A Provoked Restoration Lady

A Study of Vanbrugh’s Lady Brute in The Provoked Wife

Ritgerð til B.A.- prófs

Grétar Rúnar Skúlason

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Abstract

The Provoked Wife, a Restoration comedy by Sir John Vanbrugh was first staged in 1697. It opposes marriage to adultery; virtue to vice and desire; and happiness to misery. Lady Brute is at the center of the action. She is an English aristocratic Restoration lady in an unhappy marriage, struggling with her desire to abandon virtue. Her character is complex and paradoxical. Through her relationships on three different levels, she reveals that complexity as the essay moves from unhappiness in marriage, through desire and indecision as a nascent adulteress to the intimate friendship with her niece.

The essay is divided into three main chapters where each chapter is devoted to one relationship. The first chapter studies Lady Brute's marriage with Sir John; the second chapter is devoted to her liaison with her hopeful lover, Constant; and in the third chapter her friendship with her niece, Bellinda, comes under scrutiny. This study reveals three different facets of Lady Brute, a complex English Restoration lady.

Each chapter starts with a study of the characteristics of Lady Brute in the relationship which is being studied in that chapter, followed with an analysis of the nature of the relationship in question. Then the use of wit in the characters' dialogues is studied specifically, where the main interest is in the use of the repartee for “verbal fencing”. At last, a close reading is done of selected sections of the play in order to expose any contradictions or hidden meanings in the text. Lady Brute's words are dissected, but some expressions of the other characters are also the subject of the study, where appropriate. Use is made of poststructuralist ideas, notably Derrida’s deconstructive methods in order to look for binary oppositions in the text; to analyse how Lady Brute and the other characters express their ideas; and to bring to the surface any possible paradoxes and concealed meanings. Lady Brute claims to be a virtuous lady. This essay shows that she is also a complex character and has a darker side.
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Introduction

In *The Provoked Wife* by Sir John Vanbrugh, marital discord is a main theme. The unhappy marital situation of Lady Brute and Sir John in *The Provoked Wife* mirrors the wider social discord in England during the Restoration period, for it was a time of contrasts and conflicts. After Cromwell's reign in the middle of the century, monarchy was restored in 1660. However, peace was not achieved with the restoration of the monarchy, for Catholics and Protestants continued to dispute and finally the Catholics were ousted in the Glorious Revolution in 1688. Since then, the English throne has remained Protestant.

The advent of calm on the English throne in 1688 did not transpire into marriage, at least not into the marriage of Lady Brute and Sir John in *The Provoked Wife*. Sir John Vanbrugh depicts some of the prevalent conflicts of the period in his play: marriage and adultery; virtue against vice and desire; happiness against misery. Lady Brute is arguably the central character of the *The Provoked Wife*. She is an aristocratic Restoration lady in an unhappy marriage, struggling with her desire to abandon virtue. Her character is complex and paradoxical. Through her relationships on three different levels, she reveals that complexity as our study moves from unhappiness in marriage, through desire and indecision as a nascent adulteress to the intimate friendship with another woman.

We will follow Lady Brute in her marriage with Sir John; in her relationship with Constant, her suitor for two years; and in her close friendship with her niece, Bellinda. We discover what she is like as a character in the three different relationships and what characterises her in each one. Then we move on to an analysis of the relationships, where we study Lady Brute’s interaction with each of the three different characters. The aim is to reveal the nature of the relationships and to see whether they attribute to Lady Brute’s happiness or misery and we also explore the potential conflicts and contrasts. Conflicts are also present in the use of wit by repartee, where the characters exchange witty remarks by “verbal fencing”.
The use of the repartee in each relationship will be scrutinised in order to unveil the difference in the nature of the relationships. Contrasts and paradoxes are further revealed in our close reading of selected scenes involving the respective relationships. We apply a deconstructive approach in order to reveal any hidden meanings, binary oppositions, and paradoxes. This should show the double nature and complexity of Lady Brute and of her relationships with Sir John, Constant, and Bellinda.

_The Provoked Wife_ and the character of Lady Brute have been subjects of various studies of Restoration comedy: In _Restoration Comedy_, Edward Burns gives an overview of the play and speaks of the female characters (including Lady Brute) (176-182); in “Comedy” in _The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre_, Brian Corman mentions the marital problems of Lady Brute and Sir John as the central plot of _The Provoked Wife_ (65-66); John Loftis speaks of the characters in _The Provoked Wife_ in his book, _Comedy and Society from Congreve to Fielding_, as belonging to the gentry (53); in the article “Marital Discord in English Comedy from Dryden to Fielding”, Robert D. Hume talks about “marital discord as a provocation for adultery” (254) and amongst the numerous plays he cites as examples is _The Provoked Wife_, which he deems as “cold” and a “dark comedy” (261); Lincoln B. Faller gives a detailed account of various characters in Vanbrugh’s comedies in his article “Between Jest and Earnest: The Comedy of Sir John Vanbrugh”, where he speaks of Lady Brute as a character “whose psychology is remarkably complex” and of her search of love (21-23); in the introduction to the edition of _The Provoked Wife_ used in this essay, James L. Smith devotes ten pages to a study of the marriage and of Lady Brute, and he also speaks of other characters and of the language used in the play (xiv-xxiv).

The aforementioned studies are a few of the existing works in the field of the study of Restoration comedy and of _The Provoked Wife_. Although these books and studies offer a view on the character of Lady Brute, the author of this essay has not found a similar approach to
the one put forth in the following pages. Hopefully, this essay will be an interesting and worthy contribution to the study of Restoration comedy and of one of its (arguably) most interesting and complex characters: Lady Brute.
Methodology

The study of Lady Brute and her relationships in *The Provoked Wife* is divided into three main chapters. Each chapter is devoted to a study of Lady Brute and her relationship with a particular character of the play. We start with her marriage; her relationship to Sir John, her husband. The second chapter is devoted to her relationship with Constant, her hopeful lover. In the third chapter, we scrutinise Lady Brute's relationship with her niece, Bellinda.

