Symposium of Laughter: Eighteenth-Century Masculinity and Sociability in George Knapton's Portraits of the Society of Dilettanti

Meredith Hanna

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SYMPOSIUM OF LAUGHTER: EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY MASCULINITY AND
SOCIABILITY IN GEORGE KNAPTON’S PORTRAITS OF THE SOCIETY OF
DILETTANTI

by

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Art History Department
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ABSTRACT

SYMPOSIUM OF LAUGHTER: EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY MASCULINITY AND SOCIABILITY IN GEORGE KNAPTON’S PORTRAITS OF THE SOCIETY OF DILETTANTI

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Ideal masculine conduct for aristocratic and bourgeois circles of the British 18th century entailed polite restraint, and much of the scholarly discussion on 18th century British masculinity treats politeness and how it was taught and modeled. The Society of Dilettanti, a British antiquarian society whose early members met on the Grand Tour, seem to flout polite ideals in their portraits by George Knapton, executed from 1740-1749. With consideration to expanding dialogue on the nature of ideal masculine conduct in the 18th century, this paper asserts that the portraits create, through depictions of alcoholic ritual and interaction with the viewer, a sense of close friendship amongst the Dilettanti, allowing for the paintings’ occasional bibulousness and bawdiness. Additionally, by painting the early Dilettanti in masquerade costume, George Knapton
created a carnivalesque ethos that reinforced the relationship of the sitters to their Grand Tours, to each other, and to their larger aims as a club. The paintings, though undoubtedly offensive to some, created a symposium-like atmosphere that would demonstrate the witty, yet refined British masculinity of the Society of Dilettanti.
Much thanks is due to my Honors Thesis committee, who each provided sincere and constructive feedback at each step of completion and every iteration of this paper. Early into my research James Swensen suggested relevant books and artists that proved invaluable, and Martha Peacock’s direction in the Art History Capstone course refined my arguments and writing. Particular thanks goes to Heather Belnap, who has been generous with time, advice, and encouragement; I am incredibly grateful for her mentorship over the course of this year-and-a-half-long project. My parents deserve my gratitude for anything I might accomplish, but they have been exceptionally supportive with this endeavor. My dad, whose BYU Honors thesis sat on my childhood bookshelf, was my earliest example of the virtues of Honors learning. My mom has been a constant source of guidance, helping me deal with periods of doubt and discouragement, and celebrating my small victories with me. To Bennett Noorda, who traipsed around Europe with me as I collected library cards and searched for sources, who listened patiently as I laboriously described new ideas and arguments, and whose innate curiosity has always motivated me to do my best work, I owe the greatest portion of my thanks.
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With their vibrant costumes and variety of engaging expressions, the little-studied portraits of the Society of Dilettanti by George Knapton give an experimental view of this now venerable institution’s founders. Started in the December of 1732 at a tavern in Covent Garden, these men—most of whom were under thirty and wealthy—formed the Society of Dilettanti, dedicated to, in the words of later member Robert Wood, “encouraging, at home, a taste for those objects which [had] contributed so much to their entertainment abroad.”1 “Abroad” meant, specifically, Italy, the essential destination for privileged, male British youths on their Grand Tours. Part education, part coming-of-age ritual, the parents and guardians of these impressionable schoolboys hoped that exposure to fine art and distinguished Continental company on the Grand Tour, along with the rigors of travel, would transform their teenagers and twenty-somethings into men fit to take their place in British society.2 Grand Tour experiences were as diverse as the many personalities that undertook them, but they often involved socializing with fellow itinerant countrymen while exploring Paris, Rome, Venice, Naples, and other cultural centers.3 The Society of Dilettanti fortified and institutionalized the bonds forged on their

1 Historical Notices of the Society of Dilettanti (London: John Bowyer Nichols & Sons, 1855), B.
Grand Tours by making a rule for entry to have been “personally acquainted with [a member]” in Italy. 4

As amateur antiquarians, the Society of Dilettanti had an altruistic mission—to further knowledge of the ancient past and promote the appreciation of art in Britain. However, leading up to their recognition later in the century as an important body of gentlemen scholars, the mid-18th century Dilettantes were a group of men whose love of carousing and general merrymaking accompanied, and perhaps occasionally superseded, their lofty ambitions. Horace Walpole famously said that, “The nominal qualification [for membership] is having been in Italy, the real one, being drunk,” and the alcohol-stained pages of their Minute Book and the “ample proof of their attachment” to the Latin nunc est bibidum (“now is the time for drinking”) attest to the nature of their meetings, which were certainly convivial, if not rowdy.5

Ideal masculine conduct for aristocratic and bourgeois circles of the British 18th century entailed polite restraint, and much of the scholarly discussion on 18th century British masculinity treats politeness and how it was taught and modeled.6 However, recent studies have explored the situations in which men of the upper crust indulged in laughter, drinking, and bawdiness, and retained their societal position. Kate Davison has

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5 Ibid.

discussed the nature of laughter, that, while unseemly for general company in the 18th century, was permittable amongst close friends. These paradoxes are evident in George Knapton’s twenty-three portraits of the Society of Dilettanti; while poses are often based on appropriately elevated models like Van Dyck and classical statuary, and sitters gallantly toast their portrait-neighbors, the portraits nonetheless make unsavory jokes and often have a playful, unserious air.

