

THE LADY AND HER HORSEKEEPER AND SHAKESPEARE

FORTY years ago in these pages I assembled a number of passages from the late Elizabethan and the Jacobean drama that refer to ladies of high social station having sexual relations with men of very low station.¹ In *A Shoemaker, a Gentleman* the Nurse tells Leodice, 'I have known ladies remove their stable grooms into their bedchambers, and lower offices than that too' (II.i.151-2);² in *Wit at Several Weapons* Cuningame asks Sir Gregory Fop, 'Has not a great Lady brought her Stable/Into her Chamber? lay with her Horse-keeper?' (III.i.278-9);³ in *The Family of Love* Purge plans in an aside to stalk his wife and Lipsalve 'close and softly, like a horsekeeper in a lady's matted chamber at midnight' (IV.i.115-16);⁴ in *A Mad World, My Masters* Follywit speaks to Mawworm of ladies who 'lie with their horse-keeper' (III.iii.91-2);⁵ and in *The Duchess of Malfi* Ferdinand raves to the Cardinal that he can visualize their sister, the Duchess, 'in the shamefull act of sinne / . . . with some strong-thigh'd Bargeman; / Or one o' th' wood-yard, that can quoit the sledge, / Or tosse the barre' (II.v.55-9).⁶ J. C. Maxwell,

¹ 'The Lady and Her Horsekeeper: Middleton or Rowley?', *N&Q*, ccviii (1963), 303-6. The first two passages were cited earlier in Stanley Wells, 'The Lady and the Stable Groome', *N&Q*, ccv (1960), 31.

² Trudi L. Darby (ed.) (New York, 2002).

³ Robert Kean Turner (ed.), in *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, gen. ed. Fredson Bowers, 10 vols (Cambridge, 1966-96), VII. He then warns Sir Gregory that, if he weds, he must 'Beware a sturdy Clown' (i.e., a peasant), since married ladies 'keep Clownes to stop gaps, and drive in peggs' (281, 286). In the Epilogue to *The Conquest of Granada*, Dryden compares Fame to a woman who jilts her worthy suitor for the embraces of a 'lacquey' or 'brawny clown' (George Saintsbury (ed.), Mermaid Series, 2 vols (New York, 1949), I, 116).

⁴ A. H. Bullen (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Middleton*, 8 vols (Boston, 1885-6), III. A matted chamber muffled the sounds within it, and so was associated with clandestine sex - see *Parasitaster, or The Fawn*, V.i.335-6 (Gerald A. Smith (ed.), Regents Renaissance Drama (Lincoln, 1965)), and *The Atheist's Tragedy, or The Honest Man's Revenge*, Liv.145-6, IV.v.7 (Irving Ribner (ed.), Revels Plays (Cambridge, Mass., 1964)).

⁵ Standish Henning (ed.), *Regents Renaissance Drama* (Lincoln, 1965).

⁶ F. L. Lucas (ed.), *The Complete Works of John Webster*, 4 vols (London, 1927), II. To quoit the sledge means to throw the sledge hammer.

in his replies to my article,⁷ added three more examples: in *Monsieur D'Olive* the titular character reveals to Mugeron and Roderigue his fears that, even though he tried his best to please his wife, 'yet perhaps when all's done, my heir shall be like my horsekeeper' (I.i.356-7);⁸ in *The Revenger's Tragedy* Spurio acknowledges to the Duchess that possibly his father's 'groom / O' th' stable begot me' (I.ii.135-6);⁹ and in *The Honest Man's Fortune* Laverdure says to La-poope, 'You shall have many Mistresses that will so mistake as to take their horse keepers, and footemen instead of their Husbands' (III.iii.156-7).¹⁰

Since then some more examples have come to my attention. In *Parasitaster, or The Fawn* Hercules, the disguised Duke, informs Don Zuccone that his wife is pregnant because she 'descend[ed] to the base lust of some groom of your stable, or the page of your chamber' (II.i.273-4);¹¹ in *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage* the newly married William Scarborrow is warned by Wentloe and Bartley that 'your heyre' will be 'The sonne of some slaue', or of 'Some groome', or of 'Some Horse-keeper' (V.1192-5);¹² in *The Widow's Tears* Tharsalio's harangue to Cynthia attacks widows who, even before their husband's corpse 'be fully cold, . . . join embraces with his groom, or his physician' (I.i.107-8);¹³ in *Epicoene, or The Silent Woman* Truewit predicts to Dauphine that, when Morose marries, 'some groome of his [will get] him an heire, or this barber' (I.ii.55);¹⁴ in *Greene's Tu Quoque, or The City Gallant* Joyce tells Staines about upper-class ladies who 'have run away / With butlers, horsekeepers, and their father's clerks'

