

FORD AND THE SIMPLE LIFE: GENDER, SUBJECTIVITY AND CLASS IN A SATIRIZED UTOPIA

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The first part of this title is likely to raise eyebrows. One reader pointed out that pairing ‘Ford and the Simple Life’ was a bit like bracketing Cromwell and Theatre Attendance or Casanova and Domesticity – concepts that would seem to suggest binary oppositions rather than ideas with a significant inter-relationship. One answer to that, of course, is the argument that we define ourselves through difference, by deciding what we are not, and that Ford’s repeated quest for self-definition is in itself an adequate reason for discussing a set of practices and beliefs which Ford ultimately rejected and satirised in the book that he wrote under the pseudonym Daniel Chaucer, *The Simple Life Limited*, published in 1911. But in the space available I would like to take a different tack and argue that the identification of Ford as urban cosmopolitan modernist and urbane radical Tory does not do full justice to the unformed younger Ford, and overlooks his attraction to subversive questions about class and gender identity that drew him to live briefly among a Fabian and Simple Life community. I would also like to ask some questions about the way that the past is reconstructed and recast in the act of writing, and how imaginative texts written at some distance from an experience may reveal more about shifts in perceptions than they do about the actual formative experiences themselves. Finally I would like to consider the extent to which in 1911, Ford’s thinking about gender, as expressed in the unfinished *Women & Men*, with its questions about the social construction of gender and the way that men learn about sexual difference through literature anticipates by eighty years Judith Butler’s description of compulsory heterosexuality as a regulatory practice and gender as a performative act.¹

Among many other things, Ford's most praised work, *The Good Soldier* (1915), which he wrote in the years immediately following the publication of *The Simple Life Limited*, presents the reader with ample evidence of the crisis in masculinity that continued in the post-Edwardian period up and into the First World War. Edward Ashburnham, the good soldier, is good only to the uncritical eye of the narrator Dowell, who sees only the surface Englishman and not the fragile and ultimately suicidal man that this veneer conceals. Dowell is even more wretched: not only passionless and unobservant, but an American who spends his time counting the steps from the health baths to his hotel room, not realising that his wife is having a sexual relationship with the man he so admires. Yet Dowell is one of the more attractive characters: his gullibility is based on trust, and his simplicity is combined with genuine affection. Quite early on it is made clear that he is descended from a Pennsylvania Dutch family, and his identity is rooted in a tradition that continues to practise the simple life to this day, eschewing cars, electricity and twentieth-century clothing.

Ford Madox Ford's roots are complex. What tends to be remembered is that he was related to the painter Ford Madox Brown, and that his father was German. Both elements haunted him: the link with the Pre-Raphaelite movement was a heritage that was a generation away, but one that interested him enough for him to undertake a biography of his grandfather. As a young man of 21 Ford found himself in the family house full of Ford Madox Brown's furniture, in Hammersmith a short distance from William Morris. He was aware of the attractiveness of a Brotherhood, and grew up in an environment receptive to the exciting debates between Socialism and Anarchism. When he and his new bride Elsie Martindale took flight to the countryside, it was as much to recover from the trauma of family bereavement and the scandal of their unsanctioned marriage as it was anything else. Then, after a period of recovery in which they did indeed live out the Simple Life in the rather too rurally isolated Pent Farm in Sussex, they packed up their smocks and decided to move.

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The Limpsfield community, which Ford and Elsie joined in 1898, was not really an artists colony, nor was it a utopian experiment in the way that Brook Farm in America had been, although Ford's retrospective representation of Limpsfield bears comparison with the circumstances in which Hawthorne came to satirise the Brook Farm experiment in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). Limpsfield, if it was a colony at all, was a colony without any official structure or central organisation, for while some of its members lived the simple life full time, others were commuters on the recently completed Croydon, Oxted and East Grinstead Railway. Its modern equivalent would be somewhere like Totnes and Dartington in Devon, where people who believe in a particular lifestyle live among others who do not. But the group that believed in certain aspects of an alternative lifestyle was sufficiently dominant to give the area around the common known as the Chart a particular character, expressed in social practices, dress and ideals.

