herself at the finish of the first act of
*The Beau Defeated*. She is knowing, cheerfully and very engagingly knowing.
Outside the entertainment industry, however, servitude and knowledge were not
at all aligned in Restoration England. Records show the legal system heard and
weighed evidence from servants at best with caginess and scruples and with little
readiness to rely on the observations or understanding of a subaltern class. In his
influential writings on education, the progressive philosopher John Locke gave
blunt and emphatic warnings, singling out as ‘most dangerous of all’ any exposure
of a developing child to ‘the examples of the servants’. To focus on servants in
Restoration culture is to encounter a line separating actuality and fiction.

By departing from social convention and received opinion and, instead, taking
it for granted that servants are perspicacious, art in this era was to achieve complex
and subtle effects. Etherege’s play *The Man of Mode* (1676) – often and quite
fairly instanced as the generic Restoration Comedy – is illustrative. Witness, for
example, how the tense, intimate bedroom scene between Dorimant and Bellinda is
conducted and dramatically enhanced by the presence of Handy, Dorimant’s valet-de-chambre. The stage directions call for candlelight, and specify that Dorimant
appear in a state of undress, with Handy ‘tying up linen’, which is to say removing
and disposing of soiled sheets, from the bed where Dorimant and Bellinda have
been consummating the success of their plot to humiliate Mrs Loveit, mistress to

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Dorimant and Bellinda’s best friend. Bellinda is on edge and starting to panic, for fear Dorimant will subject her to the same disgrace as she helped him engineer for Mrs Loveit. Dorimant swears fidelity, but the extravagance with which he makes the very promises she hungers for only feeds and augments Bellinda’s anxieties. Through the course of their troubled exchanges, Handy comes and goes: he arranges transport for Bellinda, he keeps watch on the street lest any unwanted visitors enter and interrupt the proceedings, and he helps Bellinda make an exit via the back stairs so her departure can pass unobserved. Though he says little, silence does not equate with ignorance, and Handy’s competence betokens awareness. Indeed, from the very opening moments of the play, Handy has been established as privy to his master’s tastes and tendencies: well-versed in Dorimant’s addiction to new and novel conquest, he is equipped to recognize Bellinda’s fears as all too well-founded. Handy’s taciturn presence counterpoints the empty promises and vain pleas spilling from the lips of Dorimant and Bellinda, and thereby introduces Handy’s knowingness constitutes an alternative dimension, and enlarges the optic on Etherege’s comedy, disturbingly.

Remarkable here – and throughout the drama and fiction of the Long Restoration – is the ease with which it is taken for granted that servants generally can and do know. By contrast, in our times a different and a double protocol prevails. Nowadays if servants are imagined as knowing, it is on condition that their powers are highly exceptional, so much so as put them in command, like Jeeves, the butler in P.G. Wodehouse’s Bertie Wooster novels. Otherwise – and somewhat surprisingly insofar as postmodern culture often considers itself postindustrial and based on a new service economy – servants have come to be imagined as objects of knowledge rather than as themselves subjects who can be presumed to know. Even a fiercely interrogative text such as The Tortilla Curtain (1995), T. Coraghessan Boyle’s dark and intensely satiric analysis of exploitation and class dependency, exemplifies this current tendency.

A maid showed them in. She was small, neat, with an untraceable accent and a tight black uniform with a white trim and a little apron Delaney found excessive: who would dress a servant up like somebody’s idea of a servant, like something out of a movie? What was the point? Delaney is Boyle’s most Gulliver-like antihero, and while he continues to puzzle over what the maidservant signifies, Boyle’s readers are left in no doubt: she is a stage prop, her visibility an element in the apparatus of respectability assembled by a ruthless gangster to glamorize his household, and thereby deflect his guests’ attention from the fact he is living under house arrest. This present-day servant simply signifies, rather than in any way knows. In the larger scheme of the novel, her showiness places her in opposition to the oppressed and unfortunate illegal migrants from Mexico, Cándido, and América, immigrants on whose servitude

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1 and labour Delaney and his California neighbours rely, and whose misery and presence they sentence to invisibility, carelessly and regardlessly jeopardizing their existence and survival. Almost out of sight themselves, Cándido and América apprehend the world facing them with piercing sensory vividness, and feel and suffer every one of the blows that rain constantly on them with acid persistence; but their perceptions never modulate into an understanding, and never amount to a knowledge empowering them to grasp or master their situation, not even in a matter of life and death: ‘They hit something, something so big it was immovable, and Cándido lost his grip on América and the raft at the same time; he was in the water suddenly with nothing to hold on to and the water was as cold as death’.6

Lacking a capacity to process information and make of it knowledge, servants most usually appear in postmodern culture as helpless victims, and – as here – as spectacles to evoke pathos and pity; to be a servant and otherwise in contemporary culture is to be magical, like Mary Poppins.

Restoration culture mocked magic, as a bag of low tricks. To investigate further how the Restoration could imagine servants differently – differently from how servants were viewed in Restoration life, and very differently from how servants are portrayed in our own times – I shall take three steps. First of all, I shall propose a set of four protocols or rules concerning servants in Restoration plays up till the end of the seventeenth century. Next I shall outline how radical change to what servants are imagined to know becomes manifest around about 1700. This shift seems to me ideological, and in shorthand it may be described as a turn from Hobbes towards Locke, a move away from universalizing and egalitarianism towards particularization and differentiation. On this basis I shall then consider how what these servants know may indicate how art and ideology entangle.

**Rules Concerning Servants in Restoration Drama, Up to 1700**

**Rule One: Egalitarianism Prevails in Master–Servant Discourse**

When masters or mistresses converse with their servants, they do so with a presumption of mutual equality and shared humanity. Such is the note Handy and Dorimant strike, in the opening moments of *The Man of Mode*:

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6 Ibid., p. 354.

