

Playing the Girl: The Possibilities of Forster's Domestic Comedy

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Abstract: E. M. Forster once described what he had learnt from Jane Austen as “the possibilities of domestic humor” (Furbank & Haskell 2004, 14). His work has indeed often been labelled ‘domestic comedy’, ‘social comedy’ or ‘comedy of manners’, but few scholars have engaged seriously with the tactics and implications of his comedy. This paper suggests that one specific way in which Forster makes use of these possibilities is by exposing the constructed and performative nature of domestic femininity – and making fun of its absurdities.

Forster’s domestic comedy is gentle in tone and outwardly in tune with the middle-class milieus that it portrays. In keeping with Eileen Gillooly’s concept of ‘feminine humour’, it undermines “the authority of [the cultural construction of femininity] even as it faithfully records the conditions, virtues, and behaviours required of life in the feminine position” (1999, 12).

In *A Room with a View* and *Howards End*, the two novels that best represent his domestic comedy, Forster stages scenes and situations in which his female characters are expected to ‘play their part’ in order to uphold the rigid gender norms of Edwardian society. Lucy Honeychurch’s earnest effort to be ladylike involves studious mimicry as well as the occasional comic blunder, while Margaret Schlegel’s campaign as the submissive wife is shown to be both conscious and conflicted. Drawing on such illustrative examples, this paper demonstrates how Forster employs his distinct sense of humour to explore women’s attitudes and ambivalence towards this mandated performance of femininity, as well as to expose the hypocrisy of the society that demands it of them.

Keywords: domestic comedy, feminine humour, performance, gender, femininity



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Introduction

On the evening of June 20th 1952, E. M. Forster gave an interview that would be published in *The Paris Review* the following year. The interviewers, Forster biographers Furbank and Haskell, describe the scene of Forster's King's College rooms thus:

A spacious and high-ceilinged room, furnished in the Edwardian taste. [...] Books of all sorts, handsome and otherwise, in English and French; armchairs decked in little shawls; a piano, a solitaire board, and the box of a zoetrope; profusion of opened letters; slippers neatly arranged in wastepaper basket. (Furbank & Haskell 2004, 1-2)

In this most Forsterian of domestic settings, the author was asked what specifically he had learnt from Jane Austen, and answered: "I learned the possibilities of domestic humor. I was more ambitious than she was, of course; I tried to hitch it on to other things" (Furbank & Haskell 2004, 14). This phrase, *the possibilities of domestic humour*, along with a curiosity as to those "other things", has long accompanied my reading of Forster. The idea that Forster was inspired by Austen to make deliberate use of the domestic sphere and its particular humour for his own "ambitious" purposes is one that I find both enlightening and suggestive.

Indeed, Forster has often been referred to as a writer of 'domestic comedy', 'social comedy' or 'comedy of manners' (e.g. Oliver 1960, Beer 1962, Singh 1986, Page 1987, Fordoński 2005, Bradshaw 2007). John Colmer even dares to claim that "[b]y common consent E. M. Forster is a master of domestic comedy" (1982, 113). At least in terms of the two novels that this paper is concerned with, *A Room with a View* and *Howards End*, these labels seem relatively uncontested. It is my impression, however, that Forster's humour has been taken for granted, rather than taken seriously as an object of study in its own right. That is, while Forster is generally acknowledged to be a writer of comedy, the actual methods and implications of his comedy remain largely unexamined. In one sense, the same fundamental ideas which colour all of Forster's work – the sanctity of the individual and of personal relations – are also present in his domestic comedy. In another, I would suggest, his choice of domestic humour as the main mode of *A Room with a View* and *Howards End* opens up possibilities for a more nuanced exploration of gender and specifically the condition of women, than his less comedic novels allow for.