The late nineteenth century philosophy of the Simple Life was partly a by-product of the Arts and Crafts movement, and many of those who practised the Simple Life wore the kind of working smocks favoured by Morris. But equally it found inspiration in the writing and lifestyle of Edward Carpenter, who grew his own food and lived among the working men and women of the Derbyshire Dales. In turn, Carpenter and other middle-class Englishmen such as C. R. Ashbee, a friend of Carpenter's at Cambridge who took the Guild of Handicraft from Whitechapel to Chipping Campden in the Cotswolds, were inspired by a combination of socialism and temperament to retreat from the busy city to the 'simple rural idyll of craftsmanship and husbandry'.² This idyll itself drew on other models. In New England in the 1840s Transcendentalist and communitarian thinking inspired rural utopian experiments such as Bronson Alcott's community at Fruitlands and the Fourierist community at Brook Farm. Somehow the emphasis on community, which attracted both men and women in America, was transmuted into an emphasis on male Brotherhood when utopianism was practised in England. As Fiona MacCarthy

observes in her study of C. R. Ashbee's Cotswold community: 'Women of the Simple Life were almost always in the background'.³ Ashbee and Carpenter surrounded themselves with young men because they were sexually attracted to them, but it was precisely these 'Uranian' men, to use the term favoured by Carpenter, who argued for a redefinition of the roles between the sexes.

Carpenter's lifestyle, working his three fields at Millthorpe, had impressed Morris who 'was almost envious of the little village house in Derbyshire with seven acres where Carpenter lived in close community, social and sexual, with labourers from Sheffield'.⁴ Here was a man, not afraid of hard manual labour, who also found time to throw himself into nearly all the reforming movements of the period. Carpenter, like the majority of the reformers of the time, came from a privileged background, and had been influenced by William Godwin, Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855). But, more than anything, he had been inspired by Henry Mayers Hyndman's *England for All*, a booklet published in 1881, that interpreted Marx in a way that was extremely influential on the early character of English Socialism.

It is the analysis of sexual politics rather than the economics that makes Carpenter's version of the Simple Life interesting, though Carpenter himself explained how the two were linked and how women's freedom required a form of communism. In 1896 the little Labour Press in Manchester published *Love's Coming of Age*, the book having been dropped by Fisher Unwin in the wake of the Wilde trial. The book, which described the relationship between sexual and economic reform, anticipating the argument in *Homogenic Love* (1896) that heterosexuality was responsible for the growth of Western materialism, took time to become well known outside the socialist network in England, but by 1902 it was being translated into German and, if we can trust Carpenter's own version of history, was taken as a text book by the more radical elements at the first German Women's Congress in 1912. In advocating sexual relationships other than those within monogamous marriage, Carpenter was proposing an agenda

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which, as he had readily understood, had wider implications than for what he called ‘homogenics’:

I realized in my own person some of the sufferings which are endured by an immense number of modern women, especially of the well to do classes [. . .] as well as by that large class of men [. . .] to whom the name of Uranians is often given.⁵

By the time that Ford came to write *The Simple Life Limited and Women & Men* – the latter started in 1911 but not published until 1923 – Havelock Ellis’s influential *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1901) had been published in America, and women such as Frances Swiney (1906), the Pankhursts and Olive Schreiner had challenged contemporary preconceptions about female sexuality and behaviour. But, although women such as Kate Chopin in America and Ellen Key in Sweden were raising similar questions, Carpenter expressed unease that it had fallen to a man to open the debate in print in England in the 1890s:

Love’s Coming of Age ought, of course, (like some parts of *England’s Ideal*) to have been written by a woman; but although I tried, I could not get any of my women friends to take the subject up, and so had to deal with it myself. Ellen Key, in Sweden, began – I fancy about the same period – writing that fine series of books on *Love, Marriage, Childhood* and so forth, which have done so much to illuminate the Western World; but at that time I knew nothing of her and her work.⁶

What Ford saw practised at Limpsfield bore little relation to the radicalism of socialist theory and these new ideas about the relations between the sexes. It was the faddishness loathed by Carpenter that struck Ford – the faddishness that made Carpenter more famous for the sandals he sewed than for his ideas (though that didn’t stop Carpenter advertising his sandals in the journal of the New Fellowship, *Seed Time*). Such inconsistencies appeared to turn utopianism into no more than a fashionable lifestyle in which the

required vegetarianism and rural clothing was practised at home by some middle class Fabians who travelled to their London offices everyday. In his biography of Stephen Crane, who lived near the Chart in a house the commuters would all pass on their way to the station at Oxted, R. W. Stallman speaks of beards and homespun clothes in medieval style, and the drinking of mead from bullocks horn cups.⁷ It was a version of the simple life that disgusted Tolstoi, who in the 1880s and 1890s at Yasnaya Polyana adopted a simple life himself, becoming a vegetarian and wearing peasant dress. Tolstoi was against colonies precisely because they led to organisational structures, however loose. Like Thoreau Tolstoi believed that change had to occur within individuals, and this powerful individualistic ethic was shared by Ford, who throughout his life seemed to be most happy when distancing himself from groups that had initially attracted him, or when coming into contact with those whose world view and temperament he did not share.