In their raillery, Handy and Dorimant echo each other in tone. As the play continues, this sameness of idiom appears too among the women – between Mrs Loveit and her maidservant Pert and between Harriet and her maidservant Busy. Such easiness persists into the theatre of the 1690s, elaborated in the argumentatively witty repartee of servants such as Valentine’s man Jeremy in Congreve’s Love for Love (1695), or Lovewell’s man Brush, in Farquhar’s Love and a Bottle (1698):

**BRUSH.** Sir, you can’t be my Master.

**LOVEWELL.** Why so?

**BRUSH.** Because you’re not your own Master; yet one would think you might be, for you have lost your Mistress. Oons, Sir, let her go, and a fair riddance … my Shoes and Stockings are upon their last Legs with trudging between you. I have sweat out all my moisture of my hand with palming your clammy Letters upon her. I have –

**LOVEWELL.** Hold, Sir, your trouble is now at an end, for I design to marry her.

**BRUSH.** And have you courted her these three years for nothing but a Wife?

**LOVEWELL.** Do you think, rascal, I wou’d have taken so much pains to make her a Miss?

**BRUSH.** No, sir; the tenth part on’t wou’d ha’ done. – But if you are resolv’d to marry, God b’w’ye.

**LOVEWELL.** What’s the matter now, Sirrah!

**BRUSH.** Why, the matter will be, that I must then Pimp for her. – Hark ye, Sir, what have you been doing all this while, but teaching her the way to cuckold ye?

Even the daftest of social climbers has no trouble accepting that discourse with a servant should proceed on a companionable footing: Mrs Rich in Pix’s The Beau Defeated is so pleased with the maidservant Betty that she confers on her the nobility of a French particle such as she herself would delight in: ‘From henceforth let me call thee de la Bette; that has an air French and agreeable’. But though Mrs Rich’s snobbery is mildly ludicrous, her fond courtesy to her maid mitigates rather than intensifies her ridiculousness.

The force of the rule is even more apparent when we consider what happens if it is infringed. Rudeness to a servant earns its perpetrator automatic reproach: when Lord Worthy cuffs his footman Buckle, in Susannah Centlivre’s The Basset Table (1705), the skittish Lady Reveller can immediately take the high moral ground, and she upbraids him on the spot: ‘Where did you learn this rudeness, my Lord, to strike your servant before me?’ Should a foolish master or mistress speak harshly to a servant by pulling rank, it is not merely evidence he or she is a fool, but it is likely to herald his or her come-uppance. As the name indicates, Sir Davy Dunce in Otway’s The Souldiers Fortune (1681) is a cretin; to begin

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9 Pix, The Beau Defeated, I, 1, p. 166.

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What do the servants know? With, he appears an amiable idiot, demonstrating simple stupidity by, for instance, claiming that a soldier who spent a night cavorting in a ditch with a Jesuit could have accidentally mistaken the Jesuit for a woman; but later in the play, after he has lashed out undeservedly against his own servant, Vermin, Sir Davy marks himself down for severe humiliation:

Davy Dunce. Open the door, you whelp of Babylon!

Vermin. Oh Sir, y’re welcome home; but here is the saddest news! Here has been murder committed, sir.

Davy Dunce. Hold your tongue, you fool, and go to sleep, get you in, do you hear, you talk of murder you rogue? You meddle with state-affairs! Get you in.\(^{11}\)

Following on from this, Sir Davy is exposed publicly as the cuckold he has constantly claimed he was not, and as the play finishes he is left abasing himself to his cuckolder: ‘lay me in a Prison, or throw me in a Dungeon’.\(^{12}\)

Likewise, in *The Way of the World*, once Lady Wishfort speaks abusively to a young servant, she dispatched to fetch her makeup, it is clear she is the one who has crossed a line:

Lady Wishfort. Paint, paint, paint, dost thou understand that, changeling, dangling thy hands like bobbins before thee? Why dost thou not stir, puppet? Thou wooden thing upon wires!\(^{13}\)

Her transgression is compounded when she directs unforgiving venom on Foible, her personal maid, by placing ruthless emphasis on the class difference between them:

Lady Wishfort. Begone, begone, begone, go; that I took from washing of old gauze and weaving of dead hair, with a bleak blue nose, over a chafing-dish of starved embers, and dining behind a traver’s rag, in a shop no bigger than a bird-cage. Go, go, starve again, do, do! Foible. Dear madam, I’ll beg pardon on my knees.

Lady Wishfort. Away, out, out, go set up for yourself again, do; drive a trade …\(^{14}\)

Congreve’s denouement heaps shame and exposure on Lady Wishfort, no less savagely than Otway did on Sir Davy Dunce: this passionate widow has to agree to relinquish hope of a husband, and then dance in celebration of a marriage she has been opposed to, till she is ‘ready to sink under the fatigue’.\(^{15}\) Not every fool is rash enough to break the rule of egalitarian discourse with servants; those who do bring on themselves punishment and humiliation that is harsh and on target.

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\(^{12}\) Ibid., V, pp. 738–9.


\(^{14}\) Ibid., V, 1, pp. 3–20.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., V, 1, pp. 609–10.
For this stage convention there is substantial intellectual precedent. In his account of how the Royal Society took scientific enquiry forward, Bishop Spratt had famously observed the importance attached to linguistic democracy: 'They have exacted from their members a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions, clear senses; a native easiness … and preferring the language of Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants, before that of Wits, or Scholars'. It is questionable whether the bishop’s approval for those who borrow the language of the common people would give full licence to liberty in conversation between classes, but Hobbes reaches more fully in that direction when, in the opening to Leviathan, he refuses to countenance 'either the barbarous state of men in power, towards their inferiors; or to encourage men of low degree, to a sawcie behaviour towards their betters'. The freedoms in cross-class discourse upheld on stage link not with revolution but with the universalizing which Hobbes promulgated as 'the similitude of passions, which are the same in all men, desire, fear, hope, &c; not the similitude of the objects of the passions, which are the things desired, feared, hoped, &c; for these do so vary'. Hobbes begins from an insistance of sameness, on whatever it might be that makes us all alike, members of humankind, and it is sameness in this sense which underpins the egalitarianism of discourse between masters and servants on the restoration stage, the theatre embracing the ideology of Hobbesist inquiry.

