

Reading the Surfaces of Colley Cibber's *The Careless Husband*

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I do here think fit to inform the Reader, that in such Conclusions as these, Reason is certainly in the Right; and that in most Corporeal Beings, which have fallen under my Cognizance, the *Outside* hath been infinitely preferable to the *In*: Whereof I have been farther convinced from some late Experiments. Last Week I saw a Woman *flay'd*, and you will hardly believe, how much it altered her Person for the worse.

Jonathan Swift's satiric masterpiece *A Tale of a Tub* (1704) takes as its subject the relative value of what we might call an "aesthetics of surface," as opposed to an "aesthetics of depth."¹ Throughout his work, Swift's various narrators prod his reader to consider the two alternatives, as the text encourages us to fathom what it means first to embrace the surface, then to explore the meaning of depth. The experience, as readers of the text know too well, is vertiginous. In the end, we are hard pressed to say which side comes out on top. Is the narrator serious, for example, when he writes that wisdom is really a cheese, "which by how much the richer, has the thicker, the homelier, and the courser Coat; and whereof to a judicious Palate, the *Maggots* are the best"²? The brilliance of Swift's text lies in its ability to keep both alternatives in play simultaneously. Thus we live in a world where surface is all, where digging only discovers stinky cheese *and* in a world where the truth is always deep and necessarily difficult to come by.

In the end, *A Tale of a Tub* is much more than an aesthetic game, as Swift's project positions him in the middle of a wider social and cultural struggle. At stake is not just the value of two interpretative strategies, but alternative understandings of human subjectivity: are we creatures of depth or creatures of surface? Is the human character best understood as another

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kind of “surface,” to be read in terms of externalized signals or signs that denote status, social identity, religious conviction, or even gender? Or is human character in fact a “deep” effect, something buried to the casual observer and only obliquely accessible to those who know how to read beneath surface?

For many of Swift's contemporaries, this query takes a different, though related, form: where do we locate the truth of our “deep” and “authentic” being?³ In the works of Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, an ascendant sensibility will link aristocratic display, ostentation, sartorial splendor, and performance to the *inauthentic* self, while decorum, modesty, restraint, and—above all—the absence of performative behaviors will come to mark an *authentic*, normative, and valued bourgeois subject.⁴ As Erin Mackie has recently argued, fashion plays an especially important role in this redefinition of subjectivity. She explains that, in the pages of the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, “Fashion and style are often negatively evaluated as at best empty, and at worst deceptive, signs, with no necessary, and often an illusive, relation to ethical referents. Capitulation to fashion threatens one's character and, since character is being conceptualized as an internal and personal subjectivity, it threatens one's very self.”⁵

In a related way, Deidre Shauna Lynch explores the meaning of consumerism for emerging eighteenth-century definitions of identity.⁶ While Mackie describes how fashion was thought of as a force antithetical to deep character, Lynch's work queries whether consumerism was ever merely a superficial and mindless practice, and she demonstrates how the affirmation of Frances Burney's heroines is embedded in commercialism. While discussing the meaning of consumerism in *Camilla*, she gives the example of the consumer who stands in front of a dressing-room mirror or who studies a fashion magazine and who announces “It's *not* me.” In Lynch's example, the very recognition of one's identity is facilitated by the presence of consumer culture. Rather than undermining a “deep” subjectivity, fashion makes possible its articulation. Lynch argues for the importance of recognizing that “a consumer culture is a psychological culture.”⁷ This recognition that identity establishes itself in relation to consumerism further complicates the opposition between deep and surface renderings of subjectivity.

The project that Mackie, Lynch, and other eighteenth-century scholars make their subject is most often seen in relation to prose—to the journalistic essay, or to the novel, which, as Emily Allen argues, “comes to be aligned with an appropriate inwardness, with nature in fact.” Theatrical spectacle, in contrast, “is aligned with an inappropriate exteriority and ocular excess.”⁸ Allen explains how the novel assumed dominance in an age when the evocation of “depth” was the higher goal of artistic represen-

tation: “The theatrical subject is read from outside (as opposed to being narrated from the inside) and as a product of its effects, while the role-playing at the heart of theater introduces a destabilizing uncertainty about original identity.”⁹ Of all forms of representation, then, the eighteenth-century stage posed the most serious challenge to the project of promoting deep and authentic subjectivity. Simply put, the eighteenth-century theater asked its spectators to participate in the world of artifice, surface, masking, and performance to discover the truth of their deep, authentic, and nonperformative selves. This irony was not lost on playwrights themselves, who responded to it in a variety of ways.

One could mock it, as does John Gay in *The Beggar's Opera* (1728). One could integrate it into the thematics of the play, as does George Lillo in *The London Merchant* (1731). There the evil prostitute Millwood openly admits she is a performer, while the men around her struggle to strike the appropriate moral pose. The irony is openly exposed in Hannah Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem* (1780), where, in the words of one character, society itself is “one universal masquerade, all disguised in the same habits and manners.”¹⁰ Oliver Goldsmith develops the irony in *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773), when Kate Hardcastle's “performance” reveals her true identity. And, in *The School for Scandal* (1777), Richard Brinsley Sheridan names his two male protagonists Sir Olive and Joseph Surface to discover the true nature of familial performance.

