

Assignment of Representative Speech

in

The Shoemaker's Holiday:

How the English tradition has evolved; it affects America

The use of language to differentiate and demarcate the line between the noble, more aristocratic, upper classes and the lower masses in English literature, prior to the development of the middle class, has long been recognized. In his great work, *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer assigns a manner of speech to the Wife of Bath that indicates to the reader that the Wife is uneducated in proper speech, and her stories, while reflecting an odd morality, are indicative of an ignorance on the Wife's part regarding stories of the Bible and procreation. In the fine Arthurian tale, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a vast majority of the characters speak in an elevated verse: perfect meter, diction, and syntax included. This mode of speech and dialogue among noble, aristocratic characters of the types dominated in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not unusual. William Shakespeare has been noted as one of the English playwrights and authors who routinely assigned verse to upper class characters in representative speech and prose to lower class characters. This pattern, while not engraved in stone, began to lose its efficacy in the late sixteenth century, as the developing middle class – a burgeoning economic group whose social status and prominence

was based on a developing, modern cash economy as opposed to an old world economy based on feudal dues and noble rights – began to take firm root in England and demanded a place for itself in a world where only the lower and upper classes seemed to exist. The “city comedies” of the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century English stage are reflective of this uneasy tension in English society. With the development of a class of citizens who could afford to dress like the wealthy upper classes and educate themselves in the same manner as the upper classes and – most importantly – conduct important, economic transactions with the Crown like the upper classes, the use of language in representative speech and dialogue to differentiate between the classes *almost* became null and void. Almost! The use of prose no longer represented *only* lower class characters, *but* perhaps provided insight into a perspective of a *particular* character; the use of verse no longer represented *only* a person of noble birth, *but* perhaps a *particular* person with noble characteristics and qualities.

The city comedy *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, by Thomas Dekker, provides ample evidence surrounding the use of language to expose, or queer, characteristics and perspectives of individual characters that may not superficially expose themselves on the respective surfaces of the characters: i.e., the social rank of the characters. It is believed that the use of language in the city comedy to provide perspective and insight into characters is analogous to the ability of the city – the physical, material city itself – to provide different perspectives on the total human condition.

Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* is a perfect example of a city comedy that provides the audience with insight into the depth of the comedy's characters through the use of language. Simon Eyre's highly imaginative, rhetorical, and alliterative verbal flashes – reflective of an *almost* perfect English at times – helps to underscore, illustrate, and reinforce the possibilities of the middle class: all the material success and

social status that is available to one not born of noble birth, if one works hard and one is loyal and patriotic to one's country. Lacy's use of a pseudo-Dutch alternative to English betrays his lack of loyalty to England and perhaps provides commentary on thoughts contemporary to Dekker's time about the aristocratic classes. Hammon, a rich citizen of the middle class, seems unsure about himself and his place in the developing society as he continues to speak at a level to which he wishes to ascend, yet of which he is completely ignorant; in his courtly, elevated, romantic discourse Hammon is not aware of the understanding that he cannot communicate with young ladies aware of city-life in the same manner and language used to woo women at court. Hammon's understanding of how the new man of the middle class should carry himself is out of mode and no longer fashionable. And lastly, Firk is a character whose language provides insight into the working class journeyman who does the dirty work of the city; hence, his language is dirty and bawdy, yet clever and intricate: just like the emerging cities of England, particularly London.

It should be noted that Simon Eyre does speak primarily in prose throughout the play: in this sense he, not being born of a princely line, follows the pattern of non-noble, non-aristocratic characters in the English tradition. Eyre's prose is highly imaginative however, and his skill regarding the use of the tools of eloquence, such as rhetoric, makes the reader pay close attention to what is being said by the character. Eyre's use of devices of eloquence suggests that the tide is turning regarding the assignment of representative speech to characters. Eyre's manner of speaking defies the ignorant style of prose usually dedicated to the non-nobleman. Take Act 17, lines 17-19 for example:

I scorn it! It shall never be cast in my teeth that I was unthankful. Lady Madgy, thou hast never covered thy Saracen's head with this French flap, nor loaden thy bum with tis farthingale – tis trash, triumphery, vanity – Simon Eyre had never walked in a red petticoat, nor wore a chain of gold, but for my journeyman's portagues. And shall I leave him? No. Prince am I none, yet bear a princely mind.