However, once this egalitarianism of the theatre is relocated offstage, as a feature of casual conversation, it immediately sounds saucy and outrageous. In the dialogue he envisaged for the Duchess of Cleveland and the actress Betty Knight, Rochester carries the cross-class levelling of theatre convention over into a supposedly everyday encounter:

Quoth the Duchess of Cleveland to Mistress Knight,
I’d fain have a prick, knew I how to come by’t.
But you must be secret and give your advice,
Though cunt be not coy, reputation is nice.
To some cellar in Sodom your Grace must retire,
There porters with black pots sit round the coal fire.
There open your case, and your Grace cannot fail
Of a dozen of pricks, for a dozen of ale.
Is’t so? quoth the Duchess. Aye by God, quoth the whore.
Then give me the key that unlocks the back door.
For I had rather be fucked by porters and car-men,
Than thus be abused by Churchill and Jermyn.

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18 Ibid., pp. 82–3.
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1 The joke here is to present talk which in its freedom is intellectually and theatrically plausible – and very likely was in character psychologically plausible too – as if it is occurring, with all the energy it takes to imagine something actually so (almost) impossible. By playing against and across the boundary between fiction and fact, what is demonstrated is the force of that boundary.

7 Rule Two: Servants are Noncombatants in Erotic Engagements

9 Unless they are complete fools – and that is highly unusual – servants opt to remain onlookers on the love chases taking place all around them. Thomas Southerne’s

11 The Wives’ Excuse (1682) begins experimentally, with a long scene featuring only servants on stage, supposed to be waiting outside a fashionable concert hall; footmen discuss with great knowingness their masters’ and mistresses’ potential for adultery; pageboys then enact in mimicry the behaviour that is described. But despite their delight in reasoning extensively from what they observe, it is striking that not one of these witty footmen or pageboys gives any sign he would want to go further, and plunge into or participate in the love games they analyze so avidly:

2 FOOTMAN. My Master has been married not a quarter of a year, and half the young men in Town, know his Wife already; nay, know that he has known enough of her, not to care for her already.

3 FOOTMAN. And that may be a very good argument for some of ’em, to persuade her to know a little of somebody else, and care as little for him.

4 FOOTMAN. A very good argument, if she takes it by the right handle.

2 FOOTMAN. Some of your Masters, I warrant you, will put it into her hand.

3 FOOTMAN. I know my Master has a design upon her.

2 FOOTMAN. And upon all the Women in Town.

4 FOOTMAN. Mine is in love with her.

5 FOOTMAN. And mine has hopes of her.

3 FOOTMAN. Every man has hopes of a new marry’d Woman for she marries to like her Man; and if upon trial she finds she can’t like her Husband; she’ll find somebody else that she can like, in a very little time, I warrant her, or change her Men ’till she does.

2 FOOTMAN. Let her like as many as she pleases, and welcome: As they thrive with her, I shall thrive by them: I grind by her Mill, and some of ’em I hope will set it a going. Besides, she has discover’d some of my Master’s Intrigues of late. That may help to fill the Sails; but I say nothing, I will take Fees a both sides, and betray neither.20

38 Earlier in the scene, there is one cheekily forward footman who makes the macho boast that he has cheated his master of a wench and stolen a clap from him; but the others give him no credence; instead they freeze him out and resume their discussion of their masters as if he had not spoken. They are attached to their detachment.

In plays that end on multiple marriages, bytimes there is encouragement for the servants to mirror their masters and couple too; but even should one servant agree, this is soon nipped in the bud. As for example at the end of Etherege’s *The Comical Revenge* (1664), after a stage direction for Sir Nicholas to enter with his bride, followed by Wheadle with his bride, and Palmer with his bride, it is then proposed that the maid Betty and the valet Dufoy should swell the numbers and marry too; Betty seems ready to agree, but Dufoy interrupts: ‘Peace, peace, Metres Bett; ve vil be ver good friend upon occasion; but ve vil no marriee: that be ver much beter, beggar’.21 Shakespearean multi-marriage endings are generally resisted by wittier maidservants. Betty in Pix’s *The Beau Defeated* has no hesitation in knocking back the forwardness of the manservant Jack, who proposes she joins him in the general marital ruck:

JACK. Nay, we shall live a delicious life that’s certain, ha, my dear damsel!

BETTY. Peace, and mind your betters.22

And at the end of Centlivre’s *The Basset Table*, when the maid Alpiew is put in a similar situation, she too is pithy in her refusal:

LOVELY. Will not Valeria look on me? She used to be more kind when we fished for eels in vinegar.

VALERIA. My Lovely, is it thee? And has natural sympathy forborne to inform my sense so long?

[...]

BUCKLE. Here’s such a coupling! Mrs Alpiew, han’t you a month’s mind?

ALPIEW. Not to you, I assure you.23

Indeed, servants tend to appear onstage far more in the earlier acts of plays, and to be absent at endings; it appears that what the servants know would undermine closure:

Reciprocally, even the daftest masters and mistresses take umbrage at the very suggestion of erotic engagement with a servant. In Congreve’s *Love for Love* (1695), Foresight the astrologer snaps out of his stargazing when he hears his daughter proposing to marry Robin the butler, and with unexpected acumen he gives a brusque and practical order: ‘Bid Robin make ready to give an account of his plate and linen’.24 However hot with greedy passion she may be, Lady Wishfort too draws the line at cross-class liaison:


What ... betray me ... marry me to a cast serving man ... make me a receptacle, an hospital for a decayed pimp! O thou frontless impudence, more than a big-bellied actress!²⁵

There is, though, just one moment in the drama of the era in which a master–servant relation is eroticized quite lusciously, and this a scene invented by Rochester for his tragedy Valentinian, an addition he composed to put his stamp on the last act of his adaptation of Fletcher’s old play. It is an extraordinary scene that begins with the Emperor Valentinian lolling swooningly on a couch with the boy Lycias, servant to Maximus; Lycias has just helped engineer Valentinian’s rape of Lucina, Maximus’s wife, and now Valentinian embraces him, exclaiming to him amorous:

Oh let me press thy balmy lips all day
And bathe my love-scorched soul in thy moist kisses.
Now by my joys thou are all sweet and soft.²⁶

Just when it seems that Valentinian can take his excesses no farther, Rochester has found some more taboos for him to violate. It is notable that once the old soldier Aeicius enters and discovers this couple, what horrifies him is not that Valentinian is declaring love for another man, but love for someone ‘base’, and is eroticizing a servant.²⁷ Valentinian rises to the occasion and attempts to interpose his own body, heroically but too late, between Aeicius’s sword and the unfortunate servant lad, who is stabbed to death. Because Valentinian is himself a study in transgression, someone who crosses every limit, he constantly demonstrates what are the rules by dint of constantly breaking them. If we ask the question of whether the servant Lycias himself responds erotically to Valentinian’s lovemaking, the play is silent: Lycias is described in the cast list as a ‘eunuch’, whatever that may mean; and the only words Lycias gets to speak during this scene are pleas for help when under assault from Aceicus’s sword. The general rule is affirmed: what has been shown very vividly is that a servant who enters into an erotic embrace is sure to be somehow destroyed.

