

Plain-Speaking and Plain-Dealing: The Ambivalence of Transparency in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Literature

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I. William Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer* (1676)

Remake or revisionary rewriting of Molière's *Le Misanthrope* (1666)
(in turn revised by Voltaire in *La Prude*, 1747)

Manly, the plain-dealer (≈ Alceste in Molière, the misanthrope)

Olivia, his false beloved (≈ Célimène)

Varnish, Manly's false friend, betrays him with Olivia and marries her

Freeman, his only real friend (≈ Philinte)

Novel and **Lord Plausible** (≈ Clitandre, Oronte), spiteful and foppish men about town

Fidelia, in love with Manly, follows him in men's clothes

Widow Blackacre, a ludicrous old woman who has a mania for law-suits and is black-mailed into marrying Freeman

MANLY [...] but I, that am an unmannerly Sea-fellow, *if I ever speak well of people, (which is very seldom indeed) it shou'd be sure to be behind their backs; and if I wou'd say, or do ill to any, it shou'd be to their faces:* I wou'd justle a proud, strutting, over-looking Coxcomb, at the head of his Sycophants, rather than put out my tongue at him, when he were past me; wou'd frown in the arrogant, big, dull face of an overgrown Knave of business, rather than vent my spleen against him, when his back were turn'd; wou'd give fauning Slaves the Lye, whil'st they embrace or commend me; Cowards, whil'st they brag; call a Rascal by no other

title, though his Father had left him a Duke's; laugh at Fools aloud, before their Mistresses: And must *desire people to leave me, when their visits grow at last as troublesome, as they were at first impertinent.*

L. Plausible. *I wou'd not have my visits troublesome.*

Manly. *The onely way to be sure not to have 'em troublesom, is to make 'em when people are not at home; for your visits, like other good turns, are most obliging, when made, or done to a man, in his absence. A pox why shou'd any one, because he has nothing to do go and disturb another mans business? (I,i)*

MANLY.

Tell not me (my good Lord Plausible) of your **decorums, supercilious forms, and slavish ceremonies**, your little tricks which you, the **spaniels** of the world, do daily over and over, for and to one another — not out of love or duty, but your servile fear. (I,I, 1-4)

Therefore I rather choose to go where **honest, downright barbarity** is professed; where men **devour one another like generous hungry lions and tigers**, not like **crocodiles** [...]" (I, I, 594-7)

Freeman. Why, don't you know, good Captain, that telling truth is a quality as prejudicial, to a man that wou'd thrive in the World, as **square Play to a Cheat, or true Love to a Whore!** Wou'd you have a man speak truth to his ruine? You are severer than the Law, which requires no man to swear against himself; you wou'd have me speak truth against my self, I warrant, and tell my promising Friend, the Courtier, he has a bad memory? [...] What other good success of all my Plain-dealing cou'd I have, than what I've mentioned? [...]

Well, Doctors differ. You are for **Plain-dealing**, I find; but against your particular Notions, I have the **practice of the whole World**. Observe but any Morning what people do when they get together on the Exchange, in Westminster-hall, or the Galleries in Whitehall. (I,i)

Oxymoronic Analogues:

Gaymond. Pshau, 'tis the Fashion now: Shew me the Man that never talk'd ill of others, nor well of himself, and I'll be bound to shew thee **a Plain-dealing Courtier, a Peace-making Lawyer, a silent Woman, an honest Taylor, a witty Alderman**, a— (Peter Anthony Motteux, *Love's a Jest*, 1696)

Lucinda. Not at all; but I think I do you Justice, to let you know, that you Sparks that deifie your Bottles, have forfeited all claim to any just Amour; and you ought to be laugh'd at when you pretend to't; for my part I'd **sooner expect Plain-dealing in a Courtier, Humility in a well-dignifi'd Prelate, or Remorse of Conscience in a Usurer; than Truth and Sincerity in a Topping Lover.** (Thomas Dilke, *The City Lady*, 1697)

Linguistic Analysis of Plain-Dealing and Plain-Speaking

Collocations

plain-dealing & sincerity (12)
 plain-dealing & truth (11)
 plain-dealing & free(ly) (8)
 plain-dealing & honest/y (5)
 plain-dealing & candor (1)

Antonyms

deceive/deceit (11)
 lie/lying (10), dissemble (8)
 flattery (7), false/hood (6)
 cheat/ing (5) (Cheater, Cheatly)
 dissimulation (3)

LION database, Drama 1660-1750

proverb: „plain-dealing is a jewel“ (8)→ „double-dealing is a jewel“ (Congreve)

“Right and Plain-dealing is a Jewel fit for a forsaken Mistresses Ear“ (Roger Boyle, Mr. Anthony, 1690) Later readings of the plain dealer as blunt and rude:

The afterlife of *The Plain Dealer*:

Hotspur. They call her here in Richmond, **The Female Plain Dealer**.

