Literary and Cultural Intersections
during the Long Eighteenth Century
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Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

It is undeniable that eighteenth-century English literature greatly contributed to the unprecedented atmosphere of major political, cultural and social change which led to the revolutions at end of the century. In fact, although both the American and French revolutions upset the equilibrium and certainties acquired during the Enlightenment, they clearly represented the climax of a series of tensions that had been developing throughout the century. The origins of the long, cultural passage from the golden Augustan past and the pre-Romantic and Romantic outbursts of passion and national sentiment were undoubtedly rooted in the 1688 Glorious Revolution. Following this, culture and literature, indeed intellectual life as a whole, in Britain were characterized by complex internal tensions as well as influenced by events taking place in France and Europe at the time. Both the complexity of this period and its attraction is manifest in the philosophical and aesthetic thinking of the time. Enlightened reason was often paired with, but more frequently eclipsed by, the ambiguity of the senses and the strength of passion and feelings. Thus, reason never established absolute dominion throughout the century: in fact, it was tormented by restlessness, doubt, irrationality, witticism, irony, and not least, eroticism.

Furthermore, the diffusion of periodicals and newspapers, which formed the basis of public conversation in urban coffee-houses, functioned as a vehicle for the dispersion of works which publicly reflected a private society in the process of transformation. The focus on this change and the circulation of new ideas on taste and polite society as well as on culture and literature can be found in the continual intertwining between the public and the private spheres of society. Firstly, the rituals of country life became replaced by the stage of London, considered the centre of public opinion and visibility, and secondly, the clubs in existence at the beginning of the century were gradually being expanded to include the amusement of coffee-houses, pleasure gardens and theatres, where self-display became a prerequisite for a much coveted “entrance into the world.”

Hume’s theories and the studies conducted by Jürgen Habermas into the mechanisms of the public sphere, however, tend to leave some important questions unanswered, especially when we consider this issue
from a gendered perspective. The way Habermas imagined two separate spheres; the stereotype of the public world associated with the male universe versus the private, exclusively female sphere, belongs to a critical approach which has been in question since the end of the 1980s, when the concept of overlapping spheres was introduced, suggesting that the presence of women was actually of primary importance in literary debates and erudite conversations.1 In addition to the traditional eighteenth-century distinction between public and private spheres of society (or male and female roles in society as well as in the literary marketplace), the concept of a literary “canon” and its concomitant boundaries have become decisively blurred to contemporary scholars and readers. Thus, the main objective of this collection of original, unpublished essays by young international scholars in the extremely interesting and still-to-be-fully-explored field of eighteenth-century studies is to offer new directions to a research inaugurated by Paula Backscheider and Timothy Dykstal in 1996.

The aim of the first part of this collection of essays is to investigate the dynamics of these “overlapping” spheres through new readings of eighteenth-century literary works which not only analysed the mechanisms of the public and private spheres, but also highlighted some remarkable cultural features, including clothing and fashion, as in Amanda Spuckler’s essay on costuming in Charlotte Lennox’s The Female Quixote; gossip, as highlighted by Jack Shear in his contribution on Tom Jones; and gender issues, of which the essays here presented for the first time by Riccardo Capoferro, Susan Mc-Neill-Bindon and Kathleen Tamayo offer a further, interesting analysis.

In her essay, Amanda Spuckler claims that the eccentricity in the female protagonist’s choice of clothing in Lennox’s novel signals her rejection of a society that regards women as “ornamental.” She argues, that Lennox used Arabella’s original and unconventional dress as a means to discuss and criticize eighteenth-century gender divisions and to challenge popular fashion as dictating a taste which repressed female desire. Jack Shear’s study on the importance and the role of “idle talk” in Tom Jones introduces gossip as a literary device, a medium of communication, that merges the private and the public spheres of discourse, embodying a social process of interaction between private talk and public conversation. And, from a similar perspective, Susan McNeill-Bindon’s essay transfers public and private spaces into the urban space of

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London, where the heroine of Sarah Fielding’s *The History of Ophelia*, who comes from the pace of a life led in accordance with the natural world of Wales, struggles with the new “city codes” of behaviour that govern emotional interactions in the city. In a model of socialization that Fielding describes so accurately, McNeill-Bindon argues, that such “juxtaposition of natural and constructed spaces” exposes the extent to which Ophelia is constantly observed (“surveilled,” in Susan McNeill-Bindon’s words), both in public and in private, thus demonstrating that even bodies and feelings are submitted to a process of constant evaluation.

Kathleen Tamayo’s essay interestingly focuses on Swift’s scatological poems in which his male characters observe the private spaces of women’s dressing rooms, noting the disjunction between the “public physical perfection” of the female and the “covert griminess” of the female in private. The process under analysis is that of unmasking idealization, a process which Tamayo investigates and recognizes as the empirical method that links Swift to the physical examination promoted by the learned men of the Royal Society. Finally, the first part of this volume concludes with Capoferro’s work on Lady Mary Montagu, in which he centres on the way in which *Turkish Embassy Letters*’ contamination of genres informs, and to a large extent enables, their gender critique. Capoferro convincingly shows how, unlike most Enlightenment travelogues, Montagu’s *Letters* are deeply aware of the way in which gender conventions influence the production of knowledge, implying that Montagu’s feminine viewpoint helped her broaden the *Letters*’ empirical perspective.