Feminine Humour

In *Smile of Discontent: Humor, Gender, and Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (1999), Eileen Gillooly traces a strain of feminine humour through the works of Fanny Burney and Jane Austen to, among others, Elizabeth Gaskell, Anthony Trollope and Henry James. Gillooly describes this tradition of feminine humour as “appropriating the cultural construction of femininity for its own purposes” and contriving to “undermine the authority of that construction even as it faithfully records the conditions, virtues and behaviors required of life in the feminine position” (1999, 12). Notably, while its tactics have been “gendered feminine”, feminine humour is not exclusively employed by women writers (Gillooly 1999, xix). Indeed, Gillooly suggests that the “goals and tactics of feminine humor – notably its subversiveness, diffuseness, and self-deprecation – have much in common with the humor of others who are similarly marginalized (and consequently gendered feminine)” in a masculine-dominated culture (1999, xxv).

I would argue that Forster's humour shares many of these ‘feminine’ tactics and traits: it is generally understated, subtle and diffused through the narrative. To a great extent, it relies on the keen observation of and sympathetic interest in the social conditions and personal development of his female protagonists, i.e. what Gillooly aptly refers to as “faithfully record[ing] [...] life in the feminine position” (1999, 12). Furthermore, Gillooly posits that because “standard taxonomies” tend to be based on more traditional, male-authored comedy, many works that employ these subtler comedic tactics “have consequently been ignored almost entirely in considerations of humor” (1999, xviii-xix). Perhaps this goes some way towards explaining why Forster's humour and its many possibilities have yet to be fully explored.

This paper pays particular attention to Forster's engagement with the construction and performance of femininity in *A Room with a View* and *Howards End* – as *one* of those “other things” that Forster uses his domestic comedy for. I will present some representative examples of scenes in which the female characters *play their parts* in order to uphold the rigid gender norms of Edwardian society. My hope is to demonstrate how Forster employs his distinct sense of humour to explore women's practical experience with, and ambivalence towards, this performative aspect of domestic labour, as well as to expose the absurdity of the society that demands it of them.

The choice to include substantial passages from the novels in my discussion may need a note of explanation. First, as has been mentioned, Forster's comedy is inherently diffuse and intrinsic to his narrative. Rather than, for example, relying on identifiable joke structures with set-ups and pay-offs, Forster's comedy emerges within the context of a particular situation and stems from the idiosyncrasies and interactions of the characters and from the narrator's specific turns of phrase in describing them. To pick out individual lines or shorter passages to exemplify this kind of comic writing is therefore both difficult and counter-productive; this is one reason why I find a longer quotation more illustrative. Furthermore, I like to think of this *situational* or *scenic* quality to Forster's writing as an indicator of his place in a domestic comedy tradition which harks back, beyond Austen, to the theatrical comedy of the Restoration period. While this comedic legacy is not the focus of the present paper, it deserves to be mentioned as it has a certain bearing on my perception and presentation of Forster's comedy specifically in terms of *scenes*.

Setting the Domestic Comedy Scene

The bathing scene in *A Room with a View* is one of Forster's most blatantly comic and symbolically significant passages. Lucy's brother Freddy Honeychurch has brought George Emerson and the rector Mr Beebe to the Sacred Lake for a spontaneous swim, and Forster depicts the scene as a celebration of youth, masculinity, freedom and nature in exalted and hilarious harmony. Many critics have commented on this iconic scene in terms of its depiction of homo-social or homo-erotic relationships, and as a contrast to the novel's conventional romantic comedy plot (e.g. Herz 2007).¹

From my point of view of feminine performance, however, the truly interesting part begins when Lucy and her mother Mrs Honeychurch, accompanied by Lucy's fiancé Cecil Vyse, enter and interrupt the joyful scene. "Hi! Hi! Ladies!" is Mr Beebe's ominous cry of warning when he sees them coming, as if announcing the approach of an intruding enemy force (Forster 2000a, 122). In context, it is interesting to note how the dynamics of the scene change with the introduction of that foreign element – "ladies" – into it.