Frederick. They do so, and justly too, for she takes as much Pride in speaking **blunt Truths**, as the rest of her Sex do in studying quaint Lyes. (Thomas D'Urfey, *The Richmond Heiress*, 1693)

Sir Francis. **A Plain-Dealer?**

Harriet. **A Brute**. (William Taverner, *The artful wife*, 1718)

Emilia. Oh! he sets up for a **Plain-dealer**, that is, one who **shows his Wit at the Expence of his Breeding**. (Henry Fielding, *The Modern Husband*, 1732)

Manly's reformation: learns to lie and intrigue

Manly. Pr'ythee let me be rid of thee, I must be rid of thee.

Novel. Faith, thou canst hardly, I love thee so. Come, I must know the business.

Manly. So, I have it now. (*aside*) Why, if you needs will know it, he [Freeman] has a quarrel, and his Adversary bids him bring two Friends with him: now, I am one; and we are thinking who we shall have for a third.

Nov. A Pox, there goes a Fellow owes me an Hundred pound, and goes out of Town to morrow: I'll speak with him, and come to you presently. (III,i)

Manly learns to lie and intrigue and discovers the deceit of Olivia and Varnish and the true love of Fidelia

John Tillotson (1630-94), *Sermons* (1694)

And with the sincerity of our **Piety towards God**, let us joyn the simplicity and integrity of Manners in our **Conversation with Men**; let us strictly charge our selves to use truth and plainness in all our words and doings; [...] and our outward actions exactly agreeable to our inward purposes and intentions. (22-3)

[...] the World is grown so full of **Dissimulation** and **Complement**, that Mens words are hardly any signification of their thoughts; and if any Man measure his words by his heart, and speak as he thinks, and do not express more kindness to every man [...] he can hardly escape **the censure of rudeness and want of breeding**: The old English plainness and sincerity, that generous integrity of Nature and honesty of Disposition which always argues true greatness of mind, and is usually accompanied with undaunted courage and resolution, is in a great measure lost amongst us; there hath been a long endeavour to transform us into foreign Manners and Fashions and to bring us to servile imitation of none of the best of our Neighbours in some of the worst of their Qualities: [...] (23-4)

II. Speaking and Hiding the Truth: Early Modern Conundrums

keywords dissimulation and equivocation

Early Modern Dissimulation and Equivocation as Necessary Survival Strategy

Dissimulation could play a decisive role in multiple contexts. On the one hand dissimulation could be a means of achieving some kind of political and religious compromise in the face of theological convictions – held by potential negotiating partners – which were completely incompatible. [...] On the other hand, dissimulation could be a means for the individual subject or believer to escape the enormous pressure to demonstrate conformity with the prevailing religious orthodoxy which both secular and ecclesiastical authorities exercised. [...] For the very reason that in the Renaissance sincerity became an important ethical ideal, the tensions between such an ideal and men's and women's actual behavior became more visible. (Asch 2021)

rampant suspicion and **distrust**, search for truth and authenticity vain

Jesuitical equivocation and *Macbeth*: Huntley (1964), Greenblatt (1993), Wilson (1997)

1606 treason trial of Father Garnett after Gunpowder Plot

Sir Edward Coke – *doctrine of equivocation*

„[...] **express[ing] one part of a man's mind, and retain[ing] another**“ (Huntley 390, qtd. *State Trials*)

Jesuits seen as agents of the Devil rather than God

dissembling and lying, „logic of hypocrisy“ (Huntley 393)

posing of the „bloody question“ – Father John Gerrard, S.J. in 1594 – Pope or Queen?
→ Robert Southwell S.J.’s turning of the tables – would you lie to a Spanish soldier wanting to kill the queen?

application to *Macbeth* – equivocation of the witches, moral equivocation on the part of Macbeth

Reginald Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) – how the public is fooled by charlatans to believe in witchcraft by verbal deceit and magic

