THE BATTLE OF THE SEXES: MONTAGU V. SWIFT

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ABSTRACT

THE BATTLE OF THE SEXES: MONTAGU V. SWIFT
An Analysis of the Sociocultural Dynamics of Gender in Eighteenth-Century British Print Life

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Two of the most interesting “guardians” of eighteenth-century sociocultural standards were the satirists Jonathan Swift and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Swift is remembered by scholars as one of the “greatest prose satirists in the history of English Literature,” but Montagu, until recent decades, has been less well-known. This thesis will look at the satirical poetic dialogue between the Rev. Dr. Jonathan Swift and the Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and provide insights into the sociocultural dynamics of gender in eighteenth-century British print life as revealed by the individual texts.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to dedicate this work to my mom and thank her for not allowing me to quit even when I wanted to. I would also like to thank my dad for finding and marrying my mom. My special thanks to Dr. Billy Hall, Dr. Joseph Parry, and Dr. John Talbot for supporting and encouraging me to complete such a massive project on such a miniscule timeline. And to you, dear Honors student who randomly picked up this bound thesis, thank you; your dedicated readership has made this endeavor totally worthwhile.
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Introduction

“Satire is a sort of Glass, wherein Beholders
do generally discover everybody’s Face but their Own”
  – Jonathan Swift

“Satire should, like a polished razor keen,
Wound with a touch that’s scarcely felt or seen.”
  – Lady Mary Wortley Montagu

The eighteenth century is often referred to as the Age of Satire in British print life (Backscheider 129). During this time there was an explosion of publications featuring both good-natured satires confident in their power to reform society, as well as outrageous, vitriolic satires whose goal was to expose and punish those who were not safeguarding social morals. Satirists themselves believed they were “guardians of standards” for the social, cultural, and political spheres in which they operated and published works to reflect these principles (129). Two of the most interesting “guardians” of eighteenth-century standards were the satirists Jonathan Swift and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Swift is remembered by scholars as one of the “greatest prose satirists in the history of English Literature,” but Montagu, until recent decades, has been less well-known (129).

“Always competent, sometimes glittering and genuinely eloquent,” Lady Mary Wortley Montagu has been praised by modern scholars, but critiqued by her contemporaries, for entering the satirical conversation (Halsband 145). Eighteenth-century critics called her work “masculine,” insinuating that it was improper for a woman to write verse which undermined societal expectations of femininity (Winch 73; “Lady Mary Wortley Montagu”). Speculatively, gendered sociocultural expectations such as
these explain why so few of Montagu’s works, as well as the works of other female satirists, were published during their lifetimes. Montagu’s verbose personality, however, allowed at least one of her satirical works to be published and, in 1734, she openly engaged in poetic warfare with the best of her male contemporaries, Jonathan Swift.

In 1734, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu wrote a poem called “The Reasons that Induced Dr. S to Write a Poem Called the Lady’s Dressing Room” in response to Jonathan Swift’s 1732 poem titled, “The Lady’s Dressing Room.” Swift’s poem satirizes the illusion that women are “goddesses” and pokes fun at both the women trying to emulate this ideal and the men who encourage it through feigned disillusionment. Montagu’s response makes the public personal by calling Swift out on his misogynistic encouragement of dispelling the ideal publicly, while simultaneously promoting it privately. Consequently, both Swift and Montagu wrote satire critiquing – but simultaneously playing into – the hypocritical social expectations surrounding corporeal standards of beauty, interpersonal sexual relationships, and gendered behavior within eighteenth-century public and private spheres.

This discursive battle of the sexes between Jonathan Swift and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu reveals two opposing viewpoints on the sociocultural dynamics of gender in eighteenth-century British print life. The first is Jonathan Swift’s argument that women are vainly trying to achieve an aesthetic ideal that will never be possible. By completely eliminating Celia’s presence from the poem, Swift illustrates, physically, how unattainable the ideal woman truly is: she’s literally nonexistent. However, Celia’s very visible absence also creates a homogenization between men and women, allowing Swift to argue that there is less difference between the vain ideals of the sexes as some like to
think. By setting himself up as an omnipotent narrator and positioning Strephon as an antiquated neoclassical specter, Swift shows variance between himself and Strephon, but not between Strephon and Celia. Swift places himself above the plebeian imagery he creates in Strephon (representative of all men) and Celia (representative of all women) and subsequently critiques the vainness of all people within both sexes, himself excluded. Consequently, Swift establishes a narrative that women and men are all vain and foolish with the exception of the one who sees through the façade: the satirist responsible for guarding society’s standards.

The second, and oppositional viewpoint to this vanity critiquing vanity, is Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s argument that what Swift perceives and dismisses as vanity among women and foolish men is no less present in the lives of all men. There are, she argues, distinct differences between the sexes, but a woman’s influence, power, and position within society are too often linked with her aesthetic “goddess”-like presence in the eyes of men, one of the perpetrators of which is Swift himself. Swift’s questionable reputation among women was well-known and Montagu’s counter-poem illustrates this by replacing Strephon with Swift (representing all men) and uses Betty the Prostitute as an emblem of overarching female empowerment. Montagu’s response, therefore, acknowledges and combats, rather than ignores, the oppressive social binaries Swift so eagerly dismisses.

