USEFUL FICTIONS AND NECESSARY IDOLS: THE COMEDY OF
ENLIGHTENMENT UNDERSTANDING

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Charging the Enlightenment with naivety for its advancement of human understanding has become a critical commonplace. Yet, in truth, Enlightenment thinkers were their own first critics where understanding is concerned. Eighteenth-century debates raised profound misgivings about the limits of human understanding, including concerns about the integrity of individual judgment and the credibility of knowledge gained by the senses. In my dissertation, I argue that four authors—Jonathan Swift, Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne, and George Gordon, Lord Byron—employ laughter to resolve anxieties surrounding human understanding. Directing their comic critique at what Fielding describes as “not men, but manners; not an individual, but a species,” these authors depart from traditional forms of ridicule that polemically ostracize particular individuals or beliefs. Instead, they ridicule the flawed nature of all human understanding by exposing the comic results of rating human understanding as an absolute authority or an agent of truth. Laughter at collective foolishness introduces reflexivity in readers that redirects them from the proud error of wanting to know what is true to the social pursuit of living well. These authors reconcile living well with a limited human understanding by
reconceiving the nature of “fiction” as not falsehood or lie absolutely opposed to “truth,”
but as a fruitful mode for achieving collective commitment to practical conventions on
the grounds not of ontological rectitude but of increased sociability. I designate these
conventions as “useful fictions” and “necessary idols” to emphasize the collaboration of
aesthetic invention and practical reason, and remark on “the Comedy of Enlightenment
Understanding” to denote the mode of ridicule these authors apply as a specifically
literary continuation of the Enlightenment project of disenchantment that disenchants
human understanding itself through the critical and clarifying pleasures of laughter.
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Jonathan Swift rightly acknowledged that “Men are happy to be laughed at for their humor, but not for their folly,” yet it has been my great happiness to be continually surrounded by men and women who have graciously laughed me out of my most ridiculous conceits, comical postures, and profound follies. For their generosity and good humor I am deeply thankful. And while it would be a fool’s errand to catalog all who have gifted me with their smiles and laughter over the course of this project, there are those whose care, attention, and commitment should not pass without especial notice. Neither this project, nor its author, could have advanced to their current state without the candor, compassion, and intellectual labor of Prof. Michael McKeon, my advisor and dissertation director: he has been a continual source of intellectual and emotional support, guidance, and the necessary humility for beginning to ask serious questions. There are neither words nor thanks enough. My committee members at Rutgers, Professor Lynn Festa and Lorraine Piroux, have spent countless hours reading, re-reading, and, ruthlessly interrogating the propositions I laid before them. They were not thankless hours, and I am especially grateful for the intensity and seriousness of their inquiry. Yet Professors Festa and Piroux have also gifted me with exceptional examples of how to navigate the academy as a female scholar with both grace and dignity. This perhaps unintentional influence has nevertheless been strongly felt, and my thanks in this under-recognized mode of academic development also justly extends to Professors Carolyn Williams, Anne Coiro, Stacy Klein, Mary Fuller, Diana Henderson, Kristin Girtin, Colleen Rosenfeld, and, though it should go without saying, my great friend, Kathryn Kaminsky. Officially
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Introduction

George Gordon, Lord Byron, the last of the four authors considered in this study, advises his readers “to begin with the beginning” and “then proceed”—although he admits that “this clause is hard.” To assist the reader as he or she proceeds forward through this study and encourage the “Chearfulness and Good-Humour” that Henry Fielding advances, I hope that it will be useful to begin by examining some of literary, historical, and epistemological influences that gave it shape and helped this author draw together her questions about the unreliability of interpretation, the desire for sociability, and the status of fiction in the British long eighteenth century and beyond.

As the title of my work, Useful Fictions and Necessary Idols: The Comedy of Enlightenment Understanding suggests, among the most important of these influences is Francis Bacon, whose The Novum Organon summarized a constellation of anxieties and concerns regarding traditional intellectual authorities, methods, and beliefs within the early modern period that he collected under the term “idola”—“illusions” or “idols”:

The illusions [idola] and false notions which have got a hold on men’s intellects in the past are now profoundly rooted in them, not only block their minds so that it is difficult for truth to gain access, but even when access has been granted and allowed, they will once again, in the very renewal of the sciences, offer resistance and do mischief unless men are forewarned and arm themselves against them as much as possible.\(^1\)

The threat that Bacon’s idols pose is that “illusions and false notions” will influence how man, “Nature’s agent and interpreter,” interprets nature, and, in turn, limit his power over it. He promotes his method of induction as a tool for investigation with which men may “arm themselves against” the idols. I take Bacon’s conceit of the idol as a crucial,

\(^1\) Francis Bacon, The New Organon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 40. Further citations will appear parenthetically in the text as NO followed by page number.
however symbolic, moment because it diminishes the qualities of human interpretation not directly invested in the pursuit of knowledge to foolish superstition or useless excess.

Bacon’s de-idolized vision of man as the reasoning subject who dominates his environment has garnered its share of modern criticism and condemnation, most notably by Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* where the domination of nature through knowledge represents the first step in a uniquely efficient and insatiable domination of man by man. Adorno and Horkheimer characterize the Enlightenment as “behav[ing] towards things like a dictator towards men,” and expand this charge into an indictment of brute reification: “What men want to learn from nature is how to dominate it and other men. That is its only aim. Ruthlessly, in despite of itself, Enlightenment has extinguished any trace of its own self-consciousness.” Despite the passionate force of their arguments, neither Bacon’s promotion of reason as a means to disenchant nature and thereby gain power over it nor Adorno and Horkheimer’s characterization of this strategy as an idolization of reason that enables men to oppress and dehumanize other men gives a full picture of the Enlightenment, particularly not of that corner of the Enlightenment on which study focuses: the British long eighteenth century.

Modern culture has both praised and damned reason as the “light” of the Enlightenment. But in truth, Enlightenment reason was its own first critic. The ambition to understand the world critically soon acquired a momentum that outstripped its origins and raised profound misgivings about reason’s subordination to masked interpretative biases that led seventeenth- and eighteenth-century minds to re-evaluate the status of

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human understanding: its reliability, its structure, and its purpose. Informed by these misgivings, literary experiments in comic fiction emerged that seemed to draw their comic energy from confounding and confusing the reason of their readers, and ridiculing their tacit biases and proud blindness. *Useful Fictions and Necessary Idols: The Comedy of Enlightenment Understanding* examines literary texts written in different periods of the British long eighteenth century that reject the endorsement of rational and empirical understanding as affectations that are both comically and, potentially, tragically naïve, and looks at their authors’ shared project of recuperating whatever might have been lost in the disenchantment and denunciation of the idols. Exploring works of comic fiction by Jonathan Swift, Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne, and George Gordon, Lord Byron, I argue that each of these authors conceives of the process of understanding as a form of interpretation that exceeds simple hermeneutic evaluation. So characterized, interpretation becomes a more-or-less creative process of constructing representations that are mediated by influences like the relativity of time and place or an aesthetic predisposition for symmetry over chaos, as well as simple human vanity. These influences, they believe, cannot be overcome by attempting to increase the accuracy of human understanding; rather, they argue that strategies like the inductive method that Bacon posits only further obfuscate and bias interpretations, recursively creating more and more unacknowledged idols and unreliable representations.

These four comic authors—Swift, Fielding, Sterne, and Byron—expose the ridiculous progress of reason from one absurd conceit to the next, and advance laughing at faith in reason as the only reasonable and ethical action available. By showing the limits of reason in its most laughable forms, these authors appeal to their reader’s reason
not as a tool for positive knowledge, but for skeptical critique. Each author builds upon this ironic reflexivity in his own way to reconceive the role of reason as the agent of not “truth” but useful fictions. This striking literary strategy can be understood schematically as the outcome of two stages of “enlightenment.” The first stage undermined traditional categories of judgment that had become deeply embedded in social practice. These categories and approaches for interpreting the world were hidden in plain sight and thereby exempt from critical examination. However, a variety of conversations, discoveries, and re-evaluations in different intellectual and cultural communities within early modern Western Europe began to uncover and unmask these categories and their methods as uncritically held superstitions, and, therefore, also began to seek out alternative strategies.

There is not one primal scene or igniting incident that provides a compelling explanation for this trans-European, conceptual disembedding. Nevertheless, the questions concerning the interpretation of canonical texts raised by humanism’s quarrel with the scholastics are an important contribution to consider for understanding the role of fiction that I identify in the long eighteenth century, as well as its status in the texts I will explore. Anthony Grafton has examined the complex debate between humanists and scholastics in fifteenth century Italy and its later echoes across Europe as a re-evaluation of the authority of traditional texts, the process of textual interpretation, and finally, the usefulness or purpose of reading:

Humanists criticized the emphasis of the university arts curriculum on formal, logical argumentation; these skills might make men learned, but they would never make them good or equip them to make other men good. They criticized, even more sharply, the university scholar’s efforts to embed the classics in commentaries that removed their sting and made them explicitly relevant to modern condition. The humanists insisted that the classics should be read for
what they were . . . and treated as the products of a society that had not been modern or Christian.\textsuperscript{3}

Although the humanists were hardly unified or consistent in their arguments or literary productions, the humanist critique intimates questions that emphatically recur in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries concerning the relativity of interpretation that reconceive textual engagement not as an invitation to become learned—either in the practical and theoretical arts of the scholastic or in pursuit of dominion over nature (or men)—but as an opportunity to reflect upon and determine how to best lead a good life. The relationship of human understanding to this pursuit becomes increasingly complex as traditional authorities hold less sway over human consciousness and more details about the world of possibilities beyond conceptual constraints emerge.

In England, this conceptual reconsideration was entangled with political, socio-economic, and religious upheavals of the seventeenth century that thoroughly destabilized the authority of traditional institutions, suggesting to many their potential illegitimacy and to some that all interpretations mediated by customary and tacitly held beliefs are unreliable. For the latter groups of thinkers, the answer seemed to lie in explicit and rational judgment based on the evidence of each individual’s experience tested against and collectively confirmed by that of all others—an empirical epistemology that Bacon’s work advanced at the beginning of the century and that John Locke promoted and popularized at the century’s end with \textit{An Essay Concerning Human Understanding}. But despite its promise as a foolproof method of correcting the falsehoods of traditionally endorsed idols and illusions, the rationality of empirical epistemology itself soon became vulnerable to critique owing to the undependability of

the senses and the unreliability and divergence of individual acts of empirically grounded reason. In the face of radical skepticism, the authority of reason itself was challenged. Traditionally, the corrective to reason had been faith. But faith no longer exercised a normative authority, and empirical reason became increasingly vulnerable to denigration as no more than faith masquerading in modern dress.

Following the interrelatedness of understanding and genre, Michael McKeon has drawn from “the very fact of categorical instability in the later seventeenth century” to productively explore the transition of traditional epistemological and generic categories in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a “shift in attitudes towards how to tell the truth in narrative.”^4 Focusing on how the novel is born out of the previous generic categories of “history” and “romance,” how “extreme skepticism” critiques the modes of “naïve empiricism” and “romance idealism,” and how “conservative ideology” emerges from “progressive ideology” and “aristocratic ideology,” McKeon demonstrates that the “instability of generic categories and social categories is symptomatic of a change in attitudes about how truth and virtue are most authentically signified” that respond to various changes in how people perceive and structure systems of truth and morality.\(^5\)

Both the value and status of traditional categories synchronically destabilize across a large social spectrum as a result of the emergence of multiple interpretations of the same, pre-existing categories, such as “truth” and “virtue,” as well as the different functional meanings of these categories in various ideological structures. The double problem of representation that McKeon separates out into “questions of truth” and “questions of

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“virtue” are also questions of the interpretation of “truth” and “virtue” within the network of conceptual categories that determine individual understanding. The instability of the very terms of these questions are indicative of the “collapse of traditional categories” and “disenchantment of the world” that lead to the availability and attractiveness of “fiction” as a space for interrogating the terms and repercussions of these questions themselves.⁶

This study focuses on the status of fiction as a tool for humanist critique and as a complement to the work of human understanding. Central to what I’ve designated as the second stage of enlightenment were, significantly, writers of fiction who inquired into the realm of affect and affectation to formulate an unconventional approach to the problem of interpretation: the undifferentiated pleasure of laughter. Laughter punctuates the limits of particular categories of understanding because it relies on surprise for its comic effect. The occasion of laughter can only be what is not anticipated by any one individual’s categories of understanding, creating a moment of potential discovery when the opportunity arises for reconceiving both the categories that inform our anticipations as well as the status afforded them.

The authors I read in *Useful Fictions* employ a range of narrative techniques that emphasize various interpretive limitations and differences within the text, as well as between readers and narrating voices, making explicit the disjunction between confident pretensions to truth—or “affectations of objectivity”—and their humorously idiosyncratic and flawed results. This unmasking serves two critical purposes. The first purpose is to demonstrate that all interpretation is relative and subject to individual biases. Interpretive unreliability is not a feature of one set of categories while another is true; rather, all interpretations and interpretive categories are inevitably flawed while uncritical

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confidence that one’s own interpretations are true representations is the greatest flaw of all. The consequence of these recognitions is that, as far as the pursuit of a moral or good life is concerned, the individual is at risk for acting on wrong information or ideas that not only limit his or her agency but also leave him or her vulnerable to manipulation by others. As they experience the discrepancy between interpretive judgments on the page, their readers become aware of the obfuscating potential of any interpretative approach that is not reflexively self-critical. And because laughter’s sensuous immediacy is independent of interpretation, it avoids interpretive discrepancies and uncertainty, and allows readers to engage in this self-conscious critique regardless of their conceptual complexion.

The second purpose is to demonstrate the threat such affectations pose to social stability, and to emphasize laughter as a way of overcoming and correcting for such threats. Having emerged from what Christopher Hill has memorably and justly described as “The Century of Revolution,” eighteenth-century minds were especially attuned to the conflicts that arose from enthusiastic belief in the rectitude of one set of beliefs. One approach to resolving and preventing these conflicts was an appeal to reason and public discussion that would allow for people to refine their beliefs and arrive at shared conclusions. Yet another was to inculcate authorized categories of belief across the social spectrum. To some, however, these two approaches felt both risky and naïve: their skeptical misgivings rejected both the recourse to reason and any social solution that required a shared interpretation of the world. And while the likelihood of another civil war or series of religious persecutions in England decreased as the eighteenth century

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unfolded, these authors were profoundly sensitive to the role of what George Simmel would come to call “sociability” [Sociabilität] in both the collective and the individual good life.

Examining the various ways men associate with each other in society, Simmel has argued that it is “not without significance that in many, perhaps all, European languages, the world ‘society’ (Gesellschaft) indicates literally ‘togetherness.’ The political, economic, the society held together by some purpose is nevertheless, always ‘society.’”

Simmel argues that there is something pleasurable in the “togetherness” of society itself: this pleasure is sociability—a pleasure that I claim these four authors also identify and promote:

To be sure, it is for the sake of special needs and interests that men unite in economic associations or blood fraternities, in cult societies or robber bands. But above and beyond their special content, all the associates are accompanied by a feeling for, by a satisfaction in, the very fact that one is associated with others and that the solitariness of the individual is resolved into togetherness, a union with others.

Society is at its root a pleasurable form. And because laughter is free of particular conceptual investments and pays tribute to no one set of interpretive categories, Swift, Fielding, Sterne, and Byron deploy laughter through their comic fiction as a way to enable and facilitate the pleasures of social togetherness.

These writers employ laughter first as a skeptical, space-clearing instrument of epistemological clarity and as an occasion for sociable pleasure, but then also use laughter to redirect reason’s search for truth toward the construction of self-consciously artificial, tentative “fictions” that increase social pleasures and social stability. This shift

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9 Simmel, 121
reconciles living well with the limitations of human understanding by reconceiving “fiction” as not falsehood or lie absolutely and diametrically opposed to “truth,” but as a fruitful mode for imagining and achieving collective commitment to principles on the grounds not of ontological rectitude but of social utility in terms of sociability. I distinguish these principles as “useful fictions” and “necessary idols” both to emphasize their origin in the developing taste of an unprecedented reading public for realist fiction and to acknowledge the complex and ironic engagement of these works of comic fiction with the Enlightenment project of disenchantment through human understanding as a disenchantment of the power of “human understanding” itself.

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This study is divided into four chapters that each focus on the work of one canonical British author, and progresses chronologically from the early eighteenth century with the works of Jonathan Swift, moves forward to the mid-eighteenth century with the comic fictions of Henry Fielding, and then onto the phenomenon of Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentlemen*, to ultimately conclude with an examination of Byron’s early nineteenth-century comic epic, *Don Juan*. Together these authors span the length and breadth of the British long eighteenth century, advancing a continual and continually comic critique of human understanding that promotes feeling and fiction as necessary complements to the increasingly empirical world of the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment man.

**Chapter 1**
My first chapter, “‘Order from Chaos Sprung’: Jonathan Swift’s Argument for Affectation” asserts that Jonathan Swift uses his comical fiction and poetry, including *Gulliver’s Travels*, *A Tale of a Tub*, and the group of pastoral parodies that I call the “scatological romances” as an mode for reconsidering the use and value of affectation. Swift draws a sharp distinction between tacit affectations that deceive and explicit affectations that enhance to emphasize a role for aesthetic form that is not tacitly deceitful or distortive, but explicitly useful for both the production of pleasure and the prevention of enmity. I organize under the heading “tacit affectations” those uncritically held, interpretive postures that Swift comically reproduces in his texts. Central to the problem of tacit affectations, Swift shows, is the inflated status of subjective interpretation—an affectation of objectivity that encourages any number of his characters to believe that their limited interpretations of the world are truthful, incontestable, transparent representations. The comic inadequacy of these representations is not necessarily meant to ridicule only the specific content of a given affectation and they are not intended to ridicule the people who are possessed by them. Rather, they expose the ridiculousness of tacit affectations generally, as well as the ridiculous behaviors that they enable, to encourage readers to reconsider confidence as an inverse metric of the correctness of their most assured convictions.

While Swift’s representations of these affectations are comical, Swift is careful to temper their comic force with their inevitable eventuation in civil unrest and antisocial divisions. Swift suggests that these laughable affectations are laughable for the most part because they are believed, and it is belief in their rectitude that also makes them dangerous. It is the way affectations are used and interpreted not the mode itself that
Swift argues is the source of the trouble. Distinguishing a mode of affectation that is an explicit, artistic practice that enhances the pleasure of any given content by setting it off to its best advantage, Swift argues that a conscious employment of form creates illusions that can nevertheless be pleasurable, despite being recognizably untrue. Furthermore, he suggests that such aesthetic pleasures are best experienced with consciousness of their verisimilitude because, on one hand, they then pose little to no risk to the understanding, while on the other hand, they allow people to appreciate the discipline and ingenuity of others’ aesthetic self-representations free from scrutiny of their veracity. Ultimately, these explicit affectations create an opportunity for men to share common forms and customs of behavior because they are pleasant, not because they are true. Swift shows that affectations in this context are not only useful, but also necessary for people to better enjoy each other’s company: for the mark of mutual esteem becomes one of disciplined comportment through virtuous forms while the opportunity for social pleasures arises in those arts that make us more pleasant to the senses than we are in fact.

Chapter 2

The second chapter, “‘With Cheerfulness and Good-Humour’: Henry Fielding’s Prudent Fictions” argues that Henry Fielding’s works of comic fiction encourage readers to adopt a prudent, sceptical posture with regard to their own categories of interpretation. Through a series of comic misinterpretations, he advances a cheerful and good-humored stance towards one’s own fallibility as a moral rather than strictly epistemological pursuit. I examine Fielding’s joint inquiry into “morality” and “the understanding” as a broadly hermeneutic exploration of vanity’s influence on empirical reason. In his
critique, vanity’s solipsistic self-deceptions shape empirical judgments and preclude critical examination. As a result, inclinations toward virtue unknowingly perpetrate vice, while vicious desires masquerade as virtues, often with grave consequences and antisocial effects. Vanity’s deceptions pose problems not only to the quality of interpretations, but to moral quality as well; in turn, the only moral position for empirical thinkers is an alert or prudent skepticism towards the reliability and durability of the categories by which they judge their interpretations, their experience, and ultimately, themselves.

Fielding proposes that prudence can only be achieved by using laughter to create a momentary detachment of a thinker from his or her interpretations. Laughing at one’s vain misperceptions becomes a key moment of moral and epistemological remediation for his characters as well as his readers, as both eventually learn that their interpretations of events have been errant, all the way down to the “true” identity of Fielding’s heroes. Yet this unmasking can only occur in a sociable space: readers, like his characters, require continual exposure to the opinions, examples, and conversation of others in order establish a variety perspectives through which their affectations can be “read.” The solitude of reading, however, creates a virtual sociability that increases the chances for an initial disarming of the power of vanity as a force of affectation and self-representation because it provides a private space for the ridicule of reader’s own affectations. In this privacy, disinterested laughter can free readers from the self-interested blinders that are imposed by public display. Readers can then turn inward to examine their own limited and biased categories of understanding and revise them on successive occasions of comic discovery.
Chapter 3

The third chapter, “The Importance of Being Misunderstood: The Role of Laughter in Laurence Sterne’s Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy” argues that Sterne recalibrates the relative values of understanding and misunderstanding, as well as their respective faculties of judgment and wit in Lockean associationism, by reconsidering the effect of our expectation that reason is singular and integral. Like Swift and Fielding, Sterne responds to the eccentricity of individual categories of interpretation through laughter whose epistemological and affective ends lie beyond it. Sterne, however, also celebrates the fruitfulness of laughter itself, suggesting not that these eccentric modes of interpretation should be reformed, but that they should be enjoyed.

Sterne argues that interpretive differences are ineluctable and impenetrable, but he also asserts that the ensuing phenomenon of misunderstanding only causes difficulty, socially or personally, because of the inevitably frustrated expectation that reason should facilitate mutual understanding. It is this misunderstanding of misunderstanding that gives rise to antisocial conflict and promotes feelings of alienation and enmity. Extrapolating from Locke’s division between the faculties of wit and judgment, Sterne suggests that judgment’s contentious stalemate of disparate interpretations may become for wit shared surprise and laughter that evoke delight rather than disappointment. As a source of pleasure, laughter enables people to enjoy each other’s difference through comic feeling that deflates the aggression of conceptual competition. Sterne reads the priority of judgment in empirical rationality, conceived as a means to prevent fanaticism and conflict, as ironically a fanaticism of judgment that foments conflict. Sterne’s synthetic view of judgment and wit reveals all judgment to be subjective, funny, and
flawed: a negative fiction by the partial standard of judgment alone but a useful fiction, heuristic, and source of sociability by a more synthetic standard.

Chapter 4

In the final chapter, “Byron’s ‘Strange Animal’ and the Problem of Narrative Desire,” I argue that Byron conceives of the vexed relationship of affectation and understanding as a phenomenal curiosity, and investigates why conceptual affectations take the absolute shape that they do. Swift, Fielding, and Sterne more-or-less see unreliable interpretation as an involuntary consequence of the understanding’s dependence on conceptual categories that mediate and organize knowledge, focusing on comic strategies for their unmasking. Byron doesn’t discount these achievements; rather he builds upon them by asking if people find something particularly desirable about absolutism of affectations and, therefore, interpret experience willingly through fictional categories. He takes a critical, oppositional stance toward an idealistic, romantic desire to return to the mode of romance idealism that the Enlightenment had sought to eradicate through the disembedding of beliefs, and unmask the desires with comic dramatizations and satires of their manifestation in the present.

Throughout Don Juan, Byron considers various conventions and categories of tradition by which experience can be seductively interpreted only then to show the inability of these forms to manage the overwhelming content of modern, empirical experience. When details become too much of a burden for a given interpretation, his characters employ various comical strategies to maintain control, which he illustrates by showing them caught up in labyrinths of casuistic reasoning, appending or fusing one
interpretive category with another, or abandoning one fiction absolutely and turning entirely to another, more suitable set of authorizing affectations. For Byron, laughter separates out form from content to designate fiction as a specifically aesthetic space for imaginative desire to unfold that enables men to enjoy and explore its pleasures without constraining the possibilities of human life with the careful unities of aesthetic conventions and affected totalities of human understanding.

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My reconsideration of these fictional works as comedies of interpretation and representation uncovers an eighteenth-century mode of self-conscious inquiry that is both pleasant in its comic effect and useful for re-evaluating the utility of understanding itself. Reading these comic fictions as participants in epistemological debates and as affective interventions distinguishes their critiques of human understanding as the critique of affectations of understanding that are ironically animated by the same uncritical mode it sought to root out. The radically skeptical self-consciousness that these comic fictions express re-imagines the social contract as an adaptable, explicit verisimilitude and constitutes a sociability based on the recognition of interpretive unreliability and on recourse to the testimony of the senses in terms of what is socially pleasant rather than what is absolutely true.

Taken together, these authors’ “fictions” offer a contemporary critique of eighteenth-century impulses, however tacit or misconstrued, to dominate the world and each other through affectations of understanding by telling the story of traditional investments in truth giving way to an alternative, irony-governed emphasis on utility and practice to suggest that sensuous, comic pleasure may be our most (and perhaps only)
reliable critical faculty. Moreover, they argue that quality of human life is more important than intellectual rectitude, and that the value of reading does not lie only in the dissemination of ideas, but also in opportunities for social pleasures that need not be true, productive, or reasonable: the pleasure they give is already in itself reason enough.
Chapter 1

“Order from Chaos Sprung”: Jonathan Swift’s Argument for Affectations

Jonathan Swift’s characterization of *Gulliver’s Travels* as “a book in which man is the measure of all things” gestures comically to Gulliver’s practice throughout his narrative of adducing specific measurements of the curiosities he encounters, particularly in the first two books, as well as his concentrated efforts to demonstrate their accuracy as well as his credibility to his readers.¹ In the case of his Lilliputian adventure, for example, he provides an abundance of details ranging from the conventional to the trivial: “The two great Streets which run cross and divide it into four Quarters, are five Foot wide. The Lanes and Alleys which I could not enter, but only viewed them as I passed, are from Twelve to Eighteen Inches”; “The outward Court is a Square of Forty Foot”; “I made two Stools, each about three Foot high”; “I lifted [a Stool] over the Roof, and gently set it down on the Space between the first and second Court, which was eight Foot wide” (*GT* 28-9).² Similarly, in the tale of his time in Brobdingnag, Gulliver gives calculations that put his observations and encounters into familiar, quantifiable terms for his European readers: “Nature in that country observ[es] the same Proportion through all her Operations, a Hail-stone is near Eighteen Hundred Times as large as one in Europe; which I can assert upon Experience, having been so curious to weigh and measure them” (*GT* 93). And, by way of his use of standard of measure and geographical analogy, he places the observations into a privileged English context: “The King’s Kitchen is indeed

a noble Building, vaulted at Top, and about six hundred Foot high. The great Oven is not so wide by ten Paces as the Cupola at St. Paul’s: For I measured the latter on purpose after my Return” (GT 91). Carolyn Houlihan Flynn has astutely observed that Gulliver “spends more time measuring, observing, and recording a strange land than he does meditating on his condition,” yet, given that Swift has constructed Gulliver’s Travels as a first person narrative of the past, it is perhaps safest to consider not what Gulliver does during his travels, but rather how the character represents himself in the fiction of his narrative.3

Reconsidered in terms of the mediation of self-representation, Claude Rawson’s assessment of Gulliver’s character—“Entirely devoted to evidence of the senses, Gulliver is one of those ‘plain,’ diligent, and laborious observers’ celebrated by Thomas Sprat, who bring their ‘eyes’ uncorrupted to their work”—can be read to suggest not that Gulliver is a Royal Society type like those whom Thomas Spratt celebrated, but rather that he thinks of himself, represents himself, and wants to be thought of as one who brings his “eyes uncorrupted to their work”: a purely impartial instrument of observation.4 Comically, Gulliver becomes a literal instrument of his own measurement in Lilliput when a new suit of clothing must be made for him. Seamstresses take only Gulliver’s thumb measurement to get his full measure; they “desired no more; for by a mathematical Computation, that twice round the Thumb is once round the Wrist, and so on to the Neck and the Waist” (GT 44). Along these lines, the comedy of Swift’s remark

increases beyond the recollection of Gulliver’s tedious observations to make an ironic commentary on man as measurer, thing that is measured, and thing of measure.

Placed alongside this literal enacting of the “rule of thumb,” Gulliver’s observation that the Lilliputians have a “Rule of an Inch,” a “Length of Cord” that is an inch or human thumb long, harmonizes Lilliputian measurement with British units of measure, as though the heuristic of imperial units were a natural phenomenon or universal law. The average human thumb that the inch represents becomes attached to a specific man, Gulliver. Swift thereby moves from cultural and geographic relativity to corporeal relativity and subjectivity, ridiculing Gulliver’s presumption and presentation of his mind as an objective instrument of measurement and suggesting that when man affects being “the measure of all things,” he makes himself into nothing more than a thing to be measured.

Swift’s ridicule of Gulliver’s measurements does more than remind readers that an inch is a construct, not a thing—and certainly not a natural standard. It also unmasks the unacknowledged relativity of the character’s observations, what Sean Moore has called his “epistemological arrogance.” Furthermore, in the context of Gulliver’s interaction both with his foreign hosts and with his implied readers, the ridicule also interrogates the utility of Gulliver’s attention to detail and promotion of knowledge. For despite his accumulated wealth of quantifiable information on the sizes of people, places, and things, as well as his documentation of qualitative cultural practices, Gulliver nevertheless overlooks the hostility surrounding him, so much so that when he leaves the lands of Lilliput, he does so in order to escape having his eyes plucked out by royal

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decree. And when he leaves the lands of his protectors, Blefuscu, its court is “impatient to have [him] gone” (GT 56).

In Lilliput, Gulliver is charged with multiple counts of treason, each the result of his neglect of cultural connotations and cultural affect—extinguishing a fire in the imperial palace with his urine being perhaps most comical among these oversights. Gulliver blames these actions on his ignorance and admits that even if the Lilliputians would have given him a fair trial, “he could not deny the Facts alleged in the several Articles” that led to his gruesome sentence. Gulliver recognizes that facts become polyvalent when vulnerable to tendentious or politically motivated interpretations in rival cultures, but he overlooks the problems of relativism that nearly condemn him, representing those who have views different from his own as a “Cabal” in Lilliput and envious or malicious, as in the case of the Dwarf in Brobdingnag whom he describes as a “malicious urchin,” jealous of his more diminutive stature (GT 55, 86). Curiously, Gulliver claims that upon his having learned of “the Nature of Princes and Ministers, which I have since observed in many other Courts, and their Methods of treating Criminals less obnoxious than myself; I should with great Alacrity and Readiness have submitted to so easy a Punishment” (GT 53). His admission reads their cultural perspective as political corruption. Yet his demotion of politics and the court has its own irony: having drawn away the veil of politesse from the affairs of court, Gulliver states that he would, with “great Alacrity and Readiness,” suffer the loss of his sight—which invites the inference that it is, on occasion, perhaps better not to see the full truth and that under like circumstances he would prefer to see no more.
Anxious about the tedium of his detail, Gulliver directly engages the reader, seeking his or her approval of the measurements and details he records:

These and the like Particulars; which however insignificant they may appear to groveling vulgar Minds, yet will certainly help a Philosopher to enlarge his Thoughts and Imagination, and apply them to the Benefit of public as well as private Life…I have been chiefly studious of Truth, without affecting any Ornaments of Learning, or of Style. But the whole Scene of this Voyage made so strong an Impression on my Mind, and is so deeply fixed in my Memory, that in committing it to Paper, I did not omit one material Circumstance. However, upon a strict Review, I blotted out several Passages of less Moment which were in my first Copy, for fear of being censured as tedious and trifling, whereof Travellers are often, perhaps not without Justice, accused. (GT 73)

The flattery of the reader as “Philosopher” and the inflation of the social value of information come on the heels of Gulliver’s description of his body at its most vulnerable—discharging his “Natural Necessities” under leave in the land of the giants:

I was pressed to do more than one Thing, which another could not do for me; and therefore endeavoured to make my Mistress understand that I desired to be set down on the Floor; which after she had done, my Bashfulness would not suffer me to express my self farther than by pointing to the Door, and bowing several Times. The good Woman with much Difficulty at last perceived what I would be at; and taking me up again in her Hand, walked into the Garden where she set me down. I went on one Side about two Hundred Yards; and beckoning to her not to look or follow me, I hid my self between two Leaves of Sorrel, and there discharged the Necessities of Nature.

Gulliver’s presentation of the episode makes his textual promotion of the stylistically censured full disclosure of “material Circumstance” and disparagement of “affecting any Ornaments of Learning, or of Style” problematic; further, what he describes in full detail—or at least euphemistically—for the reader, he takes pains to hide in “real life” and communicates to the giantess only under duress. Furthermore, the elevation of his description of defecation to a “Benefit of public and private Life” is comic not only for its ridiculous inflation of gratuitous details—for it is doubtful that anyone questions whether or not Gulliver had occasion to defecate during his travels, despite his fear of Maligners
who “have been pleased” upon such excremental points “to call into Question,” a fear that leads him “to justify [his] Character in Point of Cleanliness to the World” (GT 13). It also exposes a contradiction between the posture of privileging of information in narrative or of “being studious of truth” on the one hand, and the practical utility and social custom of keeping some things hidden from sight.

In the context of Gulliver’s many ironic engagements with “measure” and the ridicule of Gulliver’s inflation of the value of information, Swift’s characterization of Gulliver’s Travels as “a book in which man is the measure of all things” folds together comic contradictions epitomized in the text and concerns shared across his works about the usefulness of human understanding and the self-consciousness of representation. Swift borrows his expression from Protagoras’s statement on the relativity of human knowledge: “Man is the measure of all things: of things that are, that they are; of things that are not, that they are not.” Aristotle later interprets Protagoras as having “meant simply that each individual's impressions are positively true.”

But if this is so, it follows that the same thing is and is not, and is bad and good, and that all the other implications of opposite statements are true; because often a given thing seems beautiful to one set of people and ugly to another, and that which seems to each individual is the measure.6

Swift approaches the diffusion of subjectivity that Aristotle identifies as an opportunity to reconsider the way men employ their understandings, to distinguish individual impressions from the “positively true,” and to suggest that the pursuit of the “positively true” is only one possible application of human reason—and a foolish, unpleasant one at that. Beyond the antitheses of “things that are” and “things that are not,” Swift identifies a space for representations, drawing attention to the need for possible uses of

representations beyond objective measure that seek to represent things not as they are or are not.

In Gulliver’s accounts of Lilliput’s domestic factionalization and its war with Blefuscu, Swift dramatizes the conflict and consequences of different pursuits of the positively true and interpretations that claim to see only things strictly as they are. He comes to understand from a Lilliputian “Principal Secretary” that “there have been two struggling Parties in this Empire, under the Names of Tramecksan, and Slamecksan, from the high and low Heels on their Shoes, by which they distinguish themselves” (GT 29-30). The factions develop from a question of which heel size is the correct one and who has the authority to make such a claim. The low-heeled secretary explains to Gulliver, and, through him, to the reader:

It is alleged indeed, that the high Heels are most agreeable to our ancient Constitution: But however this be, his Majesty hath determined to make use of only low Heels in the Administration of the Government, and all Offices in the Gift of the Crown…The Animosities between these two Parties run so high, that they will neither eat nor drink, nor talk with each other. (GT 30)

Early readers of Gulliver’s Travels and the majority of its critical scholarship have recognized the controversy of the heels as a satire of the Whigs and the Tories, the Low- and High-Church parties. The ridicule of contemporary politics, however, does not exhaust the critique of the heels controversy; for by replaying the political controversy along lines as trivial and indeterminate as the agreeableness of heel-height, Swift deflates the pretensions of such controversies to suggest that claims of the right or true are either speculative (“alleged”), or dependent on individual deduction (“his Majesty hath

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determined"), and, ultimately, that these disputes are themselves trivial, irresolvable, and disruptive rather than beneficial public and private life.

Swift makes clear that the social costs of these knowledge-factions can far exceed the domestic hostilities of “neither eat[ing] nor drink[ing], nor talk[ing] with each other” by elaborating the bloody history of Lilliput’s war with Blefuscu. The thirty-six year war has its origins, as Gulliver retells the tale, in a dispute over the “convenient end” at which to break an egg, a dispute that is fueled by the putative correlation of knowing which end is the definitively “convenient end” of the egg and the righteous status of being a “true believer.” His informant explains:

It is allowed on all Hands, that the primitive Way of breaking Eggs, before we eat them, was upon the larger End; but his present Majesty’s Grandfather, while he was a Boy, going to eat an Egg, and breaking it according to the ancient Practice, happened to cut one of his Fingers. Whereupon the Emperor his Father published an Edict, commanding all his Subjects, upon great Penalties, to break the smaller End of their Eggs. The People so highly resented this Law, that our Histories tell us, there have been six Rebellions raised on that Account; wherein one Emperor lost his Life, and another his Crown. These civil Commotions were constantly fomented by the Monarchs of Blefuscu; and when they were quelled, the Exiles always fled for Refuge to that Empire. It is computed that eleven Thousand Persons have at several Times suffered Death, rather than submit to break their Eggs at the smaller End….During the course of these Troubles, the Emperors of Blefuscu did frequently expostulate by their Ambassadors, accusing us of making a Schism in Religion, by offending against a fundamental Doctrine of our great Prophet Lustrog, in the fifty-fourth Chapter of the Blundecral (which is their Alcoran). This, however, is thought to be a mere Strain upon the Text; for the Words are these; ‘That all true Believers break their Eggs at the convenient End: and which is the convenient End, seems, in my humble Opinion, to be left to every Man’s Conscience, or at least in the Power of the chief Magistrate to determine’ (GT 31)

The ambiguity and arbitrariness of what constitutes “convenient” for a given person at a given time reiterates the speculation inherent in the low-heeled secretary’s “alleged” “Agreeableness,” only here the problem of interpretation is explicitly bound up in disputes between the subjective experience of the personally convenient, as in the case of
the king’s grandfather’s rather inconvenient experience of cutting himself, and the authority of tradition, as in the case of the “primitive Way”: neither side nor source makes a compelling case for the most convenient end. Instead, each exposes its embeddedness in an epistemological system and commitment to determinate truths—the defense of which leads to civil war, regicide, rebellion, the deaths of “eleven Thousand Persons,” and an ongoing war with Blefuscu. While the contents of the Lilliputian disputes may be trivial and the disputants may be ridiculous, the results of the affectations that drive them are nevertheless significant and nothing to laugh about.

Clarifying that for Swift, “human misunderstanding” is “the satiric side of the epistemological coin,” Francis Deutsch Louis observes that “Swift’s images of men making foolish choices in politics, ethics, science, philosophy, literature, and religion suggest that he conceived of no system of learning so profound and complete that it could eliminate the distortions that get between the mind of man and the matter before him.” I claim that Swift further shows that these distortions also get between men and other men in his satires when they are accepted as objective truths, and I will show in this chapter that he is less concerned with the unmasking of particular knowledge systems or beliefs in his satirical fiction than with revealing the unacknowledged affectations that they all share as well as their antisocial consequences.

Swift’s critique of unacknowledged or tacit affectations employs comic spectacles to expose the foolish individual pretensions behind wars of truths and true systems, ridiculing the pretention to true knowledge as a form of affected self-presentation. He does so perhaps no where more explicitly, economically, or comically, than in an episode

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of the *Battle of the Books* in which Dryden challenges Virgil to battle, only to cower in surrender, literally unmasked as an incorrigible child playing dress-up in the armor of adults:

Lifting up the Vizard of his Helmet, a Face hardly appeared from within, which after a pause, was known for that of the renowned Dryden…. The Helmet was nine times too large for the Head, which appeared Situate far in the hinder Part…. And the voice was suited to the Visage, sounding weak and remote. Dryden in a long Harangue soothed up the good Antient, called him Father.9

Unmasking the discrepancy between Dryden’s self-representation and his diminutive stature implies that Dryden’s claim for the authority of the “Moderns” is also an equally comical affectation. Yet, to emphasize the degree of the affectation, Swift details not only the difference in size between Dryden and Virgil, but also the relative aesthetic poverty of Dryden’s Virgilian imitation:

Then he humbly proposed an Exchange of Armor, as a lasting Mark of Hospitality between them. Virgil consented (for the Goddess Diffidence came unseen, and cast a Mist before his Eyes) tho' his was of Gold, and cost a hundred Beeves, the other’s but of rusty Iron. However, this glittering Armor became the Modern yet worse than his Own. Then, they agreed to exchange Horses; but when it came to the Trial, Dryden was afraid, and utterly unable to mount. (*TT* 158).

Swift disparages Dryden work as a poor copy of greater poets, ridiculing by proxy the Moderns’ claim to superiority over the Ancients. Notably, the aesthetic quality of the representation diminishes in proportion with the degree of the affectation and modern’s zeal, for while Dryden’s armor is noisy and “rusty Iron,” Virgil’s is made of gold.

While Swift’s satires undoubtedly cause embarrassment to those he names, they are nevertheless focused on what authors do and what they produce, not who or what they are. Drawing attention to the distinction, he declares:

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I must warn the Reader, to beware of applying to Persons what is here meant, only of Books in the most literal Sense. So, when *Virgil* is mentioned, we are not to understand the Person of a famous Poet, call'd by that Name, but only certain Sheets of Paper, bound up in Leather, containing in Print, the Works of the said Poet, and so of the rest.