One early-eighteenth-century play in particular offers us an especially instructive example of how this irony could be managed within the play itself. Categorized as one of the first “sentimental comedies,” *The Careless Husband* (1704) by Colley Cibber engages the subject of surface and depth, or those who play and those who refuse play, in an especially complex manner.¹¹ Written in response to *The Relapse* by Sir John Vanbrugh (1696), which was itself an answer to Cibber's *Love's Last Shift* (1696), this play takes up the theme of marital infidelity, only to resolve it in domestic harmony. As a response to *The Relapse*, *The Careless Husband* self-consciously evokes, even echoes, themes from the earlier plays. For an audience well trained to listen for continuities in plot lines or to watch for subtle variations in performance, the play would have had additional, metatheatrical dimensions: would Cibber's rakish husband, now that Vanbrugh had rendered him beyond redemption, finally learn to love his wife? Cibber himself played the fop in all three plays: first Sir Novelty Fashion in *Love's Last Shift*, he was then elevated to Lord Foppington in *The Relapse*, and he reprised the role in *The Careless Husband*.¹² As a playful form of surrogation,¹³ this kind of internal self-referencing enhances the performativity of the stage by alerting its audience to the larger theatrical context and history

that underlie each dramatic performance. Never a discrete, self-enclosed entity, the play always surpasses its boundaries, drawing attention to its nature as a responsive and deeply performative art form.

Critics have long argued that this, one of Cibber's most successful comedies, is perhaps his most masterful capitulation to the new ethos of bourgeois morality. However, *The Careless Husband* is also structured around its own series of paradoxes. In this comedy, even as the deep characters triumph, they remind us that human beings depend upon a world of superficial signification for their existence. While the play's themes explicitly endorse the society of "authentic" and "true" sentiments over the world of fashion and of theatrical posing, the resolution of the plot depends precisely upon the manipulation of fashionable objects and effects. Moreover, following Lynch's lead, I will suggest that this play reveals especially well how the authentic self is advanced not *in opposition to* consumer culture (as the project of bourgeois self-authentication suggests), but *in relation to it*. Read this way, *The Careless Husband* is less a sentimental comedy and more a meditation on the nature of human performance itself.

I. READING THE SURFACE

Initially, *The Careless Husband* seems straightforward, devoid of complexity or even special interest.¹⁴ For readers without ready recall of the play, I summarize its content. The action of the play is organized around the conflict between two opposing camps; we can call them characters of surface and characters of depth. The characters of surface include Sir Charles Easy, Lord Foppington (as mentioned, one of Cibber's signature roles), Lady Betty Modish, and Mrs. Edging. These characters are immoral, dissolute, superficial, and often witty. They revel in their own theatricality, flaunt their indiscretion, actively resist domestication, and resent the monogamous bonds of marriage. They demonstrate their disdain for morality by either engaging in a series of sexual affairs or (in the case of Lady Betty) playing the coquette. They are fond of dress and display (this is especially true of the ladies) and enjoy playing games at all levels. Their motto is best summarized by Lady Betty: "Constancy shall be the Mark of Age and Ugliness, Virtue a Jest; we'll rally Discretion out of Doors, lay Gravity at our Feet, and only Love, free Love, Disorder, Liberty and Pleasure be our standing Principles" (III.i, p. 369).

The opposing camp consists of Lady Easy and Lord Morelove. These two characters deplore artifice and superficiality, speak on behalf of modesty and discretion, and desire only that their partners should faithfully return their love. They are advocates of monogamy and the pleasures of marriage.

We are meant to recognize the “authenticity” of these characters—the way in which they are true to themselves and the real nature of their desire. Their essential goodness lies both in their rejection of fashionable society and in their simplicity, in their ability to be content with so little. In contrast, the characters of surface are meant to be an unhappy lot. They are restless, at odds with themselves and each other. Leftovers from the aristocratic Restoration stage, these dissolute characters belong to a dying mode of theatricality, one that had been effectively attacked by Jeremy Collier and others.¹⁵

The double plot of the comedy involves Lady Easy’s efforts to win back her careless husband and Lord Morelove’s efforts to tame Lady Betty Modish. Both succeed—Lady Easy by her silence, suffering, and forbearance, and Lord Morelove through a display that allows Lady Betty to recognize her love for him. In both plots, the blocking force is represented as a failure within a character himself or herself. The blocking force is, in other words, internalized and represented as a psychological, rather than social, familial, or political effect. Sir Charles and Lady Betty need only to recognize the true nature of their feelings for the conflict to be resolved. The resolution depends upon the characters looking within themselves in order to discover a buried truth. The comedy suggests that beneath the surface of the rake or the dissipated gentlewoman lies the making of a solid bourgeois husband or wife. This subject emerges when the game playing stops and when the superficial world of false appearances is banished.