Each chapter is divided into four main sections. In the first section, we establish Lady Brute as a character in the relationship in question: what is she like as a wife; as a nascent adulteress; as a friend? We look at how she perceives herself, how she is perceived by the other characters, and what this relationship means to her as a character. In the second section of each chapter, we analyse the particular relationship. By looking at textual evidence, we attempt to find out what each particular relationship means for Lady Brute and what its characteristics are. The third section of each chapter is devoted to the study of the use of wit in that particular chapter.

The definition of wit can be problematic, especially when studying literature through the ages. It originates in Old English where *witan* meant “to know”, so originally wit referred to intelligence (Cuddon 1044). In the study of wit however, we have Abrams definition of wit in mind, where he states that “Wit, [...] now denotes a kind of verbal expression which is brief, deft, and intentionally contrived to produce a shock of comic surprise”. We focus the study on the use of a specific type of wit, the *Repartee*, which Abrams defines thus: “*Repartee* is a term taken from fencing to signify a contest of wit, in which each person tries to cap the remark of the other, or to turn it to his or her own advantage” (Abrams 381).
In the fourth section of each chapter we attempt to unveil any hidden meaning in the text, as it applies to the respective relationships. We do a close textual analysis of sections of the play, where we apply poststructural deconstructive methods.

Deconstruction is a term in literary theory, attributed to Jacques Derrida and based on his ideas as they are put forth in his book, Of Grammatology, especially in the chapter titled “The Exorbitant. Question of Method” (157-64). It allows us to look closely at the oppositions and conflicts within the text by use of binary oppositions and by use of difference, where “what is 'meant' is different from what appears to be meant. Meaning disguises itself” (Lye).

In Beginning Theory, Barry gives us a practical approach, a “recipe”, for deconstructing a text, along with a detailed example (73-79). We will make use of his approach in our close reading. Barry lists three different stages of deconstruction: the first stage of deconstruction is, by Barry’s definition, verbal. At this stage we look for “paradoxes and contradictions” in the text and concentrate on “binary oppositions like male and female, day and night, light and dark, and so on” (74). Barry defines the second stage as textual, where the analysis “moves beyond individual phrases and takes a more overall view [...] looking for shifts and breaks in the continuity of the [text]” (75). The third stage “involves looking for moments in the [text] when the adequacy of language itself as a medium of communication is called into question” (75-76). We will focus our study by doing a close reading of the text as described by Barry, where we will concentrate our effort solely on the first stage of his approach and do a verbal deconstruction of passages from The Provoked Wife. By that we aim to bring to light any possible paradoxes and contradictions in Lady Brute as a character and in the relationships which are under scrutiny. Lady Brute is a multifaceted character and our method will enable us to establish how complex she is.
1. Lady Brute and Marriage

The central theme of *The Provoked Wife* is marriage, namely the marriage of Lady and Sir John Brute. The first section of the chapter will take a look at Lady Brute in the role of the wife. In the second section of the chapter we will analyse the marriage itself and the relationship between Lady Brute and Sir John. The third section studies the use of the repartee in the verbal exchange between the two characters involved. The concluding section of the chapter is devoted to a close examination of chosen sections of the text which pertain to the marriage, where the aim is to bring to light any hidden meanings and paradoxes by verbal deconstruction.

1.1. Lady Brute as Wife

In Sir John's very first description of Lady Brute, his wife, he says she is “a young lady, a fine lady, a witty lady, a virtuous lady - and yet I hate her” (1.1. 8-9). His description of his wife is favourable but all the same he says he hates her, simply because he is married to her: “The woman’s well enough, she has no vice that I know of, but she’s a wife, and - Damn a wife!” (2.1. 250-51). He seems to trust his wife and does not seem to fear being cuckolded by her: “I believe my wife’s religion will keep her honest” (2.1. 243). However, he is not as convinced at the end of the play, when he feels for his horns, a sign of a cuckold: “I am a downright stinking cuckold. - *(Putting his hand to his forehead) Here they are*” (5.5. 76-77).

Lady Brute does not seem to loathe her husband in return, on the contrary all she wants is to please him (1.1. 33). In her very first soliloquy Lady Brute admits that she had been warned before her marriage that it would become an unhappy experience, although she does not say who had warned her (1.1. 47-78). However, she had enough self-belief to think

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1 Quite a few comedies about marriage and marital problems exist from the time of *The Provoked Wife*. Hume mentions Thomas Southerne’s *The Wive’s Excuse: Or Cuckolds Make Themselves* (1691) as an excellent example. Mr. and Mrs. Friendall are Southerne’s married couple, with Mr. Friendall as “a loathsome character” and Mrs. Friendall as “virtuous” (Hume 258).
that she would be able to charm her husband enough to govern him and she admits that she had in the end been governed by vanity (1.1. 48-51). She admits that she has never loved Sir John but has respected virtue and remained faithful to him, in spite of “a tempting lover” (1.1. 59). She goes on to speculate that she should act more favourably towards her lover and that her sufferings in marriage might be a punishment for not doing so (1.1. 61-62). At the end of the soliloquy she seems to have convinced herself to abandon virtue in this matter and consider a lover to the extent that Bellinda, her niece, cannot help noticing it when she enters and says “Good morrow madam; you look pleased this morning” (1.1. 80).

Lady Brute is trapped in an unhappy marriage and the legal status of married women during the Restoration period was such that, once married, there was no escape from married life and women were considered properties of their husbands (Picard 225). Divorce was impossible to obtain: “there was no doubt about divorce: there was none” (Picard 231). Consequently, once married, people remained married, although often unhappily (as in the case of the Brutes).

