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Plotting, Counterplotting, and Underplotting in *The Yellowplush Correspondence* : Reading Thackeray's Early Burlesque*

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Synopsis : William Makepeace Thackeray was a young freelancer and full of ambition for a career as a writer when he published *The Yellowplush Correspondence* (1837-40) in *Fraser's Magazine,* first as a book review and only later serialized to become his first fiction of substantial length. Not surprisingly, the plot of the narrative is loose and has escaped serial evaluation as a unified work of art. But on close reading, Thackeray's playful narrative by a fictitious narrator of peculiar character reveals itself to be well calculated and even strategical. While the narrator pretends to be random and free, he secretly brings plot into the narrative and carries the reader on to the end, and yet avoids being straightforward in narrative and action. This paper attempts to analyse and evaluate such narrative strategies in this burlesque using the chain of concepts of *plot, counterplot,* and *underplot.*

1. Introduction

William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-63) has not been particularly a popular writer for the last century. Not that his works have been forgotten or escaped critical attention—in fact, the major publishers have never excepted *Vanity Fair* (1847-48) from their lists, and many Victorian scholars have discussed some of his works, mainly Vanity *Fair* and /or *Henry Esmond* (1852). But significantly, such influential critics as F. R. Leavis, Raymond Williams, and Terry Eagleton excluded Thackeray from their studies of the English novel,[1] and some other theorists of narrative fiction mentioned his works only as examples of classic realist mode against which more advanced works of fiction could be assessed.[2]

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For most of the reading public, Thackeray has been the one-book author of *Vanity Fair ;* only for a selected readership, the heavyweight novelist of *Pendennis* (1848-50), *The Newcomes* (1853-55), *The Virginians* (1857-59), and *Philip* (1861-62) ; and for still fewer, a prolific writer of miscellaneous writings ranging from his early reviews and sketches to maturer essays and lectures, novellas and parodies, and illustrations and cartoons.[3] This is a sad situation, for I believe that Thackeray's shorter writings are entertaining in their own right, and provide easier access to his actual merits than his more demanding masterpieces.

His shorter fictions, mostly written before *Vanity Fair,* may not be much to modern taste—with their flat characters, boorish humours, and apparent lack of serious intentions. Even George Saintsbury, editor of the first and up to now only critical edition of his whole works, hesitated to call them short stories or novellas, which would recall more refined forms of narrative art, and preferred such terms as *satires, burlesques,* and *comic tales.* But if they are not good fictions by the modern standard, why not regard them as something nobler? John Carey, for example, puts the writer's golden age in the decade preceding *Vanity Fair,* saying : "In the years up to *Vanity Fair* he wrote with more wit, more trenchancy, more vividness than he ever managed afterwards. The capacious novels that he put together after 1848, beginning with *Pendennis,* are mixtures of dough and treacle for much of the time" (16). Indeed, the vigour of *The Yellowplush Correspondence* (1837-40), the tremendousness of *The Tremendous Adventures of Major Gahagan* (1839), the variety of *The Paris Sketch Book* (1840), and the dark humour of *Catherine* (1840) are unsurpassable.

Perhaps one factor that has delayed serious evaluation of Thakceray's shorter fictions is their apparent loose structures, which might imply that each work was written haphazardly. In fact, Thackeray's first fiction of substantial length started as a book review in *Fraser's Magazine,* and was only later augmented chapter by chapter before it became a narrative series of eight chapters, *The Yellowplush Correspon-*

dence. Not surprisingly, the plot of the series is fragmental, at best loosely structured, and sometimes abrupt in changing directions. But these kinds of complaints have been often made against his mature novels as well. Robert Bell, for example, called *Vanity Fair* "a novel without a plan" (66) in one of the earliest reviews of the novel ; Henry James, setting up the standard of modern literary criticism, counted *The Newcomes* among the "large loose baggy monsters" by the nineteenth-century masters (Preface 1107) ; and even such a sympathetic critic as J. A. Sutherland admitted that "there is a culpable deal of 'idleness' and 'carelessness' in the composition of Thackeray's fiction" (7), though he soon added that "He was, above all, a spontaneously creative artist" (8) whose "virtues as well as vices arise from what Trollope would call the author's idleness" (66). This means that the loose plotting on the writer's part may turn out to be to his advantage.