1 In her chapter on *A Room with a View* in *The Cambridge Companion to E. M. Forster*, Judith Scherer Herz discusses some of those queer approaches which read the novel, and this particular scene, "more in terms of the writer's desire for George than George's desire for Lucy" (2007, 142). Notably, Lucy's desire for George is generally disregarded in this and similar discussions.

'Hi! Hi! *Ladies!*'

Neither George nor Freddy was truly refined. Still they did not hear Mr Beebe's last warning, or they would have avoided Mrs Honeychurch, Cecil and Lucy, who were walking down to call on old Mrs Butterworth. Freddy dropped the waistcoat at their feet, and dashed into some bracken. George whooped in their faces, and scudded away down the path to the pond, still clad in Mr Beebe's hat.

'Gracious alive!' cried Mrs Honeychurch. 'Who ever were those unfortunate people? Oh, dears, look away! And poor Mr Beebe, too! What ever has happened?'

'Come this way immediately,' commanded Cecil, who always felt that he must lead women, though he knew not whither, and protect them, though he knew not against what. He led them now towards the bracken where Freddy sat concealed.

'Oh, poor Mr Beebe! Was that his waistcoat we left in the path? Cecil, Mr Beebe's waistcoat -'

'No business of ours', said Cecil, glancing at Lucy, who was *all parasol and evidently 'minded'*.

'I fancy Mr Beebe jumped back into the pond.'

'This way, please, Mrs Honeychurch, this way.'

They followed him up the bank, *attempting* the tense yet nonchalant expression that is *suitable for ladies* on such occasions.

'Well, I can't help it,' said a voice close ahead, and Freddy reared a freckled face and a pair of snowy shoulders out of the fronds. 'I can't be trodden on, can I?'

'Good gracious me, dear; so it's you! *What miserable management! Why not have a comfortable bath at home, with hot and cold laid on?*'

'Look here, mother: a fellow must wash, and a fellow's got to dry, and if another fellow -'

'Dear, no doubt you're right as usual, but you are in no position to argue. Come, Lucy.' They turned. '*Oh, look - don't look!* Oh, poor Mr Beebe! How unfortunate again -'

For Mr Beebe was just crawling out of the pond, on whose surface garments of an intimate nature did float; while George, the world-weary George, shouted to Freddy that he had hooked a fish. [...]

‘Hush, dears,’ said Mrs Honeychurch, who *found it impossible to remain shocked*. ‘*And be sure you dry yourselves thoroughly first. All these colds come of not drying thoroughly.*’

‘Mother, do come away,’ said Lucy. ‘Oh, for goodness’ sake, do come.’

‘Hullo!’ cried George, so that again the ladies stopped.

He regarded himself as dressed. Barefoot, bare-chested, radiant and personable against the shadowy woods, he called:

‘Hullo, Miss Honeychurch! Hullo!’

‘Bow, Lucy; better bow. Who ever is it? *I shall bow.*’

Miss Honeychurch bowed. (Forster 2000a, 122-123, my emphases except line 1 and 18)

Here we have Forster setting a comedic scene – domestic in character, albeit out of doors – and staging a performance of normative gender roles. In Eric Haralson’s queer reading of the scene, the arrival of the ladies is described as “the amalgamated powers of the maternal, the domestic, the female-amative, and the bourgeois-respectable interven[ing] to terminate this idyl of masculine adhesiveness” (1997, 70). Insightful though this is, it disregards the comic potential of this intervention. I would argue that while the presence of the ladies puts an immediate stop to the raucous, untamed silliness, it does not put a stop to the comedy. Rather, Forster resets his comedic mode from the lyrical impressionism of the bathing scene to the more low-key, gentle domestic humour that characterises the novel as a whole. This emphasises its close association with the female characters; it is *their* natural mode of comedy.

