

It's a Cuck-Cuck-Cuck World:

An Examination of the Cuckold in the 17th-Century Theater and the 21st-Century Internet

ENL 150A

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He was still completely gone on her, had never so much as considered an extramarital fling, and he could forgive her much. But not being cuckolded in his own home. You don't want to wear those horns; they grow out of your ears, and kids laugh at the funny man on the street.

--Stephen King, *Cujo*

Act I: Introduction

In the Summer of 2018, I began preparing for two courses, studies of William Shakespeare and Stephen King, by reading an arbitrarily selected work from each course's reading list. The two works, Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* and King's *Cujo*, appeared initially to be radically different: a 17th-Century theatrical romcom and a 20th-Century psychological horror novel. Yet, for all the differences inherent in those two texts, I found myself drawn to one glaring similarity: across mediums, across genres, across *four centuries*, those two texts both contained central characters obsessed with the possibility that their wives might be having sex with other men. It seems to me that there is something grotesquely special in that coincidence, that across medium and genre, across time and space, a man's fear of his own wife's sexuality becomes transcendent. So, let's talk about the cuckold. As the bulk of the textual analysis taking place in this paper will be spent in consideration of 17th-Century cuckoldry, an initial overview of the internet's cuckoldry and the subcultures connected to it seems prudent.

Two primary internet manifestations of the cuckold are worth noting at this point: the cuckold genre of pornography and the cuck at the core of what is most commonly called the Red Pill ideology¹ (named after the red pill of *The Matrix*, in which the protagonist literally awakens

¹ Much of the information on the Red Pill contained in this introduction is derived from Natalie Wynn's "Incels".

from a permanent dream induced by artificial intelligence after ingesting said pill) of incels, men's rights activism, pick-up artistry, and Men Going Their Own Way. The two manifestations hold some obvious parallels--they both imagine women having unfaithful sex, and they both center on the male experience of that imagined unfaithfulness--and at times the two manifestations almost certainly come together and contextualize the other. The primary distinction comes in their purposes: the pornographic cuckold is a tool for titillation, while the Red Pill cuck is the rhetorical bedrock of an ideological and political worldview.

The Red Pill's conception of the cuck is the natural product of the Red Pill's conception of women. Women, according to Red Pill ideology, are essentially hypergamous (preferring sexual partners more attractive or more powerful than themselves), resulting in a situation in which only the top 20% of men (called "Chads" in the terminology of incels) are ever truly desired by women--and producing the rationale for the worldviews of incels (I am not one of the top 20% of men, and so I will never find a partner) and pick-up artists (I am not naturally one of the top 20% of men, and so I need to manipulate women into having sex with me). Complicating this worldview is the reality that many more than 20% of men are able to find and establish relationships, and the concept of the cuckold emerges as the worldview's critical rhetorical support. According to the manosphere², although women desire only the most attractive of men, they are willing to establish relationships with inferior men for economic support--entering romantic relationships with average or pathetic men for stability while simultaneously pursuing and engaging in sexual encounters with more attractive and powerful men. Cuckold status, within this framework, becomes the defacto nature of any average (or below average) man who

² A term used to describe the collective whole of groups that accept the ideology of the Red Pill.

has not recognized the nature of women, and as a result has not ‘taken the red pill’. And with the Red Pill’s intersections with the alt-right, its terminology could be reworked.

As an individual who grew up amidst the toxic wasteland that is the internet, and as a citizen who reached the age of majority during the national ascension of Donald Trump and the global renaissance of the far right, I have been fascinated by the term’s extraordinary versatility--in the mouth of a misogynist, a cuck is a male feminist; in the mouth of white supremacists, cucks are race traitors; in the mouths of xenophobes, cucks are pro-immigration; and in the alt-right dialogue that preceded the 2016 Presidential Election, cucks were any conservative critical of Donald Trump--but it has never lost its original meaning: cuckolds are men with adulterous wives. The words prevalence throughout the online rightwing is certainly ripe for contemporaneous analysis, but in the context of this course, a different angle of analysis emerges: the 21st-Century conservative internet shares its cuckold obsession with 17th-Century playwrights.