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²⁶ Rochester, Valentinian, V, I, pp. 1–3, in Rochester: Complete Poems and Plays, ed. Paddy Lyons (London, 1993); Rochester’s innovations are examined on pp. 323–6, and this scene is considered further on p. 325.
²⁷ Homophobia as we know it did not prevail in English culture before 1700. In his study of male homosexuality in early modern England, Rictor Norton notes that from the time of the trial of the Earl of Castlehaven and his catamite pageboys in the 1630s, there is no further record of executions for these activities until 1703. See Rictor Norton (ed.), ‘Passion for a Catamite’, in Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England: A Sourcebook (10 April 2000, updated 15 June 2008) <http://www.rictornorton.co.uk/eighteen/1701cata.htm>.
Rule Three: Servants Know the Laws of Desire

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes persistently identifies desire as primary, as the vital force fundamental to life: ‘to have no Desire is to be Dead’.28 This generates a far from comfortable equation: ‘there is no such thing as perpetuall Tranquility of mind, while we live here; because Life it selfe is but Motion, and can never be without Desire’.29 And Hobbes makes no attempt to conceal the potential for tragedy in desire, in its dimensions of motion and change, and inexhaustible inconstancy: ‘Nor can a man any more live, whose Desires are at an end … Felicity is a continuall progresse of the desire, from one object to another’.30 In taking as its field courtship behaviour, both among people who are married and those who are not, Restoration theatre dedicated itself to the demonstration and exploration of these Hobbesist theses that privilege mobility and change. Desire will only pursue a moving target; and he or she who permits capture ceases to be an object of desire. This is encoded in the plotting of the plays, again and again. It gives rises to a recurrent sequence of desire and pursuit followed by possession, satiation, boredom, and rejection, a vicious cycle, doomed to circularity and constant repetition. Dorimant announces the position, succinctly, in the opening of *The Man of Mode*: ‘Next to the coming to an understanding with a new mistress, I love a quarrel with an old one, but the devil’s in’t, there has been such a calm in my affairs of late’.31 The intolerableness of this cycle gives rise to dramatic tension when Truewits who know the laws of desire nevertheless allow themselves to be pulled by passion and to seek – in general fruitlessly, sometimes amusingly, sometimes with great pathos – to bypass or surmount the laws they already know will and must prevail. By contrast, the servants are more or less unshakeable in their knowing awareness, and remain bystanders on these games. Just how well servants understand the laws of desire becomes evident once we consider how they speak of desire.

Rule Four: Servants Are Expert in Utterance

To communicate the laws of the material world and articulate their consequences is to take a step beyond simple acceptance, as Hobbes makes plain, when he observes that ‘True and False are attributes of Speech, not of Things’.32 This understanding is built into the dramaturgy of the period: if, for example, desire withers once it is reciprocated, it cannot be stated; in these Hobbes-inflected plays, love is only ever acknowledged in an aside that is presumed to pass unheard; to declare love directly is ruinous, and passion is altered once it is admitted or revealed. For servants, who never voice surrender to desire, the issue is that of 28


30 Ibid., *Leviathan*, p. 160.


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1 how to intervene, how to warn or inform, and their sophistication in this domain is 1
great. A sharp example is given by the maid Isabel, in Wycherley’s Love in a Wood 2
(1671), who alternates knowingly between tactful restraint and brutal hearsay 3
with her ill-tempered mistress, Christina, as she responds to Christina’s restless 4
demands to hear only what she wants to hear:

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7 Isabel. Faith, Madam, you’ll be angry, ’tis the old trick of Lovers to hate their 7
informers, after they have made ’em such.
8 Christina. I will not be angry.
9 Isabel. They say then, since Mr. Valentine’s flying into France, you are grown 9
mad, have put yourself into mourning, live in a dark room, where you’ll see 10
nobody, nor take any rest day or night, but rave and talk to yourself perpetually.
11 Christina. Now what else?
12 Isabel. All this hitherto, is true; now to the rest.
13 Isabel. Indeed, Madam, I have no more to tell you. I was sorry, I’m sure, to hear 13
so much of any Lady of mine.
14 Christina. Insupportable insolence!
15 [Knocking at the door.]

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We may note in passing how at the start Isabel manages to work into her utterances 23
a caveat on the dangers frankness may give rise to, which – just as Isabel 24
expects – Christina at once professes to accept and instantly disregards. But as 25
the scene continues, Christina’s women friends remark how valuable are Isabel’s 26
skills in discourse:

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Lady Flippant. How can any one alone manage an amorous intrigue; though the 1
Birds are tame, somebody must help draw the net; if ‘twere not for a Woman 2
that could make an excuse with assurance, how shou’d we wheedle, jilt, trace, 3
discover, countermine, undermine, and blow up the stinking fellows. 4

To ‘make an excuse with assurance’ is to follow Hobbes to the letter, in treating 6
true and false as attributes of speech, not of things; and this capability qualifies 7
servants to probe revealingly across gaps between what is said and the feeling 8
which prompt what is said. Wycherley again:

Lucy. Nay, madam, I will ask you the reason why you would banish poor Master 10
Harcourt forever from your sight. How could you be so hardhearted?

Alithea. ’Twas because I was not hardhearted.

Lucy. No, no, ’twas stark love and kindness, I warrant.

Alithea. It was so; I would see him no more because I love him.

Lucy. Hey-day, a very pretty reason!

Alithea. You do not understand me.

Lucy. I wish you may yourself.

