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MINDREADING AND SOCIAL STATUS

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What does it mean for one fictional character to be more complex than another, and why does it matter? One way to define complexity is to look at characters' ability to reflect upon their own and other people's mental states, that is, their ability to *embed* their own and other's thoughts and feelings on a higher, or deeper (pick your metaphor) level. For instance, when Fanny Price, of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, realizes the significance of Edmund Bertram's taking up a newspaper and removing himself from the general conversation, she is embedding mental states on the fourth level. She *realizes* that Edmund *knows* that Henry Crawford *wants* to talk with Fanny privately about her *feelings*:

> [As] Edmund perceived, by [Henry's] drawing in a chair, and sitting down close by her, that it was to be a very thorough attack, that looks and undertones were to be well tried, he sank as quietly as possible into a corner, turned his back, and took up a news-paper, very sincerely wishing that dear little Fanny might be persuaded into explaining away that shake of the head to the satisfaction of her ardent lover.... Fanny...grieved to the heart to see Edmund's arrangements.[1]

Fanny's capacity for complex embedment contrasts starkly with that of Lady Bertram, seated right next to her, who is constitutionally incapable of embedding thoughts and feelings above the second level, but also, in fact, with everyone else at Mansfield, for Fanny frequently seems to be one mental state above, or ahead of, whichever Bertram or Crawford happens to be at hand. Here, for instance, Edmund is aware of Henry's intentions regarding Fanny, but Fanny does him one better, for she is aware of Edmund's intentions regarding Henry's intentions regarding herself.

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[1] Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 310.

This may seem, at first blush, just a fancy new way to talk about the old distinction between round and flat characters, but it is not.[2] (After all, we wouldn't characterize either Edmund or Henry as flat.) Instead, the focus on the characters' relative capacity for complex embedment captures a distinct dynamic of its own. In exploring this dynamic, students of literature might start out by drawing on research in cognitive science, but they may ultimately use that research to shed new light on issues that have long been of special interest to our own discipline, such as the role of historical contexts and power relations in the production and reception of literary texts. (I emphasize the literary-critical ends of this enterprise to stake out my position in the ongoing debate between cognitive literary scholars, such as myself, and "Literary Darwinists," who think that the goals and methods of literary criticism should be superseded by those of science and whose implementation of this agenda may be more accurately described as scientistic.[3])

Here is a brief overview of my perspective on mindreading and culture. In experiencing fictional characters' actions as caused by their thoughts and feelings (Edmund picks up the newspaper because he *wants* to help Henry), we exercise our cognitive adaptations for mindreading, aka theory of mind. On some level, these adaptations do not fully distinguish between the mental states of real people and of imaginary entities whom we "meet" on page, on screen, or on canvas: as soon as we are faced with behavior, we start attributing intentions to the behaving agents. In modern industrial and postindustrial societies, this eagerness to attribute mental states underwrites a variety of fictional forms and (more broadly) leads to the emergence of "cultures of greedy mindreaders,"[4] characterized by countless modes and niches that continuously satisfy and whet our mindreading appetites.

One aspect of mindreading, which in recent years has received sustained attention from social and developmental psychologists as well as cognitive neuroscientists,[5] has to do with embedded mental states, or as one essay's title has it, "thinking

[2] See Natalie M. Phillips, *Distraction: Problems of Attention in Eighteenth-Century Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 179–80; and Lisa Zunshine, "Bakhtin, Theory of Mind, and Pedagogy: Cognitive Construction of Social Class," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 30.1 (2017): 109–26; 118.

[3] See Lisa Zunshine, "Introduction to Cognitive Literary Studies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies*, ed. Lisa Zunshine (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1–9; and Nancy Easterlin, "Voyages in the Verbal Universe: The Role of Speculation in Darwinian Literary Criticism," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 2.2 (2001): 59–73; 64.