In order to fully grasp the influence of this battle of the sexes between Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Jonathan Swift, one must first understand not only the original poetic dialogue, but also delve into the contemporary criticisms surrounding the debate. As such, this thesis will unfold in two parts. The first will be an overview and analysis of
the critical conversation surrounding these poems. It will feature literary criticism from Montagu scholars Wendy Weise (2006), Danielle Bobker (2011), and C.C. Barfoot (2006) as well as Swift scholars Laura Baudot (2009), Margaret Anne Doody (2002), and David M. Palumbo (2010). The second part will then focus on the poems dialogically. By unpacking the individual texts, this thesis will reveal the aforementioned social binaries and highlight how Swift and Montagu’s opposing viewpoints and individual criticisms of corporeal beauty and interpersonal sexual relationships influenced the sociocultural dynamics of gender in eighteenth-century British print life.
Review of Critical Literature

As a Montagu scholar Wendy S. Weise has taken significant steps to rectify the “puzzling oversight” of Lady Mary’s dressing room satire (Weise 708). In her readings, Weise illuminates the darkness surrounding Montagu by providing historical context to her relationship with Swift and argues that Montagu wrote “The Reasons” not only in response to Swift’s “The Lady’s Dressing Room,” but also to his joint publication with Alexander Pope of their Miscellanies. In it they “viciously and sexually lampooned Montagu (as well as some of her friends)” with their “semi-pornographic” content and incited a deep animosity between themselves and the Lady (708). Consequently, Montagu’s “Reasons” were more than simple sociocultural refereeing; this war was personal.

Weise acknowledges that Montagu was “offended by Swift’s possible misogyny,” but that his misogyny was less of an irritant than his blatant narcissism. Montagu’s personal letters reveal how she observed Swift to be “intoxicated with the love of flattery,” often surrounding himself with those who “worshipp’d him even while he insulted them” (Montagu Letter to Lady Bute 56). Even if Swift aggravated her with his social ineptitudes, however, Montagu ultimately dismissed him as no more threatening than a “eunuch in a seraglio” and made this clear in both her private letters and her public response (Ibid).

1 A “seraglio” was a Turkish Harem. Lady Montagu’s extensive travels often took her to exotic places such as the Ottoman Empire and, during her stay at the Ottoman palace among the women of the Sultan’s court, she was guarded by eunuchs. This is one of many times in which Lady Mary Montagu slights Jonathan’s Swift “inability to perform.” See also: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s Letter to Lady Bute, written 23 June 1754 as found in The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: 1752-1762. Edited by Robert Halsband, vol. 3, Oxford University Press, 2014.
Publishing her “Reasons” in response to Swift was an uncharacteristic move for Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Weise surmises that perhaps the main reason Montagu deconstructs Swift’s poem with “one of the few poems published in her lifetime” is to “critique the disparity between idyllic representations of heterosexual desire and the lived realities of gender relations” (Weise 708-709). Danielle Bobker supports Weise, adding that “Montagu’s willful passivity with respect to print” and her “awareness of the archaism of her position given the development of the publishing industry” are central to understanding “The Reasons that Induced Dr S[wift] to write a Poem call’d the Lady’s Dressing room” (Bobker 2). However, while Weise argues that Montagu transcended print life with her single publication, Bobker argues the opposite.

Danielle Bobker sees Montagu as “entangled in, and ultimately subordinate to, her critique of the print market” (Bobker 2). Even though Montagu’s “Reasons” today is widely anthologized as an “energetic expression of antipatriarchal outrage,” her attack on print and publishing by foregoing publishing limited, in Bobker’s eyes, Montagu’s literary freedom and deprived audiences of her work for many years to come. However, in her comparative analysis of the works Montagu did publish, Bobker claims that the reasons for Montagu publishing was because her primary hope was to beat Swift at his own game (Bobker 7-8). Thus, in order to out-Swift Swift, Bobker notes three distinct ways in which Montagu secured success: formally, psychologically, and through the poem’s own circuitous path to publicity (8).

Formally, Bobker notes how Montagu “appropriates many of Swift’s moves and motifs,” and puts them in a “mode of mock-pastoral” that even though Swift tried to use, he had “largely neglected” (8). Psychologically, Montagu represented Swift as “paranoid
and ineffectual” and painted him in a more unflattering and unforgiving light than anything in his self-satire (8). Publicly, the poem’s “circuitous path to publicity” allowed Montagu to publish without attribution and shows how she “probably hoped to make readers suspect that Swift, whose career she obviously followed attentively, was the author of her satire” (8). Bobker argues that “performed as if inadvertently before a large audience, such a disappearing act would be both a classically Swiftian gesture and a powerful public affirmation of her elite female entitlement to authorial privacy,” allowing Montagu to out-Swift Swift while simultaneously securing her literary legacy (8).

As Bobker points out, “The Reasons that Induced Dr S[wift] to write a Poem call’d the Lady’s Dressing Room” illustrates Montagu’s “evasive dance with publicity and publication,” but also highlights – through content and action – her sociocultural critiques on gender, interpersonal relationships, and social binaries (Bobker 8). Consequently, Montagu not only attacked these issues through what she wrote, but also how she wrote and shared it with readers. C.C. Barfoot clarifies this connection by noting that “Montagu’s poem attacks Swift’s potency, a potency that fails him in bed as well as in print,” and allows Montagu to capitalize on both the social and the corporeal repercussions simultaneously (Barfoot 141).