As suggested by the title, the second part of the collection will expand on the principal idea of “intersections” in eighteenth-century English literature: from the intersections linking the public and private spheres of British society, to those between eighteenth-century works within the British literary canon, taking into account the influence of European thought. The purpose of the second group of essays, such as Sharon M. Hekman’s essay on Thomson’s *Seasons*, is thus that of offering fresh perspectives and a re-evaluation of literary and cultural reciprocal exchanges in order to better locate or re-locate canonical works within the eighteenth-century British literary tradition. Through a judicious analysis and close reading of James Thomson’s poetical work and W. Hinchcliffe’s *Seasons*, Hekman both proposes a radical re-evaluation and successfully presents a re-interpretation of Thomson’s own *Seasons*. Hekman’s innovative viewpoint on the origins of *The Seasons* raises an unexpected variety of issues concerning Thomson’s precedents as well as his own style, and at the same time, challenges the canon of criticism on Thomson.
Introduction

My essay on the relationship between the Italian writer Giuseppe Baretti and Hester Lynch Piozzi, and Maria Rita Coppotelli’s study on Italian opera and libretti in Britain in the first half of the eighteenth century both focus on the presence of Italian intellectuals in the British literary and cultural context, yet from two different points of view. My contribution centres on Giuseppe Baretti’s literary battle with Hester Lynch Piozzi, with the aim of highlighting Piozzi’s responses to Baretti’s invectives against her and her work as a means to interpret her uneasiness concerning her position as a professional writer in a world of letters dominated by men. Coppotelli’s essay offers instead an overview of the influence and popularity of Italian opera and libretti in Britain, which not only excited interest and indeed came into great fashion, but also urged a British response, as exemplified by Joseph Addison’s articles and opinions.

Finally, through Franca Dellarosa’s contribution, the British colonial world is also brought into the range of our research. Her essay, which is the starting point for an original, wider project she is currently developing, analyses the success met in Britain by several versions of Jack Mansong’s story, a runaway African slave in Jamaica also known as “Obi” or “Three-Fingered Jack.” Dellarosa describes in detail the diverse stage adaptations of Obi’s adventures in order to show that idyllic representations of the colonial plantations were indeed a way to exorcise the growing anxiety concerning the emerging concept of colonialism in public opinion in Britain, as well as about possible slave revolts in the colonies.

Brought together in one volume, these essays offer a small, but representative example of the multifaceted cultural and literary scene of eighteenth-century Britain, enriching, with the diversity and energy of their perspectives, the critical assessment of a literary period that undoubtedly remains fascinating due to both its complexity and significance.

Works Cited


PART I
Arabella, the heroine of Charlotte Lennox’s novel *The Female Quixote* believes that she is a heroine like those she reads about in her collection of French romances. Raised in isolation by her father the Marquis, the beautiful young heiress’s favorite diversion is the perusal and study of these books: as a result of her lack of interaction with the outside world, romances become the filter through which she views reality. This devotion to the conventions of romance also extends to her ornamental style of speech and her unusual sartorial choices that are so far from the vogue that they appear as costuming to other characters. She firmly believes in the empire of love that gives her the power of life, death and banishment to anyone who admires her. As Arabella slowly becomes introduced to society beyond the confines of her father’s estate, her unconventional behavior makes her an object of ridicule and sport for others and a source of constant embarrassment for her cousin, suitor, and ultimately, husband, Glanville, who fears her being “exposed.” That to which Arabella exposes herself and others is far more than ridicule, but the foolishness of many eighteenth-century social standards. For Arabella, her reliance on romantic conventions constrains her expression of the passions but also allows her to give her desires expression in a way that other women in the novel are unable to. Although members of both sexes have difficulty understanding Arabella’s ornamental speech and frequent digressions into the realms of romances, women seem more troubled by her lack of adherence to convention than men since they cannot tell by her dress if she is someone worthy of their notice, based upon rank. For men, Arabella’s dress inspires admiration and the desire to see more of her lovely face even if her speech causes confusion; however, in spite of her own generosity of sentiments towards her own sex, Arabella invokes far more passionate responses in
women who feel envious of her attention-grabbing clothing. In turn, Arabella cannot place other women on a social or emotional continuum based on their own clothing choices, relying instead upon physical beauty as the basis of her opinions. In the novel, Arabella’s dress enables her to remain socially ambiguous and allows her more freedom of expressing certain passions and hiding others, at the same time, her lack of knowledge of eighteenth-century convention surrounding attire effects her inability to understand other characters’ passions and clothing choices.