In the Dilettanti’s early years, George Knapton’s portraits were on display in a room at the tavern where they held their meetings, reportedly open to the public. With the members of the Dilettanti portrayed in such a playful light, we may wonder how these portraits may have been received, and why this group of distinguished gentlemen would feel comfortable making them available for public viewing. Bruce Redford and Jason M. Kelly have devoted a chapter each to these portraits in their respective books on the Society of Dilettanti, and these are rich resources for sitters’ biographies, analyses of costume, and how the portraits exemplify Dilettanti mottoes. Kelly considers how the portraits, and the Dilettanti ethos, capture aristocratic libertinism, and how Grand Tour-educated dilettantes and antiquarians parodied themselves in ways that may be present in the portraits. Yet neither fully consider how the paintings might still interact with contemporary standards of polite sociability; to consider them solely as rakishly flouting morals negates the more conventional portraits within the group and their larger institutional interests. With consideration to expanding dialogue on the nature of ideal masculine conduct in the 18th century, this paper asserts that the portraits create, through depictions of alcoholic ritual and interaction with the viewer, a sense of close friendship
amongst the Dilettanti, allowing for the paintings’ occasional bibulousness and bawdiness. Additionally, by painting the early Dilettanti in masquerade costume, George Knapton created a carnivalesque ethos that reinforced the relationship of the sitters to their Grand Tours, to each other, and to their larger aims as a club. The paintings, though undoubtedly offensive to some, created a symposium-like atmosphere that would demonstrate the witty, yet refined British masculinity of the Society of Dilettanti.

Bruce Redford divided the costumed portraits into 5 groups: the Graeco-Romans, the Libertines, the Van Dycks, the Venetians, and the Turkish. One portrait from each of these groups—Charles Sackville, 2nd Duke of Dorset for Graeco-Roman; Sir Francis Dashwood, Lord LeDespencer for Libertine; Sir James Gray for the Van Dycks; Samuel Savage for the Venetians; and Lord Sandwich for the Turkish—will be employed as representatives of these varied types, along with the un-costumed Sir Bourchier Wrey (Figs. 1-5). While each portrait from the series has unique details and significations, the chosen images display the major elements found in their companion pieces, and will work effectively to demonstrate how the Dilettanti portraits still functioned as examples of appropriate British masculinity to their tavern-going, predominantly male audience.

George Knapton had been trained by preeminent English painter Jonathan Richardson the Elder before spending from 1725-1732 in Italy, where he painted in various genres and studied the Old Masters. During his travels he fraternized with the

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future Dilettanti, who recommended and qualified him for acceptance to the Society’s ranks when he returned to England in 1732. Known as Britain’s preeminent pastel artist in the 1730s and 40, he was mainly a portraitist. He enjoyed recognition as a connoisseur, cataloguing pictures at the Althorp estate in 1746 and surveying the royal collection in 1750. After holding the title of Official Limner to the Society, Knapton resigned from his post and membership in 1763. He became Surveyor for the King’s Pictures in 1765 and died in 1778.

Knapton’s portrait project began in 1741, resulting in twenty-three “Picture[s] in Oil Colours” of the Society’s members in 1749. Members were required to sit for a portrait, and Society records indicate a yearly fine—“Face Money”—levied to those who deferred the present of their portrait. It was common for eighteenth-century societies to be memorialized in painting; the Kit Cat Club notably had Godfrey Kneller paint individual portraits of its members, such as that of Charles Lennox, and many societies, like the art-inclined Virtuosi of St. Luke, had one group portrait made of all members (Fig. 6). As Bruce Redford states, “regretful[ly]…no preliminary drawings, records of sittings, account books, or correspondence [relating to the painting of the portraits] have been recovered,” making Knapton’s creative practice, and his collaboration with his peers

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8 Ibid., 2.
9 Ibid., 13.
10 Ibid.
that sat for portraits, largely unknown.\textsuperscript{12} Despite the lack of crucial information in what was likely a lively production process, the personalization of the portraits to the sitters suggests a high degree of sitter-artist involvement in determining the direction of the painting. The artistic references to classical statuary and the works of Van Dyck additionally showcase the erudition of George Knapton, the connoisseur.