While any narrative claim in Swiftian satire is slippery at best, this provision nevertheless gives a crucial direction for navigating the more violent scenes of the battle, like the death of Des-cartes “impaled by a Spear in his right Eye and whirled into his own Vortex,” suggesting that it is only the claim to truth of Descartes’ swirling astronomy and *cogito ergo sum* that Swift wishes to attack, not Descartes himself (*TT* 157).

Swift’s distinction of “Books in the most literal Sense,” as well as his foregrounding of inflated representation and poetic production in Dryden’s battle scene, emphasize the material, sensuous medium of representation and invite consideration of what books are and what they do, and particularly what Swift thinks his books are and what they do—literally or otherwise. Swift’s choice to deploy his satires in manifestly fictional or hypothetical contexts, like a living library or a remote island where horses reason, distinguishes his texts from the modern claims of truth or facts that he ridicules. His works parody this pretension by claiming the truth of narratives and ideas that only the most credulous would believe to be so. Literally, his works are fictions on the page that illustrate the comedy of affecting to know the truth and dramatize the social dangers that result from this folly.

Like Aesop’s fables, Swift’s fictions operate as parables that intend to correct behavior. Through indirect satire, he focuses on a particular type of behavior, affectation as a mode of representation, including the self-representation of one’s intellectual capacity. I propose that Swift’s satiric method promotes a reconsideration of the nature
and use of affectations and representations by producing a continual and laughable display of tacit affectations that are foolish in any context. Humanist rather than vengeful, Swift’s satiric fictions accept the limits of human understanding as man’s natural condition, and suggest that the instrument of mankind’s antisocial strife, affectation, can also be its virtuous cure. For Swift doesn’t argue for a ban on affectations themselves—nor does he suggest that human progress lies in better, more accurate representations; rather, he proposes a recuperation of affectations from their tacit, ideological embedding and that puts them to work as aesthetic supplements for the vicious aspects of human nature that spur folly and enmity to begin with.

**The Common Fault**

Drawing explicit attention to the problem of representation, Swift’s self-composed eulogy “Some Verses on the Death of Dean Swift” (1731) broadcasts its essential unreliability as an objective measure of the Dean through its formal present, and in so doing emphasizes the status of eulogy as an aesthetic form distinct from any claims of objective truth. The eulogy is a formal aesthetic representation of a person that praises what is likeable while staying mute regarding his or her faults. Read apart from its aesthetic status, however, eulogy reduces man into a measurable thing whose entire truth is legible and read proleptically only to be praise. The presumption involved in this type of evaluation proves to be a comical variant of the case of Gulliver’s self measurement when Swift’s authorial persona, the speaker of the poem, implies that he is the best and most objective person to judge his life because friends are always biased by their own self-interest. He draws this lesson from a representation of mankind in its entirety that the
frames of the poem, an epigram taken from La Rochefoucauld: “Dans l’adversité de nos meilleurs amis nous trouvons / Quelque chose, qui ne nous deplaist pas” (“In the adversity of our best friends, we find something that doth not displease us”). The question of pleasure and representation, traditionally the concern for aesthetic philosophy, unfolds here as an inquiry into the pleasure of representing that asks what is at stake when a representation or interpretation is presented as true?

“Some Verses” engages immediately with La Rochefoucauld’s maxim, opening with an apology for both the maxim and the man himself:

As Rochefoucauld his Maxims drew
From Nature, I believe 'em true:
They argue no corrupted Mind
In him; the Fault is in Mankind. (ll. 1-4).

The lines suggest that mankind has a natural and irremediable “Fault,” an innate Schadenfreude that takes pleasure in the deflation, insult, or destruction of friends because the demotion of others achieves the same pleasure as self-promotion. The emphasis on representations and evaluations of the self implicit in this fault expand in the poem into a panorama representation of human vanity:

The first part of the introduction or ‘proem’ says that people are vain; the second part of the poem shows that other men are vain. The third part shows that Swift is vain. When Swift . . . informs us that he himself is humble, fearless, altruistic, diligent, innocent, and resolute, he is not presenting an apologia, but making an assertion of his own vanity necessary to complete his thesis that all mankind is egoistic, selfish, and proud.¹¹

The speaker “Swift,” however, should not be mistaken for the authentic author; rather, the display of the speaker’s vanity unmasks the affectation of that character’s undertaking, not Swift’s own. Vanity is a vice of representation, as Swift indicates in his sermon “On The Causes of the Wretched Condition of Ireland” where he critiques “the folly, the vanity, and ingratitude, of those vast numbers, who think themselves too good to live in the country which gave them birth, and still gives them bread” as well as “that monstrous pride and vanity in both sexes, especially the weaker sex, who, in the midst of poverty, are suffered to run into all kind of expense, and extravagance in dress,” vanity involves both a mistaken interpretation of one’s own value in comparison to others and a desire to represent oneself according to that interpretation. It is a vice of inflated self-representation. The speaker’s attempt to fix his image for posterity as “humble, fearless, altruistic, diligent, innocent, and resolute” ironically negates those qualities, unmasking him as “egoistic, selfish, and proud,” which is to say vain and affecting a presentation that complements that vanity. The exposure of the author’s affectation suggests that his representation of all men as self-interested is itself nothing more than an affectation. This last layer, however, ironizes the shift from eulogy’s praise to the speaker’s pessimistic blame, suggesting that one position does not correct for the other, but that they are simply different manifestations of the same flawed misreading of form. Both modes claim truth as their own as well as the competency to make such claims and to represent those truths.

In this light, the common “Fault” identified alongside La Rochefoucauld’s maxim is not proud Schadenfreude but a problem of vain self-representations that tacitly assign opinions, impressions, and interpretations the value of truth. Swift is careful to clarify that his is a critique of man as he does, not as he is; his goal is not to discover man’s
inherent or natural “Fault,” but to expose faulty actions and affectations. These are not faults of human content but of man’s use of form.

**Affectation as Form**

Swift is not interested in the critique what someone is, which is to say their content; instead, he is interested in the satiric correction of his or her behavioral affectations, their self-representations, and their relationship to form. Swift’s examination of praise and blame in “Some Verses” intersects with his critique of human understanding to illustrate that individual understanding is not only destabilized by the influence of vices like covetousness, envy, and pride, but also that the privileged status that moderns grant human understanding is the product of covetous, envious, and proud affectations.\(^\text{12}\) He populates his satires with idolatrous characters that inflate the authority of their different epistemological systems; they cling to sacred “truths” that are opposed to each other, truths that he illustrates in the domestic and foreign disputes of the Lilliputians and then unmask as variants of the same flawed mode of affectation.\(^\text{13}\) “Some Verses” accomplishes this unmasking through a multi-layered opposition of praise and blame, but in doing so also suggests that these affectations are not understood by their agents to be affectations. Confounding representation and reality, people lose sight of the explicit function of form and convention in representation, as well as the effect of

\(^{\text{12}}\) These vices comically take the form of the “Duchess d’Argent, Madame de Grands-Titres, and the Countess d’Orgueil” — the seductive nobility in *A Tale of a Tub* who spark the brothers’ first acts of heresy.

conscious ornamentation, ironically dismissing affectation as a practice even as they practice it in their pursuits of knowledge and truth.

Swift draws attention to the complex and inescapable influence of representation on putative truths, examining not only the problem of subjective and cultural relativity, but also the nature of interpretation in time. In *A Tale of a Tub*, to which I will later return, the coats of the brothers change over time: they begin as flawless representations of the father’s religion, but as a result of adornment, alteration, wear, tear, and misguided acts of recovery, none of the brothers’ coats remain the same as they were, and their original status is irrecoverable. As a result, it is problematic and reductive to derive any objective meaning of the coats for all time.

The objects men experience sensuously, unlike revelations, are also historical objects subject to change and mutability. This includes written texts: in *Gulliver’s Travels*, for example, the paratextual “A Letter” and “The Publisher to the Reader” that precede the proper narrative of *Gulliver’s Travels* claim that Lemuel Gulliver’s words have been revised by anonymous hands, that passages are missing or had been excised, and that false political passages had been added to the text, rendering it as irreparably distorted as the brothers’ altered and rent garments. The sensuous experience of a given object at any one point or period of time therefore cannot give a reliable representative of its truth even if it could be experienced objectively; put another way, the limited time that men have as mortal beings to experience an object in history can’t sufficiently ensure complete exposure to its full nature and, therefore, can’t vouchsafe truth.

“Some Verses” makes the historical critique comically clear with its ironic premise: for Swift cannot write a eulogy about himself precisely because he would need
to be already dead to know his life as a totality, as well as omniscient to give that totality universal meaning—to say nothing of the problem of self-interested interpretation. In much the same way, Swift dismisses modern arguments of human progress or human decline in *Gulliver’s Travels* by drawing attention to the simple poverty of historical evidence from which they draw. In Gulliver’s fantasy projection of himself as an immortal, for example, he speculates that he would have

> The Pleasure of seeing the various Revolutions of States and Empires; the Changes in the lower and upper World; ancient Cities in ruins, and obscure Villages become the seats of Kings; famous Rivers lessening into shallow Brooks; the Ocean leaving one Coast dry, and overwhelming another; the Discovery of many Countries yet unknown; Barbarity overrunning the politest Nations, and the most barbarous become civilized. (*GT* 180)

Only under these circumstances does Gulliver believe that he could have sufficient experience to determine truths. And yet, even then, this knowledge is subject to subjective and cultural mediation.

As with the questions of interpretation raised by subjective and cultural relativity, historical relativity makes any experience only a partial and unreliable representation. The omnipresent and the eternal perspectives that would allow for absolute knowledge are not the prerogative of man; therefore, Swift concludes, it is not in knowledge or the pursuits of truths that man should seek his proper vocation, but in the moral management of his everyday behavior: how he conducts or represents himself, his self-consciousness of those representations, and his disclosure of them.

> Adopting the posture of “One indifferent” in “Some Verses,” Swift elaborates a taxonomy of human content or characteristics, and of tacit affectations, which is to say behavior or form, to draw attention to form as a site of human agency. This new,
“indifferent” speaker declares that “Swift” perhaps “Had too much satire in his vein,” but that “malice never was his aim” (ll. 482-83).

He lashed the vice but spared the name. 
No individual could resent, 
Where thousands equally were meant, 
His satire points at no defect, 
But that what all mortals may correct [...] (464-8)

The speaker indicates that the targets of Swift’s satire are not a person’s natural characteristics, but how he or she represents them along with the explicitness and fitness of that representation.

He spared a hum or crooked nose, 
Whose owners set not up for beaux. 
True genuine dullness moved his pity, 
Unless it offered to be witty. 
Those, who their ignorance confessed, 
He never offended with a jest: 
But laughed to hear an idiot quote 
A verse from Horace learnt by rote. (ll. 471-78)

These satirical targets actively disguise themselves: a behavior implicitly informed by an a priori hierarchy that determines which qualities are better or worse. The fault here is not natural “defect,” but the problem of unacknowledged or tacit representation, or what I suggest Swift argues is improper use of form.

Form is more robust than the ridiculous affectations derided in “Some Verses”; it encompasses the disciplining virtues and aesthetic enhancement, for these too are forms of representation. Unlike individual defects, formal representations are voluntary choices: they are a person’s manner, practice, or habit as shaped by customizable mixtures of natural inclinations and disciplining virtues that enhance or conceal those inclinations as well as his or her qualities. With this insight, Swift encourages a conscious shift in the form of human behavior away from tacit affectations that misrepresent content or that
encourage the representation to be taken as “true,” and towards the explicit application of aesthetic and affective tools such as the virtues, decency, and decorations that enable men to control their behavior and consciously represent humanity in a more pleasing, however artificial, way, than it appears when viewed through the ascetic lenses of truth and fact.

Swift promotes an explicit practice of verisimilitude that declares its art as a necessary aesthetic complement to the limits of human nature—both psychological and temporal. Against Francis Bacon’s claim that to know the world mankind must free itself from obfuscating “idols” and their “illusions,” and apply a novum organon—a new instrument or method of interpretation—that will allow people to see the world accurately, I suggest that Swift nominates an antiquium organon that recuperates the idols (NO 39, 40). Bacon declares that “Human knowledge and human power come to the same thing, because ignorance of cause frustrates effect,” and that knowledge can be gained more efficiently with the right intellectual tools or perspective (NO 33). Swift shifts focus away from the power to accrue knowledge onto the power given to men through their creative, aesthetic capability to give shape to their behavior and improve their sensuous experience. Swift identifies representations that are not strictly true or false, but explicitly selective. In short, Swift returns to the obfuscation of the idols, arguing not for the passive obfuscation of truth, but for the utility of self-conscious and explicit obfuscations: he makes man an “Interpreter of Nature” as Bacon would have him, but in terms not of deciphering truths, but of creativity, aesthetic license, and art (NO 90).  

The observer becomes performer.

In the next section I will show that the virtue that Swift identifies in formal representation lies in making the fictitiousness of form explicit. Swift demonstrates that explicit affectations enable men to better pursue their proper vocation of leading a sociable, “good life,” in so far as goodness is a feeling, not a fact, while tacit affectations of truth, fact, and rectitude lead to antisocial hostility and enmity. At stake in this move are the unmasking of epistemological systems as unreliable modes of interpretation and the promotion of formal, explicit affectations into a common good: affectation thereby emerges as a technology that allows mankind to experience his world in a more pleasing and inclusive way that is morally sound and explicitly fictional.

The Scatological Romances

Because of their common work of disenchanting pursuits and claims of true knowledge and their foregrounding of the social consequences of these pursuits, what I am calling Swift’s “scatological romances”—“The Lady’s Dressing Room” (1732), “Strephon and Chloe” (1734), “Cassinus and Peter” (1734), and “A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed” (1734)—provide useful examples of Swift’s unmasking of tacit affectations and his promotion of explicit affectations. I designate these poems “romances” to emphasize their critique of what Michael McKeon has called “Romance Idealism,” a “narrative epistemology [that] involves a dependence on received authorities and a priori traditions.”15 The first three of these poems begin with lovers who interpret the world through a mediating idealism of gender and the body composed of pastoral poetics and social biases, while the last poem directs our attention directly on to the variable ratings of one woman’s beauty based on her self-conscious representations.

What I will call their “pastoralism” (or “pastoral idealism”) filters experience through poetic clichés that designate the sensuous beauty of their beloved as directly indicative of her supernatural status and all that it implies. Metaphor is lost in their idealism: if the beautiful beloved has the semblance of a “goddess,” then she is one: she is not like, but is an “Arcadian” “nymph,” with “Ambrosia” exhaling skin—in short, “a Deity.” To illustrate the ridiculousness of any and all idealizing postures, Swift places the poems’ protagonists into epistemological crises that destabilize the well-defined conditions of pastoral possibility, confronting them with their beloveds’ excrement. The shared announcement in “The Lady’s Dressing Room” and “Cassinus and Peter” that “Cælia Cælia Cælia sh—s,” like the incredulous protest in “Strephon and Chloe,”

“…ye Gods, What sound is this?
Can Chloe, heav’ly Chloe ——?”

responds to a sensuous encounter that provokes an epistemological dissonance between observed form and expected content.

**Cassinus and Peter**

It isn’t until the last line of this mock elegy that Cassinus announces the nature of Cælia’s disgrace and his mortal heartbeat in a deathbed utterance. The poem begins by establishing that it is a dialogue between

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17 “The Lady’s Dressing Room” (ll. 1-3); “Cassinus and Peter” (ll. 73, 64); “Strephon and Chloe” (ll. 87-9).
Two College Sophs of *Cambridge* Growth,
Both special Wits, and Lovers both,
Conferring as they us'd to meet,
On Love and Books in Rapture sweet (ll. 1-4).

Yet Swift displaces their sweet literary rapture into a fetid bedchamber where Cassinus wallows in a disheveled melancholy. Peter had “never seen” “such a sight” as his friend now presented:

Well embrown'd with Dirt and Hair.
A Rug was o'er his Shoulders thrown;
A Rug; for Night-gown he had none.
His Jordan stood in Manner fitting
Between his Legs, to spew or spit in.
His antient Pipe in Sable dy'd,
And half unsmoakt, lay by his Side,

Him thus accoutred Peter found,
With Eyes in Smoak and Weeping drown'd. (ll. 18-26)

The rather nonchalant placement of the pot complements the disarray of the scene; the pitch at which their dialogue begins and the discourse that follows, however, are comically at odds with the conditions of this sophist student’s chamber. Peter conducts himself with poetic eloquence, enacting “Rapture sweet” even in the squalid mess, while Cassinus’ “Eyes in Smoak and Weeping drown’d” suggest that his interpretation of his
position, both physical and metaphysical, is distorted by a superabundance of emotion and the “Smoak” of his “anitent Pipe”—if not also the smoke and mirrors of spastoral idealism’s sweet raptures.

The two characters engage each other in a dialogue more suited for Arcadia than Cambridge in which Peter tries to divine the meaning of Cassinus’s cryptic lament, “Cælia! Thrice,” and its relationship to his current condition (l. 40). The series of questions he asks obliquely reveal the conditions of possibility for women according to their pastoral and social conventions. He begins with the question: “Is she dead?” which innocuously presumes that Cælia is incapable of causing any grief herself, rather that grief is only caused by her absence (l. 42). To this surmise, Cassinus rejoins: “How Happy were that the worst/ But I was fated to be cursed” (ll. 43-4). Cassinus’s reply not only recognizes the value of Cælia’s life only as it contributes to his emotional state, but it also elevates his dejection by making his heartbreak a curse.

Peter redirects his inquiry into another conventional register, promiscuity, to see if Cælia might be physically fickle—which Cassinus also rejects: “Come tell us, has she played the Whore?/ Oh Peter wou’d it were no more!” (ll. 45-6). The possibility and rating of Cælia as a “Whore” suggests that an alternative measure of her value is her sexual status. Yet she is deemed fit, so Peter is left with one of two possibilities: she has lost her beauty or she has left Cassinus, both of which Cassinus denies. In terms of beauty, Cassinus talks in poetic clichés drawn from the likes Marvell and Herrick: “Oh Peter! Beauty's but a Varnish,/ Which Time and Accidents will tarnish” (ll. 51-2). Despite his rhetorical aside, she still appears to be physically beautiful. Instead, Cassinus
accuses her of having tarnished “Those Beauties that might ever last” that the outer-beauty should rightly signify and secure (l. 54).

Cassinus persists, “That ungrateful charming Maid” has his “purest Passion betray’d,” leaving Peter with the lone option that Cælia, still charming, has betrayed Cassinus by leaving him for another. Marking the gravity of the presumed betrayal, Peter exclaims with a hostile and implicitly homicidal tone: “Hang her, though she seem’d so coy/ I know she loves the Barber’s Boy” (ll. 61-2). Cassinus denies this possibility as well, going so far as to ennoble the “Barber’s Boy” by casting him as a potentially “more deserving Swain” for whom Cælia may leave if she so chooses: because their conventions authorize such merit based selections, Cælia is free, perhaps even obligated, to choose the better man (l. 66).

With the rejection of death, promiscuity, disfigurement, and infidelity, Peter is at a loss: all possible causes internal to the genre have been exhausted. But it is precisely because Cælia is guilty what should not be possible that Cassinus suffers and rebukes his friend:

How ill hast thou divin’d
A Crime that shocks all Human Kind;
A Deed unknown to Female Race,
At which the Sun should hide its face. (ll. 67-70)

Cælia’s crime is not within the conditions of possibility established by their generic conventions, and it is for that reason Peter cannot divine it and, moreover, that it is a crime. She has done something that Cassinus regards as unnatural, un-Female, an act that defies his pastoral cosmology so entirely that “all Human Kind is shocked” and even the
sun can feel the force of her disgrace. Indeed so great is his shock that Cassinus responds by displacing himself into an indulgent fantasy of his funeral celebration, complete with the pomp of Arcadian elegy, and by apostrophizing pagan demons of the underworld, protesting his essential purity against the “hellish Fry” (l. 87).

Cassinus ultimately only agrees to share the nature of the crime once he has solicited the promise of secrecy from his friend upon pain of haunting should he break their trust. For Cassinus fears the consequences of the knowledge of her deed becoming public, not only the consequences to the well being of mankind, but also the consequences to his reputation as a good Swain fit to be memorialized by the epitaph:

Here Cassy lies, by Cælia slain,
And dying, never told his Pain. (ll. 77-80)

Cassinus’s self-consciousness about how he is represented and care that his legacy will epitomize the conventions of his pastoralism ironically contrasts to the irreverent and destabilizing threats of Cælia’s crime.

The “blackest of all Female Deeds” on one level turns out to be nothing more than the revelation that Cælia defecates. But it is “no Wonder” that Cassinus loses his “Wits” when Cassinus discovers that “Cælia, Cælia Cælia sh—s,” for his wits are bound to an ideology in which appearance signifies content. His pastoralism separates out female beauty from human corporality. Cælia’s beauty then becomes a betrayal, a form unfit for her all too human contents. And while he blames her and her “Fact” for his suffering, his heartbreak and decline are the result of the conflation of generic conventions that give rise to “Sweet Rapture” in poetry, and the material conditions of everyday life.
Strephon and Chloe

While Cassinus holds fast to his pastoral affectations, the sensuous testimony of Strephon’s nose leads him to reject his idealization of Chloe, the pastoral conventions and social customs that support the idealization, and, ultimately, the legitimacy of any conventions or customs all in one crude cascade. At the narrative outset, Strephon’s idealization of Chloe epitomizes a socially embedded separation of female beauty from male corporeality. The poem’s speaker draws attention to the conventions that separate the status of Chloe’s beauty from the body with a sequence of exclusions: “No Humours gross, or frowzy Steams,/ No noisome Whiffs, or sweaty Streams/ … /None ever saw her pluck a Rose.” (ll. 11-16). Because these features are not apparent, the speaker is encouraged to suggest: “You’d swear, that so divine a Creature/ Felt no Necessities of Nature” (ll. 19-20). The suggestion cautiously and comically is comically conditional, implying that you would swear that she “felt no Necessities of Nature” if you didn’t know better. The limitation imposed by the conditional grammar draws attention to the distinction between content and presentation, while introducing the possibility that someone could read her public presentation as truthful only then to ridicule it. But the pastoral idealist of the poem, Strephon, cannot conceive of the world in the fictional possibilities of hypothetical conditions, and therein lies the trouble.

Because Chloe’s appearance fulfills pastoral and social expectations, she becomes the natural choice to “engrosseth ev'ry Swain”; with all suggestions of the vulgar body removed, she can represent herself, be interpreted, and, in turn, be re-represented in “Poetic Strains” and “Billet-doux” as poetry walking (ll. 31, 37, 38). Chief among these Swains is Strephon who
Sigh'd so loud and strong,

He blew a Settlement along:

And, bravely drove his Rivals down. (ll. 39-41)

To distinguish the conventions of beauty and bodiliness, Swift follows Chloe’s poetic elevation beyond the body, with the Swain’s anxieties about his masculine embodiment, creating a comic situation wherein the ethereality of the poetic beauty must encounter the filth of the man who covets her:

**Strephon** had long perplex’d his Brains,

How with so high a Nymph he might

Demean himself the Wedding-Night:

For, as he view’d his Person round,

Meer mortal Flesh was all he found (ll. 72-76)

Taking the poetical conventions of female beauty literally, Strephon decides that the best course of action is to make his “Meer Flesh” appear as inoffensive as possible:

His Hand, his Neck, his Mouth, and Feet

Were duly washt to keep 'em sweet;

(With other Parts that shall be nameless,

The Ladies else might think me shameless.) (ll. 77-80)

Yet, despite his best efforts, he already fears the affectation won’t hold: “He’ll sweat and then the Nymph may smell it” (l. 84). Clothing, hygiene, even lace all prove insufficient to transform him absolutely. But just as a literal reading of poetry poses suggests the
problem, it also suggests a solution. Strephon need not resolve how “such a Deity endure/
A mortal human Touch impure?” because poetry has given him a series of precedents—
“Venus,” “Thetis,” “Pelus,” “Jove” “Semele”—in which the deity does endure it and that
is quite good enough (ll. 89-90; 95-110).

The overlapping affectations leading up to their wedding night suggest an idealist
mise-en-abîme in which Strephon affects the role of a swain, signing songs and sighing to
capture Chloe’s heart and her marriage settlement, and then as groom of the divine, goes
so far as to bathe for the part. He effects these representations because his pastoral
idealism predicts that Chloe, who represents herself and allows herself to be understood
as a pastoral commonplace, will be offended by his body—for beautiful women in this
idiom are free of the flaws of the flesh. Turning a comic gaze toward the labor and
methods of affectations, Swift shows that bodily exclusions and aesthetic perfections that
elevate her are not “Charms divine” but illusions produced by rigorously disciplined
behavior (ll. 249). As a result, she appears, but only appears, to be:

    By Nature form'd with nicest Care,
    And, faultless to a single Hair.
    Her graceful Mein, her Shape, and Face,
    Confest her of no mortal Race:
    And then, so nice, and so genteel;
    Such Cleanliness from Head to Heel:
    No Humours gross, or frowzy Steams…
    No noisom Whiffs, or sweaty Streams,
    Before, behind, above, below,
Could from her taintless Body flow. (ll. 5-14)

The ironic claim that “Nature form’d” her ridicules the belief that any presentation of a body so unnatural as to be spared the indignity of “natural Necessities,” to borrow Gulliver’s phrase, could be formed by nature—either her body is unnatural or her presentation is not natural. Swift’s speaker gives some of the tricks of her trade away by informing parents of Chloe’s strategy to keep “Humours” and “Steams” away:

Forbid your Daughters guzzling Beer;
And make them ev'ry Afternoon
Forbear their Tea, or drink it soon;
That, e'er to Bed they venture up,
They may discharge it ev'ry Sup;
If not; they must in evil Plight
Be often forc'd to rise at Night, (ll. 116-22)

While Chloe can present herself publically as immaterial beauty, she cannot play the nymph twenty-four hours a day. On her wedding night, she finds herself facing that “evil Plight” and is “forc’d to rise.” Having drunk “twelve cups of tea,” “the Bride must either void or burst.” And although Cassinus and Peter, and presumably Strephon, would rather see their beloved dead than be cursed with the reality of her bodily facts, Chloe opts not to burst. She elects to void, but despite her best attempt to conceal it, sensuous evidence clarifies that her poetic semblance is not real but an affectation.18

When Strephon smells and hears Chloe’s urination, he filters the information through a dichotomy of truth and lie, things that are and things that are not. With a “whiff,” Strephon demotes her to a thing that is “as mortal as himself at least.” Because the poetic representation is not true, he goes on to repudiate all pastoralism as well as its pleasing affectations as things that are not, supplanting them with a libertine materialism that permits everything that can be. In a gesture both vengeful and righteous, Strephon ceases to play the part of a Swain and seizes a second chamber pot—“And as he fill'd the reeking Vase, / Let fly a Rouzer in her Face”—transforming the honeymoon suite into a crude and bitter corporeal carnival (ll. 190-92).

The pastoral repudiation leaves a moral and aesthetic vacuum, that is so vulgar that Cupids, along with other poetic staples, are “Abasht at what they saw and heard” (l. 194). The speaker tells us that they “Flew off, nor evermore appear'd,” followed in suit by “ravishing Delights,” “High Raptures,” “Romantic Flights,” “Goddesses so heav’nly sweet” and the “Expiring Shepherds at their Feet” (ll. 196-200). The exodus of pastoral conventions dramatizes the incompatibility of pleasing poetical illusions with Strephon’s abject materialism, yet it also marks a precipitate deontological expulsion. For Strephon and Chloe “learn to call a Spade, a Spade” and “soon from all Constraint are freed,” including any standards of behavior or cleanliness (ll. 203-6). Both virtuous practices and artificial beauties are expunged from the record books and what remains is a world that is as unpleasant as it is amoral. It is a “Society in Stinking” that reduces all material and all action to their lowest denominator through a filter of an excremental categoricalism that the speaker labels a “beastly way of thinking” (ll. 210, 209). With all affectations
putatively expelled, there is no authority—only objects stripped of any meaning beyond the material, such as a beast might perceive.

Their beastly freedom permits a mode of sociability that inverts the fundamental principles of Christian society through its unprincipled toleration: theirs is not a self-conscious economy of “do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” but an invitation to do unto others as they have done to you, and then some, to which Strephon responds with both pot and rouser. Clarifying the fungibility of their libertine rapport, Chloe “more experienced grown/ With interest pays him back his own” by expressing a generous volume of flatulence (ll. 213-4). The qualitative decline of their nuptial aesthetic gives ironic force to the claim of Swift’s speaker that women must:

…after Marriage, practise more

Decorum than she did before;

To keep her Spouse deluded still,

And make him fancy what she will. (ll.141-4)

Yet, even though the pastoral idealism has been disenchanted as a convention, the pleasure of decorum and aesthetic illusion are nevertheless still viable.

**Fraternal Ressentiment**

The ‘Hack’ narrator’s cynical description of social deceit in Swift’s *A Tale of a Tub* draws attention to the complexity of aesthetic illusions and deceptions. He asserts that “Those Entertainments and Pleasures we most value in Life, are such as *Dupe* and play the Way with the Senses,” suggesting a skepticism that mirrors Strephon’s libertinage. But his explanation of happiness complicates the status of these affectations
as simple lies: “For if we take an Examination of what is generally understood by *Happiness*, as it has Respects, either to the Understanding or the Senses, we shall find all its Properties and Adjuncts will herd under this short Definition: That, *it is a perpetual Possession of being well Deceived*” (*TT* 110-11). While the Hack intends to disparage happiness and deception by claiming that we are only happy when we are “well Deceived,” by which is meant thoroughly or sufficiently deceived, the parable of the brothers he relays suggests that there is value to being well-deceived in different sense: a selective and explicit deception of the senses that man is in control of, or possesses, rather than controlled or possessed by.

The parable begins with the consideration of a will and three coats left to three brothers by their father. Allegorically, the father holds the status of God (“the father”), the will of scripture, and the coats of traditional religious practices; however, the parable is not limited to commentary on Christian history. The will lays out a relationship between appropriate religious practices and sociability. It states that the brothers should do nothing to alter their coats and that if they keep them clean, they will grow with them “so as to always be fit” (*TT* 47). It also warns that the brothers “*should live together in one House like Brethren and Friends, for then you will be sure to thrive, and not otherwise.*” The narrative of what happens next suggests that the converse is true, that by altering their coats, and thereby the representation of their religion, the brothers fail both to thrive and to behave like “Brethren and Friends.”

When the brothers come to town after their father’s death, they are possessed by a desire to alter their coats to match evolving urban fashions. The desire reflects an concern about how they are seen by others and how their coats signify value or status. They are
unwilling to defy their father’s will explicitly, and instead approach the document with various systems of interpretation until one brother, Peter, finds “an Expedient” that produces an interpretation that matches their desires (TT 54). Peter’s bad-faith readings satirize biblical hermeneutics by retailing new and tendentious interpretations as fully representative of the will’s true meaning whenever the need arises. Yet, as “Fashions [were] perpetually altering in that Age, the Scholastic Brother grew weary of searching farther Evasions, and solving everlasting contradictions. Resolved therefore at all Hazards, to comply with the Modes of the World, they concerted Matters together, and agreed unanimously to lock up their Father’s Will” and replace it with the Peter’s exegetical and “expedient” representations (TT 54). The other two brothers, Martin and Jack, are willingly “well Deceived” by their brother’s affectation of learning, and accept the Petrine cannon as a true representation of the will.

Each of Peter’s new affectations holds the status of a new truth, and promotes Peter to the status of truth-maker. But as with the twelve cups of tea in Chloe’s bladder, the volume of Peter’s affectations—including the sale and resale of Terra Australis Incognita, the promotion of a Universal Pickle, the transubstantiation of bread into mutton, and, eventually, the sale of divine pardons—become too much for him to manage. The other two brothers’ affirmation of Peter’s affectations translates into resentful rejection when Peter’s religious affectations are unmasked as nothing more than scams. The Petrine disenchantment leads Martin and Jack to “reflect on the numberless Misfortunes and Vexations of their Life past, and [they] could not tell, on the sudden to what Failure in their Conduct they ought to impute them” (TT 87). Their inability to
immediately recognize the cause of these “Misfortunes and Vexations” foreshadows the role reason and reflection will play in the two brothers’ divergent paths.

Returning to their father’s will, they confront the vast disparity between Peter’s canon as representation of the will and the will itself, as well as their adorned coats as they are—representations of Peter’s accumulated religious affectations—and as they should have been: “There was never seen a wider Difference between two Things; horrible down-right Transgressions of every Point. Upon which, they both resolved without further Delay, to fall immediately upon reducing the Whole, exactly after their Father’s Mode” (TT 87-8). Because Peter’s sartorial affectations were accretive, their coats are burdened by “whatever Trimmings came up in Fashion”: “There was hardly a Thread of the Original Coat to be seen, but an infinite Quantity of Lace, and Ribbands and Fringe, and Embroidery, and Points” (TT 88). As a result, their coats cannot be fully separated out from the added ornaments—a point Martin realizes upon having “very narrowly escaped a swinging rent in pulling off the points, which being tagged with silver (as we have observed before), the judicious workman had with much sagacity double sewn to preserve them from falling.”

Martin concedes in a moment of calm reflection that stripping away all ornament or aesthetic additions would ultimately only corrupt the coat further by destroying its original fabric:

Where he observed the Embroidery to be workt so close, as not to be got away without damaging the Cloth, or where it serv’d to hide or strengthen any Flaw in the Body of the Coat, … he concluded the wisest Course was to let it remain, resolving in no Case whatsoever, that the Substance of the Stuff should suffer Injury; where he thought the best Method for serving the true Intent and Meaning of his Father’s Will. (TT 89)
Martin only removes the obviously offensive ornaments that can be cleanly excised, leaving behind those additions that are “workt so close” that they cannot “be got away without damaging the Cloth” and those that “serv’d to hide or strengthen any Flaw in the Body of the Coat.” Martin’s conclusion implies that it has become necessary to maintain some affectations or enhancements: removing them entirely will destroy the coat while keeping some actually proves beneficial to the coat itself.

This calm and prudent reconsideration of the value of aesthetic additions moves beyond an evaluation of their status as truths in Peter’s canon and also denies their status as malevolent lies in Jack’s vain imagination. For Jack, “The Memory of Lord Peter’s injuries, produced a Degree of Hatred and Spight, which had a much greater Share of inciting Him, than any Regards after his Father’s Commands, since these appeared at best, only Secondary and Subservient to the other” (TT 89). Jack displaces his resentment at Peter’s affectations on the ornaments themselves. His “Zeal” distorts his initial inclination to recover the “true Intent and Meaning of his Father’s Will” with “Hatred and Spite” that encourages a Petrine purge that savages the coat (TT 92). The Hack notes here that “Zeal is never so highly obliged, as when you set it a Tearing; and Jack, who doated on that Quality in himself, allowed it as this Time its full Swing,” implying that Jack’s rejection of the unmasked affectations is more a vainly inspired concern about self-representation. Likewise it is the vain affectation of righteousness that drives him to “rent the main Body of his Coat from Top to Bottom.”

Playing his brother’s keeper, Martin urges him to stop and protests that he should not “Damage his Coat by any Means; for he never would get such another.” Refocusing explicitly on questions of behavior and the sociability prescribed in the will, he reasons:
That it was not their Business to form their Actions by any Reflection upon Peter’s but by observing the Rules prescribed in their Father’s Will. That he should remember, Peter was still their Brother…and therefore they should by all means avoid such a Thought, as that of taking Measures for Good and Evil, from no other Rule, than of Opposition to him. That it was true, the Testament of their good Father was very exact in what related to the wearing of their Coats; yet was it no less penal and strict in prescribing Agreement, and Friendship, and Affection between them. (TT 93)

Martin concludes they have no authority to punish their brother, Peter, in fact or by proxy, clarifying that they are enjoined by their father to strive for “the Advance of Unity, than Increase of Contradiction.”

Martin’s example suggests that some judicious ornamentation is not only permissible, but also necessary while Jack’s rejection of his advice promises to destroy the coats and the opportunity for fraternal sociability. Zealous and contemptuous, Jack resists Martin’s logic and instead reconceives the will as a personal oracle whose deep and dark “mysteries” give him objective knowledge of how to act righteously in every situation. While Peter’s affectations overwhelm the will, Jack regards the will as a true and precise representation: “His common talk and conversation ran wholly in the praise of his Will, and he circumscribed the utmost of his eloquence within that compass, not daring to let slip a syllable without authority from thence.” Swift presents Jack’s inspired devotion as a comic parody of his brother Peter’s testaments that bread is mutton and that pickle is divine with his claim, “I will prove this very Skin of Parchment to be Meat, Drink, and Cloth, to be the Philosopher’s Stone and the Universal Medicine. In consequence of which raptures he resolved to make use of it in the most necessary as well as the most paltry occasions of life” (TT 123). Emboldened by his “raptures,” like the
bookish “Rapture sweet” of Cassinus and Peter, he vows to apply the will to all aspects of life, “working it into any Shape he pleased,” assured of its absolute truth (TT 124).  

Swift portrays Jack’s enthusiastic relationship to the will as inspiration in reverse: a spitting out of self-produced stuff similar to the excretions of the Aeolists described by the Hack. He does so most economically through an episode in which Jack defecates in his pants at a stranger’s house because he is unable to find instructions in the will on either how to reverse the course of his bowels or where to relieve them in a stranger’s house. After the inevitable fact, “none could “prevail with him to make himself clean again, because, having consulted the will upon this emergency, [because] he met with a passage near the bottom (whether foisted in by the transcriber is not known) which seemed to forbid it.” The passage, most likely Revelation xxii.11, “He which is filthy, let him be filthy still,” becomes an ironic law for Jack—so much so that his foulness only accumulates:

Having from his manner of living frequent occasions to wash himself, he would often leap over head and ears into the water, though it were in the midst of the winter, but was always observed to come out again much dirtier, if possible, than he went in. (TT 124)

The fluttering coat fabric caused by his violent and prolific excretion mirrors the accumulation of ornaments on the Peter’s coat, reinforcing the symmetry of their common folly.

It is the Nature of Rags to bear a kind of mock resemblance to finery, there being a sort of fluttering Appearance in both, which is not to be distinguished at a Distance in the Dark or by short-sighted Eyes, so in those Junctures, it fared with

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19 Scholars have traditionally recognized Jack’s reading of the will as a satire of Puritan or Dissenter reading practices. See the classic studies of C. M. Webster, “Swift and Some Earlier Satirists of Puritan Enthusiasm,” PMLA 48 (1933): 1141-53 and “The Satiric Background of the Attack on the Puritans in Swift’s A Tale of a Tub,” PMLA 50 (1935): 210-23.

Jack and his Tatters, that they offered to the first View a ridiculous Planting, which, assisting the Resemblance in Person and Air, thwarted all his Projects of separation [from Peter], and left so near a Similitude between them as frequently deceived the very Disciples and Followers of both. (TT 129)

Their “similitude” is a product of their limited epistemological alternatives of truth and lie, as well as their reductive understanding of the possibilities of affectation. Both conflate form and content, however, Jack’s status as the filthier of the two suggests that the malice of his ressentiment and rejection of Petrine affectations have set him on the more dangerous, derelict, and ridiculous path of decline.

While Martin seeks social unity through selective, explicit affectations, the Hack draws attention to the antisocial force of tacit affectations: “It was highly worth observing, the singular Effects of that Aversion or Antipathy, which Jack and his Brother Peter seemed, even to Affectation, to bear towards each other” (TT 128). Jack and Peter mutual resentments indicate a correlation between unacknowledged affectations and enmity that affirms Martin’s sociable promotion of explicit affectations through counterexample. Similarly, their divergent conditions imply that any alternative preferable to the antisocial hostilities of sectarianism must make room for the pleasure and productive possibilities of explicit affectations.

Decent Verisimilitude.

Martin’s re-evaluation of the necessity and utility of the coat’s ornamentation in A Tale of a Tub provides a template for reading the advice of the speaker of “Strephon and Chloe” regarding wifely decorum beyond its evident sexism, and also complements the poem’s implied correlation between a rejection of affectations and a beastly, stinking society. The speaker hypothesizes that if Strephon had seen Chloe “on the privy” before
assimilating her public acts of representation as a pastoral truth, then his “fancy” would “dwell” on the memory in “Spight of Chloe's Charms divine” (l. 249). Foreknowledge would disenchant her charming affectation by making clear that her “Charms divine” were only that, “Charms.” The hypothesis suggests a new and radical category of affectations divorced from the logic of truth and lie, and things that are and are not: things as they seem to be, or, in the language of pastoral idealism, “charms” disenchanted. The speaker observes that:

Authorities both old and recent

Direct that Women must be decent;

And, from the Spouse each Blemish hide

More than from all the World beside. (ll. 251-4)

It is an important distinction that authorities prescribe decency not divinity; and while the injunction to hide each blemish rings as a sexist absurdity, the prescription nevertheless asks the reader whether women—or all people—would be better off giving “each Blemish” a value and status equal to beauty, natural or otherwise. The question extends beyond the physical representation to behavior, asking whether there should be distinctions between modes of conduct informed by our vicious inclinations, like those women who “learn polite Behaviour,/ By reading Books against their Saviour,” and our gentler social inclinations—as well the virtuous practices that, like the ornaments that remain on Martin’s coat, strengthen and enhance what is pleasing while concealing and disciplining what is vicious (ll. 271-2).