Yet to say that Cibber represents the conflict as psychological, making it the property of “deep” characters, is not to overlook the political content of the play. For example, the dissolute characters are represented as a force dangerous to both class and gender relations. Sir Charles himself destabilizes a fragile class balance by dallying with his maid, Edging. His sexual favors lead to her impertinence, to an assumption of equality, which the play will show to be profoundly mistaken. Claiming to have refused “lords and dukes” for the sake of Sir Charles, she speaks disrespectfully of her mistress, Lady Easy. Sir Charles rebukes her: “When you speak of my Wife, you are to say your Lady and you are never to speak of your Lady to me in any regard of her being my Wife—for look you, Child, you are not Her Strumpet but Mine” (I.i, p. 332). Still, Sir Charles himself is represented as responsible for unleashing the inappropriate behavior of this lower-class character, whose superficiality is signaled by her name. In the end, she is no more than an insignificant piece of decoration, a bit of trim. In its adherence to a strict class hierarchy, the play extends no mercy to this maid-as-gold-digger. Edging is returned to her properly subordinate—and silent—position.

If dissolute behavior jeopardizes class relations, it is even more disruptive of gender relations. Initially, it would seem possible to make the

case for this as a “feminist” play: in disclosing the rampant misogyny of the Restoration rake, the play makes the plea for the improved treatment of women. Imagery employed by Sir Charles and Lord Foppington first aligns women with prey (I.i) and then, quite literally, with meat.¹⁶ The men jest about their appetite for “chapons bouillés” (boiled capon) as opposed to a joint of Banstead mutton. Like a discerning cannibal, Lord Foppington rates the pleasure of “a plain Slice of [his] Wife’s Woman” over his “Guts full of e’er an Ortolan Duchess in Christendom” (II.i, p. 350). Their patriotism in choosing English over French meat only enhances the joke, which makes them avid consumers of female flesh.

By displacing this kind of banter, once a commonplace of the Restoration stage, in a context where it is clearly preposterous, the play speaks against one kind of female commodification. The purpose of the blameless Lady Easy is to demonstrate that true female worth is beyond a price and to belie the kind of misogynist understanding of the female character articulated by her husband and Lord Foppington in their comic interlude. Lord Foppington insists that “’tis not of late so very Expensive” to buy a woman: “now and then a *Partie Quarrie*, a Jaunt or two in an Hack to an *Indian House*, a little China, an Odd Thing for a Gown, or so, and in Three Days after you meet her for the Conveniency of trying it on *Chez Mademoiselle D’Epingle*.”¹⁷ Sir Charles picks up the jest: “Ay, ay, my Lord, and when you are there, you know, what between a little Chat, a Dish of Tea, *Mademoiselle’s* good Humour, and a *Petit Chanson*, or two, the Devil’s in’t if a Man can’t fool away the Time, till he sees how it looks on her by Candle-light.” Foppington rejoins: “Igad, I fancy thee and I have unlac’d many a Reputation there. Your great Lady is as soon undrest as her Woman” (II.ii, p. 351).

In addition to putting such misogyny in its place, the play also speaks against the selling of women. The characters of surface readily acknowledge and accept the fact of a traffic in women, one that equates a woman’s value with the property she brings to a marriage settlement. The opposing characters, however, argue for a different understanding of female value, for woman not merely as commodity, but as deep and interiorized subject, whose value lies in the qualities of her soul. As Lady Easy aphorizes, “’tis the Beauty of the Mind alone that gives us lasting Value” (II.i, p. 342). In a scene that establishes two antithetical definitions of female value, the two main female characters discuss the arrival of a fashionable new scarf from London. Lady Betty insists that women are only read as surfaces, with dress as the ultimate signifier of worth: “a new Fashion, upon a fine Woman, is often a greater Proof of her Value, than you are aware of” (II.i, p. 342). She scoffs at the notion of reputation, arguing that “amongst People of Fortune,

no Woman wants Virtue that has Beauty: But an Estate and Beauty join'd, is of an unlimited, nay, a Power Pontifical, makes one not only Absolute, but Infallible" (II.i, p. 345).¹⁸

Following her metaphor that associates her superficiality with imperial themes, she compares a woman's reputation to the bob or pendant worn monstrously, as the *Indians* do, at their lips: "and it really becomes 'em just alike" (II.i, p. 345). Thus, the conversation shows us that Lady Betty really cannot go below the surface. Failing to see the difference between western and eastern values, she cannot see that what an Indian woman does to convey her value ought to be different from what an Englishwoman does. The metaphor implicitly indicts Lady Betty Modish as a cultural relativist, one who is blind to the "inevitable" superiority of an emerging group of upper-class Englishwomen. The metaphor also shores up the audience's notion that, in an age of expanding empire, Lady Easy—and not Lady Betty—represents the necessary future of British womanhood. Finally, finding power in beauty, Lady Betty relishes her ability to manipulate men. She defends her flirtation with Foppington, a married man, saying, "My Dear, fine Fruit will have Flies about it; but poor things, they do it no harm: For, if you observe, People are always most apt to chuse that that the Flies have been busy with—ha, ha!" (II.i, p. 344). The tone of the last comment, of course, undoes Lady Betty and works, on a formal level, to convince the viewer of her almost "rotten" character: for what kind of woman would compare herself to a piece of ripe fruit?