Ever since the efforts of Gustave Flaubert and Henry James among others to sublimate fiction into art, we have been all too familiar with the notion that the work of fiction has to be strictly structured, the more elaborately refined the better. But Thackeray flourished in the literary milieu preceding Flaubert and James—though Flaubert was his contemporary—and even preferred the styles of the previous century, during which prose narrative was a more casual mode of narrating or not narrating stories ; it was not so much like a well-wrought urn, whose structure would collapse if one tiny piece were extracted out of it, as like a long journey on a stagecoach, as Henry Fielding put it (808), during which the author entertained his fellow-travellers with the means at his disposal.[4] Now with *The Yellowplush Correspondence,* Thackeray follows this tradition, and takes his readers on a random journey ; it is remarkable that he recovers himself on the right track after an abrupt start. How he did this deserves serious consideration while the work has received little critical attention, except perhaps from James H. Wheatley, who focused on the tensions of opposing moralities on the margins of fashionable society, Edgar F. Harden, who admired

the eponymous hero's clever perspective in his own tale, and Mark Cronin, who detected Thackeray's "cynical eye" on Boz (Charles Dickens) in the humourous narrative. The following is an attempt to fill this critical gap and evaluate Thackeray's effective use of plot in his first novella.

2. Two major approaches to plot

To begin with, it may be desirable to summarize current discussions about *plot* and *plotting,* for I will use these terms with their rich connotations and nuances. Broadly speaking, there are two major approaches to this subject : one strictly narratological, and the other freely critical.

The narratological approach to *plot* began with Aristotle, who regarded the plot (*mythos*) as an essential part of poetry, actually the most important part of tragedy, and required it to be strictly unified so that "if one part is shifted or taken away the whole is deranged and disjoined" (81). Aristotle's logical analysis of narrative constituents was refined by modern successors as poetics in the neo-classical era and as narratology in the twentieth century. One of the precursors of narratology, E. M. Forster tried to distinguish *plot* from *story,* as did his contemporary Russian formalists *sjužet* from *fabula ;* Forster turned attention to causality which connected events in the narrative and called the chain of causation *plot.* His idea of opposing the logical to the chronological sequence of events laid the foundations of recent narratology while narratologists also drew on structuralist theorization of myths and folktales, according to which the plot of any complicated narrative could be reduced to a simple grammatical structure. In the scene of scientific discussion of fiction today, the plot of a story can be understood either as a logical sequence of events or as the underlying pattern of the movement as a whole.

On the other hand, less scientific approaches by literary critics have activated discussions of plot. Peter Brooks, for example, clearly opposed

the trend since modernism and new criticism of making light of plot in the narrative and advocated the desire for plot, which he considered to be “the organizing dynamic of a specific mode of human understanding”[5] (7). By the metaphor of *dynamic,* Brooks literally means a sort of driving force that moves the reader onward through the text, which is comparable to a “steam engine” (44) or a “sexual organ” (46) ; hence Brooks’s argument about the desire for plot as an erotics of fiction. Besides Brooks, Robert L. Caserio and Peter K. Garrett have also focused on plot, arguing for “the sense of plot” in Victorian masters (Caserio) or for their skillful uses of multiplots (Garrett). Recently, Amanpal Garcha cast new light on the issue, arguing that in the early 1830s such great authors as Thackeray, Dickens, and Elizabeth Gaskell preferred as their modes of writing plotless sketches, which were “imcomplete, fragmented, and hurried, like modern time itself” (4), before they began to write their mature novels ; here we can see the young masters’ struggles for or against plot, the driving force which would furnish their mature novels with irresistible powers.

