



What does the Spa Town Stand for? The Example of *Epsom Wells* by Thomas Shadwell (1673)

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Abstract:

During the thirty years that followed the Restoration of 1660, few comedies show places outside the metropolises of Madrid, Naples, Venice and of course, London. Despite spa towns being the object of abundant contemporary discourse (satires, lampoons, poems *etc*), actions only take place in spa towns in two cases: *Tunbridge Wells*, a mediocre success by an unknown author (only one representation, in 1678) and *Epsom Wells* by Thomas Shadwell, the latter being regularly staged at least between 1672 and 1682. Epsom is visited by a metropolitan, socially diverse crowd, having the significant advantage of being only about twenty kilometers away from London, far closer than Scarborough, Bath or Bristol. In the dichotomy of town and country theorized by Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City* (1973), Epsom could therefore represent an ideal compromise, where the brilliance of an urban and polite society would meet the regenerating virtues of the country, and the proximity to the center conveniently coincide with the avoidance of its main dangers.

But what is striking about *Epsom Wells* is that all but one of the characters take their thermal cures seriously: far from providing an alternative to the miasmas and decadence of the town, thus reactivating Horatian and Juvenalian *topoi* of urban corruption (the memory of the Great Plague is still fresh), the comic possibilities of the spa town in *Epsom Wells* are surprisingly underexploited. The exact same stereotypical dynamics as in other contemporary comedies can be found, with the same, typically urban tension of young, rakish gallants seducing falsely prude young women and cuckolding silly country gentlemen. With one significant exception: the character of Clodpate, whose name signifies enough his status as a comic butt: Clodpate hates London, claims loudly to appreciate the purity of the water and air at Epsom, and follows his cure with exemplary diligence. Of course, seductive urbanity triumphs in the end, and Clodpate ends up a figure of ridicule.

Why then chose to set the play in a spa town? Is the spa town a mere extension of the city,

where the very same characters meet and the same moral turpitudes take place? Is it simply used as a cheap exotic background -considering the scarcity of allusions to the waters after the first act? I would like to submit to scrutiny the hypothesis that systematic derision of the purity of Epsom waters and the pastoral imagery of regeneration it carries actually stand, through Clodpate's comical punishment, for a subtle metaphorical condemnation of Puritanism, which is nowhere named in the play. Why such discretion when other plays are usually perfectly explicit in that respect? Could it be that Shadwell uses the ambiguous status and image of the spa town to negotiate symbolically between his necessity to please a court audience (the play was staged before the king, as an *ad hoc* prologue shows) and his status as the emerging champion of the Whig cause?

Biography:

A former student of the École Normale Supérieure and *agrégée* in English, I am currently in my fourth year of working on a PhD thesis at the Sorbonne under the supervision of Prof. Alexis Tadié. I study stereotypes, their political use and the complex and ambiguous role of laughter in Restoration comedy (1660-1688). After three years of doctoral contract and teaching at the Sorbonne, I am currently a *lectrice* at St John's College, Cambridge.