While Strephon may have fared better if he had not linked beautiful forms with essential truth, Swift nowhere suggests that anyone benefits if Chloe ceases to present a
more appealing figure than a scrunched-up face at work over the privy. The indecorous marital and social relations of the libertine “Society in Stinking” make a strong case for some degree of conscious decoration—for charms disenchanted—that are stripped of their epistemological value, yet retain their aesthetic power to please. Throughout these three scatological romances, Swift uses female characters as examples of the power of aesthetic illusion to affect an appearance so pleasing that it can be mistaken for pastoral divinity. He explores the power of aesthetic illusions directly in the fourth of the scatological romances, “A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed,” through the aesthetic labor of the “Beautiful Young Nymph,” Corinna. Corinna, like the nymphs of the other scatological romances is not truly what she appears to be publically; however, Corinna’s affectations are an extreme case. A prostitute disfigured by poverty and disease, Corinna requires many layers of cosmetics, stays, a wig, and a glass eye to project the mere image of health, to say nothing of divine beauty. Swift’s muse details the unmaking of her affectation in a perverse strip tease and blazon that first registers as a comic unmasking of her affectations to beauty. Yet after she has dutifully taken down her complex façade, a different feeling overtakes the narrator and the reader, particularly when she is viewed in the harsh light of day.

Awaking “A Dreadful sight!” whose smell and appearance would cause anyone to “spew” or feel “poison’d,” the speaker reports that:

The Nymph, tho' in this mangled Plight,

Must ev'ry Morn her Limbs unite.

But how shall I describe her Arts

To recollect the scatter'd Parts?
Or shew the Anguish, Toil, and Pain,
Of gath'ring up herself again?
The bashful Muse will never bear
In such a Scene to interfere. (ll. 65-72)

The “parts” that she gathers, the wig, the glass eyes, and so on, are not natural but artificial, false parts that she assembles and disassembles each day. In part, because her “Tresses fill'd with Fleas” and “Crystal Eye” are so shabby, the image she affects in “Dawbs of White and Red” cannot be mistaken for natural beauty (ll. 64, 61, 34). The “bashful Muse” shows us Corinna’s affectations as affectations, and does so without condemnation: whatever disparagement remains ricochets back onto the reader for his or her hasty laughter. The muse doesn’t ridicule, but demurs out of what Thomas Gilmore has identified as “respect” and “grudging admiration” for Corinna’s sheer ability to survive and to repeat the performance in full costume each day. Yet there is also a sense of humility: we need only imagine how Pope’s Belinda would fare in Corinna’s place, let alone we readers.  

Laughter stops, yielding to something like awe, wonder, and pity.

While Swift may deplore her profession, he nevertheless indirectly endorses her use of aesthetic illusion as necessary both for her survival and for our engagement with her. Given the ambiguous if not privileged status of the power of aesthetic illusion and affectations here and elsewhere to enhance and conceal, surely Swift’s “Strephon and Chloé” cannot suggest, as some critics have claimed, that affectations and aesthetic pleasures should be eschewed and beauty unmasked as irrelevant, leaving people to “Love and Esteem” one another based on character alone in the full bloom of natural

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human stink.22 “A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed” confronts the reader with a powerful representation of humanity in the raw, making a case for softening its impact with the judicious, aesthetic affectations.

The narrator of “Strephon and Chloe” proposes a collaboration of explicit affections, wherein the verisimilitude of “decency” emerges as a privileged alternative to the odium of pastoralism and libertinage:

For, Beauty, like supreme Dominion,
Is best supported by Opinion;
If Decency brings no Supplies,
Opinion falls, and Beauty dies. (ll. 222-25)

Decency links morality and body through behavior, not the authenticity of presentation. Responding to the role of decency to the poem, John Hawkesworth remarked that

If virtue, as some writers pretend, be that which produces happiness, it must be granted, that to practice decency is a moral obligation; and if virtue consists in obedience to a law, as the nuptial law enjoin both parties to avoid offence, decency will still be a duty, and the breech of it will incur some degree of guilt.23

Hawkesworth argues that virtue is a type of discipline or “obedience to a law.” In turn, decency becomes a moral obligation understood as a nevertheless affected practice. Similarly, Swift’s former classmate, the dissenter Isaac Watts, claimed “the great Design of Prudence … is to determine and manage every Affair with Decency, and to the best Advantage. That is decent, which is agreeable to our State, Condition or Circumstances, whether it be in Behavior, Discourse, or Action.”24 For Watts, as with Swift, managing to

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22 See Siebert, 23.
the “best Advantage” in “Behavior, Discourse, or Action” is neither a misrepresentation nor a hypocrisy, but a moral act.

Mirroring the distinction between tacit, deceitful affectations and decent verisimilitude, Watts asserts that “Falsehood often puts on a fair Disguise, and therefore we should not yield up Judgment to every plausible Appearance. It is not part of Civility or good Breeding to part with Truth, but to maintain it with decency and candor.”

The phenomenology of decency doesn’t rely on the distinctions of truth or lie, or things that are or are not in the way that pastoralism and libertinage do. Rather decency’s conscious fictions enable men and women to set their contents off to their best advantage.

**Perfume and Performance**

“The Lady’s Dressing Room” emphasizes the incompatibility of the affectation of objectivity and the pleasure of affectations by tracking the steps of a second Strephon who dares to look behind the façade. In his lady’s dressing room, he discovers a famously nasty pageant of sweat, smell, stain, and filth alongside tools and technologies of the toilet. He understanding these discoveries as evidence that his Celia’s “glory” is inauthentic—the produce of artifice and affectation. The unanticipated discovery shocks Strephon into the recognition that his pastoral idealism is as obfuscating as Celia’s discarded boudoir leftovers.

Having rejected idealism, Strephon reconsiders his discoveries as facts uncovered in a “grand survey,” and transitions into a “naïve empiricism” fueled by passionate resentment. Swift takes the opportunity to burlesque the mechanics of Lockean

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25 Watts, 209.
26 See the discussion of naïve empiricism in McKeon, 1987, 47-51.
associationism, by suggesting that this empirical Strephon makes an errant association based on his senses:

   His foul Imagination links
   Each Dame he sees with all her Stinks:
   And, if unsav'ry Odours fly,
   Conceives a Lady standing by:
   All Women his Description fits,
   And both Idea's jump like Wits:
   By vicious Fancy coupled fast,
   And still appearing in Contrast. (ll. 121-28)

His “vicious Fancy” couples together scent and resentment, and combines the idea of one particular woman with the abstract category of woman. “And both Idea’s jump like Wits” to form a false syllogism that represents all women as noxious and all stink as the necessary property of womankind.

Reading “The Lady’s Dressing Room” in the tradition of romance critique, Ronald Paulson identifies Strephon’s initial idealization of Celia as a reiteration of the fancifully amorous Don Quixote’s love for Dulcinea’s. Like Quixote, Strephon “has read poets who refer to their beloved as a goddess, and instead of accepting this as a poetic convention, acts upon it.”27 The important difference, however, is that when Don Quixote is faced with Dulcinea’s mediocre material body, dissonance is assimilated as a false enchantment. He interprets her natural appearance as a malicious, deceitful representation. He remains faithful to his poetic idealism, a fidelity that Cassinus also

maintains though with very different results. When Strephon encounters Celia’s material fact, however, the spell is irreparably broken. The departure from quixotism allows Swift to exceed the particulars of romance convention and ridicule modern empiricism’s affectation of objectivity proud conventions as even more ridiculous than simple knight errantry and far more antisocial.

Drawing from fictional precedents outside of romance, Swift links Strephon to Ovid’s Epimetheus and Milton’s Lucifer to both ridicule his pretension and emphasize its potentially disastrous outcomes. Once inside Chloe’s dressing room, Strephon seeks out objects of disenchantment, eventually stumbling on her closed and disguised “chest” which he dares to open:

As from within Pandora’s Box,
When Epimetheus op'd the Locks,

...  
So Strephon lifting up the Lid,
To view what in the Chest was hid.

...  
O never may such vile Machine
Be once in Celia’s Chamber seen!
O may she better learn to keep
The secrets of the hoarie deep. (ll. 87-98)

Like Epimetheus, Strephon is not merely a fool deceived or enchanted by female beauty, although this part of the analogy certainly fits; he is also a fool who fails to reflect on the
outcome of his actions. He confidently and recklessly ventures forth, unleashing “A sudden universal Crew/ Of humane Evils” onto the world and fails to recognize the hope that remains (ll. 85-86). Swift does supply hope for the reader—but not as a occult thing to be retrieved from an “the Bottom of the Pan.”

The Miltonic allusion more strongly indicts Strephon’s search for truths as a dangerous, even sinful affectation. With the line "Those Secrets of the hoary deep" Swift alludes to Milton’s description of Satan confronting the incomprehensible anarchy of Chaos beyond God’s orderly world:

Before their eyes in sudden view appear
The secrets of the hoarie deep, a dark
Illimitable Ocean without bound,
Without dimension, where length, breadth, & hight,
And time and place are lost; where eldest Night
And Chaos, Ancestors of Nature, hold
Eternal Anarchie, amidst the noise
Of endless Warrs, and by confusion stand.28

The parallels between Celia’s dressing room and “Eternal Anarchie,” and between the contents of her private chest with “a dark / Illimitable Ocean” are deliciously witty. The coupling of an arrogant fallen angel in an immeasurable world of Chaos with a prowling, “peeping” courtier in pastoral drag is comical as well, and also allows Swift to link Strephon’s empirical affectation with the viciousness of a “mind not to be chang'd by Place or Time” that “is its own place, and in it self/ Can make a Heav'n of Hell,” and

ironize Strephon’s acts by recalling the devil’s later claim that I “myself am hell” for no new heaven is ever constructed.²⁹

With “The Lady’s Dressing Room,” Swift illustrates how tacit intellectual affectations eventuate in ridiculous representations, social isolation, and anti-social misanthropy—here in the form of misogyny. One especially comic aspect of Strephon’s discovery of Celia’s affectation is that it is ultimately no discovery: the suggestive “Five Hours” that he waits for her to dress should register to all but the most obtuse that her resulting presentation is a labored artifice (l. 1). And certainly, the very fact of a dressing room should destabilize any presumption of authentic “Glory” (l. 135). But discovery of the “Secrets of the hoarie Deep” sends Strephon into fits that foment a new system of understanding that both condemns Celia for her affectations and perverts the pleasure he once implicitly took in them.

As with Cælia, Chloe, and Corinna, the narrative testifies to the power of this Celia’s skills to affect and enhance beauty. Similarly, the heap of her toiletries and her deceptively decorated “chest” demonstrate the length to which Celia has gone to conceal her less pleasing sensuous realities or “blemishes.” It is a key feature of the poem that people will smell if nothing is done about it, a concern that Carol Fabricant and Donald Siebert, among others, have noted was not insignificant in the Swift’s early-eighteenth century.³⁰ And while idealizations of mankind (and of woman in particular) may vainly deny olfactory menaces, it is aesthetic practices and affectations that disarm them just as virtue disciplines vice.

²⁹ Milton, 1.253-5.127, 4.75.193.
A Tincture of Reason

Strephon’s accumulation of facts recalls Gulliver’s display of details in the first two books of his travels. In the third book, Swift constructs a more direct critique of the impact of the affectation of objectivity on sociability. Swift’s ridicule of the wild fantasies of practical science and the senselessness of theoretical abstraction are well documented and need not be rehearsed here.31 The little remarked upon episode of Gulliver’s encounter with the immortal Struldbruggs, however, deserves attention for its juxtaposition of sociable affectations and anti-social affectations of objectivity.

On the island of Balnibarbi, Gulliver hears rumors of an immortal race that lead him to construct an elaborate fantasy of how he would behave if he were to live the life of an immortal. He begins his fantasy by claiming that if he had the “good fortune” to be immortal he would convert that into a literal good fortune in the economic sense, and eventually acquire the greatest fortune, as he progresses through a projected two hundred years of financial prudence in order to rule over all men both financially and politically. His initial attention to thrift corresponds with his desire to accrue all knowledge. Speculating that he could accomplish both political and financial dominion, he grants his fantasy self a semi-divine status. Wealthy, powerful, and knowledgeable, he will become “a living Treasury of Knowledge and Wisdom,” and he believes that he will become an agent of ineffable authority, an “oracle” (GT 179).

His oracular posture neatly triangulates knowledge, power, and wealth as affectations of superiority, yet Gulliver nevertheless appears sincere in his desire to

benefit humanity. His projected relationship with mortal humanity begins to shifts as he contemplates progression beyond the human condition—a move that raises anxieties about the nature of progress for an individual, a society, and the progression of time. Imagined as an oracular immortal, Gulliver ultimately dissolves all sociable ties with humanity. Reducing them to objects rather than recognizing them as equals, he imagines a class of immortals who will divert themselves with humanity’s triumphs and follies unfold like the changing of the season, “just as Man diverts himself with the annual Succession of Pinks and Tulips in his Gardens with out regretting the Loss of those which withered the previous Year” (*GT* 180). Elevation through knowledge of and over the mechanical world corresponds to the ominous geographic elevation of the Laputan intellectual elite hovering above Balnibarbi with the ever-present threat of crushing them. Laputan veneration of knowledge depreciates the body, the senses, and the social, absolving the individual thinker of any sentimental or moral ties with other human bodies. Knowledge and power become the tools of individual desire that demote others to nothing more than physical matter to be measured and manipulated as *reason* dictates.

Gulliver’s immortal, oracular self-projection lacks both explicit affectations and empathy, resembling the mechanical god who observes but never interferes as though all life was simply a spectacle. The resemblance recalls the callousness of Newton’s clockwork deity as well as the pretense of man as an objective instrument of measure. This aspect of Gulliver’s fantastic oracular posture echoes earlier anxieties of the mechanical man, such as the Lilliputian surmise that Gulliver’s watch is “the God he worships,” because he “seldom did any thing without consulting it. He called it his Oracle, and said it pointed out the Time for every Action of his Life”; or, the
Brobdingnagian King’s suspicion that Gulliver “might be a piece of Clockwork … contrived by some ingenious Artist” (GT 81). The trope moves from consultation of the mechanical and regular, to being a product of a mechanical maker, to having complete knowledge of the mechanical, regular processes of a clockwork world in which human events, passions, and pains are as predictable and neutral as the cycle of annual flora. This affectation, like Strephon’s material libertinage, engenders an amoral world, indications that the affectation of objectivity and pretention to knowledge are less about helping humanity lead a better life through progress, as Gulliver at first represents them, and more a puffed up presentation of man’s inhumanity to man.

Swift redirects his unmasking of affectations of objectivity to show the poverty of the lives the “true immortals” whom the Balnibarbi exclude from social customs, conventions, and other pleasurable affectations. These immortals lose the ability to enjoy the company of others as they become incapable of participating in the common forms of social life—property, marriage, and language. “They are despised and hated by all sorts of people” because “they were not only opinionative, peevish, covetous, morose, vain, talkative, but incapable of friendship, and dead to all natural affection, which never descended below their grandchildren. Envy and impotent desires are their prevailing passions” (GT 183). Gulliver remarks that the Struldbruggs “were the most mortifying sight I ever beheld… Besides the usual deformities in extreme old age, they acquired an additional ghastliness, in proportion to their number of years, which is not to be described.” They are undisciplined, unadorned, miserable bodies, even more horrible than Corinna before the dawn. The “mortifying” materiality of the Struldbruggs argues for the
necessity of the formal social conventions from which they lack, whether or not there is any truth to them.

The Yahoos that Gulliver encounters in the last of his travels make a compelling argument for the necessity of enhancing and concealing affectations that exceeds the “despised and hated,” “ghastly” specter of the Struldbruggs. For as soon as Gulliver encounters their unwashed bodies and their unselfconscious behavior, he is overwhelmed with “Contempt and Aversion,” noting: “I never beheld in all my Travels so disagreeable an Animal, or one against which I naturally conceived so strong an Antipathy” (GT 193). The joke, of course, is that these “disagreeable” “Animals” are actually people stripped of their cultural and aesthetic affectations. His strong antipathy is for natural man—though so unrecognizable is he alongside the civilized men of varying sizes and customs he has already encountered, that Gulliver cannot identify him as human, a blindness that suggests the inextricableness of man’s image of himself and his affectations.

Gulliver soon comes to realize that costume and conduct are all the separate him from the Yahoos, filthy in tooth and claw. This is made nowhere more evident to him than when a female Yahoo attempts to copulate with him with neither ritual nor ceremony. She simply reacts to his scent and the sight of him naked, bathing in a stream. Gulliver claims, “I was never in my life so terribly frightened,” but the fear is not just of the uninvited attempt but also of the nature of his distinction from the Yahoos (233). He relates that “Now I could no longer deny that I was a real Yahoo in every limb and feature, since the females had a natural propensity to me, as one of their own species.” Provocatively, despite the all too public unmasking of his true Yahoo identity, as well as his Houyhnhnm master’s knowledge of his naked Yahoo body, Gulliver continues to
wear clothing, to bathe, and to cling to all the other affectations of civility that once made him appear a different species. Made explicit and voluntary, his behavior makes a very different claim about the usefulness of affectations.

Recognition of the value of affectations and their relationship to reason plays a crucial role in the Houyhnhnm debate on a proposed Yahoo genocide. In the debate, Gulliver’s display of reason, civilized behavior, and gentle appearance are marshaled together to support of a theory of Yahoo migration and cultural disembedding. His master explains to the other Houyhnhnms, as Gulliver retells it:

That my Body was all covered with an artificial Composure of the Skins and Hairs of other Animals; that I spoke in a Language of my own, and had thoroughly learned theirs; That I had related to him the Accidents which brought me thither; That when he saw me without my Covering, I was an exact Yahoo in every Part, only of a whiter Colour, less hairy, and with shorter Claws. He added, how I had endeavoured to persuade him, that in my own and other Countries, the Yahoos acted as the governing, rational Animal, and held the Houyhnhnms in Servitude; that he observed in me all the Qualities of a Yahoo, only a little more civilized by some tincture of Reason, which, however, was in a Degree … far inferior to the Houyhnhnm Race. (GT 237-38)

The quality that separates Gulliver from the Houyhnhnms is not reason, for he has this, though it is rated at “a degree … far inferior” to that of the Houyhnhnms. Rather, the distinctions lies is his artifice and his adaptive affectations: his clothing (“artificial composure of skins and hairs of other animals”) and his ability to express himself in a different, non-natal language as well as to create a language of his own, while the Houyhnhnm have facility only in their own language and wear no clothing. It is a great and profitable irony that what separates him from the common Yahoo is also in part what separates him from the Houyhnhnms.

Although Gulliver idealizes their objective, efficient culture, the description of their rational world of the Houyhnhnms denies the importance of feeling and aesthetic
affect. It is a culture in which one child is of no greater or lesser value than another—there is no parental “Fondness” (GT 234). Death is greeted with the same lack of feeling as birth, and sensuous beauty deflates into the quality of comeliness that is measured in the interest of social symmetry, but never felt:

In their Marriages they are exactly careful to chuse such Colours as will not make any disagreeable Mixture in the Breed. *Strength* is chiefly valued in the Male, and *Comeliness* in the Female; not upon the Account of *Love*, but to preserver the Race from degenerating: For, where a Female happens to excel in *Strength*, a Consort is chosen with regard to *Comeliness*.

However well rationalized these categories may be, the Houyhnhnms’ miscegenation taboo and gendered eugenics resemble the conventional world of the scatological romance more closely than it does a paradise of sociable pleasure.

The Houyhnhnms hypothesize that the Yahoos lost their civilizing affectation during their post-migration period. They “became much more savage than those of their own Species in the Country from whence these two Originals came” (GT 237). Curiously, neither the Houyhnhnms nor Gulliver draws the conjectural history of the Yahoos a similar story for the European horse. For insofar as they are also stripped of cultural affectations, European horses would most likely inspire nothing more than “Contempt and Aversion” in its Houyhnhnms kin. The surmised mode of the Yahoos’ decline suggests that the production and discipline of cultural affectations, whether in terms of the aesthetic body or behavior, distinguishes man from a beastly way of living, and that these affectations are not completely arbitrary, but are selective, useful products of reason that may or may not have been elevated over time into custom and then truths. Consequently, the Houyhnhnms fear that Gulliver might train or reform the Yahoos, a
fear that argues the possibility of not only a Yahoo revolt, but also of their return to civility through a layering of behavioral and aesthetic affectations.

Deported from the land of the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver’s initial rejection of Yahoo-Europeans in deference to an idealized Houyhnhnm culture mirrors Strephon’s rejection of women in “The Lady’s Dressing Room.” Humanity has been utterly and grossly disenchanted. Nevertheless, Gulliver’s misanthropy is gradually mediated by the power of aesthetics, affectations, and form, even if he still venerates his rational equine masters. When the Portuguese sailor Pedro de Mendez rescues Gulliver and takes him aboard his ship, he treats him with extraordinarily patient hospitality and demonstrates an acute power of judgment, so much that Gulliver “wondered to find such Civilities from a Yahoo” (GT 251). He promotes the captain in time from “an animal which had some little portion of reason” to “a wise man” (GT 251-2).32 Similarly, while at first it was only “in gratitude to the captain [that Gulliver] sometimes sat with him, at his earnest request,” striving “to conceal [his] antipathy against human kind, although it often broke out” and he could not suffer the mere idea of borrowing the captain’s clothes, he eventually elects to spend whole days with him, finds it acceptable to wear clothing tailored on the captain’s body—provided that it has been aired out for twenty-four hours—and even suffers the captain to embrace him upon their parting.

Examination of Gulliver’s misanthropy tends to overlook an interesting aspect of his post-travels life: namely that he chooses to spend time with people. In a discussion with Mendez, the captain convinces Gulliver to return to England, persuading him that “it

32 The similarity between “Mendez” and mendacity suggests that there is something artificial or untrue about his generosity. Yet, his lack of any agenda against Gulliver indicates that the mendacity of the “good man” is precisely the mendacious status of “civilities” as conscious affectation and virtuous discipline. See the discussion in Frank T. Boyle, Swift as Nemesis: Modernity and Its Satirist (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 166-72.
was altogether impossible to find such a solitary Island as I desired to live in; but I might
command in my own House, and pass my Time in a Manner as Recluse as I pleased” (GT
52). Yet Gulliver doesn’t play the recluse. Even before this conversation, Gulliver
begins to “tolerate” the captain’s company and grows interested it the world outside,
peeping out windows and walking into the town with his tolerable companion.

Gulliver finds that his “terror [of people] gradually lessened, but [his] hatred and
contempt seemed to increase”—but at least part of this contempt and hatred is the result
of a sensuous antipathy. To better enjoy his exchanges with Mendez, Gulliver keeps his
“nose well stopped with rue, or sometimes with tobacco” (GT 253). Distorting the smell
of other people allows him to engage in a tolerable, if not agreeable, perfumed
sociability. Notably, he repeats the sensory masking his encounters with his wife to
accommodate himself to her company. Their first meeting is characterized by his
physical repulsion at her scent: it sends him “into a swoon for almost an hour.” Yet, in
time, he judiciously applies aesthetic enhancements that enable him to increasingly
tolerate her company:

I began last week to permit my wife to sit at dinner with me, at the farthest end of
a long table; and to answer (but with the utmost brevity) the few questions I asked
her. Yet, the smell of a Yahoo continuing very offensive, I always keep my nose
well stopped with rue, lavender, or tobacco leaves. (GT 254)

While Gulliver still spends time with his horses, misconstruing their physical
resemblance to Houyhnhnms as testimony of their inner resemblance, his use of aesthetic
masks to remain in his wife’s company and abandonment of the reclusive solution,
suggests that he desires some degree of human social contact. He chooses to be with
people, even if they are loathsome, and strives to give them a less loathsome semblance.
Like “Swift” in “Some Verses,” Gulliver doesn’t condemn men for their nature outright, but focuses on their affectations, explaining that “When I behold a Lump of Deformity, and Diseases both in Body and Mind, smitten with Pride, it immediately breaks all the Measures of my Patience” (GT 260). The problem is not simply one of natural deficiencies; it is complicated by problem of tacit affectations. Alongside his nascent steps at sociability, the act of recording his travels also suggests that Gulliver has or at one point had hope that through sensuous masks and the virtuous discipline his book could inspire, men could affect a better version of themselves. He ends his tale explaining, “I dwell the longer upon this Subject [of tacit affectations] from the Desire I have to make the Society of an English Yahoo by any Means not insupportable; and therefore I here entreat those who have any Tincture of this absurd Vice,” the vice of vanity or pride which engenders tacit affectations, “that they will not presume to appear in my Sight.”

Swift emphasizes the connection between tacit affectations and social fragmentation throughout his satires. Similarly, he argues that explicit affectations or “useful fictions” can facilitate sociability through the power of pleasing illusions. To this end, Swift argues that A Tale of a Tub’s Martin can only realize his father’s promotion of “the Advance of Unity, than Increase of Contradiction” or “Agreement, and Friendship, and Affection between them” through the judicious selection of traditional ornaments, which is to say conventions or customs; similarly, the speaker of “Strephon and Chloe” advises that only the self-conscious affectation of “decency” can achieve a happy marriage and raise society above its natural stink. Likewise, Gulliver’s Travels proposes a collaboration of virtuous discipline and aesthetic practice to make mankind “not
insupportable” and “tolerable,” while “A Young Nymph Going to Bed” argues the practical utility if not necessity of aesthetic masking for social survival. Conscious affectation frees men from the constraints of tacit affectations but also allows them the opportunity to freely choose how to set themselves and others to “best advantage” in order to achieve the pleasures of sociability.

The narrator of “The Lady’s Dressing Room” gives perhaps the most simple and direct version of this message. He both pities and ridicules Strephon because his empirically driven affectation of objectivity has made him blind “To all the Charms of Female Kind,” not unlike the male Houyhnhnms, which in turn has made him blind to the social pleasures of half the population, if not outright hostile to them (l. 130). Alternatively, the narrator reinforces the charm of affectations, forms, and fictions, and puts the choice plainly to the reader in conventional couplets:

Should I the Queen of Love refuse,

Because she rose from stinking Ooze? (ll. 131-2)

For Swift, denying her charms, denies any pleasure beyond the isolation of smug vanity. Turning away from Strephon’s pursuit of the true and unmasking of the false, Swift’s speaker promotes explicit affectations as a moral and necessary method for facilitating sociability: they are not opposed to reason but are an expression of reason beyond truth and lie. The consciousness of the fiction is the key to its utility and its pleasures.

Swift’s speaker concludes:

When Celia in her Glory shows,

If Strephon would but stop his Nose;

(Who now so impiously blasphemes
Her Ointments, Daubs, and Paints and Creams,
Her Washes, Slops, and every Clout,
With which he makes so foul a Rout;
He soon would learn to think like me,
And bless his ravisht Sight to see
Such Order from Confusion sprung,
Such gaudy Tulips rais'd from Dung. (ll. 135-44).

Celia’s glory is not her natural beauty nor does it pretend to reproduce natural beauty; here, her illusion is distinguished as a pleasing artifice: like the virtues of decency, her “Ointments, Daubs, and Pains, and Creams/ Her Washes, Slops, and every Clout” set her off to best advantage. Her glory is not natural beauty, but aesthetic ingenuity.

Swift’s satires are not merely texts that unmask affectations; they also critique the impulse to privilege as truth what is beyond the mask. Swift repeatedly shows that stripping away affectations completely leaves only confusion and resentment behind that lead to new and divisive affectations that assume the authority of the old. Man can neither achieve a pastoral Arcadia nor make himself into an objective tool of measure—nor Swift suggests, should he desire to do so. Instead, Swift suggests that the unmasking of tacit affectations allows for a reconsideration of the value of affectations and the usefulness of aesthetic and virtuous fictions. For Swift, any “order from chaos sprung” will always be a “gaudy Tulip rais’d from Dung.” Yet its gaudiness—its unnatural excess—is not a defect, but a fully human and humanist corrective to natural human “defects” and, above all, to the immoral, unreasonable, and ridiculous conceit that a good life is life lived without the pleasures of affectations.
Chapter 2

“With Cheerfulness and Good-Humour”: Henry Fielding’s Prudent Fictions.

The potency of the narrator’s emphatic apostrophe to vanity in Joseph Andrews suggests the intensity of Henry Fielding’s concerns about how vanity affects his readers and about what they, like his characters, may unknowingly do in its service:

O Vanity! How little is thy Force acknowledged, or thy Operations discerned? How wantonly dost thou deceive Mankind under different Disguises? Sometimes thou dost wear the Face of Pity, sometimes of Generosity: nay, thou hast the Assurance even to put on those glorious Ornaments which belong only to heroick Virtue. Thou odious, deformed Monster ... The greatest Villanies are daily practised to please thee ... All our Passions are thy Slaves.¹

The constellation of vanity’s “Force,” “Disguises,” and “Operations” overlaps with the problematic relationship between aesthetic presentation and affectation to knowledge that occupy Swift’s satires; however, the address to vanity alone singles out the passion as the source of the behavior. Fielding considers the problem of interpretation in a more explicitly empirical context than Swift and assigna vanity a more prominent, complex, and menacing role as the source of tacit affectations.²

Fielding’s preface to Joseph Andrews meditates on the nature of affectations, separating vanity from hypocrisy as two distinct causes of affectation, and emphasizing hypocrisy’s “violent Repugnancy” (JA 1.1.8). His narrator presents hypocrisy as “an Endeavour to avoid Censure by concealing our Vices under an Appearance of their opposite Virtues” with the intent of deceiving others. Alternatively, Fielding proposes

¹ Henry Fielding, Joseph Andrews, ed. Martin C. Battestin (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), Book 1, Ch. 15, page 69. All references are to this edition, cited as JA, followed by book, chapter, and page number.
² I use the term “comic fictions” to broadly incorporate “novels” such as Tom Jones, Joseph Andrews, and Amelia, as well as shorter, less easily classifiable works such as Jonathan Wild and Shamela.
that vanity deceives by concealing a person’s own vices from him or her as virtues. While “these two Causes are often confounded,” Fielding emphasizes that “they proceed from very different Motives, so they are as clearly distinct in their Operations: for indeed, the Affectation which arises from Vanity is nearer to Truth than the other; as it hath not that violent Repugnancy of Nature to struggle with, which that of the Hypocrite hath.” Because hypocrisy, as he defines it, is a self-conscious practice of deceiving others, the narrator ridicules and castigates hypocrites for their explicitly villainous acts. Theirs is an evil that knows itself to be so yet persists nevertheless. Fielding, therefore, rates the viciousness of hypocrisy higher than that of vanity, but the weight he accords hypocrisy doesn't negate the very real concerns he raises about vanity’s effects. In this chapter I will explore Fielding’s critique of vanity as a form of unconscious self-deceit in *Joseph Andrews* and beyond to show the way it too poses problems for sociability.

While it is a commonplace that the vain cannot perceive their own vanity, Fielding puts pressure on this observational bias by asking questions in his narratives about how vanity affects the processes of human understanding. The broad outline of influence that the narrator of *Joseph Andrews* proposes in his apostrophe to the vice is not encouraging. It is the self-deceptiveness of vanity that troubles Fielding the most, and with good reason, for self-deception indicates that people’s participation in “villanies” is not strictly consensual, nor is their moral understanding reliable—no trivial concern for the future magistrate of Westminster.3 Instead, there is a problematic dissonance between what they perceive themselves to do, and what it is that they are actually doing.

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3 The year after the publication of *Tom Jones*, Henry Fielding served as the magistrate of Westminster for seven years until succeeded his half-brother, John, for reasons of ill health that drew him to the countryside. See the thought discussion of Fielding’s literature, philosophy of evil, and judicial career in Claude
Fielding argues that most people want to be virtuous and are capable of “that Generosity of Spirit, which is the sure Foundation of all that is great and noble in Human Nature,” which he terms “Good-nature.” In his essay on the subject, he explains that “Good-nature is a Delight in the Happiness of Mankind, and a concern at their Misery . . . This is that amiable Quality, which, like the Sun, gilds over all our other Virtues; this it is, which enables us to pass through all the Offices and Stations of Life with real Merit.”

His observations on vanity, however, hypothesize that people are encumbered and diverted by vanity’s tacit operations: judgment is “deformed” so that people are persuaded that they act virtuously because they are inclined to understand their actions to be so.

Unlike in cases of hypocrisy, here people don't consider themselves to be villains or their actions “odious”; instead, they act well assured that they are moral, even “heroick,” although they lack any external verification or standard of meaning for these categories. The deceptions of vanity are problematic not merely because people end up acting in immoral ways that they do not perceive, but also because these deceptions corrupt both what people think and how they think, disabling their ability to make clear or accurate judgments. Fielding therefore suggests that people exist in a paradoxical condition in which their best impulses to be moral, sociable, and good-natured are inverted by an inveterate, enslaving, and invisible predisposition to be the opposite.

In these terms, vanity unfolds in Fielding’s works as a complex epistemological problem with deep implications for how people understand their world and for the quality of their social participation in it. Fielding explains that vanity is fundamentally the pursuit

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4 Henry Fielding, The Champion, March 27, 1740.
of adulation or “applause” from others, a pursuit that overrides critical faculties; it “puts us on affecting false Characters” and persuades us that we are other, better, than we are (JA 1.1.8). These deceptive inflations extend from a person’s character to the character of his or her thoughts. And, because people are inclined to prefer the flattering representations of themselves that vanity constructs, including that they are astute thinkers, they are disinclined to reflect on their convictions and are rather more disposed to defend them tooth and claw. For Swift, ideological conflicts result more or less from affectations of objectivity: the truths that turn bloody in Lilliput, for example, are valuable because of an errant privileging of truth. For Fielding, people’s thoughts are colored with a seductive self-certainty that grants opinions a semblance of truth that is inextricable from people’s inflated beliefs about themselves. Moreover, this certainty emboldens people to force these opinions on others and to suffer no critique, turning innate virtuous impulses into enthusiastic crusades, misanthropic tragedies, and, on occasion, very bad, self-indulgent literature.⁵

Questions of morality and understanding are familiar territory to Fielding scholarship, yet scholars have frequently approached them as an invitation to excavate his rhetoric of indoctrination from Fielding’s texts and uncover his absolute moral principles. Arguments, beginning with Wolfgang Iser's exploration of Fielding's self-conscious relationship with his readers, focus on describing the means by which Fielding persuades his “implied reader” to assimilate “the correct mode of conduct.”⁶ More recently, Nicholas Hudson, among others, has complicated Iser’s pursuit to argue that Fielding flatters readers into a mere semblance of self-consciousness and intellectual superiority

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among an implied “‘hierarchy’ of readers,” in which they believe that they arrive at meaning autonomously, but are all the while quietly coerced into the narrator's rarefied “dictates of benevolence.” Readerly indoctrination, however, is a practice Fielding himself frequently criticizes as unreliable because the process of interpretation can themselves be unreliable, so too are absolute moral principles. He comically illustrates this unreliability, for example, in the youthful education of his antihero Jonathan Wild. Wild, “a passionate Admirer of Heroes, particularly Alexander the Great,” engages with “Classical Authors” selected for his moral instruction by educational authorities only to draw (ironically, though with perhaps more justice to the texts themselves,) the principles of violence and greed from their examples. Similarly, Fielding shows the characters Blifil and Tom Jones receiving the same education—but with very different results—to suggest that texts presumed to advocate and inculcate one correct set of values and ideas can be interpreted in ways diametrically opposed to their explicit intention.

Critical arguments concerning the status of understanding in Fielding's works have proceeded without taking into account Fielding’s complex engagement with the problems of sensuous interpretation and its mediation by subjective and unacknowledged conceptual categories, taking for granted that Fielding presumes that “dictates” for a “correct mode of conduct” exist, and that human understanding is adequate to identify them and assimilate accurately. Fielding’s comic fictions tell a different story, proposing a relationship between vanity and understanding that destabilizes such presumptions. As I will argue, in fact, Fielding’s works identify the likelihood of human thought to become

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overwhelmed by these conceptual commitments as a considerable threat to human sociability and to private virtue. Fielding insists, “it is much easier to make good Men wise, than to make bad Men good.” His comic fictions, I claim, are not coercive invitations to any privileged set or system of beliefs that the author may hold, but an attempt to unfold for the reader the ways by which vanity quietly distorts human understanding into such privileged commitments in the first place. By liberating human understanding from the influence of vanity, Fielding doesn't force men to be good, but enables them to follow their inclination to be so undeceived.

Provocatively, Fielding suggests that he will liberate mankind from vanity, among the other passions that are its slaves, not through appeals to reason, but through comic affect. His method, as he states in the opening lines of *Tom Jones*, will be “To laugh mankind out of their favorite follies and vices” (*TJ Dedication* 8). Because vanity encourages men to commit themselves to distorting affectations of moral clarity, laughter emerges as a tool of moral and epistemological unmasking. For Fielding, human nature is characterized by a relationship between moral quality and the quality of understanding. And inasmuch as Fielding’s comic fictions share both a common purpose and, I will add, a common subject in human nature, they likewise share a common preoccupation: the social consequences of the unacknowledged relationship between vanity and interpretation.

This chapter will explore the role and status of “morality” and the “understanding” in Fielding’s works of comic fiction by separating out his particular interpretation and use of “vanity” from contemporary writers and thinkers, and focusing

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on his unification of questions of virtue and questions of truth into one general hermeneutic inquiry: How does vanity affect empirical understanding? His pursuit of this question through comic fiction engages and interrogates different literary methods to articulate a theory of moral understanding that exposes the force of vanity and enables people to achieve a “public conversation” that is simultaneously authentic, moral, and pleasurable (*TJ* 13.1.680).

His comic fictions explore how the passion of vanity influences the processes of empirical understanding in two ways: first by empirically constructing biased interpretive categories; and, second, by flattering the thinker that his or her limited understanding of the world is objective, universal, and absolute. Presenting the problem of interpretation as one of “not men, but manners; not an individual, but a species,” Fielding separates out man and method or content and form to examine a shared vulnerability to vanity’s influence on the understanding (*JA* 3.1.189). While contemporary empiricism admits to the limitations of sensuous knowledge, Fielding expands the complexity of interpretive unreliability by asserting the priority and persistence of vanity as mediator of consciousness, perception, and interpretation. What I am calling Fielding’s theory of moral understanding is a constellation of ideas concerning thinking, morality, and sociability that recur throughout his comic fictions. It is an implicit theory that fuses together contemporary concepts of an empirical mind, which is to say, a mind that relies on the senses and sensuous interpretation. Fielding agrees with Locke that there are “*No innate Principles in the Mind,*” but he nevertheless qualifies the agreement by emphasizing that the passions, including vanity, are innate (*ECHU* 1.2.1.48).
While Fielding’s contemporary Hume suggests, “Reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions,” Fielding asserts that it is a and ought to be moral duty to acknowledge the influence of vanity as well, and thereby disarm the passion’s force because it has social as well as person consequences. Vanity’s effects radiate outward to threat to sociability, a phenomenon that Fielding terms alternately as “indiscretion” and “imprudence.” The narrator of Tom Jones expresses the wish “to inculcate that Virtue and Innocence can scarce ever be injured but by Indiscretion” (TJ Dedication 7). The narrator’s early use of “indiscretion” here aligns with Squire Allworthy’s use of “imprudence” later in the narrative during his reconciliation with Tom:

You now see, Tom, to what Dangers Imprudence alone may subject Virtue (for Virtue, I am now convinced, you love in a great Degree). Prudence is indeed the Duty which we owe to ourselves; and if we will be so much our own Enemies as to neglect it, we are not to wonder if the World is deficient in discharging their Duty to us. (TJ 18.10.960)

Broadly speaking, imprudence generally represents a failure to properly compare relevant factors, evidence, or information before taking action. Rather than a singular mode of behavior or moral dictates, Fielding proposes a practice of self-conscious reflection, which he terms “prudence,” that interrogates both its own categories of judgment and their moral preconditions as means of overcoming the problem of vanity.

Prudence is a learned behavior that develops in two stages: people must first reconceptualize themselves as partial interpreters and then learn to recognize that partiality from a comic distance. Fielding separates a public prudence or “circumspection” that addresses the complexity of public representation from a private prudence that informs subjective interpretation, though these are complementary

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functions. In terms of public sociability, Fielding explains, “Prudence and circumspection are necessary even to the best of men….No man can be good enough to enable him to neglect the rules of prudence; nor will Virtue herself look beautiful, unless she be bedecked with the outward ornaments of decency and decorum” (TJ 1.12.71; 3.7.141). Echoing Swift, Fielding characterizes public prudence as the recognition that one’s actions are subject to interpretation by others within a multi-layered field of subjective and traditional authority. Fielding ironizes affectations of this prudence in such instances as the vigilant “prudence” of Mrs. Deborah protecting her ancient virginity, Tom’s “want of prudence” in failing to avail himself of Mr. Western’s fortune through an early seduction of Sophia, or the “prudent counsel” of Black George’s wife; and, in so doing, alerts the reader to the ironic disparity between interpretation and representation (TJ 1.2.36; 4.6.171; 4.8.178). Public imprudence is then the failure to recognize the possibility of other people’s alternative subjectivities, while private imprudence fails to recognize the subjective affectations of an individual’s own vanity.