Now returning to *The Yellowplush Correspondence,* it is evident that the work belongs to a phase in Thackeray’s career in which he was intent on sketch writing. He had not yet acquired the space and money to contemplate long, thickly-plotted novels, nor was he by any means satisfied with wasting his talent on rubbish. Certainly, to bring plots into his writing and grow into a novelist was among his ambitions. Here it is helpful to look again at Brooks. Elaborating the concept of plot on the basis of Aristotole’s argument, Brooks refers to the dictionary definitions of the English word *plot,* of which the *American Heritage Dictionary* gives four basic senses : (1) a small piece of ground, (2) a ground plan, (3) the series of events, and (4) “[a] secret plan to accomplish a hostile or illegal purpose ; scheme” (qtd. in Brooks 12). Of these four senses, Brooks pays special attention to the last : “I would suggest that in modern literature this sense of plot nearly always attaches itself to the others : the organizing line of plot is more often than not some

scheme or machination, a concerted plan for the accomplishment of some purpose which goes against the ostensible and dominant legalities of the fictional world, the realization of a blocked and resisted desire" (12). Brooks thus emphasizes the dark aspect of narrative plot in the sense that the plot in the narrative is intended to fulfil the personal desire of the protagonist against the dominant social order, that the protagonist seeks success through the plot of machination. This is exactly what happens in *The Yellowplush Correspondence,* as Mr. Yellowplush makes his way through the plot of machination. But it is also the case with Thackeray in real life who sought his own success by a sort of machination, that is, secretly introducing plot in the narrative. My hypothesis is that Thackeray was well aware of this peculiar coincidence between evil plotting on the protagonist's part and narrative plotting on the author's, so that Mr. Yellowplush's success would bring his own.

3. Plotting

The Yellowplush Correspondence started, as I said before, as an independent book review. When John Henry Skelton published in 1837 *My Book ; or, The Anatomy of Conduct,* "a pretentious manual of 'silver fork' etiquette" according to Gordon N. Ray (198), the young Thackeray had just become a freelancer after the collapse of *The Constitutional,* and was asked by James Fraser to contribute to his magazine with a review of the new conduct book. Thackeray took the chance and, to meet the challenge of exposing the absurdities of fashionable manners that he did not know at first hand, created the persona of a footman in the service of society men. The outcome was a cynical review of the conduct book from the viewpoint of a marginal observer of high society ; it was not a plotted narrative, but it did contain the seeds of a potential plot. How the potential plot is about to quicken is easily seen in the opening sentences :

> My dear Y. —Your dellixy in sending me *My Book* does you honour ; for the subjick on which it treats cannot, like politix, metafizzix, or other silly sciences, be criticized by the common writin creaturs who do your and other Magazines at so much a yard. I am a chap of a different sort. I have lived with some of the first families in Europe, and I say it, without fear of contradiction, that, since the death of George the IV., and Mr. Simpson of Voxall Gardens, there doesn't, praps, live a more genlmnly man than myself. (*YC*[6] 1)

Here the reviewer, Mr. Charles Yellowplush, establishes the frame of his narrative, in which he, claiming himself to be a "genlmnly man" with the experience of having lived with "some of the first families in Europe," begins to talk about the book he recently received from Mr. Y[orke]. To take this statement at face value, we are led to believe that the reviewer is a gentleman of the first rank, though it is actually ambiguous whether he *himself* is of an old family or only has lived with some of them, say, as a servant. His diction, however, contradicts his statement, for such cacography as "dellixy" for *delicacy,* "subjick" for *subject,* and "politix" for *politics* seems to betray his lower breed, and especially his spelling of "genlmnly" is unmistakable evidence against his gentlemanly status. Thus we are thrown as early as in the first paragraph into a series of questions : who is really this Mr. Yellowplush? why is he boasting of a gentlemanly status? how has he climbed up the social ladder from the bottom to his present position? which all constitute the curiosities that require the plotted narrative of Mr. Yellowplush's life history.

In fact, Thackeray intended this book review to be a prelude to a longer narrative. He boasts in his letter to Fraser attached to the manuscript of his first contribution : "I think I could make half a dozen stories by the same author, if you incline" (*Letters* I, 349). Fraser consented, and the narrative of Mr. Yellowplush started afresh two months

later as a series of stories. But the first installment had already revealed tendencies toward fiction; the book review was scattered with more information than is necessary about the reviewer's own living environment, which are quite irrelevant to Skelton's book: "As for 'Emulating a genteel carriage,' not knowing what that might mean, we at once asked Jim Coachman; but neither he nor his helpers could help us. Jim thinks it was a baroosh; cook says, a brisky; Sam, the stable-boy . . . said it was all dicky, and bid us drive on to the nex' page" (*YC* 2). The variety of occupations the reviewer finds around him, the wide-of-the-mark guesses they make, and the diction they substitute for the silver-fork vocabulary not only add a comic accent to the review but also reveal the reviewer's true belongings. The reviewer after all tends to tell more about himself than about the book, and Thackeray thus succeeded in securing the position of a serial writer on his first contact with *Fraser's*.