II. BENEATH THE SURFACE

Thus, in the conflict between Lady Betty and Lady Easy, a kind of feminist argument tentatively emerges, for, no doubt, the argument that women should not be reduced to beauty or to their fortunes bespeaks a liberal agenda. Valuing a woman for who she really is, deep down inside, seems preferable to measuring her worth in terms of her display value. However, the association of Lady Betty with imperial excess begins to suggest further dimensions to this reading. The logic which exposes her as a cultural relativist is, in fact, nationalistic, even xenophobic: to get the humor, a spectator has to believe in the inevitably superior value of an Englishwoman's reputation. If we are offered two antithetical representations of female subjectivity, those representations carry with them profoundly different understandings of the place of women in social, political, and even imperial life. Lady Betty, discredited though she is, positions women in a relatively public space of commerce and display. She puts woman, through her avid interest in fashion, at the forefront of an imperial expansion. Lady Easy pro-

motes not only the internalization of female value, but also the interiorization of woman herself: as the embodiment of a new domesticity, her character advocates the virtues of staying home. With her family surrounding her, she does not need to go out. She needs neither the excitement of urban life nor the luxuries of empire to keep her happy. Yet we might reasonably wonder—as do female characters from other contemporaneous plays—about opportunities lost to women, once they were confined to the more restricted domestic sphere.¹⁹

The “easy” of Lady Easy refers both to her complacency, her willingness to accept a circumscribed (albeit still powerful) position in her social sphere, and to her ready accessibility as a character to be read.²⁰ Quite simply, she is a good character because the spectator always knows who she is. In contrast, Lady Betty is a “bad” character to both the audience and other characters in the play because she is a confusing and contradictory surface, one that cannot be trusted. Lord Morelove especially worries how to read Lady Betty. He fears finding her in a mask, “and of all the most dangerous”—a bare face. When Lord Foppington claims not to understand him, Morelove explains that a woman’s bare face can hide her heart: “and therefore I think it sometimes a more dangerous Mask than a Piece of Velvet: That’s rather a Mark than a Disguise of an ill Woman: But the Mischiefs skulking behind a Beauteous Form, give no Warning, they are always Sure, Fatal, and Innumerable” (III.i, p. 363). Though Foppington comically persists in his appreciation of “the beauteous form” of a woman, Morelove sounds the note of male anxiety that runs through the play: how is anyone to know who, exactly, a woman is? What if all beautiful female surfaces only cover what is fatal within? What if all women were as dangerous to read as Lady Betty? When spectators identify with Lady Easy as the “good” woman, they also implicitly invest in a male perception which prefers her because of her moral transparency. They accept that she is a “good” character because she reassures a male gaze. In other words, before hastening to find a feminist agenda in Lady Easy’s positions, one might well ask about the dynamics of looking: *who* looks, under what conditions, and to what effect? To what extent might Lady Easy be the projection of a *male* need for reassurance?²¹

Furthermore, can the audience be certain of Lady Easy’s transparency? Within the dynamics of performance, the actress who plays Lady Easy (Mrs. Knight in the original production) already compromises the idea, since she only *plays* a woman who does not play. Even within the play itself, it is quite possible to argue that Lady Easy’s forbearance, her silence on the subject of her husband’s sexual affairs, is also a kind of performance. The difference in this performance is that she shares her dramatic intentions

with the audience in the very first scene, thereby preserving the illusion of her transparency. In the soliloquy which opens the play, she announces:

Oh! how tedious a Relief is Patience! and yet in my Condition 'tis the only Remedy: For to reproach him with my Wrongs, is taking on myself the Means of a Redress, bidding Defiance to his Falsehood, and naturally but provokes him to undo me . . . Since I want the Power to please [my husband], he never shall upbraid me with an Attempt of making him uneasy.—My Eyes and Tongue shall yet be blind and silent to my Wrongs; nor would I have him think my Virtue could suspect him, till by some gross, apparent Proof of his Misdoing he forces me to see,—and to forgive it.

(I.i, pp. 329–30)

Thus, her refusal to play is still a kind of play; her disavowal of acting is a kind of acting. Though she finds the demands of her role tedious, even oppressive, she knows she cannot accomplish her purpose without her pretended innocence. She acknowledges the power of performance as the only viable means of getting through to her husband. So too, when Morelove stages the scene that precipitates Lady Betty's recognition of her love for him, another "deep" character necessarily resorts to a manipulation of surfaces.