Fielding identifies vanity as the root of imprudence—both public and private—because it corrupts the quality of understanding and emboldens with false conviction. To correct for this corruption, he promotes prudence through his comic fictions to help readers laugh themselves out of their “favorite vices and follies” by unmasking their affectations. With a combination of laughter, irony, and conversation, his comic fictions coax readers into an imaginary conversation with the narrator and the characters he narrates, exposing them to competing interpretations and categories of interpretation.11

11 In this practice, Fielding echoes Shaftesbury’s methods of soliloquy and “double-reflection” in Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author, though does so without the categorical prolepsis of Shaftesbury’s Platonism. See Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, ed. Lawrence Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 70-162.
Without prudence, Fielding’s world at best resembles the scenes of confusion and cacophony of various inn and public house brawls played out in *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*, during which each of the characters misrecognizes both the nature of his or her own actions and the impostures of others, binding them together in a foolishly muddled and frenzied squall from which it seems someone is always seeking to recoup a profit. Such examples reaffirm that the moral problems of individual interpretation are also problematic for public sociability.

Recognizing the vulnerability of interpretation to vanity forces the question: how can one be a moral, good-natured, sociable agent in a world of competing, tacit affectations? Fielding responds by acknowledging the destabilized conditions of social, intellectual and moral possibility that makes the question possible. Bringing necessary attention to the problem of conceptual categories in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, both Michael McKeon and Charles Taylor have theorized their transformation, multiplication, and conflict. McKeon argues that the “instability of generic categories and social categories” of the period “is symptomatic of a change in attitudes about how truth and virtue are most authentically signified.”

This change in attitude responds to various changes in how people interpret and represent experience as traditional categories lose their authority. Fictional experiments such as Fielding’s comic prose emerge in this period as spaces for working through the problem of interpretation and representation, and managing the repercussions of “the sense of the collapse of [traditional] categories.”

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Charles Taylor explores the simultaneous multiplicity of interpretive categories in the period, aptly designating it “the Great Disembedding”\(^{14}\). Taylor’s explores the proliferation and mutability of conceptual categories in this period, explaining that the transition of categories away from traditions of “hierarchal complementarity”—or as McKeon has characterized it, “aristocratic ideology” for which “the social order is not circumstantial and arbitrary, but corresponds to and expresses an analogous, intrinsic moral order”—is neither instantaneous nor universal: it happens to different individuals in different way at speeds.\(^{15}\) As a result, any number of emerging and competing ideological models may co-exist, fomenting conflict when they imprudently collide.

Fielding is especially concerned with the social consequence of these conceptual collisions. His concern registers in his portrayal of Lady Western’s plot to marry Sophia to Lord Fellamar in *Tom Jones*. Her eagerness to have Sophia dragooned into a marriage bed that will “aggrandize [her] family” and “ennoble” Sophia through the “Charms of a Coronet upon [her] coach” articulates her personal ambitions for class mobility (*TJ* 17.4.88). Meanwhile, Squire Western’s resistance to this match reinforces his generally robust, if not rugged, “aristocratic” perspective that “a Parity of Fortune and Circumstance … be physically as necessary an Ingredient in Marriage, as Difference of Sexes, or any other Essential”; consequently, he opposes the marriage of his gentry daughter to an aristocrat (*TJ* 6.9.300). Likewise, the Squire “had no more Apprehension


\(^{15}\) For Taylor’s discussion of “Reform at several speeds,” and multi-speed systems of modernity, see *Secular Age*, 62, and, more broadly, ch.1; McKeon, 1987, 131.
of his Daughter’s falling in Love with a poor Man, than with any Animal of a different Species,” evincing a hierarchic social ideology distinct from the upward mobility of his sister’s.

The conflict of this brother and sister over Sophia’s marriage demonstrates two irreconcilable ideologies competing within the text. Fielding’s fiction is of course full of raucous and lively scenes of ideological collisions, conflict, and perplexities, but if we pursue the Jacobite Squire and his Hanoverian sister beyond their political and social dimensions, it becomes clear that the source of their conflict lies in their tenacious commitment to distorting interpretive categories, which Fielding explores as a problem of sight and insight:

No two Things could be more the Reverse of each other than were the Brother and Sister, in most Instances; particularly in this, That as the Brother never foresaw anything at a Distance, but was most sagacious in immediately seeing every Thing the Moment it had happened; so the Sister eternally foresaw at a Distance, but was not so quick-sighted to Objects before her Eyes. Of both these the Reader may have observed Examples: And, indeed, both their several Talents were excessive: for the sister often foresaw what never came to pass, so the Brother often saw much more than was actually the Truth. (TJ 10.8 556)

Fielding correlates each sibling’s fidelity to social ideology with a pattern of misapprehension. The brother and sister are not simply representative types or ideological animations, but characters that enact complex patterns of perception, foresight and oversight, through which they equally misrecognize and misjudge immediate experience, and of which they are equally unaware.\textsuperscript{16} The vanity of Lady Western’s representation of the future shapes her selective vision of the present, while Squire Western’s rigid “aristocratic” outlook determines the possibilities of his perceptions before he sees them. It is a case of seeing the world only in compliance with a desired

\textsuperscript{16} See Fielding’s discussion of two types of suspicion, as well as the separating out of the distinct affectations of Square and Thwackum. TJ 4.11.174.
future on the one hand, and judging how things must be before they are seen, because there is only way that things could ever be, on the other.

The issue is more fundamental than political ideology: it lies at the level of immediate perception and judgment, suggesting that ideology is a *symptom*, not an *original cause*, of problems in the understanding. In this respect, Squire Western’s conclusion is opposed to his sister’s in terms of content, not form: both epitomize a vain submission to subjective categories that break down sociability.

**Dancing in Chains**

Fielding’s inquiry into interpretation expands the complexity of the Lockean empirical mind by considering the influence of vanity on idea association. On the operative level, Lockean empiricism describes the generation of ideas through sensuous experience; these ideas associate with each other or “concatenate,” to use the language of Fielding’s Lockean adventuress Mrs. Fitzpatrick, into complex ideas or categories by which people makes sense of future experience (*TJ* 11.7.598). This process is a troubled one because it is vulnerable to accidental associations of unrelated details that produce errant categories of judgment. Fielding gives a diminutive example of such an association at work in Sophia Western’s chiding of her cousin’s bad choice for a husband: “But what could you expect? Why, why, would you marry an Irishman?” (*TJ* 11.7.601). The association of ideas here is clear: “Bad husband” and “Irishman,” a relationship she believes is self-evident. But Fielding invites the reader to consider what, if any, necessary connection exists between them, as well as how the otherwise gentle Sophia could espouse such jingoistic non-sense. Mrs. Fitzpatrick exposes the troubled
associations of her cousin’s reasoning, from the authority of both a larger range of experiences and reflection over time: “There are, among the Irish, men of as much worth and honour as any among the English . . . I have known some examples there, too, of good husbands; and I believe these are not very plenty in England. Ask me, rather, what I could expect when I married a fool; and I will tell you a solemn truth; I did not know him to be so” (TJ 11.7.602). The exchange criticizes the hasty determination of character through conceptual categories, and raising the questions of how Mrs. Fitzgerald overlooked her husband’s foolishness. Mrs. Fitzgerald’s direct experience of a bad and Irish husband doesn’t lead her to conceive of a necessary relationship between the two: instead, she models a critical awareness of the nature of categories that uncovers the root cause of her flawed oversight.

Like many characters throughout Fielding’s comic fictions such as Wilson, Tom Jones, and the philosopher Square, Mrs. Fitzgerald discovers that she, like Swift’s Martin and Jack, has been a willing victim of deceptive representations: for her vanity leads her into folly just as surely as the lies of her fraudulent, “Machiavel” husband. “I will confess the truth,” she explains to her cousin. “I was pleased with my man. I was pleased with my conquest. To rival my aunt delighted me; to rival so many other women charmed me” (TJ 11.4.583). The pleasure of her inflated self-representation affirmed her husband’s affectations and discourages her from identifying him as a fool while making her one in the process. In contrast, her later literary assemblage of “Daniel's English History of France; a great deal in Plutarch's Lives, the Atalantis, Pope's Homer, Dryden's Plays, Chillingworth, the Countess D'Aulnois, and Locke's Human Understanding”
anthologizes a critical history of hubris and the complexity of representation. Reading these texts places her into a conversation of ideas and perspectives that unmarks the vanity of her foolish affectations and awakens a general suspicion of any “too general a negative” (JA 11.7.596-97). She is an exemplary reader who demonstrating a useful self-consciousness of the authority of individual judgment and skepticism of what Locke called “the ungrounded fancies of a man’s own brain” (ECHU 4.19.698).

Locke identifies a weakness in human understanding whose moral and social risks concern Fielding: namely that conceptual categories formed by idea association may be flawed without our knowing it: “Some independent ideas, of no alliance to one another, are, by education, custom, and the constant din of their party, so coupled in their [mistaken people’s] minds, that they always appear there together; and they can no more separate them in their thoughts than if they were but one idea, and they operate as if they were so” (ECHU 2.33.18). The modest expressions of this type of misassociation in Sophia’s anti-Irish bias and Mrs. Fitzpatrick’s bad marriage affirm that it “gives sense to jargon, demonstration to absurdities, and consistency to nonsense, and is the foundation of the greatest, I had almost said of all the errors in the world.” Locke determines that under these circumstances men “reason right from wrong principles,” a vulnerability that Fielding’s skepticism implies that any claim of “right” principles is a vain affectation.

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17 The irony of this grouping comes from the juxtaposition of Locke’s philosophical essay and works that encourage reflection either through satire (Pope and Dryden), directly through reasoned argument about religious dogmatism (Chillingworth), or, alternatively, that interrogate the veneers and smooth hypocrisies of Whig culture (Manley) with works or authors that exemplify the weaknesses of unexamined categories of belief: the highly prejudiced Histoire de France depuis l’établissement de la monarchie française (1713, trans. 1726) and the fantastical Contes des Fées (1698) of Madame d’Aulnois [d’Aulnoy] (1650-1705), which were expressly supernatural unlike the folktale work of Perrault. In William Chillingworth’s The Religion of Protestants: a safe Way to Salvation (1637), gives an example a Lockean precursor whom Locke himself described as emblematic of “perspicuity and the way of right reasoning.”

18 This formulation suggests an interesting accommodation of the Pauline problem of divine knowledge and Augustine’s anxiety of the knowledge of personal sin in terms of the limitations of self-knowledge or the “soul’s knowledge of itself” with respect to the omniscience of God. See 1. Corinthians 13:12; Augustine, The Confessions Book X.
because interpretation is always vulnerable to accidental and subjective biases. While sensuous contingency may be the material cause of this vulnerability, Fielding shows that vanity has a hand in the development and, more importantly, the affirmation of wrong principles. Empirically developed interpretive categories are necessary to make experience useful by ordering it into knowledge, but they can also degrade the reliability of subsequent interpretations by giving a false shape to experience. Perception becomes apperception and discovery, anticipation.

The effect of this interpretive constraint is nowhere better exemplified than by the comic irony of Joseph Andrews’s Parson Adams whose hasty imprudence quite literally sees only one path:

[He] soon came to a large Water, which filling the whole Road, he saw no Method of passing unless by wading through, which he accordingly did up to his Middle; but was no sooner got to the other Side, than he perceived, if he had looked over the Hedge, he would have found a Foot-Path capable of conducting him without wetting his Shoes. (JA 2.2.96)

To be clear, Fielding does not argue that empiricism is an inaccurate model of human understanding; rather, he explores the interpretive inaccuracies to which it leaves men vulnerable. Fielding is “ultimately skeptical of and hostile to any systematic explanation that claims absolute truth and perpetual relevance,” yet he also views the development of such categories as a necessary process of human understanding.

Through the exemplary case of literary genres, he gives readers of Tom Jones a representative narrative of the development of interpretive categories to indicate how

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19 It may be helpful to contextualize his thinking with Bacon’s observation: “The subtlety of nature is far beyond that of sense or of the understanding; so that the specious meditations, speculations, and theories of mankind are but a kind of insanity, only there is no one to stand by and observe it.” One useful way of situating Fielding’s unconventional narrators is to understand them as precisely those who witness and observe human nature’s follies: the “specious meditations, speculations, and theories” in all of their relative “insanity.” See NO 34.

they can be either useful or encumbering. The narrator parodies the posture of modern critics by announcing his own new genre, the “prosai-comi-epic.” The announcement is comically paradoxical because it is made in the middle of the only example of the genre. The simultaneity raises questions of both the meaning of genre and of the temporal relationship of categories and episodes that exemplify them. He initially resolves the question of priority by claiming that his new text comes into being according to these new generic laws; however this assertion becomes satire when he gives no reason for the generic rules themselves beyond that they happen to correspond to his text: “For this our Determination we do not Hold ourselves strictly bound to assign any Reason; it being abundantly sufficient that we have laid it down as a Rule necessary to be observed in all prosai-comi-epic Writing” (TJ 5.1.209). To emphasize the point and ridicule the Augustan investment in aesthetic decorum he asks, “Who ever demanded the Reasons of that nice Unity of Time or Place which is now established to be so essential to dramatic poetry?” The absence of “Reasons” dismantles the authority of these categories and reproduces on the troubled process of sensuous interpretation.

Fielding’s tongue-in-cheek posture draws attention to experience and interpretation as the source of aesthetic principles, unmasking their empirical and subjective origins. The critical promotion of authoritative generic categories mirrors the affectations of favorite principles as correct principles. “Time and Ignorance,” Fielding explains, which are “the two great Supporters of Imposture, gave Authority; and thus, many Rules for good writing have been established, which have not the least Foundation in Truth or Nature” (TJ 5.1.211). Individual sensitivity to patterns in good writing may be useful for inspiring new artistic production, as we see in the comic and parodic
concatenation of prosai-comi-epic; however, when given authority, these categories
“commonly serve for no other Purpose than to curb and retrain Genius in the same
Manner as [they] would have restrained the Dancing-master, had the many excellent
treatises on that Art laid it down as an essential Rule, that every Man must dance in
Chains.” In this respect, literary critics are representative of how thinkers in all registers
are apt to mistake “Form for Substance” and affect the authority of “wrong principles.”

Locke uses a child’s coupling of darkness and monsters to exemplify the
production of wrong principles and to explain the persistence of irrational categories and
superstitious beliefs by otherwise reasonable people:

This wrong connexion in our minds of ideas in themselves loose and independent
of one another, has such an influence, and is of so great force to set us awry in our
actions, as well moral as natural, passions, reasonings, and notions themselves,
that perhaps there is not any one thing that deserves more to be looked after…The
ideas of goblins and sprites have really no more to do with darkness than light: yet
let but a foolish maid inculcate these often on the mind of a child, and raise them
there together, possibly he shall never be able to separate them again so long as he
lives, but darkness shall ever afterwards bring with it those frightful ideas, and
they shall be so joined, that he can no more bear the one than the other. (ECHU
2.33.9-10.397-98)

For Locke too, these faulty categories are an inevitable feature of human cognition, but
Fielding’s language of “Imposture” departs from Locke’s morally neutral contingency
with the implication of affectation, asserting that the influence and promotion of wrong
principles is a problem of tacit affectations. In a parody of Locke’s child, Fielding argues
that the formation and persistence of such categories is never completely arbitrary or
accidental: when such associations persist, it is vanity that seals the bond. Fielding’s
parody reconfigures the childhood fear of monsters as young girls’ acquired fear of
husbands as monsters: “These Impression being first received, are farther and deeper
inculcated by their Schoolmistresses and Companions; so that by the Age of Ten they
have contracted such a Dread of, and Abhorrence of the above named Monster, that whenever they see him, they fly from him” (*JA* I 4.7.299). Unlike Locke’s child who mechanically persists in the dread of goblins in the dark, Fielding exposes the role of vanity in the status of the young ladies’ fearful interpretations:

> [T]hese young Ladies tho’ they no longer apprehend devouring, cannot so entirely shake off all that that been instilled into them; they still entertain the Idea of that Censure which was so strongly imprinted on their tender Minds…. To avoid this Censure therefore, is now their only care; for which purpose they still pretend the same Aversion to the Monster: And the more they love him, the more ardently they counterfeit the Antipathy. By the continual and constant Practice of which Deceit on others, they at length impose on themselves, and really believe they hate what they love. (*JA* 4.7.300-301)

As in the case with Mrs. Fitzpatrick’s seduction, Fielding identifies vanity as the force behind the persistence and inflexibility of Miss’s errant interpretive categories. When ‘Miss’ no longer has experience that directly accords with her categorical expectations, she nevertheless persists in her beliefs—not out of fear of ‘Master’—but from a tacit desire for flattery. She affects repugnance in exchange for the adulation of her peers while her vanity further encourages her to align her judgment against her natural interests. Eventually, she loses control over her affectation and she really believes that she hates what she should otherwise love. Her vain affectations begin to quietly control how she sees the world—not because they are accurate, but because they flatter her out of a care for accuracy.

**Natural Dispensation**

Vanity’s influence is perhaps nowhere more evident in Fielding’s fictions than where it would seem least likely: his “Character of perfect Simplicity” and benevolence,

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Parson Adams (*JA* 1.1.10). The narrator’s peek into Adams's psychology traces the complex influence of vanity on his understanding as well as its potential consequences for sociability: “if this good Man had an Enthusiasm, or what the Vulgar call a Blind-side, it was this: He thought a Schoolmaster the greatest Character in the World, and himself the greatest of all Schoolmasters, neither of which Points he would have given up to Alexander the Great at the Head of his Army” (*JA* 3.5.232). Parsing his train of thought reveals a flattering syllogism by which Adams believes himself to be the greatest of all great characters. Nevertheless, the parson maintains in earnest, “I have never been a greater Enemy to any Passion than that silly one of Vanity,” an irony that is further intensified by his immediate desire to read aloud from “a Sermon, which he thought his Master-piece, against Vanity.” The comic dissonance between the parson's actions and beliefs neatly affirms his interlocutor Wilson's opinion that “Vanity is the worst of Passions, and more apt to contaminate the Mind than any other” (*JA* 3.3.214). Adams's opinion is clearly self-interested, yet the parson himself is nevertheless “blind-sided.” Assured of the objective truth of his convictions, Adams boldly universalizes them as true for all times and places, as his fantastical agon with the Macedonian Alexander the Great implies. Yet, because vanity masquerades as truth, the parson cannot see the connection between the passion and his passionate devotion to the principle.

Fielding's characterization of Adams's thoughts as an “enthusiasm” translates a traditional religious errancy into the empirical and moral register of affectations. In terms of religious belief, Locke explains enthusiasm as a seduction by our own ideas merely on the grounds that they are ours. “Though founded neither on reason nor divine revelation,” enthusiasm works “more powerfully on the persuasions and actions of men than either of
those two, or both together: men being most forwardly obedient to the impulses they receive from themselves” (*ECHU* 4.29.7.699). Fielding extends Locke's observations on inflated persuasions and actions beyond religion by identifying vanity as their cause, implying that any opinion has the potential to become enthusiastic when promoted by vanity. For Adams, the superiority of schoolmasters is not a reasoned or debatable proposition; rather, it is an affectation that in Locke's terms “flatters many men's laziness, ignorance, and vanity.” Enthusiasts “are sure, because they are sure: and their persuasions are right, because they are strong in them.... They serve them for certainty in themselves” (*ECHU* 699, 700). Fielding enhances this formula by explicating the imbrications of certainty in the “persuasions” themselves with the persuasiveness of self-certainty, which is to say: vanity begets unreflecting enthusiasm, religious or otherwise.

Adams's imprudent eagerness to defend his beliefs against “Alexander the Great at the Head of his Army” illuminates the intense, intoxicating power of vanity on understanding, for these odds seem plainly insuperable for any mere man, let alone a parson over fifty—even if he does restrain the spit-wielding Mrs. Tow-wouse “with the Strength of a Wrist, which Hercules would not have been ashamed of” (*JA* 1.17.85). These heroic aggrandizements expose the comic inflation of his vain pretensions. Yet, what is ridiculous here also gestures to a more invidious aspect of tacit affectations: namely, a tendency towards conflict, violence, and martyrdom that exposes the underlying antisocial aggression and antagonism vanity encourages. Adams is willing and ready to fight.

The case of Adams suggests that enthusiastic convictions have less to do with the quality of the conviction than with the degree to which our “character” is flattered by
those convictions. This observation is repeated throughout Fielding's texts, perhaps most baldly in the quarrel between a country parson, Barnabas, and a surgeon over how best to prosecute a thief who has attacked the hero, Joseph. What at first appears as the rehearsal of a “constant contention between the two doctors, spiritual and physical” unfolds into a very different set of concerns when the narrator identifies both parties as “extremely zealous in the Business” though paradoxically uninterested in either the robbery or justice itself. “To account for this Zeal,” the narrator explains that their “sole Motive” is “to display their Parts ... before the Justice and the Parish” in the guise of their intellectual commitments (JA 1.15.68-69). In other words, that which here passionately asserts itself under the antithetical masks of religious and scientific righteousness is, again, simply human vanity.

In isolation, these incidents are comic. Extrapolated as the natural progression of human nature and replicated throughout the public sphere, however, these tacit affectations set the groundwork for an ideological war of all against all. Fielding is not alone in this bleak vision; nevertheless, he consciously separates himself from the traditional response of moral remediation through inculcation. While neoclassical authors were preoccupied with the preceptual function of literature, contemporary novelists populated pages with “saints and villains” who “illustrate clean choices” between vice and virtue, and wisdom and folly; both tendencies attempt to regulate and reform how people understand their experience, ascribe moral value, and participate in a sociable world.\(^\text{22}\) They construct and enforce unique and totalizing visions from the double surmise that there are clean choices, a correct mode of conduct, or dictates, and that

people will absorb them cleanly and correctly. The pressure Fielding places on vanity reconsiders these methods as ironic expressions of the very problems that they intend to remedy. His example of Adams, a vain pedagogue who is vain of his pedagogy, exemplifies a case in which didactic principles are deformed by the same self-interest as the deformed principles they seek to reform and replace. Moreover, it suggests that there is something paradoxically self-interested and violent endemic to moral projects that attempt to inscribe particular visions of how the world ought to be or people ought to think upon the understanding of others.

Fielding constructs a parallel between the affectations of quaintly absurd opinions such as the Parson's and the larger philosophical and moral projects of his contemporaries, exposing them both as products of vanity's deceptive influence. While vanity influences the understanding, the tenor of its influence will vary from person to person, creating a “prodigious Variety” of any number of conflicting affectations (TJ 1.1.32). The variety of the expressions of vanity in Fielding’s works correlates directly with the prodigiousness of human nature he celebrates. Fielding’s model of moral understanding describes people as vain in neither the same way nor the same degree; yet vanity is as universal as subjectivity. He asserts that everyone has natural predilections, but that their sensitivities are inherently different; they are “un-acquired, original distinction[s] in the nature or soul of one man, from that of another.”

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23 In From This World to the Next, Fielding fantasizes that Prenatal Spirits must drink from two sources: a “Pathetic potion” which contains various passions and humors and the “Nous-phoric Decoction,” which is the source of the rational faculties. The result is a unique cerebral foundation: “a mixture of all the passions, but in no exact proportion, so that sometimes one predominates and sometimes another; nay, often in the hurry of making up, one particular ingredient is, as we were informed, left out.” See Henry Fielding, Miscellanies, ed. Hugh Amory, 2 vols. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 29. C.f. Tom Jones: “Nature hath by no Means mixed up an equal Share either of Curiosity or Vanity in every human Composition” (TJ 455).
Fielding’s “natural dispensation theory” allows him to move beyond Locke’s contingencies and accidents to “account for the markedly different inclinations to good and evil among children, let us say, of the same background and education.”

The Harris sisters in *Amelia* exemplify the classic and most clear case of good sibling–bad sibling: both sisters live together in a respectable house of plenty, yet they develop antithetical moral categories. Throughout his fictional works, Fielding uncouples moral sameness from genetic sameness, educational sameness, and social or material parity, deriding such conventional connections through a variety of ‘sibling’ permutations that demonstrate a wealth of contradictory oppositions: Blifil and his half-brother Tom Jones, Joseph Andrews and his sister-apparent Pamela, Pamela and her blood sister Fanny, Sophia Western and her cousin Mrs. Fitzpatrick, the brother-in-laws Col. Bath and Col. James, the social doubles Sq. Allworthy and Sq. Western, Fanny Andrews and Molly Seagrim, and the physical siblings Squire Allworthy and Bridget Allworthy, and Dr. Blifil and Captain Blifil, and so on. The differences in moral quality are not always resolved into privileged dichotomies as evident or simple as Amelia and Betty Harris, but they nevertheless give a sufficient collection of contrasts to disarticulate the discussion of vanity from any natural characteristic or social position, and relocate it to individual interiority.

Fundamentally, these sibling pairs suggest that interpretive categories are not predicated on experience alone, but on unique sensitivities that vanity escalates. This suggestion destabilizes traditional ideas of moral education in two dramatic ways: first, it suggests that individual experience engenders moral systems and interpretive categories.

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that flatter the individual. Second, it implies that any moral instruction that relies on
dictates to inculcate a correct more of conduct will be practically ineffectual because of
the necessarily recalcitrant vanities of both the instructor and the would-be instructed.

Nasty Places and Bad Minds

Fielding uses the conventions of utopianism as an optic for examining vanity's
tacit and variable influences. In his “Essay on Conversation,” he yearns, tongue-in-cheek,
for a utopia based on the parity of understanding among those who must socialize:

> It would be greatly therefore for the Improvement and Happiness of Conversation,
if Society could be formed on this Equality: but as Men are not ranked in this
World by the different Degrees of their Understanding, ... [they] must *ex
necessitate* frequently converse, [and] the Impossibility of accomplishing any
such Utopian Scheme very plainly appears.25

Fielding abandons this “Utopian Scheme” as impossible because the very nature of
sociability and conversation require the inclusion of various dispositions and
perspectives. This fantastical wish for utopian parity would desiccate the “prodigious
variety of human nature” and remake society in one of two ways. It would either isolate
factions according to ideologies, thereby reinforcing biases by suppressing alternatives,
or it would calibrate all minds to interpret the same things in the same way: both result in
a sociability wherein public conversation is merely reciprocal adulation and affirmation.

Any projected utopia “takes up and refunctions the ancient topos of *mundus
inversus*: [it] is a formal inversion of significant and salient aspects of the author's world
which has as its purpose or telos the recognition that the author (and reader) truly live in

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an axiologically inverted world.” Resolving into a dichotomy of ideal and not ideal—of ought and is—utopian thought universally conflates all possible states as wanting and all persons as corrupt. The result is a highly subjective vision of a faultless world disguised as a journey to another place or time affirmed by selective interpretations of present and past experience. Fielding implies that these are not discovered, innate, or natural ideals; they are projections of inflated categories and affectation of privileged difference from contemporaries. It follows that utopian fantasies are contingent on homogenizing human understanding so that it reproduces the tacit biases of their authors.

In practice, utopian affectations threaten sociability because they deny the possibility of productive sociability in the present with an absolute denunciation of contemporary social institutions or of humanity itself—a move that more often than not reflects the subject's own paradoxical view of himself as an ideal or perfect subject, a supposed exception that proves the rule. There are therefore two types of utopian affectation that Fielding considers in his works, the social and the antisocial. Social and antisocial utopias presume opposite causes for the perceived dystopia of the present, but they nevertheless arise from the same dysfunctional vanity. In the social utopia, people are perceived as flawed because social and moral institutions are flawed; people therefore can be salvaged, reformed by a change in the ideological structure of their society and its “trickle-down effect” on individual understanding. In the second, the antisocial utopia, humanity itself is considered intrinsically flawed in comparison with an idiosyncratic, idealized standard. It is therefore only in the absence of sociability that a utopia is feasible: a utopia of one. Fielding unmasks each of these affectations in *Tom Jones* as

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products of the same problem, demonstrating that the utopian curative mode and that which it seeks to cure result from the same problematic influence of vanity on the understanding.

Addressing the case of social utopias, the gypsy episode of Torn Jones supplies a traditional utopian travel narrative. Tom and his companion, Partridge, lose their way during a journey; they are isolated in a threatening natural landscape; on the edge of despair, they “discover” an ideal society that succors their immediate needs while providing an idealized foil to normative social behavior and public institutions. Tom and Partridge become lost in a foreboding night forest, only to stumble across a vibrant and welcoming gypsy camp. At face value, the gypsy episode presents an ideal community based on an economy of honor that challenges the corrupt institutions of contemporary Britain, thereby suggesting that modern dysfunction is institutional and conventional, not inherently human. Yet as political allegory, the episode is a particularly unsubtle satire of the contemporary Jacobite affectations. Here Fielding disenchant[s] the contemporary fantasy of centralized absolutism into an ideological projection of the vanity that lies at the heart of institutional remediation. It is no idle coincidence, then, that Bonnie Prince Charlie is thought by locals to be wandering the same forest. He is both figuratively and literally proximal to the gypsy king, and, given Partridge's persistent fear of spirits and enchantment, the Prince of Darkness as well—suggesting that there is something diabolical in this “political gypsy-ism.”

Fusing the Pretender, the satirized gypsy king, the devil, and all would-be absolute monarchs implies that Tory satires and their royalist cause are similar

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expressions of vanity. Tory satire “presents an absurd universe in which the assumptions of Quixote—or Achitophel, or Satan—have come true,” ironically reproducing the same myopic tendency as the object of its satire by participating in privileged, partisan ideologies of either/or. While utopias such as More's *Utopia* or Bacon's *New Atlantis* posit final, singular visions of society as a critical alternative to contemporary institutions, Tory satire presents oppositional utopian schemes as ridiculous dystopias, affirming the sanctity of modern institutions by reducing the would-be utopians to a deviant minority. The norm becomes “utopia-proof” because it is itself aggrandized by a utopian articulation of permanent, universal, and vain principles.

Fielding's critique of utopianism extends beyond specific systems into a denunciation of utopianism as deceptive affectation, understanding the utopian *eu-topos* (“perfect place”) to be necessarily *ou-topos* (“no place”). He explicitly articulates this position in the critique of absolute monarchs as a utopian solution in the gypsy episode: “In reality, I know but of one solid Objection to absolute Monarchy. The only Defect in which excellent Constitution seems to be the Difficulty of finding any Man adequate to the Office of an absolute Monarch” (*TJ* 13.12.672). If no one can be trusted with absolute power, then no one may justly claim the absolute authority of any interpretation as an enduring, universal truth, nor can the currency of ideas, nor their social saturation, nor individual confidence render any set of absolutes more or less true than another; neither can they argue for enthusiastic adherence. The universal pretensions of utopian conventions, utopian schemes, and utopian satires are therefore, on their own terms, dubiously “utopian.”

28 See discussion of Tom as a parody of the Pretender in McKeon, 1987, 418.
Fielding's deflation of absolute monarchy broadens the utopian critique from principled places to principled persons: utopia becomes not only a case of no (perfect) place, but also one of no (perfect) person. From this position, Fielding takes aim at antisocial utopians with the figure of Tom Jones's Man of the Hill, and augments the argument with an unmasking of the tacit vanity of neo-Epicurean philosophers. Both groups maintain dichotomies of ideal and un-ideal persons: the antisocial utopian judges himself as ideal and all others as corrupt, while the neo-Epicurean, as Fielding understands him, sees himself and all others as falling short of his absolute standard, promoting an inflation of the understanding over the inflation of the self. Reprising the Gulliver idiom, Fielding's Man of the Hill travels through a series of what he perceives as dystopias, concluding that all man-made states more or less reproduce the corruption. Fielding is careful to show that this is a self-interested affectation, a nasty example of the extremes of flattering conclusions drawn from limited experience. A handful of social disappointments conjoined with the denial of private fallibility persuade the Man of the Hill that all other men are inherently evil, a judgment that posits an ideal, himself, against which everyone disappoints. His flattering I/other categorization conditions his understanding to the point that he becomes “warmly” suspicious of the very man who saved his life, reading the good-natured act as an affectation intended to put him off his guard (TJ 8.15486).

Constructing a utopia of one disposes the Man of the Hill to find evil at the root of all human actions, blinding him to the good nature of his companion and eliminating the opportunity to engage in conversations of “with Cheerfulness and Good-Humour” (TJ 18.1.913). His vanity closes down the possibility of sociability, “taking the Character of
Mankind from the worst and basest among them.” Fielding characterizes this as a flawed practice “committed by those who, from Want of proper Caution in the Choice of their Friends and Acquaintance, have suffered Injuries from bad and worthless Men; two or three Instances of which are very unjustly charged on all the human Race” (TJ 8.15.485).

This vain foolishness, Fielding argues that vanity encourages people such as the Man of the Hill to deem all men universally evil rather than admit complicity or imprudence in their own disappointments.

Tom's response to the Man of the Hill's misanthropy makes the influence of vanity on such judgments explicit. “In Truth,” he explains, echoing the critique of praise and blame in Swift’s self-eulogy, “None seems to have any Title to assert Human Nature to be necessarily and universally evil, but those whose own Minds afford them one Instance of this natural Depravity.” This indictment widens the scope of Fielding's critique beyond the Man of the Hill's solipsism to include such philosophers as la Rochefoucauld, Mandeville, and, as Fielding understands him, Hobbes, who have surmised “that there were no such Things as Virtue and Goodness really existing in Human Nature and who deduced our best Actions from Pride” (TJ 8.15.485-86). These “Finders of Truth” he explains, are similar to unsuccessful gold-finders whose method is “the searching, rummaging, and examining into a nasty Place; indeed ... into the nastiest of all Places, a BAD MIND,” recalling Strephon’s nasty survey of Celia’s dressing room and his critique of universal blame in “Some Verses.” The narrator breaks the analogy to push his point by asking, in sharp opposition to the enthusiast, “who ever heard of a Gold-finder that had the Impudence or Folly to assert, from the ill Success of his Search,

30 To this end, the editors of the Wesleyan edition have noted that Fielding “warmly denounced the views of those 'Political Philosophers' who followed Hobbes ... in representing human nature as 'depraved and totally bad'” (TJ 268).
that there was no such thing as Gold in the World?” (TJ 4.1.268-69). Fielding moves his investigation from results to practice, exposing the efficient vanity of anyone who presumes to truths as solid, real, or valuable as a nugget of gold. Fielding asks, “Why will we not modestly observe the same Rule in judging of the Good, as well as the Evil of others,” pointing out that men also clearly have a taste for virtue. Humility proves to be the hitch; because elaborating from the general “Good” would not personally flatter. It is a problem of interpretation wherein “Predominant Vanity is, I am afraid, too much concerned ... This is one Instance of that Adulation which we bestow on our own Minds, and this almost universally” (TJ 4.1.271).

The Ideal Made Flesh

Fielding identifies a methodological symmetry between utopian enthusiasm and didactic literature such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela: or Virtue Rewarded*. By demonstrating their common adherence to precepts and absolutes, he links the perfection of a utopian place to the perfect, utopian type, of which Pamela is exemplary. The externalized ideals of policy and institution that social utopias express relocate, in Fielding's reading, into the interiority of individual adherence to moral truths that Richardson's novel dramatizes. This shift accommodates the emergence of the individual in eighteenth-century thought, moving away from the laws that govern a perfect society to the internalized laws that govern perfect beings. Unlike in the case of an absolute monarch, whose judgment is meant to publicly regulate belief and behavior from the outside, this utopian type exemplifies a moral telos for all mankind and is meant to privately inspire mimesis, working from the inside out.
It is not surprising that Fielding's first major experiments in fiction begin as militant parodies of what he interpreted to be Pamela’s tacit affectations. Fielding understands Richardson's novel as participating in the same false claims to historicity or locality that validate utopian travel narratives as diverse as New Atlantis and Robinson Crusoe, as well as the same tacit enthusiasm. This is amply evident in Mrs. Heartfree's autobiographical episode in Jonathan Wild, during which Mrs. Heartfree unconvincingly represents herself as a Pamela qua Crusoe. Shipwrecked on a savage island, she maintains her personal and protestant virtue, for which the ruler of the local tribe, itself represented as a utopian government, rewards her with a “very rich Jewel, of less Value, he said, than my Chastity” (JW 4.11.175). The episode conflates the affectations of ideal places and ideal persons, ridiculing both and unmasking Richardson’s Pamela as an idealized representation of the author’s biased affectations and vain claim to authority through false claims to historicity.

The historicity of Pamela's letters, as well as the objective truth advertised by the lack of narrative mediation and immediacy of composition, suggest that both Pamela and her precepts are disinterested, authentic, and ideal. As a result, readers are theoretically primed to imitate her explicit behavior and attend to the precepts she details at the end of the first part of the novel as well as those “rules, equally new and practicable, inculcated throughout the whole, for the general conduct of life” that string together the plot of the novel's sequel. Fielding exposes the arbitrariness of such precepts with his antihero, Jonathan Wild, who rattles off a list of maxims to aid the reader in achieving "Greatness," which is to say, sociopathic roguery.

The payoff *Pamela* advertises with its message of “Virtue Rewarded” is an eccentric variant of the religious maxim “by his fruits shall you know him” wedded to the doctrine of justification by faith. Virtue here is not the self-conscious, explicit discipline that Swift advocates, but the work of tacitly affecting a pre-defined paradigm of virtue, for one's own interests. Like Mr. B., who becomes a proxy for *Pamela’s* readers as he undergoes spiritual transformation by reading of the same letters and journals that effectively constitute the novel, readers too may learn to mirror her example in anticipation of their own reward. Richardson succumbs to the same vanity that Fielding identifies as utopian enthusiasm, mediating ought and is through the flattering fiction of an ideal who walks among us: for Richardson doesn’t intend to find or make utopias, but to fashion utopians. It is the unmasking of the tacit vanity and manipulativeness of these methods that motivates Fielding’s *Shamela* and sparks the more robust *Joseph Andrews*.

Fielding's parodies of *Pamela* ridicule the affectation silently at work in Richardson's novel, making explicit the narrative sham of “Pamela,” from her precepts to her stylized presentation. Fielding's objections to *Pamela* do not concern the historical reality of events per se, or even of a real Pamela. His objection is to how she is bowdlerized by an enthusiastic text, signaling broad concerns about the repression of particulars and their reconstitution through enthusiastic moral categories. He puts pressure on these concerns through the perverse historian of *Jonathan Wild*, whose exaggerated biases make clear to readers the interpretive problem vanity poses. Wild's historian conceptualizes the world through the categories of the "Great" and the "Good,"

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33 See McKeon, 1987, 394-95, for a discussion of Shamela as Pamela “unbowdlerized.”
eventually reducing all experience to a list of general precepts. Narrative enthusiasm begets narrative irony in *Jonathan Wild*, making explicit the slippage between experience as experience and ideological interpretation of experience. Indeed, just as vanity precludes its own acknowledgement, so too the narrator's use of precepts necessarily precludes recognition of their ironic effect. The narrative infelicity of *Jonathan Wild* is not evidence that “Fielding's control of characterization, of plot-arrangement, and, above all, of ironic modulation, is clearly not yet sufficiently developed to accommodate such warring complexities or to bridge such debilitating gaps.” Instead, Fielding uses these gaps to illustrate the shift between the experience of an event and its enthusiastic interpretation, executing a controlled, ironic representation of someone whose vanity has overwhelmed his understanding. A brief examination of this technique at work in the historian's representation of Mr. Heartfree will illustrate the distinction.

The historian's first representation of Mr. Heartfree is plainly incompatible with his later mobilization of the character as “Good.” Initially he reports that “This Person has a Regard for our Hero, as he had more than once, for a small Reward, taken a Fault on himself, for which the other, who had more Regard for his Skin than Wild, was to have been whipp'd.” Accepting a bribe and suffering the repercussions is behavior hardly commensurate with the ensuing claim that Heartfree “was of that Sort of Men, whom Experience only, and not their own Natures, must inform that there are such things as Deceit and Hypocrisy in the World; and who, consequently, are not at five and twenty as difficult to be imposed upon as the oldest and most subtile” (*JW* 2.1.50-51). While

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34 See Richardson's maxims on wifely duty, *Pamela* 1:467-71; also the maxims of “Greatness” in *JW* 4.4.191-92, 3.11.82-86.

Heartfree is certainly naive in some respects, he is not constitutionally the martyr that the historian's divide of Great and Good demands. The historian's compulsion to project these categories over history reveals that it is less Heartfree than the historian who cannot see clearly. The “Good” descriptions of Heartfree progressively intensify throughout the work, from generous in business and a kind family man to a Protestant Socrates of Newgate. The amassing intensity, however, cannot suppress the historical fact of corruption in the schoolhouse for the reader; to the contrary, the contradictions invite a general suspicion of all types and conventions from the epic hero to the modern rogue, as well as the ideologies that supply them. The idealized type, virtuous or vicious, is an affectation that does not exist off the page, and it is the work of Fielding’s narrative strategy to make this distinction explicit.

Fielding's critique in Jonathan Wild encompasses all ideological or preceptual categories: the “Great” and the “Good” are just special cases of a wider phenomenon of troubled interpretations that programmatically suppress contradictory particulars. Like Shamela, who (according to Fielding's parody) had been repackaged as the virtuous Pamela, the historian of Jonathan Wild tacitly bowdlerizes his representation of Heartfree, retailing him as a paragon of goodness and Wild as walking greatness. The gratuitous dissonance raises his interpretation to the level of the ridiculous, demonstrating that it is not just the historian’s particular categories and precepts that appear ridiculous, but also his unreflecting, vain investment in them.