1.2. The Marriage: Lady Brute and Sir John

1.2.1. The Marriage: Analysis

Unhappy marriage and “[t]he incompatibility of domestic patriarchy” were starting to be debated at the end of the seventeenth century and at the beginning of the eighteenth century and The Provoked Wife contributed to that debate (Stone 164-65). Mary Astell also contributed to the debate in Some Reflections Upon Marriage (published in 1700), where she blames men for the lack of happiness in marriage:

[H]ow comes it, may you say, that there are so few happy Marriages? Now in answer to this, it is not to be wonder’d that so few succeed, we should rather be surpriz’d to
find so many do, considering how imprudently Men engage, the Motives they act by, and the very strange Conduct they observe throughout. (11)

As Astell asks why “there are so few happy Marriages”, the question also rises, when unhappy marriages are being scrutinised, why the two individuals married in the first place. Sir John and Lady Brute clearly had different reasons for marrying: she admits to never having loved him (1.1. 55) and when Sir John accuses her of only marrying him for money, she raises no objections (1.1. 41-43). Likewise, when Sir John is pressed to the matter by Heartfree, he admits to having married Lady Brute out of lust: “I married because I had a mind to lie with her, and she would not let me” (2.1. 256-57). This is an honest and accurate statement by Sir John, if we bear in mind that during the Restoration period “there was, practically speaking” no “[s]exual intercourse between couples before marriage” (Picard 159).

It is, all the same, interesting in this context, to note some contradictions: when Sir John accuses his wife of having married him for money it is in response to her saying “you married me for love”, a statement which Sir John does not contradict (1.1. 40). When Sir John has left the first scene, Lady Brute then goes on to say that he is a fool and she suggests that his behaviour has changed lately: “hitherto he has been no monster” (1.1. 55). This raises some questions: was Sir John happy at the beginning of the marriage and not so antipathetic towards his wife as he is now? Why then has he changed and why has the marriage turned sour? Did Sir John perhaps marry Lady Brute out of love, after all?

It is conceivable that the only party to marry out of love was Sir John but now he is incapable of admitting to it openly. We can even speculate further and assume that he has turned to drinking, to bitter sentiments, and to abusive behaviour because he has been lacking love and affection at home. His wife seems virtuous and polite but as she points out herself, she was after his “estate” and did not aim to love him, but rather to “govern” him (1.1. 49-50).
really the honest one and who is really the deceiving one. Corman states a similar view when he says that “Vanbrugh chooses to look more thoughtfully at the problems of dysfunctional marriages. He refuses the easy solution in favor of the more realistic recognition that both parties are at fault and must suffer the consequences” (65). This idea of Lady Brute’s “darker side” will be explored further, when we apply deconstructive methods to chosen sections of the text, pertaining to the marriage of Lady Brute and Sir John.

1.2.2. The Marriage: Use of Wit

With Sir John’s soliloquy at the very beginning, it can be argued that The Provoked Wife takes off with a flurry of wit. Sir John starts with a witty and bathetic metaphor of food where he compares love and matrimony to meat and sauce respectively, and by adding the sauce the meat cloys and is thus less enjoyable. He then declares that marriage has debauched him (more precisely his senses), whereas marriage should be a state of virtue. By this definition of marriage and its effect on him, Sir John can be considered to turn the meaning of the word “debauch” upside down. He concludes by admitting that he has become such a coward that he dare not draw his sword, even to get rid of his wife. So by his play with words, his wit, Sir John states his case (1.1. 1-15).

When Lady Brute enters the scene the repartee is immediately put in use, especially by Sir John. When she asks him what appear to be simple questions concerning dinner, he retorts and throws back witty remarks: “If thinking wrong were an excuse for impertinence, women might be justified in most things they say or do” (1.1. 17-18, 20-21). During this dialogue, Sir John exposes his misogyny, “If women were to have their wills, the world would be finely governed” (1.1. 37-38); he also displays his bitterness about his matrimonial situation by the use of wit:

LADY BRUTE
What is it that disturbs you?

SIR JOHN

A parson.

LADY BRUTE

Why, what has he done to you?

SIR JOHN

He has married me. (1.1. 43-46)

The scene in Covent Garden, when Sir John enters with Lord Rake and Colonel Bully, drunk and swords drawn, could be considered a culminating point of wit, puns, abusive language and behaviour in the play: “Is the dog dead?”; “How the witch his wife howled!”; “if I can’t do mischief, I’ll think of mischief - in spite of your teeth, you dog you!” (4.1. 1-71). Irony (a sense of antiphrasis (Pavis 189)) is strong in this scene, demonstrated by Sir John’s outrageous behaviour and by the fact that in the midst of the comedy, the wit, and the brutish behaviour, we learn that Sir John and his friends have just committed murder (off-stage): “there's a man murder'd” (4.1. 6, Downes 477).

1.2.3. The Marriage: Deconstruction

At the beginning of the play (1.1. 1-15), Sir John starts by creating the metaphor of love as food and matrimony as the sauce that spoils love. By blaming the sauce (matrimony) for the meat (love) turning bad, Sir John might actually be refusing to believe that love is bound to lose its appeal with time, in much the same way as food is something that can seldom remain in a stable state (since it usually becomes stale or rotten in one way or another). The paradox in Sir John's arguing is that he expects love/meat to remain fresh.

Sir John describes the good qualities of his wife by saying “she's a young lady, a fine lady, a witty lady, a virtuous lady” and then goes on to say “and yet I hate her” (1.1. 8-9). By
this he implies that all his wife’s good qualities should in fact make him love her but “yet” he
does not. Lady Brute's good qualities are in opposition with Sir John's hate. What does Sir
John want from a wife? The question rises whether he “loves to hate” or whether he “hates to
love”! We could even go as far as arguing that we have here an instance of aporia, since Sir
John's words “cannot be explained within standard rules of logic” (Lucy 1).

When Sir John has left Lady Brute alone, following their dialogue (1.1. 16-46), she
claims that “[t]he devil's in the fellow” (1.1. 46). The antithesis of a devil would be a saint and
could we assume that Lady Brute really thought she would be marrying a saint or someone of
“saintly” behaviour? She does go on to admit that she had been warned (although she does not
specify by whom) before she married but being vain and ambitious she wanted this marriage.
She assumed she would gain happiness by gaining “an estate” and she also thought she could
prove wrong what she had been warned about and “govern” Sir John with her “charms” (1.1.
47-51). The paradox in Lady Brute's argumentation is that as she is condemning her husband
and accusing him of having “the devil” in him, at the same time she is contemplating a
revenge on Sir John. This is hardly a “saintly” thing to do, so she seems to have an element of
devilishness in her, thus revealing the paradox in her words and the paradoxical nature of her
character.