Elsewhere in The Country Wife Lucy encourages Mrs Pinchwife to lie, there being 19
no other way to ensure her survival in the face of Mr Pinchwife’s jealous violence; 20
and here she works on her mistress, the tediously self-deceiving Alithea, like a 21
Lacanian psychoanalyst, drawing her to recognize how her desires are the obverse 22
of those she has been pronouncing. Her adroitness demonstrates her knowing 23
command of utterance.

Sensitivity to these entanglements of desire and articulation remained 25
characteristic of servants to the end of the century. No less subtle than Wycherley’s 26
Lucy is the maid Lucy in Congreve’s The Old Bachelor (1692), who instructs 27
Silvia, her mistress, in the practice of ingenuity:

Lucy. I have that in my head may make mischief.

Silvia. How, dear Lucy?

Lucy. You know Araminta’s dissembled coyness has won, and keeps him hers – 30
Silvia. Could we persuade him that she loves another –

Lucy. No, you’re out; could we persuade him that she dotes on him, himself.

Contrive a kind letter as from her, ’twould disgust his nicety, and take away his 34
stomach.

Silvia. Impossible; ’twill never take.

Lucy. Trouble not your head. Let me alone – I will inform myself of what passed 37
between ’em to-day, and about it straight. Hold, I’m mistaken, or that’s Heartwell, 38
who stands talking at the corner – ’tis he – go get you in, madam, receive him 39
pleasantly, dress up your face in innocence and smiles, and dissemble the very 40
want of dissimulation. You know what will take him.

34 Ibid., II, 2, pp. 55–73.
Silvia. 'Tis as hard to counterfeit love as it is to conceal it: but I'll do my weak
endeavour, though I fear I have not art.

Lucy. Hang art, madam, and trust to nature for dissembling.\textsuperscript{36}

Silvia goes on to win the love of Heartwell by not being frank with him and, thanks
to Lucy, also unsettles the man who passed her over: a forged letter purporting to be
from Araminta and admitting reciprocal feelings for Vainlove does indeed alienate
him, exactly as Lucy predicted. So pleased with herself is Silvia that she imagines
this to be all her own work, and tells Lucy in delight, ‘I find dissembling to our
sex is as natural as swimming to a negro; we may depend upon our skill to save us
at a plunge – though till then we never make the experiment’.\textsuperscript{37} Lucy exemplifies
well the four rules for servants: she discourses on an equal basis with Silvia, she
supports Silvia loyally but does not herself succumb to erotic entanglement, and
she puts at the service of her mistress both her knowledge of the laws of desire and
her expertise about how utterance and discourse are enmeshed.

Servants After 1700

After 1700 these four rules fall apart, all more or less at once. By the 1720s Defoe
imagines Moll Flanders as wanting to escape servitude, wanting to make money
and to marry money, by hook or by crook, so as to be a ‘gentlewoman’. There has
been, we could say, an onset of class-consciousness, accompanied by new social
aspirations. Hobbes’s principles arising from ‘similitude of passions’ – base in
every sense to humankind at large – have ceased to count: instead of sameness,
it is differences that have come to matter. This new conception is Lockean, we
may say, as it was Locke who taught that people are blank slates, all of us \textit{tabula
rasa}, till inscribed on differently by differing life experiences; or, as Valentine
announces somewhat sourly to Angelica, ‘You are … a sheet of lovely spotless
paper, when you first are born; but you are to be scrawled and blotted by every
goose’s quill’.\textsuperscript{38} Lady Wishfort expands this Lockean logic when she rages against
her servant Foible:

Bosom traitress … drive a trade, do, with your threepennyworth of small ware,
flaunting upon a packthread, under a brandy-seller’s bulk, or against a dead wall
by a ballad-monger. Go, hang out an old frisoneer-gorget, with a yard of yellow
colberteen again, do; an old gnawed mask, two rows of pins, and a child’s fiddle;
a glass necklace with the beads broken, and a quilted night-cap with one ear. Go,
go, drive a trade. These were your commodities, you treacherous trull; this was
the merchandise you dealt in.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{36} William Congreve, \textit{The Old Bachelor}, III, 1, pp. 35–55, in \textit{The Complete Plays of

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., IV, 1, pp. 150–53.


Foible is atomized, and in this abusive tirade is imagined in terms of her past experiences, as the sum of the commodities with which she has been associated. Lady Wishfort’s fury is Lockean too in setting its target apart. The servant is branded as different, and as from different stock because formed by different experiences. The year of the play is 1700.

If people are not similar but differ radically, through differences of social origin, experiences, and upbringing, then there are not necessarily any grounds for equality in discourse. If everyone is radically not the same in their core passions, it is quite possible the laws of desire are not the same for everyone. These shifts are very apparent in Farquhar’s *The Beaux-Stratagem* (1707) when Cherry the innkeeper’s daughter fobs off the advances of Archer, who is calling himself ‘Martin’ and acting as valet to Aimwell—though Archer is in fact himself a beau, a member of the gentry. Cherry is an avatar of Moll Flanders, and eager to be upwardly mobile: ‘tho I was born to Servitude, I hate it’. What Cherry knows is that the gentry are different, and she is observant as to how their kind conduct themselves, astutely and teasingly pointing out to Archer ‘your Discourse and your Habit are Contradictions, and it wou’d be nonsense in me to believe you a Footman any longer’.

To get her to bed with him, Archer tries telling her what she should want to hear, that he is a gentleman, down on his luck, but Cherry is no fool, and she probes further:

*Cherry.* Then take my Hand – promise to marry me before you sleep, and I’ll make you Master of two thousand Pound.

*Archer.* How?

*Cherry.* Two thousand Pound that I have this Minute in my own Custody; so throw off your Livery this Instant, and I’ll go find a Parson.

*Archer.* What said you? A Parson!

*Cherry.* What! do you scruple?

*Archer.* Scruple! no, no, but – two thousand Pound you say?

*Cherry.* And better.

*Archer.* S’dearth, what shall I do – but heark’e, Child, what need you make me Master of yourself and Money, when you may have the same Pleasure out of me, and still keep your Fortune in your Hands.

*Cherry.* Then you won’t marry me?

