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*The Country Wife* Close Reading

Therefore his Play shan't ask your leave to live:  
Well, let the vain rash Fop, by huffing so,  
Think to obtain the better Terms of you;  
But we, the Actors, humbly will submit,  
Now, and at any time, to a full Pit;  
Nay, often we anticipate your Rage,  
And murder Poets for you on our Stage:  
We set no Guards upon our Tying-Room,  
But when with flying Colours, there you come,  
We patiently you see, give up to you,  
Our Poets, Virgins, nay our Matrons too. (ln.18-28)

This passage from *The Country Wife* is the last eleven lines of the prologue, which was ultimately a justification and apology from the actors to the audience about the playwright, or as referenced in the prologue, the poet. In the first few lines of the prologue (preceding the lines here), it compares poets (in this case also playwrights) to “Cudgell’d Bullies,”(1) in the sense that when bullies are hit a couple times, chances are they won’t back down. The poet, according to the prologue, also will not back down after he has been “Cudgell’d,” or rather, criticized. Wychereley uses “you” as the audience, or the one being bullied, which indicates that the poet sees himself as superior to you and will not be discouraged if you don’t like his play.

The main indicator of the superiority of the poet in the prologue is line 1 and 2, “POETS, like Cudgell’d Bullies, never do/ At first or second Blow submit to you;”(1-2) this is the beginning of the explanation that the poet is superior to the audience. However the lines I’m

analyzing are rather explaining the opposite of the actors. It describes and apologizes for the imperfections of the play – specifically aspects of the play that were not necessarily in the poets control, that is, things the actor does. It is written from the point of view of the actors, and read by an actor, and the ending is really more of an apology to not only “you,” the audience, but in some ways also the poet. Comparing the initial two lines to line 21, “But we, the Actors, humbly submit,” (21) it is evident that the actors are asking for sympathy from the audience and also kind of asking the audience not to blame the actors, because they only do as we ask of them.

After the actors explain that they will submit, they also tell the audience about all the things the actors do for them on stage. In lines 23 and 24, “Nay, often we anticipate your Rage,/ And murder Poets for you on our Stage:” (23-24) the actors tell you a specific instance, of when the audience gets mad at a character in the story, they murder those characters for you, as if they feel your anger. It also talks about how they would willingly give up anything the audience asked of them, basically sucking up, in lines 27 and 28: “We patiently you see, give up to you,/ Our Poets, Virgins, nay our Matrons too» (27-28). The actors essentially want the audience to like them, and to applaud the things they do on stage.

Prologue’s to plays and poetry commonly have apologies incorporated in them to try to make the poet seem humble, as if they don’t know their work is great and think the world will not like it. I thought this prologue was interesting; specifically these last eleven lines, because it does the exact opposite of the poet and instead aims that humbleness toward the actors. The poet is “cocky,” he knows he’s great and has no problem boasting about it. The actors, however, try to suck up to the audience and gain their support.