Some write that with wishing they [witches] can send needles into the livers of their enimies. Some that they can transferre corne in the blade from one place to another. Some, that they can cure diseases supernaturallie, flie in the aire, and dance with divels. [...] They can raise spireits (as others affirme), drie up springs, turne the course of running waters, inhibit the sunne, and staie both day and night, changing the one into the other. [...] They can go invisible, and deprive men of their privities, and otherwise of the act and use of venerie. They can bring souls out of the graves. [...] But in this case a man may saie, *Miranda canunt / sed not credenda Poetae* (Ovid 1.4.8, qtd. Scot, qtd. Greenblatt 117)

All this stufte is vaine and fabulous. (Scot 260)

The pope maketh rich witches, saints; and burneth the poore witches. (179)

I for my part have read a number of their conjurations, but never could see anie divels of theirs, **except in a plaie**. (258)

Greenblatt on witchcraft and exorcism and its application to Shakespeare

[...] the significance of exorcism, then, lies not in any intrinsic quality of the ritual or in the character of the marks of possession but in the **impression made upon the minds of the spectators**. (Greenblatt 1985: 596)

James VI/I has Scot’s book burned. Author of *Daemonologie* (1597):

“what is for Scot a sign of the fraudulence and emptiness of the discourse of witchcraft becomes for James a further proof of the demonic compact” (Greenblatt 1993: 118)

Joan of Arc (“La Pucelle”) as witch in *Henry VI Part I*, V, iii/iv.

IV. The Idealization of Sincerity and the Problem of Distinguishing Truthful and Mendacious Utterance

- **Dissimulation and Equivocation** in the early modern period: suspicion of lying in conjunction with a demand for authenticity and sincerity
- Restoration comedy: protestations of sincerity compromised by flattery and rules of decorum among individuals of the upper classes when socializing (conversations in drawing-rooms and parks) → **frankness and candour are perceived as rude and uncultured**
- Move towards the **sentimental comedy** – the rake morphs into the faithful lover and, being honest and truthful himself, becomes the prey of the dishonest schemer. **Naïvety of the Plain-Dealer**

William Congreve's diabolic plain-dealer in *The Double Dealer* (1693)

Maskwell, the double-dealer, who is a villain undermining **Mellefont's** chances of marrying Cynthia (whom Maskwell wants to marry himself)

Well, this double-dealing is a jewel. (Maskwell; III,i, 138)

Now will I [...] discover the whole and real truth of the matter to him, that he may not suspect one word on't.

No mask like open truth to cover lies,

As to go naked is the best disguise. (Maskwell; V,i; 1985: 192)

Byron.

I had rather be a Canker in a Hedge than a Rose in his Favour; and it suits my Blood better to be hated by all than meanly to steal Affection from any; **though I can't be said to be a flattering honest Man**, it must not be deny'd but that I am a **plain-dealing Villain**. (James Miller, *The Universal Passion*, 1737)

Cunning-Man.

If I am in the City, for instance, I never harangue against Circumvention in Trade; if at Westminster, I say nothing against entangling Property, spinning out Causes, squeezing of Clients, or making the Law itself a greater Grievance than the Breakers of it; **when at Court, not a word of Honour and Sincerity, Plain-**

dressing or Plain-dealing; in short, I never behave with regard to what Men really are, but what they have a mind to be. 'Tis my Business to make every body happy with themselves, for then I can strike 'em for my own Advantage.

Mercury. "Um—**so you never say an ill-natur'd thing, nor never do a good-natur'd one.**" (James Miller, *A Hospital for Fools*, 1739)

MASK. Why, I intend to tell my lord the whole matter of our contrivance; that's my way.

MEL. I don't understand you.

MASK. Why, **I'll tell my lord I laid this plot with you on purpose to betray you**; and that which put me upon it, was the finding it impossible to gain the lady any other way, but in the hopes of her marrying you. [...] So, why so, while you're busied in making yourself ready, **I'll wheedle her into the coach; and instead of you, borrow my lord's chaplain, and so run away with her myself.**

MEL. Oh, I conceive you; **you'll tell him so.**

MASK. Tell him so! ay; **why, you don't think I mean to do so?**

MEL. No, no; ha, ha, I **dare swear thou wilt not.**

MASK. Therefore, for our farther security, I would have you disguised like a parson [...].