The social and corporeal crossover Barfoot examines is the interplay between women’s sexual desire and social constraints regarding women’s sexuality. As Barfoot reveals, “[Celia] stinks, ergo she is, ergo she desires” and the “carnality expressed by Celia’s sh–t is the carnality that make possible sexual pleasure” (Barfoot 142). It is ultimately “Celia’s desire that stinks,” rather than her personal effects through which Strephon gropes (142). Barfoot’s reading, therefore, questions Swift’s reputational
directness and begins to analyze a more nuanced variety of social ills found within the poem. Montagu’s reply, therefore, uses the “cuckoldry trope” to provide an alternative reading to “women’s sexuality as sh–t” and Laura Baudot’s analysis of Jonathan Swift’s “The Lady’s Dressing Room” touches on some of these same issues (142).

Since it’s 1732 publication, Jonathan Swift’s “The Lady’s Dressing Room” has continuously provoked such violent physical, emotional, and moral responses from readers that many avoid the poem for fear of losing their dinner. As Baudot concedes, there is certainly “much to avoid in Swift’s notoriously filthy poem” (Baudot 637). Between the “dirty Smock” with “Arm-pits well besmear’d,” a “filthy basin,” towels with “Dirt, and Sweat, and Ear-wax grim’d,” “greasy Coifs and Pinners reeking,” old hair “Bequeathed by Tripsy when she dy’d,” and most famously, “the full chamber pot,” readers are both surprised and disgusted to encounter such an “unpoetic, unlovely” space as they follow Strephon journeying to visit his beloved Celia in her dressing room (637).

While many scholars critique “The Lady’s Dressing Room” as misogynistic and repulsive, Baudot aims to explore “the status of a misogyny that, while claiming to condemn an essential corruption, so quickly substitutes the accoutrements and ornaments of the female body for the woman herself” and specifically seeks to understand the very visible absence of Celia, the poem’s principle target (Baudot 638). “Celia’s absence,” Baudot says “leaves a void” (638). “Exploring this void,” she argues, “is crucial to a full understanding of “The Lady’s Dressing Room” as it “permits a glimpse beyond the satirical fabric of the poem to disclose Swift’s self-reflexive inquiry into the nature of

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2 See Laetitia Pilkington, Memoirs and Anecdotes of Dean Swift, 1748–1754, Vol 3 (Garland Pub., 1975), p.161: “With all the Reverence I have for the Dean, I really think he sometimes chose Subjects unworthy of his Muse, and which could serve for no other End except that of turning the Reader’s Stomach, as it did my Mother’s, who, upon reading the Lady’s Dressing-room, instantly threw up her Dinner;”
poetic creation” (638). Celia’s absence, therefore, supports the idea that Swift homogenizes the sexes and extends his self-reflexive inquiry to his gender. Thus, building an argument flexible enough to accommodate the “splenetic restlessness” of Swift’s satire is where Baudot truly shines.

Baudot’s analysis of Swift’s “The Lady’s Dressing Room” respects the poem’s complexity while simultaneously allowing for a coherent argument. She identifies Swift’s engagement with materialism and argues that he “uses materialist principles…to expose the cost of materialism itself” (Baudot 640). Swift wrestles with these contradictions, of materialism and non-materialism, in gender relations to illustrate through “desecration of the goddess/muse in the poem” the simultaneous desecration of social binaries. Consequently, the love that Strephon feels for Celia – produced by his ignorance – also fades away when confronted with her corporeal, or material, reality. Readers and poets alike, therefore, become acutely aware of the “filth” that tethers them, like Strephon, to relationships and reality. However, this tethering is not epiphanic in the eyes of most Swift scholars; especially those who have studied Swift’s relationships.

Margaret Anne Doody is the foremost scholar on Swift’s relations with women and provides insight to what Weise criticized as Swift’s “caustic rebuke against all ladies” in “The Lady’s Dressing Room” (Weise 708). According to Doody, until the early 2000s Jonathan Swift was thought of by scholars as lustful, putrid, and nauseating. John Middleton Murry led the charge against Swift in the 1960s with his epithet that the Rev. Dr. possessed a “peculiar physical loathing of women” that no “honest critic” of his could ignore (Murray 439, 441; Doody 68). John O’ Connor seconded this notion with Swift’s own denunciation of women:
When I reflect on this [foolishness of women], I cannot conceive you to be human creatures, but a sort of species hardly a degree above a monkey; who is an animal less mischievous and expensive, might in time be a tolerable critic in velvet and brocade, and, for aught I know, would equally become them” (O’Connor 13).

Margaret Anne Doody, however, presents a different view of Swift: one in which the Swift males are “Shandean misfits, powerless against the formidable control exerted by their disagreeable females” (Doody 87).