(p. 253);¹⁵ in *The Second Maiden's Tragedy* Sophonirus complains in a soliloquy that his wife cuckolded him with 'a scurvy page / that I kept once' (II.iii.1167-8);¹⁶ in *The Woman Hater* Gondarino places a curse on Oriana: 'mai'st thou dote upon some sturdy Yeoman of the wood-yarde, and he be honest' (V.iv.119-21);¹⁷ in *The Captain* Jacamo makes a sardonic offer to Clara: 'I'll send my Foot-man to thee, he shall leap thee, / And thou wantst horsing' (III.iii.120-1);¹⁸ and in *The Scornful Lady* the Elder Loveless, whose advances have been repeatedly rejected by the Lady, finally decides in a soliloquy that she must prefer

Some Meeching raskall in her house, some hinde,
That she hath scene beare (like another *Milo*)
Quarters of Malte upon his backe . . .
These steelechind rascalls that undoe us all.
Would I had bin a carter, or a Coachman,
I had done the deed ere this time.
(V.i.12-20)¹⁹

I argued in my original article that it was most unlikely that these passages were topical allusions to some contemporary scandal, which modern scholars have failed to uncover, and that they probably drew, instead, on a general idea embedded in the folklore, and, I would now add, in male anxieties. The idea is that the motivation of upper-class women in

¹⁵ *A Select Collection of Old English Plays*, ed. Robert Dodsley, 4th edn, rev. W. Carew Hazlitt, 15 vols (London, 1874-6), XI.

¹⁶ W. W. Greg (ed.), Malone Society (Oxford, 1910).

¹⁷ George Walton Williams (ed.) (see n. 3), I.

¹⁸ L. A. Beaurline (ed.) (see n. 3), I.

¹⁹ Cyrus Hoy (ed.) (see n. 3), II. Milo(n) of Croton was a Greek wrestler of the sixth century bc who carried a heifer the length of the stadium, and *steelechind* means strong-backed, which signified virility. In *The Alchemist*, II.ii.37-9, Sir Epicure Mammon tells Face, 'I will make me, a back / With the *elixir*, that shall be as tough / As HERCVLES, to encounter fiftie a night' (Herford and Simpson (eds), see n. 14) - compare *The Malcontent*, IV.v.58-9 (M. L. Wine (ed.), Regents Renaissance Drama (Lincoln, 1964)); in *The Insatiate Countess*, IV.ii, p. 56, a 'Libel' against the Countess says that any man who loves her '*Needs Atlas back for to content her lust*' (H. Harvey Wood (ed.), *The Plays of John Marston*, 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1934-9), III); in *The Maid of Honor*, I.ii.44, Sylli boasts to Camiola about 'the strength of my back' (Arthur H. Nethercot *et al.* (eds), *Stuart Plays* (New York, 1971)); and in *The City Match*, V.viii, p. 311, Warehouse suggests that Dorcas is sexually attracted 'To fellows that can lift weights' (Dodsley (ed.), see n. 15, XIII). See also the quotation above from *The Duchess of Malfi*.

⁷ J. C. Maxwell, 'Replies', *N&Q*, ccxi (1966), 305, and ccxii (1967), 229.

⁸ Thomas Marc Parrott (ed.), *The Plays and Poems of George Chapman: The Comedies* (London, 1914).

⁹ Lawrence J. Ross (ed.), Regents Renaissance Drama (Lincoln, 1966).

¹⁰ Cyrus Hoy (ed.) (see n. 3), X.

¹¹ Smith (ed.) (see n. 4).

¹² Glenn H. Blayney (ed.), Malone Society (Oxford, 1964).

¹³ Ethel M. Smeak (ed.), Regents Renaissance Drama (Lincoln, 1966).