To what extent does the play evince awareness of its own deep paradoxes? It certainly seems possible, given the fact of the Collier controversy, that the irony of performative yet "deep" characters is meant consciously to mock antitheatrical prejudice. In fact, Lord Morelove responds directly to Collier's accusations against the supposed immorality of theatrical representation: "Plays now indeed we need not be so much afraid of, for since the late short-sighted View of 'em, Vice may go on and prosper; the Stage hardly shews a Vicious Person speaking like himself, for fear of being called Prophane for exposing him" (III.iii, p. 389). Clearly, on one level, Cibber makes a conscious choice in using the stage to advance a moralistic agenda. Similarly, the play seems self-consciously to propose that even deep characters must by necessity resort to theatrical performance in order to be effective.

However, if the play is protheatrical in its intent—despite its textual warning about the dangers of theatrical behavior—then it is also worth asking about the content of its other "surface" messages. For if a performance of *The Careless Husband* reverses one kind of "surface" meaning, showing its audience that theatricality is necessary to almost any human purpose, then that same performance also potentially reverses its other surface meanings as well. For example, we have seen how, following the basic

lines of opposition in the play, the “dissolute” characters explicitly commodify women, while the “deep” characters seem to deny such commodification. However, it is possible to argue that the virtue of Foppington’s misogyny, so delightfully displayed, is its accessibility. What he performs is so ridiculous, so superficial (and so clearly “an act”), as to be readily dismissed as not really threatening to women at all. In contrast, Lord Morelove wants to control Lady Betty from the inside out. Though it might be a stretch to call this misogyny, the anxiety of this “deep” character drives him to seek another kind of male mastery. In this vein, one might ask whether changing the terms of female value actually obviates the process of female commodification. A woman who is valued for her reputation, rather than her beauty, remains a woman subject to the controlling interest of a male economy.

Under this reading of *The Careless Husband*, in which the paradoxes are intentional and protheatricalism rife, the project of constructing authentic and deep subjects out of audience members is critiqued on yet another level. As we saw in the scene with Lady Easy, Lady Betty, and the scarf, the opposition between deep and surface characters is also signaled by a disinterest in fashion versus an addiction to fashion. Lady Easy is a deep character because fashion means little to her. As Mackie’s work suggests, in the papers of the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, fashion was, in one way, construed as a force antithetical to an authentic being. (Or, as a student recently insisted to me, someone aware of his true identity does not need to rely on fashion to convey who he is.) The paradox is, of course, that even the disavowal of fashion is its own kind of fashionable statement. Even the refusal to dress in fashionable clothes is one kind of fashion statement. Addison and Steele come up against this paradox when, despite their avowed suspicions of fashion, they struggle to establish themselves as “the” voice of a fashionable society, as Mackie points out.

The Careless Husband brilliantly engages with the paradox of the nonfashionable fashion in the so-called “steinkirk” scene, which is also the scene for which the play is most famous. In this scene, occurring late in act V, Lady Easy discovers her husband and her maid, asleep in easy chairs after their sexual dalliance. Solicitous at the sight of her husband’s wigless, exposed head, she places her neckerchief, always referred to as a “steinkirk,” on his head. When he awakes, he is moved by the sign of her care. He repents, disavows his libertine ways, and the play hastens toward its resolution.

Whether the scene works is subject to debate: is the audience genuinely convinced that so simple a gesture has the power to effect the necessary reform of Sir Charles? What interests me here is not, however, the verisi-

multitude of the gesture, but the specificity of the object employed. Though its significance would be lost to modern audiences, the steinkirk was apparently a highly recognized consumer object, one at the height of fashion around the turn of the century. Taking its name from the French victory over the English in 1692, this scarf was laden with the symbolism of military exploit. It links fashion to war, the drawing room to the battlefield, and it makes Lady Easy a “warrior” in the wars of love.²² But it also necessarily makes her a *consumer* and implicates her in the very world of fashion against which she polemically positions herself. While the play conveys to its audience the message that the authentic female self is best denoted through the absence of fashionable, consumer effects, here the work of an authentic female subject depends precisely upon a fashionable—and superficial—object. While the text of the play thematizes how the fashionable and the authentic self are oppositional, the steinkirk scene contradicts that opposition.

Moreover, in specifying the scarf as a steinkirk, the playwright apparently assumed that his audience would immediately recognize the object. Thus, *The Careless Husband* relies on the existence of a world of fashionable, material objects to convey its moral message, and it intimates the larger role played by consumer objects in the construction of cultural meaning.²³ This scene also reinforces the point, made in a different context by Lynch, that although a “deep” subjectivity claims to establish itself *in opposition to* consumer culture, it is more accurate to argue that the impression of a deep and complex “self” occurs *in relation to* consumer culture. Far from undoing a stable identity, fashion—whether we embrace or resist it—allows us to make a statement about who we really are.