Swift’s relations with women in his real life provides insight into the reasons why he might write “The Lady’s Dressing Room.” “The story that Swift told himself about his relationship to the first women in his life,” Doody writes, “is fraught with disappointment, anger, need, and rejection” (Doody 88). His mother was a “distant and rejecting woman who did not need him,” his older sister was “oddly resentful,” and the women with whom he kept company were either budding authors who he “actively encouraged to write” or young women with whom he could play the role of “beggarly rascal” (88; 93). David M. Palumbo, however, argues that Swift “wasn’t as misogynistic as his poetry makes him out to be” and cites numerous examples of women who were “fond of [Swift] as both a man and as a teacher” (Palumbo 432). His relationships with women, it seems, were either fatherly or fleeting, but never intimate.

One might postulate that Swift possessed an undisclosed homosexual nature; Lady Montagu’s letters certainly reveal her epithet that Swift was as harmless as a “eunuch in a seraglio” and her “Reasons” highlights Swift’s sexual failings in not-so-nuanced terms (Montagu Letter to Lady Bute 56). History counters her reasoning with the Rev. Dr. proposing marriage on two separate occasions to two different women, Varina and Stella. However, his proposals were so “baldly,” “briskly,” and “uncompromising” that they seem like a deliberate attempt to elicit a “no” response (Doody 89). Jonathan
Swift, therefore, never married. Perhaps this is why Swift physically removes yet continuously desecrates the fictional Celia: love, marriage, and committed relationships are associated in Swift’s personal life with “loss,” “severe qualms,” and a deep fear of “inescapable intimacy” and is hidden under Juvenalian satire in his “Lady’s Dressing Room” (89).

Knowing whether Jonathan Swift was borderline feminine, or Lady Mary Wortley Montagu was too masculine is impossible to ascertain from the scholarship surrounding their personal lives – more research needs to be done in these areas. Their individual poems, however, are another story. Swift’s “The Lady’s Dressing Room” and Montagu’s “Reasons” provide oppositional, but intimate, looks at the author’s viewpoints and criticisms of gender, corporeal beauty, and interpersonal sexual relationships in eighteenth-century British print life. Consequently, with Jonathan Swift as effeminate bachelor and Lady Mary as masculine matron, one reads these poems as mirror images of what both authors hope to guard society against rather than as what they hope society will become.
Jonathan Swift’s “The Lady’s Dressing Room”

Jonathan Swift tries to break down the sociocultural binaries of gender in eighteenth-century Britain by homogenizing men and women in his poem, “The Lady’s Dressing Room.” The poem begins with Strephon, “stealing” into his beloved Celia’s dressing room and later leaving in “fits” because he is so repulsed by what he finds (7, 117). At first glance, it seems as though Swift is misogynistically satirizing women, pointing out the hypocrisy of their “sweet and cleanly” façade by having Strephon penetrate their private, domestic space and discover their falsehood (18). However, like Laura Baudot observes, “Celia’s absence leaves a void” that is crucial to understanding who, specifically, Swift is satirizing. As such, Swift shamelessly begins his satirical narration with masculine spectatorship of the feminine, but only for the first few lines:

Five hours, (and who can do it less in?)
By haughty Celia spent in Dressing;
The Goddess from her Chamber issues,
Array’d in Lace, Brocades and Tissues.

Strephon, who found the Room was void,
And Betty otherwise employ’d,
Stole in, and took a strict Survey,
Of all the Litter as it lay;
Whereof, to make the Matter clear,
An Inventory follows here.

As readers, we only catch a glimpse of Celia as she exits, implying that Swift believes either, first, that truly knowing and understanding women requires their absence – in which case the attempt is futile and men are better off without them – or second, that what Strephon discovers is only repulsive because it ruins his idealized “Goddess” by demystifying and normalizing her into a corporeal human being (3). Strephon’s brief

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3 Strephon and Celia – come from traditional pastoral or classical romance poetry.
4 Betty – the generic name for a maidservant, but also for a lower-class woman or prostitute.
sighting of Celia, therefore, inspires him to investigate her private space further; an action for which the narrator Swift “pit[ies] wretched Strephon blind” (129).

Satirically and superficially, Swift’s disagreement with Strephon’s actions seem to stem from a place of humorous condescension. It’s akin to watching an epic, age-old drama: Swift knows that this ignorant young lover is going to be disheartened by what he finds, but it’s much more entertaining to watch the scene play out than it is to warn the players. However, by the conclusion of the poem, Swift writes that the “Vengeance Goddess never sleeping / Soon punish’d Strephon for his Peeping” as a warning that what Strephon did in entering Celia’s space was wrong. What made Strephon’s intrusion wrong, however, is more than a simple expose of vanity.

It could be argued that Swift is teasing Strephon, and by extent the readers, with a jovial warning that ignorance about women truly is bliss. By illustrating how Strephon’s punishment is self-inflicted – he knows “Those secrets of the hoary Deep!”5 – Swift seems to be saying that men can never be attracted to women again once they truly know them (98). For the rest of his life in Pavlovian-like response, Strephon’s:

...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 Ideas jump like Wits:

However, this approach, while humorous, doesn’t paint the whole picture. Wendy Weise posits a different claim, one in which Swift’s poem comments on the interpersonal sexual relationships between men and women in the eighteenth-century.