Dress and appearances affect Arabella’s perception of others in the novel as well as their understanding of her. Clothing has its own semiotic importance and code that requires an individual to be familiar with it in order for it to be understood.¹ The code is entirely socially-constructed leaving Arabella at a disadvantage when confronted with fashionable society. Furthermore, the eighteenth century witnessed a change in society; it now promoted being à la mode and this soon diffused to the middle classes.² Someone of Arabella’s rank and wealth would be expected to be familiar with the latest fashions, the typical costuming indicating wealth, the desire for male attention, and worldliness.³ The elaborateness of the clothing, in particular the hoop skirt, is indicative of a society in which women were largely ornamental and emotionally immobilized by unwieldy clothing. Arabella’s non conformance with popular fashion is an attempt to reject a society that would dictate the expression of her desires. Furthermore, her outlandish costuming reflects her reluctance to become a typical upper-class woman, obsessed with fashion and scandal, as well as her refusal to undermine other women in order to gain male attention.

In spite of Arabella’s stringent expectations of her admirers and her passive attitude, she, like other women in the novel, desires romantic conquests that validate her significance and power. Trapped by her father, the Marquis, in a rural retreat, she looks at her image in a mirror and “often complained of the Insensitivity of Mankind upon who her Charms seem to have so little Influence” and “could not comprehend, how any Solitude could be obscure enough to conceal a Beauty like hers from Notice; and thought the Reputation of her Charms sufficient to bring a

¹ Roland Barthes’s work is important in understanding the semiotic relationships between clothing and language. See Barthes, The Fashion System, and Elements of Semiology.
² For a further discussion of the importance of fashion and its dissemination in eighteenth-century England see McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb, The Birth of a Consumer Society, esp. 34-98.
³ See Barthes, Mythologies.
Croud of Adorers to demand her of her Father.” In the style of romance, Arabella expects the admirers to be drawn to her, allowing her to seem immovable and disdainful of them and to banish them whenever they declare their love for her. The countryside acts like a veil to hide Arabella’s charms from the outside world, including London society; a milieu to which her cousins belong and later introduce her. The veil prevents Arabella’s passions from being observed and understood by others, leaving her desire and expectations for admirers and conquests unknown except to her loyal servant and confidante, Lucy.

When Arabella is finally presented with an admirer, she adheres to her romantic principles in both behavior and dress in order to veil her emotional response and place a barrier between herself and the potential suitor. A visiting gentleman, Mr. Hervey, notices her not only for her beauty, but also for her unusual manner of dress: a gown that is fitted tightly to her body like a robe and her hair which is styled in curls around her neck, quite different from the conventional hooped skirt and the popular style of having the hair piled upon the head. Furthermore, Arabella deliberately sets herself apart by wearing a veil, which the novel goes to great lengths to emphasize as unfashionable: a style indicative of Arabella’s refusal to conform. Although Arabella is “pleased with the unusual Appearance of so fine a Gentleman and the particular Notice he took of her,” she uses her veil to deflect the very attention that she wishes to attract. To Arabella,

This Veil has never appeared to her so necessary before. Mr. Hervey’s eager Glances threw her into so much Confusion that, pulling it over her Face as much as she was able she remained invisible to him all the time they afterwards stayed in the Church. This Action, by which she would have had him understand that she was displeased at his gazing on her with so little Respect, only increased his Curiosity to know who she was.

The veil serves to mask her confusion expressed through “modest blushes” that also reflect her desire to be observed with admiration by a man: a man that she too admires, judging him based upon fine appearances. On returning from church, Arabella’s thoughts are consumed by Mr. Hervey whom she believes to be passionately in love with her and she feels disappointment when he does not make an attempt upon her. When she receives a letter from the gentleman, “she is not displeased” but

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5 Ibid., 9.
6 Ibid., 9.
forces her maid Lucy to deliver it back to him unopened due to her French romantic script that forbids her from accepting a letter from a man. Arabella will not allow herself to express any pleasure at having a suitor, yet still enjoys the attention in spite of the veil that she places between her emotions and the world. Her blushes reveal the very pleasure that her stern tone with Lucy tries to conceal from everyone, including herself. Mr. Hervey misunderstands Arabella’s motives for hiding her face, believing her to be flirting, unaware of the dress of romantic heroines. In her work on masquerades during the eighteenth century, Terry Castle notes that “Masks had always held risqué connotations. Conventional wisdom held that someone donning a mask, especially a woman, experienced an abrupt loss of sexual inhibition.” Indeed, the veil causes Mr. Hervey to misunderstand Arabella’s covering, reading it as a sign of sexual availability and her willingness to end her country confinement through marriage. He believes she wishes to free herself both from the confines of her physical environment as well as the emotional restrictions placed upon her by being unable to express pleasure at being admired or desire for a man to admire her. As a result, when Mr. Hervey finally approaches her, she reacts in horror, accusing him of being a ravisher, causing him much confusion owing to his lack of knowledge of romance.

Arabella’s appearance inspires both admiration and jealousy and, rather than the empire of love, this is the true source of her power. Her words are incomprehensible to most listeners due to her borrowings from the language of romance. Arabella’s uncle, Sir Charles, believes her to be in a delirium and rude when he hears her mourning for her father in hyperbolic, extravagant terms followed by her defense of romances as containing “true” events. However, his opinion of her as out of her senses is soon obliterated as he sees “her deep Mourning, and the black Gawfe which covered Part of her fair Face, was so advantageous to her Shape and Complexion, that Sir Charles … was stuck with an extreme Surprize at her Beauty” whilst her suitor Glanvile gazes at her passionately. Analogous to how the veil partially hides her tears from the observation of others, Arabella uses the language of romance to both convey her grief as well as to deflect it. Her language conceals her mourning by being misunderstood.