The Society of Dilettanti’s existence and aims speak to a wider eighteenth-century British phenomenon of largely urban, male-dominated societies and clubs.\textsuperscript{13} When Joseph Macky wrote his 1724 \textit{Journey Through England}, London contained “an infinity of clubs or societies for the improvement of learning and keeping up good humour and mirth.” In the next decade another writer wrote, “what numbers of these sociable assemblies are subsisting in this metropolis! In the country not a town or village is without its club.”\textsuperscript{14} This “associational world” was comprised of societies of all kinds: alumni associations, artistic societies, the Freemasons, horticulture societies, neighborhood clubs.\textsuperscript{15} Within these gatherings members discussed topics as varied as books and bee-keeping,\textsuperscript{16} and participated in activities as diverse as sports, debate, and


\textsuperscript{13} Peter Clark, \textit{British Clubs and Societies 1580-1800}, 3.


\textsuperscript{15} Peter Clark, \textit{British Clubs and Societies 1580-1800}, 2.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 1.
Besides these structured groups, venues like taverns and coffeehouses were homosocial centers of conversation and community. This sociability was one shared by the common population, extending throughout the classes and beyond the British Isles to their colonies and other populations of British people abroad, galvanizing the creation of many such groups of amateurs. Charles Sackville, the member of the Dilettanti depicted in his Knapton portrait as a Roman general, for example, founded a Masonic lodge in Florence. Among these groups were many that, like the Society of Dilettanti, would embrace “heavy drinking, ceremonies and ritual, old-style masculinity, client-patron relationships, and selectivity,” as a part of their regular proceedings.

The profusion of British clubs in the 18th century, and the varied scholarly topics to which they were dedicated, speaks to the ideal proposed by the Dilettanti’s choice of name. “Dilettanti” had just come into usage in the English language, itself an import from Italy, from the Italian *dilettare*—“to delight.” Later the term would become a foppish byword, a signifier of trifling interest and little real education in a field of one’s choosing, substituting passing fancy for professional, hard-won knowledge. At the time however, “dilettante” “defined a cultural ideal,” with those assuming its title considering

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17 Ibid., 2.

18 Ibid., 2-3.


20 Ibid., 1.
themselves led by “energetic, enjoyable, wide-ranging curiosity—curiosity that crosses what would now be called ‘disciplinary boundaries.’”

Of course, the Dilettanti did not assemble solely for the discussion and appreciation of art; as Robert Wood writes, “it would be disingenuous to insinuate that a serious plan for the promotion of the arts the only motive for forming this Society. Friendly and social intercourse was undoubtedly the first great object in view…” From the beginning of the Society, commitment to the arts was tempered with a playful love of pleasure, as exemplified in the Dilettanti’s primary motto, seria ludo. Accompanying its other mottoes—Viva la Virtú and “Grecian Taste and Roman Spirit”—seria ludo was taken from Virgil’s seventh eclogue and Horace’s first satire from his first book. In the former, Meliboeus the shepherd pauses from his work to listen to a singing contest, saying, “my serious business gave way to their playing,” or, posthabui tamen illorum mea seria ludo. In the latter, the speaker asks, “What is to prevent one from telling the truth as he laughs, even as teachers sometimes give cookies to children to coax them into learning their ABC?—still, putting jesting aside, let us turn to serious thoughts,” sed tamen amoto quaeramus seria ludo. Between the two references, the serious is fused with the playful, with laughter, encapsulating the Society’s quest to foster art historical knowledge while maintaining a spirit of boisterous sociality and good-will.

21 Ibid.

22 Historical Notices of the Society of Dilettanti, B.
Since the early 20th century, discussions of ideal 18th century masculinity in Europe have emphasized politeness. 23 The British 18th century was that of a “polite and commercial people,” according to Paul Langford, with masculinity defined by polite manners. 24 More recent scholarship has challenged this claim, referencing bawdy and sadistic satirical prints produced in the 18th and early 19th centuries, such as those studied by Vic Gattrell and Simon Dickie. 25 These studies asserted that though politeness was the ideal in theory, practice reflected an earthier, less polished reality. 26 Kate Davison posits, however, that rather than a dichotomous “gulf between theory and practice,” a wider variety of acceptable social practice existed in the 18th century. As she writes, “Social practice does not disprove or negate the importance of the language of politeness; it adds alternatives to it, since men were influenced by standards set out in print as well as the behavior of others. Examples of gentlemanly homosocial encounters…reveal a wider culture that offsets the discursive ideal of the ‘polite gentleman,’ and makes it possible to think that different practices were rewarded in different settings.” 27 Davison argues that unfamiliar company would be the recipient of “decorous behavior,” or politeness, while close friends allowed “…the greater licence [sic.] to revel in the rude and lewd…” 28 Terming the relaxing of manners in private circles “intimate bawdiness,” she relates the

24 Ibid., 926-927.
25 Ibid., 927-8.
26 Ibid., 928
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 923.
humorous liberties allowed amongst male friends to “a train of renaissance humanist thought that valorized wit as the centrepiece [sic.] of male sociability.”

