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The Artifice of Women in *Evelina* and 'The Lady's Dressing Room'.

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When first encountered, both Jonathan Swift's 'The Lady's Dressing Room' and Frances Burney's *Evelina* appear to exemplify a society which thought of women as silly creatures for their trivial pastimes, and deceitful and immoral for their attention to their appearance. Swift's poem disassembles the absent Celia as Strephon pulls apart her private life, revealing her as a wrinkled and foul-smelling fabrication. Burney's Evelina, a natural beauty, is snobbish towards those who have to try to be outwardly appealing, and is rewarded with a rich husband for her lack of artifice. However, the texts are not so straightforward and satire is prevalent throughout each. Swift's poem becomes an ambiguous critique of numerous possibilities, not all so misogynistic, and *Evelina*, whilst revealing the era's deference to male authority, turns the female object into a consciousness to expose the follies of the age. Satire is the use of 'humour, irony, exaggeration or ridicule to expose and criticize immorality or foolishness' and this essay shall reveal features of the two works that show that both writers were frustrated with women's roles in the eighteenth century.[1] An analysis of the two texts as criticism of women's artifice shall be carried out, before moving onto some historical context that shall prepare the way for a rereading of the works as critiques of eighteenth century society's treatment of women.

Swift has been described as a 'lightning rod' for feminist criticism and 'The Lady's Dressing Room' continues a theme of women as essentially filthy found elsewhere in his works, including his other scatological poems and *Gulliver's Travels*.[2] The poem reflects how Swift was 'outraged that civilized behaviour is only a veneer concealing the grossest physicality' and records Strephon's findings in his lover's dressing room with a scientific attention to detail, unmasking Celia as, not a human being, but a foul creature who 'rose from stinking ooze' and who corrupts everything she touches: 'The petticoats and gown perfume, / Which waft a stink round every room'.[3] The satire, rather than using humour, ridicules women's artifice, invoking disgust with the lurid details of sweat-stained clothes and the dirt-encrusted sink.

Celia's attention to her appearance is portrayed as a time-wasting triviality that applies to all womankind, as shown when the narrator says Celia prepared herself for 'Five hours, (and who can do it less in?)'.[4] The sheer volume of vials and combs that Strephon finds indicate that a lot of work is needed to 'smooth the wrinkles' and mask the 'scabby chops' of the creature underneath.[5] A dissection is carried out and the reader's disgust escalates, with the narrator using the rhetorical device apophasis to heighten the horror of the contrast Strephon has found: 'The stockings why should I expose, / Stained with the marks of

[1] Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. 'satire', (2013). <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/171207?rskey=GoymvV&result=1#eid> [accessed 15.05.14].
[2] Donal C. Mell, ed., *Pope, Swift, and Women Writers* (London: Associated Presses, 1996), p. 15.
[3] Susan Gruber, 'The Female Monster in Augustan Satire', *Signs*, 3:2 (Winter, 1977), p. 381; Jonathan Swift, 'The Lady's Dressing Room' (1732), line 132, in Module Reader for' Order and Chaos: Spring 2014', lines 113-114.
[4] Swift, line 1.
[5] Swift, line 26; line 36.

stinking toes'.[6] The narrator's appreciation of the supposed skill of women to be able to transform themselves — 'Such gaudy tulips raised from dung' — is undercut since tulips are artificially grown flowers and the word 'gaud' meant a 'trick' until the nineteenth century, implying the deceitful nature of women, even when claiming to appreciate them.[7]

The magnifying mirror found in Celia's chamber is a reference to the revealing of her true nature in every detail but these few lines attack the artifice of women in a second way: 'A glass that can to sight disclose, / the smallest worm in Celia's nose'.[8] The reflective surface becomes a vanitas — 'an emblem and reminder of the mutability of things' — and the mention of worms coming out of her face creates an image of Celia as a corpse, showing that although she works so hard to look beautiful, it will not be long until beauty fades.[9]

Swift's poem ridicules women for their artifice but *Evelina* appears to condemn artifice in women, yet promote it in guise of 'good manners'. A common view at the time, and one held by Burney herself, was that novels had a value lying in 'vicariously experiencing the characters' moral traits — and thus internalizing lessons without having to derive them from one's own experiences'.[10] In this didactic value *Evelina* shares some features with the conduct book, texts that 'exerted a strong influence on eighteenth-century views of female education'.[11] Whilst Evelina is described as 'artless as purity itself', with a natural understanding and beauty, readers are probably not so lucky.[12] In the style of a conduct book, they, through Evelina's trials, must seek 'improvement'. There are, however, firm boundaries between 'improvement' and 'artifice', dictated by the social rules of the eighteenth century.