Act II: It’s a Cuck-Cuck-Cuck World

The 17th-Century stage’s interest in the cuckold is on full display in Ben Jonson’s *Epicoene* and Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*. In the former, the character Truewit attempts to dissuade the gentleman Morose from marriage, claiming that Morose’s friends “desire that you would sooner commit your grave head to this knot than to the wedlock noose” (Jonson II.II.27-28), a claim that (setting aside its falsehood) implies that death would be preferable to the misery of marriage--an implication ultimately argued for by the declaration “with whom you are to marry may have made a conveyance of her virginity aforehand...Who can tell? Or if she have not done it yet, she may do, upon the wedding day...and antedate you cuckold” (Jonson

II.II.135-40). In the latter play, Shakespeare presents a king, Leontes, who is obsessed with the existence of cuckolds, asserting “There have been,/Or I am much deceived, cuckolds ere now...That little thinks she has been sluiced in’s absence/And his pond fished by his next neighbor” (Shakespeare I.2.191-5). This paranoia is quickly turned against his own wife, and he demands of his advisor, “Ha’ not you seen, Camillo--/But that’s past doubt, you have, or your eyeglass/Is thicker than a cuckold’s horn...My wife is slippery?” (Shakespeare I.2.267-73). Despite the counterarguments of his lords, Leontes’ preoccupation with cuckoldry drives him to throw out his daughter (Shakespeare II.3.178-82), imprison his wife (Shakespeare II.1.103), and orders the murder of one of his closest allies (Shakespeare I.2.345-7). The representation of the cuckold is repeated consistently, in more plays than it would be possible or worthwhile to list (in the context of a 12-page paper, at least)--leaving the question of what, exactly, this obsession means.

In “Why Do Cuckolds Have Horns?” Claire McEachern notes the prominence of cuckold imagery in Shakespeare’s works, citing Samuel Johnson’s criticism that “there is no image which our author appears so fond of as that of a cuckold’s horns.” (McEachern 607) But, rather than being a uniquely Shakespearean obsession, McEachern suggests that “[cuckold] horns are a guffaw that he shares with his culture” (McEachern 608), and that “a graph of [horn humor’s] incidence in plots and puns would demonstrate a marked and metonymic spike beginning around the turn of the seventeenth century” (McEachern 607). This cultural obsession with cuckold humor is theorized to serve as a displacement of anxiety, “allowing the audience to transmute some deeper fear into the more lighthearted one of adultery” (McEachern 610). The cuckold’s utility in entertainment is fairly straightforward: “he is a butt, a gull, someone at a disadvantage

with respect to others--characters within the play as well as the audience--who can see what he cannot.” (McEachern 610) Through this analysis, parallels between the (arguable) overuse of the cuckold in the 17th-Century and the 21st can be drawn, wherein social conservative internet communities displace their anxieties about shifts in gender roles, demographics, and politics onto a conception of their opponents as cucked idiots who fail to see the reality they alone are cognisant of. But, as compelling as these initial parallels can be, further analysis suggests it might be best to hold off on clear-cut parallels.

Digging deeper into some of these plays casts some doubt on easy parallels between modern and 17th-Century cuckoldry. The diction used in relation to cuckoldry in *Epicoene*--even as it maintains the shame of the cuckold--begins to push against assumed perceptions of cuckoldry. One such example is the phrase *smooth chin*, which Truewit uses when attempting to convince Morose not to marry, saying “so she may kiss a page or a smooth chin that has the despair of a beard” (Jonson II.II.109-110). The phrase stands out as a physical characterization of the adulterer in a context in which physical description tends to focus on the husband and his (practically-cliche) cuckold horns. Consulting the *Oxford English Dictionary*, not entirely surprisingly, produces no quick search results for “smooth chin”, but widening results to a full text search produces four entries: Flanders, *n.*; muliebrious, *adj.*; pilled, *adj.*; and smooth, *adj.* A number of these entries seem to connect “smooth chin” to femininity, particularly the entry “muliebrious”, meaning “effeminate; feminine”, in which a source from 1652 declares “A little chin signes one envious;..and a round and smooth chin, muliebrious”, and the entries “pilled” and “smooth”, both of which provide 17th-century examples connecting the terms to the feminine. Further searches for appearances of “smooth chin” in the database *Early English Books*

Online produces additional evidence of emasculation. One result, “The life of Captain James Whitney”, describes the captain’s would-be wife requesting that he shave his beard “and bring a smooth Chin to her soft Embraces”, which the captain flatly refuses as a result of his “Masculine Resolution”. Other 17th-century texts, such as “The measures and offices of friendship with rules of conducting it”, seem to connect the smooth chin to attractiveness, while others, such as “A young Gentleman to his Lady, who lookt upon him as too immature”, imply a connection to youthfulness. These results seem to imply the emasculation of the subject of a woman’s extramarital affection, a result quite different from the contemporary incel’s vision of the “Chad”, a strong, hyper-masculine man attracting the sexual, adulterous attention of women. In this way, close readings of *Epicoene* can complicate our understanding of the lover in an instance of cuckoldry--yet the play retains the depiction of shame and emasculation in the cuckold himself.