As the paintings were hung in a semi-public space—the meeting rooms of a tavern—they made permanent the bawdy jokes of some of the paintings, certainly that of the “libertine” group. Davison writes that “intimate bawdiness” is not meant to include those “elite men who asserted their superiority by openly flouting the ethical aspirations of their middle-class emulators”—this is the common classification of the libertine.

Jason M. Kelly furthers the definition, writing,

Rather than being tied to a ritual or a social calendar, the elite libertine was ostensibly free to ignore social conventions at will. Functionally, acts of libertinism were assertions of exceptionalism available only to elite males who had little fear of social repercussions…Dueling and carousing were activities that, paradoxically, supplemented elite codes of mannerly and virtuous conduct by asserting a parallel code of unrestrained indulgence.

It is telling that two sources, including one from Horace Walpole, revealing that the portraits were available for non-club viewing mention Sir Francis Dashwood’s portrait—it was, then as now, the most assertively subversive painting. In this sense, the Dilettanti portraits are not perfect examples of “intimate bawdiness” because their intimacy was compromised by non-Society viewers. Undoubtedly, these viewers were mainly men, as

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 930.
the paintings were, as previously stated, hung in the meeting room of a tavern. Some of
the paintings are clearly “unrestrained” in their flouting of polite conduct, and the rest of
the series is marked by association. Yet I argue that the closeness reflected amongst sitters
through pose and alcoholic ritual demands that we consider the paintings as symptomatic
of this eighteenth-century sociability, where closeness of friendship allowed for greater
lack of restraint.

The objectionable jokes—the “intimate bawdiness”— of the Dilettanti portraits
are readily observed. Most saliently, the portrait of Sir Francis Dashwood, Lord
LeDespencer shows the sitter dressed as a Franciscan monk performing mock-
Communion at the loins of the Venus de’Medici. The statue’s hand has been removed and
leg partially extended to draw attention to her secret parts, from which light emanates in
the direction of her tonsured devotee. Though it was not unusual to be painted in
costume, Dashwood’s faux-monk garb was part of the “ludicrous, the libertine, cross-
dressing,… and so on,” costumes that were popular at masquerades yet portrayed
unflattering characters that most chose not to be remembered by in portraits. Dressing
as Catholic ecclesiastic figures could be termed “libertine,” as they were associated in
Britain with a repressed, and thus more palpable, sexuality. As Terry Castle writes of
Catholic costume in the British masquerade, "the ironic disparity between the trappings

32 Aileen Ribeiro, Clothing Art: The Visual Culture of Fashion 1600-1914 (New Haven:
Yale University Press, 2017), 196-197.
of celibacy and the all-too-human body beneath held then as now a peculiarly inflaming power".  

Further realms for offense could be found in the portrait of John Montagu, Lord Sandwich, a close friend and collaborator of Dashwood. Dressed as a Turkish sultan, the portrait references his voyages in the Levant with Lord Bessborough and Jean-Etienne Liotard, and his membership in the Divan club, a short-lived society for those who had visited the Middle East. Sultans, with their associations with the harem, were seen as sexually charged power figures, even as British people lusted after the exotic fabrics and craftsmanship of Orient. The phallic placement of Montagu’s dagger further emphasizes the sexuality of the image.

The objectionable humor of the portraits notwithstanding, the portraits establish a closeness amongst the sitters and viewers that creates an intimacy for these unsavory jokes. Though the arrangement of the portraits in the tavern meetinghouse is unknown, groupings can be inferred by elements like costume and relating inscription. John Montagu, for example, toasts his companion Lord Bessborough, who greets him in his portrait with his hand raised. The two are the only sitters shown in Turkish clothing, being the only members of the Dilettanti to have traveled to the Orient. Samuel Savage’s direct gaze creates an atmosphere of intrigue as he reaches mysteriously into his cloak, presumably to retrieve something for the viewer, or to disrobe. Sir Bourchier Wrey looks

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outside his frame to another, for whom he gamely essays to make punch in a rocking ship at sea. Redford writes, “Knapton’s sitters explicitly acknowledge ‘the presence of an audience’…These are pictures, after all, that derive from and commune with an intimate, even inbred group of cognoscenti.”

