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“The Experience of Mrs. Patterson-Grundy” as Proto-Baudrillardian Parable

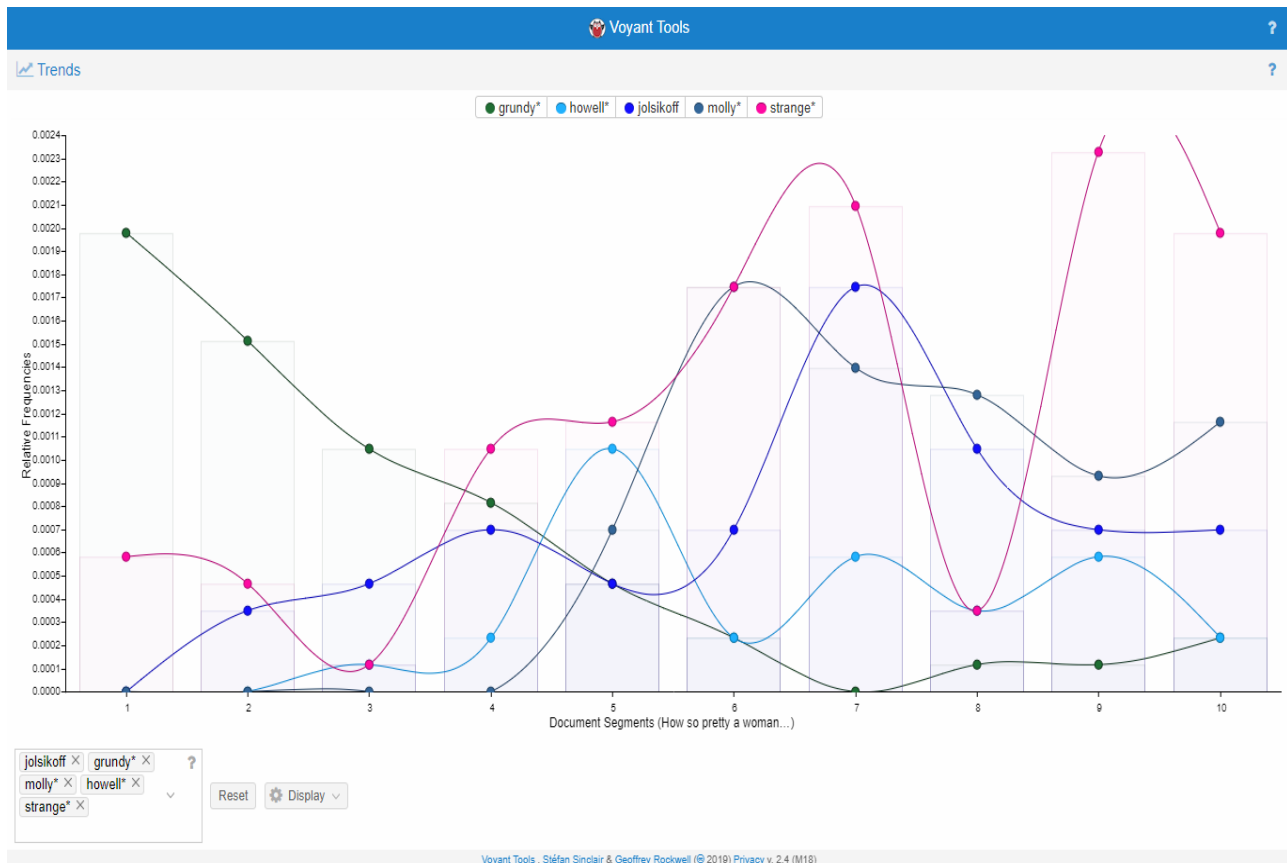
Morley Roberts’s “The Experience of Mrs. Patterson-Grundy” is an inferior potboiler, all too fit for *The Strand*, a middlebrow general interest periodical (Willis). It is repetitive, its characters are underdeveloped, and its jokes usually fall flat. Even the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography indicates that “[c]ritics agree that he [Roberts] wrote far too much and too quickly, his popularity with the average reader being acquired at the cost of quality” (Coustillas). The present story exemplifies Roberts’s populism, but it warrants closer consideration for two special reasons: it mocks Victorian priggishness while extolling adventurous albeit patriarchal romanticism (unsurprising, given Morley Roberts’s reputation as an avid traveler and mountaineer), and it explores the nature of play and identity fluidity, presaging the self-reflexivity of postmodern literature. Characters with suspicious names assume new personas, don costumes, invent identities for others, fumble in maintaining social illusions, and most importantly, play roles until they *become* those roles. Thus, “The Experience of Mrs. Patterson-Grundy” may be understood as both a proto-Baudrillardian exploration of the hyperreal in Edwardian romance and a patriarchal failure to create a gender-equitable simulation.