[4] See Lisa Zunshine, *Getting Inside Your Head: What Cognitive Science Can Tell Us About Popular Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

[5] See Rebecca Saxe, "The Right Temporo-parietal Junction: a Specific Brain Region for Thinking about Thoughts," in *Handbook of Theory of Mind*, ed. Alan Leslie and Tamsin German (New York: Routledge, forthcoming 2021) (http://saxelab.mit.edu/ sites/default/files/publications/Saxe_RTPJChapter.pdf); Saxe and Nancy Kanwisher, "People Thinking about Thinking People: The Role of the Temporo-parietal Junction in 'Theory of Mind,'" *NeuroImage* 19 (2003): 1835–42; Patricia H. Miller, Frank S. Kessel, and John H. Flavell, "Thinking about People Thinking about People Thinking about…: A Study of Social Cognitive Development Child Development," *Child Development* 41.3 (September 1970): 613–23; and Ian Apperly, *The Cognitive Basis of "Theory of Mind"* (New York: Psychology Press, 2011).

about people thinking about people thinking."[6] While cognitive scientists look at embedments structuring our daily social interactions, cognitive literary critics extend this inquiry to cultural representations. Elsewhere, I have discussed patterns of embedment in fiction, such as, for instance, the difference between explicitly spelled out and implied mental states of characters, narrators, and readers.[7] Here I build on that work to look at possible ideological underpinnings of the choices made by writers when they portray some characters as capable of more complex embedment than others. As I see it, ideology enters the picture when writers intuitively invert certain real-life dynamics of mindreading in their allocation of complexity.

The First Model: Reflecting Real-Life Dynamics

Let's start with real-life dynamics. Perhaps because of the unfortunate terminology (both "theory of mind" and "mindreading" imply too much conscious reflection and perspicacity), it is sometimes assumed that some people are better mindreaders than others; that is, that they are more accurate than others in their attribution of mental states. In reality, there is no such thing as an across-the-board good or bad mindreader. It all depends on the social context in which one finds oneself. For instance, one way to immediately improve one's mindreading skills is to take a demotion in one's social hierarchy. Studies have shown that people in weaker social positions engage in more active and perceptive mindreading than people in stronger social positions.[8] It works even when we know that it's just a game: "when one is given the role of subordinate in an experimental situation, one becomes better at assessing the feelings of others, and conversely, when the same person is attributed the role of leader, one becomes less good."[9]

In real life, those in superior social positions may assert and "exert their status precisely by refusing to read mental states of others."[10] Mindreading obtuseness can function similarly to strategic ignorance: "it is the interlocutor who has or pretends to have the *less* broadly knowledgeable understanding of interpretive practice who will define the terms of the exchange."[11] The powerful, Rebecca Solnit writes, "swathe themselves in obliviousness in order to avoid the pain of others and their

[6] Miller et al., "Thinking about People Thinking," 613.

[7] Lisa Zunshine, "The Secret Life of Fiction," *PMLA* 130.3 (2015): 724–31.

[8] See Henry Carlo Santos, Igor Grossmann, and Michael E. W. Varnum, "Class, Cognition and Cultural Change in Social Class," *PsyArxiv Preprints*, July 2, 2018 (https://psyarxiv.com/92smf/).

[9] Sara E. Snodgrass, "'Women's Intuition': The Effect of Subordinate Role on Interpersonal Sensitivity," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 49.1 (1985): 146–55.

[10] Simon Stern, email communication, March 8, 2018.

[11] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ed., "Privilege of Unknowing: Diderot's *The Nun*," in *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 23.

own relationship to that pain. There's a large category of acts hidden from people with standing: the more you are, the less you know."[12]

Mansfield Park reflects this dynamic quite accurately, at least in its depiction of its female protagonist. Fanny Price is young (merely a child, when she first arrives), female, and poor—a charity case with no obvious claims to beauty or intelligence. To survive and thrive in social circumstances stacked against her so thoroughly, she has to be particularly attuned to other people's wishes and intentions, and so she is. Again and again, she is placed on the top of the mindreading chain, in direct inversion of her social position vis-à-vis her relatives and acquaintances.