Weise argues that Strephon’s “crossing of the threshold and entering Celia’s private space” is symbolic of Strephon entering into Celia’s “private parts” in an act of sexual intimacy (Weise 710). Swift, who clearly paints this act as punishable by “vengeance” from the “Goddess” could be, given his background with women, completely against sexual intimacy entirely as he personally associated marriage and love with “ruin and unhappiness” (Doody 88-89). This reading, however, seems extremist and conflicts with some of Swift’s more amorous personal behavior (88). A different reading suggests that Swift only morally opposes intimacy that requires either eternal commitment or is nonconsensual. It’s easily inferred that Strephon plans on his commitment to the “Goddess” being eternal, but consensual may be another matter.

It has been assumed up to this point that Strephon and Celia are lovers. Given their neoclassical pastoral names and the traditional gender binary they represent, romance between the two seems like the obvious conclusion. However, Swift never refers to Strephon as a lover, but rather as “the Rogue” who “stole in” to the dressing room, is cursed by “vengeance,” wished “blind” by the narrator, and “stole away” by the conclusion of the poem (13, 7, 119, 129, 116). Weise notes that as Strephon “moves from the waiting room to the dressing room to the chamber pot within” he penetrates “increasingly intimate female space,” but Celia’s absence indicates that this intrusion is absolutely uninvited (Weise 714).

Celia’s absence is crucial. She exits her room in the first few lines of the poem to leave to an unknown location without Strephon, clearly indicating that the two are not in an amorous, consensual relationship. Strephon’s impulse, therefore, to enter the room and “view the unknown” is in response to the “anxiety” Celia’s sexual indifference provokes
in him (714). This unfulfilled – and probably unrequited passion – leads Strephon to enter the dressing room without Celia’s consent and completely alters the light-hearted satirical nature of the poem. Strephon’s presence and Celia’s absence, therefore, are co-indicators of a metaphorical rape rather than of romance or revelation.

As Strephon observes the littering of objects around the room they become “metonyms for the fetishized body parts” of the absent Celia (Weise 711). Instead of Celia’s physical lips, hair, eyes, and legs, Strephon sees:

The various Combs for various Uses,
//
Sweat, Dandruff, Powder, Lead⁶ and Hair;
//
There Night-gloves made of Tripsy’s hide,
//
Here Gallypots⁷ and vials plac’d,
Some fill’d with Washes, some with Paste,
Some with Pomatum⁸, Paints and Slops,
And Ointments good for scabby Chops.
Hard⁹ by a filthy Bason stands,
//
A nasty Compound of all Hues,
For here she spits, and here she spues.

Celia is literally objectified by Strephon and, as Weise argues, “appears less a woman than a sum of these symbolic objects” under his male gaze (712). This objectification strengthens the allusion to sexual assault and rape as “Strephon cautious” approaches Celia’s chamber pot and “exercise[s his] spite”:

For Strephon ventur’d to look in,
Resolv’d to go through thick and thin;
He lifts the Lid, there needs no more,
He smelt it all the Time before.

⁶ Lead – a cosmetic to whiten the face.
⁷ Gallypot – a small pot made from glazed earthenware or metal used to hold medicines or ointm
⁸ Pomatum – ointment; a perfumed unguent for the hair or scalp
⁹ Hard by – “nearby”
As from within *Pandora’s Box*\(^{10}\),
When *Epimetheus*\(^{11}\) op’d the Locks,
A sudden universal Crew
Of humane Evils upwards flew;
He still was comforted to find
That *Hope* at last remained behind;
So *Strephon* lifting up the lid,
To view what in the Chest was hid.
The Vapours flew from out the Vent,
But *Strephon* cautious never meant
The Bottom of the Pan to grope,
And foul his Hands in Search of *Hope*.
O never may such vile *Machine*\(^{12}\)
Be once in *Celia’s* chamber seen!
O may she better learn to keep
“Those secrets of the hoary Deep!”\(^{13}\)

Weise observes that the “vulvic opening of the chamber pot evokes the female genitals” as a “dark, hellish site of chaos and horror” and suggests that “Strephon’s groping the pot” is not only rape, but “may represent a reproductive function…that results in ‘hope,’” or in other words, pregnancy (Weise 714). This is certainly reinforced by Swift’s allusion to the scene in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* where Sin, a victim of rape, is damned to eternally reproduce the monstrous as secrets from the hoary, or in this case “whorey,” deep (Weise 715; Swift 98).

As a “guardian of standards” in eighteenth-century British society, Swift’s underhanded attempt to comment not only on the vanity corporeal standards of beauty, but extensively on the horrors of forced intimacy, is a plausible stretch. By referencing

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\(^{10}\) *Pandora’s Box* – From Greek mythology, this refers to the box that Zeus gave to Pandora. She was told not to open it, but she gave in to curiosity; as she opened it, all the miseries and evils of the world flew out—except one, hope—and that’s why we have suffering in the world. She is an Eve figure in Greek mythology (Lynch).

\(^{11}\) *Epimetheus* – Pandora’s husband created by Zeus. Epimetheus was warned never to accept a gift from the gods, but he did: the box that Pandora opened.

\(^{12}\) *Machine* – a “complicated piece of workmanship” (Lynch).