Zealous Puppeteers

36 The figuration of Walpole as Jonathan Wild is well established; however, it is worth considering how the Licensing Act of 1737 corresponds to the bowdlerizing principles the historian. See Thomas Raymond Cleary, Henry Fielding, Political Writer (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University). Press, 1984), 193.
Fielding’s principle concern is not which categories people use to interpret experience, but the unreflecting vanity that confirms those interpretations, inflating them to the level of truth. His critique of didactic exemplarity theorizes that the same vanity that makes precepts and categories inadequate for interpreting sensuous experience is also renders reading an unreliable method of empirical assimilation. The eighteenth century largely understood reading and writing as visual intercourse with image-ideas produced in the imagination, which is to say, indiscernible from the process of vision or any other sensuous faculty in terms of empirical experience. For Fielding, the process of interpretation is just as vulnerable to vanity as any other form of conceptual intercourse.

In the context of the sensuous word, Samuel Johnson’s argument for didactic fiction articulates a universal theory of interpretation in which an ideal sensuous experience necessarily produces ideal categories of thought (morals), and ultimately ideal behavior. His belief in the power of realist fiction to replicate experience, therefore, urges authors to proceed with the utmost caution regarding the moral quality of the scenes, characters, and values presented that they present in novels for all but the most sophisticated audiences: “They are the entertainment of minds unfurnished with ideas, and therefore easily susceptible of impressions; not fixed by principles, and therefore easily following the current of fancy; not informed by experience, and consequently open to every false suggestion and partial account.” The theory suggests that “unfurnished minds” will furnish themselves uniformly under ideal conditions by way of a common or

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innate mechanical causation in the understanding. This one-to-one correspondence between objective and subjective experience theorizes that everyone who reads about a moral and just world without preconceptions will precisely develop the intended morals. Locke's theory of education shares this mimetic theory of mind, and it is here on the level of innate interpretation that Fielding's insight into the influential power of vanity and its many disguises distinguishes his project from those of contemporaries and predecessors.

As with Johnson after him, Locke privileges didactic conditioning over explicit precepts, explaining that “a fault in the ordinary method of Education [is] the charging of Children's Memories ... with Rules and Precepts,” arguing instead that these rules should be made “habits.” Timothy Dykstal contends that “Fielding's last novel, as well as his other works, combine a Lockean faith, or simply hope, in the power of education to perfect human nature,” and suggests that Amelia successfully bowdlerized the reality that her children experience to incline them unthinkingly towards virtue. This Lockean reading of Amelia supposes that an ideologically shaped representation of experience in which vices are punished and virtue rewarded can fashion children's morality and understanding. Fielding's own analysis, however, suggests that this method will more likely only encourage affectations of virtue, permitting such antisocial creatures as Master Blifil, whose “Zeal” for adulation from his “worthy Preceptor,” Thwackum, results only in enthusiastic corruption (TJ 3.5.133).

Fielding's analysis of subjective interpretation raises questions that vanity suppresses, namely: how do we select or whom do we choose to select the correct

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precepts with which to covertly inculcate the vulnerable? The inquiry redoubles onto the
two strands that have run through this discussion so far: the inadequacy of precepts and
the vanity of human understanding. The vain premise that some one could determine the
right principles for all mankind resembles no social conceit as closely as it does the
utopian convention of absolute monarchy, intimating a proliferation of what philosopher
Susan Neiman has described as “the Enlightenment subject as dictator, calling his own
pale virtues universal, the better to force them on everyone else.” Yet, because of the
multiplicity of vain dispositions and their complex manipulations of sensuous experience,
such dictatorial maneuvers are always destined to fail, no matter how covert or well
intentioned.

Regardless of what well-intentioned people believe, didactic manipulations are
manipulations all the same, and erect a power structure antithetical to sociability. Jill
Campbell observes that Fielding's works "return obsessively, with hilarity and with
horror, to the idea that people and puppets may turn out to be interchangeable." Fielding's
metaphor of puppetry is two-tiered: on one level, men are the puppets of their
own vanity, which distorts their judgment with the flattery of pleasing affectations. On
another level, Fielding identifies an unsettling presumption of power at work in the subtle
machinations of enthusiasts, who seek to manipulate men like puppets. The power
dynamic replicates a relationship of dominance over perception not unlike the authority
of vanity over interpretation or what we see with Fielding's villainous characters that
manipulate others to serve their own ends.

2008), 212
42 Jill Campbell, Natural Masques: Gender and Identity in Fielding's Plays and Novels (Stanford: Stanford
Fielding makes the connection between puppeteers and villains explicit in *Jonathan Wild*: “A Puppet-show will illustrate our Meaning better, where it is the Master of the Show (the GREAT Man) who dances and moves every thing; whether it be the King of Muscovy, or whatever other Potentate, alias Puppet, which we behold on the Stage” (*JW* 3.11.124). The “Great” of *Jonathan Wild* are puppeteers of men, pulling the strings of their enthusiasm; yet, ironically, it is their own vain enthusiasm that compels them to do so. Didactic enthusiasts, by contrast, try to attach strings themselves, which suggests that the only difference between Fielding's two real-world examples of villains—Walpole, his real-life Jonathan Wild, and Whitefield, the spiritual leader of the loathsome Blifil—is the method by which their puppets' beliefs are formed. Both attempt to manipulate people without their explicit consent.

The power dynamics of vanity's relationship with the understanding, and further, the power dynamics between people that vanity inspires, reproduce the topos of slavery explicit in Fielding's apostrophe to vanity: “All of our Passions are thy Slaves” The extension to puppets, however, suggests something even more nefarious at work. Unreflecting adherence to subjective interpretations allows for the reduction of other people to merely a material body, a “Person or Tool to be employed” or manipulated to produce or affirm private pleasures (*JW* 3.12.124). On this view, “person” is synonymous with both puppet and tool, stripped of interiority and agency; the social model is no longer the war of all against all, but the war of me against those who are wholly inferior and dispensable if not useful—or useful only in their dispensability. In both *Jonathan Wild* and *Tom Jones*, Fielding follows innocent characters to the jail where they await execution, unwilling martyrs to another's enthusiasm. In each case, both Jonathan Wild
and Master Blifil are insensible of any wrong implicit in sending Heartfree and Tom to hang; rather, their vanities demand it. At the same time, however, these characters progressively lose their own autonomy; instead, like Swift’s enthusiastic Jack in A Tale of a Tub, they are seduced by their zeal and become antisocial agents of “Hatred and Spight” (TT 89).

Marching to his own death, Wild is consumed by the tenets of his affectation to greatness; rather than consider the life he is about to lose, he uses his last moments to pick the pocket of the executioner. Similarly, when confronted by Tom, whom he tried to send to his death, Blifil proves insensible to considerations beyond the future of his material circumstances. Oblivious to the possibility of personal wrong, he moves so deeply into the recesses of vain subjectivity that he has no concept of a world beyond adulation, progressing to a future of "the pernicious Principles" of Methodism's sanctification by faith and the purchase of a parliamentary seat (TJ 8.8.430). Blifil's corruption particularly exemplifies vanity's innate and ironic potential to dehumanize, to turn men into desperate puppets acting out the vices and follies of their affectations to the extent that their vain self-love ultimately effaces the self.

Fielding carefully demonstrates that these antisocial tendencies are not unique to the expressly antisocial or villainous characters of his narratives: at one point, even the good-natured hero Tom is prepared to murder another man in duel as a sacrifice to his “honour.” He is prevented only by the happenstances of narrative intervention and historical contingencies.

The Prudent, Good-Humoured Reader
Although the prognosis for unacknowledged vanity is grim, Fielding does not leave his readers without hope. Fielding argues that marshaling various subjectivities into a singularly true system is impractical, and that the impulse to do so is symptomatic of the same vanity such schemes intend to remediate. Because he believes that a variety of conceptual categories is intrinsic to human nature, Fielding shifts the discussion on to our relationship with conceptual categories, reconsidering them in terms of utility rather than rectitude. Making categories useful, however, requires making them explicit as categories instead of tacit truths—a move that in and of itself requires readers to be convinced not just of the influence of vanity over the understanding, but also of the influence of their vanity over their understanding.

The rhetorical hurdle for Fielding’s social-moral project, then, is the development of a style that allows readers to discover their own flattering affectations of objectivity and then gives them the tools to make these affectations useful—though neither in the way Johnson, Richardson, and Locke would conceive, nor strictly in the aesthetic manner that Swift promotes. Questions of the autonomy of Fielding’s implied reader and the narrator’s influence over him or her have drawn considerable critical attention, particularly as concern what Fielding intends when his narrators turns away from the narrative to address the reader directly. The narrator’s remark that “We cannot possibly Divine what Complexion our Reader may be of” corresponds with the general movement away from fixed interpretations in his works (TJ 1.9.59). It is reasonable, therefore, to take Fielding at his narrator’s word when he posits an unknowable variety of readers and an expectation of readerly unpredictability: “In short,” as Spacks clarifies, “many of the narrator’s explicit evocations of his readers stress the diverse possibilities they
The narrator’s sensitivity to possibility and his interpretive constraints is also an exemplary expression of humility that models the self-conscious prudence that the narrative promotes.

Fielding exploits narrative strategies to encourage the development of readerly prudence. Like Swift, Fielding is alert to the temporality of information and interpretation and questions the integrity of interpretations based on the always-incomplete knowledge they work from. He therefore takes advantage of narrative time, unfolding information in pieces, much as it comes to his readers in daily life. By giving partial evidence to be interpreted at the moment rather than providing truths, he allows readers the freedom to misinterpret that evidence as they please. He also gives readers a companion reader, the narrator who engages with our judgments and interpretive rationale as we read, as though we were traveling together on a long journey as fellows in coach conversing “with Cheerfulness and Good-Humour” (TJ 18.1.913). Such layering of perspectives from characters and the narrator lifts the interpretive process out of the isolation of private interiority where it is most vulnerable to the influence of vanity, and into an imaginative dialogue of contrasts received not as antagonism but as pleasant conversation. Individual interpretation becomes social and sociable as conversation becomes an opportunity for prudent reflection that allows multiple perspectives to collaborate and criticize with “Jokes and Raillery” (JA 2.1.89). The playfulness of Fielding’s conceit creates a distance between men and manners that disarticulates categories of

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43 Spacks, 36.
44 Fielding also uses the analogy of a Journey to characterize the experience of reading in Joseph Andrews. Here, however, he does not construct contrast between opinions of readers, characters and the narrator, but encourages moments of repose and reflection through the heuristic of chapters, creating a space of temporal conversation that allows impressions to be collected and reviewed rather than merely assimilated. See JA 2.1.89.
understanding from the individual, creating a space for the reader to re-imagine his or her own interpretive categories from the perspective of another, often comically.

The opening and closing chapters of Tom Jones present a comic object lesson of interpretive ironies that illustrate how easily even the most alert readers can be mislead by naïve, unacknowledged biases. Readers of Tom Jones begin their ‘journey’ confronted with mystery of Tom’s appearance as a baby in the Allworthy household. They are compelled to make sense of the event: “Who are Tom’s parents?” and, contingently, “who is Tom?” The speculations of various characters in Tom Jones approximate the interpretive paths readers may follow, tempting them to hasty and erroneous conclusions: he is Tom Jones Partridge, the son of Jenny and Partridge; he is Tom Jones, the son of Jenny and anyone; he is Tom Jones Allworthy, the son of Squire Allworthy and Jenny Jones, he is Tom Allworthy, the son of Allworthy and anyone; or, he is merely Tom, the son of no one—which is to say of no one the reader would know or probably care to know. The variety of plausible judgments testifies to the various interpretations to which evidence is vulnerable; that none of them is true demonstrates the success of Bridget Allworthy’s multi-categorical manipulation of human understanding, both of fellow characters and readers, as well as their vulnerability to being so manipulated.

Nevertheless, the truth of Tom’s birth is hidden in plain sight, effectively disguised by the reader’s vanity, whether he or she fancies him or herself a “candid reader”, a “sensible reader”, a “graver reader”, a “virtuous reader”, or a “sagacious reader.”

45 Tacit categories determine early on for readers and characters what Bridget is capable of so that they unthinkingly dismiss her as a suspect, while a more fit and

45 See TJ Dedication, 8; 1.1.32; 1.3.40; 1.5.46; 1.6.47.
flattering solution—that Jenny Jones is the mother—is taken for truth. Such judgments lead characters and readers alike to overlook or misinterpret evidence indicative of the fact, such as Bridget’s unlikely preference of Tom to her son Blifil, her hypocritical affectations concerning her brother Allworthy, and her secret licentiousness with Cpt. Blifil. In turn, this evidence is quietly assimilated by other false categories, a consequence Fielding comically ironizes with Square’s conclusion that Tom is the preferred rival for Bridget’s sexual attention. While it is easy to laugh at Square’s interpretation, readers ultimately find out that the joke is equally on them.

The ultimate disclosure that Tom is the half-common, half aristocrat, bastard neveu d’Allworthy illustrates how one inflexible, accidental association can affect the interpretation of future events: multiple misreadings ensue and the individual interpretation becomes increasingly distorted though the reader is increasingly confident in its accuracy. Further, unlike characters in the book that are left alone with their interpretive preferences, the reader engages with a narrator who continually warns him or her, not to make hasty, absolute judgments. I fully agree with Spacks’s observation on the theme of interpretation: “the narration itself repeatedly reveals this task’s difficulty, as even the most admirable figures in the novel fall into their own interpretive mistakes. No wonder, then, that readers make error, error likely to multiply if the interpreter is dominated by self-interest and cynicism.”46 But I would like to redirect her conclusion that it is ultimately “the reader’s primary responsibility is to interpret character accurately” to suggest that it is the primary responsibility of their reading to shift the locus of interpretation to interpretation itself. The process of reading that Fielding engineers unmask the affectation of objective interpretation to advance a more local and

46 Spacks, 37.
tentative approach to interpretation in which we learn to interpret interpretation accurately.

When the “truth” emerges at the end of *Tom Jones*, prudent readers are set up to laugh at themselves as participants in irony of the surprise and to acknowledge that the vanity that led them to believe that the narrator’s warnings concerning interpretive haste were intended for other, lesser readers, has rendered them as biased and gullible as those hypothetical others. In this way, the reader is not unlike the philosopher Square when Tom discovers him naked (save for Molly’s bonnet), half-hidden under her bed. Upon later reflection, he comes to see himself through Tom, the narrator, and the readers’ eyes, prompting him to acknowledge not only the ridiculousness of his position (physical, moral, and epistemological), but also the absurd “vanity of philosophy” by which he flattered himself into that posture.

The Posture, indeed, in which he stood, was not greatly unlike that of a Soldier who is tied Neck and Heels; or rather resembling the Attitude in which we often see fellows in the public Streets of London, who are not suffering but deserving punishment by so standing. He had a nightcap belonging to Molly on his head, and his two large eyes...stared directly at Jones; so that when the idea of philosophy was added to the figure now discovered, it would have been very difficult for any spectator to have refrained from immoderate laughter. (*TJ* 5.5.232-33)

Tom laughs at the scene, but his laughter is not a mockery or *schadenfreudisch* deflation of the philosopher as man, but a natural and authentic response to the awkward position he has gotten himself into. It is the good nature and lack of affectation of Tom’s response, laughing at the manner and not condemning the man—for “Philosophers are composed of flesh and blood as well as other human creatures; and however sublimated and refined the theory of these may be, a little practical frailty is as incident to them as to
other mortals”—that allows Square to eventually recognize the comic irony of his posture, a recognition that unmask his vanity and invites his later humility.

While it has often been claimed that Fielding engages in, if not originates, the practice of what E. M. Forster christened “Flat” and “Round” characters, it may be productive to tentatively reconsider this dichotomy into characters that are presented as thinking in flat or, to return to the language of this discussion, unreflecting and imprudent ways, and those who become self-conscious and prudent.47 This modification compensates for changes, however great or small, in the interpretive quality of characters such as Wilson, Square, Mrs. Fitzpatrick, Sophia Western, Lord Fellamar, and the hero, Tom Jones himself. These characters model how to prudently self-reflect—as opposed to what to think. They engage alternative perspectives, compare them with their own, and become increasingly aware of their own vain affectations in conversation with others: thus Wilson is “cured” of vanity by “reflections” induced by his soon-to-be wife’s good nature (JA 3.3.214-15). Their prudence expands beyond the vigilant recognition of their troubled conceptual categories to develop a conscious practice of making them useful.

Fielding’s comic fictions are not indictments of specific conceptual categories; nor are categories themselves pernicious in Fielding’s work—they only become so as the tools and trade of vanity and vice. As the vulnerability of categories become increasingly explicit to characters they begin to view them not as true or false, but as tentative representations. The shift from unacknowledged affectation to prudence reconceives the

role of the understanding not as a judge of truth or lie, or in Protagorian terms, “things that are and things that are not” but as a reflexive interpreter of self and experience. The transition reflects a humble consciousness of the incompletes of empirical knowledge and bias of interpretation that acknowledges that evidence may always appear destabilizes their beliefs and convictions, calling for revision. This in nowhere more evident that in the paternity plots of Tom Jones and Joseph Andrews that eventually reveal that the no such persons as “Tom Jones” or “Joseph Andrews” ever existed. Rather, readers come to know that these heroes were born Tom Sommerset and Joseph Wilson.

Fielding’s historical comedy draws attention to the temporal and psychological limitations of perception to support a change in how readers value and employ their interpretations. Allworthy’s legal casuistry when he interrogates Jenny Jones, as well as his less formal conversations with Tom, exhibit the use of tentative categories for exploring the information at hand without assigning it a permanent meaning. In these cases interpretive categories are made public and understood as approximate, tentative, and revisable, yet necessary to prudently structure sociability. Fielding’s comic fictions give a measured social critique that unmasks both subjective categories and traditional categories of interpretations as fictions that readers can conserve, expand, and redefine in a manner that increases the possibilities for virtue.\(^\text{48}\) Virtue, for Fielding, is not a zero sum gain: his is a method of prudent reflection in medias res that allows for the retention of what continues to be useful for sociability while rejecting what evidence and experience show are not.\(^\text{49}\)

\(^{48}\) See JA 1.12.53.
\(^{49}\) For a discussion of the tradition of “in medias res” in Fielding’s words, see Richetti, The English Novel in History 12.
Categories are made useful instead of encumbering when understood as tentative, revisable representations of the subtle and mixed nature of persons and things. Prudence may therefore be understood as allowing for the possibility of parodying one’s own categories in time, unfolding a series of useful fictions. Wilson exhibits such prudence by cautiously waiting to see how his suspicions of Parson Adams and Joseph as kidnappers match their future conduct before accusing them of crimes or denying them charity.  

Similarly, when confronted by a robber, rather than condemn him as a highwayman Tom looks to his own safety first, then inquires why the man wanted to rob him. Tom’s prudent moment of reflection on the category of “highwayman” culminates in an act of charity that keeps the man from further criminal actions, and further rescues a family imperiled by poverty on the one hand, and a father that would otherwise be bound for the gallows on the other. Tom’s ready use of “highwayman” as category may or may not have saved his life in the moment, but his prudent investigation and revision allows him expand and shift his interpretation beyond this first impression into a more subtle appreciation of character complexity and motive that assuredly does save lives.

A generous optimism about human nature, what Fielding repeatedly calls “Good Nature” and “Good-Humour” contribute to his theory of prudence by promoting a willingness to seek out virtue when not is readily apparent. For example Sophia neither immediately accepts or denies Tom’s claim to be a changed man, and remarks instead to the pride of her namesake: “the Proof of this must be from Time” and allowing him the opportunity to demonstrate his “Alteration in Character” (TJ 18.12.973). Already good,

50 See JA 3.2.200.
51 The resemblance of the stories of Tom Jones’s highwayman and the postillion boy of Joseph Andrews suggest the necessary tentativeness of categories, particularly where economics and virtue are concerned: Tom’s prudence reveals his highways to be a charitable and virtuous character, while conversely, Joseph’s postillion boy (who is never graced with a name) distinguishes himself through compassion and charity to Joseph only to be imprisoned and presumably hung as a thief for stealing a chicken out of starvation.
Sophia has become wise. In this case, the tentativeness of categories is especially significant, for Sophia recognizes that her conceptual categories can change, as can their objects. Echoing her cousin earlier advice, she too now avoids any “too general a negative,” erring towards the possibility intimated by the best examples, rather than hasty and definitive judgments taken from the worst. This practice is repeated by characters throughout Fielding’s comic fictions, as well as by the narrator-author himself who cautions: “not too hastily to condemn any of the Incidents in this our History...for a little Reptile of a Critic to presume to find Fault with any of its Parts, without knowing the Manner in which the whole is connected, and before he comes to the final Catastrophe, is a most presumptuous Absurdity” (*TJ* 10.1.459). This is equally the case for interpretations of literature in the study of people and events off the page.

Just as the hasty pessimism of imprudence results from vain affectations, Fielding shows that patient, good-natured prudence yields tentative judgments that are conscious of their own potential imprecision, recalling Swift’s distinction of Martin’s “cool” reflection and Jack’s “Zeal” in *A Tale of a Tub*. Just as Fielding suggests readers must judge mankind as a whole from the best instead of the worst of its members, he further encourages them to model the character of men tentatively on the best, not the worst of their behaviors, separating specific actions from the always indeterminable character of another person. A glimpse into the judgment of Allworthy exemplifies this good-natured prudence:

> Whatever Detestation Mr. *Allworthy* had to this or to any other Vice, he was not so blinded by it, but that he could discern any Virtue in the guilty Person, as clearly, indeed, as if there had been no Mixture of Vice in the same Character. While he was angry, therefore, with the Incontinence of *Jones*, he was no less pleased with the Honour and honesty of his Self-accusation…. And in balancing
his Faults with his Perfection, the latter seemed rather to preponderate. (TJ 4.11.173)

There is no self-flattery in this optimistic speculation, unlike in the affectations of utopianism that indirectly flatter us: for when we definitively condemn another, we simultaneously applaud ourselves.

It cannot be denied that Allworthy’s interpretations are frequently wrong. In fact, he is routinely deceived by almost all whom he encounters—though he discovers in time his errors and amends his judgments. What this suggests is that while Fielding understands a link between moral quality and the quality of understanding, the absence of vice doesn’t necessitate the absence of error. Interpretations are only semblances; they are fictions not truths, but this doesn’t mean that they are not virtuous or cannot contribute to social pleasure. Fielding uncouples the association of truth and virtue by abandoning the fiction of accessible, absolute, and universal truths.

While the sensuous world may not be fully intelligible, Fielding ultimately argues that the interior moral world is accessible through the knowledge of our own choices. As a virtuous practice, prudence requires that a person choose to self-reflect and to humbly revise his or her interpretations: it is a voluntary, moral choice wholly independent of the accuracy of the interpretation, so much so “that a virtuous and good Turk, or a heathen, are more acceptable in the sight of their Creator than a vicious and wicked Christian, though his faith was a perfectly orthodox as St. Pauls’ himself” (JA 1.17.82). What is thought is not nearly as significant as how a person regards him or herself as a thinker, and behaves based on their interpretations.

Fielding asserts that the variety of categories endemic to human nature ceases to pose a threat to contemporary sociability when the influence of vanity is removed from
and replaced by “Good Nature” and “Chearfulness and Good-Humour” (TJ 18.1.913). He exposes the tacit affectations to which interpretation is vulnerable and advances prudent self-reflection as a way to manage these vulnerabilities that transforms its representations into useful fictions. With the prudent and good-natured use of these fictions, and a self-consciousness developed by the engaged conversation of Fielding’s own useful, comic fictions, Fielding believes readers will begin to laugh themselves beyond subjection to vanity. In turn, life will parody art as that this model of expands beyond the privacy of reading and into the public sphere in a way that increasingly contributes to a prudent sociability of good nature and good humor.
Chapter 3

The Importance of Being Misunderstood: The Role of Laughter in The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman.

With an emphasis on the role of laughter and smiling in the “Dedication to the Right Honourable Mr. Pitt” Laurence Sterne frames The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman with a peculiar endorsement of comic pleasure: “Every time a man smiles, —but much more so, when he laughs, it adds something to this Fragment of Life.”1 His praise of laughing and smiling suggests that comic experiences enhance people’s lives, but the praise is also a form of critique, for it suggests that people come to the comic moment incomplete. Living only a “Fragment of Life,” people are incomplete things who among others who are no less unfinished. The “Dedication” communicates key concerns of the humanist critique performed throughout Swift’s entire work about the deflation of feeling in an empirical age, and the divisive and antisocial outcomes of that deflation. The comic phenomenon that Sterne credits suggests that it is not increased knowledge or clearer understanding that rectifies the condition of fragmentation. Rather, Sterne’s uses his comic fiction to unmask the largely Lockean endorsement of human understanding as merely one of many peculiarly satisfying biases that encourage people to overlook, diminish, and preclude a mode of experience crucial to their individual and collective wellbeing: the comic pleasure of laughter born from misunderstanding.

This chapter focuses on the status of comic pleasure in Tristram Shandy in order to better understand Sterne’s characterization of contemporary life as fragmentary, as well as his promotion of laughter and smiling as pleasurable supplements for the

incompleteness of fragmented lives. Like Swift and Fielding, Sterne is skeptical of the power of human understanding and sensitive to its affectations; however Sterne is less convinced than Fielding as to whether people could identify and disarm their individual affectations. Similarly, he is less hostile to affectations themselves than either Swift or Fielding, identifying them not as product of vanity’s flattery but of the peculiar pleasures of associating ideas. For Sterne, it is both the pleasure men receive from their subjective representations of the world and the comic delight in the representations of others that can rejoin the empirical mind celebrated by Lockean psychology with the human body, as well as draw together fragmented, incomplete individuals with the pleasures of a common, comical humanity.

*Tristram Shandy* draws its comic energy from an unremitting sequence of unanticipated misinterpretations and misunderstandings between the eccentric residents of Shandy Hall, and between the narrator and his implied as well as actual readers. Yet, even as it produces abundant comic pleasures, *Tristram Shandy* is nevertheless a deviation from the established epistemological expectations of the comic genre traditionally thought to facilitate comic pleasure. As one early, anonymous critic complains, Sterne “owes the success of it to its not being understood.”\(^2\) The critic indicates something provocative and different in Sterne’s approach to comedy: namely, an unconventional and unexpected relationship between laughter and misunderstanding.\(^3\) Understanding the status of comic pleasure in *Tristram Shandy* therefore requires that we

\(^2\) *Tristram Shandy's bon mots, repartees, odd adventures, and humorous stories*… (London: Printed for E. Cabe, 1760), 69-70.

\(^3\) While I argue to distinguish what is unexpected and different in the comic-epistemology of the text, Thomas Keymer has productively investigated Sterne’s place among the new and the novel in British literature of the 1760s, arguing for the author’s self-consciousness modernity both as artist and writer in the marketplace. See Thomas Keymer, *Sterne, the Moderns, and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), esp. chp 1, 2, and 5.
understand the nature of the relationship of laughter to misunderstanding in the novel, as well as Sterne’s argument for its potential to enhance fragmented lives.

Misunderstanding is a device common enough to comedy; however, its comic pleasure typically relies on the expectation of its resolution. In his discussion of “comic illumination,” C. L. Barber has drawn from Northrop Frye’s classic literary anatomy to argue that “when the forms for serious meaning are inevitable, received from accepted tradition, the comic reapplication of them need not be threatening. People so situated can afford to turn sanctities upside-down, since they will surely come back rightside up.”

Similarly, R. D. V. Glasgow observes that the comic archetype has a narrative progression “from disorder to order—or from order via disorder back to order.” In terms of comic misunderstanding, readers are typically “secure in the knowledge that everything will turn out fine [and] less troubled by the hitches encountered on the road towards this guaranteed felicity.” As consumers of comedy, we either know or expect that we will know, what is really going on.

Affirming felicitous, stable meaning through facts and moral certainty takes on paramount cultural importance during the British eighteenth century. Yet, unlike popular mid-century comic plays and novels whose plots are driven by mistaken identities or misinterpretations—one need only recall, for example, the errant misprisions of Fielding’s Tom Jones—Tristram Shandy offers neither comforting resolutions that clarify misunderstandings nor a narrative teleology in which disorder yields to order.

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Proceeding without stable facts and reliable interpretations, the problem of misunderstanding is never overcome, emphasizing a perdurable state of irreconcilable intellectual isolation or fragmentation among characters and readers alike.

The phenomenon of intellectual irreconcilability distinguishes *Tristram Shandy* from its literary predecessors on both generic and epistemological grounds by uncoupling comic pleasure from the necessity of mutual comprehension or authoritative facts. Meanings may be irreconcilable in the Shandean world, but Sterne uses the comedy of *Tristram Shandy* to argue that people need not be, and further, that it is the traditional prioritization of reconciling individual understandings that obstructs social reconciliation. Sterne proposes that if people conceive of intellectual difference as an opportunity for comic pleasure, then they may laugh together as equal players in the comedy of human understanding, enjoying an inclusive, pleasurable sociability that receives the differences of any one person’s understanding as a particular instance of the universal nature of all people—whether they are understood or not.

**Concerning Human Misunderstanding**

So pervasive is misunderstanding in *Tristram Shandy* that David Marshall has remarked, “the entire book might have been called *An Essay Concerning Human Misunderstanding,*” characterizing the Shandy household as “an illustration of the consequences of the fact that people are not transparent, that their ideas and feelings are hidden or invisible.”7 People may be opaque without a Shandean “Momus Glass”; however, some feelings, particularly the feelings of comic pleasure, are visible both to

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characters within and readers outside of the text (TS 1.23.82-3). The consequences Sterne
draws from these conditions are surprising: people laugh and smile together, as he
illustrates in the comic misunderstandings concerning a book of military engineering in
the “Stevinus affair”:

—You may take the book [Stevinus] home again, Trim, said my uncle Toby, noding to him.

But pri’thee, Corporal, quoth my father, drolling, —look first into it, and see if thou can’st spy aught of a sailing chariot in it.

Corporal Trim, by being in the service, had learned to obey,—and not to
remonstrate;——so taking the book to a side-table, and running over the leaves; an’ please your Honour, said Trim, I see no such thing; —however, continued the
Corporal, drolling a little in his turn, I’l1 make sure work of it, an’ please your
Honour;—so taking hold of the two covers of the book, one in each hand, and
letting the leaves fall down, as he bent the covers back, he gave the book a good
sound shake.

There is something fallen out, however, said Trim, an’ please your
Honour; but it is not a chariot, or any thing like one:—Pri’thee Corporal, said my
father, smiling, what is it then?—I think, answered Trim, stooping to take it up,—
‘tis more like a sermon,—for it begins, with a text of scripture, and the chapter
and verse;—and then goes on, not as a chariot,—but like a sermon directly.

The company smiled. (TS 2.15.137-38)

The scene achieves its effect through a series of misunderstandings. Neither character
pierces the opacity of the other’s mind, yet there is no suggestion that this
misunderstanding is troubling. To the contrary, it light-heartedly celebrates
misunderstandings as cohesive and pleasurable. Even though these characters are
intellectually isolated by what Marshall calls an “epistemological void”—an insuperable
gap between subjective interpretations—a shared pleasure ultimately connects them
because of their misunderstandings. Neither Walter nor Trim fully understands what the
other means. Nevertheless, they end up smiling in each other’s confused company—an
unachievable result had Trim immediately and completely understood that Walter wanted
him to look for a drawing of the sailing-chariot.
The scene’s progress departs from traditional expectations for comedy, as well as from the civic and psychological assumptions of a century shaped by Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Locke theorized that social harmony might be achieved only if people constructed ideas about particular facts that are “clear and determinate: And when they are so, it will not breed any confusion or mistake about them” (*ECHU* 2.11.2.156-57). On this view, “Wrong and unnatural Combinations of Ideas will… establish the Irreconcilable opposition between different sects of philosophy and Religion” (*ECHU* 2.33.18.400). Conversely, a shared understanding of “particular matters of fact [is] the undoubted foundation on which our civil and natural knowledge is built,” and as a result, our civic peace. Sociability in the Lockean sense therefore depends on a shared understanding of meanings: confusion and error resulting from disparate judgments are the enemy of the public good.

Characterizing Locke’s project as an attempt to “free the world from the lumber of a thousand vulgar errors,” Sterne’s comedy troubles those assumptions (*TS* 3.20.239). He proposes that “errors,” however vulgar, can be socially productive and argues that accurate understanding bears no direct relationship to social harmony. In Shandy Hall, agreement on “particular matters of fact” is unnecessary for sociability. Instead, the laughter and pleasures that intellectual differences inspire achieve an affectionate sociability signified by “the company smiled.” The errors and confusion of misunderstanding are not a “lumber” from which men need to be freed, but naturally occurring opportunities for shared social pleasure misunderstood by Enlightenment predecessors.

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8 John Locke, *Some Thoughts on the Conduct of the Understanding in the Search of Truth* (Glasgow, 1754), 6.
The misunderstandings within the Stevinus affair are clear: Trim believes that Walter wants him to search for a *physical chariot* in the volume of *Stevinus*; reciprocally, Walter believes that Trim really thinks he may find one. Both misunderstand each other and believe that it is the other who has misunderstood. Yet, rather than pointing out the error of the other, they perpetuate the confusion with ironic awareness, “drolling” each other with increasing relish. Neither demands clarification, receiving pleasure from the surprise of what the other has understood that ripples through the entire company. “The company smiled” despite the absence of shared, stable meanings—more to the point, they smile because of it.

Sterne’s application of “drolling” exemplifies the sort of reappraisal of misunderstanding I argue he is after and how it can manifest in real-life domestic situations. As Walter and Trim “droll” each other, their behavior mimics the form but not the function that the verb customarily implies. Seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century writers advocate drollery as a form of ridicule, the object of which is to expose the fallacies of another’s system of belief. In this context, drolling uses humor to correct, discipline, and homogenize individual judgment. Representatively, Roger L’Estrange suggests that “men that will not be reasoned into their senses, may yet be laughed or drolled into them.” In the Stevinus affair, however, and throughout *Tristram Shandy*, the pursuit of shared meaning collapses in favor of an aesthetic pursuit: shared pleasure.

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The characters droll each other without clarifying meanings, laughing at the surprising particularity of the meanings themselves—it is their surprise that delights. The result is that both characters delight in indulging each other’s interpretations while the spectators share a smile at their confusion.

Sterne effectively shifts “drolling” from the rhetoric of judgment to an aesthetic experience of comic pleasure. He produces an alternative definition of drolling that inverts its traditional purposes and models the potentially flexible interpretability of even a single term, celebrating the instability that drollery itself historically intended to correct. At the same time, Sterne’s version of “drolling” deflates interpretive anxieties even as it creates the potential for new confusion locally. His approach is to humor and to find humor in unexpected differences. Rather than depict them as an obstacle to accurate communication, Sterne’s characters laugh and smile at their interpretive differences—which is to say, they take pleasure in them—turning away from a philosophy in which wit clarifies meaning and towards an “affective” galvanization of wit altogether separate from the enterprise of meaning-making.11

Ending the Stevinus affair in collective mirth instead of collective comprehension allows for the simultaneity of multiple interpretations, disembedding the “delight and surprise” of Joseph Addison’s well-known description of wit from preoccupations with

clear and determinate ideas. The company shares a smile together, those smiles result from individual “train[s] of thoughts” and “succession[s] . . . of ideas,” which is to say, fundamentally different interpretations resulting from distinctly different faculties of understanding (TS 2.8.119, 2.10.123). On the most basic level, Walter and Trim are surprised and delighted by what they see as the other’s simplistic and literal understanding of: “See if thou can’st spy aught of a sailing chariot in it [Stevinus].” But what of the audience of this spectacle—Uncle Toby, Dr. Slop, Obadiah, and, by extension, Tristram, Sterne himself, and any number of possible readers? Smiling indicates pleasure but reveals nothing of its psychological origins. The trains of ideas that lead to a smile are unknowable and inaccessible. Sterne considers a like inaccessibility in Tristram’s fanciful digression on the soul and the Momus glass as a tool for seeing it clearly:

[H]ad the said glass been there set up [in the human breast], nothing more would have been wanting, in order to have taken a man's character, but to have taken a chair and gone softly, as you would to a dioptical bee-hive, and look'd in,—view'd the soul stark naked;—observed all her motions,—her machinations;—traced all her maggots from their first engendering to their crawling forth;—watched her loose in her frisks, her gambols, her caprices; and after some notice of her more solemn deportment, consequent upon such frisks, &c.—then taken your pen and ink and set down nothing but what you had seen, and could have sworn to:—But this is an advantage not to be had by the biographer in this planet. (TS 1.23.82-3)

On the one hand, the motions and machinations of the soul cannot be observed without the implementation of such a tool, a comic slight at Bacon’s celebration of the organon as tool for observation. Only interpretable signs remain on the surface, suggesting a threshold that empirical knowledge cannot penetrate: that souls and their subjective meanings are inaccessible as observable facts. The convergence of questions of the limits

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of observation, the utility of reason, the status of men’s characters in this episode recall various Swiftian antecedents, none the least of which is Swift’s representation of “Momus” as the “Patron of the Moderns”: their affectation to objective knowledge and the social and physical violence they perpetrate in its pursuit (TT 153). The voyeurism Sterne implies in observing the “soul stark naked” and the gross coupling of maggots with the conventional ethereality of the soul recall the muse peeping at Corrinna undressing in “A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed,” as well as Strephon’s imprudent “grand Survey” in “The Lady’s Dressing Room,” while the physical penetration of the glass recalls the violence implied by another great digressive narrator, the Tale’s Hack who declares that “Reason is certainly in the Right; and that in most Corporeal Beings, which have fallen under my Cognizance, the Outside hath been infinitely preferable to the In: Whereof I have been farther convinced form some late Experiments. Last Week I saw a Woman flay’d, and you will hardly believe, how much it altered her Person for the worse” (TT 112). Placed alongside the woman’s tragic corpse and the “vitrified” and ultimately desiccated bodies of observational subjects on Mercury, the opacity of the smiling company in the Stevinus scene becomes less threatening than the empirical alternatives (TS 1.23.83).

By separating out language and gesture from their subjective source, the Stevinus scene dramatizes the limitations as well as the susceptibility to multiple interpretations of sensuous experience, leaving us with the most basic empirical signification that every one in the company felt pleasure, however much that pleasure might have come from quite different understandings of what had transpired. It dramatizes semiotic limitations, leaving us with only basic signification that everyone felt pleasure and saying nothing of
the different understandings that achieved it. More to the point, the episode also invites the Reader to delight in that pleasure as well, without proscribing how we should do so.

Sterne’s emphasis on shared feeling marks a reconsideration of the utility of understanding and misunderstanding, the value of clear meanings and ambiguity, and the antagonism of wit and judgment. By proposing that people who are incapable of understanding each other can nevertheless take pleasure in each other’s company, Sterne restructures the problem of intellectual irreconcilability and subjective difference as opportunities for facilitating shared pleasure. I mean to suggest not that Sterne contests the mechanics of Lockean psychology, but that he challenges the prioritization of clear and determinate ideas, using comic spectacle to demonstrate that understanding and misunderstanding, and their Lockean correlatives, judgment and wit, are equally necessary for a functional and pleasurable sociability.

**When Two Hobby-Horses Collide**

The original call for Stevinus that leads to Trim’s chariot search arises from the meeting of two distinct understandings, Walter’s and Toby’s, specifically the irreconcilably eccentric part of each, which the narrator, Tristram, designates the “Hobby-Horse.” The figural meeting of their Hobby-Horses reveals an intellectual progression from the priority of clear and determinate meaning to that of shared pleasure. In this progression, wit independent of judgment emerges as a sociably productive means of resolving conflicts of different understandings.

The figure of the Hobby-Horse explores the relationship between individual associations of ideas and the pleasures, both private and social, which they elicit. Hobby-
Horses represent a gradual constellating of associations that cluster around a particular pleasure and, in turn, pull new ideas into that constellation with something like attractive, gravitational force. In Lockean epistemology, wit combines various ideas and impressions according to any type of semblance in the understanding, and then judgment intercedes to determine which ideas do and do not naturally or of necessity belong together, drawing its criteria from prior associations (*ECHU* 2.11.2.156). Mis-associated ideas are not “natural” associations but fictional associations of the fancy that cause confusion and error (*ECHU* 2.33.5.395). When they also fill us with pleasure, Sterne hypothesizes that a Hobby-Horse is born.

Sterne recuperates these fictional associations from their inferior status in the Lockean paradigm by emphasizing the pleasure Hobby-Horses yield against their truth value. For this approach he is perhaps most indebted to Swift’s more cynical observation in *A Tale of a Tub* that “if we take an Examination of what is generally understood by Happiness, as it has Respect, either to the Understanding or the Senses, we shall find all its Properties and Adjuncts will herd under this Short Definition: That, *it is a perpetual Possession of being well Deceived*” (*TT* 110-11). Sterne’s understanding of “being well Deceived” adds a third and less recriminating possibility to the tacit and explicit forms of deception Swift describes and the deceptions of vanity that Fielding laments by naturalizing sensuous deceptions as the only mode of sensuous interpretation and by clarifying that its pleasures are not the result of flattery, but the natural and inevitable result of the processes of understanding itself.