As Evelina learns how to behave in society, she is still praised by Mr Villars and Lord Orville as a natural girl, but employs some artifice, such as when she tries to appear haughty at a ball to prevent any man from asking her to dance.[13] Her nature is governed by the powerful men around her, as when she tries to help an old lady who has fallen over as part of a racing bet. Evelina describes how 'Involuntarily, I sprung forward to assist her', the passivity of the action, and her abandonment of the action following Lord Merton's cries, showing how her nature has been supressed and artificialized by what society expects from women.[14] Conduct book writer Halifax explained that to understand when something is ridiculous is a virtue but these thoughts must 'be kept under great restraint' and remain thought only, showing how women must be instructed to appear virtuous in society.[15]

Burney would have known that women were thought of as artificial and trivial, and women who embodied these qualities were 'threats to a striving female's self-image' and damagingly perpetuating the stereotypes. Burney therefore created comedy figures that are satirised, like Celia, for identifying themselves in their artificial looks. Madame Duval is universally laughed at when dancing in her 'showy dress, and an unusual quantity of *rouge*', unfitting decorations for a woman of her age and class.[16] The Miss Branghtons are ridiculed for the contrast between their artificialized public personas and natural selves when in their

[6] Swift, line 3; lines 51-52.
[7] Swift, line 144; Katherine Mannheimer, *Print, Visuality, and Gender in Eighteenth-Century Satire*: '*the Scope in Ev'ry Page'*, Vol. 8 (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 58.
[8] Swift, lines 63-64.
[9] Laura Baudot, 'What Not to Avoid in Swift's "The Lady's Dressing Room"', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 49:3 (Summer 2009), p. 648.
[10] Marth J. Koehler, *Models of Reading: Paragons and Parasites in Richardson, Burney and Laclos* (Massachusetts: Bucknell University Press, 2005), p. 154.
[11] Audrey Bilger, *Laughing Feminism: Subversive Comedy in Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), p. 46.
[12] Frances Burney, *Evelina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 20.
[13] Burney, p. 223.
[14] Burney, p. 312.
[15] Marquis George Saville Halifax, *Advice to a Daughter (1688)*, p. 396, quoted in Bilger, *Laughing Feminism*, p. 97.
[16] Burney, p. 222.

rooms: 'when they've got their dirty things on, and all their hair about their ears'.[17] This is reminiscent of the disgusting Celia although with less venom than Swift but in one episode Burney is perhaps crueller. In a scene of revenge, Madame Duval is attacked and thrown into a ditch where 'her head-dress had fallen off', 'she was covered in dirt, weeds and filth' and the dust from the road was 'quite *pasted* on her skin by her tears'.[18] This may be a dismantling of artificiality, but the attack and distress of the lady make the satire seem overly harsh to a more sympathetic modern audience.

In the eighteenth century, women of the middle and upper classes were dependent on their fathers until they were married and could then be dependent on their husbands. With few careers open to them, the lack of a vote and voice, and the important aim of finding a husband to keep them well-provided for, women faced a paradox: they only had power for the short time that they were young and beautiful but with so little open to them, they had little to occupy that time, meaning middle class and aristocratic women wasted these years learning accomplishments, beautifying themselves, and attending 'diversions' such as the theatre. These were seen as morally useless pastimes, problematic for women since 'the identification of female life with time-wasting [was] so strong that it implies a superficiality damagingly attributed to the female character itself'.[19] These attributions to female nature are evident in 'The Lady's Dressing Room' and *Evelina,* and the danger of building one's identity on such ephemeral foundations as beauty is seen in the allusions to Celia as a corpse, and in *Evelina* when Lord Merton says 'I don't know what the devil a woman lives for after thirty: she is only in other folks way'.[20]

This was an era where appearance was of the utmost importance, as shown by Mr Lovel's admission that he does not know what play he has just witnessed because 'one merely comes to meet one's friends, and show one's alive'.[21] Hair-dresses were elaborate and clothing made up of so many layers that the female form was obscured, all so that a woman could get attention and a husband. Evelina describes the ridiculous nature of this at her first ball where the gentlemen 'passed and repassed, looked as if they thought we were quite at their disposal, and only waiting for the honour of their commands'.[22] Whilst a topic of ridicule, women's adornment was also promoted for economic means, as Evelina describes on her shopping trip that 'six or seven men' of each shop who 'recommended caps and ribbands with an air of so much importance, that I wished to ask them how long they had left off wearing them'.[23] However much men criticised the trivial nature of women, they perpetuated it for their aesthetic pleasure and economic means.

