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“All the Litter as it Lay”

Swift, Montagu, and Their Practice of Thing Theory

Eli Phillips

“Was there ‘thing theory’ in the English eighteenth century?” (Blackwell 9). That’s the question that Mark Blackwell asks in his introduction to *The Secret Life of Things*, a book of critical essays examining it-narratives and their elucidation of the role of material objects in eighteenth-century literature. The answer, while literally “no” (Bill Brown wouldn’t publish his groundbreaking article “Thing Theory” until the early 2000s) is actually quite substantially more complicated: at least since McKendrick et al.’s work proposing eighteenth-century England as the scene for the birth of the first consumer society, critics have well established the importance of material, materialist, and commercial culture for the philosophic and literary climate of the period (McKendrick et al., Wall and Benedict). Such a cultural obsession with objects created and utilized by human beings implies that a more or less conscious contemplation of objects and their role in human life would follow, but most criticism so far has focused on the progressive cluttering of English *prose* with the products of consumerism, only occasionally providing evidence for the contemplation of these objects in a way that could be seen as a proto-thing-theory and largely ignoring poetry (Benedict).

Blackwell finds the answer to his question (a qualified “yes”) in the prose (with the exception of an article on Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock”) it-narratives that his book analyzes, and Cynthia Wall establishes the turn

toward contemplation of objects in prose in her book *The Prose of Things*, but Benedict finds both lacking in their investigation of poetry when she suggests that Wall might have included an examination of the poetic turn towards object-description in her work. This paper, to assist in filling that gap, argues that the treatment of objects in the interchange between Swift and Montagu comprising Swift's "The Lady's Dressing Room" and Montagu's "The Dean's Provocation for Writing the Lady's Dressing Room" provides evidence confirming the fact that poets, as well as prose writers, were not only including the products of consumer culture in their work but specifically contemplating the roles of both objects and things, and that they also included and made conclusions about poems themselves as objects and things in their respective works.

A brief introduction to thing theory is necessary here to establish criteria for Swift and Montagu's work as participating in a prototype of its tradition. Thing theory as it exists in the twenty-first century focuses on the difference between the object and the thing as they exist in human consciousness. For Brown, an object is a thing with a purpose, a physical item that a human being uses to achieve some end, and which therefore possesses some *telos* or overarching essence. Human beings conceive of objects based on their purpose, so objects lose their status as such when they challenge, whether through malfunction or minute observation, their *telos* and instead force us to encounter the aspects they possess which don't conform to, or are superfluous to, our expectations of their function:

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily (Brown 4).

An event that thus forces us to examine aspects of an object that are not inherently important to its purpose also forces us to consider the object as a "thing" in its own right, instead of simply a member of a category of means to an end. Linguistically, the word "thing" contains ambiguity, derision, and even celebration: we use it when we are unsure what to call an object because that object is unable to conform to our ideas of its essence, or when we notice aspects of an object that preclude our reducing it to its essence (Brown). Even when a thing is not damaged, investigation of the thing constitutes an instantiation of our imagined object in reality, revealing aspects beyond its central purpose. Each such instantiation, with its variation from our expectations, is therefore a

destruction of our imaginary category for the object: if it is not what we imagined, we must reevaluate our imagination. Such a definition provides a criteria for judging whether Swift and Montagu engaged in thing theory instead of just filling their poems with the objects that had recently come to fill the lives of all members of British society. Beyond this superficial employing of the objects of their culture in their poetry, Swift and Montagu both contemplate the place of very different types of objects and examine what Brown calls their “thingness,” the elements of their character that go beyond their most basic purpose.

Swift’s examination of things comes in the context of their effect on the two characters of his poem: Celia and Strephon. Swift, as he does in another of his “Dressing Room” poems, “A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed” uses objects to construct his characters. Celia, after five hours spent using things to beautify herself, “from her chamber issues / Array’d in Lace, Brocades and Tissues” (Swift 3–4). Already surrounded by objects, and having emerged as the beautiful but necessarily constructed “Goddess” (Swift 3) she disappears from the rest of the poem, and in her absence Strephon is also essentially built by his own encounter with each of the items in her dressing room—a series of encounters that not only characterizes him but also, interestingly, rebuilds Celia in his imagination through the thingness of the objects she uses to make herself beautiful. Like the prostitute in “A Beautiful Young Nymph” who constructs her physical appearance with not only cosmetics but also prosthetics (which Turner and Withey link to the commercial culture of the time), Celia and Strephon are almost literally built by the objects they encounter: only their interaction with objects and with things characterizes them.