*Archer.* I wou’d marry you, but –

*Cherry.* O sweet, Sir, I’m your humble Servant, you’re fairly caught, wou’d you persuade me that any Gentleman who cou’d bear the Scandal of wearing a Livery, wou’d refuse two thousand Pound let the Condition be what it wou’d – no, no, Sir, – but I hope you’ll Pardon the Freedom I have taken, since it was only to inform myself of the Respect that I ought to pay you.

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41 Ibid., II, 2, pp. 194–6.

42 Ibid., II, 2, pp. 208–30.
What Do the Servants Know?

1 Cherry’s interrogation gives precedence to class analysis and follows reasoning based on a mocking understanding of class difference. She also embodies a new eroticization of the servant that is even most conspicuously on display when Mrs Sullen and Dorinda take notice of the attractiveness and charms of the man they suppose to be a servant:

DORINDA. I have heard say, that People may be guess’d at by the behaviour of their Servants; I cou’d wish we might talk to that Fellow.

MRS SULLEN. So do I; for, I think he’s a very pretty Fellow: Come this way, I’ll throw out a Lure for him presently.43

Like Cherry, Mrs Sullen and Dorinda question whether there may be some mismatch between the man and his livery, now hoping it is so:

DORINDA. This is surprising: did you ever see so pretty a well-bred Fellow?

MRS SULLEN. The Devil take him for wearing that livery.

DORINDA. I fancy, Sister, he may be some Gentlemen, a Friend of my Lord’s, that his Lordship has pitch’d upon for his Courage, Fidelity, and Discretion to bear him company in this dress, and who, ten to one was his Second too.

MRS SULLEN. It is so, it must be so, and it shall be so. – For I like him.44

Here there is fudge, as Mrs Sullen and Dorinda conjure up gentility to pluck Archer out of the servant class and make proper the pleasure they take in his person and his sex appeal. Belonging to the first years of the new century, The Beaux-Stratagem is a transitional play; for his ending Farquhar opts to fudge and blur all issues, abandoning any enquiry into the laws of desire, and instead preferring warmth, with a fantasy divorce that spreads freedom and love among the gentry, on the impossible grounds that ‘Consent is law enough to set you free’.45 Cherry’s skill in deft inquiry does not reappear; conveniently, Cherry goes into hiding to shelter her criminal father from his pursuers; and nothing remains of her other than a billet-doux and a strongbox full of money, to complete Archer’s return to fortune, and make him fully eligible to marry the newly divorced Mrs Sullen. In short, cross-class erotic engagement is toyed with in prospect but obliterated from the final picture.

Liaison between servants and gentry also seems a momentary possibility in the final act of Mrs Pix’s The Beau Defeated (1700), another transitional play, though with a different mood. Sir John Roverhead, the beau of the title, is a kept man, the live-in lover of the gambler Lady La Basset. He comes close to marrying the wealthy widow Mrs Rich, and also to eloping with her young niece Lucinda, who possesses a fine casket of jewels. But his plots are foiled, and he is revealed by Lady La Basset as himself a servant, dressed in ‘borrowed honours’. For a moment it seems we are witnessing a confession, an enraged admission of folly

from a Duchess furious at being betrayed by a servant she has lowered herself to 1
and loved. But the false Sir John is vengeful, and turns on her quickly:

SIR JOHN. Hold, hold; not so fast. How came you to be the Honourable, the Lady
Basset. I think ’twas I dubbed ye. As I take it, ye were but the cast mistress of Sir
Francis Basset, when I found ye.46

Order prevails: the illicit liaison was, after all, no worse than a liaison of commoners. 7
But what is interesting is that no one on stage is very troubled or surprised in the
wake of these revelations; they are all absorbed in their own concerns, and only
Mrs Rich even bothers to pay them any passing notice:

MRS RICH. Sir John, will ye participate in our diversion, or employ your time in
reconciling yourself to this enraged lady?47

In Mrs Pix’s plays, shock and surprise never last long, and people move on, 15
unflappable, taking for granted whatever may be; here what is taken for granted
foreshadows a new construction of the stage servant, one which was soon to
become widespread.

Eliza Haywood was a woman who came to London as a young actress and 19
soon became known for her capabilities in writing for the contemporary literary
market. Her first original play, A Wife to be Let (1723), displays how in the space
of two decades the cross-class liaisons toyed with by Farquhar and Mrs Pix had
become mainstream: when the footman Shamble passes himself off as one Sir
Tristam, and marries the wealthy Widow Stately, his social mobility is greeted first
of all with amusement and then with general applause:

WIDOW STATELY. Your servant, gentlemen, your servant, ladies; I beg pardon for
my long absence – but, but – a – I cou’d not rise today, I think.

GAYLOVE. Sir Tristram play’d his part then pretty well, last night, I find.

FAIRMAN. Joy, madam – you have stole a wedding, I hear.

WIDOW STATELY. People of quality never talk of these affairs till they are
accomplish’d, Mr Fairman – Sir Tristram here was so pressing.

COURTLY. And your ladyship so easy –

GRASPELL. Sir Tristram! Why, are you all mad? Why, this is Jonathan Shamble –
sure I know Jonathan Shamble: he was footman to a nephew of mine about four
or five years ago, when I was last in London.

ALL. Ha, ha, ha! a footman!

GAYLOVE. Well, well, Mr Graspell, he’s a man of an estate now, and ’twill be
unmannerly to rip up pedigrees.

WIDOW STATELY. I am not cheated, sure – what’s the meaning of all this?

SHAMBLE. Why, faith, my dear wife, since the truth must out, I only borrow’d my
quality to make myself agreeable to you. –

47 Ibid.
**What Do the Servants Know?**

**WIDOW STATELY.** Villain! Rogue! I’ll tear you to pieces.

**SHAMBLE.** Hold, hold, good lady, passion – have mercy on my clothes, for they are none of my own.

**GAYLOVE.** Patience, madam, patience! Boxing does not become a woman of quality.

**WIDOW STATELY.** A footman! A footman! But I’ll have him hanged! He’s a cheat, he has married me in a false name. But you shan’t think to carry it so – I was not born yesterday: I’ll go to a lawyer immediately.