\(^{13}\) “*Those Secrets of the hoary deep*” – See Paradise Lost, 2.890-91: “Before their eyes in sudden view appear/The secrets of the hoary Deep.”
“Pandora’s box,” it is clear that Swift associates Strephon’s actions with evil and misery, but by including that “Hope at last remained,” Swift enters dangerous territory where he belittles the female experience in favor of reproduction (83). Without the presence of Celia to be “the representation of woman as difference,” though, an analysis of Swift’s social commentary on rape within the realm of eighteenth-century interpersonal sexual relationships crumbles inconclusively (Weise 716).

One could argue that because the poem is satire it merely mocks the violence it implies and is harmless sociocultural commentary. Weise argues that whether the poem “attacks the vanity of men or women or both is unclear,” but the language Swift employs almost certainly makes a mockery of both with only himself excluded (Weise 719). This is why Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s response reconfigures Swift’s poem and makes a mockery of not only the vanity surrounding corporeal standards of beauty, but of the vanity of the people who comment on such topics.
Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s “Reasons”

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s “The Reasons that Induced Dr. S[swift] to write a poem called ‘The Lady’s Dressing Room’” is filled with reasons illustrating how gender is as artificial as it is pliable. By mimicking Swift’s images, tropes, rhyme, and meter, Montagu rebukes Swift’s homogenization of men and women, reconfigures the sexual relationship between Strephon and Celia to empower women, and ultimately identifies Swift’s own “hapless social climbing” and “sexual inadequacies,” as the “true source of his disappointed, caustic rebuke against all ladies” (Weise 708). Consequently, Montagu’s response acknowledges and combats, rather than ignores, the oppressive social binaries Swift so eagerly dismisses.

Much like “The Lady’s Dressing Room,” Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s “Reasons” opens with a male figure pursuing a female object of desire:

The Doctor in a clean starch'd band,
His Golden Snuff box in his hand,
With care his Di'mond Ring displays
And Artfull shews its various Rays,
While Grave he stalks down — Street
His dearest Betty — to meet.

Unlike Swift, however, Montagu does not fixate her poem on the aesthetics of the female object of desire, Betty, but turns the focus on “The Doctor” (1). What Montagu highlights here is almost a continuation of where Swift left off: in the beginning lines of Swift’s

14 *Doctor* — The Rev. Dr. Jonathan Swift was a Doctor of Divinity.
15 “— —” — These are deliberate blanks left for the “protection of the innocent” (Howe). Poets used them instead of spelling out names that would too clearly identify someone in a potentially scandalous manner. However, poets also use these blanks for some obscene words deemed too scandalous to print. Of course, as is the case here, most readers would be able to guess what should appear there, whether from rhyme, meter, or topical knowledge. The safety such blanks afford is, therefore, purely cosmetic.
16 *Betty* — the generic name for a maidservant, lower-class woman, or prostitute.
poem we glimpse Celia’s departure, but in the opening lines of Montagu’s poem we
witness the Doctor’s arrival. And, while we don’t know for certain how many hours the
Doctor spent in dressing, it is implied that it was quite a while given the obvious
importance of his appearance.

The Doctor’s “clean starch’d band” and “Golden Snuff box” in hand with
“Di'mond Ring display[ed]” is an “artful” showing of not only aesthetic vanity, but also
of the value placed on material wealth (1-4). By highlighting these vanities on the Doctor,
Montagu draws a parallel between gendered sociocultural commodification: for the
Doctor, his social currency stems from material possessions that highlight his wealth but
for Celia – and, by extent, all eighteenth-century women – her social currency is defined
by her beauty and aesthetic appeal. Consequently, Montagu highlights the differences
between gendered social expectations by paralleling the roles of Celia and the Doctor.
However, a simplistic parallel is not all Montagu creates.

The Doctor dresses in such a way that his social currency is on display, but his
attempted regality still does not tempt Betty the Prostitute. Contrary to the traditional
narrative of the male customer being in control of the sexual experience, the Doctor is a
customer at the merciful admittance of Betty:

Long had he waited for this Hour,
Nor gain'd Admittance to the Bower,17
Had jok'd and punn'd, and swore and writ,
Try'd all his Galantry and Wit,
Had told her oft what part he bore
In Oxford's Schemes in days of yore,18
But Bawdy, Politicks nor Satyr
Could move this dull hard hearted Creature.

17 *Bower* – A “bower” is a poetic term for a nest-like enclosure in a tree or some other high place; see
Swift’s pastoral imagery in the names he gives to his hero and his mistress.
18 *“In Oxford's Schemes in days of yore”* – Swift visited Oxford university in 1691, and received an MA
there the following year with the assistance of a friend in a high place, William Temple (Howe).
Montagu paints Swift as having “long-waited” for his chance to be with “his dearest” prostitute despite having “jok'd and punn'd, and swore and writ” and “Try'd all his Galantry and Wit” at fenagling his way into her “Bower” at an earlier hour (8-10). By doing this, Montagu casts Betty in Strephon’s role and makes a spectacle of the Doctor in the same way that Swift made a spectacle of Celia (or at least the objects that comprised Celia in her absence). By doing this, Montagu “creates a heroine” who functions “not as a mirror…but rather as a prism diffracting the image” and “sustaining the oscillation between femininity and masculinity” (Weise 721). Thus Montagu, through this role reversal, diffracts Swift’s misogyny and replaces it with pliable gender roles.