Eyre's imagination explodes! He has complete control of the use of metaphor: “thy Saracen's head.” Then there's the imaginative use of the idiomatic expression “cast in my teeth” used

by Eyre to underscore his concern for his reputation. He does not want it to be said by the population at large that he was “unthankful.” Eyre's concern for his good reputation and standing in the community also reflects the changing dynamics of English society. In the effort to delineate themselves, members of the middle class have become very concerned about image and appearance, when compared with their fellow citizens. An outward appearance of vanity is “scorn[ed].” Simon has never “walked in a red petticoat, nor wore a chain of gold” and he finds the act of covering “thy bum with the farthingale” to be “trash” and “trumphery.” Eyre's speech represents a member of the middle class more concerned with substance over style.

Both Eyre's use of rhetoric and his loyalty to friends and employees, and even country, come shining through in the selected quotation as well. In deciding whether or not he should accept the post of Lord Mayor and in essence abandon his shoemaker, Eyre states, “Shall I leave him?” – referring to Hans, a newly employed journeyman. Eyre's rhetorical question betrays his concern for the welfare of the newly befriended Dutch journeyman and his loyalty to his company of men. He does not want to abandon them, even at the expense of his own success and probable rise in social status. And the condescending tone with which he refers to “this French flap” highlights the contempt for which Simon and every loyal English citizen held for anything French at this time.

Eyre's alliterative style, most justly illustrated in one of his favorite sayings, “Prince am I none, yet bear a princely mind”, can be found sprinkled throughout the play. Simon states, “It's a stirring life, a fine life, a velvet life, a careful life” (17.35-6) and “His majesty is welcome, he shall have good cheer, delicate cheer, princely cheer” (17.38-40). But, even with the use of rhetoric and metaphor and alliteration, Eyre still primarily speaks in prose. That is, until Act 17 lines 49-50:

Boys, that day are you free: let masters care

And prentices shall pray for Simon Eyre.

A heroic couplet! Perfectly balanced in iambic pentameter! Yes! Simon Eyre can speak in verse if he so desires. The use of verse seems to be indicative of noble qualities that are alive within Eyre and depending upon what angle one views Eyre from, one may just get a glimpse of Eyre delivering ennobled verse. For Simon Eyre, heroic verse is something that springs from him naturally, not something to be imitated for personal, economic, or carnal desires. This single use of verse illustrates that Simon is capable of producing the most eloquent form of speech and writing in the English tradition. Consider that, the next time someone is overdetermined as a speaker of Ebonics!

Rowland Lacy, nephew of the Earl of Lincoln, and his use of language in *The Shoemaker's Holiday* is suggestive of a man of a totally different make-up when compared to the hard working, loyal, patriotic Simon Eyre. While Lacy is quite capable of speaking in verse, as is usually stereotypical of the nobles, he is quick to discard all that should be near and dear to himself and his country as the nephew of an Earl: his military loyalty to the country of England. And when this betrayal of allegiance takes place, Lacy speaks in prose...a Dutch prose at that! Disguised as Hans, the Dutch journeyman employed by Eyre, Hans (Lacy) states, "Forware, metress, tis un good skoe, it sal vel dute, or ye sal neit befealen" (15.30). In one instance Lacy betrays his country and his social class: one by speaking Dutch and the other by speaking in prose. Lacy, thus disguised as Hans, "forsook his charge in France/ incurred the King's displeasure, and/ stirred up rough hatred" against himself (3.7-9). And it can be argued that Lacy's disloyalty to the country is evident early on in the play. When discussing Ralph's conscription Lacy states, "he must go/**His country's** quarrel says it shall be so"(1.179-80). This statement left one asking, "Is England not Lacy's country as well." However, when Lacy does speak in a manner reflective of his class, he does not do so in the attempt to redeem himself in the eye of a King whom he betrayed by not

fulfilling his military duties, he speaks in the effort of gaining romantic love:

O, how I surfeit with excess of joy,
 Made happy by thy rich perfection!
 But since thou payest sweet interest to my hope,
 Redoubling love o love, let me once more
 Like to a bold-face debtor, crave of thee
 This night to steal abroad (15.9-14)

For Lacy's part, at least, romantic verse is something spoken at court and so he is not attempting to be something that he is not when he does speak. The same cannot be said of Hammon.

