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The Comic Rival: An Evolution from Moliére's Trissotin and Wycherley's Sparkish to Stiller's Michael

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represented than challenged through her polymorphous eroticism.

Works Cited


Northrop Frye writes that in a comedy “what normally happens is that a young man wants a young woman, that his desire is resisted by some opposition, usually paternal, and that near the end of the play some twist in the plot enables the hero to have his will” (Frye 163). Frye continues this handy recipe, writing that “the obstacles to the hero's desire, then, form the action of the comedy” (Frye 164). One of these obstacles, matching even paternal opposition in its import, is the rival. From the grand comedies of the French baroque period (of which Molière is the unquestioned father and champion), to the comic plays of Restoration England (William Wycherley’s stomping grounds), to the contemporary American cinema (Ben Stiller’s place of business), the romantic comedy is and was necessarily peopled with rivals for the affections of the male hero’s love interest. Even though the rival character has evolved quite considerably throughout the past four hundred years, the formula remains, if not the same, at least evident. What is fascinating, however, are the ways in which the rival character has been broken down into its component parts and redistributed between the romantic rivals in the films of the contemporary cinema, including and especially, Ben Stiller’s unbearably trite, often unwatchable 1994 Slacker-esque romanti-dramedy, Reality Bites.

Molière (the nom de plume of 17th century French playwright Jean Baptisté Poquelin) wrote many of the great comedies of world literature over the course of his long life as a playwright, director, and actor. While he employed the convention of the comic rival in many of his plays, The Learned Ladies’ Trissotin is his most textbook example of the comic rival in action. Far less despicable and lascivious than Tartuffe’s title character, Trissotin is much more similar to the foppish would-be wit rival characters of the English Restoration. Trissotin is by all accounts—even those of Henriette, the unreciprocating object of his affections—not that bad a guy. He is a would-be wit, a faux scholar, and an occasional plagiarist, more interested in the lace on his cuff than the philosophy he espouses, but his pursuit of Henriette is one of simple greed and sexual attraction; he is at no point looking to throw the merchant class family, on whom he is an over-educated parasite, out on the street. Richard Wilbur, Molière’s greatest translator, calls Trissotin merely "a vain and narrow pedant" (Molière 82). Trissotin is an unmitigated fool and hypocrite, but not a fiend like Tartuffe.

Molière’s Trissotin fits very clearly the comic rival role that would become so popular across the
English Channel. Though Molière throws us a bit of a curve in that Henriette's father, Chrysale (the role that Molière himself originated on the stage), approves of her marriage to her love, Clitandre, and it is her mother, Philaminte, who has decided that it is Trissotin whom Henriette will marry, the rival plot of The Learned Ladies is, nevertheless, one which would become quite familiar. Trissotin advances with a sparkling tongue, Henriette retreats with a sharp one. Clitandre engages Trissotin in wit combat and Trissotin is nearly beaten. Clitandre's love is expressed time and time again. Trissotin literally chases Henriette around the set for a scene. And, finally, the marriage of Trissotin and Henriette is thwarted at the last minute thanks to the scheming of Chrysale's brother, Ariste. Clitandre and Henriette are married and everyone, except Trissotin, live happily ever after.

In The Learned Ladies, Molière created a template for the would-be wit comic rival that nearly all the playwrights who followed would trace, however bluntly or incompetently. Trissotin is a hypocrite, a fool, a relativley harmless fellow, and, most importantly, not the man whom the heroine loves.

In 1675, a mere three years after Molière's The Learned Ladies premiered in France, William Wycherley's The Country Wife took the stage in an England steeped in Restoration chic. One of that play's myriad sub-plots concerns the rivalry between Harcourt (what passes in the Restoration for a decent guy) and Sparkish (quite the foppish would-be wit) for the hand of Alithea, an heiress. Over the course of Wycherley's five acts these three circle each other until, in the end, Harcourt and Alithea are married—Frye's signification of order restored—and Sparkish, our comic rival, comes up empty.

The audience is fully aware of Sparkish's role from his first appearance (in act 1 scene 1, in which he drops fancy restaurant names and calls "wit... the greatest title in the world") to his ironic words in Act 3 scene 2:

...the reason why we are so often louder than the players is because we think we speak more wit, and so become the poet's rivals... Damn the poets!... they make a wise and witty man in the world a fool upon the stage, you know not how; and 'tis therefore I hate 'em too, for I know not but it may be my own case; for they'll put a man into a play for looking asquint. Their predecessors were contented to make serving-men only their stage-fools, but these rogues must have gentlemen.