The second installment thus begun (No. II: "Miss Shum's Husband") tells, quite naturally, the eponymous narrator's life history *ab ovo*. He was born fatherless, and given the "genlmn's name" (*YC* 12) of Charles Edward Harrington Fitzroy Yellowplush, as he claims, "in compliment to several noble families, and to a sellybrated [celebrated] coachmin whom she knew, who wore a yellow livry, and drove the Lord Mayor of London" (*YC* 12), whom he supposes to be his father. This very combination of stately middle names and a humble last name indicates his mixed pride as "of a genlmnly origum" (*YC* 12) and "a footman by buth [birth]" (*YC* 12). He started his career as a servant to a shopman at Pentonville, "where I made my first *ontray* [entry] into fashnabl life" (*YC* 13), and seems to have achieved moderate success by the time of his narration: "I was knife, errint, and stable-boy then, and an't ashamed to own it; for my merits have raised me to what I am—two livries, forty pound a year, malt-licker, washin, silk-stockins, and wax candles—not counting wails, which is somethink pretty considerable at *our* house, I can tell you" (*YC* 13). Here we are again thrown into a se-

ries of questions about him : what is he now? who is living with him at "*our*" house? and how has he achieved that status with his "merits"? The suggested plot here is that of social climbing, typical of Victorian fiction.

As a footman, however, Mr. Yellowplush depends for his success on the masters he serves. Although his service to his next master, Mr. Frederick Altamont, proves to be a second false start, as Mr. Altamont is disclosed to be a street sweeper under the guise of a gentleman, he learns a lesson that aspiring and even pretending to be a gentleman is a common phenomenon among his society. His third master who first appears in the third installment (No. III : "Dimond Cut Dimond") proves to be a worthy gentleman. The "Honrabble Halgernon Percy Deuceace, youngest and fifth son of the Earl of Crabs" (*YC* 27), as he spells it out, is a barrister living in Pump Court, Temple, and a "GAMBLER" (*YC* 28). He is not only indisputably of noble family but also familiar with the ways of the world, if too worldly and corrupt. One day, he learns that one of the lodgers in the same apartments (Mr. Blewitt) has taken an interest in the newcomer (Mr. Dawkins), and finds out the former's design on the latter : "When a raskle and a simpleton is always together, and when the simpleton is *rich,* one knows pretty well what will come of it" (*YC* 29). The narrative that follows tells how Mr. Deuceace works with Mr. Blewitt to induce Mr. Dawkins into a game of cards and skin him of all his money ; in the end, Mr. Deuceace even outwits Mr. Blewitt and appropriates the profit all to himself. Thus successfully exploiting the raskal and the simpleton, Mr. Deuceace sets a good example, however morally questionable, to Mr. Yellowplush who aspires to live by his own wits.

Throughout this episode, the plot of the narrative goes in perfect parallel with Mr. Deuceace's plot to swindle the simpleton. When Mr. Deuceace finds out the interesting situation of his apartments, the narrative quickens a plot ; as Mr. Deuceace sets his sight on the target and seeks Mr. Dawkins's acquaintance behind Mr. Blewitt's back, the plot

develops ; when his plan is discovered to his rival, the plot thickens ; and when the two raskals conspire to bring Mr. Dawkins into card playing, the plot reaches a climax. The development of the game is an epitome of the story. At first, fortune favours Mr. Dawkins, and he wins the first games. But the fortune reverses, not surprisingly, and Mr. Dawkins gradually loses to both swindlers until he becomes entirely ruined. Only innocent readers would assume that the game was played fairly. The fact is undoubtedly that the whole process was elaborately plotted by both swindlers as well as by the author ; the apparently capricious fortune was under the perfect control of the plotters in both senses. One additional touch to this refined plot is Mr. Deuceace's acquirement of a draft for £400 (perhaps forged) from Mr. Blewitt, his fellow swindler. He makes the best of this weapon when the latter comes to claim his share of Mr. Dawkins's fortune, and sends him away without giving a penny.