Where *Epicoene* might complicate our understanding of 17th-Century cuckoldry, Thomas Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* obliterates it. In the play, cuckoldry is primarily depicted through the character of Allwit, a name which William Carrol’s notes informs the reader is “a pun on ‘Wittol’ = a complaisant cuckold” (Middleton 155)--revealing the (contextually shocking) fact that in the 17th-Century the idea of a complaisant cuckold was not only present, but common enough to have been named. Consulting the *OED* grounds the word somewhat, noting that through the words use, it developed the additional meaning “One who has little sense; a half-witted person; a fool,” (wittol, n.) and similar negativity is applied to Allwit by numerous characters. His own servants state “make the most of him he’s but one peep above a servingman,” (Middleton I.ii.68-69) Whorehound describes his state by saying “When man turns

base, out goes his soul' pure flame" (Middleton II.ii.40), and Dahumma claims it would "No matter and [Allwit] were hanged" (Middleton II.iii.4). Yet for all these remarks against Allwit, the character himself clearly views his life positively, describing in the lines "Bless the right worshipful, the good founder's life./I thank him, h'as maintained my house this ten years,/Not only keeps my wife, but a keeps me,/And all my family" (Middleton I.ii.15-18) his gratefulness for the prosperity he derives from being cuckolded, a sense reenforced when he notes how unsustainable his family's lifestyle would be otherwise in the lines "I heard a citizen complain once that his wife's belly only broke his back: mine had been all in fitters seven years since, but for this worthy knight that with a prop upholds my wife and me" (Middleton III.ii.72-75). Allwit is so thoroughly happy with his situation, that when Dahumma informs him of Whorehound's plan to marry, he becomes vocally distraught, saying "Marriage Davy? Send me to hanging rather" (Middleton III.ii.232) and immediately begins thinking of ways to avoid the development in the lines "I have no time to stay, nor scarce can speak,/I'll stop those wheels, or all the work will break." (Middleton III.ii.236-7) The play further subverts the expectations of cuckoldry by making the wife's lover the jealous figure, displayed in Whorehound's suspicious lines "What entertainment has lain open here?/No strangers in my absence?" (Middleton I.ii.85-86), even hinting at the possibility that Allwit is (in some sense) actually cuckolding Whorehound through the line "Thou has hit it right Davy,/We ever jumped in one, this ten years Davy." (Middleton II.iii.8-9)

At this point, a number of things should be clear: the depiction of cuckoldry was an obsession, not only of Shakespeare's, but also of contemporaneous playwrights and 17th-Century English culture as a whole; the cultural obsession with cuckold depictions can

reasonably be read as a displacement of some larger cultural anxiety; the 17th- and 21st-Century cuckold obsessions hold substantial parallels, while containing substantial aesthetic distinctions in the imagination of the cuckoldress' object of desire; and that the introduction of the wittol concept via *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* suggests an imagination of the cuckold deeply at odds with everything discussed prior to it. But in this delineation I find myself left with a number of lingering questions. Insofar as *Epicoeence* suggests an emasculation of the adulterer, it remains unclear what the ramifications of such emasculation are. And Insofar as the cuckold represents the displacement of societal angst, it remains unclear what angsts (beyond the facile fear of adultery) it displaces. And insofar as Allwit subverts the cuckold, it remains unclear whether Allwit's character is intended to be read positively, how common such a depiction or conception would have been, and what the significance of such subversions would be.

Act III: Emasculation and Angst

The emasculation present in the image of a woman kissing a smooth chin appears, especially when considered alongside other elements of Truewit's speech, to be functioning in a way that highlights the perceived injustice of the cuckolding act by depicting the woman's preference for an *inferior* sexual partner. At the same time as he warns Morose of the possibility of smooth-chinned lovers, he also suggests that a wife "may kiss a page" (Jonson II.II.109), an identity contrasting with Morose's superior social identity as a gentleman. In the same speech Truewit suggests that a wife might "go live with her she-friend or cousin at the college" (Jonson II.II.98-99), a line which, when considering the term's connotations 'mistress', 'strumpet', or 'lover', appears to imagine Morose's future wife sexually active with another woman--in other words, favoring a second-class gender identity over the socially-superior male identity of

Morose. Contextualized as such, it seems reasonable to read the emasculation of a cuckoldress' sexual partner as being more about the cuckold than anything else. Their emasculation works, effectively, to further the shame of a cuckold who, by having the superior-masculine quality of a beard, rightfully should have been favored by his own wife.

With this function in mind, parallels between the 17th-Century image of a wife's lover and the 21st-Century image of the Chad begin to reappear. Although the aesthetic superiority of the Chad is an essential part of the Red Pill worldview, it doesn't take much time on an incel forum to find efforts to disparage those facially-superior males. In one thread, an incel claims "if you were chad hur dur would be enough for them to suck your cock on a spot" (Saudade), decrying women's willingness to partner with ineloquent and potentially unintelligent Chads. In another, a poster informs his fellow incels that the man his cousin is attracted to "is a guy (M24) she never met irl, and is a high school dropout with zero social media presence" (Rassimov), suggesting a perception of the Chad as inferior at the academic and socioeconomic level. In a third thread, an incel goes so far as to proclaim "Incel Homo sapiens ran the Neanderthal chads to extinction. They were all stronger brutes but the humans were SMARTER AND USED FUCKING ROCKS AND STICKS TO BASHH TF OUT OF THEM", arguing that there is no societal value in "being a 6ft 4 Chad with broad shoulders and muscular body + strong jawline." (Trashcel420) Although proponents of the red pill unequivocally imagine both themselves and cucks to be less attractive than Chads, these comments suggest a sense of outrage at the injustice of that attractiveness, imagining Chads as inferior intellectually, and even morally, to those men which women disdain. With such a reading, the similarities between Clerimont complaining to his servant boy "No marvel if the door be shut against your master, when the entrance is so easy