One of several ways in which Austen accomplishes this is to first present us with a seemingly complete scene, outlining everyone's embedded feelings—which seem complex enough, for the time being—and then superimpose Fanny's mind on top of that scene. For instance, when the golden youth of Mansfield Park embark on their ill-conceived theatrical production, we learn that Julia Bertram is jealous of her sister Maria, who is clearly preferred by Henry Crawford; that Maria ignores Julia's feelings; and that Julia hopes that Maria's fiancé, Mr. Rushworth, will become aware of the impropriety of her behavior and expose her to public humiliation:

> [Julia] was not superior to the hope of some distressing end to the attentions which were still carrying on there, some punishment to Maria for conduct so shameful towards herself as well as towards Mr. Rushworth....Maria felt her triumph, and pursued her purpose, careless of Julia; and Julia could never see Maria distinguished by Henry Crawford without trusting that it would create jealousy, and bring a public disturbance at last.

To this mix of second- and third-level embedments Austen then adds Fanny's awareness of Julia's feelings, while also making sure that there is no reciprocal awareness (and hence comparable complexity) on Julia's side:

> Fanny saw and pitied much of this in Julia; but there was no outward fellowship between them. Julia made no communication, and Fanny took no liberties. They were two solitary sufferers, or connected only by Fanny's consciousness.[13]

Fanny's consciousness is indeed the place where various characters get "connected," or, to put it differently, where many of the novel's fourth-level embedments take shape. To spell one of them out (an exercise which typically results in painfully pedestrian prose, for, in the original text, those high-level embedments are often implied rather than laid out in their full propositional glory), we can say that Fanny *knows* that Julia *is miserable* because Julia *knows* that Henry *likes* Maria. We can further say that Fanny *intuits* that Julia *hopes* that Mr. Rushworth *will realize* that Maria's behavior makes people around them *think* that he is a fool and revenge

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[12] Rebecca Solnit, "Nobody Knows," *Harper's Magazine* (March 2018): 5.
[13] Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 197.

himself upon her, and that, though otherwise compassionate toward Julia, she can't quite find it in herself to empathize with this particular hope of her cousin's.

As Austen is considered, in some quarters, the patron saint of cognitive literary criticism (i.e., someone whose prose is particularly amenable to cognitivist exploration), let us now turn to authors from very different cultural and literary traditions. In the eighteenth-century Chinese classic, Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber*, aka *The Story of the Stone* (ca. 1750), girls and young women typically embed mental states on a higher level than rich men and older rich women.[14] Although beautiful, accomplished, and pampered by their families, these female characters are powerless. Their fates are decided by their elders, who cannot—and will not—read their emotions and, consequently, doom their young charges to lives of misery or to early deaths.

The striking mindreading skills of Cao's young women stand out in the long history of the literary response to social stratification in premodern China. As Haiyan Lee observes,

> [In societies] structured by kinship sociality…theory of mind is certainly present and useful but not always prized in social life and does not animate expressive culture to the same extent [as it does] in modern commercial societies structured by stranger sociality, cosmopolitanism, and social mobility.…The hierarchical structures of [kinship sociality] place a greater premium on theory of mind for subordinates than for the powerful, hence attaching a tinge of opprobrium to its exercise.[15]

When subordination follows the lines of gender, mindreading acumen (configured as cunning) follows closely:

> Women in a patriarchal and patrilineal society, especially young daughters-in-law, are structurally motivated to be inward-looking, to adopt a calculating, fawning, and defensive mentality, and to orient their action around the intentions of the more powerful (senior, male) members of the kin group.[16]

Fawning, defensive, and calculating underlings, female or male, do not make for sympathetic fictional characters, which is why such personages tend to "ply shady trades as go-betweens, procuresses, litigation masters, soothsayers, brokers, and garden-variety hangers-on who prey on the honest and unsuspecting." Yet, as Lee argues brilliantly,

> [In some] exceptional circumstances…mind-reading becomes an asset and the consummate practitioner is admired and celebrated as a cultural hero. Most of these

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[14] Lisa Zunshine, "From the Social to the Literary: Approaching Cao Xueqin's *The Story of the Stone* (Honglou meng 紅樓夢) from a Cognitive Perspective," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies*, ed. Lisa Zunshine (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015): 176–96.

[15] Haiyan Lee, "Measuring the Stomach of a Gentleman with the Heart-Mind of a Pipsqueak: On the Ubiquity and Utility of Theory of Mind in Literature, Mostly," *Poetics Today* 41.2 (2020), forthcoming. For in-depth discussion of "kinship sociality," see Haiyan Lee, *The Stranger and the Chinese Moral Imagination*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014.