III. FLAYING THE SURFACE

Working under the assumption that its ironies and paradoxes are under authorial control, we have seen how *The Careless Husband* reverses the content of its own “surface” messages and how, especially when it is considered as performance, the play offers a rich critique of the promotion of deep, authentic, and nonperformative subjectivity. In the process, we have seen how emerging definitions of femininity in particular can be subjected to a healthy dose of skepticism. However, one character remains to be discussed, as she belongs to neither of the two camps. The presence of Lady Graveairs suggests another level of meaning, and she returns us to the citation from Swift with which this essay began.

In Swift’s passage, the narrator teases us: we will hardly believe how much flaying the woman—brutally removing the outermost layer of her

superficial being—has altered her person for the worse. No doubt her appearance deteriorates, since skinning her has probably killed her. He leaves unsaid what prompts the attack upon the woman's person: since "flaying" is also a kind of whipping, is she being punished (as under Puritanism) perhaps because she has been an excessively superficial woman?²⁴ Without more information to guide us, we are left with an image that is both comic and disturbing, derisive and sympathetic. The narrator continues: "Yesterday I ordered the Carcass of a *Beau* to be stripped in my Presence, when we were all amazed to discover so many unsuspected Faults under one Suit of Cloaths. Then I laid open his *Brain*, his *Heart*, and his *Spleen*; But, I plainly perceived at every Operation, that the farther we proceeded, we found the Defects encrease upon us in Number and Bulk." In this way, Swift's narrator continues the jest: another creature of fashion is stripped first of his outermost layer, then cut into in order to display his (inevitably flawed) depths. Arguably, in its suggested association of beaux and women with the excesses of consumerism, the tone of the passage is both homophobic and misogynist.²⁵ Yet even if the passage is intended as a joke at the narrator's own expense, it continues the larger themes of "A Digression Concerning Madness." Both flaying the woman and anatomizing the beau entail a horrific violence to the surface. Regardless of tone, the passage intimates how the woman and the beau are most heavily marked by the search for depth. The passage further suggests that *someone pays the price* for the shift from a world of external to internal evaluation: someone is bloodied and ritualistically displayed in the heat of the moment. If the seeker of depth targets those thought to be most addicted to self-display, that someone is most likely to be a woman or a beau.

Lacking the subtleties of nuance and tone that characterize Swift's narration, *The Careless Husband* would initially seem devoid of such insight. Yet the character of Lady Graveairs, who is otherwise extraneous to the resolution of this comedy, suggests the violence that potentially attends a movement toward the endorsement of depth. Another one of Sir Charles's sexual partners, Lady Graveairs is not as easy to dismiss as Edging. She and Sir Charles are locked in a battle of wills: she threatens to break off their relationship; he tells her he could not care less; she returns for more. They trade words, in which the sado-masochistic nature of their relationship is revealed. The more cruel Sir Charles is, the more Lady Graveairs succumbs to his power. He lectures her about her insubordinate behavior as mistress: "When once [a woman] comes to reproach me with Vows, and Usage, and Stuff,—I had lief hear her talk of Bills, Bonds, and Ejectments; her Passion becomes as troublesome as a Law-suit, and I would as soon converse with my Sollicitor—In short, I shall never care Six Pence for a Woman who won't

be Obedient" (III.i, p. 358). Using the language of commerce, he tells her that their affair must be entirely under his control—and that nothing of substance can happen. Like Edging or any of his other mistresses, she is worth nothing to him. Theirs is an empty transaction, with no real emotional currency behind it. Only his wife, he reminds her, holds any sway over him.

Lady Graveairs responds with sarcasm: "Certainly a Woman of Condition must be infinitely happy under the Dominion of so generous a Lover! But how came you to forget Kicking and Whipping all this while? Methinks you should not have left so fashionable an Article out of your scheme of Government" (III.i, p. 359). But Lady Graveairs, the audience soon recognizes, is in the wrong. The more shrill her tone, the more she makes *herself* an object to be kicked and whipped, as in the following interchange.

Lady Graveairs: But one thing more and I have done,—Pray,
 what degree of Spirit must the Lady have, that is to make herself
 happy under so much Freedom, Order, and Tranquillity?
Sir Charles: Oh, she must at least have as much Spirit as your
 Ladyship, or she'd give me no Pleasure in breaking it.

Sir Charles then dismisses Lady Graveairs with a dressing down: "I have lov'd you very well a great while; now you would have me love you better, and longer, which is not in my Power to do, and I don't think there's any Plague upon Earth like a Dun that comes for more Money than one's ever likely to be able to pay" (III.i, p. 359). By turning their love into commerce, he empties it of any value, refusing to pay what she believes he owes her.²⁶

Where does this scene fit into the overall structure of the play? Does it properly belong to the comedy at all? On the one hand, the scene seems unnecessary to advance the plot: with the steinkirk scene yet to come, Sir Charles's dalliance with Edging already constitutes a serious enough blocking force. Moreover, Sir Charles's character emerges clearly elsewhere, in his many interchanges with Lord Foppington, for example. Thus, this scene, with its deep intimations of sado-masochism, seems gratuitous. On the other hand, however, the brutal display of a physical passion lacking any depth may be precisely the point. Financial metaphors work to distinguish marriage from mere physical passion, establishing that only marriage gives a woman real currency. Quite simply, outside of marriage Lady Graveairs trades herself too cheaply. For that she deserves to be whipped. And, while the play does not exactly endorse Sir Charles's sadistic streak, it does nothing to condemn it.

