

The Transgressive Literacy of the Comic Maidservant in Tobias Smollett's *Humphry Clinker*

Kathleen Alves

Kathleen Tamayo Alves is an assistant professor of English at the City University of New York. She is writing a book on representations of servant literacy in eighteenth-century British novels.

Following the eighteenth-century narrative tradition of linguistically comic servants like Henry Fielding's Mrs. Slipslop, Tobias Smollett engages with the possibilities of social ascension the literate servant represents in his servant characters' inadvertent punning. Smollett considers the literate servant, who can blur distinctions between ranks, as an unfavorable product of the increasingly commercially saturated culture of eighteenth-century Britain. The servant who can read and write is an emerging phenomenon of modernity, an actively political subject that must be suppressed to conserve distinction and social order. Considering the ethos of conservatism and polite sensibility towards the end of the period, I suggest that the novel's comic representation of servant literacy operates as an ideological mechanism that reinforces distinction.

Humphry Clinker's epistolary narrative comprises a range of voices in Squire Matthew Bramble's family sharing their own experiences in the family expedition through England and Scotland. Winifred Jenkins' entries have long been considered (along with her mistress, Matt's sister, Tabitha Bramble) to be the major comic relief in the novel, prone to folk expressions and mangling words that result in puns and double entendres (Lewis, 2006).

The maidservant's unwitting punning operates as the mechanism that conveys the obscene joke at her expense framed within her poor literacy. "Good puns" contain the play of sound and sense, keeping themselves within the text, yielding meanings that are additional but relevant to the word (Bates, 1999). Smollett's play with sounds strongly suggests associations that exist regardless of the sense of words, but the servant's written language challenges the neatness of such playful polysemy. Writing to fellow maidservant Mary Jones, Win confuses the proper orthographic arrangements of words for comical substitutes. "County of Killoway" becomes "cunty of Killoway" (51). The jest of the poor literacy of the servant conveys itself clearly here and poses no problems of recognition. A third meaning emerges as well and only makes sense within the social context of the "servant problem" in the eighteenth century: disobedient, intractable, and promiscuous servants who were more loyal to their purse than to their employers. Social commentators wrote frequently on the problem of servant promiscuity, seeing the proliferation of illegitimate children and venereal disease tied specifically to the ungovernable sexuality of servant women. Therefore, the signification of "county," located in a sexually charged place of the female body, the pudendum, gestures to the communal characteristic of female servant sex. The suggestion can be discerned only in the distorted orthography of the servant's limited skills in literacy. The bad spelling disturbs the neatness of the "good pun."

Ferdinand de Saussure objects to the use of punning in communication since the practice ambiguates meaning and disturbs the neat system of communication by which meaning is conveyed from speaker to listener. In his view, human society depends on this system to make us intelligible and understood (1983). The pun creates confusion and impedes understanding, an "anarchist" in challenging the stability of linguistic order. Win's written language inadvertently pokes fun at her own presumption of being literate, but in a rough sense, it also stands as a metaphor for the threat of an alternate literacy emerging from other social groups. Win speaks no gibberish here; the reader can clearly understand both her and Smollett's meaning in the punning. Even in shockingly bad writing, Win urgently promotes servant literacy to her fellow servants:

...and I pray of all love, you will mind your vriting and your spilling; for craving your pardon, Molly, it made me suet to disseyffer your last scrabble, which was delivered by the hind at Bath – O! voman! voman! if thou had'st but the least consumption of what pleasure we scullers have, when we can cunster the crabbidst buck off hand, and spell the ethnitch vords without lucking at the primmer (124).

A proud servant “sculler,” Win places importance in intuitive literacy for her fellow servants. But the substitution of “sculler” for “scholar” collapses the degree of seriousness inhabited in the word, mocking the very concept of a learned kitchen maid by linking the malapropism with lower-class labor. Though visually comical in its flagrant errors, the presence of servant writing in the novel acknowledges the existence of such a literacy within more traditional forms of communication found in Jerry's, Lydia's and Matt's letters. This kind of writing, a language that seems out of control from its unintelligibility, muscles its way into more dominant forms of writing. The effect is not just bad writing that is funny to the literate eye: it is precisely in the bad writing where the pun is located. Erroneous spelling in the punning makes these meanings structurally compatible and available to the reader.