Lady Brute does, at the end of her soliloquy, seem to manage to persuade herself that
she has every right to take on a lover, due to her marital situation. She condemns the supposed
over-emphasis on virtue in the discourse:

Well, by all I see, if I argue the matter a little longer with myself, I shan’t find so
many bugbears in the way as I thought I should. Lord, what fine notions of virtue do
we women take up upon the credit of old foolish philosophers! Virtue’s its own
reward, virtue’s this, virtue’s that - virtue’s an ass, and a gallant’s worth forty on’t.

(1.1. 73-78)
With these word, Lady Brute finishes her soliloquy by committing the same fault she
condemned in her husband at the beginning. The paradox here is apparent, as we have the
binary opposition of vice/virtue. Lady Brute has become a “she-devil” who has convinced
herself that she should turn her back on virtue and give in to vice by taking on a “gallant”,
because it would be worth more than virtue!

In act 5 scene 2, we are at Lady Brute and Sir John's house where Lady Brute and
Bellinda are about to play cards with their guests, Heartfree and Constant. Suddenly, Sir John
(who is dead drunk, dirty and bloody) enters his house and Heartfree and Constant hide in
haste in a closet (5.2. 19). When Sir John enters, dirty and bloody, Lady Brute exclaims: “Ah
– ah – he's all over blood!” (5.2. 20). This exclamation leaves room for interpretation: could
Lady Brute be genuinely concerned about her husband's health or could she be expressing
hope (of, maybe, a mortal wound)? In deconstructive terms, this could be defined as a
supplement (Cuddon 224), for “[i]n Derrida's view, we must always say more, and other, than
we intend to to say” (Abrams 70). Lady Brute immediately expresses her concern over Sir
John's condition and she also expresses her relief when he says he is all right, but he is quick
to state that he does not believe her (5.2. 20-28)! As Sir John points out (and as in 5.2. 20),
Lady Brute's concern can be deemed as unconvincing (a supplement, in deconstructive terms),
for Lady Brute is nervously trying to conceal the fact that she has a hidden lover in her closet.
She even says that she would have her own blood spilt rather than his, but he is not about to
give her that pleasure as he would rather be crucified (5.2. 29-32).

Lady Brute then offers to go to bed with Sir John, in an attempt to save her hidden
lover in the closet by putting Sir John to bed. She gets the opposite of what she had wished
for, because as soon as Sir John senses that she finds his kisses disgusting he showers her with
even more. He seems pleased with himself and with how well he has succeeded in displeasing
his wife, so he wants to go further: “So, now, you being as dirty and as nasty as myself, we may go pig together” (5.2. 59-60).

2. Lady Brute and Adultery

For an unhappy, married woman in London at the end of the seventeenth century, leaving the husband was not a realistic option. However, taking on a lover was not only realistic, but also not infrequent, coinciding with “the release of the libido” and manifested in “the dramatic upsurge of extra-marital liaisons” (Stone 328). It should be no wonder then, given the provocation of her husband’s behaviour, that Lady Brute at last contemplates yielding to a gallant who has been chasing after her for two years (ironically, since the day she was married to Sir John). Constant offers an escape route to Lady Brute.² He desires her and offers her affection and intimate experience that is clearly lacking in the lady's marriage. All the same, this is no simple matter, for Lady Brute fears losing her virtue. She conducts an internal struggle, where she weighs her virtue against her desire and against the arduous approaches of her hopeful gallant.

The first section of this chapter takes a look at Lady Brute as a nascent adulteress. In the second section of the chapter we analyse the adultery and the relationship between Lady Brute and Constant. The third section studies the use of the repartee in the verbal exchange between the two characters involved. The last section of the chapter is devoted to a close examination of selected sections of the text which pertain to the relationship, where the aim is to bring to light any hidden meanings and paradoxes by verbal deconstruction.

² Lovers and adultery were a constant theme in Restoration comedy. To give a well known example, suffices to mention The Country Wife by William Wycherley (1675), where Mr. Horner is the rakish young man seeking to conquest as many women (wives) as possible. Arguably, Constant is a “modest” version of earlier Restoration rakish characters.
2.1. Lady Brute as a nascent Adultress

Lady Brute has been followed by her hopeful lover, Constant, for two years but has not yet yielded to him. This does not mean that she has not been tempted or that she does not have feelings for Constant, as Bellinda has been able to observe: “I have observed you blush when you meet him, force yourself away from him, and then be out of humour with everything about you. In a word, never was poor creature so spurred on by desire, and so reined in with fear!” (1.1. 122-25).

Lady Brute admits her interest in Constant to her niece, but insists, in spite of what Bellinda may have observed and that although “coquetry is one of the main ingredients in the natural composition of a woman”, she is no coquette herself and that she has managed to keep her interest a secret (1.1. 164-69). Nonetheless, as soon as she gets a taste of the forbidden fruit she seems to enjoy it, and the likelihood of her giving in to temptation seems to grow: “Lord, how like a torrent love flows into the heart when once the sluice of desire is opened! Good gods! What a pleasure there is in doing what we should not do” (2.1. 324-26). Lady Brute finds increasing gratification in flirting with Constant and is not lacking in imagination, an example being when she conspires with Bellinda to make Constant and Heartfree “an appointment ‘twixt jest and earnest. […] In Spring Garden”,⁴ where they would meet them wearing masks, as she finds “herself in very good humour, ready to do ‘em any good turn” she “can think on” (3.3. 135-43).