4. Counterplotting

The coincidence between the plot *of* the narrative and the plot *in* the narrative in "Dimond Cut Dimond" sets a format for the next development of the Yellowplush narrative, which the narrator predicts at the end of the installment. But before going into the expected adventure of master and servant in Paris, Mr. Yellowplush, or precisely Thackeray behind his persona, inserts another book review installment : "Skimmings from 'The Diary of George IV'" (No. IV). This abrupt interruption of Mr. Yellowplush's narrative might indicate, for the defenders of narrative art, haphazardness, planlessness, or lack of serious intentions on the author's part ; but to more tolerant readers it could suggest another deliberate device in the narrator's burlesque style. Thackeray here is perhaps imitating Laurence Sterne, for example, in teasing the readers by postponing the satisfaction of their curiosity. Remember Brooks's thesis about the plot embodying narrative desire, and is teasing not an advanced tactics in erotics?

Besides his love of the eighteenth-century style, Thackeray is likely to have another good reason to deviate from the straightforward course of narrative at this stage. He has shown in the previous episode his skill of plotting the narrative of successful swindling, so it is preferable to avoid simply repeating the same success plot ; next time, plot needs to meet *counterplot* by all means, of which Gerard Prince's definition is suggestive : "A unified set of actions directed towards a result opposite the result intended by the actions of the (main) PLOT : the ANTAGONIST'S actions and goals can be taken to make up a Counterplot" (17). In fact, the next adventure of the heroes in Paris proves to be a hard experience, especially to Mr. Deuceace whose plot to marry money is frustrated by his antagonists, and it is possible to suppose that Thackeray chose to cast an ominous shadow on the course of Mr. Deuceace's adventure in Paris by blocking the course of his own narrative before starting the new episode.

It is following this deliberate digression, as I assume, that the next four installments recount the adventure of the two heroes in Paris, which constitutes the longest and central part of *The Yellowplush Correspondence.* After the preliminary comedy of "Foring Parts" (No. V), during which the protagonists move from London to Paris, "Mr. Deuceace at Paris" (Nos. VI to VIII) features the eponymous gentleman's amorous plot to capture a rich bride. The target family is the Griffins, of which the narrator begins by telling in a somewhat Austenean style : "Leftenant-General Sir George Griffin, K.C.B., was about seventy-five years old when he left this life, and . . ." (*YC* 60). The late Sir George leaves £300,000 to his young widow (Leonora) and his daughter (Mathilda), but nobody knows exactly how the fortune has been disposed. Now Mr. Deuceace gets wind of their fortune and approaches them, and luckily enough finds both ladies fallen in love with him. It is no wonder, as he is in great need of money to clear his debts at home and make a living in Paris, that he begins the game : "Now, then, it was his bisniss to find out which had the most money. . . . In the mean-

time, his plan was to keep 'em both in play, until he could strike the best fish of the two—not a difficult matter for a man of his genus" (*YC* 64).

Mr. Deuceace's new plot is, however, met with difficulties. The first apparent obstacle is Shevalliay [Chevalier] de L'Orge, a young French gentleman on close terms with the Griffins and particularly in love with Leonora. Although Mr. Deuceace dismisses him easily, he is challenged to a duel for a trifle reason, which results in his losing one hand while he nearly takes the other's life. This de L'Orge appears to fit the role of the antagonist in the narrative, as he competes with Mr. Deuceace for Leonora's hand and actually opposes him with a weapon. But it gradually turns out to be someone else that has been pulling the strings behind their rivalry. The second obstacle to Mr. Deuceace's marriage plot comes, unexpectedly, from Leonora. She was once favoured by both Mr. Deuceace and Chevalier de L'Orge, but when the exact condition of Sir George's fortune is found out to her disadvantage, she falls out of favour with the former. Learning that Mr. Deuceace is now intent on her daughter-in-law who will inherit Sir George's fortune, Leonora becomes vengeful, and refusing to giver her daughter-in-law's hand to her ex-suitor, frustrates Mr. Deuceace's plan to marry money.