[16] Lee, "Measuring the Stomach."

circumstances involve forces of good combatting forces of evil, as in warfare or criminal investigation. More rarely, theory of mind is mobilized to emplot romantic courtship.[17]

In other words, we can read the literary history of premodern China as punctuated by the appearance of works that valorize a character's capacity for complex embedment of mental states. Those works include warfare chronicles (such as Luo Guanzhong's fourteenth-century *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*) and detective novels (such as the eighteenth-century case studies of Judge Dee), as well as the *bildungs-roman*-courtship-novel extraordinaire *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Although some of the *Dream*'s young women (most obviously, Wang Xi-feng) still come across as defensive and calculating, most are true to the ideal that the middle-aged Cao Xueqin set out to bring back to life, after finding himself one day, in low spirits, "thinking about the female companions" of his youth:

> As I went over them one by one, examining and comparing them in my mind's eye, it suddenly came over me that those slips of girls—which is all they were then—were in every way, both morally and intellectually, superior to the "grave and mustachioed signior" I am now supposed to have become.[18]

And so, in direct contrast to the young women of, for instance, *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (ca. 1590), whose sharpened capacity for high-level embedment of mental states makes them cheats, liars, and hypocrites,[19] the cognitive complexity of the girls from the *Dream* manifests itself in their admirable social sophistication and poetic sensibility. Far from damaging their personalities, their subordinate status lends poignancy to their moral and intellectual superiority.

Let us cross national boundaries again. If we look at Russian literature before the 1760s (that is, before Russian writers became exposed to Western European models, such as sentimental novels, which prized sociocognitive complexity in their protagonists[20]), we see something very similar to what Lee describes as the association of such complexity with "pipsqueaks," that is, with socially insignificant personages who, nevertheless, manage to create problems for "gentlemen."

There is, for instance, Frol, from the anonymous *Tale of Frol Skobeev* (1680–1720), a social nonentity who rises to wealth and nobility by thinking one step (i.e., one mental state) ahead of various aristocratic figures who come his way. Frol is a pettifogger (remember Lee's observation that a social nonentity may use his mindreading skills to become a "litigation master"?), who tricks the only daughter of a

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[17] Lee, "Measuring the Stomach."

[18] Xueqin Cao, *The Story of the Stone*, Volume 1: *"The Golden Days,"* trans. David Hawkes (London: Penguin, 1973), 20.

[19] For discussion, see Lisa Zunshine, "I Lie Therefore I Am," in *Approaches to Teaching* The Plum in the Golden Vase, ed. Andrew Schonebaum (New York: MLA, forthcoming).

[20] Lisa Zunshine, "'Think What You're Doing, Or You'll Only Make an Ugly Reputation for Yourself': *Chin P'ing Mei* (金瓶梅), Lying, and Literary History," in 认知诗学 [*Cognitive Poetics*] (December 2017): 44–62.

rich courtier into sleeping with him and then elopes with her. When the distraught parents find out what has happened, they first want to prosecute the rogue, but then relent and start showering the young couple with land and money, all the while cursing their "thief" and "knave" of a son-in-law.[21]

They relent because Frol knows how to manipulate their feelings. When they send a servant to inquire about the health of their child, Frol asks his wife to pretend to be sick and tells the servant: "See for yourself, my friend, how she's doing: that's what parental wrath does—they scold and curse her from afar, and here she is, dying."[22] Frol *wants* his parents-in-law to *think* that their *anger* is killing their daughter, a stratagem that quickly cools their wrath and sets Frol on the way to prosperity.

Critics consider the *Tale of Frol Skobeev* an early example of Russian picaresque.[23] Viewed in the context of the present argument, this characterization raises the intriguing possibility of a cognitivist reading of the literary figure of the picaro. From Mateo Alemán's *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599–1604) to Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1724), picaros use their superior mindreading skills to flatter, bully, cheat, and steal their way to economic survival. They are simultaneously a threat—to the extent to which their society still retains traces of "kinship sociality" (and what society does not?—even if just in the form of cultural fantasies about a golden age, when all behavior was transparent and pro-social and no mindreading acumen was called for)—and a treat for readers who follow their double-dealing tricks with guilty delight.