**GAYLOVE.** Hark ye, hark ye, madam – your anger will do you but little service. – He has wedded you, bedded you, and got your writings, and if you consider calmly on the matter, you’ll find nothing can be done in this affair for your satisfaction. – You had better therefore quietly forgive the imposition; and as you have a good estate, turn part of it into ready money, and e’en buy him a title – such things are done every day in London – and when once you have made a gentleman of him, everybody won’t know by what means he came to be one.

**WIDOW STATELY.** Why that’s true, indeed.

**GAYLOVE.** You’ll find it your best way.

**WIDOW STATELY.** Well, since there’s no help, I’ll sell all I have, and away to London.

**GAYLOVE.** You may be happy enough – I dare swear he’ll make you a good husband.48

Unlike Congreve’s Lady Wishfor just a generation earlier – whom Haywood is to some extent rewriting, but on the terms of new times – this widow is quickly reconciled to having a husband from the servant class: it is only boxing that ‘does not become a woman of quality’. It all appears reasonably acceptable: after all, Shamble is not only energetic but is actually affectionate, declaring publicly he ‘borrowed’ nobility ‘only … to make myself agreeable to you’. And once she is reminded that she is wealthy enough to buy her new husband a title – ‘such things are done every day in London’ – the Widow’s anger is all over, she can shrug her shoulders, à la Mary Pix, and set off to purchase him a peerage ‘as is done every day in London’. By 1723 entertaining a cross-class liaison with a servant was familiar on the London stage. It was already so in, for example, _The Northern Heiress_ (1716), a play by Irishwoman Mary Davys, where the witty maid Liddy gets herself married to Mr Bareface, one of her mistress’s several suitors. Class solidarity is evident in Davys’s play, enough for upwardly mobile servants to connive happily together, to enable each other to marry up the social ladder: Liddy’s capture of Mr Bareface is accomplished with the assistance of a manservant, Ralph, who is as it happens is himself aspiring to be a playwright. This too is taken up by Eliza Haywood: Shamble’s design on Widow Stately is forwarded with the aid of his old girlfriend Jenny, no longer a girl-about-town but retired to the country, with her Lockean memories, and living very comfortably as the widow’s housekeeper. But it is notable how all these marriages are brought about by disguise and pretence to nobility, not through the expertise in articulation that was characteristic of

48 Eliza Haywood, _A Wife To Be Let_, V, 1, pp. 68–9, 2nd edn (London, 1729).
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pre-1700 stage servants: Mr Bareface is led to imagine he is marrying the heiress Isabella when he is in fact marrying her maid in a mask; and though he is rather less gracious than Widow Stately in accepting marriage to a servant, everyone else is delighted, and they conclude the play by patronizing him effusively:

ISABELLA. I beg you will make a kind husband to my maid, for I assure you she is a gentlewoman born, (and tho’ perhaps you may never find it out) a woman of very good sense too.

BAREFACE. Madam, the more good qualities she has, the more I have to thank you for.

[Aside] Pox take you for your present.

SIR JEFFREY. So, so, all’s well. Come, now let’s have a dance.49

It is news that Liddy ‘is a gentlewoman born’; but the late news device is familiar from Farquhar, an indication that cross-class eroticism on stage was still tentative, the relative boldness of Eliza Haywood not yet altogether established.

The World and the Stage – Art and Ideology

Ingenuity is on display whenever servants are applying their knowledge, whether in the service of their masters and mistresses on the pre-1700 stage, or in pursuit of betterment for themselves through marriage to money, as became prevalent on the stage after 1700. The considerable conspicuousness with which ingenuity is exercised signals that the spectacle is special, uncommon in the everyday world of its audience. But it is pointlessly flippant to brand Restoration theatre, as Charles Lamb did, as ‘altogether a speculative scene of things, which has no reference whatever to the world that is’.50 The split begs a question about desire: why should these times have wished to endow stage servants with so much more knowledge than it attributed to actual everyday servants? To examine why this was, and why around about 1700 there is change to what the fictional servants know, I would like to borrow from Althusser, and to regard theatre as not reflecting its world with the photographic directness of a mirror any more than ideology does: ‘What is represented … is not the system of real relations which governs the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live’.51 In short, we need to ask what were the relations of theatre audiences – relations of identification, disidentification and counter-identification – to these servants who could be imagined as knowing – and differently so before and after 1700?

Before 1700, theatre was prone to sneer at ‘the grave man of business’:

Wycherley’s Horner reviles the business community as sexually impotent; for

similar reasons Aphra Behn in *The Lucky Chance* (1688) mocks the financial
and banking community; and merchants and traders in general fare badly on the
pre-1700 stage. The epilogue to Mrs Pix’s *The Beau Defeated* (1700), the ending
of which has already been noted as tentatively indicating change in the placement
of servants, breaks with this old habit, and announces new loyalties:

The glory of the world our British nobles are,

[...]

But to our City, Augusta’s sons,

The conquering wealth of both the Indies runs;

Though less in name, of greater power by far.\(^{52}\)

After 1700, theatre architecture had altered, the size of the auditorium increasing
fourfold; Mrs Pix was welcoming new theatre-goers who were to fill these vastly
enlarged spaces, and they came from a new nonproductive class, one that came into
being with the founding of the Bank of England (1694), and the many speculative
ventures – such as the South Sea Bubble, such as the slave-trading companies –
which were thereby soon enabled. It was a class that located production outside of
and apart from itself, and which would swell in numbers as farther reaches of the
British Empire opened to colonial exploitation. Though not yet nobility, this class
well understood Widow Stately taking herself to London to purchase a peerage.

Coming from a range of backgrounds which could include domestic service, this
new class was more prone to hire servants to bring itself prestige rather than to
recall origins; for this class, the new Lockean servants on stage, imagined as shaped
and defined by their specific backgrounds and experiences, provide a counter-myth,
and offer counter-identification, embodying all this new audience wanted to see as
not reflecting itself directly, which is to say scheming, wheedling, and conniving to
attain wealth through marriage, in the way of old aristocracy.