That the portraits were in conversation with each other indicated that the Dilettanti, too, were engaged in robust and animated conversation. Richard Steele, the 18th century writer who expounded on ideal masculinity, wrote that, “a gentleman is a man of conversation.” Scholar Michèle Cohen explains that upper class British men were expected to perfect languages, specifically French, in their native lands and on the Grand Tour, because “breeding implied cultivation and refinement of the tongue as well as of manners.” Laurence Klein traces the instigation of the Grand Tour to the courtly tradition, which so prized the French language that British men were sent to France to perfect it, along with visiting Italy to see the ruins and learn Italian. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who resided in Venice several times between 1739 and 1761, shows the importance of language learning to elite British when she mocked “English dandies” in Venice, who neglected their study of the Italian language to “loung[e] around the


36 Ibid., 56.

37 Ibid., 55.
Venetian coffeehouses, elegantly dressed in the latest fashions, sipping coffee and chocolate, discussing their latest affairs…”  

Paradoxically, the British feared that their Grand Tour-educated young men would become too refined, too polite as they left their country to learn from the gentry of the Continent. British men were to learn from the French, yet “were warned not to imitate [Frenchmen]: Frenchmen’s masculinity was suspect because they spent so much time in gallantry with ladies.”  

In Richard Hurd’s 1764 imagined discourse between Lord Shaftesbury and John Locke, which debated the merits and disadvantages of foreign travel for young men, Locke expresses the fear that a young man would be “polished… out of his rusticity…but may easily wear himself into the contrary defect, an effeminate and unmanly foppery.”  

Englishmen are, according to Hurd’s Locke, models of “plainness” and “roughness,” though still endowed with worthy, manly qualities: “…but let them atone for this defect by their useful sense, their superior knowledge, their public spirit, and, above all, by their unpolished integrity.”  

How then, to reconcile the accomplishments amassed on the Grand Tour, still considered a worthy undertaking?

40 Ibid., 59.  
41 Ibid., 61.
Michèle Cohen writes that, “A true [18th century] gentleman…displayed neither his foreign clothes or his foreign tongue,” and John Barrell writes, somewhat hyperbolically, that an eighteenth-century gentleman was one “who is imagined as being able to comprehend everything, and yet who may give no evidence of having comprehended anything.”  

The Society of Dilettanti wear their learning proudly, and literally, showcasing their travel and classical education through costumes, props, and inscriptions. The portraits, with their references to the writings of Horace and Cervantes, were visual testaments to individual and collective breeding—even the libertine portrait of Sir Francis Dashwood shows a familiarity with classical statuary and Catholic art that speaks to Italian Grand Tour travel. They are not the unassuming “true” British gentleman proposed in the studies of Cohen and Barrell, yet the portraits depict the sitters as still in possession of manly British characteristics.

Sir James Barry, part of the Van Dyck group, strikes a uniquely English tone with 17th century costume modeled on the Dutch artist’s paintings. This “fancy dress,” or costume, was particularly popular in English masquerades, likely because Van Dyck was such a formative figure in British art. Sir Francis Dashwood, though evidently fascinated with Roman Catholicism (he later created his own club: a fraternity of debauched “monks”), mocks their clergy and the perceived slavishness of Catholic ritual. The implications of his portrait are crass, but they mirror rightly indignant criticisms that

42 Ibid., 59.
43 Ibid.
British Protestant Grand Tourists levied on Roman Catholicism, perceiving its followers as superstitious and its leaders as hypocritical and worldly.\textsuperscript{44} Dashwood’s portrait, and others in the series, represent fascination with the clothing and customs of the “other,” but the sitters resist accusations of foppish abandonment of country through their comic tone. As Clare Haynes writes, anti-Catholic sentiment was “fundamental to the experience of [English] nationality in the eighteenth century.”\textsuperscript{45} As Redford writes, “For all their trappings of mockery, the portraits of the Dilettanti, like the Dilettanti themselves, use parody as a means of affirming rather than subverting the status quo.”\textsuperscript{46} As British men, they were intent on proving that their Grand Tours were an asset to their Britishness, not a repudiation.

An assertion of national identity and fraternity is clear in the many toasts and full wine glasses of the Dilettanti portraits. A ceramic punch bowl figures prominently in the uncostumed portrait of Sir Bourchier Wrey, with ingredients for punch—oranges and sugar—placed in the foreground. Like many contemporary punch bowls, it is highly decorated—the centerpiece of a table. Views of drinking were varied, but many eighteenth-century British viewed it as “manly and convivial, an aid to wit, good humour

\textsuperscript{44} Evelyn Lord, \textit{The Hellfire Clubs} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 80, ProQuest Ebook Central.