The most used word in the story is *said*, at 153 uses, and this should not surprise us, as the story contains quite a lot of speech, and Roberts values function over variety in his communicative verbiage, but more pertinently, the most used words after *said* are *Strange* (at 93), *Molly* (60), *Jolsikoff* (59), and *Patterson* (54).

dressing as Mephisto, Strange reveals something of his true essence; he has lured Mrs. Patterson-Grundy (a more passive, bemused counterpart of Faust) away from the humdrum moralizing of the play in order to expose her to a night of romance and adventure. On first reading this story, this author actually suspected that Strange would somehow abuse or take advantage of Mrs. Patterson-Grundy; her husband William had left her at the play with Miss Catesby, a cousin of the playwright, and Strange's luring her away under the pretence of protecting her from a Russian prince is a worrisome scenario. Thankfully, Strange is a philanthropist, and there is no foul play. St. John Howell (if that is his name) dresses as a Cavalier, an homage to the Royalist supporters of Charles I, specifically the Cavalier poets like Herrick, Lovelace, and Suckling. Strange weirdly describes Howell as "very mad" in a private letter whereafter the man proves that he is quite bland. Strange's claim that Howell is a secret government agent for whom he ghostwrites poetry remains unverified, though we can reasonably assume that it is spurious.

As for Mrs. Patterson-Grundy herself, she briefly plays the role of Lady Strange (one suspects that Strange is a bachelor) before the narrator reveals that her Christian name is Millicent, a fact unknown to Strange, Howell, and Villiers, to whom she is "Mrs. Patterson-Grundy, *alias* Queen Mary, *alias* Milly [which they never once call her] or Molly [which is what they most often call her]" (409). Molly is once spelled "Mollie" in the original printing, but this is more likely an editorial error than a deliberate ambiguity. After she is dressed up as Queen Mary, the narrator only once refers to her as Millicent in an aside, and we suspect that Roberts only ever mentions her Christian name to avoid having to write out Mrs. Patterson-Grundy every time, but according to *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names*, Millicent derives from the Old French *Melisende*, from the Germanic *amal* [work] and *swinth* [strength] (Withycombe), which could be an elaborate irony, given that Millicent is generally dull and

submissive; she never discovers that the night of romance is at least partly a simulation, which is to say that her gullible perspective renders the experience real.



As has been noted, the surname *Strange* is the most used name in the text, by a significant margin. Its use steadily increases from segments 3–7, drops significantly in segment 8 (during the exchange between Molly and Jolsikoff), then soars to its most uses in segment 9 during the rescue scene and remains well-used in segment 10, when Strange describes the regularity of his “philanthropic” activities. *Grundy*, the second half of Millicent’s surname, is used very frequently in segment 1, when the reader is first becoming acquainted with the Patterson-Grundys, but then plummets thereafter, not being used at all right before Molly’s abduction by Villiers-Jolsikoff, then being used only sparsely till the end. The use of the nickname *Molly* significantly increases after its introduction in segment 4 as *Grundy* continues

its downward trend into non-use then intermittent use. This is significant, because Strange invented Queen Mary *alias* Molly or Mollie or Milly, not even knowing Millicent's Christian name and only referring to her as "Mrs. Patterson-Grundy" no more than four times. Strange and Howell reinforce Millicent's new identity by repeatedly referring to her as Molly and expressing a suspiciously cloying admiration for her, as neither of them knows her well at all and Strange later reveals that he regularly guides unwitting subjects (of which Millicent is only one) through similar 'reformatory' simulations, so it is not beyond conjecture that Strange and Howell are playing up their attraction to Millicent for the sake of the experience. Strange's improvisatory ability may be slipping when he says to Howell, "If you say a disrespectful word to her, St. John, I will kill you with a—with a—a soup-tureen" (407). As Millicent dances with Strange at the masquerade, he says, "You've had wrong ideas of life, my child [infantilizing a grown woman, possibly with ecclesiastical undertones]. Very wrong ideas. Life is no milk and seed-cake, nor is South Kensington [Millicent's residence] the ultimate refuge for humanity. Life is strange and mad. We are surrounded by Jolsikoffs; the universe itself is Jolsikoffian. There is no escape from the nature of things. Ask St. John Howell. Inquire of Jolsikoff himself when he speaks to you" (408). This is either proper stuff, or metaphysics too sophisticated for this author, or else some mixture of the two, but oddly appropriate as a summation of this story's jaunty, playful romanticism.