But the most wicked and consistent obstacle to Mr. Deuceace's selfish plot turns out to be his own father, the Earl of Crabs. He first appears in "Foring Parts" as a mercenary nobleman who begs a little share of his son's profit in swindling, which his son refuses to yield. This ungenerous attitude of Mr. Deuceace's is, however, to cost him a great deal afterwards. Lord Crabs follows him to Paris and surprises him at his apartments, quite ready to interfere with his courtship business. Mr. Deuceace finds this a bad omen, and more so when he learns that the Griffins have received an invitation from the ambassador and his wife, apparently of Lord Crabs's connection :

Master [Mr. Deuceace] read the noat with no such fealinx of joy. He

> felt that there was somethink a-going on behind the seans, and, though he could not tell how, was sure that some danger was near him. That old fox of a father of his had begun his M'Inations pretty early! (*YC* 70)

This is one of the earliest warnings to the reader that some counterplot is working behind the scene, not only in that some invisible enemies are secretly working against Mr. Deuceace but also in that some invisible designs are affecting the course of narrative. As Mr. Deuceace fails in penetrating Lord Crabs's "M'Inations" or machinations, so probably does the reader at this point in seeing what the real driving force of the narrative is.

As the narrative proceeds, Mr. Deuceace gradually loses his attraction and aura that should accompany the leading part in the story. He is led to woo Mathilda, the plainer of the two, fights a meaningless duel with his French rival, which costs him a hand, and gets arrested for his debts and incarcerated in prison, to the disgrace of the self-styled gentleman of fashion. The imprisonment is even on the point of spoiling his marriage plan when financing from Lord Crabs narrowly saves him. Thanks to this act of good will of his father, Mr. Deuceace manages to consumate the wedding, but it is only after returning from the honeymoon trip that he realizes the trap ; since he wedded Mathilda without the consent of her mother-in-law, the newly-wed lost their claim to Sir George's fortune. In the meanwhile, Lord Crabs gets married with Leonora and carries out his secret plot to intercept the fortune. It is no wonder that Mr. Yellowplush gives up on his simple master and goes over to Lord Crabs's side. Thus Mr. and Mrs. Deuceace find themselves penniless on their return from honeymoon, and are ushered by his former footman into the presence of the victorious Earl and Countess Crabs, much to their disgrace.

Through this episode of Mr. Deuceace's plot being outwitted by Lord Crabs's counterplot, their battle of wits is repeatedly described with the

metaphor of game, as Harden notices (28). When Mr. Deuceace contemplates his plan with the Griffins, his aim is compared to fishing : "his plan was to keep 'em both in play, until he could strike the best fish of the two . . . Miss was hooked for certain" (*YC* 64). On the other hand, when he goes too far in encouraging Leonora's passion, he is ignorant of the danger of being caught himself, the game being reciprocal of either fishing or being fished : "He thought he'd made all safe. Poar fool! he was in a net—sich a net as I never yet see set to ketch a roag in" (*YC* 80). In fact, he is subjected to Leonora's plotting : "I doan't think Deuceace ever suspected any game on the part of her ladyship, for she carried it on so admirally, that the quarls [quarrels] which daily took place betwigst him and the Frenchman, never seemed to come from her ; on the contrary, she acted as the reglar pease-maker between them" (*YC* 82-83). Finally Leonora succeeds in instigating the two rivals into a duel, and would have remained satisfied if it had not been for someone else's encouragement, as Mr. Yellowplush correctly suspects :

> His lordship was quite right in saying to master that "Lady Griffin hadn't done with him." No moar she had. But she never would have thought of the nex game she was going to play, *if somebody hadn't put her up to it.* Who did? If you red the above passidge, and saw how a venrabble old genlmn took his hat, and sauntered down the Plas Vandome (looking hard and kind at all the nussary-maids—*buns* they call them in France—in the way), I leave you to guess who was the author of the nex skeam : a woman, suttnly, never would have pitcht on it. (*YC* 87)

Here Mr. Yellowplush directly draws the reader's attention to the schemer behind Leonora's vengeful actions, and interestingly enough, compares him to *the author!* Indeed, the schemer's next game plan *is* and *constitutes* the plot of the subsequent narrative sequences, which outgrows the original plot of Mr. Deuceace coveting the Griffins's for-

tune. The counterplot of Lord Crabs and Leonora to revenge on the selfish Deuceace develops to such lengths that, while Mr. Yellowplush changes master from one to the other, Mr. Deuceace finally realizes what is up, though not to a full extent :