Constant’s description of Lady Brute is favourable, but not complemented by hate like Sir John’s was. Perhaps this difference between the two men is because the Constant is genuinely good and Sir John genuinely bad. But this difference could as well stem from the

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³ A possible allusion to Every Man out of His Humour; a satirical comedy by Ben Jonson, performed in 1599 and published in 1600.
⁴ “Spring Garden was the name of several pleasure gardens noted as places of assignation and intrigue” and although there are two possible locations for the garden in London, the “original audience” would have “understood” St James’s “to be the location” (Downes 534-35).
⁵ A possible allusion to Ben Jonson. This would refer to his Every Man in His Humour; a comedy written and performed in 1598.
fact that Sir John has already bedded Lady Brute but for Constant that still remains an unfulfilled dream. Constant's actions and words are, in fact, generated by desire: “My dear, dear mistress! - S’dearth! that so genteeel a woman should be saint, when religion’s out of fashion!” (2.1. 126-27). He describes her as “cold” (2.1. 134) and “virtuous even to a fault” (2.1. 139) which proves that she has succeeded in concealing her emotions and keeping them a secret from him, as she proclaimed in her dialogue with Bellinda in the first act. His views change though, when Lady Brute gives him “hope” and leaves him in an “ecstasy of joy” (2.1. 444).

2.2. The Adultery: Lady Brute and Constant

2.2.1. The Adultery: Analysis

The audience learns already in Lady Brute's first soliloquy that she has the possibility of a lover very much on her mind as she weighs the pros and cons of giving in to Constant who has been pursuing her for two years (1.1. 47-78). She has always resisted his approaches but now it seems she might finally have reached the point in her marriage where she could give in to Constant as well as give in to her own longings. In the ensuing dialogue with Bellinda, Lady Brute admits to having feelings for Constant and thus, already in the first scene, it is confirmed to the audience that adultery is clearly an option. Constant is in for a surprise since he was starting to lose hope after two years of unsuccessful courtship: “Oh, 'tis in vain to visit her” (2.1. 207). But at their encounter in act 3 scene 1, he is convinced that the tide is turning and after Lady Brute has left, he can not hide his excitement as he confides in his friend Heartfree (3.1. 450-53).

In act 4 scene 4, Lady Brute finally offers herself up to Constant's embrace, when Constant and Heartfree rescue her and Bellinda from Sir John's assault (Sir John has been approaching them as prostitutes because he does not recognise them, since they are wearing
masks). Lady Brute sees this rescue as a sign: “since fate has designed you for our guardians, 'twill make us the more willing to trust ourselves in your hands” (4.4. 100-01).

Passion grows gradually and finally becomes irresistible to the point that the two lovers lose control:

**LADY BRUTE**

And lovers wild. Pray let us stop here; at least for this time.

**CONSTANT**

'Tis impossible. He that has power over you can have none over himself.

**LADY BRUTE**

Ah, I'm lost!

_As he is forcing her into the arbour, LADY FANCYFULL and MADAMOISELLE bolt upon them, and run over the stage. (4.4. 205-08)_

It seems certain that Lady Brute would have submitted herself totally to Constant had not the two women burst on the scene and interrupted them, instead she backs off and runs home afraid of the scandal that could be made out of the situation.

In the last act, Constant and Heartfree go to Lady Brute's house while Sir John is out. When he suddenly comes home, the two visitors have to hide in a closet where Sir John eventually finds them, when he goes to get some cold tea.⁶ So it follows that Sir John is convinced that he has been cuckolded. The matter is resolved when the two women try to convince Sir John that the two men had been there because of Bellinda's relationship with Heartfree and that they are about to be married. Whether Sir John believes them or not, he does not pursue the matter further and gives his consent for the marriage (5.5. 98).

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⁶ According to a footnote in *The Provoked Wife*, cold tea was often “prepared in advance for occasional drinking” (5. 2. 60). This reference to tea recalls the well known “china scene” from William Wycherley’s *The Country Wife*, a scene that was rich in double entendre and sexual innuendo. The audience would probably have been familiar with that particular scene (Wycherley 4. 3).
In the end, we can affirm that Lady Brute and Constant have been brought closer together and that they are on the verge of going all the way, down the road of adultery. But their love is as impossible as it ever was. Their situation is ultimately unchanged, perhaps more so for Lady Brute. She seems to have no way of escaping marriage and so a gallant can perhaps only remain a distant and unattainable dream for her.

2.2.2. The Adultery: Use of Wit

The cleverness in the expression of the characters and their witty language is again to be experienced in the scenes involving Lady Brute and Constant, as was the case in our study of Lady Brute's marriage with Sir John. And again the repartee is made use of, evidenced in the scene where Constant and Heartfree are left alone with Lady Brute and Bellinda (3.1. 141-89). The witty scene is rich in coquetry and double entendre. However, it swiftly changes when Lady Fancyfull enters and initiates another round of repartee with numerous participants, starting with Lady Brute and Lady Fancyfull, then involving Heartfree against Lady Fancyfull and eventually Bellinda joins in the venomous exchange with Lady Fancyfull, venomous but indirect since it takes place by means of insinuation and the use of wit (3.1. 194-320).

When Lady Brute and Constant find themselves alone together they start by exchanging witty remarks at the expense of other (and absent) characters:

CONSTANT

Though the renewing of my visit may seem a little irregular, I hope I shall obtain your pardon for it, madam, when you know I only left the room lest the lady who was here should have been as malicious in her remarks as she's foolish in her conduct.

LADY BRUTE
He who has discretion enough to be tender of a woman's reputation carries a virtue about him may atone for a great many faults. (3.1. 328-35)

Lady Brute's and Constant's conversations are characterised by flirtatious and witty language. Enough is hinted without saying too much and the expressions are clad in decorative words. They do not refrain from the use of the repartee, as they engage in an intellectual exchange of words which includes, amongst others, the subjects of monarchy, virtue and honour:

**LADY BRUTE**

I think, sir, your sophistry has all the effect that you can reasonably expect it should have; it puzzles, but don't convince.

**CONSTANT**

I'm sorry for it.

**LADY BRUTE**

I'm sorry to hear you say so. (3.1. 375-79)

The repartee continues when Lady Brute and Constant meet again in the fourth act of the play. Their fencing of words builds up the sensual tension and finally the two lovers almost surrender to their desires, only to be stopped at the last moment by the entrance of Lady Fancyfull and Madamoiselle (4.4. 147-224).