Ford and Elsie moved into Gracie's Cottage, Limpsfield in March 1898 having been invited there by Edward and Constance Garnett, Ford's childhood friends from London. The Garnetts had gone to live in the Chart woods to be remote and to avoid society. The woods at the edge of the Weald satisfied these requirements, but they were not completely isolated there. The railway line from London to nearby Oxted had opened in 1884, and this access had attracted Henry Salt who had resigned his position as schoolmaster at Eton to live the Simple Life on one hundred pounds a year. The Salts were Fabians, and other Fabians soon followed: Sydney and Margaret Olivier in 1891 and Edward and Marjorie Pease. The Garnetts moved to Limpsfield Chart to be close to the Oliviers, whose four daughters would, in theory, provide companionship for their son David.

Ford and Elsie stayed in Gracie's Cottage for only one year and moved when their lease expired in March 1899. Yet during that year Ford met Stephen Crane and Joseph Conrad, both of whom came to Gracie's Cottage. Crane was younger than Ford, but had already been published. His chameleon-like character was not unlike Ford's own,

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and, when Ford came to write about the Limpsfield period in *Return to Yesterday* (1931), he did so in a mood of fond reminiscence, quite unlike the mood of *The Simple Life Limited*. Joseph Conrad was a much more stolid, older man in his forties when Garnett introduced him, and their initial conversation, as recalled by Ford, was on the subject of work. Ford was in his gardening clothes, which may have been his simple life clothes, and Conrad took him for a gardener. When he understood him to be Hueffer, he commented on how good a setting the cottage was for work. Work was Conrad's obsession, and it is interesting that Ford, who had become a Roman Catholic in 1892 when he was 19, and who regarded Puritanism as unrealistically idealistic, was moved to collaborate with a man who temperamentally was so different. It is tempting, perhaps too tempting, to psychoanalyse this meeting as an encounter with a figure who would serve to replace the authority of the grandfather, who in turn had assumed a significance following the death of Ford's father when Ford was only 16. His grandfather had famously painted a picture called 'Work', and Ford had perhaps inherited this tendency to romanticise the practical and the virtues of industry. Again like Nathaniel Hawthorne, he was appreciative of the energy of Puritanism: in England, as in America, the Puritans had been responsible for moves towards democracy. Richard Heath, who with his family moved into Gracie's cottage after Ford and Elsie had left, had published 'The Puritan Ideal' in *Seed Time* (April 1891) looking forward to the day when the Social Commonwealth would be reborn. But Ford was not a Puritan, and this may help to explain why, in novels such as *The Good Soldier*, he is so understanding of, and sympathetic towards, characters who are strikingly various and different.

The *Simple Life Limited* shows much less understanding. Although extremely witty at times, overall the novel seems less of a satire and more an act of personal exorcism. In revisiting his past Ford seems intent on an act of Peter-like renunciation, almost as if this former self that was the very young Ford is an embarrassment to the 1911 Ford, who has just completed an exciting period at the centre of

London literary society as the editor of the *English Review*. The Simple Life community is full of cranks, but Ford was tolerant of cranks, especially if their crankiness was accompanied by a sense of humour. The 1907 periodical *Ye Crank* claimed to take its name from the idea of a crank handle starting ‘a revolution’, but there was a sense of self irony there. Ford and Elsie had been willing enough to appear ‘cranky’ themselves. No, it was the hypocrisy and fraudulence that Ford attacks in this novel.

‘We object [. . .] to all such things as individual property, marriage, revealed religion, the unequal distribution of wealth’,⁸ says Ophelia Bransdon, but, like Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance*, she abandons her beliefs very easily when the attractions of the outer world present themselves. The misanthropy that runs through Ford’s novel includes a persistent strain of misogyny. Of the two newlyweds – they have married as an act of rebellion, not conformity – it is Ophelia, and not Hamnet, who is the priggish one, and the main target for the satire: ‘We have neither of us tasted flesh meat or alcohol in our lives and we are compiling a book called “Health Resides in Sandals”’ (*SLL* 17). Miss Egmont, who is attracted to the colony’s moving spirit, Horatio Gubb, is ‘a hard lady of may be fifty, with a hooked nose, a light skin, greyish curly hair, and prominent spectacles that hardened already grey eyes’ (*SLL* 85). Even Miss Stobhall, sincere and genuine socialist, is a crank who bores Hamnet with her readings from Marx. The four daughters that Mrs Lee hauls around in her donkey cart wish they were men in a way that at first suggests genuine frustration at the limitations of being young women (dressed, moreover, to look like men). But two of them want to be young men to help their father in the city while the other two wish they were men to help mother with the Simple Life – two activities which Ford presents as totally unsound. Against this it is possible to point only to women as victims, to the women, notably Mrs Bransdon and Mrs Gubb, who fall prey to the men’s obsessions and are literally destroyed by them. Gubb’s treatment of women is shown to be particularly callous and self centred. Even so, there is little here to