\textsuperscript{46} Bruce Redford, \textit{Dilettanti: The Antic and the Antique in Eighteenth Century England}, 42.
Wrey’s preparation of punch, and his expectant glance to a companion outside the frame, suggests a generosity of spirit as he doles out drink. Karen Harvey writes particularly of punch that, “the liquid of punch—the blending of water, fruit, spices, and spirit—suggested to contemporaries a world in which disparate individuals joined together in good-humoured [sic.] friendship.” With the tilted frame and the hilarity of toppled jars and sloshing water, Wrey is not a delicate, overly polite Continental fop, but a British traveler who approaches the challenges of tourism with a robust and hardy spirit—a pleasant, witty companion.

Antiquarian Dilettanti members would have enjoyed the classical allusions inherent in the collective drinking of punch. Many songs and poems of the age imagined classical gods and goddesses each contributing an ingredient for the beverage; in one broadside, Apollo brings water, Juno brings lemons, Venus brings sugar, Bacchus brings grapes, Mars brings brandy, and Saturn brings nutmeg. Sharing punch amongst male companions hearkened to Greek symposia and Roman convivia, the formal drinking parties of antiquity where men gathered to do business and discuss ideas. The Latin inscription on Sir Bourchier Wrey’s punch bowl reinforces the dinner parties of the ancient world with an inscription taken, as with *seria ludo*, from Horace: *Dulce est Despiere in Loco*, “’Tis sweet at the fitting time to cast serious thoughts aside.”

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49 Ibid.
was an instrument of camaraderie, with its depiction in Sir Bourchier Wrey’s portrait asserting the goodwill and joviality of the Society as a whole.

Depicting the Dilettanti in masquerade dress aligns them all with Venice, reinforcing their collective ties formed during their Grand Tours. It is thought that the Society “first began to crystallize” in la Serenissima, “the center of masquerading par excellence.” In Venice, English tourists could, like Joseph Spence in 1732, experience the dizzying sensation of Venice at carnival, where one could be, “pushed aside by, ‘an odd blundering harlequin and while you are recovering yourself you stumble perhaps against a milkmaid, who, ten to one, is a lady of the first quality. There are great numbers of gentlemen dressed up like country fellows, with wooden shoes...[and] others like Turks, Indians, Sclavonians &c’” Though Venice by the 18th century “was perceived by foreign visitors to be in economic decline” it nonetheless “[performed masquerades] with Grandeur and Magnificence,” making attending and participating in an Italian masquerade “an indispensable part of the peripatetic English gentleman’s itinerary.”

Sitters’ costumes in the Dilettanti portraits can be tied to real masquerade costume, yet in contrast with the usual “logic of symbolic inversion,” or dressing as the


opposite of oneself, that was the hallmark of the masquerade, the Dilettanti “impersonate beings that stylize, liberate, document, or parody aspects of their authentic selves.” As a further assertion of personality, the sitters do not wear masks, which were, of course, essential to a masquerade and a source of their enduring appeal and mystique. Van Dyck and Catholic dress were often seen at masquerades, as was Oriental dress like that of John Montagu, yet Charles Sackville’s portrait calls to mind a more refined version of the masquerade, those that might have been organized by members of “learned academies, or grand aristocratic families,” which centered on “allegorical, mythological, or oriental themes.” As it was, to wear classical dress to a masked ball would normally have been considered “too antiquarian, too serious,” with the loose, ungainly draperies associated with it usually posing a challenge to all but the most daring of revelers. Shown in Knapton’s portrait holding a scroll and wearing a sumptuous cuirass decorated in gold vegetal motifs, his costume makes reference to a Florentine carnival when he staged and performed in what was, according to a contemporary, “a superb masque representing a Roman general or consul returning from battle in triumph…the entire spectacle was a great success and set all of Italy talking.” The inscription on his portrait makes


56 Ibid., 238.

reference to this event, saying, “Charles Sackville, Earl of Middlesex, during the
Florentine Saturnalia of 1738 [represented] in the guise of a Roman consul returning
from a campaign.” In the carnivalesque spirit of the typical masquerade, and seria ludo,
this homage to antiquity has a “highly theatrical vein,” with a dark, stage-like background.

Samuel Savage, who had visited Venice twice in his Grand Tour, is shown
wearing a red coat trimmed with fur, along with traditional Venetian masquerade attire: a
black tricorn with feathers, a black lace bauta, a black domino, and a mask cast to the side
(Fig. 5). These costume elements were popular in England as well as Italy, with dominos
called “Venetian cloaks.” The domino was not a specific costume representing a specific
character or culture, but it was unmistakably Venetian. Black was the traditional Venetian
color for a domino, indeed it was the customary color of everyday life, with Joseph
Spence writing, “nobles, physicians and lawyers have habits alike; their robes are black
silk for the summer, black cloth autumn and spring, and the same with furs for the
winter.”