We find the association between characters' low social status (low, that is, in relative rather than absolute terms: always in comparison with someone else in the story) and their heightened capacity for complex embedment, in a broad spectrum of fictional narratives. Some characters embed complex mental states as they mastermind a plot to help their bumbling masters, as do "clever slaves" of ancient Greek and Roman comedies. Some do it as they trick a larger or more violent and dangerous animal in order to save their lives, as do Brer Rabbit of West African folklore and the little mouse of Julia Donaldson's *Gruffalo*. Some seem to lack any agenda and merely display a mastery of innuendo beyond that of their social "betters," as does Algernon's servant Lane in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.[24]

Some have central billing, as does P. G. Wodehouse's Jeeves. Others make only brief appearances in one scene, as does Wilde's Lane. Still others, such as the office cleaners from Rachel Cusk's *Saving Agnes* (1993), are episodic characters who lack

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[21] Zunshine, "'Think What You're Doing,'" 47.

[22] Translation mine (original at: http://www.drevne.ru/lib/frol.htm).

[23] Marcia A. Morris, *The Literature of Roguery in Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century Russia* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 51.

[24] See Michael Patrick Gillespie's discussion of the master-manservant dialectic in "From Beau Brummell to Lady Bracknell: Re-viewing the Dandy in *The Importance of Being Earnest*," in Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, ed. M. P. Gillespie (New York: Norton, 2006), 179.

any identifying features, and manage to outclass the main protagonist in the business of mindreading while remaining nameless and faceless:

> Agnes slammed into the house in a state of considerable distemper. She had been forced by the nonchalance with which the editorial department was approaching its deadline to stay late in the office, working alone while the cleaners emptied bins and vacuumed floors around her. Watching them sanitize the unsavory detritus of her day she had been besieged by feelings of shame and guilt, and had attempted to engage them in pleasantries. Not beguiled by her condescension, however, they had roundly rebuffed her overtures and left her feeling that a mysterious exchange of power had taken place, the precise maneuvers of which she was not able to fathom.[25]

If we map out this "mysterious exchange of power" in terms of its underlying mental states, we can say that Agnes *wants* to make herself *feel better* by engaging in small talk with the cleaners (second-level embedment). The cleaners, however, *know* that she *wants* to use them to make herself *feel better* (third-level embedment) and refuse her that satisfaction. As Agnes apparently expects that her class privilege will automatically translate into superior social acumen (even though she can't see the cleaners as people with faces and names), when their conversation doesn't follow that scripted path, she is left disoriented and angry.

The Second Model: Inverting Real-Life Dynamics

So far I have considered cases in which the relative sociocognitive complexity[26] of fictional characters tracks the real-life correlation between weaker social positions and more active and perceptive mindreading. I now turn to literary texts which invert this correlation. The way I see it, neither pattern in and of itself says anything about the aesthetic value of the text, but the latter (i.e., the inverted correlation) is an indicator of a particular ideological agenda on the part of the writer, whether she is consciously aware of it or not.

My first example comes from Frances Burney's epistolary novel *Evelina* (1778). Having discussed it elsewhere, I will only say here that the differential capacity for embedment functions in *Evelina* as a form of heteroglossia, complementing other speech markers associated with class difference. Hence Burney's shopkeepers and parvenus with shopkeeper mentality don't rise above the second level in their attribution of mental states, while her ladies and gentlemen of leisure effortlessly weave third-to-fourth level embedments into almost everything they say.[27]

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[25] Rachel Cusk, *Saving Agnes* (New York: Picador, 1994), 157.
[26] For a definition and discussion of the term, see Zunshine, "The Secret Life," 728.
[27] Zunshine, "Bakhtin," 126.

How does one explain this reversal of the real-life sociocognitive dynamics? We may speculate that it reflects the period's anxiety about the incipient porousness of class boundaries or/and the Burney family's nervousness about their own social standing. Either way, it seeks to naturalize social class, portraying upper-class characters as more aware of their own and other people's feelings, and hence more deserving of readers' sympathy than lower-class characters, with their limited capacity for complex embedment.