The act of dressing one's self up, then, could be seen not so much as a frivolous and immoral activity, but as 'the necessary occupation of a socially dutiful woman', conforming to society's rules and the necessity to secure a husband.[24] Manners are learnt, not to deliberately deceive, but to take part in the rituals of society and appear a respectable woman, since, as Mr Villars reminds Evelina, 'nothing is so delicate as the reputation of a woman'.[25] Burney clearly reflects some of the troubling aspects of this society in her novel, as shall be further elaborated upon, but Swift was also aware of women's potential worth that should be lead into channels other than the attendance of shallow diversions.

[17] Burney, p. 175.
[18] Burney, p. 148.
[19] Kristina Straub, *Divided Fictions: Fanny Burney and Feminine Strategy* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1987), p. 12.
[20] Burney, p. 275.
[21] Burney, p. 80.
[22] Burney, p. 28.
[23] Burney, p. 27.
[24] Straub, p. 78.
[25] Burney, p. 164.

If Swift was such a misogynist, we would expect eighteenth-century advocate of women's rights, Mary Wollstonecraft, to save her fiercest criticism for men like him. She believed it was wrong of him to satirize women when their vacuous nature 'appears to be the inevitable consequence of their education', but it was the conduct book writers who she thought 'contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters' in order to 'render women pleasing'.[26] These books encouraged women to be artificial, for the sake of men and society, whilst simultaneously discouraging the enjoyment of the activities for that would be immoral. Swift ridicules the five hours Celia spends at her mirror, yet Wollstonecraft disagrees with this vanity too. She even included some of Swift's poems, written for his close friend nicknamed 'Stella', in her anthology, *The Female Reader,* designed to instruct women. Swift believed that women were free agents open to satirise, but even he knew that women could be just as virtuous as men: 'I am ignorant of any one Quality that is amiable in a Man, which is not equally so in a Woman'.[27]

Since Swift therefore did not believe that women were inherently faulty, other targets for his satire in 'The Lady's Dressing Room' come to light. One option is the classical conventions of poetry, where women are idolised as goddesses and men delude themselves to the point where they do not even see women as human beings who would obviously have the same bodily functions as men. This interpretation is reflected in the language, such as Strephon's 'blasphemy' of Celia's cosmetics and his cry of 'Oh! Celia, Celia, Celia shits!', which, in the first half of the utterance seems a clichéd sigh of the romantic lover, before being undercut by reality.[28]

Susan Gubar believes Swift may be satirising women's artificiality but in the process shows how 'male illusions and standards are ridiculous', and this naivety of men is another target.[29] Strephon, following his invasion of Celia's privacy, is punished by the goddess Vengeance so that he associates all women with the filth he has seen and smelt. Strephon is criticised by the narrator for still appearing 'blind / To all the charms of female kind', which, although an ironic statement since Strephon has clearly seen too much, he has now gone too far the other way and is still blind to woman as a human being, womankind in his mind having turned from goddess to monster.[30] He is not even aware of the charms that women may hold, such as those that Swift believed both genders were capable of showing.

There has been a shift away from seeing Swift as a misogynist writer who is purely criticising the artifice of women and A. B. England describes how the poem actually juxtaposes 'two laughably over-simplified concepts of women' to suggest 'that a right attitude lies somewhere in between'.[31] This view proposes that the poem's satirical focus is not deceitful woman but the inability to identify her as a human being, preferring to categorise her as idealised angel or disgusting monster. However, the ambiguity of the poem means there is no suggestion of the right way to view women. This is not unusual since 'The Lady's Dressing Room' is not conduct literature, instructing people how to think and act, but a mockery of eighteenth-century ideologies and activities.