Wycherley portrays in Sparkish exactly the sort of vapid depthless rival that Molière perfected in Trissotin. Horner, The Country Wife's rake hero, describes our classical sense of the rival in his final lines:

Vain fops but court, and dress, and keep a pother,
To pass for women's men with one another

Sparkish and Trissotin, both, are relatively harmless objects of ridicule throughout their respective plays and, in the end, are defeated to no great consequence. What is of most importance is that at no point do Molière or Wycherley leave the judgement of these characters to the audience; there is no ambiguity—Trissotin is a fake and Sparkish is a fool and neither of them cares about the object of their desires except as objects with rather deep pockets. The audience is never given a legitimate chance to, even for a moment, side with these rivals. It is never a race with an uncertain finish; we know who's the hero and who's the rival. The rival is, as Frye puts it, an "obstacle to the hero's desire." Further, their quests come to a very finite conclusion: Trissotin is discovered to be only interested in Henriette's family's money and, with great flair, exits the final scene of The Learned Ladies, and, similarly, Sparkish backs his way out of the Alithea sweepstakes with his declaration that he will not play the part to which Harcourt has agreed. These classic rivals are clearly defined and without question the lesser man in each case.

Three hundred and nineteen years after The Country Wife was first seen in England, Ben Stiller's comedy Reality Bites premiered in the United States and while this film contains all manner of contemporary shadows of the Restoration dramaturgical form, the film's basic departure (keep in mind I'm correcting for three hundred years) is its treatment of the rival character, the MTV-esque executive, Michael. One can, of course, make a very legitimate point that the film is an interesting contemporary take on the Restoration's style: there is a very palpable tension between old and new societies (young slacker versus work-a-day parents as well as the metacinematic element of Stiller's casting his famous mother, Anne Meara, in the role of an older generation employer who doesn't hire Leleina), a rake hero (Troy), a relatively self-assured heroine (an aspiring documentary film maker who Stiller even goes as far as to call "Leni," in this case short for "Leleina," but also, coincidentally, the first name of the greatest female documentarian of all time, Leni Riefenstahl), a specific audience focus (the so-called "Generation X" or "Slacker generation"), a good degree of wit combat (between Leleina and Troy, and Michael and Troy), several under-developed and unnecessary sub-plots (Vicky's possible AIDS, Sammy's coming-out to his mother) and a rivalry between two men for the heroine's affections (Michael versus Troy). It is this rivalry that forms the basic conflict of the film, as Frye would agree. Nevertheless, it is also the treatment of these rivals that is, curiously enough, the most peculiar element of Reality Bites.

The first filmic scene (as opposed to the video documentary scenes that begin the film), in which Leleina and Troy have dinner with her divorced parents and their spouses, seems to set Troy up as the
t Typical suitor whose opposition is largely paternal (Leleina's father's description of Troy later supports this). Over the course of the first several scenes of the film we see how close Leleina and Troy are and his role seems clear: up until we meet Michael, Troy seems the perfect Frye-esque comic lover.

From the first moment Michael is introduced, however, we are made to understand that not only are he and Leleina very similar (young and awkward, uncomfortable with their roles), we are beaten over the head with how similar Troy and Michael are (college drop-outs, obsessed with nostalgia—from Troy's head with how similar Troy and Michael are (college drop-outs, obsessed with nostalgia—from Troy's warmed over hippie sensibility to Michael's Dr. Zeius/Planet of the Apes bank—who are relatively well-versed in TV's "Good Times" and enormously drawn to Leleina). This is a decided departure from the classical comic rivalry situation, wherein, for example, Trissotin and Henriette have absolutely nothing in common. Possibly Stiller's greatest departure from the Restoration rival formula is the brief discussion Leleina and Michael have at dinner on their First Date in which they, together, make fun of Troy. Further, as the First Date between Leleina and Michael proceeds, apart from him not laughing at her "non-practicing virgin" joke, we find him to be always charming and sweet and, later, it is Leleina who is the one who makes the proverbial move, describing the moment that they are sharing as "one of those when everything's okay" moments and continuing that "this is perfect right now." When would we ever see Alithea describing a shared moment with Sparkish as "perfect"?

As we come to see that not only is Troy very much in love with Leleina, but that he is the nicest thing that anyone has ever said to me ... the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me." A mere few minutes later, the scene has shifted back to her apartment where Leleina berates Troy in words that are eerily similar to the way Henriette speaks to Trissotin:

Leleina: Money? Oh, but what's money to an artist, to a philosopher? It's just green colored paper that floats in and out of his life, like snow (Reality Bites, 1994).