MEL. Excellent Maskwell! **Thou wert certainly meant for a statesman or a Jesuit; but thou art too honest for one, and too pious for the other.** (V,i, 195-6)

Maskwell's impiety:

Maskwell (alone) [...] Cynthia, let thy beauty gild my **crimes**; and whatsoever I commit of **treachery** or **deceit**, shall be imputed to me as a **merit**. Treachery? What treachery? Love cancels all the bonds of **friendship**, and sets men right upon their first foundations.

Duty to kings, piety to parents, gratitude to benefactors, and fidelity to friends, are different and particular ties. But the name of **rival** cuts 'em all asunder, and is a general acquittance. [...] Ha! But **is there not such a thing as honesty?** Yes, and whosoever has it about him, bears an enemy in his breast. *For your honest man, as I take it, is that nice, scrupulous, conscientious person, who will cheat nobody but himself*; such another coxcomb as your wise man, who is too hard for all the world, and will be made a fool of by nobody but himself; ha, ha, ha. Well, **for wisdom and honesty give me cunning and hypocrisy**; oh, 'tis such a pleasure to angle for fair-faced fools! [...] I have **the same face, the same words and accents when I speak what I do think, and when I speak what I do not think, the very same**; and **dear dissimulation** is the only art not to be known from nature.

Why will mankind be fools, and be deceived,
And why are friends' and lovers' oaths believed,
When each, who searches strictly his own mind,
May so much fraud and power of baseness find? (II, i, 151-2)

Moving into the Eighteenth Century: The Novel of Sensibility

Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism* (1762):

feelings tend to reveal themselves in „**plain and legible characters**“ and in „natural signs“ and „universal language“ that „open[s] a **direct avenue to the heart**“ (1970: II 118, 127, qtd. Wolf 1992: 118; Home 2005: I 297, 301)

Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759)

affective morality through sympathy and vicarious suffering

Wolf (1992): transparency of signification (Foucault's Renaissance epistème) and transparency of bodily expressions replaced by sentimental opacity

William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794) – Treason Trials 1794

Sir Ferdinando **Falkland** – murder of Mr. Tyrrel

Caleb Williams, his servant, suspects the murder

Four key scenes of protestations/confessions:

- Falkland protests his innocence before the magistrates and is believed.
- He acknowledges his guilt to Caleb privately.
- Caleb protests his innocence of having robbed Falkland, but in vain.
- Final confrontation with Falkland before the law.
Original ending: Caleb is not believed and goes mad.
Published ending: Caleb's speech (in which he accuses himself)
results in belief and in convincing Falkland to confess

He saw my **sincerity**; he was penetrated with my grief and compunction. [...] Williams, said he, you have conquered! I see too late the greatness and elevation of your mind. [...] I see that **the artless and manly story** you have told, has **carried conviction to every hearer**. (Postscript, 1991: 324)

IV. Concluding Remarks

Plain-Dealing and Sincerity: The Paradoxes of Transparency

Sincerity and truth are ideals; *in practice* they turn out to be problematic.

- Speaking one's mind (plain-dealing) is **dangerous** (during Elizabeth I and James I) – hence dissimulation, flattery and equivocation necessary
- Plain-dealing is socially unacceptable and a sign of bluntness, impoliteness, **lack of manners or sophistication**
- Satire of excessive truthfulness: the **misanthropist** (*Alceste* and *Manly*)

- The plain-dealer is a **fool** who is credulous and **gullible**: he will be betrayed and cheated – Manly believes Olivia; Mellefont is duped by Maskwell
- Figure of the hypocritical **schemer** who pretends to honesty and virtue and utters ostensible truth in order to betray (Maskwell, Joseph Surface in Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*, 1777) **Impossibility to distinguish truth from lying**, with fatal consequences (*Caleb Williams*, treason trials)

Plain-Dealing inherently dramatic – a performative speech-act

1. Plain-speaking is usually taken to be a constative speech-act. Its truthfulness can only be established by external evidence (compare trials)
2. **Sincere utterance always open to suspicion and distrust**
3. Language a **veil hiding truth or untruth** (reference)
4. Language a performative act that **stages sincerity and tries to convince**
5. Achieving the illocutionary act of convincing the interlocutor remains dubious and fraught with pitfalls
6. Lack of **transparency and the instability of meaning**
7. Asseverations of truthfulness inherently suspect
(„the lady protests too much“, key feature of narratorial **unreliability**)
8. Literary reflections on the problems of plain speaking

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