The relationship between pleasure and wit is central to Sterne’s extension of Lockean associationism and the re-evaluation of misunderstanding. For it is not just that
people alter the manner in which they judge and assimilate ideas with their Hobby-Horses; they also like to do so—just as a child at play with an actual Hobby-Horse enjoys his fanciful ride. The coupling of misunderstanding and pleasure refutes any necessary relationship between shared meaning and pleasure or, for that matter, happiness as an affective phenomenon, and implies a radical dependence on misunderstanding where the pleasures of sociability and human happiness are concerned. For, if happiness comes from misunderstandings born of fictional associations, then does the pursuit of shared understanding lead to unhappiness? Put another way, Sterne asks with his Hobby-Horses whether pleasure is, in fact, possible in the absence of misunderstanding. The history of Toby’s Hobby-Horse and its intersection with his brother Walter’s provides some surprising answers to these questions.

Toby’s Hobby-Horse is to associate words and objects with military history and technology, reflecting the events that set it into motion. During his long convalescence from a groin injury sustained at the battle of Namur, Toby is frustratingly unable to communicate the experience to others accurately. He is neither understood nor able to make himself understood; meaning is locked in Toby’s mind. Like Yorick’s Starling in *A Sentimental Journey*, it “can’t get out.”

Toby takes this as a failure of perspicuity, and with the aid of maps, mathematical equations, and military history, he strives to form and express clear and determinate ideas. But in this striving he gradually diverges from the expected pleasure of transparent communication as the research itself becomes pleasurable—so much so that pleasure trumps perspicuity as he goes “deeper into the art, than what his first motive made necessary” (*TS* 2.3.101). As Tristram explains, “The more my uncle Toby pored over his map, the more he took a liking to it” (*TS* 2.3.102).

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And, further: “The more my uncle Toby drank of this sweet fountain of science, the greater was the heat and impatience of his thirst...he would read with such intense application and delight, that he would forget himself, his wound, his confinement, his dinner.” Misconstruing his uncle’s labors, Tristram laments that the search for Truth is “endless”; yet if the search for truth is endless, then Toby’s example indicates that the pleasure the search affords is also endless, as well as an end in itself (TS 2.3.103).

The pleasure of the pursuit becomes a pursuit of pleasure that masquerades as a search for truth. Is Toby deceived? Yes—but he is also happy. Ironically, the pursuit of transmissible facts isolates Toby’s understanding within the constraints of what he had wanted originally to be able to express clearly: the history of his wound at the battle of Namur. As a result, if an idea or sensation can be drawn in by the gravity of his Hobby-Horse it will be, and with great pleasure. The more judgment strives for clear and determinate ideas, the less competent it becomes to associate and communicate them. That this process is both involuntary and inevitable implies that wit’s associations are not unnatural as Locke claimed; rather, it is excluding these associations as unnatural that is unnatural. Sterne announces that “we must go some other way to work” if we are to overcome the challenge to sociability Hobby-Horses pose (TS 1.23.83). The “other way,” it turns out, depends on the same process that creates Hobby-Horses to begin with.

The genesis of Walter’s Hobby-Horse—a passion for order, explanation, and learned disquisition—exemplifies wit’s distortion of judgment, which “work[s] sometimes like yeast;—but more generally after the manner of the gentle passion, beginning in jest,—but ending in downright earnest (TS 1.19.60-1). The conclusion that Walter’s “judgment...became the dupe of his wit” signals that his associative clarity
becomes increasingly troubled as pleasure-producing habits make wit’s fictions into judgment’s tacit axioms. Because people are blind to their Hobby-Horses, the encounter between two Hobby-Horses mimics the collision of two horsemen blindly approaching each other at a turn in the road; the collision is a surprise, neither foreseeable nor preventable. The horse-riders Obadiah and Dr. Slop illustrate such a collision “when Obadiah and his coach-horse turn’d the corner, rapid, furious,—pop,—full upon him!—Nothing, I think, in nature, can be supposed more terrible, than such a Rencounter,—so imprompt! So ill prepared to stand the shock of it as Dr. Slop was!” (TS 2.9.122). The collision is all the more violent for its being unanticipated by Dr. Slop’s limited dogmatism. Thus it is a renounter in both senses of the word: a meeting by chance and in hostility.

Tristram reproduces the renounter on an intellectual level with the collision of his father’s and uncle’s Hobby-Horses. Narrative proximity suggests a resemblance, which the immediate object of Walter’s Hobby-Horse, “analogy,” directly reinforces. Just as Walter begins to explain the nature of analogies to Toby as part of his larger disquisition on “handles,” a bell rings coincident with a tap on the door. For Toby, these sounds “excited a very different train of thoughts;—the two irreconcilable pulsations instantly brought Stevinus, the great engineer, along with them, into my uncle Toby’s mind” (TS 2.10.125). The noises arouse Toby’s Hobby-Horse to Walter’s frustration. Because a disagreeable isolation replaces the pleasure of his disquisition, he ridicules his brother’s Hobby-Horse to rein him back in:

With all my heart, replied my father…I wish the whole science of fortification, with all its inventors, at the Devil—it had been the death of thousands,—and it will be mine, in the end. —I would not, I would not, brother Toby, have my brains so full of saps, mines, blinds, gabions, palisadoes, ravelins, half-moons, and such
trumpery, to be proprietor of Namur, and of all the towns in Flanders with it. \(TS 2.12.130\)

Walter’s virulent ridicule expresses both hostility towards Toby’s Hobby-Horse and a frustrated desire to express the pleasures of his own, offering a provocative rationale for his excessive passion. Tristram indicates that a man’s Hobby-Horse is his most “tender” part, a pleasure-producing aspect of the individual understanding \(TS 2.12.132\). Yet Walter’s eruption suggests that he also needs his brother’s participation to enjoy Hobby-Horses in his company, implying that their enjoyment is increased when shared with others, though they are the very vehicles by which mutual understanding is blocked. This paradox obtains not just for Walter but also for Toby’s Hobby-Horse, which flourishes when he is in the company of his servant, Corporal Trim. Even Tristram’s digressions have an intended audience—the reader. The desire to share one’s Hobby-Horse is ever present but not in the way the prioritization of meaning would have us suppose.

Sterne suggests that we are mistaken if we believe that we will gain pleasure from successfully communicating the ideas our Hobby-Horses indulge. Instead, he demonstrates that we derive pleasure from sharing the pleasures we take in riding our Hobby-Horses. The pleasure lies in communicating our joy in the journey, not in agreeing upon the destination. Conversely, Hobby-Horse rejection denies pleasure and foments the resentment evident in Walter’s vituperative ridicule. Toby’s reaction, however, suggests that such anti-sociability is a problem of reception. Not a necessary effect, the hostility of a rencounter can be transformed into an opportunity for sociability on affective terms.

Toby responds to his brother’s assault with a sympathetic smile: a “countenance spread over with so much good nature—so placid; —so fraternal; —so inexpressibly
tender towards him; —it penetrated my father to the heart” (TS 2.12.133). Note that nothing at all penetrated Walter’s mind. Toby's fraternal good nature complements his disinclination to force his ideas. The unswerving contempt throughout the text for semiotic bullying through force, intimidation, or other antisocial actions, be they executed by characters, critics, or the oft-cited brutalities of the Inquisition, privileges Toby’s smiling tenderness as a favored alternative. Toby responds to the limitations and irreconcilability of others’ judgments, even if he does not fully recognize the contours of his own. Preferring to indulge in a round of Lillabullero rather than argue when companions are in Hobby-Horsical reverie, Toby emerges as a model participant in misunderstandings, exemplified by his interpretation and response to Tristram’s christening.

The mistaken christening of “Tristram” instead of “Trismegistus” swells into a crisis because, among his other Hobby-Horses, Walter holds the belief “that there was a strange kind of magick bias, which good or bad names, as he called them, irresistibly impress upon our characters and conduct.” Tristram explains that in the case of “the influence of Christian names, however it gained footing, he was serious;—he was all uniformity;—he was systematical, and, like all systematic reasoners, he would move both heaven and earth, and twist and torture every thing in nature to support his hypothesis. In a word, I repeat it over again;—he was serious” (TS 1.19.58) The link between names and destinies reveals a paradoxical desire for a semantically perfect world, in which all things are universally identical to their proper names as well as corresponding to our particular interpretations of them. Directed by his insuperable association of naming with destiny,
Walter confidently interprets the naming of his son “Tristram” as “the greatest evil.”

Toby pities him for his despair although he recognizes it as an absurdity:

—For my own part, Trim, though I can see little or no difference betwixt my nephew's being called Tristram or Trismegistus—yet as the thing sits so near my brother's heart, Trim—I would freely have given a hundred pounds rather than it should have happened.—A hundred pounds, an' please your honour! replied Trim,—I would not give a cherry-stone to boot.—Nor would I, Trim, upon my own account. (TS 4.18.352)

Unconvinced by the terms of Walter’s understanding, he nevertheless refrains from correction. Instead, he puts himself in his brother’s place and shares his feelings of disappointment. The self-projection echoes the celebrated treatment of sympathy in Adam Smith’s roughly contemporary The Theory of Moral Sentiments:

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case. It is the impressions of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy. By the imagination, we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, and we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something that, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them.¹⁴

This famous passage explains that other people’s sensations are incommunicable: we can only attempt to imagine how we might feel in the given circumstances. Toby can neither experience Walter’s Hobby-Horse nor his desires, but he does know about suffering. Both here and during Walter’s eruption described above, Toby conceives of his brother not as an antagonist in the struggle for singular meaning but as a fellow sufferer. In this context, the harsh words of Walter’s harangue communicate not a conflict of ideas but a
feeling Toby knows well: the frustration of being unable to share and enjoy the pleasures of a Hobby-Horse. James Chandler has remarked that

Smith outlines a form of subjectivity in which we are always at once potential spectators sympathetic with the positions of others and potential agents aware that we may or may not gain sympathy from those who observe what we do. The fundamental virtue to be refined or polished is ... a capacity for putting ourselves in the place or ‘case’ of another.15

Toby’s sympathy suggests that the frustrated desire to share the pleasures of our Hobby-Horses is the “case” of everyman.

How to Handle Jack-boots

The fraternal smile is an act of sympathy crucial to Sterne’s use of comedy and misunderstanding to reform sociability. Toby’s sympathy reworks his brother’s Hobby-Horsical discourse on “analogy” and “handles,” the interruption of which, we may recall, provoked Walter’s outburst and need for sympathy in the first place. Before the interruption, Walter explains that “Every thing in this world…has two handles,” which is to say there are at least two ways of understanding anything. The promised disquisition on handle comically alludes to Swift’s playful use of handles in his examination of readers and interpretation in *A Tale of A Tub*:

Now, he that will examine Human Nature with Circumspection enough, may discover several *Handles*, whereof the *Six* Senses afford one apiece, beside a great Number that are screw’d to the Passions, and some few riveted to the Intellect. Among these last, *Curiosity* is one, and of all others, affords the firmest Grasp; *Curiosity*, that Spur in the side, that Bridle in the Mouth, that Ring in the Nose, of a lazy, an impatient, and a grunting Reader. By this *Handle* it is, that an Author should seize upon his Readers; which as soon as he hath once compast, all Resistance and struggling are in vain; and they become his Prisoners as close as he pleases, till Weariness or Dullness force him to let go his Gripe. (*TT* 131)

Comically, no one in Shandy Hall is particularly curious or enthralled by the promised dissertation; rather, they are seized, as Toby is, by his Hobby-Horse when it finds a handle it can grab onto. Of course, there may be several handles by which a thing can be grasped. Nevertheless, the Shandy brothers’ exchange demonstrates that there are only two types of handles by which an idea or object is taken: my own and the other’s.¹⁶

Different “handles” signify the transformative power of psychological difference or Hobby-Horsery on an ontological as well as epistemological level because such interpretation defines what something is and excludes what it is not. The result, however, is that objects will have as many different handles and become as many different things as there are Hobby-Horses in this world. Within this context, the following description of Walter is not unique to him but universal; only his handles are particular:

There was that infinitude of oddities in him, and of chances along with it, by which handle he would take a thing,—it baffled, Sir, all calculations.—The truth was, his road lay so very far on one side, from that wherein most men travelled,—that every object before him presented a face and section of itself to his eye, altogether different from the plan and elevation of it seen by the rest of mankind.—In other words, ‘twas a different object and in course was differently considered. (TS 5.24.456)

The problem of intellectual isolation extends beyond interpretations of words to the meaning of objects. Though there may be a common object, individual understandings structure realities with radically different semiotic orders.¹⁷ The Shandy family jack-boots illustrate the convergence of these multiple realities: Walter regards these boots as

¹⁶ Sterne revisits his concern with handles in a letter to Dr. Eustace that meditates on a multi-handled walking stick: “Your walking stick is in no sense more shandaic than in that of its having more handles than one”—The parallel breaks on in this, that in using the stick, every on will take the handle which suits his convenience. In Tristram Shandy, the handle is taken which suits their passions, their ignorance or sensibility.” See Laurence Sterne, The Letters of Laurence Sterne: Part One, 1739-1764, ed. Melvyn New and Peter de Voog (University Press of Florida, 2009), 411.

an invaluable family heirloom, but Toby observes in these boots the semblance of a mortar casing. He appropriates them for his militaristic reconstructions on the bowling-green and inadvertently provokes his brother:

By Heaven! cried my father, springing out of his chair, as he swore—I have not one appointment belonging to me, which I set so much store by as I do by these jack-boots—they were our great grandfather's brother Toby—they were hereditary. Then I fear, quoth my uncle Toby, Trim has cut off the entail.—I have only cut off the tops, an' please your honour, cried Trim—I hate perpetuities as much as any man alive, cried my father—but these jack-boots, continued he (smiling, though very angry at the same time) have been in the family, brother, ever since the civil wars;—Sir Roger Shandy wore them at the battle of Marston-Moor. (TS 3.22.241-2)

Different Hobby-Horses result in different meanings and therefore evaluate the same object differently, as we can see in the distinction between the priceless heirloom and material for toy mortar shells. Toby’s Hobby-Horse assimilates the boots without particularity—any jack-boots would do. Walter, however, considers them unique and priceless. His cry, “I have not one appointment belonging to me, which I set so much store by as I do by these jack-boots,” indicates that his interpretation adduces a sentimental value to the object—that they are more than jack-boots as well as jack-boots.

Walter’s sentimentalizing suggests that Sterne understands sentiment as a pleasurable version of the judgment “reasoning rightly from wrong principles,” as Locke would put it, not as an alternative to reasoning itself. Walter’s interpretation further implies that Hobby-Horsery troubles not just communication in words but communication through objects. Writing on the resistance of the sentimental object to commodity objectification, Lynn Festa explains that “the sentimental object gleans meaning from those who possess it. The sentimental object is an extension of the
person,”—which is to say, it is an extension of their Hobby-Horse.\textsuperscript{18} The fundamental premise of a commodity economy requires that objects can have a mutually agreeable meaning or market value and that particular objects are fungible because they have a fixed, accessible meaning or value. But in the case of the sentimental object,

Self and possession bleed together . . . breaking down the neat divisions between alienable and inalienable that facilitate commodity exchange. Since sentimental objects cannot be loved by others in the same way, that is, they create a form of \textit{inalienable} value that cannot be replaced by money or goods of like kind.

Here people mistake the value that a particular interpretation adduces to the object for the inalienable value of that object in and of itself. Sterne’s parody of the Lockean argument on property elaborates the formative labor embedded in the process of sentimental interpretation. Locke argues that an object becomes one’s property because of the labor one exerts to alter or produce it.\textsuperscript{19} Tristram applies this same formula to the register of ideas, claiming of his father: “He pick’d up an opinion, Sir, as a man in a state of nature picks up an apple.—It becomes his own—and if he is a man of spirit, he would lose his life rather than give it up” (\textit{TS} 3.34.262-63). This brief remark suggests that perception is a type of transformative work performed upon an object or idea that both personalizes and privatizes its meaning. Therefore, without self-consciousness or reflection on its own processes and conditions, the mind misattributes inalienable and particular value to the object.

On this view, the sentimental object is not valuable because it has a special invisible quality, but because of the intellectual labor of wit and judgment that produce a plausibly weighted association between coincidental yet incompatible ideas. These

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\item \textsuperscript{18} Festa, 74.
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associations are indisputable precisely because they are a product of particular reason, and reason cannot be reasoned out of itself: “There is no disputing about Hobby-Horses” (TS 1.8.12). Neither it seems can they be bargained with. Toby frequently attempts to soothe his brother’s Hobby-Horse with money, yet the exchanges never take place; despite the displacement of pleasure onto the object, that pleasure is priceless. The inalienable value that Festa identifies in sentimentalization can therefore be re-imagined in the epistemological context as one of subjective, inalienable meaning-making. As a result, the intellectual production of unique and inalienable meaning can also cause alienation from others, a point that makes explicit through tangible objects the psychological isolation that troubles social exchanges.

The conflict over the meaning of the boots presents two handles by which one object can be taken; it also supplies a resolution to the very challenge these handles pose to sociability. In the case of “Analogy,” Walter’s frustration with Toby is met with sympathetic pleasure; here his frustration is transformed into pleasure, exceeding the pleasures of sympathy, with an unlikely balm: a joke—and not just any joke, but one that employs the different contexts of the conflict to bridge the epistemological void between them.

Told the boots are “hereditary,” Toby quips to his brother: “Then I fear... Trim has cut off the entail,” to which Trim replies, driving the point of semiotic instability home with his confusion of “entail” for “tail”: “I have only cut off the tops, an' please your honour.” Toby’s joke extends beyond sympathy. It connects differences with a pleasure-producing comic analogy that reproduces socially with Hobby-Horses what wit does with ideas, creating surprise and delight through semblance. If the boots signify

\[^{20}\text{c.f. TS 3.12.242; TS 4.18.352.}\]
heredity, then slicing the boots is akin to cutting off the entail and spoiling the inheritance, as well as the slicing off of such parts to which a patrilineal entail might symbolically refer, an implication whose comic force grows with Trim’s defense that he only cut off the tops not the tails. Walter smiles at Toby’s spontaneous wit as the two arrive at a common experience of pleasure. Yet Toby’s witticism does not influence his own ideas about the boots. He acknowledges his brother’s loss but continues to look at the boots or, rather, “the two mortars[,] with infinite pleasure” (TS 3.22.242). Analogy thereby connects different meanings that surprisingly coincide in the same object through comic pleasure, requiring neither the priority of one meaning over the other nor their reconciliation.

Just as he is interrupted by his brother’s turn to Stevinus, Walter begins to explain that “analogy... is the certain relation and agreement which different”—it is fitting that the term remains both fragmented and undefined by the interruption (TS 2.7.118). Nevertheless, we can trace the double valence of the Shandean analogy. On the one hand, it is through imaginative analogies that people can feel sympathy for one and another. On the other, it is only because of the associative possibilities of analogy, and the faculty that produces it, wit, that Toby may joke with his brother and transform private frustration and public renencounter into mutual delight.

Pleasure can be shared, even if ideas aren’t reliably transferable. Recognizing this, Walter has a change of heart on the subject of Toby’s Hobby-Horse: “Besides, what have I to do, my dear Toby, cried my father, either with your amusements or your pleasures, unless it was in my power (which it is not) to increase their measure” (TS 2.12.133). The apology articulates a desire to increase the pleasures of others while taking pleasure in the
strangeness of their difference—for with meaning removed, there is no other motive for Walter to increase his brother’s pleasures than that it increases his own. The desire links the private pleasures of the Hobby-Horse with the pleasures of sociability.

These episodes of comic sympathy demonstrate the potential for wit to produce social pleasure distinct from toleration and its kinship with judgment. The empirical argument for toleration reasons that because some degree of intellectual difference is ineluctable, it is unreasonable to punish private opinions, for as Locke surmises in his discussion on religious plurality in his Essay, “we cannot imagine every one of their Followers to impose willfully on himself, and knowingly refuse Truth offer’d by plain Reason” (ECHU 2.33.18.400). In his A Letter on Toleration, Locke argues more directly, “it is not the diversity of opinions, which cannot be avoided, but the refusal of toleration to people of diverse opinions, which could have been granted, that has produced all the bustles and wars that have been in the Christian world upon account of religion,” The same sentiment holds superficially in Tristram’s lively “De gustibus non est disputandum;”—that is, there is no disputing against Hobby-Horses; and for my part, I seldom do; nor could I with any sort of grace, had I been an enemy to them at the bottom” (TS 1.8.12). Tristram’s statement localizes to individual judgment what Locke surmises on the level of public policy while his emphasis on “grace” complicates Locke’s argument with an affective, sociable characterization. Locke argues that we must tolerate differences even if we dislike them, so long as they cause us no physical harm or monetary loss. Toleration of difference affirms indifference, that is, division. There is no

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consideration for social pleasure here: toleration alone fragments society by rationalizing
division even as it allows people to ride their solitary Hobby-Horse rides.\(^{22}\)

The social aridity of toleration requires an alternative, supplementary associative
method independent of judgment. Tristram details this alternative in one of his many
asides to the reader, while asking for his or her indulgence:

—You must have a little patience. I have undertaken, you see, to write not only
my life, but my opinions also; hoping and expecting that your knowledge of my
close, and of what kind of a mortal I am, by the one, would give you a better
relish for the other: As you proceed farther with me, the slight acquaintance,
which is now beginning betwixt us, will grow into familiarity; and that unless one
of us is in fault, will terminate in friendship. (TS 1.6.9)

A mechanics of pleasure emerges here in which ideas need not be fully understood and
assimilated, but rather relished for their surprising dissimilarity—a relish that crosses
from the private to the social as we move from enjoying observations of a person’s
character to forming affective ties of friendship. Being “in fault” in this context doesn’t
imply that readers have misinterpreted ideas but that they have judged judgment itself
incorrectly. The problem is again presented as one of reception: as familiarity develops,
readers may take pleasure in the surprising differences they observe, or they may become
frustrated by them, as well as with the author, because they are, as Samuel Johnson would
say, “odd.”\(^{23}\) Tristram intervenes to urge readers to “laugh” or at a minimum to “keep
their temper” when oddities arise or misunderstandings occur:

[I]f I should seem now and then to trifle upon the road,—or should sometimes put
on a fool’s cap with a bell to it, for a moment or two as we pass along,—don’t fly
off,—...and as we jog on, either laugh with me, or at me, or in short do any
thing,—only keep your temper. (TS 1.6.9)

\(^{22}\) For a panoramic discussion of the toleration and Locke’s Letter, see John Marshall, John Locke,
Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

1950), Vol 2, 49.
Throughout the novel, Tristram tries—often unconvincingly—to control the way readers will interpret his text. The most commented upon these cases are his addresses to “Madam,” to whom he tries to clarify, among other occult meanings, that his mother “was not a papist.” Unable to control the reception of meaning at every turn, the preface shifts focus from the accuracy of reception to its temperament, emphasizing affect over understanding. Like Fielding, Sterne creates a narrator who is sensitive to the “variety of human nature” and its various interpretive approaches, and who makes an appeal to the reader’s disposition: “let us behave to one another like Fellow- Travellers in a Stage Coach, who have passed several Days in the Company of each other; and who, notwithstanding any Bickerings or little Animosities which may have occurred on the Road, generally make all up at last, and mount, for the last Time, into their Vehicle with Cheerfulness and Good-Humour” (TJ 18.1.913). Tristram anticipates that he and his methods may seem odd to the reader but doesn’t apologize for it, rather he enjoins them to enjoy these oddities and suggests, following Fielding, that a good temper, like “Chearfulness and Good-Humour” is a choice fully within the reader’s power. Yet unlike Fielding whose narrators, at least in the longer works of Tom Jones and Joseph Andrews, have the air of omniscience or objectivity—even if it is only knowledge as pertains to a fictional biography—Tristram makes no such claims. Instead, Tristram testifies to the difficulty of trying to tell the truth in narrative about anything while demonstrating through his characters the problematic nature of trying to perceive the truth about anything. This distinction corresponds with the different stances each writer takes with regard to their didactical efforts. For Fielding, the goal is to destabilize reader confidence

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in the veracity of their interpretations; Sterne, however, is more interested in how his readers respond to the diversity of the opinions of others. The “fault” in readers that Tristram anticipates and attempts to correct is therefore not one of misinterpretation, but the impulse to “fly off” when confronted with understandings at odds with their own.

Sterne inverts the proposition that misunderstanding impedes sociability, arguing first that misunderstandings can produce pleasure, and, second, that the tacit expectation that everything ought to be mutually understandable is itself at the root of social discord. Differences in judgment lead to misunderstanding, but exclusive reliance on individual reason causes the social strife reason, according to Locke, should prevent. Judgment is shown impotent to remedy its own vulnerabilities and limitations, and for this reason wit becomes attractive to Sterne as a means for solving the problems judgment introduces.

Lockean judgment separates incompatible ideas according to individual understanding. Wit, on the other hand, assembles disparate ideas through resemblances that produce pleasure. Therefore, when wit is involved, “there is required no labour of thought to examine what truth or reason there is in it,” because the purposes of wit are different from those of judgment (ECHU 2.11.2.156). Consequently it becomes a fool’s errand and “a kind of an affront to go about to examine it [wit] by the severe rules of truth and good reason; whereby it appears that it consists in something that is not perfectly conformable to them” (ECHU 2.11.2.157). Sterne translates these observations into the register of sociability. Drawing from Locke that there is a “pleasant oddness” to the “curious incidents” of understanding, Sterne argues not for discernment but for taking uncritical pleasure in the surprising strangeness, not sameness, of others (ECHU 2.33.16.399). For this reason, Sterne “draws” people’s characters according to their most
eccentric part, their Hobby-Horses (TS 2.23.85). We do not need to understand them to enjoy them.

The established body of scholarship that investigates Lockean influence on Tristram Shandy has traditionally set up an unsound, however symmetrical, antagonism between wit and judgment, and between Locke and Sterne, in which Locke sees wit as “inimical to judgment” and “believe[s] wit to be a positive evil” while “Sterne protests the moral value of wit.” This view overlooks Locke’s own insight that wit and judgment produce different outcomes, pleasure and ideas, and problematically recasts wit as an unprejudiced form of judgment within Sterne’s text. Such readings tacitly prioritize the clear and determinate meanings of judgment. They read wit as an “instructive” means for finding “deeper similarities” between ideas, as a type of “invention” of new knowledge, or as “a synthesis of ideas resulting in a new juxtaposition of them,” getting astride Sterne’s prose and reproducing the same prejudices he seeks to overturn.

Sterne adapts Lockean psychology to emphasize the different registers and equal significance of wit and judgment. He attacks not judgment, but what he perceives as a cultural prejudice for judgment over wit. Subverting this prejudice in his “Author’s Preface,” Tristram laughs at the proposition “that wit and judgment in this world never go together; inasmuch as they are two operations differing from each other as wide as east from west—So, says Locke—so are farting and hickuping, say I” (TS 3.20.227). Deploying the scatological aesthetics of Augustan satires on religious enthusiasm and the affectations of moderns and their methods, such as we have seen employed to great effect.

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by Swift, Sterne argues that like hiccups and farts, Hobby-Horsical pleasures and beliefs must also escape the body, lest vapours rise up to the brain causing madness, settle in the belly to inflict indigestion, or collect until the body painfully balloons and pops.\(^{27}\) His point, of course, is that wit and judgment must coexist for a body to be healthy—this is true for material bodies as well as the body social. Yet it is also noteworthy that he uses a witty, comic analogy, not judgment, to connecting these distinct discourses.

Sterne’s critique of Lockean psychology evaluates Locke’s particular judgment of judgment as ironic evidence of the philosopher’s own Hobby-Horsery. Much as Walter’s wit dupes his reason, Sterne claims that Locke’s judgment is “bubbled” and “outwitted” even as the philosopher lauds the faculty’s superiority. Characterizing Locke as an enthusiast for the idea of judgment, Sterne muses, “Instead of sitting down coolly, as such a philosopher should have done, [examining] the matter of fact before he philosophized upon it—on the contrary he took the fact for granted, and so joined in with the cry, and halloo’d it as boisterously as the rest” (TS 3.20.237). The description of Locke’s loss of cool mirrors the teleology of Hobby-Horses, recalling their figuration as a type of enthusiasm, following Swift: “When a man gives himself up to the government of a ruling passion,—or, in other words, when his Hobby-Horse grows headstrong,—farewell cool reason and fair discretion!” (TT 110). That Locke himself misunderstands an enthusiasm for truth as truth, a valorization of judgment as judgment, and a ruling passion as cool reason has a comic pleasure all its own. This laughable, bubbling Locke astride his Hobby-Horse, a veritable Don Quixote of reason, brings us closer to the

\(^{27}\) The motif of enthusiastic, bodily “gas” is perhaps nowhere better employed than in the Aeolist satire and the Hack’s system of vapors in Swift’s *A Tale of a Tub*, 100-4; See Frank T. Boyle’s discussion of the “Critical Theory of Air” for an examination of Augustan debates on the status of “air” in the new science and its Swiftian critique, Boyle, 188-148. For a survey of the scatological aesthetic tradition leading up to the mid-eighteenth century, see Lee, chp 1 and 2.
essential problem generated by what Tristram calls the “Magna Charta of stupidity”—that in a world comprised of fact, knowledge, and right reason there are neither smiles nor laughter, and further, that without wit, there is neither sympathy nor affection (TS 3.20.238). The world of clear and determinate meaning is a world in which nothing is funny and pleasure is hermetic. It is the eradication of the social.

Sterne claims that the Lockean departure from “philosophy” misconstrues misunderstanding as pernicious and that it seeds hostility against all Hobby-Horses and handles save one’s own. Sharpening this critique, Sterne portrays Locke as conspiring with “your graver gentry” “against the poor wits” in the cause of judgment, aligning the priority of judgment with “deceit,” “false sounds,” “imposture,” “cunning,” “artifice,” and “halloo[ing] boisterously” (TS 3.20.237). This collection of terms implies that Locke and his cadre are not only mistaken in their expulsion of misunderstanding, but that there is something unnatural and invidious, let alone antisocial, about the humorless condition they promote.

With his characterization of a life denied laughter as a fragment in the “Dedication to the Right Honourable Mr. Pitt,” Sterne pushes beyond the borders of bloodless intellectualizing and joins the suffering mind with the suffering body: “I live in a constant endeavour to fence against the infirmities of ill health, and other evils of life, by mirth; being firmly persuaded that every time a man smiles, —but much more so, when he laughs, it adds something to this Fragment of Life.” Indicating what he hopes his book may help readers, including Mr. Pitt, do through laughing with it—“fence

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28 While Ronald Paulson doesn’t extend the Quixotic qualification to Locke as a character within Tristram Shandy, my observation here very much shares the spirit of his diagnosis that Sterne “invokes the Quixotic model, turning Quixote’s madness foible into everyone’s hobby-horse” in Don Quixote in England: The Aesthetics of Laughter (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 150.
against…ill health … and other evils” by “add[ing] something to this Fragment of a Life,” he proposes a reciprocal relationship between the ability to laugh and to make others laugh. The physicality of the description (“infirmities” and “ill health”) extends psychological alienation beyond both the particular anxieties of Lockean psychology and the historical moment of associationism. By conceiving of Hobby-Horses as aspects of the passionate, living body—not just the ethereal mind—Sterne is able to incorporate them into the tradition of melancholy, in terms of their symptoms, and, as concerns comic pleasure, their cure.

Recognition of laughter as curative precedes Sterne, informing discourses on melancholy and its eighteenth-century equivalents, the “spleen” and “vapours.”

Burton’s popular *Anatomy of Melancholy*, which Sterne silently plagiarizes throughout the novel, explains melancholy to be “a habit… a chronic or continue disease, a settled humour…not errant, but fixed; and as it was long increasing, so now being …grown into an habit, it will hardly be removed.”

Like the fictional associations of the Hobby-Horse, melancholy affects the understanding by way of “dotage” as “some one principal faculty of the mind, as imagination or reason, is corrupted, as all melancholy persons have.” Dotage develops in much the same way as Hobby-Horses, and shares their psychological and social effects. Elaborating on the psychological influence of dotage and its objects, Burton explains that

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So delightsome these toys are at first, they could spend whole days and nights without sleep, even whole years alone in such contemplations and phantastical meditations, which are like unto dreams, and they will hardly ever be drawn from them, or willingly interrupt; so pleasant their vain conceits are, that they hinder their ordinary tasks and necessary business, they cannot address themselves to them, or almost to any study or employment, these phantastical and bewitching thoughts so covertly, so feelingly, so urgently, so continually set upon, creep in, insinuate, possess, overcome, abstract, and detain them, they cannot I say, go about their more necessary business, stave off to extricate themselves, but are ever musing, melancholizing, and carried along.\textsuperscript{31}

As a result, melancholics are “habituated to such vain meditations and solitary places, [and] can endure no company.”\textsuperscript{32}

Dotage in Burton’s view is paradoxically pleasurable and painful, pleasurable because we enjoy the dotage itself, but painful because it causes us to enjoy pleasures in an increasingly solitary state. Drawing from Seneca, he states that “solitude leads us into all sorts of evil; this solitude undoeth us….It is the foe of the social life…”’Tis a destructive solitude.’\textsuperscript{33} Sterne similarly argues that when wit and mirth are absent, people cannot overcome the epistemological gap between themselves and others, and react to eccentricities with scorn, frustration, and ridicule. Publically, religious conflicts reproduce this pattern in terms of sectarian violence, while Walter’s eruptive response to Toby’s Hobby-Horsery demonstrates it in the domestic sphere.

Taken as a form of melancholic solitude, we can construct a two-fold, negative trajectory for Hobby-Horses as far as sociability is concerned. First, isolation or idleness of some kind is required for the formation of melancholy. As we have seen, all Hobby-Horses develop in isolation, be it Toby’s martial research, Walter’s idle contemplation, or Tristram’s in so far as melancholics are “habituated to such vain meditations and solitary

\textsuperscript{31} Burton, 246-47.
\textsuperscript{32} Burton, 247.
\textsuperscript{33} Burton, 245.
places, [and] can endure no company” and their “solitude leads us into all sorts of evil. . . . It is the foe of the social life.”

Burton exhorts melancholics to laugh, for “melancholy is cured by mirth, pleasant company, and laughter. Honest mirth. . . cure[s] many passions of the mind in ourselves, and in our friends which Galataeus assigns for a cause why we love merry companions”; “I request you to be merry . . . for without this mirth, which is the life and quintessence of physic, medicines, and whatsoever is used and applied to prolong the life of man is dull, dead, and of no force.”

Though laughter does not extinguish Hobby-Horses or melancholy, but it enables the solitary pleasure of Hobby-Horses to produce reciprocal social pleasures.

The use of laughter to treat melancholy continues from Burton through the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, popularized in various pamphlets and books touting or prescribing the laughing cure. Collections of humor such as Cambridge jests: or, witty alarums for melancholy spirits by a lover of Ha, Ha, He (1721); The Merry companion: or, A cure for the spleen (1730); and the miscellaneous collection Laugh and be fat: or, an antidote against melancholy (in a twelfth edition by 1753) abound in the eighteenth century, all citing laughter and mirth as a cure for the melancholic disposition. Similarly, Joseph Addison observes that “the gloominess in which sometimes the minds of the best men are involved, very often stands in need of such little incitements to mirth and laughter, as are apt to disperse melancholy, and put our faculties in good humour,” while Richard Steele recommends William D’Urfrey’s

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34 Burton, 123-4.
35 Burton, 119, 124.
36 Carol Houlihan Flynn has emphasized the role of the body in the splenetic condition, providing a provocative intersection point for questions of laughter as bodily exercise and spleen as a sedentary condition of isolated urban privilege. See "Running out of Matter: The Body Exercised in Eighteenth-Century Fiction," in Languages of the Psyche: Mind and Body in Enlightenment Thought, ed. G. S. Rousseau (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1990), esp. 154, 172-86.
popular *Laugh and be Fat; or, Pills to Purge Melancholy* (1698-1720) to his splenetic readers.37

Examining the “prevalence of spleen and vapours amongst the characters” of eighteenth-century novels, Oswald Doughty notes that, “Even Corporal Trim knew the vapours.”38 As a cure for the increasingly vaporous, melancholic, and splenetic multitude, Tristram offers his book as a universal comic treatment without any pretensions to universal meaning:

If 'tis wrote against any thing,—'tis wrote, an' please your worships, against the spleen! in order, by a more frequent and a more convulsive elevation and depression of the diaphragm, and the succussions of the intercostal and abdominal muscles in laughter, to drive the gall and other bitter juices from the gall-bladder. *(TS 4.22.360)*

By considering the symptoms of eighteenth-century intellectual isolation as spleen, Sterne intersects the social and psychological concerns of modern philosophers like Locke and Shaftesbury and, later, Hume and Smith, with a larger historical tradition of melancholy. He thereby uncouples contemporary psychological anxieties from contemporary presumptions of a historical break from a superstitious or erroneous past. He portrays these anxieties as merely contemporary expressions of an enduring human condition of fragmentation that the inflation of judgment exacerbates rather than remediates. He suggests these anxieties are a contemporary expression of an enduring condition, which painfully isolates and separates people in a society. Sterne supplements the spirit of this trans-historical approach with his plagiarisms and allusions. By using the writings, ideas, and attitudes of past writers in new and novel contexts, he reiterates


38 Doughty, 262-3.
the semiotically unstable structure that wit requires. Here wit produces a surprise and delight when these plagiarisms are discovered that connects readers to their cultural past, just as it associates disparate understandings within a shared synchronic moment.

Returning now to the “Dedication,” we can better understand the terms of the mutually affective relationship it proposes between the ability to laugh and to make others laugh and how wit may create a link or association between similarly fragmented people in a fragmented society. Sterne explains, taking recourse to civic imagery, that, “[I]f I am ever told, [the book] has made you smile; or can conceive it has beguiled you of one moment's pain—I shall think myself as happy as a minister of state; —perhaps much happier than any one (one only excepted) that I have read or heard of” (TS Dedication). While above I examined misunderstanding as a source of affection through laughter, here we can see Sterne directly clarifies that laughter creates pleasure and that this pleasure in turn becomes a way of bringing people together.

Sterne argues that the laughter that wit produces performs a function on a par with yet separate from, the binding legal protections offered by ministers of state. This parity recalibrates the relative values of judgment and wit while uniting our concerns for the social with the material conditions of the civic. While a Minster of state connects people through laws concerning property and toleration to which they reasonably assent, the comic author connects them through instances of misunderstanding and laughter. Judgment produces the one, wit the other. Sterne makes a similar calibration in the last line of the Dedication by identifying himself as Pitt’s “Well-wisher, and most humble Fellow-subject.” The coupling of fellow and subject strengthens the implied associative power of laughter by analogy, while the hyphenation implies a separation between fellow
and subject. In terms of this distinction, Sterne assigns laughter as important a role in
fellowship or friendship as matters of state perform in uniting people as subjects of the
British commonwealth. Wit, it follows, has the ability to connect otherwise isolated
people in a society even if the laughter is ephemeral; it creates an emotional fellowship as
a complement to reasoned obligations of national law.

What Sterne has observed with words and ideas through wit, he here abstracts by
analogy to the social sphere, using wit to affectively connect people with the laughter
born from the surprise and delight of Hobby-Horsical misunderstandings. Nevertheless,
he carefully re-crafts a moderating role for individual judgment and for a common set of
public conditions to which people may assent. If we recall the end of the Stevinus affair,
the company proceeds to smile as an object—a sermon, not a sailing chariot—falls out of
the Stevinus volume. Yorick’s work, the sermon focuses on the problems of conscience,
indicating that the same processes by which Hobby-Horses form and influence our
sensuous judgment also trouble our moral judgment—our conscience.

Departing from the Pauline principle, “For we trust we have a good Conscience,”
Yorick’s sermon explains that individual consciences cannot be trusted in all cases.39
Because our judgment is subject to the perturbations of wit and the enticement of
pleasure, it cannot be a fool-proof guide in moral matters:

Thus conscience, this once able monitor,—placed on high as a judge within us,
and intended by our maker as a just and equitable one too,—by an unhappy train
of causes and impediments, takes often such imperfect cognizance of what
passes,—does its office so negligently,—sometimes so corruptly,—that it is not to
be trusted alone; and therefore we find there is a necessity, an absolute necessity,
of joining another principle with it, to aid, if not govern, its determinations. (TS
2.17.154)

39 Hebrews xiii.18.
While we have been heretofore examining the productive potential of Hobby-Horses, here Sterne puts the reins on the Hobby-Horse, so to speak. He indicates that there is a moral limit to how Hobby-Horses can be expressed. Since our consciences are vulnerable to corruption, laws must be applied to teach us to discipline our behavior—though not our thoughts. “Law-makers are forced to multiply” laws, he explains, because people do not reflect how their private pleasures impact civil society, and make their pleasure-addled conscience a syllogistic law unto itself.