Note that by framing *Evelina*'s pattern of embedment as an ideological project, we assume the ready availability of a cultural template according to which mindreading acumen is associated with higher social standing. Inaccurate as this template may be when it comes to real-life communication, it nevertheless took hold in the eighteenth-century popular imagination, informing, in particular, certain genres of polite literature, such as sentimental plays and novels. Developed side by side with such "pipsqueak"-centered genres as the picaresque, they engaged in parallel play with them (pretending, that is, that the other doesn't exist: think of Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and Richard Steele's *The Conscious Lovers*, or of John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* and Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*).

To reconstruct the genealogy of this template one may turn to Restoration comedy, in which aristocratic wits, such as Dorimant from George Etherege's *The Man of Mode*, embed mental states on the fourth and even fifth level, while their mistresses and hangers-on can barely keep up with them.[28] Granted, for many a Horner—the upper-class plotter from William Wycherley's *A Country Wife*—there is a Lucy: the clever servant, who steps in at a critical juncture to save her "betters" from catastrophe. Still, after the 1670s, aristocratic high-embedders became a recognizable literary type, paving the way for the letter-writing sophisticates of Richardson and Burney. Restoration plays obviously came with their own political agendas—one of which was to please a series of royal patrons and their friends (who would consider themselves the greatest wits of them all)—which demonstrates yet another way in which ideology can drive the inverse-correlation model in fiction.

Going yet further back, one finds a ruler high on the sociocognitive spectrum in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (1604). Shakespeare's men in power are not generally known for mindreading perspicacity, yet Duke Vincentio seems to derive a peculiar personal satisfaction from reading and scripting the complex emotions of his subjects. Thus he wants Isabella to think that Angelo beheaded her brother, Claudio—even though Claudio is alive—so that, later, when she least expects it, he can reveal to her the true state of affairs and turn her despair into "heavenly comfort":

> Isabella [Within] Peace ho, be here!
> Duke. The tongue of Isabel. She's come to know
> If yet her brother's pardon be come hither:

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[28] Lisa Zunshine, "Why Jane Austen Was Different, and Why We May Need Cognitive Science to See It," *Style* 41.3 (2007): 287–90.

> But I will keep her ignorant of her good,
> To make her heavenly comforts of despair,
> When it is least expected.[29]

The Duke knows that Isabella will be devastated when she hears of her brother's execution. He also *knows* that she will be happy beyond measure when she learns that he is alive—*happier*, presumably, than she *would have been* had she not first *believed* that he is dead (fourth-level embedment). This is to say that the Duke is angling to put himself in a god-like position in which he will have complete access to Isabella's feelings both now and later (i.e., when the truth is revealed). His mindreading hunger is tinged with sadism, even as he wishes to bring Isabella's happiness to the highest pitch (a literary mindreading dynamic that I dub, elsewhere, "sadistic benefaction"[30]).

Measure for Measure is considered one of Shakespeare's "problem plays." As Steve Vineberg puts it, "the long final scene can strike an audience as sadistic…And when the Duke proposes marriage to Isabella, after all he's put her through, you may wonder what Shakespeare could have been thinking of." Directors deal with this problem differently. Some play up the Duke's emotional cruelty, showing that Isabella can't catch a break in the patriarchal society of Shakespeare's Vienna; others explain the Duke's behavior by his desire to see if Isabella is capable of generosity—of "moving beyond her own injuries to act on another's behalf"[31]—as when she kneels before the Duke to ask for Angelo's life while still believing that Angelo has killed her brother. However charitable toward the Duke, this reading still can't explain away his stated intention to plunge Isabella to the lowest depths of despair in order to render her subsequent joy more intense. He may claim that he does it for her own good, but he gets out of it an intoxicating fantasy of complete access to her feelings.

What I find striking about the ethical problem that the Duke's behavior presents is that it seems to be mainly *our* problem, rooted in our own particularly historically situated sensibility. Shakespeare himself may not have viewed the Duke's actions as objectionable. The reason I say this is that I can't discern even a hint of punishment meted out to this "sadistic benefactor." The Duke remains beloved by his subjects, and, as the play ends, he is on the brink of being rewarded with a marriage to a much younger, beautiful, and virtuous woman. To paraphrase Hamlet, this is hire and salary, not acknowledgment of a problem.