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1 For a more thorough discussion of the importance of blushes in the novel see Nussbaum, Torrid Zones, 120-4.
2 Castle, Masquerade and Civilization, 39.
3 Lennox, The Female Quixote, 60. Mourning clothing in the eighteenth century was often fashionable and garments were deliberately chosen because they were flattering. Arabella’s wearing of mourning clothes to her advantage is not unique. See Buck, Dress in Eighteenth-Century England, 60-3.
with many references to the even deeper mourning of characters in her beloved stories. The conversation between her and Sir Charles is sidetracked from her father’s death into a heated conversation about the credibility and value of romance, for which Arabella displays more “genuine” emotion than when discussing her father’s passing. Sir Charles and Glanville, however, are able to excuse Arabella’s foible and rudeness because of her beauty that disarms them far more effectively than her claims to rule in the empire of love.

Arabella’s costuming and language also allow her to deflect her true sentiments about her cousin and suitor, Glanville, and allow her to feel a sense of power over him as well as be able to indulge in bloodthirsty sentiments of power. Following her romantic script, she refuses to let him speak to her of love and marriage but is willing to accept any other flattery he wishes to bestow on her. While being the sole woman to join Glanville and other men on a hunt she averts his attentions by both her dress and her speech. For the hunt she dresses so:

Her Shape being as perfect as any Shape could possibly be, her Riding-habit discovered all its Beauties: Her Hat, and the white Feather waving over Part of her fine black Hair, gave a peculiar Charm to her lovely Face.10

Although Arabella maintains her femininity in her choice of riding habit, the outfit was criticized during the eighteenth century as being too masculine due to its similarity to a jacket worn by men.11 The hunt, considered a masculine exercise, allows Arabella to give vent to the fierce sentiments she has acquired from romances when she and Glanville again encounter Mr. Hervey. Arabella still views him as a potential ravisher and wishes for Glanville to prove his bravery to her by attacking him, aggressively using him as a weapon to enforce the dominion of the empire of love. Glanville leaps to her defense with his sword, also protecting himself from Hervey’s ridicule of her romantic notions. Arabella’s misreading of the situation allows her to rejoice in his bravery, informing her uncle with a sigh that Glanville “is, haply, shedding the last Drop of his Blood in my Quarrel … [and] if it be the Will of Heaven he should fall in this Combat … he can never have a more glorious Destiny.”12

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12 Lennox, *The Female Quixote*, 158.
of Glanville’s battle also indirectly reveals her true feelings for him. She informs her enraged uncle “that her Cousin’s Safety was not so indifferent to her as he imagined: and that she did not hate him so much, but that his Death would affect her very sensibly.”\textsuperscript{13} Based on the conventions of romance, the admission that she does not hate her cousin is tantamount to an admission of love, causing her to blush with shame. Her words, however, continue to be misunderstood by her uncle who feels that she has forgotten “the gentleness of her sex” while so costumed.\textsuperscript{14} The heroics of romance allow her to co-opt violence as a veil to hide her affection for Glanville even as her costuming contributes to people’s misunderstanding of her.

Similarly, in the solitude of her mourning the death of her father, Arabella makes mistakes based on appearances and what people choose to veil from the world, believing that women are able to be open with each other. At the country church, Arabella makes the acquaintance of Miss Groves and her attendant, and invites her to stay at the castle, the invitation being based solely upon her appearance:

\begin{quotation}
Very magnificently dressed: tho’ she did not seem to be more than eighteen Years of Age, her Stature was above the ordinary Size of Women; and being rather too plump to be delicate, her Mein was so majestic, and such an Air of Grandeur was diffused over her whole Person, joined to the Charms of a very lovely Face [and additionally] thought she saw a great Appearance of Melancholy in her Eyes, which filled her with a generous Concern for the Misfortunes of so admirable a person.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quotation}

The woman’s rich clothing and regal appearance blinds Arabella to her true character since the whole basis of Arabella’s opinion of Miss Groves as admirable comes from her appearance; she is immediately attracted to her lovely face and majestic person. She misreads the melancholy in the other girl’s eyes and construes her as a heroine like herself, not questioning why someone of her own rank would visit such an isolated location. Miss Groves is not like Arabella, however, and possesses artifice that comes from being “perfectly versed in the Modes of Town-Breeding, and nothing-meaning Ceremony;” so her tongue is tied in the presence of Arabella, whose version of ceremony is with the “native Elegance and Simplicity of her Manners [that] were accompanied with so much real

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 160.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 160.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 167.
Benevolence of Heart.” Miss Groves’s silence and impressive appearance hides what the novel calls “an absence of mind” and a scandalous love affair that resulted in two illegitimate children by a man who seduces using soft appearances. Arabella cannot see through the fine costuming to the less than virtuous woman inside it. She is unable to understand “a topology of costume, the controlling figure was the antithesis: one was obliged to impersonate a being opposite, in some essential feature to oneself” or not all beautiful women are as virtuous as they present themselves. Later, however, when informed of Miss Groves’s “history” she is able to reconcile and reinterpret the story so her virtue remains intact. Similarly, Miss Groves cannot penetrate Arabella’s speeches and simple manners or the lack of costuming of her sentiments regarding women, believing herself to be deceived by a girl wanting to delight in her scandal just as her lover fooled her by disguising his lustful desires with tenderness.