Very occasionally, from 1700 onwards, servants fall for other servants, and
when they do the cruel laws of desire seem not to apply; instead, their shared class
awareness brings them close to being embodiments of Miltonic companionate
marriage, a central element in the ideology of the new rising class. Untroubled
friendliness characterizes the conversations between Foible and Waitwell, the
servants who marry in *The Way of the World* (1700). Tom and Phillis, the servants
who fall in love in Steele’s *The Conscious Lovers* (1722), specialize in affectionate
mockery of each other, and in shared (and very Lockean) fond recall of how they
found each other when polishing opposite sides of the one window-pane. It simply
does not occur to either of these couples that they too could undergo the restlessness
and uncertainties which unsettle the loves of their masters and mistresses or that
their loves must follow a pattern which moves from hunt to capture to boredom:

**Tom.** One acre with Phillis would be worth a whole country without her.

**Phillis.** O, could I believe you!

But such coupling of servants in love is notably rare on stage, rare because it risks inviting sympathetic identification from an audience which enjoyed servants and their antics in terms of counter-identification. It is thus not surprising that both Congreve and Steele should choose to exclude these pairs from their finales, even though these finales celebrate marriages that Foible and Waitwell, and that Tom and Phillis have helped to bring about. To go on to show servants in married bliss would have been too close to holding up servants as a mirror to a class that for itself favoured Miltonic bourgeois marriage, and in the theatre preferred the Locke-enabled option of counter-identification.

Pre-1700 theatre had, however, offered its audiences a richer and more complex system of identifications and disidentifications, more akin to Lacan’s story of the child gazing in a mirror and seeing – both and at once – a more coherent version of itself and a figure recognized as outside of and other to itself. This is a doubleness, exemplified for instance in Wycherley’s presentation of his Plain Dealer as at once both a mouthpiece for himself and also the butt of his mockery and satire. The Hobbesian inflection accorded to servants in the plays before 1700 ‘similitude of passions’, and on-stage egalitarianism gave grounds for identification, particularly as the servants’ knowledge of desire and its laws were confirmed in every twist and turn of the plays’ composition. It is a knowledge also shared by the Truewits, unless passion leads them into temporary forgetfulness, the difference between Truewits and servants being that Truewits (and, even more so, Would-be Wits) can get hurt – whereas servants remain bystanders, and preserve themselves intact. In other words, from one perspective, desire is dangerous, and potentially humiliating, while for those who hold off and stay on the sidelines – as the servants do – desire provides a spectacle which can be amusing and in its way instructive. The servants and the Truewits thus constitute two alternate poles in a dialectic between safety and vulnerability, and these plays offer a doubleness of identification, with both contrary positions available at once to its spectators.

Theatre bore witness to a gradual shift from one conception of the servant to another, from feudal to bourgeois, from Hobbes to Locke. But what happens if both these contrary concepts are in action together? There is one text from the decade of the Licensing Act which returns to the doubleness of pre-1700 theatre through its focus on servants, while simultaneously engaging with the Lockean mode of the new century. Swift’s Directions to Servants, though first published after his death in 1745 was, we know, in hand by 1731, and it is quite likely he had worked on it over some years: as Samuel Johnson remarked, ‘such a number


of particulars could never have been assembled by the power of recollection'.

It is a parody conduct-book, one of Swift’s funniest and darkest writings, full of bad, wicked, dangerous advice, such as this handy hint for nursemaids and child-minders: ‘If you happen to let the child fall, and lame it, be sure never confess it; and if it dies, all is safe’. Who is being addressed? This wise counsellor lets it be known quite frequently that most of the servants he is writing for are illiterate and cannot read. Is he then warning their masters and mistresses, divulging wickedness sometimes suspected to be part of what every low and cunning servant well knows? Is he setting down for the servants what they already know all too well? Or is the hardship and difficulty of servants’ lives – and the puny smallness of their joys – evoked so as to satirize an ignorantly self-satisfied ruling class? The tone is deadpan and gives nothing away: all perspectives are possible.

Johnson was right to notice how much this writing dwells on particulars: each of Swift’s servants is embedded in his or her duties, the sum of their associations, and thus perfectly Lockean. The opportunities to be foul and sluttish available to each one are catalogued with precision, as if drawing up demonic job descriptions.

The housemaid, to whom it falls to empty out the chamberpot should her ladyship prefer not to piss outdoors in the garden, is advised as to how she can lessen her load, quite simply, by conveying the pot:

down the great stairs, and in the presence of the footmen; and if anybody knocks, to open the street-door while you have the vessel filled in your hands. This, if anything can, will make your lady take the pains of evacuating her person in the proper place, rather than expose her filthiness to all the menservants in the house. This housemaid is indeed set apart by her routine. But then, just a couple of paragraphs later, still on the topic of chamberpot duties, her dislike for her lot seems entirely justified, as particularity is displaced and instead we are faced with a ‘similitude of passions’, as the housemaid is addressed as a ‘cleanly girl’ and advised ‘never wash them [chamberpots] in any other liquor except their own; what cleanly girl would be dabbling in other folk’s urine?’

Egalitarianism here is on the verge of crying out for democracy. The Directions to Servants is easily read as a text of rage, plentiful in details that fix class differentiation and generate inequalities, from which there is at most the relief of subverting authority by dodging a task without being caught out – ‘nothing [is] so pernicious in a family as a telltale, against whom it must be the principal business of you all to unite’. It establishes a world of entrapment, prone

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56 Swift, Directions, p. 70.
57 Ibid., p. 65.
58 Ibid., p. 66.
59 Ibid., p. 12.
to paranoia. And yet, in the self-same sentence, that which evokes paranoid mutual mistrust come too the contrary hints as to how class solidarity might make things better: ‘the principal business of you all [is] to unite’. The unfortunate housemaid is even allowed a moment of emotional release, in diversion that joins her in equality as one with her masters:

When you wash an upper room, carry down the pail so as to let the water dribble on the stairs all the way down to the kitchen; by which, not only your load will be lighter, but you will convince your lady that it is better to throw the water out of the windows, or down the street-door steps. Besides, this latter practice will be very diverting to you and the family in a frosty night, to see a hundred people falling on their noses or back-sides before your door, when the water is frozen.60

The discourse is repressive and vindictive, the impulses are potentially revolutionary. For Swift, writing at the end of the Long Restoration, the figure of the servant prompted a geometry of both connection and disconnection, and – just as for the playwrights – the servant seems at once to stand as the political unconscious of Swift’s own times, and to look forward almost unknowingly to times still to come.

60 Ibid., p. 67.