2.2.3. *The Adultery: Deconstruction*

Lady Brute's relationship with Constant changes over the course of the play. Constant has a desire and a longing for Lady Brute who in turn has resisted his approaches in order to preserve her virtue. The focus is on Lady Brute and on her text in the following close reading of selected scenes, but we will also take note of some of Constant's replies where appropriate.
In the first scene of the third act, the play unfolds at Sir John and Lady Brute's house. In this scene, Constant re-enters to find Lady Brute alone, having left earlier because of Lady Fancyfull's presence (3.1. 326). He starts by apologising for “renewing” his visit (3.1. 328-29). Lady Brute speaks of “virtue” and “faults”: “He who has discretion enough to be tender of a woman's reputation carries a virtue about him may atone for a great many faults” (3.1. 333-35). She seems to want to give precedence to “fault” and thus reverse the polarity of the binary opposition virtue/fault (Barry 74). By this, it could be concluded that Lady Brute, although she speaks of “a woman's reputation”, is willing to jeopardise her virtue. Constant replies to Lady Brute with the paradox “love” as a “crime”: “its pretensions must needs be strongest where the crime is love” (3.1. 336-37). This reveals the duality of the situation Constant finds himself in. He claims to love Lady Brute, but at the same time and although he knows it could jeopardise her, he prefers to commit the “crime”.

Later on in this scene, Lady Brute paradoxically suggests that Constant is not convincing: “I think, sir, your sophistry has all the effect that you can reasonably expect it should have; it puzzles, but don't convince” (3.1. 375-77). Is she suggesting that he could do better and that he should; does she want to be convinced?

At the end of the scene she leaves him by saying: “I give you just hopes enough - (Breaking from him) to get loose from you; and that's all I can afford you at this time” (3.1. 441-42). By this she states that she only wants get away but she sounds paradoxical, for she says “at this time”. Is she saying that she in fact wants to be with him? At least, that is how Constant sees it (3.1. 443-48).

When they find themselves alone together again, they have moved closer to each other and when alone with Constant, Lady Brute claims to be concerned: “Sure you think me scandalously free, Mr Constant. I'm afraid I shall lose your good opinion of me” (4.4. 147-48). Lady Brute opposes “scandalously free” to “good opinion”. Although she says she is
“afraid” it seems safe to assume that in this binary opposition she would prefer to reverse the polarity and decide to run the risk of the scandal. Constant replies with a paradoxical remark: “My good opinion, madam, is like your cruelty, never to be removed” (4.4. 149-50). The binary opposition in Constant’s reply is good opinion/cruelty. Constant says that Lady Brute’s “cruelty” is “never to be removed”. Yet, he continues to pursue Lady Brute, because he claims that his “good opinion”, like Lady Brute’s “cruelty”, is “never to be removed”! Does that mean he has masochistic tendencies, as he likes to be treated cruelly? Whether Constant be masochistic or not, it seems we have a case of reversed polarity, since he prefers Lady Brute and by consequence: cruelty.

Constant speaks of “charms” that “attack” and “assault” (4.4. 170-71). Here, we have a paradox. How can something that charms be an attack and an assault? When you are assaulted or attacked, you are often hurt. A little later on, he also speaks of “[b]eauty” that gives “pain”, arguably another paradox (4.4. 174). Is beauty not a pleasant thing? How can it give pain? And paradoxically, beauty suddenly has the opposite effect when it “applies the balm of compassion to the wound” (4.4. 175). So, “beauty” almost seems to be in binary opposition with itself, an apparent paradox: it gives “pain”, but then immediately cancels itself out by “[applying] the balm to the wound”!

Towards the end of scene 4 in act 4, Lady Brute is near to yielding herself to Constant. At this point she brings up the paradoxical expression “coward virtue” (4.4. 200). By calling “virtue” a “coward”, she is undermining the worth of the idea of virtue. Virtue is something to strive for and something that Lady Brute has been trying to hold on to (exemplified in her resistance to Constant for two years). By giving virtue the quality of cowardice, she diminishes the positivity of the concept. It can not be said that Lady Brute is actually reversing the polarity of the binary opposition virtue/coward, but she is not “far off the mark”.
It does not defy reason to define Lady Brute’s relationships with Sir John and Constant as emotionally taxing. How then, can she counter being torn emotionally? Her friendship with her niece, Bellinda, is crucial in this respect and gives another dimension to the study of Lady Brute and her relationships in *The Provoked Wife*.

3. Lady Brute and Friendship

The relationship between Lady Brute and Bellinda differs from the two relationships studied thus far. It is a friendship of two characters of the same sex, who confide in and support each other. They derive pleasure from witty dialogues as well as from preparing and carrying out carefully prepared ruses. The friendship is an intimate one, and because it differs from the unhappy marriage and the complications caused by taking on a lover it adds an extra dimension to the character of Lady Brute.

The first section of the chapter is a study of Lady Brute as a friend. In the second section of the chapter we analyse the friendship between Lady Brute and Bellinda. The third section studies the use of the repartee in the verbal exchange between the two characters involved. As in previous chapters, we conclude this chapter with a section devoted to a close reading of selected pieces of the text which pertain to the friendship, where the aim is to bring to light any hidden meanings and paradoxes by verbal deconstruction.

3.1. Lady Brute as a Friend

The friendship with Bellinda is valuable to Lady Brute. It contrasts with her marriage to Sir John and the consequent conflicts and feeling of unhappiness. It also differs from Lady Brute's encounters with Constant. In Bellinda, Lady Brute has a close friend whom she can

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7 Friendship is a recurrent theme in Restoration comedy. In *The Provoked Wife* we have a same sex male relationship in Constant and Heartfree. In George Etherege’s *The Man of Mode* (1676), we have the friendship of Mr. Dorimant and Mr. Medley as well as that of Mrs. Loveit and (coincidentally) Bellinda.
trust completely and in whom she can confide. She realises this and is grateful for the friendship: “‘Tis true, Bellinda, you have given me so many proofs of your friendship, [...]” (1.1. 144-45). Bellinda does her aunt a good turn when she proposes to save her from trouble by marrying Heartfree: “And to give this a good impudent face of truth (that I may deliver you from the trouble you are in), I'll e'en (if he pleases) marry him”. To this, Lady Brute replies: “I'm beholding to you, cousin; but that would be carrying the jest a little too far for your own sake” (5.2. 115-19).