As the veil of her isolation lifts and Arabella becomes unveiled to society, her foibles and passions become more pronounced, especially as the novel begins to draw comparisons between Arabella and other women. When Glanville’s sister Charlotte is introduced to the novel she serves as a contrast to Arabella’s veiled emotions and romantic values. Charlotte veils her sentiments in whatever the prevailing social attitudes are and is much more open in her attitudes towards lovers. The novel continually asserts Arabella’s superiority to Charlotte based on beauty, intelligence, fortune, and sweetness of temper. Charlotte is presented as an upper-class woman at her worst—shallow and petty with only vain and silly pursuits to occupy her day. She is jealous of her country cousin because she “was fond Beauty in none of her own sex but herself” and fears the consequent loss of male attention when presented with Arabella in public. She is unable to understand her cousin’s kindness and compliments on her beauty because of her belief that all women desire to make conquests and compete with each other for male attention. Having never read romances she does not realize that Arabella is following the behaviors she has absorbed from these stories, since “Heroines … knew not what Envy or Emulation meant,” and believes her cousin to be making a mockery of

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16 Ibid., 68. Italics from the text.
18 Arabella is not insane and sees what everyone else sees. She differs in the matter of interpretation and is far more likely to engage in literal interpretations of events than other characters. See Motooka, *The Age of Reasons*, 125-41.
Charlotte reveals her vanity upon her arrival at the castle by “adjusting her dress in the glass” and does so again to ensure she is charmingly attired for men who are observing her. While Arabella too has gazed at herself in the mirror, it is not to adjust others’ perceptions of her but to confirm her own belief in her beauty that makes her worthy of being a heroine of romance. The difference between the cousins’ appearances is further illustrated as Charlotte “spent four long Hours in dressing herself to the greatest Advantage, in order if possible to eclipse her lovely Cousin, those Mourning, being much deeper, was less capable of Ornaments.” Her dress is meant to attract the male gaze and, in turn, declarations of love. Indeed, for Charlotte, clothing is a means of signaling wealth and availability. Arabella’s veiling and unusual sartorial choices are meant to deflect the male gaze but ironically, the uniqueness of her costuming in actuality commands more notice than Charlotte’s more conventional dress.

In addition to wearing clothing that more clearly indicates her social position, Charlotte’s emotions are less hidden than those of Arabella and are less refined. Charlotte tries to hide her passionate jealousy of other women and secretly feels “malicious pleasure” when Arabella subjects herself to ridicule. Her brother’s insistence that Arabella not be mocked in his presence, and the sentiments of her acquaintances towards the eccentric beauty, if favorable, however, reinforce her need to hide her sneers and disguise them with seemingly thoughtful regard. She delights in new conquests and cannot think of a greater pleasure than stealing other women’s lovers, unlike Arabella who would not have a man as a suitor who is tainted by a previous love to stain her glory. In her relations with men, Charlotte is also quite clear about her feelings, explaining to her cousin that it is perfectly acceptable to allow a man to speak of love, kiss a woman’s hand, to accept letters from him, and spend a few minutes alone with him. Charlotte even goes as far as to admit that she kissed a man “with great confusion;” an act regarded as criminal by Arabella. Charlotte defends herself by stating “all those innocent Liberties … may be taken by any Woman, without giving the World room to censure her.”

Arabella, who takes her cues from romance rather than the appearances which society demands, feels it is perfectly acceptable to visit a man who

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20 Ibid., 80.
21 Ibid., 80.
22 Ibid., 83.
23 Ibid., 322.
24 Ibid., 89.
25 Ibid., 185.
Amanda Spuckler

is not a close relation on his sick bed and that society’s prohibition against the practice of the ancients is an “affected niceness” when compared to the liberties that Charlotte allows herself. To Arabella there is no such thing as an ulterior design therefore she feels no reason to disguise her visit. Charlotte’s private moments with men and women consist of an artifice or disguise with which Arabella cannot abide, unaware of the disguises and costumes that govern the outside world. Furthermore, Arabella’s costuming allows her to identify so fully with romantic heroines that she is able to broach eighteenth-century gender divisions and live out the policies of another era.

Men and women continue to misread Arabella based upon her romantic views and costuming. When in Bath with her uncle and cousins, Arabella’s unfashionable choices are brought to the forefront in a place that concerns itself with gossip and appearances. She emerges in the pump room wearing a veil that covers her face and drapes down to her waist rather than the more popular cap or hood. Women judge her to be a “strange creature” and “ridiculous” at the same time:

The Men were struck with her Figure, veiled as she was: her fine Stature, the beautiful Turn of her Person, the Grace and Elegance of her Motion, attracted all their Notice: the Phenomena of the Veil, however, gave them great Disturbance. So lovely a Person seemed to promise the Owner had a Face not unworthy of it; but that was totally hid from their View.