“Every meeting of the Dilettanti must have resembled some species of
masquerade,” writes Bruce Redford, with dressing up in costume a codified aspect of

58 Ibid.  
59 Ibid.  
60 Aileen Ribeiro, Clothing Art: The Visual Culture of Fashion 1600-1914, 203.
Society of Dilettanti. The President, for example, wore a “scarlet toga.” In February 1742 it was decided that the secretary was to wear “the dress of Machiavelli,” though there seems to be no record of this costume ultimately being procured. The Arch-Master was to wear, “The Superb Robes of Office. Viz. the long Crimson, taffeta, tassel’d Robe, The Magnificent Embroider’d, and Emboss’d Baudrier, the long Spanish Toledo, and the Grand Hungarian Furr’d Cap.” These costumes were not without symbolism and significance. The President’s “Roman dress,” as dictated by the Society, indicated the Dilettanti’s “republican political genealogy that looked back through Venice to Rome,” and the secretary’s proposed costume was meant to hearken to Machiavelli’s role as, “the celebrated Florentine secretary.”

The Dilettanti clearly patronized their home-grown masquerades, which is not surprising considering they “took decisive shape during the period when masquerades


62 Ibid., 4.


were attaining a pitch of popularity” in England.\textsuperscript{68} Masquerades were a recent import from the Continent, first seen in England in the typical Venetian sense at the beginning of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. In one instance, the Society decided “that the Arch-Master of the Ceremonies has Liberty to go to any Creditable Masquerade in the Robes of his Office,” (1748) effectively “blur[ring] the distinction completely” between Society ritual and the outside masquerade culture.\textsuperscript{69}

Masquerades, both on the Continent and in England, were spaces in which greater jest was permitted; the Dilettanti portraits’ masquerade atmosphere allows for the humor and irreverence of the paintings. “Carnivalesque” is the term most frequently used to describe the topsy-turvy-ness so associated with the masquerade and carnival, the entertainments and gatherings at the beginning of a new year, when people, in continuity with ancient pagan rites, celebrated “the renewed fertility of the land after the end of winter.”\textsuperscript{70} Disguising oneself at carnival was traditionally a means of dissuading wandering evil spirits.\textsuperscript{71} Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian intellectual and critic, used “carnivalesque” in \textit{Rabelais and His World} to, “describe the occasions on which the world was turned upside down and the senses heightened by the possibilities of metamorphosis, ‘the feast of becoming, change and renewal,’ when men and women, via


\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 19.

\textsuperscript{70} Aileen Ribeiro, \textit{Clothing Art: The Visual Culture of Fashion 1600-1914}, 201.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
masks and clothes, became different from themselves.”72 Aileen Ribeiro describes the cacophony of carnival as she writes, “social ranks and hierarchies were temporarily suspended, so that masqueraders disguised in a variety of masks and often bizarre costumes made fun of their superiors and the religious authorities, swopped gender, and generally made mayhem.”73 By establishing a carnivesque tone through masquerade costume, an 18th century viewer could understand that the artist was evoking spaces where politeness was not required, and social niceties were rendered less potent.

Masquerades were also tinged, if not saturated, with sexual tension, which created an ideal atmosphere for the lewdness of some Dilettanti portraits. Samuel Savage’s portrait, the most unmistakably Venetian in costume, displays a shell at the forefront; shells are the symbol of pilgrims, like Grand Tourists, but also of Venus. The traditional title of Carnival King had associations with sexuality, and carnival, as stated, is a continuation of an ancient celebration of the Earth’s rebirth and fertility.74 The eighteenth-century masquerade’s eroticism can also be traced again to prevailing views on the foreign, as a 1718 Weekly Journal can attest, stating that masquerades came from “hot Countries (notorious for Lewdness).”75 In one Weekly Journal from 1718 the author writes, “The masks secures the Ladies from Detraction, and encourages a Liberty, the

72 Ibid., 198.
73 Ibid.
74 Terry Castle, Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnivalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction, 22.
75 Ibid., 7.
Guilt of which the Blushes would betray when barefac’d, till by Degrees they are innur’d to that which is out of their Vertue to restrain.”

Protected by their masks, revelers could move freely, unshackled by etiquette and the usual restraint enforced by social norms; this, despite comments like the one above, was part of the masquerade’s appeal to women in particular. The anonymity, however, caused “masquerade spectacle [to be] profoundly erotically charged, and…much of the occasion’s popularity resulted from the aura of sexual danger and mystery—the air of ‘Intrigue’—that pervaded the scene.”