¹⁴ C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson (eds), *Ben Jonson*, 11 vols (Oxford, 1925-52), V.

seeking out these lower-class men must be wholly sexual (since the great social and cultural distance between them would preclude any romantic relationship),²⁰ and that they are sexually attracted to them because lower-class men are supposed to be more physical (with stronger backs), more primitive, more animal-like, and hence more virile than the men of their own class. This would account for all those references to sturdy yeomen of the woodyard, and especially to stable grooms and horsekeepers, who take on some of the aura of brute sexuality associated with the stallion or 'stone horse' – in fact, 'horsing' and 'colting' were slang terms for coitus.²¹ As Ephraim explains in his poem in *The New Academy, or The New Exchange* about highborn ladies who chose lowborn mates, these ladies 'did wisely know, / Inferiour men best could their work below' (IV.i, p. 69).²² I also pointed out that this idea still survives in some modern fiction, such as D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, in Lady Chatterly's affair with her gamekeeper; and his 'St. Mawr', where the stallion becomes a symbol of true masculinity, and his two grooms arouse the sexual interest of Lady Carrington and her mother; and W. Somerset Maugham's 'The Human Element', which turns on the discovery that a duke's daughter is intimate with her chauffeur – probably the closest modern equivalent to a lady's stable groom.

My original article did not include any passages from Shakespeare, but I later realized that, since this idea was so widespread at the time, we would also expect to find it in his work. It is implicit in Tarquin's threat to Lucrece in *The Rape of Lucrece*. He tells her that if she does not yield to him, he will kill her, and

That done, some worthless slave of thine I'll slay,
To kill thine honor with thy live's decay;

²⁰ Thus in *Love's Mistress, or The Queen's Masque*, I.i, pp. 106–7, Apuleius distinguishes between true, spiritual love and 'intemperate lust' that 'inflame[s] the soule / With some base groome' (R. H. Shepherd (ed.), *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Heywood*, 6 vols (New York, 1964), V).

²¹ See *Cymbeline*, II.iv.133; *Bartholomew Fair*, IV.iv.231 (Herford and Simpson (eds), see n. 14); and the quotation above from *The Captain*.

²² R. H. Shepherd (ed.), *The Dramatic Works of Richard Brome*, 3 vols (New York, 1966), II.

And in thy dead arms do I mean to place him,
Swearing I slew him, seeing thee embrace him.
(515–18)²³

He repeats the threat later, saying that after he kills her,

despitefully I mean to bear thee
Unto the base bed of some rascal groom,
To be thy partner in this shameful doom.
(670–2)

Lucrece herself repeats it when she tells Collatine and his friends what Tarquin said to her:

For some hard-favor'd groom of thine, quoth he,
Unless thou yoke thy liking to my will,
I'll murther straight, and then I'll slaughter thee,
And swear I found you where you did fulfill
The loathsome act of lust, and so did kill
The lechers in their deed.
(1632–7)

and she concludes that

So should my shame still rest upon record,
And never be forgot in mighty Rome
Th' adulterate death of Lucrece and her groom.
(1643–5)

Clearly, the assumption that this lie would be believed – an assumption shared by Tarquin and Lucrece and presumably Shakespeare – depends on the idea that highborn ladies are attracted by the sexual prowess of a lowborn 'worthless slave' or 'rascal groom', which the poem exploits by its insistent repetition.²⁴ This alleged prowess may also be alluded to in *Pericles* when Marina tells Boult, the bawd, that if she fails to keep her promise he can 'prostitute me to the basest groom / That doth frequent your house' (IV.vi.190–1).

I believe there is another reference to this idea, which has apparently escaped notice, in *Much Ado about Nothing* where Margaret, while preparing Hero for her wedding, tries to engage in some traditional prenuptial jollity with Beatrice, who is not in the mood.

Margaret. Clap 's into 'Light a' love'; that goes
without a burden. Do you sing it, and I'll dance it.

²³ Quotations of Shakespeare follow *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston, 1974).

²⁴ The same threat is used in the same pattern in Heywood's *The Rape of Lucrece* – Tarquin states it twice to Lucrece in IV.iii, and she repeats it to Collatine in V.i. Compare Corvino's threat to Celia in *Volpone*, III.vii.100–3: 'I will buy some slaue, / Whom I will kill, and binde thee to him, aliuie; / And at my windore, hang you forth: deuising / Some monstrous crime' (Herford and Simpson (eds), see n. 14).

Beatrice. Ye light a' love with your heels! then if your husband have stables enough, you'll see he shall lack no barns.

Margaret. O illegitimate construction! I scorn that with my heels.

(III.iv.44–51)

All the editors note that 'Light of love' was the name of a popular dance tune (also mentioned in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, I.ii.80, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, V.ii.54), and that 'light heeled' was a slang term for loose women,²⁵ and that 'barns' puns on 'bairns' (children); but they do not try to explain the stables.²⁶ Yet the explanation can be found in the idea I am discussing: Beatrice means that these stables will be serviced by stable grooms, and that the 'light heeled' Margaret will have them service her to produce the bairns. That is why Margaret calls her response an 'illegitimate construction' – it illegitimately constructs the name of the tune, and it accuses her of illegitimately constructing her children.