Apart from heralding a shift in comedic mode, the unexpected arrival of the ladies at the Sacred Lake is essentially an ironic anticlimax – a key characteristic of Forster’s writing. It turns out that the ladies – these supposed paragons of innocence and propriety – are not actually as shocked as they ought to be or, in Lucy’s case, for the *reasons* that she ought to be. However, Lucy and her mother *pretend* to be shocked – for the sake of appearances, but undoubtedly also for the sake of Mr Beebe and Cecil, whose masculine authority is severely undermined by the situation. Hence, Mrs Honeychurch and Lucy “followed [Cecil] up the bank, *attempting* the tense yet nonchalant expression that is *suitable for ladies on such occasions*”, playing their submissive parts to save everyone further embarrassment. Mrs Honeychurch, in fact, appears to be more curious and amused than appalled by the event.

Finding it "impossible to remain shocked", she instead reacts with characteristic and unrelenting domestic pragmatism ("Why not have a comfortable bath at home, with hot and cold laid on?" and "be sure you dry yourselves thoroughly first"). She even returns George's unconventional greeting with a polite bow.

Even though both ladies *attempt* to be shocked, it is evident that Lucy has more at stake here than her mother does. Not only is Lucy less experienced than her mother (a widow and a matriarch) but, ironically, there is also pressure on her to visibly appear so. The narrator's comment, "Lucy was all parasol and *evidently* minded", shows that it is the outward manifestation of offended delicacy that matters here; it is more important that she *seems* shocked than that she actually is. Here is also a recurring pattern of behaviour with Lucy: when faced with a confusing situation, she tends to seek refuge in the first and most reliably conventional feminine trope that she can find. In this particular instance, the comedy is heightened by the fact that she hides, quite literally, behind a prim parasol – that ultimate feminine prop – as evidence of her being properly scandalised.

Having begun with a taste of Forster's comedy and what it may reveal in terms of feminine performance, we can now go back to Italy to consider Lucy at the outset of her journey.

Lucy Honeychurch: Learning to Be Ladylike

At its core, *A Room with a View* is a coming-of-age story with a distinctly Forsterian slant.² Young Lucy Honeychurch attempts to understand and reconcile countless new influences, expectations and experiences, in relation to her, as yet developing, sense of self. The first and foremost implication of Edwardian womanhood being marriageability and compliance with the norm of domestic femininity, what Lucy paradoxically experiences in Italy is that the boundaries of her existence are closing in, rather than opening up, as she enters into womanhood.

Lucy has been brought up a respectable young lady, in a liberal and affectionate family environment. She seems never to have reflected on her own life in terms of domesticity or femininity until the unfamiliarity of Italy suddenly

2 Herz (2007) describes how *A Room with a View* has long been read as a "cheerful Bildungsroman" or a "social comedy inflected by social satire" - and implies that while valid to a degree, this is an outdated reading that obscures the "darker, more complex, less end-determined narrative" (138). However, I believe that a reading interested in female performance and development cannot help but bring this aspect of the novel to the fore.

throws these things into sharp relief. When her chaperone Charlotte Bartlett and another lady at the Pensione solemnly agree that “one could not be too careful with a young girl”, this comes as news to Lucy: “Lucy *tried to look demure*, but could not help feeling a great fool. No one was careful with her at home; or, at all events, she had not noticed it” (10, my emphasis). Now, as a young, marriageable Englishwoman in a foreign country, she faces new rules and boundaries of propriety at every turn; rules and boundaries which will hereafter define and circumscribe her very existence as a woman.

One aspect of this change is Lucy’s newfound preoccupation with what is, and what is not, *ladylike*. When for once she ventures out in Florence alone, desiring the adventure of a tram journey, she stops herself, remembering Charlotte’s lecture on the subject:

This she might not attempt. It was *unladylike*. Why? Why were most big things *unladylike*? Charlotte had once explained to her why. It was not that ladies were inferior to men; it was that they were different. Their mission was to inspire others to achievement rather than to achieve themselves. *Indirectly, by means of tact and a spotless name, a lady could accomplish much.* But if she rushed into the fray herself she would first be censured, then despised, and finally ignored. (Forster 2000a, 37, my emphases)

In *Forster’s Women: Eternal Differences* (1975), Bonnie Finkelstein remarks that in *A Room with a View*, “Forster shows the demands of being ‘ladylike’ to be extremely and pointlessly constricting” for women (67). Indeed, this encapsulates Forster’s most serious indictment of the idea of normative femininity: Quite simply, that women *as individuals* have little of significance to gain by it, and a world of “big things” – experiences, achievements, possibilities, freedom – to lose.