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indicate a writer who was able to question contemporary assumptions about gender. The dominant voice is that of the sceptical satirist, and gender equality is ridiculed because the Simple Lifers, who profess to believe in it, are fraudulent and ridiculous themselves. Ford is so eager to take revenge on his past, he includes a mocking self-reference to the person he had once been perceived as. Pomeroy Roden, a disciple of the Simple Life, is making a hopeless job of pummeling leaves of tobacco:

He had read of this proceeding in one of the work of Mr Ford Madox Hueffer, an author esteemed by the Lifers as an authority upon the habits of the Middle Age and the Renaissance. (*SLL* 55)

Yet the record suggests that Ford, even as he was writing this novel, was in the process of resituating himself. In the same year that *The Simple Life Limited* was published, Ford began writing *Women & Men*, his study of the differences between the sexes, that was eventually published by Ezra Pound in 1923. In *Women & Men* Ford touches on the possibility that the way that men in a patriarchal society learn to construct the difference between men and women is through reading literature, an idea he had explored a year before in 'The Woman of the Novelists'.⁹ He demonstrates this by satirising the relief with which the advanced Young Liberals discover Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character* (1903), which had 'proved' scientifically that women were inferior animals, and by providing impressionistic sketches of strong working countrywomen from his Sussex days (the days prior to his year in Limpsfield), women whose independence of mind and body refuse to conform to the stereotypes that were then the cultural norm.

Perhaps the apparent contrast between the perspective of these two works is best explained not simply in terms of Ford's contact with, and support for, the suffragette movement that his relationship with Violet Hunt brought about – he had joined a suffragist procession in 1907 and in 1913 was to write a suffragette pamphlet,

This Monstrous Regiment of Women, for the Women's Freedom League. The connection is possibly more complex, in that what Ford is attacking in the *Simple Life* is the artificiality of role playing, and what he is considering in *Women & Men* – and what he explores further in *A Call* and *The Good Soldier* – is the possibility that gender roles are themselves a performance. In questioning an essentialist difference between women and men, he was running counter to much suffragist rhetoric which argued that there *is* such an essential difference, and, as slogans and letters to the *Times* showed, that life and God are feminine.

In so doing, Ford was tentatively exploring ideas extended and elaborated more recently, ideas about the performative nature of gender. Judith Butler, drawing partly on Foucault, has described gender as a regulatory practice that institutionalises difference and privileges heterosexuality by emphasising difference, leading to the hegemonic belief in sexual duality. Sex itself is the prediscursive domain which assumes an essentialist duality and precludes the possibility that gender is performatively constituted. Ford does not quite make that leap, but, in his understanding that gender roles are enacted and that sexual duality needs to be questioned, he contributed to a strand in modernism which was developed by a succession of modernist women writers, including Charlotte Mew, May Sinclair, Dorothy Richardson, Natalie Barney and Djuna Barnes, and which in some senses can be seen to have had greater long term consequences for the development of narrative fiction than the experimental forms of writing which we associate with Pound, Joyce and Eliot. In writing *The Simple Life Limited*, Ford had exorcised the past and paved the way for the reinvention of himself as a writer engaging thoughtfully with the relationship between literature and gender, as explored in *Women & Men*, and with selective practices of the modernism he had championed in *The English Review*, as explored in *The Good Soldier*. Ford may have remained a radical Tory by temperament, and, like many of the early modernists, suspicious of democracy, modernity and popular culture, but by asking questions about the ways that at

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our most fundamental level we perform roles constructed for us by our culture, he can now be seen to be in advance of many of his male contemporaries.

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NOTES

1. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).
2. Fiona MacCarthy, *The Simple Life: C. R. Ashbee in the Cotswolds* (London: Lund Humphries Publishers Ltd, 1981), endpaper.
3. MacCarthy, *The Simple Life*, p. 132.
4. Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 456.
5. Edward Carpenter, *My Days and Dreams* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1916), p. 97.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 197.
7. R. W. Stallman, *Stephen Crane: A Biography* (New York: George Braziller, 1965).
8. Ford, under the pseudonym 'Daniel Chaucer', *The Simple Life Limited* (London: The Bodley Head, 1911), p. 7. Subsequent references appear in parentheses in the text, using the abbreviation *SLL*.
9. 'The Woman of the Novelists' was first published in *Vote*, 2 (27, August, 3, 10, and 17 September 1910), and included as Chapter VII in *The Critical Attitude* (London: Duckworth, 1911), pp. 145-69. Speaking of 'the woman of the novelists' Ford explains: 'For you, who are women, this creature is not of vast importance as an object lesson. For us men she is of the utmost. We fancy that, for most of us she is the only woman we know': *The Critical Attitude*, p. 148.