This idea may also be involved in two problematic passages in the canon. One is the speech of Antigonus in *The Winter's Tale*, in which he protests to Leontes that Hermione has been a faithful wife:

If it prove
She's otherwise, I'll keep my stables where
I lodge my wife; I'll go in couples with her;
Than when I feel and see her no farther trust her;
For every inch of woman in the world,
Ay, every dram of woman's flesh is false,
If she be.

(II.i.133–9)

²⁵ See 2 *The Honest Whore*, IV.ii.105 (Fredson Bowers (ed.), *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, 4 vols (Cambridge, 1953–61), II), and *How a Man May Choose a Good Wife from a Bad*, III.ii, p. 53 (Dodsley (ed.), see n. 15, IX). They do not note that Benedick plays on this at the end of *Much Ado* when he calls for 'a dance ere we are married, that we may lighten our own hearts and our wives' heels' (V.iv.117–19). Nor do they note that 'light of love' was also a term for these women, as in *The Wild Goose Chase*, IV.i.139 (Fredson Bowers (ed.), see n. 3, VI); *The Chances*, I.iii.33 (George Walton Williams (ed.), see n. 3, IV); and *The Two Angry Women of Abington*, III.740 (W. W. Greg (ed.), Malone Society (Oxford, 1912)).

²⁶ The only exception known to me is Sheldon Zitner's note in the Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford, 1993), 157: 'Enough stables may refer either to the wealth of the husband – permitting a large family – or to the number of his tenants and farmhands – permitting, though illicitly, the same result'. His second alternative is on the right track, but since he does not ask why Beatrice specifies stables (rather than farms or land), he misses her specific allusion to the stable grooms.

There is no problem with the general meaning of the speech – Antigonus is asserting that, if Hermione is guilty, then no woman can be trusted, including his own wife, and so he would have to treat her accordingly. That is why he would keep her tied to him, like hunting dogs who are leashed 'in couples'. The reference to his stables, however, is not easily explained. Some editors admit that they are baffled by it, but most of those who venture an interpretation think that Antigonus means he will keep watch over his wife as he keeps watch over the mares in his stables, to prevent them from mating with the stallions.²⁷ There are, however, two problems with this reading. It is not what he actually says, and to transform what he actually says into this reading requires that we change the verb in the second clause and also the relationship between the two clauses, so that 'I'll keep my stables where I lodge my wife' becomes 'I'll keep my wife like I keep my stables', which is quite a stretch, even if we allow for the elasticity granted by poetic license. Moreover, that is not how stables are actually managed. I do not pretend to any expertise in this matter, but I am told that people who keep or breed horses and want to control their reproduction do this, not by keeping watch over the mares, but by sequestering and keeping watch over the stallions, which makes much more sense because there are usually fewer of them and they are always the sexual aggressors, which is why I argued that it is their sexuality that rubs off on the stable grooms in the passages quoted earlier.

We might ask, therefore, if a more promising explanation of Antigonus's speech can be found in the idea expressed in those passages, which is what J. H. P. Pafford suggests in another reply to my original note that has apparently escaped the attention of the

²⁷ A few commentators claim that Antigonus is alluding to Semiramis, who, according to Pliny (VIII.42), had intercourse with a horse; but if that is what worries him, he would *not* keep his stables where he lodges his wife. Some interpretations are based on misreadings of references to keeping stables in *James IV*, I.ii.62 (Norman Sanders (ed.), *Revels Plays* (London, 1973)), and in *All Fools*, IV.i.261–2 (Frank Manley (ed.), *Regents Renaissance Drama* (Lincoln, 1968)).

editors.²⁸ At first glance this speech may seem to be similar to the passages from *A Shoemaker, a Gentleman* and *Wit at Several Weapons*, where the stable or stable groom is moved into the lady's bedchamber; but there it is the lady who does this (presumably it is a metaphor meaning that she has sexual relations with the groom, although in the passage from *The Family of Love* he is literally sneaked into her 'matted chamber'). Here, however, the husband will do it literally, and his purpose is to prevent his wife from doing it metaphorically. Pafford's suggestion is that Antigonus is saying, 'Wherever I lodge my wife I myself will there be the keeper of my stables', but I think Antigonus probably means that, wherever he lodges her, he will keep watch over the stables to make sure she has no access to the grooms. Both interpretations, it should be noted, retain the actual meaning of Antigonus's *where* and *lodge*, and while they may not be completely convincing, I believe they are more plausible than the one usually offered.