The very word *ladylike*, of course, indicates acting *like* a lady, rather than *being* one. It implies performing the codes and characteristics of femininity rather than internalising them. In the Italian part of the novel, there are plenty of examples of Lucy trying to “remember” how she “ought to” behave or feel in a given situation. Having been abandoned by Miss Lavish, who has also taken away her Baedeker guidebook, on the steps of Santa Croce, Lucy “*remembered* that a young girl ought not to loiter in public places” (18, my emphasis). This leads her into the church, where she happens to meet the Emersons:

'If you've no Baedeker,' said the son, 'you'd better join us.'

[...] She *took refuge in her dignity*.

'Thank you very much, but I could not think of that. I hope you do not suppose that I came to join on to you. I really came [...] to thank you for so kindly giving us your rooms last night. I hope that you have not been put to any great inconvenience.'

'My dear,' said the old man gently, 'I think that you are *repeating what you have heard older people say*. You are *pretending* to be touchy; but you are not really. Stop being tiresome, and tell me instead what part of the church you want to see. To take you to it will be a real pleasure.'

Now this was abominably impertinent, and *she ought* to have been furious. But it is sometimes as difficult to lose one's temper as it is difficult at other times to keep it. Lucy could not get cross. Mr Emerson was an old man, and surely a girl might humour him. On the other hand, his son was a young man, and she felt that *a girl ought to be offended with him*, or at all events *be offended before him*. (Forster 2000a, 21, my emphases)

At this early point in her development, Lucy is trying to grasp the rules and outward manifestations of proper feminine behaviour. We can see that she already associates femininity with artificiality and performance, and that she intuitively understands the importance of *appearing* offended. We see her, tentatively and self-consciously, trying out some of the prescribed positions, attempting to *take refuge* in the chivalric trope of feminine dignity and hiding her insecurity behind affected, empty civilities. There is gentle comedy in Forster's depiction of Lucy's fledgling performance here. Her attempts at maturity and dignity are bluntly undermined by the avuncular Mr Emerson, who catches her in the act, so to speak, and kindly tells her to "stop being tiresome".

Lucy is drawn to the Emersons, but uneasy about the propriety of her situation: "She was sure that she *ought not to be* with these men; but they had cast a spell over her. They were so serious and so strange that *she could not remember how to behave*" (22, my emphases). Again, the word "remember" signals a lack of internalisation: Lucy is not being herself, but trying to memorise and act according to a predetermined, authoritative set of rules. She is beginning to recognise a discrepancy between her own honest, impulsive response to the world and the unspoken norms of proper feminine conduct. Since she cannot trust her

blundering self to *be* the right kind of young lady, she must *act* the part instead.

Here, it is important to note that the performance of femininity is, paradoxically, an *active performance of passivity*. The feminine ideal is inextricably associated with passivity, with a lack of individual agency and with a willingness to be led and instructed by external, patriarchal authorities. While the performance certainly demands observation and application, it does not require any critical consciousness or insight of its participants. In fact, when Lucy is engaged in the performance of femininity, her ability to question, analyse and make independent decisions is severely impaired: On some occasions she literally *does not know her own mind*. When, for example, Charlotte interrogates Lucy about the circumstances of George's kiss, Lucy – tellingly – replies, not once but twice: “I can't think” (Forster 2000a, 69). She, quite literally, cannot think of an appropriate feminine response because acting at all would simply be unladylike. Indeed, we may conclude that the performance of ideal femininity actively discourages self-reflection, and ultimately undermines self-knowledge, in young women.