> "I have it now!" says he [Mr. Deuceace], clinching his fist, and growing gashly pail—"I have it now—the infernal old hoary scoundrel! the wicked, unnatural wretch! He would take her from me!" . . . .
>
> . . . Oh! he saw it all now—the fust attempt at arest, the marridge fixt at 12 o'clock, and the bayliffs fixt to come, and intarupthe marridge!—the jewel [duel], praps, betwigst him and De l'Orge : but, no, it was the *woman* who did that—a *man* don't deal such fowl blows, igspecially a father to his son : a woman may, poar thing!—she's no other means of reventch, and is used to fight with under-hand wepns all her life through.
>
> Well, whatever the pint might be, this Deuceace saw pretty clear, that he'd been beat by his father at his own game—a trapp set for him onst, which had been defitted by my presnts of mind—another trap set afterwids, in which my lord had been suxesfle. (*YC* 96-97)

As Mr. Deuceace comes to recognize the schemes set around him, the reader is also able to see, perhaps for the first time, the whole situation in which "he'd been beat by his father at his own game." This is a moment of denouement, or *anagnorisis* in the Aristotelian sense, which clears up puzzles and solves intrigues in the narrative. It is also a moment of narrative *peripeteia* in the chiasmatic plot structure, in which the deceiver is defeated by another deceiver so that the original plot of courtship gives place to the counterplot of revenge. In result, the story of Mr. Deuceace is no longer a story of successful adventure, as it was in "Dimond Cut Dimond," but becomes one of defeat and failure.

5. Coda : Underplotting

But what of Mr. Yellowplush? The episode of the Griffins business has featured Mr. Deuceace as the hero-suitor ; he was the (mostly active) agent of the series of meaningful actions in the narrative, that is, travelling, lodging, plotting, choosing, courting, deceiving, duelling, suffering, marrying, and finally being outwitted. On the other hand, Mr. Yellowplush remained a mere servant—following his master to and fro, collecting information and money for him, and finally abandoning him. His role in the narrative appears to be a subordinate one. But it is significant to remember that this is ultimately a story of Mr. Yellowplush, which means that he occupies the centre of interest in the narrative ; one might even call him the protagonist, distinct from the mere supporting part type of narrator such as Dr. Watson and Nelly Dean, and this is an essential point in assessing the work.

In fact, *The Yellowplush Correspondence* describes the development of the eponymous hero, Mr. Yellowplush. Remember the series of questions posed in the earlier parts of the narrative : who is Mr. Yellowplush? why is he boasting of being a gentleman? how has he been able to climb the social ladder? what is he now? who is living with him at "*our*" house? and how has he achieved that status by his "merits"? These questions quickened the plot of the series, namely the plot of his social climbing, to which the adventures of his third master must be understood as subsidiary. And it is worth noting that the answers to these questions seem to be provided in the narrative. For example, I have quoted the following reference to Mr. Yellowplush's present situation from "Miss Shum's Husband" : ". . . my merits have raised me to what I am—two livries, forty pound a year, malt-licker, washin, silk-stockins, and wax candles . . ." (*YC* 13). This posed the question of how the hero has achieved that blessed position. The answer is probably found in the passage near the end of "Mr. Deuceace at Paris," relating how he was

ordered by his new master to "get a livery" (*YC* 103) at Frojé. Indeed, he "went to Mr. Frojé's, and ordered a new livery" (*YC* 103), and a few days later, "I bot [bought] myself a dressing-case, a box of Ody colong, a few duzen lawn sherts and neckcloths, and other things which were necessary for a genlmn in my rank. Silk stockings was provided by the rules of the house" (*YC* 103). It is now evident that Mr. Yellowplush's social climbing was brought on by his service to Lord Crabs, which he acquired by means of his swift and probably correct decision to quit Mr. Deuceace on the skids—who, "a swindler, who had robbed poar Dawkins of the means of igsistance, who had cheated his fellow-roag, Mr. Richard Blewitt, and who was making a musnary marridge with a disgusting creacher like Miss Griffin, didn merit any compashn on my purt" (*YC* 100). He thus proves his own merits by abandoning his unlikely master.