to you” (Jonson I.I.18-19) and user Gymcelled bemoaning a Chad that was allegedly “skinny af, we're talking borderline anorexic skinny...wearing skinny jeans and had smaller legs than his girlfriend. He was so awkward, shy, effeminate. Had that faggy voice and mannerism.The dude reeked of fucking estrogen” becomes quite a bit clearer.

In considering *why* cuckold humor spiked so much in the 17th-Century, McEachern centers very much on religious explanations: “The inescapability of cuckoldry could be an especially Protestant figuration of the fallen condition: perhaps much as the cuckold’s sexual labor is performed by a rival, so we are all in need of divine effort on our behalf” (McEachern 630). It is certainly possible that such spiritual rationales of the trend are accurate, but the reading done herein suggests to me a more secular, more nefarious explanation: the cuckold of the 17th-Century, much like the cuckold of the Red Pill, is an embodiment of male fear of female agency. Unavoidable in any characterization of a cuckold, whether they are tragic or comedic, sympathetic or pathetic, modern or Shakespearian, is a characterization of the cuckold’s partner. Through the Red Pill ideology, this characterization is clear: that hypergamy, and thus unfaithfulness, is inherent in all women, that women are naturally inferior to men, and that feminist ideas have produced an “unnatural, disruptive” power imbalance (Lewis) which has enabled uncontrolled hypergamy (and thus, uncontrolled cuckoldry). In much of the 17th-Century work considered herein, a similar idea develops. In the same speech in which Truewit warns Morose of the possibility of being cuckolded, he depicts that imagined unfaithful wife very particularly, describing how she might “Be a stateswoman, know all the news; what was done at Salisbury, what at bath, what at court, what in progress” and how she “may censure poets and authors and styles, and compare ‘em, Daniel with Spenser, Jonson with the totter

youth, and so forth” (Jonson II.II.110-5). In this imagination, Morose’s wife takes on a legally masculine role, engaging in politics, and offers judgement of a legally masculine field, the all-male theater. Together with the reading previously noted of Truewit’s argument, a vision unfolds of women making efforts to gain agency in male social spaces and control over male engagement in sexual spaces. This connection between cuckoldry and female independence is further reinforced when we consider the fact that Truewit directly links Morose’s imagined wife’s unfaithfulness to life at the colleges (Jonson II.II.99), the space in *Epicoene* most clearly representative of women’s agency.

Act IV: Conclusion

Concluding papers like this one tend to be disheartening for me. If I have written this piece effectively, I have presented an argument that paints a very gloomy picture of an issue that both infected 17th-Century theater and continues to infect our culture to this day. Nothing can be done to purge that infection from these texts, and nothing in this analysis has suggested any substantial way to fight it today. Rather, the implication of this analysis seems to be that a sexualized masculine backlash is an almost inherent result of feminine social advancement, to the point that the same basic conception of that backlash can be identified in drastically different periods and settings, and very likely will continue to be identifiable for the foreseeable future. I have not exactly written a hopeful piece, if my own judgement is correct.

If there is anything hopeful in this piece, it is that one example of the 17th-Century cuckold could not easily be situated in my argument. Allwit’s subversion of the cuckold imagined elsewhere, his position as one of the winners in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, stand in defiance of the depiction of cuckoldry established elsewhere in this paper. In the introduction to

this paper, I noted that there are two primary manifestations of the cuckold on the Internet. This paper has been primarily concerned with manifestation within the Red Pill worldview, but in researching for this piece it became clear that its pornographic and fetishistic manifestation is (although certainly not perfect) not as inherently toxic. Mireille Miller-Young and Xavier Livermon's "Black Stud, White Desire", for example, notes that amateur cuckold porn often rejects the element of shame in cuckoldry, instead presenting cuckolds "as much more active in facilitating their wives' enjoyment, making sure that they are safe and comfortable" (Miller-Young 44) and even exploring the "queering of white conjugality and the emergence of explicit interracial desire" (Miller-Young 45). It is not within the scope of this paper to provide a solution to the problem of cuckoldry as misogynistic backlash--but in the very least, there is some glimmer of hope in subversion.

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