While masquerades were popular in England, and an essential entertainment for British abroad, it is essential to note that many British would have found the costumed portraits reprehensible due to their associations with the masquerade. Though modern scholarship sees links between England’s merrymaking past and the 18th century masquerade, most English of the 18th century did not, and “were convinced…that the masquerade had no English precedent.” The eighteenth-century public associated the masquerade with the foreign and the Continental, and their remarks on the subject reveal their biases on the Catholic countries where carnival was still common, collective practice. Among the voices were the Bishop of London, who, in 1724, “blamed [the


77 Ibid., 44.

78 Ibid., 38.

79 Ibid., 7.
masked assembly’s] appearance on the machinations of a certain ‘Ambassador of a
neighboring Nation,’ and exposed them as a French plot to enslave ‘true Englishmen’ by
encouraging in the ‘Licentiousness and Effeminacy.’” In the same year, a writer for the
Weekly Journal wrote, with a hint of satire, that masquerades were “all apart [sic.] of a
Continental conspiracy to neutralize the superior beauties of English women by forcing
them to hide their charms under masks.” Terry Castle writes,

Throughout the century, not surprisingly, masquerades were persistently
associated with diabolical foreign influence, imported corruption, the dangerous
breach of national boundaries, contamination from without. To its most vociferous
critics, the masquerade was a kind of cultural influenza, a foreign sickness that,
having invaded English shores, undermined every aspect of national life.

Despite these scathing remarks, masquerades persisted in 18th century England at
pleasure-gardens like the famous Vauxhall, and in private parties.

George Knapton’s portraits are varied and playful in their approach, with
different color palettes—soft rococo pastels for Sir Bourchier Wrey, jewel tones for Sir
James Barry, earthy browns for Sir Francis Dashwood—suited for the mood of each
portrait. They may not outwardly appear to exemplify the e pluribus unum Redford has
identified as the purpose of “ensemble portraiture” like the Society of Dilettanti and Kit
Cat Club portraits. The Society of Dilettanti, by being mainly in masquerade dress,
subvert and yet reinforce e pluribus unum; they reinforce their collective eclecticism and

80 Ibid.
81 Ibid., 8.
82 Ibid., 7.
83 Ibid., 14.
individualism through their varied poses and divergent costume, and by so doing establish their values as a group. Kate Davison writes that an important component to “polite sociability” was “inclusivity… all participants should be involved in a conversation. Laughter therefore should be shared and not that of a single individual or faction within a group.”\footnote{Ibid., 3.} As part of a whole, the Dilettanti portraits are allowed a jovial, laughing aspect because, as fellow denizens of the carnivalesque masquerade, they are humorous together.

At the beginning of the society's first volume of Minute Books is written in Latin: 

\textit{Hae Nugae, in seria ducant,} meaning, “May these trifles lead to serious matters.”\footnote{Ibid., 3.} In time, the rowdy, drunken trifles of the early Dilettanti gave way to the staid, scholarly, serious institution it is today, one whose members, and their collections, would be instrumental in the creation of British museums and national artistic culture. George Knapton's portraits of the society give a vibrant and experimental view of its founders, displaying their personalities, aspirations, inspirations, and vices, all the while weaving through the same threads of the carnivalesque and masquerade that constituted a major part of the Dilettanti ceremonies and culture. Though irreverent in content and meaning, especially when compared to more public, polite contemporary portraiture, the Dilettanti portraits nonetheless demonstrate how close male friendships created spaces for boisterous exchange, even expressions of the profane. These portraits would benefit from a more expansive study of gender, examining each to voice the nuances of masculinity

\footnote{Kate Davison, "Occasional Politeness," 934.}
expressed in costume, prop, and pose. An eclectic, learned group, George Knapton’s portraits of the Society of Dilettanti are a visual assertion of the spirited private world of men in the 18th century.
Bibliography


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Fig. 1

George Knapton (1698-1778), *Charles Sackville, 2nd Duke of Dorset*, 1741, oil on canvas, 91.4 x 71.1 cm, London, Society of Dilettanti
George Knapton, *Sir Francis Dashwood, Lord LeDespencer*, 1748, oil on canvas, 91.4 x 71.1 cm, London, Society of Dilettanti
Fig. 3

George Knapton, *Samuel Savage*, 1744, oil on canvas, 91.4 x 71.1 cm, London, Society of Dilettanti
Fig. 4

George Knapton, John Montagu, 4th Earl of Sandwich, 1745, oil on canvas, 91.4 x 71.1 cm, London, Society of Dilettanti
Fig. 5

George Knapton, *Sir Bourchier Wrey*, 1744, oil on canvas, 91.4 x 71.1 cm, London, Society of Dilettanti
Fig. 6

Sir Godfrey Kneller, *Charles Lennox, 1st Duke of Richmond and Lennox*, c. 1703, oil on canvas, 36 in. x 28 in. (914 mm x 711 mm), Given by the Art Fund, 1945, London, National Portrait Gallery.