—Forced, I say, as things stand; human laws not being a matter of original choice, but of pure necessity, brought in to fence against the mischievous effects of those consciences which are no law unto themselves; well intending, by the many provisions made,—that in all such corrupt and misguided cases, where principles and the checks of conscience will not make us upright,—to supply their force, and, by the terrors of gaols and halters, oblige us to it. (TS 2.17.155)

The pain of terrors and force is required to check the inebriations of pleasure that lead people to act upon their Hobby-Horses without regard for the civic consequences of doing so. Yorick does not suggest that we must moderate our thoughts, beliefs, or interpretations; rather, we moderate how we act upon and express them. Yorick argues that while we are not competent to judge our way out of the eccentricities of our understanding, nor need we, we can judge how they manifest themselves in a day-to-day life; our judgment is adequate to this regardless of how strongly our Hobby-Horses rear. Because of the pleasurable influence of our Hobby-Horses, our consciences are not and cannot be laws in and of themselves: “God and reason made the law, and have placed conscience within you to determine;—not, like an Asiatic Cadi, according to the ebbs and flows of his own passions,—but like a British judge in this land of liberty and good sense, who makes no new law, but faithfully declares that law which he knows already written” (TS 2.17.164). Moreover, like a British judge we must take recourse to evidence or facts
to draw our conclusions, not from the pleasures of our own minds. Therefore, he explains that

The surest way to try the merit of any disputed notion is, to trace down the consequences such a notion has produced, and compare them with the spirit of Christianity;—'tis the short and decisive rule which our Saviour hath left us, for these and such like cases, and it is worth a thousand arguments—By their fruits ye shall know them. (TS 2.17.163)

Judgment must civilize the pleasure of wit in this equation through recourse to law, just as wit socializes the isolating tendencies of our judgment into shared pleasures. Whether we take pleasure in making mortar casings out of jack-boots or indulging in long discourses on the nature of analogies and handles, Yorick’s sermon, and by extension Sterne, asserts that we can judge the fruits of how we act on these pleasures. In terms of our civic participation we can decide to be tolerant and respect one another’s property, which are one and the same for Sterne, while in terms of sociability, we can choose to approach difference sympathetically with wit, as opposed to prioritizing personal judgment, which Sterne implores us to do throughout the text. These choices are moral choices for Sterne, the value and utility of which can be determined by their effects: social strife and personal pain or mutually felt pleasure and friendship.

Yorick’s sermon rebalances the impulses of wit and judgment by way of conscience. It brings into sharp relief the nature of things that we may understand as subjects in a commonwealth and under God, the material effects of our behavior, and the values and pleasures of those things which we will inevitably misunderstand, particularly the curious manifestations of other people’s Hobby-Horses.

The remark of the anonymous critic with which I began, that Sterne owes Tristram Shandy’s “success . . . to its not being understood,” ironically epitomizes
Sterne’s recalibration of wit and judgment, and misunderstanding and pleasure. The novel may be no more than a “COCK and BULL” story, yet Sterne’s multi-layered comedy makes the case for reconsidering misunderstanding as a site for affective associations and social pleasures that complement and defuse enthusiasms (TS 9.33.809). Tempering zeal with a smiling, sympathetic good nature, Sterne drolls proud affectations of understanding, objective meaning, and the culture of fact. If the book, as Sterne hoped it would, brings smiles or laughter to any of its readers and thereby adds pleasure to their fragmented lives, then by its fruits the enterprise must on Sterne’s own terms be judged a success, even if the novel is merely a “COCK and BULL” story (TS 9.33.809). In Sterne’s case, this is fruit enough to please the judgment of even the wildest of Hobby-Horse riders.
Chapter 4:  
Byron’s “Strange Animal” and the Problem of Narrative Desire.

In the first canto of Don Juan, the speaker gives an austere description of “man” that neither praises nor blames human kind; rather, he does not flatter man and shows him tending towards the ridiculous and “strange”:

Man is a strange animal and makes strange use
Of his own nature, and the various arts,
And likes particularly to produce
Some new experiment to show his parts;
This is the age of oddities let loose,
Where different talents find their different marts;
You’d best begin with truth, and when you’ve lost your
Labour, there’s a sure market for imposture.¹

Byron’s man is a “strange” “animal,” but he is also a creative animal, particularly when it comes to the act of self-representation. The speaker explains that man makes “strange use/ Of his own nature” implying both that he does strange things with his nature and does something strange to it. Among these strange uses is one that he particularly likes: to “show his parts” with “various arts,” which is to say, man represents himself in ways that are both clever (“show his parts”), employ some creative aesthetic license (“various arts”), and, attempt to discover something about his nature or the nature of the world he

inhabits (“new experiments”). It is no small irony that the speaker himself gives the reader evidence of this likable, curious activity by indulging himself in a playful and strange representation of human nature even as he describes man as a creature that enjoys this strange art.

This strangeness, however playful it appears in the first half of the stanza, turns more ominous in the second where the various arts of representing parts, move from likeable strangeness to “oddities” to “truth[’s]” “labour” “lost” to marketable “Imposture.” His juxtapositions of experiments and imposture, truth and art, and the slippage from self-representation to imposture, are all relationships and progressions familiar to the skepticism of Swift, Fielding, and Sterne. Byron shares these authors anxieties concerning the complexity of interpretation and representation—their pleasures, but also their risks and distortions. In terms of distortion, the speaker suggests that man’s representations only “show his parts,” not his entirety. The expression indicates an eagerness of show off one’s best qualities. Yet the representation also implies the suppression or bowdlerization of other “parts” and the production of dismembering self-promotions or depreciations that represent man both more and less than he is by nature, make him a stranger to himself. In turn, the way man understands the nature in which he lives must also change to accommodate this newly imagined animal, giving rise to a world that is also more and also less than his own.

Byron characterizes these new representations as “oddities” produced by laboring after truth. They are fungible remainders of unsuccessful experiments: failed “truth” made marketable “imposture” in a marketplace of ideas. As with the fumes that escape Celia’s chest during Strephon’s “grand Survey,” the age unleashes these oddities through
pursuits of truths and true representations, releasing a prodigious variety of affectations that vie for power and popularity. For Byron, “stable, objective knowledge or truth does not exist . . . [and] all so-called knowledge is in fact manufactured, subjective belief: it is often accepted as actual knowledge by those who receive it.”2 Poised beneath his spartan characterization of man as “a strange animal” in the first line of the stanza, the emphasis on oddities and imposture in the remainder of the stanza argues that any claim for a true representation by man of himself or humanity at large is itself an odd imposture, whether or not it is so understood. Nevertheless, Byron’s asserts that men “labour” after these failed truths, suggesting that people seek out these impostures, as well as that they “particularly like” doing so—these too are part of their strangeness, a tacit strangeness that Byron’s poet endeavors to make explicit.

Byron’s selection of the morally ambiguous language of the “strange” to embody concerns about human understanding departs from the morally inflected language of vanity and fault that Swift and Fielding apply to imposture and affectation. While he shares their skepticism, his understanding of the problem of representation aligns more closely with Sterne’s consideration of intellectual difference as “odd” (TS 1.6.9) Sterne argues that our responsibility is to recognize that “De gustibus non est disputandum;—that is, there is no disputing against Hobby-Horses”: we needn’t cure ourselves of our odd beliefs, only to regulate their expression and “keep [our] temper” so that we may find pleasure rather than outrage in the surprising oddities of other people’s understandings. Byron isn’t so sure (TS 1.8.12, 1.6.9).

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Writing half a century after Sterne, Byron has seen Hobby-Horse rides turn into stampedes with the French Revolution, the rise and fall of Napoleon, and the massacre at Peterloo. Looking back over the last century of enlightenment pursuits of truth and tolerance, facts and feelings, Byron poses the question: what has changed? The speaker of his notably less comical *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* gives a discouraging answer:

There is the moral of all human tales:
’Tis but the same rehearsal of the past,
First Freedom, and then Glory - when that fails,
Wealth, vice, corruption - barbarism at last.
And History, with all her volumes vast,
Hath but one page, - ’tis better written here,
Where gorgeous Tyranny hath thus amassed
All treasures, all delights, that eye or ear,
Heart, soul could seek, tongue ask - Away with words! draw near,

Admire, exult - despise - laugh, weep - for here
There is such matter for all feeling: - Man!³

That speaker’s tale presents the events of the last century as a commonplace tale: emergence from religious purges and civil war, freedom from the superstitions of the past and enfranchisement of Enlightenment man, the glory of a bloodless revolution, the flourishing trade and growth of empire, and then the re-emergence of vice and corruption: a bloody revolution across with channel, economic oppression at home, tyranny over the Irish, and the barbarism civil massacre in 1819. The cycle of history repeats itself in the same story, which at every stage stars “Man,” but man successively understood as something to “admire,” “despise,” “laugh at,” and “weep” for. This stack of words only represents him in parts—role appropriate for the historical moment. The speaker therefore leaves us only with “Man!” beyond the partiality of history’s narratives.

Byron’s *Don Juan* continues the examination of man unembellished and his self-representations, allowing alongside his tendency to strange affectations that “man’s a phenomenon, one knows not what, / and wonderful beyond all wondrous measure.” This description similarly separates man from the various representations and terms that fix his meaning and value, historically or otherwise, unmasking representations as always inadequate and inaccurate. He is no longer a “what” bounded by words or any standard of “measure,” however “wondrous,” but a “one knows not what.” The rejection of the authority of knowledge, measure, and measuring systems corresponds to the speaker’s more famous contrarian declaration: “I was born for opposition” against “tyranny of all kinds”—including the representations that attempt to fix the measure and value of man (*DJ* 15.22.595). *Don Juan* is a poem of oppositions and opposites: it is an epic and a comedy, a representation of human nature and a satire of man’s attempts to represent himself, it is a poem that relies of language, but continually unmask its ambiguities. The speaker refrains from laying out a series of new truths about the nature of man and refuses to indicate what man should be or should do, giving at most a negative representation of man that repeatedly clarifies what he is not. Indeed, whatever “man” might be, the poem indicates that man is not a thing to be known, but rather an agent who acts and therefore cannot be represented.

Byron’s man is kinetic: “a phenomenon” by virtue of both his immeasurable wondrousness and his mobility as an agent in time. Byron nominates the idea of a mobile, phenomenal, human nature that recalls Fielding’s advancement of tentativeness and the development of character prudence, as well as the concerns about deducing man or mankind’s character that Swift, Fielding, and Sterne share. Byron argues that man’s
Alert to readerly and critical expectations for narrative consistency, Byron suggests that trying to be consistent would keep him from showing “things existent.” And given the choices that men must make between interpretive possibilities, Byron argues that human opinions and representations can never be “consistent” and “veracious.” His apology for his inconsistency exceeds the comic implication that men often contradict themselves, and therefore make poor exemplars for discourses of consistency. It also suggests that ideals of “Truth’s” clear fountains, come from unclear sources, and that the only clear truth is that consistency is itself a kind of muddy fiction.

Byron’s attention to questions of human understanding and interpretation both in the structure of the episodes he narrates and his narrative digressions, rarely draw scholarly attention, perhaps because they are often topical and lend themselves to the examination of other discourses such as sexual difference, gender, and orientalism. Scholarly examinations of Don Juan generally diminish the complexity of his
oppositional critique into radical skepticism, libertinage, or simple atheism. Or, alternatively, they marshal his consideration of the problems of interpretation by parts into problematic paradoxes of subjectivity that claim, for example, that he believes that “since knowledge is manufactured and knowing is nothing more than claiming, [people] can choose to interpret the world in new ways” and that “individually created knowledge offers the possibility for such change,” but that also, at the same time, “The isolation that it seems must inevitably result from truly independent cognition creeps into all the works.” Identifying subjective idealism as both the site of human possibility and its alienation doesn’t get us very far, and Byron, I claim, takes us much farther. Byron’s interest in the problems of representation and interpretation in *Don Juan* doesn’t lie in the imaginative possibilities of individual subjectivity or in the possibility of discovering a definitive truth. Rather, the poem looks at man’s labor for truths, his pleasure in representations of himself and his world, and the partiality of representation, examining the strange way in which these entangle as narrative impostures.

**The Heroic and the Human**

By putting pressure on the possibilities of multiple signification with the first words of *Don Juan*—“I want a hero: an uncommon want”—Byron places his readers into a position of uncertainty that makes the act of interpretation explicit, extending the comical instability of empirical surmise in Fielding and the controversy of the Stevinus chariot in Sterne. The repetition of “want,” first a verb and then as a noun, which is to say first as an action and then a thing, gestures towards the word’s double-meaning and the problems of interpretive choice and predisposition. On one hand, “want” can indicate

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4 Jackson, 2
desire; on the other hand, “want” can indicate lack. The doubleness multiplies the possible meaning of the lines, intensifying their ambiguity. The speaker may desire a hero: an uncommon desire or uncommon thing to desire; or, he may lack a hero: an uncommon lack or an uncommon thing to lack.

From the first line, the reader must make a choice about how he or she will understand the term and recognize the limitations of choice. This readerly self-consciousness creates awareness that the chosen interpretation is not necessarily the true one, and, furthermore, that a true interpretation may be beyond his or her understanding. The indeterminacy of “want” permits the coexistence of multiple meanings stacked atop one another, indicating the simultaneity of “desire” and “lack,” as well as fixed objects, nouns, and temporal movement, verbs. Together these possibilities destabilize any one interpretation as authoritative or absolute, yet their individual meanings also indicate inextricability of lack and desire within the “want.”

Double-entendres in Byron’s poetry are often marshaled into what Jerome McGann has called a strategy of “homosexual double-talk,” whereby Byron takes advantage of the multiplicity of word-meanings to sneak a discourse of unauthorized, sexual desire past the censors. This reading suggests that there are both superficial interpretations of the poem that are meant to deceive and occult, true interpretations available to those who know the right way to read. While remaining within the same compass of sexualized biography, Geoff Payne expands McGann’s interpretation to suggest that rather than read Byron’s double-entendres as invitations to uncover a true or hidden meaning, the unstable signs of and multiplicity of meanings in Don Juan should

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be reconsidered as intentional “homographs,” “words of the same written form but of
different origin and meaning.” 6 The simultaneity allows Payne to identify bisexuality,
both the author’s own and within his texts, as a “sexual homograph [that] threatens
because it is ambiguous.” 7 Payne argues that in a social paradigm erected on value-
weighted divisions between sexual differences, the doubleness of the bisexual homograph
“disturbs the stability” of a value-weighted dichotomy of heterosexuality and
homosexuality by showing that these conceptual categories are neither exclusive nor
exhaustive. 8

Byron scholarship often settles questions of doubleness and desire in Byron’s
poetry with answers to questions of the author’s own sexual practices; nevertheless,
Payne’s reading of homographesis in lieu of “homosexual double-talk” or what has
elsewhere been called “a secret code” and “art of allusions” allows for an investigation
into the speaker’s use of “want” that preserves its simultaneous signification of desire and
lack and recognizes the destabilizing work such instability performs. 9 The opening line’s
simultaneous claims of lack and desire make understanding the “truth” of the speaker’s
want impossible, and thereby draws attention to limited possibilities of interpretation.
Similarly, these doubleness of want indicates a paradoxical relationship between lack and
desire that men’s narratives representation cannot overcome: a desire to interpret and
represent fully and accurate what they experience, and the lack of intellectual faculties
that can do so.

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7 Geoff Payne, Dark Imaginings: Ideology and Darkness in the Poetry of Lord Byron (Bern and New York: Peter Lang, 2008) 63.
8 Payne 63-64.
9 See McGann, 2002, 126.
Byron’s choice to emphasize the category of “hero” places explicit pressure on the irreconcilability of traditional formal conventions and men in the present. In the traditional typology drawn from the Homeric epic, “hero” is an intermediary being between man and god, whose actions empirically distinguish his (or her) supra-human status, or, alternatively, a hero denotes the mixed progeny of human and god. The conventional hero is always more than a man, an inflated status towards which Byron begins to gesture in his opening stanza by characterizing his hero-want as “uncommon.”

I want a hero: an uncommon want,
When every year and month sends forth a new one,
Till, after cloying the gazettes with cant,
The age discovers he is not the true one.
Of such as these I should not care to vaunt,
I’ll therefore take our ancient friend Don Juan —
We all have seen him, in the pantomime,
Sent to the Devil somewhat ere his time. (DJ 1.1.9)

The stanza separates the hero that he wants from the representations of heroes trafficked by contemporary gazettes. The separation provokes a series of questions about representation itself. The “uncommon want” of a hero foregrounds the formal artifice of the poem as a work constructed according to aesthetic conventions: it will not represent actual content that is available to him, but pleasing fictions, figures and interpretations that are not common to the everyday.

The separation of his “uncommon” hero-want from the common also asks: how is the common heroic appetite satisfied? —And why doesn’t the food of one satisfy the
taste of another? Isn’t every hero a “true” hero? Characterizing his hero-want as “uncommon” doesn’t suggest that the speaker wants an “uncommon” or exotic hero; rather, it draws a distinction between the heroic and the common. Both the hack gazette writers and their readers overlook the distinction between aesthetic form and content, or tradition and the present by stitching man and hero together. The seam however cannot hold, and the public discovers in time that the current cant hero is “not the true one.” Their hero lack, however, is quickly replaced with “a new one” as part of a monthly-to-yearly cycle of alternating inflation and deflation of heroic candidates. “Hero” has become and stubbornly remains a legitimate category for experience, despite accruing evidence suggesting that gazette writers are similar to the genre critics satirized by the speaker of *Tom Jones*. Despite accruing evidence that this is not a useful empirical category, the public keeps finding new candidates who status as heroes is tentative, not the category itself.

Byron’s poet neither waits for, nor seeks, nor takes a risk on a contemporary “true one”; instead, he plucks a time-honored hero out of the world of timeless fiction: “our ancient friend Don Juan.” The choice disavows any claim to historical authenticity and draws attention to the traditional Juan narrative as fiction, while his claim that Don Juan was sent “to the Devil somewhat ere his time,” makes the moral economy of the anti-hero’s narrative embedding appear more a matter of generic choice than of necessity or true representation.

*His* Don Juan need not and will not be “the true one” in the way the public conceives of truth, although he will become an agent for disclosing the discourse of truth. The age’s desire for a hero that is a “true one” makes two incompatible claims for truth.
On one hand, the common want demands a heroic exemplar that gives life to the traits that constitute a hero in classical epics, medieval romances, and cultural legends. On the other hand, the desired hero must be a real person, a contemporary whose deeds, character, and authenticity can be empirically verified and validated. In essence, they want the ideal made flesh and walking among them. Gazettes tentatively satisfy this complex, contradictory demand with “cant heroes,” not “true” ones. Cant heroes are neither explicit poetic fictions nor true representations of actual people. They are caricatures of the living men, inflations that approximate epic models: half-truth, half-fiction. Formally, these cant heroes mirror the explicitly fictional Don Juan that the poet favors. In practice, however, his gazette writers claim the status of “true ones” for their hybrids, circulating them within an economy of tacit, interpretive expectations.

In their natural state, the modern men whom gazettes promote as cant heroes are neither fit subjects for epic poetry, nor fit objects for the public’s desire; rather they are dressed up like Swift’s “Dryden” in The Battle of the Books, unequal to the grandeur of their inflated representation. Beginning with the stanza following his nomination of Juan as his hero, the speaker reviews a lengthy catalogue of one-time “true ones,” recent historical figures of note ranging from Vernon, “the Butcher of Cumberland,” to the British admirals of the Napoleonic wars, “Duncan, Nelson, Howe and Jervis” (DJ 1.2.10; 1.4.10). He argues that none could suit his poem, for “they shown not on the poet’s page” (DJ 1.5.10). Nevertheless, his recollection that “Brave men were living before Agamemnon / And since, exceeding valorous and sage, / A good deal like him too, though quite the same none,” clarifies that men still act heroically, at least in martial

10 In this light, Fielding’s critique of Pamela as Richard’s presentation of the character as ideal made flesh establishes her as something like a “cant heroine.”
terms. His acknowledgement of their heroic deeds suggests a contradiction: if these men have acted like heroes why are they not fit to be heroes? Byron resolves the paradox by explaining that it is not an impoverished history of heroic deeds that keeps these men from epic; rather it is the men’s very historicity that makes them unpoetic.

Contemporary hero candidates have distinctly different claims placed upon them as agents in time than the characters that have already been “shown on the poet’s page.” These potential heroes are or were actual living men and it is in this capacity that they are not “quite the same” as the Homeric heroes. Men can only access Agamemnon through poetry, much as we only know Don Juan as an aesthetic representation. The accuracy of any representations of living men, however, can be scrutinized to find that there is too much content for the form in terms of available details, and not enough of the right kind to persuasively sustain the heroic evaluation. Consequently, men cannot make any man heroic; they can only receive the hero-type from the past. It is therefore because he can see these would-be heroes through the eyes of history that the poet cannot “find any [heroes] in the present age/ Fit for my poem.” Because he can see so much, he can only see that they are all too human to be poetic.

By choosing Juan, the poet avoids the problems of authenticity and historicity by making the fiction visible—for, while Don Juan almost certainly never existed—at least not in his legendary form—his literary “ancientness” renders any truth claims both unverifiable and unnecessary.11 His status as an aesthetic representation in the “pantomime”—or in any other explicitly entertaining presentation that “we” are all

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11 There has been some discussion as to whether or not there ever had been an actual “Don Juan”; however, scholarly opinion predominantly concludes that there was no such person, and that the figure is a representative figment—not a living original. For a summary of arguments on the status of Don Juan as myth, see “The One and the Same: Meaning and the Critical Myth of Don Juan” in James Mandrell, Don Juan and the Point of Honor: Seduction, Patriarchal Society, and Literary Tradition (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992),13-48.
presumed to have seen—calls attention to Juan himself as a recyclable aesthetic convention: “a character in a story that has been written and rewritten.” The canting gazette writer, however, makes the double-claim that his hero is both a real, historical man and an epic hero who is more than man. Predictably, time invalidates the claim. Men either outlast their heroic action, failing to perform consistently as a fictional appropriation off of the page, or their heroic action falls out of favor with changing criteria of heroism. Byron explains that the latter was the fate of Vice-Admiral, Viscount Nelson, England’s once “God of war”; for “because the army’s grown more popular” and “the Prince is all for the land-service,” this once god has been “quietly inurned” (DJ 1.4.10). Nelson’s reduction from his status as “God of war” ironically unmasks the conventional affectation of the representation, suggesting an important distinction between the fictionalized living and their fictitious counterparts in poetry past: Ares, after all, will always be the “God of war” in the classical epics, regardless of what the Prince regent thinks. The interpretations of everyday men through the category of “hero” (or pagan “god”) will therefore always be vulnerable and eventually fail because both the individual man and the expectations for heroic election placed upon him are susceptible to changes in time. Nevertheless, the practice persists, an oddity that Byron reads as an indication of a contemporary desire for whatever it is the hero signifies as a category, whether or not any hero is or ever has been real.

A generation before Byron, Samuel Coleridge directed readers of the popular *Lyrical Ballads* “to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the

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12 Mandrell, 40.
moment, which constitutes poetic faith.” Coleridge aimed at expanding the understanding of his readers so that they might displace themselves into the narrative fantasy of his poetry and experience the poem’s “dramatic truth” with the same intensity as they would if it were true. Byron is concerned with a perversion of this process, one that suspends disbelief in the real world and extends “the moment” so that men experience truth according to the demands of narrative semblance. Like Coleridge, Byron wants to make explicit that the narratives the reader experiences are only the “semblance of truth,” and to clarify that representations on the page are likewise only “shadows of imagination.” By contrast, he accuses his canting contemporaries of substituting semblances of truth for the truth to the degree that “the very truth seems falsehood to it” (DJ 11.36.476).

The facts of the everyday don’t naturally replicate the imaginative projections of dramatic or poetic truth, nor does human nature. Fitting them into these narratives requires that the public willingly suspend their powers of disbelief to accommodate the fiction. The accommodation, however, is never self-sustaining in itself, but requires a continual rebalancing of facts to maintain its authority until such times as that labor becomes too tedious. Then either the fictional narrative or its object is replaced with a new one. Byron’s opening stanza suggests that the common want of a hero represents one such willing suspension of disbelief. Readers of the age want their hero; moreover they want the world that their categories, like the category of the hero, describe. They are not passive victims of ideological subterfuge; rather, they are complicit in the popular

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misrepresentation of mere men as true heroes. In short, they want to be deceived under the guise of truth.

Byron’s opening separation of the fictions of epic hero from the cant hero of the everyday proposes that modern understanding both desires and lacks the good faith implicit in what Michael McKeon has identified as “romance idealism”: a “narrative epistemology [that] involves a dependence on received authorities and a priori traditions.”¹⁴ The narrative unfolding of Don Juan doesn’t examine idealism, but a desire for the idealizing representations that romance provides. If the period of transition from romance to skepticism is, as Charles Taylor would have it, “the great disembedding,” then Byron observes a desire to be embedded, even if a few of the facts need to be fudged along the way.

Because gazettes trade in “cloying,” “cant” fictions and because the reading public willingly attunes its beliefs to fictional narratives, Byron makes it the ironic task of his epic poet “to show things as they really are,”

Not as they ought to be: for I avow,

That till we see what 's what in fact, we 're far

From much improvement with that virtuous plough

Which skims the surface, leaving scarce a scar. (DJ 12.40.507)

Byron seeks to separate out conflations of the “ought” with “what’s what in fact” by unmasking common inflations of virtuous narratives that both skim and scar. In so doing, he provides a representation of “what’s what in fact” and “things are they are” that are

not irreducible facts or eternal truths, but representations of man’s foolish pursuits of these affectations.

Inquiring into the didactic force of the *Don Juan*, Jerome McGann has argued that the poem “is intended, first, to correct the degenerate literary practices of the day; and second, to expose the social corruption which supports such practices,” yet he also poses the question of “how seriously” we are to take Byron’s claim to write an epic, when the poem is “evidently a joke on the traditions of epic itself?”\(^{15}\) *Don Juan* has certainly attracted a range of generic classifications; however, reading the poem through these hermeneutic categories to determine its type ironically distracts from the poem’s attempt to undermine the authenticity and authority of such systems.\(^{16}\) For Byron, social corruption is always entangled with an epistemological estrangement that corrupts the understanding so that categories like those of genre are taken seriously in the way Fielding satires in *Tom Jones*. He acknowledges the influence of political corruption and commerce in the choice of men inflated into the cant heroes of his day, but he concentrates on the temptation of human understanding that promote and facilitate them. By looking directly at the epistemological cause, he exposes a method of interpretation that contributes to social and political corruption, and by so doing he discredits the practice at its source.

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Half Impostor, Half Enthusiast

Byron asserts that people—both individually and collectively—more or less consciously misrepresent the world to themselves according to something like a generic narratives or categories, conflating representative forms from tradition and fiction with present day experiences. Moreover, he suggests that they willingly suspend disbelief to accommodate these fictional representations—to experience their poetic truth, but to authorize them as truths. Generally speaking, Fielding and Sterne have conceptualized the problem of misinterpretation as a wholly natural and involuntary phenomenon in which people don’t immediately understand that they misunderstand. Byron expands this problem of empirical interpretation to identify a space for agency that reads at least some misinterpretations as voluntary. The type of misunderstanding that interests Byron is one in which people assimilate publically available categories of belief or in which people make public their own categories of belief for assimilation. Following Fielding’s suggestion that our minds cannot be reliably disciplined by external systems and Sterne’s argument that we are naturally idiosyncratic creatures, Byron ridicules the suspension of disbelief as an affectation of true understanding. This shift complicates the emphasis that Locke and other didactic theorists like Richardson and Johnson place on the susceptibility of human understanding to moral and immoral systems. These authors paint human understanding as malleable from the outside, though only if people believe in the truth of what they experience. Byron troubles these neat assumptions about the innocence and passivity of human desire by arguing that people “particularly like” and seek out bowdlerizing and bowdlerized systems. Byron’s man doesn’t need to be deceived; he needs only the masquerade of deception. And in so far as we have seen Fielding argue
that didactic practices attempt to manipulate men like puppets and suggest that whatever they affect, “no one is ashamed of consenting to be imposed upon; of helping on the Drama”, Byron also asserts that the public arrives at the show ready to have their strings pulled, and even pulls them themselves (JW 3.11.124).

In a suppressed introduction to Don Juan, Byron discusses Wordsworth’s poem “The Thorn” to give an explicit example of deceptive categories and to argue that the public as well as the poets are complicit in their narrative deception. Byron’s critique of Wordsworth forgoes a critique of the “The Thorn” as poetry to examine the poem’s bad-faith reception among readers. Byron explains that:

The Poet informs all who are willing to be informed, that its [the thorn’s] age was such as to leave great difficulty in the conception of its ever having been young at all—which is as much as to say, either that it was Coeval with the Creator of all things, or that it had been born Old, and was thus appropriately by antithesis devoted to the Commemoration of a child that died young.

Byron implies that Wordsworth’s poems is a ridiculous mixture of measures, facts, supernatural folly, and social cant, but that the narrative nevertheless becomes authoritative to “all who are willing to be informed,” which is to say those who desire to suspend their disbelief for a narrative fiction (DJ Preface 84).

At stake for Byron is not the factitiousness of Wordsworth’s world-view, but the willingness of his readers to assimilate this narrative or any other as “a fact without some leaven of a lie” when, as he argues, it is precisely the leavening force that attracts them (DJ 11.37.476). Byron takes the poem’s semblance of truth to be similar in kind to modern religious experiments, equating Wordsworth and the lake poets with the likes of Joanna Southcott, Emmanuel Swedenborg, Richard Brothers, and parson Tozer, and diagnoses their faithful, as well as the “willing” Wordsworth himself, as “half Enthusiast
and half Impostor” (*DJ* Preface 84). Byron accuses Wordsworth of being willingly seduced by the categories of romantic idealism that he constructs, claiming that he ironically conflates true content with idealist categories, despite being conscious author these ideal categories. More ridiculous than Swift’s Cassinus or Cervantes’ Quixote, Wordsworth is simultaneously the explicit romancer and the tacitly romanced.

The problem is not one of misinterpretation, but of partially inflating experience so that it fits desirable categories. Unlike full enthusiasts who are zealously carried away by their beliefs, it is the zeal to make the content of the world mirror narrative form that drives Byron’s “half-enthusiasts.” It is not the belief, but the shape of the belief that they value: this is the reason, as his juxtaposition of Milton’s puritan faith against the mutability of the lake poet shows, that we don’t find “half-enthusiast” martyrs but only apostates who change their story when the going gets tough, or when experience can no longer be assimilated into fantasy.

If fallen in evil days on evil tongues,

Milton appealed to the avenger, Time,

If Time, the avenger, execrates his wrongs

And makes the word Miltonic mean sublime,

He deigned not to belie his soul in songs,

Nor turn his very talent to a crime.

He did not loathe the sire to laud the son,

But closed the tyrant-hater he begun. (*DJ* Dedication 10.6)

The stanza’s three final lines draw a distinction between enthusiasm for a belief and making use of beliefs to satisfy an epistemological desire. The latter condition allows for
narratives be to exchanged or compiled to suit external contingencies as they unfold. Like the men made into modern heroes, individual narratives of belief can be exchanged for better, fresher ones. Wordsworth thereby becomes a symbolic anti-Milton because he shifts his views from radical to conservative, betraying that none were never truly embedded in the first place, only preferred.\(^\text{17}\)

The “Half Impostor, Half Enthusiast” characterization re-evaluates the “halves” of Byron’s earlier, tragic hero Manfred’s claim that man is “Half dust, half deity, unfit alike to sink or soar.”\(^\text{18}\) The revision is remarkable because while Manfred’s halves are categories that feign content, what man incontestably is, the Don Juan’s halves are categories of form and behavior, what man does. The shift from condition to action unmakes Manfred’s characterization of man paralyzed—“alike unfit to sink or soar”—as an act of romantic affectation, not epiphany. Instructively, because Manfred believes he is powerless to overcome this affected natural condition, he seeks out a series of supernatural authorities that, like the cant hero, fail to be the “true one.” With no further fictions available, Manfred cloisters himself in an ancestral tower: believing himself unable to act, he literally lies down to die. His want of a true fiction translates into a want of the will to live itself.

In light of Don Juan’s reformulations of man’s halves, Manfred’s tragedy can be re-read as an unmasking of the fictions that animate the world Manfred inhabits—the spirits, witches, and divine agency, justice—to show the disenfranchisement of narrative understanding. At the same time, the shift towards enthusiast and impostor identifies a missed opportunity for human agency and action in Manfred’s story. For if there is

\(^{17}\) See characterization of Wordsworth and the lake poets in DJ Dedication 1, 3, 17. 8.
volition implicit in the choice of narratives, then men are not by nature insolubly bound to any of them. Rather, men can choose none by reconsidering what they desire from human understanding, including their desire to idealize it—and this is an action that they can always take.

The movement from deities and dust to impostors and enthusiasts intensifies the division between the everyday world and narrative fiction. At the same time, it unmasks the causal world articulated by half-imposter, half-enthusiast narratives as superimposed fictions. The motif of halves resonates as a criticism of a Romantic view of the mind’s eye that enchants “All that we behold”; for Byron, the world is not a mixture of what we half “perceive” and “half create.” Men behave as half-impostors, half-enthusiasts by willingly confounding their perceptions and created narratives and then privileging the result as truth. “Enthusiast” suggests a predisposition to interpret or “perceive” the world according to the narratives and categories we “create” as impostors. Possessed of both, men are able to seduce themselves half-tacitly, half-consciously with fictions.

Taking the market for contemporary poetry as a representative case of fictional desire, Byron details the demand placed on poets to make established narratives appear natural:

The difficulty lies in colouring
(Keeping the due proportions still in sight)
With nature manners which are artificial,
And rend'ring general that which is especial. *(DJ 15.25.597)*

The speaker’s complaint inverts the conventional practice of using art to show “Nature to advantage dress’d”—these poets instead dress artful narratives “with nature”:

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The difference is, that in the days of old
Men made the manners; manners now make men--
Pinn'd like a flock, and fleeced too in their fold,
At least nine, and a ninth beside of ten.
Now this at all events must render cold
Your writers, who must either draw again
Days better drawn before, or else assume
The present, with their common-place costume. *(DJ 15.26.597)*

These “common-place costume[s]” affect the “colour” of an artificial nature, a point the speaker ironically emphasizes by communicating his unmasking of affected representations with highly stylized versification and admitting that it is done with some “difficulty.” In conversation with Fielding’s discussion of the role of “imposture” in generic literary categories in *Tom Jones*, the chiasmus in the stanza’s second line expands beyond the conventions of literature to argue that the creative, aesthetic practices that allowed man to dress nature to advantage now enclose him in a repetitive cycle of redrawing what has already been “better drawn before.” Nevertheless, that this pinn’d flock of writers “must draw” implies the desire of the readers for the continual redressing of the narrative commonplace and nothing else—nothing new. Therefore, while poets and publishers of gazettes may be accused of fleecing the naïve public with cant fictions, this public pays to have the wool pulled over their eyes.

Alert to this economy of literary tradition and self-deception, Byron’s choice of Don Juan as his hero becomes significant because of the complex status of deceit and of consent in typical seduction narratives. Byron comically undermines the presumed power
relationships of typical seduction narratives by casting an infamous seducer as his hero only then to represent him as the seduced. The inversion aligns the imposture of reader with the desire to be read as the seduced, passive party. Many critics have suggested that that name or character “Don Juan” was merely a “pretext” for Byron’s poem or an “inapt choice,” and have generally distanced the poem from the legendary figure by citing its irrelevance to his work. Moyra Haslett rightly assesses that “many of these judgments are made because the character of his hero is interpreted as dissimilar from, if not antithetical to, the legendary seducer.” Yet Byron’s juxtaposition of the name or sign of the character with his negation in the poem draws attention to the problem of narrative inflation and typology. By intentionally disappointing reader expectations, Byron constructs a larger epistemological case about the desire to be deceived: for just as there are epic and cant heroes, so too are there epic and cant victims.

The typical seduction narrative implies an epistemological hierarchy in which the knowing, powerful seducer hides his or her intentions from his naïve victim. The victim is taken in or led astray from the truth by the seducer’s semblance of truth. But Byron troubles this narrative by suggesting that none of this takes place in passive voice: rather, the party read as seduced deceives through his or her desire to participate in the fiction of seduction. By extension, the “seduced” seductresses of Don Juan become proxies for readers who are eager to be seduced both on and off the page.

Leaving the readerly desire to be seduced comically unsatisfied, Byron places readers in parallel with the absurd “buxom middle-aged” widows and “waning prude[s]”

who are passed over as sexual spoils of war in his cantos on the battle of Ismail (DJ 9.131-2.405). Reasoning that it would not be “their fault, but only fate,” these characters eagerly anticipate “a Roman sort of Sabine wedding, / Without the expense and the suspense of bedding,” only to protest in disappointment: “Wherefore the ravishing did not begin!” (DJ 9.132.405). Byron further extends his critique of seduction to argue that narrative insufficiency always leaves excess: one seduction is never sufficient. He confronts this excess by dramatizing his characters’ narrative revisions and recourse to secondary narratives, showing that they only deceive themselves by trying to be at once authors and passive victims of their pretenses. The seduced are repeatedly self-seduced, a point he renders perhaps nowhere more comically than in Donna Julia’s seduction.

The story of Juan and Julia inverts the literary romance of Abelard and Heloise along the lines of sex so that it is an older, female tutor, Julia, who seduces a young, naive virgin, Don Juan, recalling how Fielding inverts the gendered categories that Richardson exploits in Pamela, by representing Pamela’s brother Joseph as the prey of lechery of Mr. B’s sister. To effect the seduction, the moral female must affect seduction, revising and displacing her desires as desirability to reconcile them with her presumption of virtuous categories. In Joseph Andrews this plays out in a comical scene in which Lady Booby uses her power over Joseph as his employer and social superior to lure him into her bedroom where she awaits half-naked it hopes that he will be seized will desire and ravage her. When this doesn’t take place, she then attempts to persuade him that he does desire her, should desire her, and that she is not unwilling to forgive any actions he might take to satisfy that desire:

“La!” says she, in an affected Surprise, “what am I doing? I have trusted myself with a Man alone, naked in Bed; suppose you should have any wicked Intentions
upon my Honour, how should I defend myself?” Joseph protested that he never had the least evil Design against her. “No,” says she, “perhaps you may not call your Designs wicked; and perhaps they are not so.” — He swore they were not. ”You misunderstand me,” says she; “I mean if they were against my Honour, they may not be wicked; but the World calls them so.” (*JA* 1.5.30)

To her chagrin, Joseph never really gets the hint nor does he develop the desire to proceed on his own on account of “virtue,” a failure to play his role that is punished with his banishment away from her theatre of desire and into unemployment. In the case of Julia, however, her Juan proves slightly more obliging, and the struggle over interpretation is less about transferring her desire for Juan to Juan, than about extenuating her desire in a suitable, consistent narrative.

As her desire for Juan increases, so does the complexity of her narrative entanglement until she finally divorces her body from her soul. Taking a cue from Lady Macbeth, she decides that it is the hand that is guilty, not her.

The hand which still held Juan’s by degrees:

Gently, but palpably confirmed its grasp,

As if it said, “Detain me if you please,”

Yet there’s no doubt she only meant to clasp

His fingers with a pure platonic squeeze;

She would have shrunk as from a toad, an asp,

Had she imagined such a thing could rouse

A feeling dangerous to a prudent spouse. (*DJ* 1.111.44)

The hypothetical language of the last three lines ("would," “had she”) narrate an alternative series of events that lend support to her self-characterization of “prudent spouse” by recasting her as the ignorant and misinformed victim. If she did not know,
then it is not her fault; yet this pretension of ignorance nevertheless doubles as critique of the insufficiency of her previous truths. By narrating her separation from body and desire with an excessively sympathetic tone, Byron suggests that she makes this distinction with volition and control. She only pretends to passive ignorance and impotence as she dispenses, encourages, and received sexual attention. Reprising the Vicomte de Valmont, she narrates sexual desire as beyond her control.

Byron clarifies that she, or at least her hand, is very much the agent who controls the unfolding of events as well as her interpretation of them:

And Julia sate with Juan, half embrace
And half retiring from the glowing arm
Which trembled like the bosom where it was place;
Yet still she must have thought there was no harm,
Or else’t were easy to withdraw her waist.
But then the situation had its charm
And then—God knows what next—I can’t go on;
I’m almost sorry that I e’er begun. (DJ 1.115.45)

His “almost sorry” combines with the Julia’s motif of bad-faith halves (“half embrace,” “half retiring,”) to draw the reader’s attention to her affectations of non-complicity, which he goes on to ridicule with an abrupt affectation of narrative prudery. After titillating the reader for stanzas, the speaker refuses to complete the narrative, feigning ignorance and helpless about where events the story goes. The self-censorship satirizes the bad faith of the reader who delights in each line only to protest shock and disgust at its immoral destination. Byron then comically turns to Plato, to accuse him of being both
such a writer and such a reader, making the philosopher into an ancient anti-hero, jubilantly accusing him at once corrupting the youth of Seville as well as of Athens.

Oh Plato! Plato! You have paved the way,
With your confounded fantasies, to more
Immoral conduct by the fancied sway
Your system feigns o'er the controulless core
Of human hearts, than all the long array
Of poets and romancers: --- You 're a bore,
A charlatan, a coxcomb --- and have been,
At best, no better than a go-between. (DJ 1.116.45)

The platonic “confounded fantasies” are insufficient to control the “controulless core,” but so too Byron argues, are the narratives of poets and romancers, as well as the religion Julia embraces.

Professing tongue and check on her behalf that it is “Not that remorse did not oppose temptation,” the speaker burlesques the Christian temptation narrative at its moment of failure:

A little still she strove, and much repented,
And whispering "I will ne'er consent" — consented. (DJ 1.117.46)

Exposing the real-time progress of her revisions exposes her narrative masking and unmaskes Julia as the author of her own seduction.