Rather than depending on her own judgement, Lucy's performance relies heavily on studying and mimicking the behaviour of female role models. In terms of her development, the fact that Lucy has access *only* to those “older people”, whose words Mr Emerson accuses her of repeating, is relevant. In fact, there are no *young women* in the novel, with whom Lucy might share and compare her experiences. Arguably, this lack of female peers makes Lucy all the more susceptible to the influence of her two closest models.

Unlike the Schlegel sisters, Lucy has been brought up with the steady presence of female role models: her mother and her cousin and chaperone, Charlotte Bartlett. In the first half of the novel, most of Lucy's attempts at normative feminine behaviour can be traced to one or both of these women. Even in their absence, she defers to their judgement (“She also felt that her mother might not like her talking to that kind of person, and that Charlotte would object most strongly”, Forster 2000a, 25) and takes after their mannerisms and speech patterns (“Then she became matronly: ‘Oh, but your son wants employment. Has he no particular hobby?[']”, Forster 2000a, 26). We have already touched briefly on the good-humoured domesticity of Mrs Honeychurch and the restrictive – or even obstructive – role that Charlotte plays in Lucy's life. Typically, it is Charlotte who appears – “brown against the view” – at the moment when George kisses Lucy in a field of violets, effectively obscuring the possibilities and passions that lie before Lucy, and brusquely recalling her to the narrowness of her ladylike

existence (Forster 2000a, 63). Whether actively monitoring Lucy's behaviour or not, Charlotte has a formative influence on Lucy, who adopts her anxieties, mimics her manners, and incorporates them into her own performance.

Later in the novel, as Lucy begins to truly master her feminine performance, we see her use her feminine strategies to suppress her true feelings and to manage increasingly more complex relationships and situations. She even comes to weaponise her manipulative skills *against* Charlotte, which constitutes an ironic role-reversal. But significantly, it is through Charlotte that Lucy learns that artificiality and performance are not only useful, but *necessary*, means by which the disempowered can hope to influence the little world around them.

Margaret Schlegel: Feminine Performance as Deliberate Diplomacy

While we might expect the young Lucy Honeychurch to play-act femininity as part of her entry into womanhood, Margaret Schlegel's feminine performance in *Howards End* is altogether harder to understand and accept – perhaps especially for those many readers who consider her a feminist heroine or a representative of Forster's own beliefs. Elizabeth Langland argues that in *Howards End*, Forster “exposes the constructed nature of gender and his own ambivalent relationship with traits coded ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ in his culture” (1990, 252). According to Langland, “Forster's feminist vision [...] reinterprets [Margaret] as the principle that will complicate the hierarchical opposition [of masculine and feminine] and provide a new kind of connection” (1990, 256). Importantly, however, Margaret cannot be reduced to a principle or a heroine or somebody else's mouthpiece. Forster clearly writes her as a woman – and an idiosyncratic and imperfect woman at that.

In contrast to Lucy, Margaret is already an adult, and a well-rounded and self-aware individual, at the start of the novel. While her arc cannot be described as a coming-of-age process, it is nonetheless a process that involves performing roles and negotiating ideas of femininity. Indeed, at 29 years old, Margaret is uncommonly experienced for her age and unmarried status: “She had kept house for over ten years; she had entertained, almost with distinction; she had brought up a charming sister, and was bringing up a brother. Surely, if experience is attainable, she had attained it” (Forster 2000b, 63). The conspicuous absence of a ‘charming’ – or any other adjective for that matter – to describe Tibby Schlegel may be noted as another instance of Forster's comedic subtlety. Despite all her

experience, Margaret has no particular inclination for domestic concerns, but cares deeply about people and relationships. That her home should reflect and foster “the life within” is what matters to her (Forster 2000b, 24); domesticity is a means to this end, and not an end in itself.