When Bellinda suggests that she marry Heartfree, Lady Brute at first expresses concern for her niece but then she gives her full support and contributes to securing the marriage. This could be because she genuinely wants to give her niece her full support. It could also be that she was thinking solely of personal gain: “twould be but a good friendly part; if ’twere only to keep me in countenance whilst I commit – you know what” (3.3. 129-30). Perhaps Lady Brute's motives are a mixture of both.

Lady Brute needs Bellinda to try out her ideas by expressing her thoughts and receiving feedback from her niece. Bellinda is a willing partner in crime and supports Lady Brute in her endeavours concerning Constant. An example of this would be when Lady Brute suggests that she and Bellinda “make ’em [Constant and Heartfree] an appointment ’twixt jest and earnest” (3.3. 135-36). Bellinda also lends a helping hand in Lady Brute's dealings with Sir John. Examples of these dealings with Sir John can be seen when they make him angry to the point that he “throws his pipe at ’em, and drives ’em out” (3.1. 52-53). The two friends seem to enjoy themselves together and Lady Brute shows her niece affection, perhaps more affection than she shows towards any other character in the play. Without Bellinda, Lady Brute's life would be very different and probably more difficult.
3.2. The Friendship: Lady Brute and Bellinda

3.2.1. The Friendship: Analysis

The friendship between Lady Brute and Bellinda differs from Lady Brute's other relationships in *The Provoked Wife*, as it can be deemed to be more intimate with the two friends sharing personal thoughts and secrets. An important topic of their conversations is the pair of persistent suitors, Constant and Heartfree. Bellinda encourages Lady Brute's contemplating adultery and Lady Brute in her turn is supportive of Bellinda in her relationship with Heartfree and their eventual marriage (although, as we have seen, Lady Brute might also be driven by ulterior motives). Together they enjoy their encounters with Constant and Heartfree as well as simply being in each other's company. They are close and at times the audience can be tempted to think that their relationship is so intimate that it might go beyond regular friendship, or what is the audience supposed to make of Lady Brute's words and actions: “Would I were a man for your sake, my dear rogue. (*Kissing her*)” (3.3. 122-23); and “Come, Bellinda, I'll e'en lie with you tonight” (5.2. 183)?

The relationship gives us the opportunity to question Lady Brute's thoughts and morals by contrasting them with those of Bellinda. Bellinda challenges and questions Lady Brute's words and thus allows Lady Brute to use her as a sounding board. This interaction could act as some sort of therapy for Lady Brute who thus manages to air her worries and deal with her marital problems in a constructive way. She toys with the idea of a lover and flirts with Constant. Lady Brute is on the verge of giving in to temptation (when she cries “I’m lost” (4.4. 208)), but she never does give in and as a result she remains somewhat of a flat character; she, or her situation, do not change in any real dramatic sense. The question remains whether she has come to terms with her situation in any way. Bellinda, on the other hand, can be considered a round character: her situation develops and changes dramatically, culminating in her marriage with Heartfree.
By showing the *status quo* in Lady Brute's situation (she remains in her unhappy marriage) and the change in Bellinda's situation by her entering into married life (where the inevitable question rises whether her marriage will be happy or miserable, like Lady Brute's), Vanbrugh emphasises the predicament of married aristocratic women towards the end of the seventeenth century. There really was no escape from unhappy marriages. Divorce was not a realistic option.³

### 3.2.2. The Friendship: Use of Wit

In our study of wit in Lady Brute's marriage with Sir John and in her relationship with Constant we have been able to establish the use of repartee as a consummate expression of wit. Her friendship with Bellinda differs in this respect, for it can be stated that in the dialogues between Lady Brute and Bellinda the repartee is employed somewhat differently than might be the case in other dialogues in *The Provoked Wife*. Their repartee is of the more affable and “friendly teasing” kind:

**BELLINDA:** [...] for you were pleased to make him a good round advance today, madam.

**LADY BRUTE:** Why, I have e'en plagued him enough to satisfy any reasonable woman. He has besieged me these two years to no purpose.

**BELLINDA:** And if he besieged you two years more, he'd be well enough paid, so he had the plundering of you at last.

**LADY BRUTE:** That may be; but I'm afraid the town won't be able to hold out much longer: for to confess the truth to you, Bellinda, the garrison begins to grow mutinous.

³ “In the absence of divorce in the modern sense, the Church could only offer separation from bed and board, in the hope of ultimate reconciliation, on the grounds of adultery, cruelty or continual quarrels. But even these were relatively rare” (Houlbrooke 116).

“[A] wife was irrevocably tied to a husband who turned out to be a violent, drunken, syphilitic, promiscuous lout who dissipated her dowry, brutally exercised his matrimonial rights, and abused her children” (Picard 231).
BELLINDA: Then the sooner you capitulate, the better. (3.3. 104-14)

Although Lady Brute and Bellinda are friendly in their repartees with each other, they prove themselves well capable of employing the repartee with full force against other characters when necessary. This, for instance, is the case when they have to deal with Sir John, subtly poking fun at him and at his tedious habit of smoking while at the same time implying that he really deserves to be cuckolded (3.1. 14-52). They succeed in making him angry, though his anger is mostly aroused at the fact that they objected to his smoking and had implied that men stink. Sir John does not shy from participating in the repartee and retaliates, with yet another of his witty remarks: “if woman had been ready created, the devil, instead of being kicked down into hell, had been married” (3.1. 57-58).

In conclusion, let us look at another example of wit in a dialogue between Lady Brute and her niece: Lady Brute replies to Bellinda’s suggestion that people should adhere to virtue and “return good for evil” by saying “That may be a mistake in the translation” (1.1. 100-01). She thereby makes a witty reference to the translation of the Holy Bible (BibleGateway.com, Rom. 12.21). The dialogues of Lady Brute and Bellinda certainly are witty; they are proof of “intellectual brilliance and ingenuity” (Cuddon 1045).