The second passage is Malvolio's speech in *Twelfth Night* where he is trying to convince himself that the Countess Olivia wants to marry him: 'There is example for't: the Lady of the Strachy married the yeoman of the wardrobe' (II.v.39–40). Here the problem is not in the meaning but in the reference to the Lady and her yeoman, since no one has been able to identify them, although that is not for want of trying. One of the most amusing sections of the *Variorum* is the five-page summary of these efforts. Most of them claim that *Strachy* is a misprint for another word – for *Trachy* (Thrace), or *Trachnye* (a city in Thessaly), or *Austrasia*, or *Astrakhan*, or *Strozzi* (a noble Florentine family), or *sophy* (a Persian monarch), or *satrap* (a Persian governor), or *stratarch* (a Byzantine general or governor), or *strapchy* (a Russian judge), or *straccio* (clothing room), or *starchy* (starching room), or *stitchery* (sewing room). But since none of these conjectures is accompanied by any evidence of the marriage referred to, they just substitute one unknown for another.

²⁸ *N&Q*, ccxi (1966), 393. Earlier, in his note on this passage in the *Arden Shakespeare* (London, 1963), 36–7, he gave the usual interpretation: 'I'll lock my wife up as I shut up my mares away from the stallions'.

A different tack is taken by C. J. Sisson, who claims to have solved the problem by unearthing a William Strachy, a 'sharer' in the Blackfriars in 1606, and a David Yeomans, the 'tireman' of the company.²⁹ But this solution has its own problems: Strachy's wife would not be called 'the Lady of the Strachy', and she could not be married to Yeomans when this play was written, because Strachy was still alive,³⁰ and the social distance between her and Yeomans is much too small to serve Malvolio's (and Shakespeare's) purpose. There is also a more basic objection to all these efforts, which is stated by J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik in the note on this passage in their edition of the play: 'It is most unlikely that some socially unequal marriage should be universally familiar to Shakespeare's audience and totally undiscoverable now'.³¹ It seems reasonable to conclude, therefore, that the reference to this misalliance is not a topical allusion, but was invented by Shakespeare to contribute to his portrayal of Malvolio.

We should then consider if it is related to the references to the other misalliances in the passages quoted earlier, which, we saw, are not topical allusions either. It is certainly very different from them, because here the lady marries the man, whereas the other passages describe a sexual liaison, and this man is a yeoman of the wardrobe, who, unlike those yeomen of the woodyard and horsekeepers, is not regarded as a sexual object.³² But that is

²⁹ C. J. Sisson, *New Readings in Shakespeare*, 2 vols (London, 1961), I, 188–91. This is similar to his discovery of the real man behind Jonson's Dapper – see his 'A Topical Reference in *The Alchemist*', *Joseph Quincy Adams Memorial Studies*, ed. James G. McManaway et al. (Washington, 1948), 739–41, and my 'Another "Source" for *The Alchemist* and Another Look at Source Studies', *English Literary Renaissance*, xxviii (1998), 210–30, esp. 211–12.

³⁰ Sisson tries to get around this by suggesting that Malvolio's 'married' might well be a euphemism for a sexual liaison (190). But Malvolio is not interested in a liaison with Olivia, he wants to marry her, and so wants an 'example' of a real, non-euphemistic marriage.

³¹ *Arden Shakespeare* (London, 1975), 65.

³² Robert Nares pointed out the connection between Malvolio's speech and the passages cited above from *Wit at Several Weapons* and *The New Academy*, but he failed to note the difference in the men involved (*A Glossary; or, Collection of Words, Phrases, Names, and Allusions to Customs, Proverbs, &c.* (London, 1822), 493). His remarks are quoted in the *Variorum*.

just the point and it explains why this reference is so appropriate for Malvolio, since he is portrayed as sexless. This emerges very clearly, immediately after the passage in question, in his daydream of marriage to Olivia (II.iv.44–80), which omits any erotic or romantic aspects and focuses entirely on the change in his social status that will enable him to exercise authority over Sir Toby. Thus the ‘example’ that he wants is not of a noble lady’s sexual passion for a virile young labourer, but of her marriage to a more sedate and elevated (and presumably older) servant like himself. It is impossible, of course, to determine if Shakespeare thought of this contrast when he wrote the speech, or if he expected his audience to be aware of it, but the widespread idea of the lady and her stable groom does provide a contemporary context for understanding Malvolio’s striking variation of it and the relation of this to his character.

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