Another of the ways Montagu illustrates the malleability of gender is through the other male figures she describes in the poem. In contrast to Swift’s singular depiction of Celia through objects in her absence, Montagu describes physical examples of the men visiting Betty. And, although each male visitor is a different profession or age, each displays a similar necessity for ornate self-display.

And Men their Talents still mistakeing,
The stutterer fancys his is speaking.
With Admiration oft we see
Hard Features heighten'd by Toupée,
The Beau\(^{19}\) affects the Politician,
Wit is the citizen’s\(^{20}\) Ambition,
Poor Pope Philosophy displays on
With so much Rhime and little reason,
And thô he argues ne'er so long
That all is right,\(^{21}\) his Head is wrong.

\(^{19}\) Beau – A young male lover, typically used to refer to a young man of nice etiquette and dress, not one given to serious thought.

\(^{20}\) Citizen – A townsman, a city-dweller, a man of business; this is often used as a derogatory term. A “cit” or “citizen” is not a person, typically, of wit and learning—a philistine.

\(^{21}\) “That all is Right” – This is an allusion to Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Man*, a philosophical poem about the supremely ordered universe; in epistle I, line 1734, we learn that “all that is, is right.” This idea would later be satirized by Voltaire in *Candide* (“The best of all possible worlds”).
As Wendy Weise notes, Montagu accentuates the “constructed and performative nature of masculinity” through her introduction of these male characters, asserting that “the faces men wear in public are just as false…as those of the women who paint” (Weise 722). Consequently, Montagu satirizes gendered eighteenth-century social binaries by highlighting how, “unlike a woman who removes her makeup each night and knows the limitations of her beauty,” the male “Beau[s],” “Politician[s],” “citizen[s],” and “Pope[s]” who visit Betty cannot separate the social roles they play from the identities they’ve created for themselves (Montagu 43-45; Weise 722).

In another act of defiant opposition to Swift’s text, Montagu refuses to eroticize the sexual interaction between Betty the Prostitute and the Doctor. Instead of commenting on the corporeal functions in nauseating detail or alluding to some underlying sexual repulsion, she simply has Betty, as an empowered gender reversal of Strephon, demystify the Doctor by revealing how his “Talents still mistakeing” led to an evening of “Hellish Play” (39, 66):

The Reverend Lover with surprize
Peeps in her Bubbys, and her Eyes,
And kisses both, and tries—and tries.
The Evening in this Hellish Play,
Beside his Guineas thrown away,
Provok’d the Priest to that degree
he swore, the Fault is not in me.

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22 Reverend/Priest – The references to Swift as a “Reverend” and “Priest” are correct as he was ordained a Priest in the Church of Ireland in 1695.
23 Bubbys – Early modern slang, common in the 18th century, for breasts.
24 Guineas – See “pound” at line 18. Both are monetary denominations. A pound is a bit less than a guinea (£1 is 20s; 1gn is 21 shillings). “Twice two pound” is £4, quite an extravagant sum of money in the early 18th century. In 1750, a single penny (240 pennies to a pound, and a pound is just over a dollar today) “would have had more purchasing power than a whole pound in 1998” (Howe). About £40/year could keep a small family modestly, the “middling sort” would need around £120, and a “gentleman” couldn’t live well under around £400. In the 18th century, clothes were more expensive, comparatively—a complete man’s suit of clothes could cost £8, and an orphan’s suit of clothes, someone cared for at the public expense, cost about one and a half pounds (Emsley).
Although she does describe Betty’s “Bubbys” and her “Eyes,” all other salacious details of the sexual encounter are withheld. Instead of eroticizing the female body as Swift did through Strephon’s interactions with the various objects in Celia’s room, Montagu shifts the focus back on how the Doctor “trys—and trys.” As Weise observes, the Doctor’s attempts are “separated by a long caesura” to force readers to do a “double-take” and “fixate on the Reverend” (Weise 725). By doing so, Montagu stands in opposition to Swift’s homogenization of men and women and highlights the tensions between genders specifically by choosing a prostitute as her protagonist.

Montagu’s choice of female protagonist in her verse challenges sociocultural understandings of women’s sexual empowerment and looks at class as a gendered issue. Betty as prostitute operates in a world where social stratification is fluid because her employment, rather than her class, dictates the sphere in which she operates. Even though “prostitution was closely linked with poverty” during the 1700s, it was “advocated by much of the upper classes as essential for protecting good women from promiscuous males” (Weise 726). By making Betty a prostitute, Montagu combats the paradoxical labeling of women as “good” and “bad” by highlighting how the demands of men, first, create this divide among women and then, second, socially reprimand women for what they themselves created.25 Furthermore, Montagu directs this commentary at Swift, exposing him in both his poem and his personal life as one who visits the “lowest class of people [and] the silliest of women” (Doody 69). And, even then, he fails sexually and linguistically.