So let us put aside our "ethical" response for a moment. Let's remember instead that real-life rulers stink at mindreading and that Shakespeare didn't need the research of contemporary cognitive psychology to know this, and neither did his

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[29] William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, in Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, ed. G. B. Harrison (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1980): IV. iii.110–14.
[30] Zunshine, *Getting Inside*, chapter 3.
[31] Steve Vineberg, "Problem Plays," *The Threepenny Review* 52 (1993): 32–4; 33.

audience.[32] This means that, for them, equating mindreading prowess with higher social standing may have had a different political meaning altogether. The space of the play allowed Shakespeare and his contemporaries to fantasize about their social betters who would care about their underlings' feelings so deeply that they would spend their time figuring out ways of getting inside their heads and scripting their emotions. For, as sadistic as this endeavor strikes us today, an early-modern subject might have actually been flattered by the thought of it and wondered if she might not have deserved more political attention from her rulers than she had been getting.

Is this the only possible reading of the Duke's unexpected sociocognitive complexity? Of course not. I don't aim to supply such a reading. Instead I want to stress that this complexity *is* unexpected—and must have been so for early seventeenth-century audiences—and that, more often than not, the association between the capacity for high-level embedment and high social status has specific political underpinnings.

I also want to show how using insights from contemporary cognitive science (such as the association of better mindreading skills with lower social status) can help us historicize our emotional response to a fictional character, a response that would otherwise seem obvious (as in, "the Duke is sadistic! Poor Isabella! What could Shakespeare have been thinking of?"), and thus be ahistorical. Cognitive historicism[33] has been gaining ground across different fields of literary scholarship; with this essay, I hope to contribute to its growing repertoire of interpretive models.

A Footnote on Cognition and Ideology

When, under oppressive political regimes, literary (and cinematic) production becomes explicitly regulated, mindreading sophistication acquires new ideological meaning. Thus, in fiction published in the Soviet Union under the aegis of Socialist Realism, characters of lower social status would sometimes be portrayed as less sociocognitively complex than characters of higher social status. That is, they do *not* engage in high-level mindreading when confronted with the machinations of high-status characters.

This may seem like an unambiguous example of the second model, but it is not. Although, technically speaking, these low-embedding characters, such as unskilled

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[32] For an important discussion of what it means for an author to display an intuitive awareness of various "cognitive" insights that couldn't have been known to the scientific (or natural-philosophic) thought of her day, see Patrick Colm Hogan's *Sexual Identities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[33] See Mary Thomas Crane, "Cognitive Historicism: Intuition in Early Modern Thought," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies*, ed. Lisa Zunshine (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 18–33.

factory workers, indigent peasants, and orphaned vagrant children, occupy the lowest rung of the socioeconomic ladder, they are not at all the "pipsqueaks" of yesteryear. Instead they are the new aristocracy—aristocracy of the spirit, as it were—even if they are never referred to this way. The future belongs to them. Due to their currently disenfranchised status, they are ultimately guaranteed privileged access to educational, political, economic, and reproductive resources. In contrast, various "old specialists" ("spetsy" in the half-respectful-half-contemptuous jargon of the 1920–30s), who have managed to parlay their education under the tsarist regime into lucrative high-status jobs under the Soviets, are doomed to irrelevancy and extinction. It is those well-heeled characters, as well as their repulsive young protégés, who cheat our low-status protagonists of their rightful share of the socialist paradise, but not for long, never for too long.

For instance, Sania Grigoriev, the protagonist of a widely beloved novel by Veniamin Kaverin, *Two Captains* (1938–45), is shown to be almost completely without guile, and so are his friends and his girlfriend/wife. It is his arch-adversary, a stockbroker under the old regime and school principal/distinguished scholar under the new, N. A. Tatarinov, as well as Tatarinov's favorite disciple, Romashov, who engage in complex mindreading aimed at destroying the hero. When, at the end of the book, Sania, a former-vagrant-child-turned-Arctic-pilot, gains the upper hand, it is because of his determination, courage, and good luck, and not because he has more cunning than his enemies. In 1948–56, Kaverin recreated this mindreading dynamic in another popular (and also repeatedly televised) novel, *The Open Book*, whose upright protagonist, a poor-scullery-maid-turned-famous-microbiologist, ultimately triumphs over her plotting adversaries. Their old-school Machiavellianism is no match for her talent and "open-book" personality.