Arabella’s failure to conform to sartorial conventions and ability to draw attention causes more consternation among the women than the men. Rather than dwell on the inappropriateness of her costume, the men speculate that she is foreign born or has left the convent, “reading” her as exotic because of the attractiveness of her body. The women in their jealousy deem her ridiculous until finding out she is an heiress and someone of quality, which allows her to flaunt the conventions of dress and behavior. They cite prior examples, such as “Lady J-- T-- always wore her Ruffles reversed; the Countess of-- went to Court in a Farthingale; the Duchess of-- sat astride upon a Horse,” whilst the men are even more pleased to find out Arabella is an heiress and find “greater beauties to admire in her person.”

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26 Ibid., 185.
28 Lennox, *The Female Quixote*, 263.
29 Ibid., 264, 263.
Based upon what little they can view of her physical appearance, both groups have preconceived ideas of her: the men view her favorably based upon desire for her person and her fortune, whilst the women allow her to be eccentric based on her status and fortune rather than her physical attractiveness.

The real triumph of Arabella’s costuming at Bath, however, is her attendance at a ball where it is speculated that she will appear very foolish for rejecting the modern style of that month in favour of one she believes was worn two thousand years ago. Following the example of the heroines of romance, Arabella indeed rejects what is most fashionable but in favour of a more flattering costuming. For her ball gown,

She wore no Hoop, and the Blue and Silver Stuff of her Robe was only kept by its own Richness, from hanging close about her. It was quite open round her Breast, which was shaded with a rich Border of Lace; and clasping close to her Waist, by a small Knots of Diamonds, descended in a sweeping Train on the Ground ... Her Hair, which fell in very easy Ringlets on her Neck, was plac’d with great Care and Exactness round her lovely Face; and the Jewels and Ribbons, which were all her Head-dress, dispos’d to the greatest Advantage.30

Her attire is somewhat unconventional, due in part to the lack of a hoop, which although not necessary for a ball was still the norm.31 Her deviation from convention is further emphasized by her lack of head covering. Her deliberate refusal to amend to modern fashions signals her unwillingness to conform to the prevailing social modes of courtship and behavior. The dress is modelled after that worn by Princess Julia of Rome, whom Arabella believes to be a virtuous and chaste heroine; another visitor to Bath points out, however, that she was remembered in history as a prostitute. Not unlike Miss Groves’s, who assumes the guise of a virtuous woman, Arabella’s dress is in effect costuming, since as a woman of rigorous virtue she assumes the clothes of a woman the exact opposite to her in character, thereby disrupting the semiotic understanding of clothing. Clothing fails to indicate character and challenges societal expectations. However, she is able to transcend the expected diversion of the group because in spite of her garb, “Her noble Air, the native Dignity in her Looks, the inexpressible Grace which accompany’d all her Motions, and the consummate Loveliness of her Form drew the Admiration of the

30 Ibid., 271.
whole Assembly.” The novel implies that Arabella’s own inner being combined with her attractiveness is able to transcend the language of clothing.

Arabella is as reliant on the language of clothing and costuming as other characters but interprets it differently from the rest of fashionable society. When finally brought to London by her cousins, her visit is deemed incomplete without a trip to the Vauxhall pleasure gardens, which exposes her to people beyond the small circle of gentry and aristocrats of her cousin’s acquaintance at Bath or the peasants of her own rural castle retreat. At the gardens she encounters far less respect than in Bath, because “The Singularity of her Dress, for she was cover’d with her Veil, drew a Number of Gazers after her, who prest around her with so little Respect, that she was greatly embarrass’d.” With her unusual costuming she does not blend in with the other attendees of the gardens nor is her status in the social continuum transparent. Her failure to properly signal her identity through clothing places her in a position of some discomfort, unaware that heroines can become an object of curiosity for the common rabble. She is only accorded respect when the veil drops from her face and the crowds are struck by “the Charms of her Face, join’d to the Majesty of her Person.” Arabella is not respected because she is a heroine but because of her attractiveness. The majesty of her person alone did not cause the crowds to give her respect but the sight of her face. The visit to the gardens culminates in Arabella’s most glaring error in misunderstanding eighteenth-century fashion norms. During her visit an incident occurs surrounding a young woman wearing men’s clothing whose true sex is discovered when challenged by a man with a drawn sword. Although the sight entertains the crowd, Arabella believes her to be a heroine like herself since in French romances many women disguised themselves as men. However, Arabella’s cousins understand the girl to be a prostitute based on her company and her failure to follow the strict gender norms of the eighteenth century. For Arabella none of this matters because she was really extremely pretty that Arabella was equally struck with Compassion and Admiration for her. The girl’s beauty confirms to Arabella her status as a heroine and Arabella is charmed in a way not dissimilar to that in which men are charmed by her own beauty. The moment Arabella grasps the girl’s hand to lead her away from her “rival” suitors indicates a connection between the two women. Felicity