The Schlegel sisters have the financial means and the intellectual freedom *not* to be defined by domesticity. Unlike Lucy, they have not had any prominent female role models to guide their development in a more conventional direction. Notably, then, Margaret inhabits a rare position for an Edwardian woman, where neither her family, her financial circumstances nor her own inclination seems to be steering her towards a domestic, married life. Yet, she *does* perform and she *does* marry! However, as with her approach to domestic management, Margaret’s performance of femininity serves the greater purpose of enabling personal connection and integration of differences. In fact, this is her stated mission (Forster 2000b, 159).

The difference in their respective circumstances and motives means that Margaret’s performance is more self-aware and deliberate than Lucy’s. Langland notes that Margaret “remains constantly alert to social expectations of feminine behavior, decoding those expectations”, and cites her anticipation of Henry Wilcox’s proposal as one example of this (1990, 257). In this scene, Margaret is house-hunting and Henry has invited her to come and view his own house in Ducie Street, which he is thinking of quitting. My addition to Langland’s analysis is that Margaret is not only *decoding*, but also *playing up* to a preconceived notion of feminine behaviour here:

They proceeded to the drawing-room. [...] Had Mrs Wilcox’s drawing-room looked thus at Howards End? Just as this thought entered Margaret’s brain, Mr Wilcox *did ask her* to be his wife, and the knowledge that *she had been right* so overcame her that she nearly fainted.

But the proposal was not to rank among the world’s great love scenes.

‘Miss Schlegel’ – his voice was firm – ‘I have had you up on false pretences. I want to speak about a much more serious matter than a house.’

Margaret *almost answered*: ‘I know –’

‘Could you be induced to share my – is it probable –’

‘Oh, Mr Wilcox!’ she interrupted, holding the piano and *averting her eyes*. ‘I see, I see. I will write to you afterwards if I may.’

He began to stammer. 'Miss Schlegel - Margaret - *you don't understand.*'

'Oh yes! Indeed, yes!' said Margaret.

'I am asking you to be my wife.'

So deep already was her sympathy, that when he said, 'I am asking you to be my wife,' she *made herself give a little start. She must show surprise if he expected it.* (Forster 2000b, 140, my emphases)

Anticipatory in more than one sense, this scene not only previews the gender dynamics of this particular couple, but also stages - and effectively undercuts - the generic expectations of the proposal trope. The scene is typical of Forster's domestic comedy with its understated dialogue and subtle, but piercing, irony. As so often with Forster, the momentous event turns into an ironic anticlimax. The proposal happens mid-sentence, off-hand: Looking round the drawing-room, Margaret is reminded of the late Mrs Wilcox and, in that same moment, she is asked to be the new Mrs Wilcox. Much like Lucy and Cecil's first kiss or, indeed, Margaret and Henry's first kiss (which will follow soon after their engagement, Forster 2000b, 157), this supposedly romantic moment is poorly timed and deeply underwhelming.

Clumsy and incapable of expressing genuine personal affection, Henry Wilcox completely bungles the proposal. His attempt at a masculine initiative is not only anticipated but actually interrupted by Margaret, who spots his incompetence and employs her feminine tactics (e.g. averting her eyes and acting surprised) in order to help him save face. She is aware that she must appear understanding, but not *knowing*, which is unladylike. In fact, so inconceivable is it for him that she should have figured him out that he - performatively, but futilely - says "you don't understand" - as if it to make it so. And yet, ironically, what overwhelms Margaret in this moment is not surprise or emotion, but the fact that "she had been right". As mentioned, this scene is indicative of the parts they will go on to play in married life. As Margaret saves Henry the embarrassment of having to get through this most personal of conversations, she is beginning to spoil him. It anticipates many other instances of her understanding, protecting, helping and spoiling him - without him ever noticing.³

3 Henry's failure to notice things is well established, e.g. in Ch. XXII: "there was one quality in Henry for which she was never prepared, however much she reminded herself of it: his obtuseness. He simply did not notice things, and there was no more to be said" (Forster 2000b, 159).