Henriette: I know that you may realize,
By wedding me, a dowry of some size;
Yet money, which so many men pursue,
Should bore a true philosopher like you,

This similarity between The Learned Ladies' rival and Reality Bites' hero is only made stronger when one compares the wit combat between Clitandre and Trissotin in Act 4 of The Learned Ladies and the argument of Michael and Troy in the last half of Reality Bites: if one could equate "coolness" and over-intellectualizing and call them "x," then both Clitandre and Michael are arguing against their rival's embrace of "x" above all else. Similarly, Troy's exclusive facility with the building blocks of "cool" and Sparkish's knowledge of London's fashionable eateries, for instance, each proficiency lorded over the other characters, could very conceivably be equated: the rival's trait of broadcasting his cool, be it Restoration or Gen X, is shared by the rivals Trissotin and Sparkish and the hero Troy.

Finally, in both The Big Face-Offs between Michael and Troy (in the apartment and outside the club), Michael wins the battle of wit combat. He couldn't be more right in each case. In the end, the rivalry in Reality Bites has two major problems: 1) except for several shallow blemishes (like the ridiculous lines "What's your glitch?" and "I know what she wants in a way you never will"), Michael is consistently portrayed as the better guy—it is possible that the audience is supposed to believe that in the commercial edit of Leleina's documentary there is an implicit betrayal, BUT the film goes to great lengths to show that he was ignorant of his network's re-edit and that he did everything in his power to remedy the situation; and 2) there is no conclusion to the Michael plotline—sure he loses, and one can even buy that scenario (he may be the "better" guy, but she clearly loves Troy)—however, in the end, Michael does everything right and then, because that makes the ending awkward, we just never see him again. And so the role of rival is transformed and made respectable and therein made so damn appealing that the film makers needed to sweep it under the rug in the end.

The comic rival of old may be as dead as the enemy in the no longer black and white arena of contemporary literature and film. If Reality Bites can be held up as any sort of representative sampling of the contemporary cinema (admittedly a dubious assertion), the implicit complexity of the conflict between rivals is just far too interesting to paint with only two colors. Frye might argue that not only are the rivals watered down to an exceptional degree, but also that the "twist" that enables the hero ultimately to win has been circumvented, replaced with a betrayal (and I hesitate to even call it that) with very little literal or metaphoric weight and then the simple absence of the rival. While Reality Bites borrows from the likes of Molière and Wycherley, it does not, in the end, follow the recipe too carefully.
The idea of power and control over oneself appears throughout Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. Although she discusses power in many contexts, one of the most interesting ways that she expresses her ideas of power is through her continual references to hands. One uses one's hands to write, to sculpt, to draw, to mold, to destroy, to work. Hands are a means to power--either your own power or someone's power over you. For example, without slaves' hands, the southern plantation owners would not have had crops and profits. In Morrison's novel, a character can gain power only after realizing that her hands belong to her and to no one else. Morrison uses this idea to advance her own attitudes toward slavery and its impact on the American society of today.

The most obvious case of hands being the means to power emerges through the story of Baby Suggs. Baby Suggs asks, "What does a sixty-year-old slavewoman who walks like a three-legged dog need freedom for?" (141). She does not want Halle, her son, to waste his money paying for her freedom. But when she steps onto the ground a free woman, she realizes the joy of being free. She no longer has to answer to the white man. She discovers that only now can she truly own herself. Baby's first realization of her freedom involves her hands: "suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, 'These hands belong to me. These my hands'" (141): hands that slave traders used to measure her worth; hands that did what the slave master commanded; hands that she never even noticed because they always belonged to someone else. Now these hands are hers, and no white man will ever own them again. Baby Suggs has discovered power through the ownership of her hands.

Perhaps Baby's self-empowerment explains why Morrison so often mentions Baby's hands in the healing and molding of Sethe. Sethe says that "If she lay among all the hands in the world, she would know Baby Suggs" because Baby's hands "dropped just about anything they were doing to massage Sethe's nape" (98). When Sethe first arrived from the South, Baby's hands caressed every part of Sethe's body, helping her to recover from her horrific journey. Baby's hands started to remold Sethe into a free woman. But Sethe never has the chance to reclaim her hands and thereby realize her own power. Instead, she loses all when she kills the already-crawling baby. Sethe's hands, therefore, can knead bread and make food for Mr. Bodwin, but when it comes time for soothing, Sethe still prays for Baby Suggs' touch. She needs it to calm her. In this way, hands have a spiritual, rather than a physical, power—they...