33 Ibid., 334.
34 Ibid., 335.
35 Ibid., 335.
Nussbaum believes that the distance between these women’s experiences are not that vast, and she writes: “the rout about the cross-dressed prostitute suggests that uncovering her sexualized body is a radically transgressive activity.” This paradigmatic moment of recognition of alignment with the prostitute leads to Arabella’s “exposure” and the novel’s hasty retreat from the impertinence of a woman’s recognizing herself in the face and the body of a whore and aligning herself with her. The nakedness of the prostitute’s body, without a veil or a blush, connects these women in socially unacceptable ways and reminds the polite world of its suppressed torrid zones as romance veers perilously close to pornography. The connection Arabella makes with the prostitute emphasizes that the power of young women in the novel, such as Miss Glanville, Miss Groves, and Arabella herself, is based upon the empire of beauty rather than that of love, augmented with the social signifiers that clothing provides.

Arabella’s final mistakes put into motion the events that lead to her reformation of romance. Due to being unaccustomed to the poor air in London, she is sent away from her family to live in Richmond. There another suitor, Sir George, sets a plot in motion to use Arabella’s foible to his advantage by paying an actress to pretend to be a princess from Gaul and recount a story in the style of romance in order to convince Arabella that Glanville has been an unfaithful lover. To Arabella the girl’s story is believable since she uses the conventions and language of romance and “was really very pretty.” Similar to her encounters with Miss Groves and the prostitute, Arabella makes her judgment regarding honesty and virtue based upon attractiveness. However, the actress’s tales cause Arabella to lift the veil on her own emotions and disregard the script of romance. The story of Glanville’s alleged abandonment of another woman causes surprise:

Our charming Heroine, ignorant till now of the true State of her Heart, was surpriz’d to find it assaulted at one by all the Passions which attend disappointed Love. Grief, Rage, Jealousy, and Despair made so cruel a War in gentle Bosom, that unable to express or conceal the strong Emotions with which she was agitated, she gave Way to a violent Burst of Tears.

38 Ibid., 349.
The veil of romance begins to lift as Arabella realizes she may not be able to fit the part of an unaffected romance heroine and thus, in her jealousy, she begins to resemble the women of her time. In her desperation, she attempts to emulate the heroines of romance by escaping from men she believes to be ravishers by jumping into the Thames. Her realization that the ideal of romance, including judging other women by their beauty, is a false system, culminates in the clergyman’s reformation of Arabella through the use of logic. However, her conversion is only solidified through the efforts of her husband-to-be, Glanville, who insists that Sir George come and confess his misdeeds to her. Glanville hopes that the confession will “add to the Doctor’s solid Arguments the poignant Sting of Ridicule which she would then perceive she had incurred.”39 That there are no wandering princesses on earth searching for their lovers, reveals to Arabella that the romantic script in which she has veiled the world, is ultimately an untruth. She, by the men around her, is reduced to ridicule and only when she admits her unworthiness, does she finally become engaged to her beloved Glanville.40

In Charlotte Lennox’s novel *The Female Quixote* the clothing choices that individuals make are not always reflective of their social status or their true characters. Arabella is an heiress, a woman of great fortune that insists upon making unconventional choices about her apparel as well as about social rules. Arabella’s costuming allows her to physically mask her desire for admirers as well as obscure her standing as a marquis’s daughter and true heroine. Furthermore, her costuming causes her to be misunderstood by other characters who fail to understand romantic conventions, thus offering herself up to ridicule. Arabella also mistakenly believes that behind a well-dressed pretty face there is a heroine as rigorously virtuous as herself. The novel’s attitude towards fashion remains as complicated as its attitudes towards romance: the text approves of Arabella’s decision to ignore convention and wear the clothing most flattering to her. However, Arabella’s dress, like her romantic notions, is dangerous to society and the patriarchy and only through conforming in her choice of dress, will Arabella be treated as the heroine she believes herself to be.

39 Ibid., 382.
40 For an extended discussion of desire in the novel and Arabella’s “willingness to dwindle into a wife” see Spacks, *Desire and Truth*, 12-33.
Costuming to Divert and Redirect the Passions in Charlotte Lennox’s
The Female Quixote

Works Cited


THE READER’S IDLE TALK:
GOSSIP IN HENRY FIELDING’S *TOM JONES*

JACK SHEAR

There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.
—Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

For the characters in Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* “not being talked about” is an issue of no concern: idle talk abounds, and it is via the exchange of gossip that the supposed mother of Tom Jones comes to be “known” and brought before Mr. Allworthy, the same way in which the “truth” of Jenny Jones’s discharge from the Partridges’ service is made a public scandal, and how Molly Seagrim’s pregnancy becomes a “fact” of common currency. Though it is an often untrustworthy medium of communication, the pervasiveness of idle talk as an artefact of both real and fictive discourse does not escape without comment from the novel’s narrator: “Mankind has always taken great Delight in knowing and descanting on the Actions of others. Hence there have been in all Ages, and Nations, certain Places set apart for publick Rendezvous, where the Curious might meet and satisfy their mutual Curiosity.”