3.2.3. The Friendship: Deconstruction

In our close reading of a few chosen scenes involving the two friends, Lady Brute and Bellinda, we attempt to unveil possible paradoxes and binary oppositions in their thought and expressions, especially those of Lady Brute. Already in their first encounter of the play, Lady Brute gives us a paradox when she claims that “the downright wife” would “cuckold” her husband (1.1.90-91). Being married means being tied to one man (the husband), but by saying that by cuckolding she would be a “downright wife” is a paradox, since it implies an extra-marital affair. By cuckolding her husband, the wife can be considered anything but
“downright”. It can be concluded that it seems that Lady Brute prefers the cuckolding wife to the faithful one. Therefore she can be assumed to be reversing the polarity of the binary opposition downright/cuckold.

Lady Brute presents us again with a paradox, a few lines later: “I shall play the fool and jest on, till I make you begin to think I'm in earnest” (1.1. 105-06). This is an interesting contradiction, with the binary opposition jest/earnest. It sounds bizarre to expect someone who does not believe a person to be earnest, to finally be convinced by even more jesting.

At one point, Lady Brute talks to Bellinda about Sir John's treatment of her and a possible revenge on her part: “my husband's barbarous usage piques me to revenge; and Satan, catching at the fair occasion, throws in my way that vengeance which, of all vengeance, pleases women best” (1.1. 157-60). By claiming that Satan gives women pleasure, Lady Brute is implying that she prefers vice to virtue (at least, if she wants to be pleased!). Lady Brute expresses the desire to turn to vengeance and fall into the temptation offered by Satan in order to gain pleasure. Is this a paradoxical statement on the part of Lady Brute, because she has been fending off Constant's approaches for two years, or could there be other pleasures involved?

The two friends, Lady Brute and Bellinda, are close. Their friendship may even have reached beyond the conventional, as can be speculated, for instance, when Lady Brute says to Bellinda: “Would I were a man for your sake, my dear rogue” and then kisses her (3.3. 122-23). If we take this further, then what is to be said about Bellinda's reply a little later, when Lady Brute has suggested Bellinda spend time with Heartfree so she can be with Constant: “Well, if I can't resolve to serve you that way, I may perhaps some other, as much to your satisfaction” (3.3. 132-34)? This aspect of their relationship is being alluded to again later in the play when Lady Brute says, “Bellinda, I'll e'en lie with you tonight” (5.2. 183). Although it might be difficult to substantiate this further by textual evidence, all this lesbian innuendo
sparks the imagination of the audience and it certainly leaves room for interpretation (for the actresses as well as for the particular director).

Later in the play, Lady Brute states that “there is not upon earth so impertinent a thing as women's modesty” (3.3. 91-92). We have here, much in the same manner as in the previous scenes we have studied, a paradoxical statement by Lady Brute where she takes an element of virtue and degrades it. Modesty is a virtue, but Lady Brute chooses to condemn the virtue by claiming that it is “impertinent”. Therefore, she is possibly advocating the opposite: vanity or boastfulness.

In the end, the two friends help each other out. Lady Brute helps Bellinda secure the marriage with Heartfree and at the same time Bellinda helps Lady Brute avert trouble with Sir John. Paradoxically that means that Lady Brute will stay married to the same man, in practically the same situation as before.
Conclusion

The character of Lady Brute is central to our study of The Provoked Wife by Sir John Vanbrugh. Her situation is complicated. She married Sir John for economic reasons and after two years of marriage she finds herself in a frustrating situation of marital discord. She is in a marriage that lacks the love she now craves; mis-treated by her husband who seems, at least on the outside, to despise her. Taking on a gallant is a real option for Lady Brute, since Constant has been pursuing her since the day of her marriage. Yielding to Constant is no simple matter, though, because she realises she would lose her virtue by doing so. Lady Brute is a complex character who seems to be constantly dealing with warring forces; opposing values. She has to deal with conflicts of various nature, such as her marriage opposed to adultery and her virtue against her desire.

In our analysis of her three different relationships we have been able to observe Lady Brute unhappy in marriage, excited and full of desire and indecision as a nascent adulteress, and finally “in her element” in an intimate friendship with her niece. Each relationship gives a different dimension to the complex character of Lady Brute; each relationship also offers various paths of interpretation and study, and this essay has gone down some of those paths.

The different nature of the relationships is apparent in our study of the use of wit. The repartee is put to use in a different manner in each relationship. In the married relationship, the repartee is quite venomous and mean, where especially Sir John does not hesitate in attacking his wife with sarcastic remarks. Lady Brute’s relationship with Constant is different in tone, as the “verbal fencing” is rich in coquetry and double entendre. When Lady Brute is with Bellinda, however, the repartee has a more friendly tone to it, showing affection and playfulness. The use of the repartee serves well to underline the difference in the nature of the three different relationships.
In our close reading of selected scenes of the respective relationships, we chose to apply the deconstructive method strictly on the verbal level. That approach enabled us to reveal hidden meanings, binary oppositions, and paradoxes in the text and Lady Brute’s complexity and her double natured character became apparent. Lady Brute expresses her concern for virtue but that virtue is, more often than not, opposed to her desire; the desire to yield to a lover or even a desire to be with her niece!

The deconstructive reading approach has its limitations, as it tends to become repetitive and it favours an (arguably) overly open-ended interpretation. Nevertheless, the deconstructive reading enables us to reveal a darker side to Lady Brute and it shows the virtuous lady in a less flattering light. Of course, this gives the character an added dimension and allows for a more interesting reading (and a more interesting interpretation for the actress portraying Lady Brute on stage).

*The Provoked Wife* is a play about an aristocratic English Restoration lady that is unhappy and unfulfilled. At the same time, she remains a complicated and intriguing character. She is torn between warring forces and is unable to find a resolution. At the end of the play, her situation is as unresolved as it was at the beginning. Lady Brute is condemned to remain unfulfilled.
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