Within the narrative's official linguistic norms, the disruptive power of Win's language ties up with lower-class sexual bodies. In this way, Smollett's representation of the maid's discourse can be characterized as carnivalesque juxtaposed with Win's fellow letter writers' general adherence to the language of sensibility. The maid's pen scribbles unsavory words that call attention to the body, marking her language as a violation of social acceptability. The discourse of sensibility, like all discursive formations, operates by rules of exclusion, and the puns in her language, only recognizable to others, averts the power her literacy seems to promise. Smollett channels the unconscious drives of sex and aggression through a character whose subaltern condition not only makes this language permissible, but perhaps urgent. In other words, the author *must* depict the lower class writer's language to be erroneous and distasteful to insist on the importance of *difference* in the face of major cultural change that working-class literacy poses. But, as a “trans-

gressive" language, Win's letters act as a challenge to the existing dominant forms of writing in the novel, especially since her writing is still coherent: we can still understand her, notwithstanding the flagrant errors in syntax and mechanics.

Smollett's use of the pun for the servant's language achieves a number of things: First, given the aesthetic and social culture of his time, it seems "realistic" that servants should be punning. Alderson notes in his discussion of anti-punning rhetoric that this practice of wit previously enjoyed by the elite had descended to the lower orders, much to the chagrin of many eighteenth-century contemporaries (1996). A critical response to the plebeian appropriation of aristocratic emulation is Libertine humor, in which the "migration of lower-stratum disorder describes not a random zig-zag but a dialectic of emulation and expropriation: the 'mad tricks' and drinking rituals of whore and rogue circulate through an economy of representation from plebeian disorder (simulating rakish excess) to aristocratic condescension (simulating the abject with a lofty contempt for common humanity" (Turner, p. 225). Higher-ranking wits felt that those below them violated their aesthetic space with their punning, and in return, produced a discourse that attempted to maintain social difference.

Second, servants' obliviousness to their own punning creates an elitist space of the "inside joke," barring servants from entry. Because servants have a crude skill set in literacy, the novel's middling readers expected malapropisms in servant writing. Both puns and malapropisms depend on phonic interpretations of words, but only the discerning eye and ear could recover the different meanings. In another entry in *Humphry Clinker*, Win reports to her fellow maidservant Mary Jones that her gastrointestinal discomfort from a "piss of cold cuddling tart" with the other servants was palliated by Tabitha's "viol of assings" (341). Later in the letter, she dishes on Lydia's impending match with her gentleman but calls it "all suppository" (341). Considering the cultural context of these orthographic errors develops the comedy much more fully. Win keeps the company of servants who dress like "parsons of distinkson" but have nothing to eat other than dessert, exactly the kind of "Ridiculous" person Henry Fielding detested, a person who valued material and superficial trappings to survival – the ostentatious "low" person ("Preface"). She puts her "trust in the Lord" but has witch elm sown in her pet-

ticoat to ward off evil, marking her back to her lower-class place with a superstitious practice specifically tied to rural culture. Win “scorns...to exclose the secrets of the family” but gossips freely of Lydia’s scandalous amour with an actor, evoking a common complaint of servants. Several levels of comedy can be appreciated here, but only with the discerning audience, those in on the joke.

Third, writers can impose punster humor on the servants for ideological effect. Servants are, after all, ignorant and unrefined – at least, these writers make them out to be so. *Joseph Andrews’* very own Fanny Goodwill could not read and her Christian name is suggestive of the pudendum (Rawson, 1996). As good, beautiful and kind as Fielding paints her in the novel, her name and illiteracy reminds the reader that she belongs in the lower ranks of life.

Punning servants surprised few of Smollett’s readers. In response to the popularity of punning with the lower orders, the period produced a body of antipunning rhetoric. Alexander Pope, though a punster himself, describes punning as “a contagion that first crept in amongst the First Quality, descended to their Footmen, and infused itself into their Ladies” (cited in Ault, 1935, p. 270). Alexander Hamilton, a Scottish emigré living in Maryland, laments the shift of elite punsters in James I’s reign to the dregs of society: “the only remains of [“elite” punning] are to be found scattered about in Ale-houses, Bawdy houses, Chop houses, Bethlehem Hospital, and among the black Guard boys, water men, porters, in the precincts of Wapping, the Garrets of Grubstreet...” (cited in Micklus, 1990, p. 227-228). The lower-class ignorant can easily access the pun, a mode of wit not specifically exclusive for the social and intellectual elite. Punning, thus, invites “social topsy-turveydom” for social commentators in the early part of the century. Antipunning rhetoric regulates social interaction at the public level to maintain educational and polite hierarchies (Alderson, 1996). Considering eighteenth-century regard of the pun, its ideology in confirming and crossing class lines is palpable.