Metaphorically played in this scene is not only Lady Graveairs herself, but also what she claims to want—a full and equal relationship with a man

who returns her affection, on the grounds she herself sets, outside of marriage. In the terms of the play, this is a most superficial claim, one ultimately worthy only of derision and dismissal. However, by scapegoating Lady Graveairs, burdening her with the immorality of their adulterous affair, the play does a kind of metaphorical violence to an alternative language of love. It effectively dismisses possibilities of free love, outside the acceptable system of exchange, that Lady Graveairs—in another time, another place, and on another stage—might articulate. In the meantime, Sir Charles's reformation depends upon this metaphorical whipping of Lady Graveairs: unless the threat she represents can be contained, it is impossible for him to present himself as a "new" man. He admits as much when, in the final scene, she asks whether he intends to expose her to his wife: "Twas impossible, without it, I could never be sincere in my Conversion" (V.vi, p. 404). With Lady Graveairs sacrificed to Sir Charles's reformation, Lady Easy has no choice but to hope that her husband will be true to his word. The audience is meant to accept the fantasy that Sir Charles, ever solicitous, ever responsive, will find no further need to bully anyone. His love for his wife will be deeply felt. As the play closes, Lady Easy extends a supper invitation to Lady Graveairs; no one is left isolated.

In conclusion, *The Careless Husband* demonstrates how the promotion of deep and authentic subjects was complicated, paradoxical, and sometimes even excoriating. As the play suggests, that promotion required not only the explicit disavowal of a range of performative and self-expressive behaviors, privileging in women especially indirection, self-effacement, and silence, but also the repression of passion when that passion was not subject to the controlling interests of class and family alliance. However, as a play to be performed on stage, *The Careless Husband* also lays out the impracticality of the idea of a nonperformative subject. Moreover, it alerts its audience to its own irony: here the virtues of a "deep" and authentic subjectivity can only be recognized through a theatrical experience. What speaks more compellingly for the pleasures of surface, of artifice and performance, than the play itself?

NOTES

¹The epigraph is from Jonathan Swift, "A Tale of a Tub," in *The Writings of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Robert A. Greenberg and William Bowman Piper (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), pp. 261–371, 352.

²Swift, p. 298.

³Though the term "authentic" is anachronistic to the eighteenth century, its modern usage conveniently conveys a range of characteristics recognized by the age, including reliability, trustworthiness, originality, and genuineness. An authentic identity,

throughout the eighteenth century, would be recognized as neither pretended nor counterfeit. An authentic person would be said to “belong to himself.” See “Authentic” in *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, 1:569–70. In *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1972), Lionel Trilling finds “the enterprise of sincerity” a “salient, perhaps a definitive, characteristic of Western culture for some four hundred years.” For him, authenticity is a relatively modern term which suggests “a more strenuous moral experience than ‘sincerity’ does” (pp. 6, 11). By historicizing the debate over authentic subjectivity, I do not mean to imply that there were no “deep” or “authentic” individuals prior to the eighteenth century, but that this age saw an especially intense debate over competing modes of self-representation in the public sphere.

⁴As Erin Mackie writes, in the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* “good taste emphasizes modesty, restraint, practicality, and decorum in distinction to bad (aristocratic) taste corrupted by ideologically retrogressive qualities of personal ostentation, irrational excess, arbitrary election, and libertine abandon” (*Market à la Mode: Fashion, Commodity, and Gender in “The Tatler” and “The Spectator”* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1997], p. 20).

⁵Mackie, p. 147.

⁶Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁷Lynch, p. 182.

⁸Emily Allen, “Staging Identity: Frances Burney’s Allegory of Genre,” *ECS* 31, 4 (Summer 1998): 433–51, 435 and 437.

⁹Allen, p. 437.

¹⁰Hannah Cowley, *The Belle’s Stratagem*, 2d edn. (London: T. Cadell, 1787), III.ii, p. 28.

¹¹Colley Cibber, *The Careless Husband*, in *The Plays of Colley Cibber*, ed. Rodney L. Hayley, 2 vols. (New York: Garland, 1980), 1:325–408. The text is a facsimile reprint of the 1721 *Plays Written by Mr. Cibber*. Further references will be indicated parenthetically in the text by act, scene, and page number. On the “sentimental comedy,” see Oliver Goldsmith’s famous definition in “An Essay on the Theater,” rpt. (among other places) in *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Comedy*, ed. Scott McMillin (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), pp. 489–92. For a performance history of *The Careless Husband*, see Harry Glicksman, “The Stage History of Colley Cibber’s *The Careless Husband*,” *PMLA* 36, 2 (June 1921): 245–50.