Call it the first model with a twist. What we have here is our familiar correlation between lower social standing and high-level mindreading skills, except that low-status characters (i.e., the doomed bourgeois elements) may *initially* come across as high-status characters, while the downtrodden workers, peasants, and vagrants may take some time to reveal themselves as the new aristocracy. And this proletarian aristocracy presumably does not need to excel in mindreading, since the revolution of 1917 has already stacked the socioeconomic odds in their favor.

Besides, their enemies may not be that great at mindreading either. In her study of the fate of detective fiction in the People's Republic of China, Lee provides an important insight into a particular historically specific form that the literary association between high social status and low mindreading skills can take under the watchful eye of the Communist Party. As she explains, after 1949,

> [The] hitherto thriving detective fiction was labeled a bourgeois conceit and suppressed. The new society was to be organized as a political communitas in which all were brothers and sisters under the benevolent, paternal care of the Communist Party. Everyone had a designated place in society and everyone was a known quantity. Who

would have any need for mind-reading in such a transparent society?…The only genre fiction permitted to flourish in the socialist period was the spy thriller. Crucially, the mind-game that sustained this genre was directed against "the class enemy," both internal and external. Still, enemy agents were not permitted to truly shine socio-cognitively. Rather, they schemed and connived at a low cognitive level, making laughably naïve assumptions and rudimentary blunders. And it took minimum twists and turns to ensnare them in the vast net of the people's justice.[34]

So while the proletariat had no need to "shine" sociocognitively, their enemies were "not permitted" to do that. Did that result in decades of official literary production with generally lowered levels of mindreading complexity, while works featuring truly sociocognitively complex characters had to find outlets elsewhere: abroad or in the underground/*samizdat*? And did that mean that the sociocognitive complexity of narrators, implied readers, and implied authors had to be dialed down as well?

At least one factor that seems to bear out this conjecture is the suppression, in Soviet fiction, of the style of writing that we now associate with unreliable narration. Ilya Ehrenburg's *Julio Jurenito* (1922), Yuri Olesha's *Envy* (1927), and Konstantin Vaginov's *Works and Days of Svistonov* (1929) still featured unreliable narrators,[35] but, once, in the early 1930s, Socialist Realism became the dominant paradigm, such stylistic experimentation was put paid to. Thus Vsevolod Ivanov's *U* (1932) was not published in the Soviet Union until 1988, while Leonid Dobychin's brilliant *The Town of N* (1935) was singled out for castigation during the 1936 campaign "against formalism and naturalism," driving its author to suicide. With its move away from character-based embedment to embedment emerging almost exclusively from a give-and-take between the implied author and implied reader, *The Town of N* engaged in an experimentation with fictional subjectivity that must have come across as politically subversive. Indeed, as Richard C. Borden observes, it is "something of a mystery how the book was published at all at the height of Stalinism, when dogmatic conservatism, to say nothing of philistinism, ruled the art establishment."[36]

Developing a sustained argument about the repressed sociocognitive complexity of literature under the Soviets is beyond the scope of this essay. I merely pose it here as an open-ended question and a direction for further exploration. What I want to emphasize, with this and other case studies from English, Chinese, and Russian literary traditions, is that cognition and ideology are bound with each other in a

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[34] Lee, "Measuring the Stomach"; see also Haiyan Lee, "Society Must Be Defended: Chinese Spy Thrillers and the Enchantment of *Arcana Imperii*." unpublished paper.

[35] For a recent discussion of functions of the unreliable narrator in Russian novel of the 1920–30s, see Г. А. Жиличева, "Функции «Ненадежного» Нарратора в Русском Романе 1920–1930-х Годов," Вестник ТГПУ *(TSPU Bulletin)* 11.139 (2013): 32–8.

[36] Richard C. Borden, "Leonid Dobychin's *The Town of N*: Introduction," in Leonid Dobychin, *The Town of N*, trans. (from the Russian) Richard C. Borden with Natalia Belova (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), viii.

variety of historically specific forms, and that a cognitive-literary inquiry is thus fundamentally a historicist inquiry.

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