Fourth, this allows writers to still touch on coarse subjects in otherwise “high” works of art without broaching social and aesthetic decorum. In polite society, especially towards the end of the century when sensitivity to tawdry subjects was becoming an identifying ethos, the pun’s capacity to verbally frame crudeness heightened its appeal. Men of wit could allude to base subjectes without

violating linguistic decorum. This play on words refined “low” comedy. This practice of linguistic framing, a sign of being “civilized,” became more relevant in the later part of the century (Bates, 1999). Unsurprisingly, Freud observes that the more obscure the joke, the more exclusive the circle of those who were “in” on the joke. Though the joke’s transparency decreases in its tempered form, its increasing opacity reinforces gender and class barriers.

Following Bourdieu’s (1977) claim that polysemy only exists in academic spaces and that puns are deliberate exploitation of polysemy, the sexually charged meanings of the puns may be accessible to a select community of readers, especially those familiar with the mottled culture of servants and sex. These readers witness the servant’s exposure through her own language. To counter the danger of the servant’s potential for social mobility through her discursive power, Smollett performs a linguistic act of sexual aggression, rendering her ridiculous exemplified in her written campaign for servant literacy. Smollett’s very own *Critical Review* viewed reading by the lower orders as an epidemic, an immediate threat to society that needed to be quelled (Donahue, cited in Bermingham and Brewer, 1995). Though Smollett’s politics skews towards conservatism, his jokes betray an ambivalent attitude towards servant reading and servant sexuality. The joke’s deployment admits an implied sexual excitement in exposing the maid’s body. Hamilton (cited in Micklus, 1990) recognizes the stimulating nature of the pun; punning excites intellectual and somatic responses from the audience – they think about the multiple layers of the joke, discover the joke, then laugh. In placing taboo subjects like pudendas and buttocks in the servant’s mouth, the comic effect provokes both mirth and sexual excitement. Swift’s (1716) jocular *Modest Defence of Punning* points to the political nature of punning from its capacity for “ambiguous treason” (p. 4). Following this idea to an individual’s implicit allegiance to social mores, Smollett’s punning in Win’s words betrays the socially censured desire of sexual endogamy.

The servant’s posterior, both male and female, garners considerable attention in *Humphry Clinker*. Indeed, readers encounter Clinker’s rear, so shocking to the delicate sensibility of the perpetually carping Mrs. Tabitha, before the eponymous hero himself. Win notes that his skin is “as fair as alabaster,” anticipating Clinker’s origins of a higher station as Bramble’s illegitimate son at the nov-

el's conclusion (p. 93). The servant's rear-end is the butt of the joke and an instrument of the comedic plot.

In the episode immediately preceding Clinker's introduction through his rear, Winifred's rump is also, literally, the butt of the joke. Here, Jerry Bramble, Matt's nephew accompanying the family on the tour, writes of the aftermath of their overturned carriage:

When I looked into the coach, I could see nothing distinctly, but the nether end of Jenkins, who was kicking her heels and squalling with great vociferation. All of a sudden, my uncle thrust up his bare pate, and bolted through the window, as nimble as a grasshopper, having made use of poor Win's posteriors as a step to rise in his ascent (p. 91).

Here, Win's rear is not an instrument of plot – it is merely an instrument. Smollett admired the aesthetic qualities of a well-proportioned female bottom, evidenced by his reaction to the Medici Venus in *Travels Through France and Italy* (1766): “Heavens! what a beautiful back! the loins, with what exuberance they fill the grasp! how finely are the swelling buttocks rounded, neither too thinly cleaving to the bone, nor effused into a huge mass of flabby inconsistency!” (p. 236). However, the comedy of the episode locates itself in the innovative *use* of Winifred's rump, rather than to its loveliness. The joke is class-based; the elite make use of their servants to ascend and maintain their social position. The coupling of dissimilar things (butt/step) reduces the sexual appeal of a common erogenous space on the female body, thereby making the body appear ridiculous rather than attractive. Yet, considering how much Smollett appreciates this part of the female, an ambivalence of the joke's effect arises. In drawing the reader's attention to a sexualized site of the female body, Smollett compels the reader to imagine that part of the body with him in a confederate act of sexual aggression. This point is speculative, but nonetheless invites inquiry of why the motif of exposure is an agent in the comic tradition. The treatment of the female plebian body in comic fiction, I contend, is a response to the “progressive” changes happening at the time: increased commercialization and an expanded marketplace, technological innovation and higher incomes that decreased

the gap between classes. The obscene joke is rooted in an enforced nostalgia that desires to transpose difference from rank to biological difference. It seeks to recover distinction.

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