¹²Kristina Straub discusses the fop as indicating a “discursive desire for sexual liminality” in *Sexual Suspects* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992), p. 55. See chap. 3, “Colley Cibber’s Fops: Actors and Homophobia” (pp. 46–68) as well as chap. 2, “Colley Cibber’s Butt: The Construction of Actors’ Masculinity” (pp. 24–46).

¹³For more on surrogation as performance that substitutes for something that preexists it, see Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1996), especially chap. 1, “History, Memory, and Performance.”

¹⁴For an argument that the play is organized around a “pseudo-problem,” see Helga Drougge, “Colley Cibber’s ‘Genteel Comedy’: *Love’s Last Shift* and *The Careless Husband*,” *SN* 54, 1 (1982): 61–79.

¹⁵See Jeremy Collier, *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, 1698 (rpt. in *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Comedy*, pp. 493–506). See also chap. 8 of Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1981).

¹⁶David Galef discusses this hunting imagery in “Love, Convention, and Character in Cibber’s *The Careless Husband*,” *Restoration* 14, 2 (Fall 1990): 82–90.

¹⁷For more on the connection between women and china, see my book *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1997).

¹⁸This comparison of female power through property to “pontifical” or “infallible” power also brings an anti-Catholic dimension to the scene. In admiring such power, Lady Betty both links herself to Catholic doctrine—clearly a dangerous mistake from a Protestant point of view—and then trivializes Catholicism by evoking that doctrine in such an inappropriate context.

¹⁹A good example of this perspective is found in George Farquhar's *Beaux' Stratagem* (1706) where Mrs. Sullen complains about the dullness of her retired life—playing at whist, spreading plasters, brewing diet drinks, and so on (ed. Charles N. Fizer [Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1977], II.i, p. 26).

²⁰For an argument about the nature of Lady Easy's power, see Laurie A. Finke, “Virtue in Fashion: The Fate of Women in the Comedies of Cibber and Vanbrugh” (in *From Renaissance to Restoration: Metamorphoses of the Drama*, ed. Robert Markley and Laurie Finke [Cleveland: Bellflower Press, 1984], pp. 155–79).

²¹A large body of feminist film theory, beginning with Laura Mulvey's now classic essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” addresses the nature of the male gaze. What Mulvey has to say about the dynamics of looking in classical cinema has some relevance here: “The man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralize the extradiegetic tendencies represented by the woman as spectacle” (*Screen* 16, 3 [Autumn 1975]: 198–209, 204).

²²See James Tierny, “Cibber's Careless Husband,” *Explicator* 32, 3 (November 1973): n. p. Ironically, though she is meant to exemplify Englishwomanhood, Lady Easy wears a scarf that memorializes British defeat.

²³On this point, see Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods* (New York: Basic Books, 1979); or Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1988).

²⁴For an example of such Puritan rhetoric in early-seventeenth-century America, see “The Simple Candler of Aggawam,” where the narrator is satirized for his contempt for the lady of fashion: “I look at her as the very gizzard of a trifle, the product of a quarter of a cypher, the epitome of nothing, fitter to be kickt, if she were of a kickable substance, than either honored or humoured” (in *The Puritans: A Sourcebook of Their Writings*, ed. Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, 2 vols. [New York: Harper and Row, 1965], 1:226–36, 232). Thanks to James D. Wallace for this reference.

²⁵Throughout the *Irish Tracts*, Swift often blames women and the “fops” for unnecessary expenditure on foreign luxury leading to the ruin of Ireland. Though the connections among “fops,” “beaux,” and homosexual men have been much discussed lately, it does seem as if Swift is locating an “aberrant” masculinity in men who care too much for dress. (See, for example, “A Proposal that All the Ladies and Women of Ireland should appear constantly in Irish Manufactures,” in *Irish Tracts, 1728–1733*, ed. Herbert Davis [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971], pp. 121–7.) For a reading of Swift's misogyny, see chap. 6 of Laura Brown's *Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993).

²⁶Yet paradoxically, this gesture also elevates his wife to the status of a “treasure,” thereby decapitalizing her in just the way James Thompson describes: “as political economy comes to describe and theorize civil society as a system of exchange, marriage, the traffic in women has to be re-imaged, re-presented in noncapitalist terms . . .

The representation of the treasured wife is the linchpin to the process of removing the taint of exchange from the domestic sphere, for she functions as a deliberately archaic, decapitalized figure whose sole mode of exchange is neofeudal” (“‘Sure I Have Seen That Face Before’: Representation and Value in Eighteenth-Century Drama,” in *Cultural Readings of Restoration and Eighteenth-Century English Theater*, ed. J. Douglas Canfield and Deborah C. Payne [Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1995], pp. 281–308, 302).