That being said, Roberts-Strange's simulation does not receive high marks for gender progressivism, partly because Millicent is the embodiment of the archetypal, conventionally proprietous Mrs. Grundy, and partly because the simulation basically assumes that all ladies want to be rescued from dastards by handsome gallants and dressed up in costumes without being given much of a choice in the matter. We should have been surprised if Strange had

allowed Millicent to pick her own alter-ego and disguise or if he had otherwise designed the simulation to give Millicent more or less equal footing with the men, but, alack, the story was published in 1909, and Roberts was probably indulging a personal fantasy in composing it, so it is little wonder that he does not strive to depict a simulation of gender equity.

The linchpin of Strange's illusion is Montmorency Villiers, the melodramatic actor paid to play the unscrupulous Russian prince Jolsikoff, who is mad for Mrs. Patterson-Grundy's love. Strange and Howell leave Molly alone for a moment under the pretence of luring out Jolsikoff, and if the mix of reality (the masquerade and dinner) and simulation (Villiers playing the villain, Strange and Howell playing protectors) did not already qualify as hyperreal, Villiers becomes so invested in the role of Jolsikoff that he *becomes* Jolsikoff. He creates a microsimulation of his own, which involves assertions that he murdered Mr. Patterson-Grundy and that Strange is actually a burglar and Howell is actually a coiner and forger named Matthew Tubbs, and then hyperreality is triggered by Millicent's utterance of "I defy you!", which was a strong cue in one of the melodramas in which Villiers had featured, and so he lifts her over his shoulder and bears her off, the narrator indicating that "[t]he time, the night, that splendid supper, and the excitement of playing both a prince and a pirate had indeed wrought Montmorency Villiers up to and beyond concert pitch. He felt heroic, felt that he loved Molly dearly and was prepared to risk everything for her" (410). We are then told that "[i]t is almost impossible in real life, when it becomes exciting, to use three words which are not a melodramatic cue, which shows how near melodrama often comes to the facts," little anticipating a thesis on metatheatre and the adverse effects of method acting embedded in an Edwardian potboiler. Of course, Millicent has not cottoned on to the simulation and therefore cannot be expected to understand just what has happened within Villiers (whose real identity she never learns), and she screams, but the sound is

drowned out by the orchestra, so it takes longer for Strange and Howell to discover that she has been abducted. Strange's response to this discovery is a positively befuddling "I'll murder Jolsikoff in reality!" Strange and Howell, after playing protectors, find that they must become actual rescuers before Villiers-Jolsikoff really outdoes himself.

After the two break down the door, Villiers-Jolsikoff lifts Howell and throws him into Strange, contributes to the lexicon of Millicent's pseudonyms by calling her "Patricia," is eventually overpowered, rises again, lifts Millicent again, then slips, after which Strange catches the fainting Millicent while declaring that "[a]ll is well." She wakes in Strange's chauffeured car, *en route* to her house in South Kensington; it is not explained how he knows her address. Strange reveals that he is a "missionary" who regularly shows inexperienced and sheltered persons what life is or what life is not: "it matters little which" (411). We learn that he intends to abduct a millionaire, show him the worst parts of London, and severely injure him so that he will be treated in the casualty ward of London Hospital. He bids Millicent farewell, shows her to her doorstep, then leaves in his car. Millicent reflects wistfully on the night's events, enters her home, hides her costume, speaks a moment with her half-asleep husband, then creeps into bed, where she holds "Romance close to her beating heart" (411).

If we believe the Prince of Denmark when he claims that the purpose of playing "was and is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature" (3.2), then it stands to reason that the romantic Roberts-Strange should take issue with "Mrs. Brown's Repentance," the tedious, moralistic play whose shoddy representation of nature causes him to twist, groan, and arrange for Mrs. Patterson-Grundy to play a role in a wild, melodramatic simulation of his own making. The story may be aesthetically scant and more than a little patriarchal, but its fanciful, actorly metaphysics and undaunted romanticism ought to redeem it from critical oblivion.

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