Within *Tom Jones*, this form of dissemination—“or, as it is called, Gossiping, in every Parish in England”—has two main, underlying components: pleasure and knowledge-play. The portrayal of gossip in the novel details the furtive gratification gained by exchanging information about other people; it is a “great Delight” that has the power to “satisfy” a mutual desire to trade common currency and social speculation. Gossip in *Tom Jones* also

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2 Ibid., 59.
3 In *Gossip*, Patricia Meyer Spacks assigns the pleasurable characteristics of gossip to the realm of the erotic: “Gossip, even when it avoids the sexual, bears about it a faint flavor of the erotic,” 11. Indeed, a consideration of the possible erotic quality of idle talk begins to elucidate its function as a discourse of power that re-affirms
contains an element of play that toys with the possibilities of social knowledge; the current of idle talk pushes against the limits of “knowing and descanting on the Actions of others” and accurately describes the “Curiosity” that attends finding and negotiating that limitation. Gossip seeks out and tests the boundaries of what can be said, what can be accepted as truth, and what constitutes public knowledge.

From the start of the novel, gossip maintains the dual function of knowledge-play and pleasurable exchange. After discovering an infant in Mr. Allworthy’s bed, Mrs. Wilkins and an elderly Matron gossip and speculate about who the child’s mother might be:

These two began presently to scrutinize the Characters of the several young Girls, who lived in any of those Houses, and at last fixed their strongest Suspicion on one Jenny Jones, who they both agreed was the likeliest Person to have committed this Fact.5

boundaries through the communal policing of the social sphere, even though the act of surveillance provides an illicit thrill for those discussing the breaches of others.

4 Despite the often negative connotations that are frequently attached to gossip as a social phenomenon, it conforms to all of the criteria that Johan Huizinga assigns to the more positively-construed idea of play: “Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is ‘different’ from ‘ordinary life,’” Homo Ludens, 47. Gossip, as a particular form of play that I term knowledge-play, is a voluntary social activity that possesses its own discursive rules and communal limits; it carries with it an illicit tension or joy and it is “different” from the conversation of “ordinary life” in that its rules pierce the divide between the public and private spheres. Gossip subjects public figures to the vagaries of private talk that is not regulated by the operative norms of general discussion. Furthermore, idle talk’s spatial and temporal aspects recurrently trouble the public-private division. As Michael McKeon notes, the word “gossip” is derived from “god-sib” or “god-sibling,” “a woman invited to witness the birth for the purpose of the later baptism,” Secret History, 233. This lexical origin is telling—gossip originates from a spatialized hybrid of the private and public spheres; in the eighteenth century childbirth “was a ‘private,’ but also an emphatically collective, activity,” McKeon, Secret History, 233. Although idle talk often takes place within the less-regulated sanctity of a private space, it displays a marked tendency to transcend its sequestered origins and become an item of public examination. Indeed, in its entrance into the public sphere from the private, gossip challenges the notion of relegating information to either of the two separate spheres of discourse and calls into question the solidity of the distinction between within and without.

5 Fielding, Tom Jones, 34.
This episode illustrates the perverse pleasure that the two women take in poring over the potential candidates and how conjecture about what can be known about other people is central to the discourse of gossip. The discrepancies that set Jenny apart from the other young women in the neighbourhood—her natural intelligence, an education above what is expected of her station, and her recent acquisition of a silk gown and laced cap—form the outer public boundary of what is known about her. However, the Matron and Mrs. Wilkins’s private speculation about Jenny quickly enters the sphere of public discussion, where it pushes against and expands the boundary of communal knowledge about her. These discreet units of social knowledge, assembled by means of gossip, are reason enough for Mrs. Deborah to “pass Sentence” on the girl even though they do not constitute a clear indication of guilt. As Martin Heidegger suggests, gossip has the proclivity to publicly disseminate information regardless of its truth value:

The groundlessness of idle talk is no obstacle to its becoming public; instead it encourages this. Idle talk is the possibility of understanding everything without previously making the thing one’s own.

Through gossip, “everything” becomes known about Jenny; she is inextricably linked to the “Fact” of Tom’s mysterious appearance in the Allworthy household. The boundary between what is known and what is supposed blurs, yet gossip solidifies this breach by manufacturing a version of the event that stands as truth, until further notice.

When Jenny contritely confesses to leaving the infant in Mr. Allworthy’s bed, the supposition created by gossip is accepted as truth until the end of the novel, when she reveals that she was clandestinely paid by Bridget Allworthy to pose as the child’s mother. This creates a narrative tension between what is assumed—and therefore communally known—and the mutability of knowledge gained through idle talk. The discursive tension of this episode is replayed throughout *Tom Jones* by...

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6 Ibid., 35.
8 Of course, this is not the only model of how fact and gossip interact within fiction. As Bruce Stovel notes, gossip in Lawrence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* operates according to a different paradigm: “On the very first page of the novel we see—or, more precisely, hear—Tristram converting serious facts into the playful, pleasurable stuff of gossip,” “Tristram Shandy,” 119. *Tristram Shandy* reverses the movement of gossip as it is portrayed in *Tom Jones*: in *Tristram Shandy* facts are transformed into gossip and thereby ironically dispersed, while in *Tom Jones* gossip coalesces as consequential fact.