Yet it is also true that this story line is not strong enough to keep the reader's attention throughout ; the general reader is likely to forget the kernel of the narrative and allows his- or herself instead to follow the more clear-cut subplots of swindling and courting with Mr. Deuceace as the temporary protagonist. But the reader is occasionally reminded of the kernel level of the narrative whenever the narrator refers to his own present situations. It might helpful to define this kind of movement of the plot, which fades away from the surface and yet is continuously working underground, as *underplot.* This word was once a literary term for what we now call *subplot,* as when Dryden stated : "Our [English] plays, besides the main design, have under-plots or by-concernments of less considerable persons and intrigues, which are carried on with the motion of the main plot" (630). But *OED* gives the second sense of this noun as "An underhand scheme or trick" ("Underplot"), and this seems to apply perfectly to our case, in which Mr. Yellowplush was secretly looking for a chance to get a better position while he pretended to be true to his present master. From a retrospective viewpoint, the whole narrative can be interpreted to have been driven by this underplot, both in that the hero has been always serving his masters to

learn the ways of the world and climb up the social ladder, and in that the story line of this social climbing has worked secretly behind the scene of more intriguing subplots. To conclude, by means of this deliberate underplotting Thackeray succeeded in snaring the innocent reader in his narrative trap just as his hero successfully outwitted Mr. Deuceace ; the narrative of deception was also the deception of narrative.

A few more words about the closing part of the work. After concluding the plot of Mr. Yellowplush's social climbing at the end of "Mr. Deuceace at Paris," Thackeray added two more chapters to the series, in which no new plots developed : "Mr. Yellowplush's Ajew" (VII) appeared in the August number of *Fraser's* as a farewell chapter, and was followed at an interval of seventeen months by "Epistles to the Literati. No. XIII" (VIII) in the January 1840 number, which was in effect a bonus essay in the Yellowplush style. These two codas might be supposed by strict Flaubertians and Jamesians to spoil the balance, unity, and completeness of the work, but it is evident that the author laid less store on artistic fineness than enjoying familiar chats with the reader. This aspect of *The Yellowplush Correspondence* certainly anticipates the casual style of narrating stories with occasional digressions that characterizes Thackeray's major phase, perhaps with more refined tactics in plotting, counterplotting, and underplotting. That virtue considered, will contemporary readers still reject this early burlesque as a smaller loose baggy monster, or be able to relish it as a lovely pocket-sized monster?

Notes

1 Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (1948) ; Williams, *The English Novel* (1970) ; and Eagleton, *The English Novel* (2005).

2 Especially, Henry James, actually an ardent lover of and an alleged successor to Thackeray's highbrow novel of manners, set his idea of the "art of fiction" mainly on the refusal of Thackeray's method of writing ("The Art of Fiction" 44 ; and Preface 1107-08), and Percy Lubbock followed him in evaluating James's art in comparison with Thackeray's (Lubbock). Recently, Daniel R.

Schwarz and Andrew Gibson referred to Thackeray's art to bring into relief modernist and postmodernist narrative strategies (Schwarz 22-23 ; Gibson 229-32).

[3] Richard Salmon states, "The basis of both academic and 'popular' knowledge of Thackeray has, in recent years, come increasingly to rest upon *Vanity Fair,* the one text to have survived virtually unscathed from the precipitous decline in his twentieth-century reputation" (4-5).

[4] Thackeray himself compares his novel to "a sort of confidential talk between writer and reader, which must often be dull, must often flag" in the preface to *Pendennis* (xxxv). He is aware of his weakness and also of the demerit of covering that weakness by elaborate art : "If this kind of composition, of which the two years' product is now laid before the public, fail in art, as it constantly does and must, it at least has the advantage of a certain truth and honesty, which a work more elaborate might lose" (xxxv). This would make a strong counterargument to Flaubert-James's art-cult in their theories of fiction.

[5] As to modern writers' enmity toward plot, Brooks argues that "E. M. Forster's strictures on plot . . . in *Aspects of the Novel* . . . are representative of the modernist attitude toward traditional plotting. One finds more extreme dissents later on, for example : Virginia Woolf, . . . Nathalie Sarraute, . . . Alain Robbe-Grillet. . ." (339).

[6] References to *The Yellowplush Correspondence (YC)* are to Shillingsburg's critical edition.

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