Although initially described as honest and forthright and, significantly, “not a female of the encouraging kind” (Forster 2000b, 26; 30), Margaret is shown to be a very capable social performer – at least when she chooses to be. On occasion, she downplays her superior understanding and deliberately assumes a more submissive role in order to handle particular people or social situations. At Evie Wilcox’s wedding, she joins in the ladies’ merriment because it is expected of her:

Gathering that the wedding-dress was on view, and that a visit would be seemly, she went to Evie’s room. All was hilarity here. [...] They screamed, they laughed, they sang, and the dog barked. *Margaret screamed a little too, but without conviction.* She could not feel that a wedding was so funny. Perhaps *something was missing in her equipment.* (Forster 2000b, 186-187, my emphases).

Even as a bride-to-be herself, Margaret cannot relate to the conventional feminine enthusiasm at the prospect of a wedding. I believe this is partly because she takes marriage – this sacred act of personal connection – entirely seriously, and partly because she sees through the artificiality and inanity of such femininely coded behaviour. The idea of gender as “equipment” is significant here. It connotes an exterior addendum to the self, a set of tools and tactics that can be used to outwardly project, and inwardly protect, the self. In Margaret’s case, it is not the *appearance* of femininity that is “missing”, but the ability to *naturalise the performance*, or to accept the feminine *act* as a natural and personal *fact*. Indeed, Margaret knows that “people are far more different than is pretended” and that “[a]ll over the world men and women are worrying because they cannot develop as they are supposed to develop” (Forster 2000b, 288). Her awareness of the constructed and performative nature of gender means that her own performance can never be unconscious or unproblematic.

Margaret gradually learns to manage Henry by the “methods of the harem” (Forster 2000b, 196), that is that sexualised form of informal influence that wives supposedly wield within marriage: “She was ashamed of her own diplomacy. In dealing with a Wilcox, how tempting it was to lapse from comradeship, and to give him the kind of woman that he desired!” (Forster 2000b, 195). During the crisis at Oniton – where Jacky Bast is revealed to be Henry’s former mistress – Margaret is required to summon all her social, psychological, and emotional resources in order to respond to her husband-to-be with empathy and love: “She chose her words carefully, and

so saved him from panic. *She played the girl*, until he could rebuild his fortress and hide his soul from the world" (Forster 2000b, 210, my emphasis). Nowhere is the performance of femininity – and its profound and precarious implications for men and women alike – more evident than here. This last, distinctly non-humorous, example reminds us that Margaret's *playing the girl* is no laughing matter to Forster. In fact, as Claude Summers notes, marriage and domesticity represent real dangers to Margaret's individuality; they threaten to "engulf her personality" (1983, 130).

Summers further concludes that *Howards End* is "strongly feminist in outlook, and that Margaret's attempt to mold herself into a conventionally submissive wife is depicted as unnatural and destructive" (1983, 131). Indeed, I would say that Forster *intends us to mind this* – to be provoked by and uneasy with the demeaning aspects of Margaret's feminine performance. In Lucy's case, the dishonesty of her performance leads to the (temporary) loss of her natural openness and intuition and – once she finally rejects the conventional path and marries George Emerson – to severe damage to her family relationships (Forster 2000a, 193-4).

Conclusions

In my view, Forster's affinity with the personal values inherent in domestic life, his keen eye for the nuances of social manners, and his distinct sense of the ironic and the absurd are keys to the depth and ambition of his domestic comedy novels. Forster seems to have instinctively recognised, and deliberately made use of, the possibilities of domestic humour to highlight both the societal conditions and the highly individual motives and manifestations of women's feminine performance. I believe that employing 'feminine' tactics of comedy (as characterised by Gillooly 1999) allows Forster to depict the intricacies of the performance and the ambivalence of the performers with ironic precision as well as affective sympathy. In doing so, he issues a caution against those narrow, impersonal constructions of gender, which will only serve to hold individuals back and apart – and can never lead to true connection.

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