To separate herself from her actions, she imaginatively dismembers her body, but Byron clarifies that it is nevertheless she who acts to “gently” take Juan’s “trembling” arm, who lays it across her breast, and squeezing his hand, no matter how she tells the
story. In the moment of her seduction, Julia identifies herself as the seduced, announcing that she “will ne’er consent.” To whom is this addressed? —Certainly not to Juan as she seduces him. Her ridiculous protest gives the lie to her narrative, both literally and figuratively, by actually narrating it. Placing her desires and actions within a larger, exculpatory narrative to which she openly consents, she ironically acts out her desire for an affectation of truth, while tacitly consenting to its insufficiency.

Naming the seduced boy “Don Juan,” however proves to be the ironic coup de grâce of Byron’s satire of seduction. Julia’s narrative of seduction and her desire to be seduced require an archetypal Don Juan figure to do the seducing, but she has only a teenage boy who trembles at her touch. Rendering Juan the seduced rather than the seducer troubles the discourse of passive victimization that the Don Juan mythology affirms. Her want of a “true one,” here a true Don Juan, parallels the want of a true hero and a true narrative. Byron’s Don Juan is a passive hero/anti-hero: this ridiculous conceit makes the typology of heroes explicit by contradiction, compelling reader scrutiny rather than encouraging the suspension of disbelief, and exposing further the fiction of the narrative cosmos from which the speaker withdraws his hero in stanza one.

Unlike epic heroes like Homer’s Odysseus, who embarks on a voyage of homeward return to restore domestic order, Juan’s voyages are purposeless. He has no goal, no divine guidance, and no real destination. His wanderings have no ideological consistency: he simply moves forward in time.

It is this lack of purpose that accounts for the frequent critical comments on his ‘passivity.’ Juan acts vigorously enough during individual episodes, but he makes

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22 See discussion of the ideological constraints of the Don Juan myth in Mandrell, 231.
Byron replaces narrative cosmology with coincidence and contingency: things just happen to Juan. Neither a true hero nor true seducer, Byron’s Juan disappoints narrative desires by having no narrative. The mythical Don Juan of the pantomimes to which Byron alludes in stanza one, however, is a “treacherous archetype” who serves the same narrative function as the Odyssean hero archetype: to reflect and restore moral order.

The typical Don Juan affirms a cosmological narrative of moral retribution: because he is either unable or unwilling to repent his crimes in life, he is sentenced to eternal perdition in a hell-fire of his victims’ scorn. The narrative enacts a structural symmetry by expelling the agent of dissent and disorder and thereby restoring authority and order to the narrative. Seen another way, if the *Odyssey* restores order with the slaughter of disorderly suitors, then the Don Juan narrative restores order with divine retribution against an even more egregious suitor. Byron rejects these narratives as a narrative, and rejects the constraints they place on human nature as well. His opening remark that Juan had been “sent to the Devil somewhat ere his time” not only jokes about Juan’s usefulness to the speaker in the present, but also implies that there is something wrong about that ending because his Juan exists in time, not as an eternal type.

Both epic heroes and anti-heroes are elements of narrative cosmologies that function in unchanging and unchangeable ways. Byron’s poem reminds the reader that these worlds and their inhabitants are pure fictions whose progress in time in similarly

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24 John Lauber, “*Don Juan* as Anti-Epic,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 8, no. 4 (Autumn 1968), 610.
26 The moral rebalancing is nowhere better exemplified than in the final lines of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* (still exceedingly popular in Byron’s day,) which vaunt over the damned libertine that “This is the end of the evildoer: the death of a sinner always reflects his life.”
fictionalized: their system of cause and effect is already laid out and the “true hero” cannot escape his “true fate”—Odysseus must return home; Don Juan must be condemned to hell. The heroic content and heroic actions and heroic destiny are inseparable features of the same heroic fiction. Byron’s demystification of the “true hero” also leads to a demystification of the true “narrative” that defines the hero that his imposter-enthusiasts layer over the contingencies of the everyday. In effect, the want of a hero indicates a want to be rescued from a disenchanted world.

The Fictional Structure of Epic Desire

Byron chooses to adopt an anachronistic or at least “ancient” form of epic to draw attention to conflation of content and form. His use of the epic genre has less to do with revising and expanding tentative categories of signified by Fielding’s hybrid categories of “comic Epic-Poem in Prose,” Joseph Andrews or his “heroical, historical prosaic poem” and “prosai-comi-epic writing” than with making the desire for such interpretative categories explicit (JA Preface 8; TJ 4.1.159, 5.1.209). For Byron, showing “what’s what in fact” and “things as they really are” is also the task of disarming the desire to marshal experience into categories and narratives by making that desire and its productions appear ridiculous.

Invoking two irreconcilable narratives, Byron’s poet jokes that “Man fell with apples, and with apples rose” (DJ 10.1.437). Like the “want” of stanza one, the apple emerges as a semiotic homograph, while like the men inflated into cant heroes, narrative inflates the apple so that it signifies far more than its apple nature. The first narrative indicates a biblical narrative of Eden, the fall of man, and mankind’s imminent future
redemption while the second points to Newton’s apocrypha of gravity and his narrative of a mechanical universe. Deploying a heroic hyperbole, Byron quips that Newton was “the sole mortal who could grapple, / Since Adam, with a fall or with an apple.” Praising Newton as the new Adam is comical and comically grandiose. On one hand, the joke trivializes the biblical value of “fall” and of “apple” into a mere falling apple, rendering the merit of each account suspicious, while the verb “grapple” (which comically rhymes with, takes possession of, and adds on to “apple”) suggests that each account required intellectual labor, while also constructing the comic image of either Adam or Newton physically wrestling with or grappling with the fallen apple, like Jacob with his ennobling angel.

Byron places the mathematician’s work against his own expectations for poetry in a comparison that deflates the fantasy of mechanical truth:

… We must deem the mode

In which Sir Isaac Newton could disclose

Through the then unpaved stars the turn pike road,

A thing to counterbalance human woes.

…

I wish to do as much by poesy (DJ 10.2-3.437).

The merit of devising “A thing to counter balance human woes” by paving the “then unpaven stars” is not altogether clear. Anne Barton has suggested that Byron’s juxtaposition of science and poetry here and elsewhere privileges a scientific world of fact: “It was scarcely surprising that he should develop a respect for this world, as
opposed to its less substantial, fictional twin...Byron distrusted art.”  

However, the quick move from Newton to poetry suggests that the two are twins with interchangeable functions, though the new experiment of science pretends to true narrative. The Newtonian narrative displaces the old Adamic cosmology, placing human nature into a new “true one.” By paving a new path in the heavens, he offers a new narrative to “counterbalance human woes” and satisfy epistemological desire—a process his readers also observe in the succession of cant heroes, seduction narratives, and half-imposter, half-enthusiast apostasy.

Earlier in the poem, Byron cautions against the temptation to bite into the Newtonian apple by drawing together Socratic skepticism and Newtonian progress:

Socrates said, our only knowledge was
'To know that nothing could be known;' a pleasant
Science enough, which levels to an ass
Each man of wisdom, future, past, or present.
Newton (that proverb of the mind), alas!
Declared, with all his grand discoveries recent,
That he himself felt only 'like a youth
Picking up shells by the great ocean--Truth.' (DJ 7.5.338)

In Newton’s metaphor, “Truth” corresponds to the vast and sublime ocean of knowledge from which he gathers only shells; the punctuating force of “—Truth,” however, suggests that Newton’s modest (perhaps, falsely modest,) representation of “his grand discoveries recent” as “a youth/ Picking up shells by the great ocean” is actually and ironically the

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“Truth.” The stanza begins with a consideration of Socrates’ “pleasant science” and its claims that the only “knowledge” is “to know that nothing could be known.” Following Socrates, the reader can read Newton, that “proverb of the mind,” as something like a cant hero: he has been inflated into “a man of wisdom” only to now be unmasked as an “ass” for taking that representation as true. Or, alternatively, the reader can interpret Newton as a second Socrates and take his declaration as a straight admission that truth lies beyond the shore of his mechanics. Either way, there is no “Truth” to be found here and it is clear that readers can “know” nothing except that which ever interpretation they choose, it is only one part of the story.

The first line of the stanza that immediately follows suggests the futility of the search for either wise men or truth:

Ecclesiastes said, 'that all is vanity'-
Most modern preachers say the same, or show it
By their examples of true Christianity:
In short, all know, or very soon may know it;
And in this scene of all-confess'd inanity,
By saint, by sage, by preacher, and by poet,
Must I restrain me, through the fear of strife,
From holding up the nothingness of life? (DJ 7.6.338)

Swearing by and swearing at saints, sages, preachers, and poets, he puts each in equal relationship to the others. They are interchangeable agents of false authority who demonstrate the vanity of any claim to authority. The result of this “inanity” is a social oppression that tempts the speaker to censor himself for “fear of strife”—namely, the
strife that might result from “holding up the nothingness” or not-knowable-as-thing-ness of life. Such restraint, however, as we shall see in the Haidée and English cantos, ironically trades strife over nothingness for nothingness itself. Between strife and nothingness, Byron will take strife.

Byron’s witty wordplay argues that the vanity of modern preachers’ “examples of true Christianity” unmasks the vanity of Christian truths. The ridicule of Christianity and the earlier ridicule of mechanics harmonize with his coupling of Adam and Newton as narrative heroes in canto ten. There, Adam’s apocryphal apple alludes to the Christian narrative of paradise, its loss in the fall and return in a future salvation. This narrative embeds present “human woes” into an always already unfolding story over which men have no control. The eschatological narrative repeats the temporal logic of return and restoration in the _Odyssey_ and in Don Juan mythology. Yet, for Byron, to place present day man in the middle of any of these grand narratives is to strip him of autonomy and agency, because the story has already been written, as has man’s role in it.

Byron elaborates this complication by looking closely at a narrative device common to epic poetry, _in medias res_, and comparing it. He compares _in medias res_ with “begin at the beginning” to show the consequences of placing man in the middle of that story that has already begun and that has already announced how it will end. The problem is that there is neither the possibility nor the need for human agency in a world that has been eternally defined.

Most epic poets plunge in ‘medias res,’

(Horace makes this the heroic turn pike road)

And then your hero tells, when’er you please,
What went before – by way of episode

Is the usual method, but not mine –

My way is to begin with the beginning. (DJ 1.6-7.4-5)

Byron identifies the narrative conceit of *in medias res* as a fiction that makes time both more and less than it is, a temporal inflation that is similar to the inflation of everyday men into heroes. Byron ridicules heroic inflations of man as “cant heroes” produced by rote “each month” and “year”; here he reminds that *in medias res* is simply a technique that has “the usual method.” Noting a common entanglement with narrative “turnpikes,” Byron brings together poetry and mechanics to indicate that this temporal-causal structure confounds our desired *ought* narrative with the *is* of the everyday by placing one in the context of the other.

Shifting from the totality of time to local experience, the poet qualifies his poem as “epic” by way of “episode,” highlighting the event rather than its narrative place.

My poem’s epic, and is meant to be

Divided in twelve books; each book containing.

With love, and war, a heavy gale at sea,

A list of ships, and captains, and kings reigning,

New characters; the episodes are three:

A panorama view of hell’s in training,

After the style of Virgil and of Homer,

So that my name of Epic’s no misnomer. (DJ 1.200.73)
McGann identifies that this stanza as indicative of Byron’s failure to explicate, insofar as:

Epic poets continually begin *in medias res* because such a narrative procedure establishes the need for an explicatory context. ... *In medias res* enforces the desire to understand events in terms of an orderliness that springs from causes and natural consequences. To begin *in medias res* is to ensure that the events of the epic will be set only in the context of what is relevant to them.\(^{28}\)

Byron’s omission of explanatory devices like *in medias res*, however, ridicules such explanatory “desire.” Reproducing traditional epic situations without the traditional economy of epic time forces a confrontation with the lack of a true “explicatory context” and with narrative attempts to satisfy the desire to fill that vacancy.

Byron therefore announces that he will begin with the beginning, but this beginning is not the same beginning that Sterne’s Tristram unsuccessfully seeks out, because, crucially, it doesn’t have an end in sight. *Tristram Shandy* unfolds like a conjectural history that will explain the network of events that contribute to the formation of the narrator’s current opinions at this stage of his life. We end with Tristram the real time narrator, wherever we begin. Conversely, in *Don Juan* we begin with Juan and follow him wherever it is he goes.

Separating the fantasy of explanatory time in the epic narrative from his method of beginning with the beginning, Byron recreates the scene of the *Odyssey* in which Odysseus washes up naked on the shore of Calypso’s island. In the second canto of *Don Juan*, Juan also washes up naked on the shore of an island and into the arms of the “nymph”-like Haidée; however, unfolding the events in a series of accidents refuses to grant their order any transcendental meaning (*DJ* 4.15.207). The Haidée episode expands Byron’s critique of epistemological desire beyond the convention of the Homeric epic by tempting his readers—and his characters—into assimilating information and experience

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\(^{28}\) McGann, 1976, 100.
into a ready variety of overlapping narratives. The cantos unfold along two registers, one composed of information, and the other, of the inflated interpretations of that information. The tension between the two dramatizes the want of the ideal by demonstrating the unsustainable repression of particulars necessary for any idealizing inflation.

Primary among these ideals is a narrative of history that both imagines a golden age of human innocence and maps it onto a geographic paradise. In a multi-layered attack on this narrative, the Haidée cantos allude to both the Homeric story of Calypso’s island and to various pre-lapsarian paradises through the poly-significations of nudity. The allusions offer opposing accounts of naked heroism and naked innocence. These allusions become increasingly untrustworthy, however, as the speaker extends the innocence of paradisal ignorance with the Romantic valorization of innocent and ignorant childhood as a source of truth, observing of Juan and Haidée that they are “so young, and one so innocent, / That bathing passed for nothing” (DJ 2.72.111). Which one is innocent, however, depends on a narrative choice.

Within a framework of a not-yet-sexualized Eden and not-yet-sexualized children, ignorant disregard of nudity becomes a moral affirmation of innocence. But this reading lacks a true innocent: for we have foreknowledge of Juan’s seduction and the poet’s earlier description of Haidée’s shock in the presence of male nudity upon first seeing Juan suggests she is anything but innocent of the less innocent significations of nudity.

…. She [Haidée] found,

Insensible, —not dead, but nearly so, —

Don Juan, almost famish'd, and half drown'd;
But being naked, she was shock’d, you know,
Yet deem’d herself in common pity bound,
As far as in her lay, ’to take him in,
A stranger’ dying, with so white a skin. (DJ 2.129.129)

One cannot both be ignorant and shocked. As was the case with the apple in the discussion above, the double-signification nudity destabilizes the power of either narrative. On one hand, Haidée’s shock at Juan’s nakedness mobilizes a series of moral assumptions about the shamefulness of the body. On the other hand, nakedness can be leveraged to show pre-lapsarian innocence—yet this too is destabilized by details of Haidée’s rich clothing when she enters the scene.

Her dress was many-colour’d, finely spun;
Her locks curl’d negligently round her face,
But through them gold and gems profusely shone:
Her girdle sparkled, and the richest lace
Flow’d in her veil, and many a precious stone
Flash’d on her little hand; but, what was shocking,
Her small snow feet had slippers, but no stocking. (DJ 2.121.126)

Haidée is no naked Eve in the garden. Her shock at the sight of Juan naked is unmasked as an affectation by the speaker’s exaggerated shock at the naked feet of an otherwise carefully and richly dressed princess. The reliability of shock as signifier of innocence weakens with her reluctance to get Juan dressed and her sexualization of his bare, “so white a skin.” Claims for her innocence and ignorance affect a gendered discourse of
passivity, but her lingering gaze at the insensible naked male body suggests both her imaginative and material agency. Juan’s nakedness becomes titillating for both the reader and for Haidée who, despite the speaker’s affected and projected prudery, waits until after a naked breakfast that lasts several stanzas to get her companion dressed.

As events unfold, the narrative shifts away from the valorization of nudity, and does so most strikingly when Haidée believes herself to have become mistress of her island and takes the opportunity to dress Juan with

A shawl of black and gold,
But a white baracan, and so transparent
The sparkling gems beneath you might behold,
Like small stars through the milky way apparent;
His turban, furl'd in many a graceful fold,
An emerald aigrette with Haidée’s hair in ’t
Surmounted as its clasp—a glowing crescent,
Whose rays shone ever trembling, but incessant (DJ 3.77.185)

Finery in the palace suggests a new narrative of luxury and decadence that re-writes her edenic romp with Juan on the beach as a type of dress-up via dress down. Similarly, the shift to the palace draws attention to the previous understanding of the island as a natural paradise. In its fictional inflation, the island models a privileged space in which the innocence of natural man can flourish, a proxy for a paradise that precedes original sin and the artifices of civilization: “Thus was another Eden” (DJ 4.10.206). This fantasy places an ideal of man in an ideal place, making allusion to claims against civilization as the source or reflection of human woes, spanning from the classical pastoral eclogues to
Romantic ideology. The natural virtue in natural paradise acts as a narrative foil to the corruption of modern civilization, a trope shared by the Lake poets’ valorization of country rusticity, Rousseau’s rejection of the city and its civilizing arts for the authenticity of traditional mountain villages, and the Enlightenment motif of the noble savage. Byron, however, will have none of it, and unmasks the conceit as narrative fantasy.

Byron places Haidée’s own dreamy Romance reading of Juan alongside of these geo-historical narratives to show their common merger of fiction and experience. On first seeing Juan, she immediately writes him into her pre-existing fantasy: he becomes the man “of whom these two years she had nightly dreamed, / A something to be loved, a creature meant / To be her happiness” (DJ 2.172.142). The speaker interrupts the reader’s enjoyment of a dream-fulfilled by reminding the reader of details that the narrative of pre-destined, innocent love ignores—namely Juan’s love affair with Dona Julia, for whom Juan had already claimed to have felt and sworn eternal love. The speaker disenchants the fantasy and our participation in the fantasy by asking about the status of the previous romance: “Had he quite forgotten Julia? / And should he have forgotten her so soon?” (DJ 11.208.154).

Byron illustrates the constraint of narrative on understanding by showing how signifiers of paradise-narratives encourage readers to identify Haidée and her island within the boundaries of that narrative alone, and then collapses these boundaries by re-embedding the island and its inhabitants in history. When overlooked details re-emerge, narrative signification and revision cannot keep up. Haidée, for example, had been read
as the embodiment of the pure, the natural, and the good: “Nature’s bride” and “Passion's child,”

…. Born where the sun

Showers triple light, and scorches even the kiss

Of his gazelle-eyed daughters; she was one

Made but to love, to feel that she was his

Who was her chosen: what was said or done

Elsewhere was nothing. She had naught to fear,

Hope, care, nor love, beyond, her heart beat here. (DJ 2.189.148)

Byron destabilizes the pleasing metaphors by reminding us of the content these representations have excluded and have encouraged us to forget, that the “gazelle-eyed” daughter of the sun is also the pirate Lambro’s child. While readers have given themselves over to the fantasy of paradise, her pirate father has all the while been lurking at the margins.

Unlike the honest Arab thieves so brave,

He would have hospitably cured the stranger,

And sold him instantly when out of danger. (DJ 2.80.114)

This island is not the repose of natural man, but the fiefdom of a pirate profiting from the slave trade. Ironically, as she attempts to save Juan from slavery, Haidée turns her father’s fiefdom into her own theater of fantasy where she nevertheless cures and enslaves Juan by cloistering him in an artificial paradise.
Focusing on the effects of representation, Byron argues that different interpretations of Haidée also imprison her in untenable, limiting artifices. He comically revises her meaning with one set of narrative significations and then another to correspond with events as they transpire. As narrative momentum increases, the once innocent bird of paradise is no longer legible in the language of natural metaphor. She becomes unnatural, transformed and deformed into “one who championed all human fears—/ And tall beyond her sex, and their compeers/ Pale, statue-like, and stern” (DJ 4.43.216). “Nature’s bride” becomes “Serenely savage.” She is narrated into a paradox, and a dangerous one at that.

As though she herself is exhausted by all of these revisions, Haidée collapses into a lingering still life: “Days she lay in that state unchanged, though chill—/.../she had no pulse, but Death seemed absent still” (DJ 4.59.222).

The ruling passion, such as marble shows

When exquisitely chiseled, still lay there

But fixed as marble’s unchanged aspect throws

O’er the Venus, but for ever fair;

O’er the Laocoon’s all eternal throes,

And ever-dying Gladiator’s air,

Their energy like life forms all their fame,

Yet looks not life, for they are still the same. (DJ 4.60.222)

Michael C. Cooke has demonstrated, for example that Byron uses the symbolism of different birds to describe Haidée, shifting the meaning signification from innocent fragility to fierce predator as appropriate for the moment. See “Byron and the World of Fact,” in Critical Essays on Lord Byron (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1991), 69.
This digression suggests that narratives “fix” Haidée, or any man, into artificial representations that are as lifeless and “fixed” as marble. She can no longer act or move through time. In this sense, the allusion to Laocoön implies suspension in an eternal moment that is eternally available to any and all narrative cooptation.

The Haidée cantos end with her death, the desolation of the island, and an ironic glance at the cant inflation of her death in public songs that claim:

- Many a Greek maide
  - Sighs o’er her name; and many an islander
  - With her Sire’s story makes the night less long’
  - Valour was his, and Beauty dwelt with her;
  - If she loved rashly, her life paid for wrong—
  - A heavy price must all pay who thus err,
  - In some shape; let none think to fly the danger,
  - For soon or late Love is his own avenger. (DJ 4.73.226)

The popular narrative of the episode epitomizes the multiple rewritings of the episode as it transpired. Such reinterpretations are only possible, however, when men place experience in to the middle of pre-established narratives—a displacement that ends, as in Manfred, in tragedy.

**Exorcizing the Fictions of the Past**

As Byron’s poem progresses, he moves the critique of narrative affectation into the register of the gothic and the supernatural, and aligns its narrative fictions with the narratives that would be most familiar to Byron’s contemporary readers: the manners and
etiquette of English country life.\textsuperscript{30} The “English Cantos”—the last Byron wrote before his death—ridicule contemporary social customs as narrative fictions by placing them within a larger narrative of a gothic Manor and a medieval spook. The rhetorical effect is to characterize present, artificial practice as superstitious cultural inheritance, a type of mass haunting in the form of narrative of normativeness that renders people half-alive and half-fictional like Haidée in her marble trance.

The cantos open with a panoramic indictment of English upper-class social practices, from the fops who spend their days authoring “bon mots” to affect spontaneity in the evening, to the league of women who police the culture of politesse (\textit{DJ} 13.109.557). The former scramble to reproduce novelty, while the latter regulate the fictions of reputation in which “A little genial sprinkling of hypocrisy”

\begin{quote}
Has saved the fame of thousand splendid sinners,
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
The loveliest oligarchs of our Gynocracy;
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
You may see such at all the balls and inners,
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Among the proudest of our aristocracy,
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
So gentle, charming, charitable, chaste—
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
And all by having \textit{tact} as well as taste. (\textit{DJ} 12.66.514)
\end{quote}

The distinction Byron draws between taste and tact troubles contemporary claims of the objectivity of taste and its relationship to social custom. Tact is not a matter of individual preference because there can be only one “true one.” The speaker presents “tact” as an affectation of “true” or correct taste that conforms to the way this particular society prefers to represent itself. Like the “manners that make men,” Juan’s “tact…temper’d

\textsuperscript{30} For a discussion of the gothic precedents in Byron and the contemporary opinions on ghosts, see Susan Wolfson, “Byron's Ghosting Authority,” \textit{ELH} 76, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 763-792.
him from grave to gay/ And taught him when to be reserved or free” (*DJ* 15.82.613). These are neither natural nor consistent inclinations, but stylized self-representations that affect consistency. However Byron suggests that our desire for the consistency of these affectations ironically flattens out and alienates human nature and its pleasures:

Society is smooth'd to that excess,
That manners hardly differ more than dress.

Our ridicules are kept in the back-ground—
Ridiculous enough, but also dull;
Professions, too, are no more to be found Professional; and there is nought to cull
Of folly's fruit; for though your fools abound,
They're barren, and not worth the pains to pull.
Society is now one polish'd horde,
Form'd of two mighty tribes, the Bores and Bored. (*DJ* 13.94.552)

As people aspire affect these mannered forms, contemporary society life is not only predicable and “smooth’d” of any unauthorized, unmannered “excess”, but populated by the “boring and bored”—so much so that it hardly seems worth it to the poet to ridicule it further. Nothing improbable emerges from this barrenness. Here, “second nature” narratives produce a “Society … smooth’d,” but the achievement is dull, sterile, and savagely serene. He argues that when narratives of manners contour thought and character, when novelty becomes a banal fashion rather than a change of fashion, and
when men merely profess and dress—as he elaborates in the case of Kit-Kat—then people begin to assume the lifelessness of ghosts.

But what can we glean in this vile age

Of chaff, although our gleanings be not grist.

I must not quite omit the talking sage,

Kit-Cat, the famous Conversationist,

Who, in his common-place book, had a page

Prepared each morn for evenings. 'List, oh, list!'-

'Alas, poor ghost!'--What unexpected woes

Await those who have studied their bon-mots!

Firstly, they must allure the conversation

By many windings to their clever clinch;

And secondly, must let slip no occasion,

Nor bate (abate) their hearers of an inch,

But take an ell--and make a great sensation,

If possible; and thirdly, never flinch

When some smart talker puts them to the test,

But seize the last word, which no doubt 's the best. (DJ 13.96-7.553)

Kit-Kat's mercurial labor of novelty-in-conformity evokes a world in which the essential features of wit, surprise and delight, are converted into the trite and premeditated: the genuine spirit of delight is nullified. *Don Juan* is an extremely funny poem and filled with comic irony, but the irony is reader-centric: none of the characters laugh. In the
narratives of the English manners, “The days of Comedy are gone, alas!” and “novelties please less than they impress” (DJ 13.94.552). Like a ghost, the spirit of true wit haunts the English cantos, resurrecting the specter of Hamlet’s father crying out to be avenged. The words of King Hamlet’s ghost are also a call for caution: for the ghost signifies more than a fading comic wit. It signifies also the fate of Kit-Cat himself or any other who participates in the masquerade of spontaneity. “Unexpected woes” await those who seduce themselves into the unnatural half-lives, even as they try to render the world in terms of the expected.

Like ghosts, Byron’s English characters are wraiths of human nature that increasingly fade into fiction. Byron uses the character of Lady Adeline in her Gothic Abbey to most fully express the complexities of this ghostly condition. Her social mobilité and mutability provocatively explore the half-enthusiast, half-impostor condition, while locally characterizing her adherence to social convention as a superstitious practice indebted to an ominous, cultural past. While he presents her on one level as a virtuous social matriarch, “the Queen-bee, the glass of all that’s fair,” he deflates her virtue to mere complicity in a fiction driven pathology of suspended belief.

Although she was not evil nor meant ill;

But destiny and Passion spread the new

(Fate is a good excuse for our own will) (DJ 13.12.528)

The play of fate and will along side of her good intentions suggest a bad-faith collusion of narratives that establish Lady Adeline as a character who half-believes and half-pretends—not unlike her Spanish doppelganger, Donna Julia. In her desire for Juan, Adeline had for “once” “ta’en an interest in anything,” although “she might flatter/
Herself that her intentions were the best” (*DJ* 14.88.584). Byron once again complicates what appears to be simple hypocrisy to portray the inadequacy of fiction to desire—that “lurking demon” that “perplex[es] the casuists in morality/ To fix the due bounds of this dangerous quality” (*DJ* 14.89.584).

Reading her supra-narrative attraction as a “dangerous quality” induced by “lurking demons” likens bodily desire to supernatural possession. Lady Adeline however cannot or will not comprehend that which stirs within because it exceeds beyond the “due bounds” her moral narratives fix. Byron argues that the boundaries of her fictions estrange her from her true desires: “She knew not her own heart” (*DJ* 14.91.585). Like Donna Julia, whom we recall disavowed her hand to save her soul, and, eventually, made her figurative narrative boundaries literal by confining herself in a convent. Lady Adeline denies her sexual desire and puts the cultural narrative that forbids it to work by attempting to marry Juan off and thereby place him out of bounds.

Adeline’s displacement of desire into narrative paralyzes it, leaving human nature in suspended animation. Like the statuary correlated with Haidée’s aestheticized still life, Byron portrays Lady Adeline and her milieu as half-living sculptures:

…Polished, smooth, and cold,

As Phidian forms cut out of marble Attic.

There now are no Squire Westerns, as of old;

And our Sophias are not so emphatic,

But fair as then, or fairer to behold:

We have no accomplished blackguards, like Tom Jones,

But gentlemen in stays, as stiff as stones. (*DJ* 13.110.556)
The social fiction places desire in stays, stripping society of the “prodigious variety” of tastes and desires that Fielding celebrates in his comic fictions and epitomizes with Tom Jones—to say nothing about the laughable Hobby-Horses of Sterne. Comically, Byron signifies male sexual desire and sexual repression with the same language to show the results of these conflating affectations: “Stiff as stones,” his gentlemen become sexual Laocoöns caught in the moment of arousal.

While imposture may be the primary form of the ridiculous in Fielding’s philosophy, the ridiculous becomes less and less funny and more and more alarming to Byron as manners deform the world into a place in which “sin’s a pleasure and sometimes pleasure’s a sin” (DJ 1.134.51). Yet, because these narratives are a form of imposture not truth, Byron maintains the hope of reanimating the desires that narratives displace and deny. He mobilizes physical desire to suggest that even in the most stoic of stiff stones, human nature persists. But he regards this mobilization self-consciously, aware of his own reliance of cant cliché and laughing at his narrative figuration as fiction:

But Adeline was not indifferent: for

(Now for a common-place!) beneath the snow,

As a volcano holds the lava more

Within—et caetera. Shall I go on?—No!

I hate to hunt down a tired metaphor,

So let the often-used volcano go.

Poor thing! How frequently, by me and others,

It hath been stirr’d up till its smoke quite smothers! (DJ 13.36.535)
Mocking his “tired metaphor” separates the hope he identifies from the constraints of his metaphor. The effect is different from the discursive shifts of the Haidée narrative, because here he laughs at rather than compounds his figurative insufficiencies.

I'll have another figure in a trice:—

What say you to a bottle of champagne?

The question invites the reader to recognize the figuration as a narrative figure, and to enjoy it openly as an aesthetic pleasure and laughable conceit: a bottle of champagne to share rather than a volcano on the verge of eruption. This new figure of Lady Adeline champagne argues that although her exterior is cold, her nature is nevertheless

Frozen into a very vinous ice,
Which leaves few drops of that immortal rain,
Yet in the very centre, past all price,
About a liquid glassful will remain;
And this is stronger than the strongest grape
Could e'er express in its expanded shape:

'T is the whole spirit brought to a quintessence;
And thus the chilliest aspects may concenatre
A hidden nectar under a cold presence.
And such are many—though I only meant her
From whom I now deduce these moral lessons,
On which the Muse has always sought to enter.
And your cold people are beyond all price,
When once you have broken their confounded ice. \((DJ\ 13.37-38.535)\)

Like other metaphorically “cold people,” something “immortal” and “beyond all price,” and, indeed, “beyond all wondrous measure,” still stirs in Adeline. The wit of the mixed metaphors claims that the icy constraints can thaw, social ice can brake, and corks can pop, and, happily, that the effect of all three cases are sites of emergent agency or pleasure not volcanic destruction.

Even in his most cynical moments of speculation about people and their repressive narratives, Byron suggests that human nature persists and can be recovered. Thus Juan

When he cast a glance

On Adeline while playing her grand role,

Which she went through as though it were a dance,

Betraying only now and then her soul

By a look scarce perceptibly askance

(Of weariness or scorn), began to feel

Some doubt how much of Adeline was real. \((DJ\ 16.96.648)\)

The depths of her affectation are unknowable, but Byron is careful to ensure that there is still an actor within who acts out her role. He is also careful to distinguish her acting from hypocrisy. As with Donna Julia’s articulation of non-consent, Adeline reacts to narrative, attuning herself to the demands of scene so that the narrative will seem real.

So well she acted all and every part

By turns—with that vivacious versatility,
Which many people take for want of heart.

They err--'t is merely what is call'd mobility,

A thing of temperament and not of art,

Though seeming so, from its supposed facility;

And false—though true; for surely they 're sincerest

Who are strongly acted on by what is nearest. (DJ 16.97.649)

In a footnote to this stanza, Byron gives an interpretation of “mobility” in terms of the foreign “mobilité.” Mobility “may be defined as an excessive susceptibility of immediate impressions—at the same time without losing the past: and is, though sometimes apparently useful to the possessor, a most painful and unhappy attribute” (DJ 16.7.796). The “may” of his “may be defined” makes this definition tentative: one interpretation among many. Men can thereby change this fiction, like any other fiction, or better still, recognize its homographic instability and, therefore, its destabilizing force.

By confronting Juan, as he “mused on mutability / Or on his mistress—terms synonymous,” with the figure of a ghost at midnight, Byron draws together the problems of defining social narratives of the present with problematic narratives of the past that define the present (DJ 16.20.624). Previous to the encounter, Juan “had heard a hint”

Of such a spirit in these halls of old,

But thought, like most men, there was nothing in 't

Beyond the rumour which such spots unfold (DJ 16.22.625)

The ghost is tied into the history of the gothic manor, Newman Abby, where the party resides, thought to be a Friar who would not evacuate the Abbey when Lord
Amundeville’s ancestors seized it. It is said that “Lord Amundeville is lord by day, / But the monk is lord by night” (DJ 16.40.632). The “ghost” functions as a residue of history that informs living consciousness by recalling historical shifts from one world-view to another while the diurnal separation divides narrative authority based on time of day: the narrative of manners in the light, the narrative of historical excess in the dark.

As with the ghost, Byron argues that the faces of late Lords of Amundeville also wield supernatural influence on the inhabitants by suggestively detailing their portraiture alongside the gothic details of the house each once owned. The discursive coupling draws attention to their similar status as aesthetic representations. Outside the manor, “Amidst the court a Gothic fountain play’d, / Symmetrical, but deck’d with carvings quaint—/Strange faces, like to men in masquerade, / And here perhaps a monster, there a saint” (DJ 13.65.544). Inside, however,

Huge halls, long galleries, spacious chambers, join'd
By no quite lawful marriage of the arts,
Might shock a connoisseur; but when combined,
Form'd a whole which, irregular in parts,
Yet left a grand impression on the mind,
At least of those whose eyes are in their hearts:
We gaze upon a giant for his stature,
Nor judge at first if all be true to nature. (DJ 13.67.649)

The patrilineal history of Amundeville in portraiture doubles as history of human representation played out in family lineage. Juxtaposing them against the supernatural argues for their similarity as narratives that make human faces, and by proxy, human
nature, appear “strange”: the “perhaps a monster” in the “masquerade” of the outside suggests a perhaps a patriarch on the inside. The domestication of the supernatural fiction in the family history is a variation of the desire to idealize the past and conventionalize the present. Each lays claim on the mobility of Lady Adeline. For just as the portraits can “leave grand impressions” and have their own “grand role” of disciplining the present with the gaze of an aestheticized past looking down on the living, the fantasy of what they once were also haunts the present, while those living make strange uses of their lives, dismembering themselves in the parts they play.

Leaving “the thing a problem”

Byron argues that we are not accustomed to “judge at first if all be true to nature”; instead, we try to accommodate our idealizing impulses. Exhorting his readers to learn to read beyond their narratives, he demands that if we will be readers, then we must recognize the fictionality of the narratives through which we read.

O reader! if that thou canst read, —and know,
'T is not enough to spell, or even to read,
To constitute a reader; there must go
Virtues of which both you and I have need; —
Firstly, begin with the beginning (though
That clause is hard); and secondly, proceed;
Thirdly, commence not with the end—or, sinning
In this sort, end at least with the beginning. (DJ 13.54.673)
He repeats the imperative of his earlier scrutiny of the epic: only here he implores his readers to “begin with the beginning,” translating it out of narrative itself. He does not and cannot demonstrate how this practice should proceed off the page. What he does make clear, however, is how it should not.

Two characters suggest concrete alternatives to the mobility of ghostly Lady Adeline, and, fittingly, they are her rivals for Juan’s seduction: the Duchess Fitz-Fulke and the orphan-heiress Aurora Raby. Yet neither is a compelling choice. On one hand, the voluptuous and artful Fitz-Fulke practices fully conscious deceits to satisfy her desires. It is she who roams the halls at night, meeting Juan dressed as the Friar’s ghost so that she may indulge in anything without compromising her social standing. She manipulates the common narrative for her own desires, writing and rewriting her role. And while she is characterized as physically desirable, Byron doesn’t suggest anything desirable about her manipulations of others’ beliefs. She is not the “truth is masquerade,” but simply masquerade. The guileless Aurora Raby, on the other hand, offers a second alternative of an antisocial subjectivity. While she is also an object of physical desire, her impenetrability alienates her from her companions. As though they were different in kind, she looks upon them with eyes that “sadly shone,” though it is unclear where the pathos of sadness lands:

All Youth—but with an aspect beyond Time,
Radiant and grave—as pitying Man’s decline;
Mournful—but mournful of another’s crime,
She looked as if she sat by Eden’s door,
And grieved for those who could return no more. (DJ 15.45.602)
If Adeline is the feminine model of the half-impostor, half-enthusiast, then Fitz-Fulke is a pure imposture and Aurora is an enthusiast trapped in her subjectivity. Aurora’s authenticity both isolates her and makes her indifferent to others. “Like a Seraph,”

She gazed upon a world she scarcely knew
Seeking not to know it; silent, lone,
As grows a flower, thus quietly she grew,
And kept her heart serene within its zone.
There was awe in the homage which she drew;
Her Spirit seemed as seated on a throne
Apart form the surrounding world…*(DJ 15.47.602)*

Adelaide, Fitz-Fulke, and Lady Adeline are indeed strange animals that make strange use of their nature: Adeline acts a part in a narrative and Fitz-Fulke hypocritically creates and extends narratives for her own explicit advantage, while Aurora watches the spectacle à la distance.

An early death prevented Byron from revealing to the reader what happens between Juan and Lady Adeline or between him and Aurora. In the case of the late night encounter between Juan and the ghostly Fitz-Fulke, however, he chooses not to tell the reader what happens, refusing to satisfy his or her desire to know the whole truth. He affirms nothing and “leave[s] the thing a problem, like all things” *(DJ 17.13.660)*. *Don Juan* is a fragment poem by circumstance, but the author also insists that the poem doesn’t have a pre-conceived narrative and he also divulges that there is narrative detail, such as the Fitz-Fulke affair, that he will not give as well as problems he will not resolve.
These assertions suggest a self-conscious fragmentariness that is distinct from the “completed fragment” poem that pretended to be a relic or a tale partially retold, like Byron’s *The Giaour* or Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan*, and because there was never a real horizon of completion for narrative, *Don Juan* is also distinct from fragments such as the unfinished works of Keats.31

Byron suggests many plans throughout the poem, from writing ten books in the manner of the *Aeneid* to writing twelve or twenty-four in imitation of *Paradise Lost* and the Homeric epics—he even goes so far as to suggest the first twelve books are merely an “Introduction,” perhaps making a stab at Wordsworth’s plans for his *The Prelude* (*DJ* 12.87.521). Yet, he also claims amidst this multiplicity of plans that there is no plan, and that is the plan in itself.

Some have accused me of a strange design
Against the creed and morals of the land,
And trace it in this poem every line:
I don't pretend that I quite understand
My own meaning when I would be very fine;
But the fact is that I have nothing plann'd,
Unless it were to be a moment merry,
A novel word in my vocabulary. (*DJ* 4.5.204)

The strange design is then the absence of design: no ideal to approach, no narrative to enforce. Byron asserts that he cannot understand himself when he attunes his

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understanding to hypothetical narratives in which he would “be very fine,” he cannot understand himself. These designs, creeds, and morals estrange him from the moment and from himself.

Beginning with the beginning requires that readers rethink the nature of their investment in narratives, their want of truths, and the nature of their relationship to the unstable, fragmented, open-endedness of life. By leaving things “a problem,” the speaker suggests that he is at ease with uncertainty in a way that his characters are not. Like his presumed readers, they want complete narratives, while he is merry in the moment. Byron claimed that he wrote Don Juan “to giggle and to make giggle,” not to promote truths through fiction like one of Fielding’s puppeteering didacticists. His poem allows his readers to laugh at their desire to understand their nature through the fictions of understanding, while showing that there is a reason why men lack the truths that they desire. As he did with the truth of the true hero, Byron argues that the truth men desire is itself a fiction that exists only in fictions: therefore, explicit, creative fiction is itself the proper space in which to play out epistemological desires and suspend disbelief. Fiction for Byron, as it is for all authors of this study, is useful only when it is recognized and celebrated as fiction, nothing more, nothing less. For Byron, it is ultimately our ability to reinstate disbelief through laughter that allows us to enjoy fictions, and separate art and life so that human nature is free to unfold, piece by piece, not as a problem to be solved, but as a comedy that cannot be contained by one representation because it is “strange — but true; for truth,” whatever it is, “is always strange;/ Stranger than fiction” (DJ 14.101.588).

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