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25 For more on this argument, see proto-feminist Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s (and Simone de Beauvoir’s) complaint that men fashion women into either “angels or whores” and expect women to “enact these roles through costume and behavior” but then men “withdraw their interest once women comply with their sexual demands” (Weise 728).
Betty as prostitute is more than a simple tool for the Doctor’s humiliation; she’s also a symbol of female self-sufficiency. During the 1700s, “prostitution was one of the few ways a woman could make it on her own” and if she had “intelligence, sophistication, talents, and the right contacts she could go far” (Weise 726). Betty employs each of these characteristics in her interactions with the Reverend Doctor. When he accuses her of being the reason why he can’t perform, Betty is not afraid to push back against the doctor confidently and intelligently:

The Nymph grown Furious roar’d, “By God
The blame lyes all in sixty odd,”
And scornfull pointing to the door
Cry'd, “Fumbler see my Face no more.”
“With all my Heart I'll go away
But nothing done, I'll nothing pay.
Give back the Money.” “How,” cry'd she,
[I lock'd it in the Trunk stands there
And break it open if you dare.]
“Would you palm such a cheat on me!
For poor four pound to roar and bellow,
Why sure you want some new Prunella?
[What if your Verses have not sold,
Must therefore I return your Gold?
Perhaps you’ll have no better Luck in
The Knack of Rhyming than of —

In her response, we neither see Betty shrink under the Doctor’s accusations nor flee from his rage. Instead, she “roar’d” that the “blame lyes all in sixty odd,” pointing to the Doctor’s age as reasoning for why he can’t perform (74-75). Furthermore, Betty tells him to leave her sight and “pointing to the door,” shows him the way out (76). This, of course,

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26 Sixty-odd – A reference to Swift’s age; he was sixty-four when he wrote “The Lady's Dressing Room.”
27 Prunella – The cloth of parson's and lawyer's gowns, as well as the upper parts of women’s shoes from the mid-17th century on. Also, the word suggests a woman's name. There’s an Italian fairy/folk tale about a woman named Prunella; she was a maiden locked in a tower, much like Rapunzel, who needed to be rescued (Howe).
enrages the humiliated Doctor who then demands his money be returned. But Betty, intelligent and cautious, had “lock’d [the money] in the Trunk” so that no dissatisfied customer could “palm such a cheat on” her (81-83). She then wittily turns the same argument on the Doctor in questioning accusation, “What if your Verses have not sold / Must therefore I return your Gold?” to highlight how her “alienated labor attests to her disavowal of the romance the heterosexual contract promises” (86-87; Weise 726). Betty, therefore, is the ultimate example of female self-sufficiency: financially, intellectually, and sexually empowered.

Montagu’s dressing room satire concludes with a final spat between the Doctor and Betty wherein Montagu makes a final jab at Swift’s race, literary ability, and sexuality:

“I’ll so describe your dressing room
The very Irish\(^{28}\) shall not come.”
She answer’d short, “I'm glad you'll write.
You'll furnish paper when I shite.”

By having the Reverend Doctor threaten to “describe [Betty/Celia’s] dressing room” so that the “very Irish shall not come,” he is not prophesying the future, but simply reliving his recent encounter with Betty for surely in that account the Irish did not come. Betty, without missing a beat, turns and retorts “I’m glad you’ll write / You’ll furnish paper when I shite,” finalizing both her past sexual encounter with the Doctor and his future writings as no more important than her “shite.” And Montagu, as author, seems to agree.

\(^{28}\) Irish – A jab at Swift’s lineage as he is of Anglo-Irish descent.
Conclusion

This discursive battle of the sexes between Jonathan Swift and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu reveals two, of many, opposing viewpoints on the sociocultural dynamics of gender in eighteenth-century British print life. Jonathan Swift’s argument for the homogenization of men and women in order to understand them, as compared to Montagu’s argument that distinct differences between the sexes allows them to be better understood, is a complex portrayal of sociocultural nuance masquerading as, but also better understood through, satire. It is only through satire that Montagu’s “Reasons” could acknowledge and combat, rather than ignore, the oppressive social binaries Swift’s “The Lady’s Dressing Room” so eagerly dismissed.

Whether Jonathan Swift’s “The Lady’s Dressing Room” and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s “The Reasons that induced Dr. S to Write a Poem Called ‘The Lady’s Dressing Room’” are satires that reformed society, however, is debatable. Clearly, they both left an impression on those who read them – Letitia Pilkington’s mother regurgitated her dinner after reading “The Lady’s Dressing Room” – but they seem to be making an even bigger impact on modern scholars who try to understand how the outrageous, vitriolic satires of the 18th Century expose and punish those who were not safeguarding social morals. Consequently, looking at Jonathan Swift and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu provides a perfect, examinable binary: one man and one woman, one superior in class and one lower, one self-educated and one professionally taught, and, perhaps most importantly, both equally matched in wit, confidence, and shameless satirical ability.

Thus, as “guardians of standards” for the social, cultural, and political spheres in which they operated, Jonathan Swift and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu published works
to reflect the principles they hoped their society would emulate. For Jonathan Swift, it was a combination of the expulsion of vanity, the elimination of idealization of women, and the purging of ignorant men. For Montagu, it was the empowerment of women regardless of sociopolitical sphere, the expulsion of misogyny, and the recognition of these oppressive social binaries she hoped to change. And, while both authors disagreed over the sociocultural changes, the battlefront on which they united was that all these social changes take place within the ladies’ dressing rooms.
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