Before we place Burney's novel under the umbrella term of the conduct literature that Wollstonecraft despised, a reassessment is needed with a look at the author's own life. As a timid woman who at first published anonymously to save her father and family any shame, Burney sought to 'point out the path of honour' in her fiction, to guide her readers through society, rather than attack it.[32] That did not mean, however, that she was unaware of society's

[26] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Chapter 6: 12. Online at <http://www.bartleby.com/144/> [accessed 15.05.14]; Chapter 2: 12.
[27] Jonathan Swift, *Letter to a Young Lady* (Prose, 9:92), quoted in Koehler, p. 195.
[28] Swift, line 137; line 118.
[29] Gubar, p. 382.
[30] Swift, lines 129-30.
[31] A. B. England, 'World Without Order: Some Thoughts on the Poetry of Swift', *Essays in Criticism*, 16 (1966), p. 36.
[32] Frances Burney, dedication in *The Wanderer (1814)*, quoted in Edward A. Bloom's introduction to *Evelina*, p. xxiv.

contradictions and damaging ideologies. Although *Evelina* is meant to instruct, Bilger believes that Burney placed 'conduct-book platitudes in ludicrous contexts that expose their absurdity', pointing out both how to behave at a ball and what is ridiculous there.[33] When Evelina laughs in the face of Mr Lovel at her first ball, she is mortified at her lack of manners but the reader, and Lord Orville, delight in her unaffected nature and contemporary readers may well have taken pleasure in vicariously living through her little victories over the self-important men of the book.[34] Although Mr Villars imparts advice to his ward in his letters, he is not so much the didactic voice of Halifax, but 'a study in obsessive fear of the social world', Evelina's protector who she must leave to navigate alone the complexities of middle-class and aristocratic society.[35]

Evelina is used as a satirical device, a naïve outsider who draws attention to the absurdity of the situations by not knowing the rules and hence acting without the right artificial behaviours. When Evelina visits Cox's Museum, she provides a satire on both Madame Duval and Captain Mirvan, who take opposing extreme views of the spectacle, with Madame Duval 'in extacies' and Mirvan complaining that there is no use for any of it. Evelina herself provides a reasonable middle ground: 'it is a mere show, though a wonderful one'.[36] Evelina serves as a realistic portrayal of a woman in some ways, in that she conforms to social conventions but stays detached, not allowing her outwardly appearance and time spent in diversions to merge with her identity. She describes getting her hair dressed in the latest fashion, yet talks of 'how oddly my head feels', alienated from the body which must perform in society for the sake of reputation and finding a husband.[37]

The comedy characters that seemed to confirm Burney's complicity with the eighteenth-century ideology of women as artificial creatures are in fact there to satirise the social conditions that formed them. The artificial natures of Madame Duval and the Branghton sisters are targets of ridicule but so too are their critics. Young Branghton points out how different his sisters look without their decorations but Evelina is disgusted at his behaviour towards them, as he sends in men and cats to scare them.[38] The cruel treatment of Madame Duval, although inciting the servants to laughter, appals Evelina, who talks of her 'unfeigned concern at her situation' and cruelty of Captain Mirvan.[39] A fresh look at the scene 'reveals the sadism of the prankster more effectively than the filth and fragmentation of his victim' and so Burney is not saving her venom for artificial women but for a patriarchal society that can so viciously attack a woman for sport.[40]

Evelina is a novel that combines the pleasures of society with a satire of its ideologies, avoiding a full frontal attack on the system in favour of portraying women as human beings rather than trivial and decorated ornaments. One particular episode encapsulates the criticism Burney wants to highlight when Lord Orville asks the young ladies what they think of all the new diversions they have encountered. Before the girls can respond, Captain Mirvan says 'Ask 'em after any thing that's called diversion, and you're sure they'll say it's vastly fine; - they are a set of parrots, and speak by rote, for they all say the same thing'.[41] Although some women may be consumed by the role that society assigned to them, valuing themselves purely on their affected looks and manners, Evelina and Miss Mirvan are stunned into silence

[33] Bilger, p. 97.
[34] Burney, p. 33.
[35] Jane Spencer, '*Evelina* and *Cecilia*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Frances Burney,* Peter Sabor, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 26.
[36] Burney, pp. 76-77.
[37] Burney, p. 25.
[38] Burney, p. 175.
[39] Burney, p. 147.
[40] Straub, p. 103.
[41] Burney, p. 109.

for they cannot convince the captain that their identities are separate from their pastimes and artificial trappings.

The women of 'The Lady's Dressing Room' and *Evelina* might all practise some artifice, whether in looks or manners, but neither text is solely a critique of the stereotypical deceitful woman. *Evelina* is a defence of female character and reveals society's contradictions pertaining to artifice in how it is both ridiculed yet encouraged, and Swift's poem puts blame on both men and women for the unrealistic expectations and appearance of women. They are not radical texts and at first they may even seem conservative due to ambiguity or the attempt to maintain propriety, but each text satirises a society that ridicules women whilst trying to maintain them as objects.

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