As a rich citizen of London – a member of the upper, middle class known as the bourgeoisie, that would one day include the “New Men” known as the entrepreneurs - Hammon has the economic prowess of the noble, aristocratic class, yet he is not an aristocrat. Because Hammon can move in the economic circles of the nobles, it is felt that Hammon's character believes that he must attempt to carry himself like the nobles. Hammon hunts deer and speaks in verse and even combines the two when attempting to woo Rose. This theme of hunting deer is very prominent in Renaissance poetry extolling love. In “They flee from me,” (Nate Dogg would probably refer to the “they” as hoes!) Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder reflects on the “Dear heart” (Wyatt 14) and how “they flee from me” (1). His play on dear and heart and his theme of hunting in place of wooing a woman is found typical of Renaissance courts, where he, Wyatt, spent a great deal of time. Hammon's character expresses the same sentiments as he and his cousin hunt:

Cousin, beat every brake, the game's not far
 This way with wingéd feet he fled from death
 Whilst the pursuing hounds, scenting his steps
 Find out his highway to destruction.
 Besides, the miller's boy told me now,
 He saw him take soil, and he halloaed him,
 Affirming him so embossed
 That long he could not hold (Dekker 6.1-7)

Hammon, in his elevated, romantic verse, speaks of pursuing the “game” and “scenting his steps,” when miraculously he bumps into the lovely Rose, perhaps the game that he has been pursuing. In his attempt to pull off a Wyatt-like seduction of Rose, Hammon states to Rose,

“A deer more dear is found within [your] place” (6.30). And to this courtly manner of seduction, a manner from which Hammon does not originate, Rose responds, “But not the deer, sir, which you had in chase” (6.31). The conversation should have ended there, for Rose has acknowledged that she has no interest in playing the game of pursuit to which Hammon is engaged. But Hammon, unaware of the linguistic gymnastics that are taking place and their relevance, continues his pursuit. Hammon adds, “This poor lost heart would I wish you might find” (6.41). Rose counters with, “You by such luck might prove your hart a hind,” suggesting that Hammon once again will not find that which he is presently hunting. Rose's ability to use the devices of romantic, courtly verse to undermine the desired goals of Hammon outweigh and outwit Hammon's use of verse to gain romantic love. Like Wyatt, Hammon's use of language focuses on the idealization of woman and femininity into disillusionment and complaint; unlike Wyatt however, Hammon does not have the linguistic dexterity to attain his goal: Rose.

Hammon is an example of the middle class man uneasy with his position in life. He desires to ascend to a social position of which he is ignorant and this is reflected in his continued gross misuse of romantic verse throughout the play. A man of Simon Eyre's confidence Hammon is not. Both Eyre's use of prose and verse seem more authentic than Hammon's use of verse.

Dekker should be commended for including the use of language by the working class of London as well. Firk, a working class journeyman of Eyre's, expresses a personality free of mannered constraint, whose language is erotic and sensual. Firk is found constantly rambling about the erotic possibilities of the tongues, laces and tightness of women's shoes. He is always making references to sexual intercourse during the course of the play. He states, “I would have yerked and firked your Priscilla” (13.24-25), suggesting that he would “dance the shaking of the sheets” with Priscilla (16.81). Firk is bawdy and dirty, like the fine, greasy,

meticulous, inner workings of the city that he inhabits.

Though the English tradition has a history of assigning verse to upper class nobles and prose to the collective masses, as the history of England began to reflect a change in the social and economic status quo – the move from a state dominated by feudalism to a state dominated by the modern, cash economy – the pattern of assigning representative speech to characters in English literature began to change. The assigning of representative speech to characters by playwrights such as Thomas Dekker began to change and evolve into complicated plot devices, just as the city around men such as Dekker began to evolve into a complicated social scheme. The use of language in city comedies such as Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* reflect this complication and change.

Works Cited

Dekker, Thomas. *The Shoemaker's Holiday: The Roaring Girl and Other City Comedies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 1-65.

Wyatt, Sir Thomas. "They flee from me".