Celia’s interaction with the items in her dressing room might be seen as a typical subject-object interaction, where the objects are used for a distinct purpose and achieve a desirable result, while Strephon’s interaction with the same objects in a completely different manner might be seen as an interaction with their thingness. In order to create the goddess, Celia’s cosmetics must only fulfill a purpose, and any other characteristic they possess is inconsequential, subordinated, and subverted by their one aim. The thingness of Celia’s toilette intrudes upon us, her, and Strephon only in Strephon’s voyeuristic close investigation of each of the items in her dressing room, beginning with her smock:

And first a dirty Smock appear’d,
Beneath the Arm-pits well besmear’d.
Strephon, the Rogue, display’d it wide,

And turned it round on every Side (Swift 14–15).

Strephon's close investigation is not only transgressive in its social impropriety and inherent puerile lewdness, but it reveals aspects of the smock beyond its *telos* of appearing lovely: it also apparently absorbs sweat, and isn't as lovely to the nose as it is to the eye. The same pattern follows for the rest of the objects that Strephon investigates and Swift catalogues: each is investigated, its primary purpose is usually stated—for instance, the “Comb for various uses” (Swift 21) or the “Puppy Water, beauty's help” (31)—and then a secondary, repulsive incidental characteristic is noted: for the comb, the fact that it is filled with dirt, and for the puppy urine, the implied stench. The primary purpose of each object is to beautify, but the secondary disgusts, presenting a dichotomy between objectness and thingness that runs through the poem, and emphasizing the destruction of an ideal that occurs when it is confronted by a close examination of reality.

Wall and Benedict have discussed the historical context for Swift's construction of character via things, his close examination of things, and the disgust that emerges from emphasizing thingness in Swift. During the latter half of the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth, the philosophy of materialists like John Locke emphasized the role of the material world in our understanding of nature and also in the construction of a human mind. Microscopy and close investigation became widely accepted and participated in by the educated people of the time as a means to learn (Wall, Benedict). Meditation on the material and on its influence on human life became, as Wall notes, “a sort of non-equipment-based microscopy—and a widely popularized one at that” (Wall 80). Objects began to fill previously empty narratives, and treatises conducted by microscopists as well as extensive attempts to categorize and list the various objects in the world were published to popular appeal (Wall). While these lists and accounts of microscopy often lauded the beauty and purpose of each individual object, insect, and animal they detailed, Wall mentions that Swift usually found a “negative particularity” in close investigation: for him, the instantiation of the real destroyed the ideal, and the effect was disgust and satire (Wall 80). Evidently, Swift was troubled by the fact that the real often deconstructs the ideal: as a satirist, his own *telos* was to employ realism to improve humanity. He found, as Strephon did, little joy, and rather an intense disgust when instantiating an idea and closely investigating the world, and apparently

hoped by portraying reality to encourage humanity to live closer to what he would have considered the ideal.

It's this very attitude that Swift seems to be contemplating in "The Lady's Dressing Room": if humans are nothing more than the things with which they interact, how is the thingness of those things to be ignored, or at least, how is their thingness to be allowed for and incorporated into our idea of their creation? When imagination or categorization is polluted or defied by instantiation, resulting in a destruction of the ideal, what is the result? For Strephon, at least, when Celia is reconstructed in his imagination by association with the filthy objects whose thingness intrudes on her ideal nature, the disgust overpowers his romance with the ideal:

But Vengeance, Goddess never sleeping
Soon punish'd Strephon for his Peeping;
His foul Imagination links
Each Dame he sees with all her Stinks (Swift 119–123).

The deconstruction of Celia through her association with the filth of thingness has ruined Strephon's ability to appreciate her beauty: she is inseparable from the thingness of the objects she uses to construct herself. Ironically, unlike the prostitute in "A Beautiful Young Nymph," Celia has gone through a second construction, not a deconstruction, but the result is the same: like the smell rising from her chamber pot and infesting her clothing (Swift 105–108) the thingness of the objects she used to make herself beautiful now makes her revolting.

The exact target of Swift's extended satirical meditation on thingness is extremely difficult to pin down. Real and Vienken perhaps come closest when they assert that Swift parodies reality itself: a system of love that can only exist through ignorance, vanity, deceit, and misogyny. While Swift hopes that Strephon can learn to "think like me" and admire "Such Order from Confusion sprung, / Such gaudy Tulips rais'd from Dung," (Swift 141–144) the intense and difficult-to-dismiss disgust that he has evoked through Strephon leave us unsure if this is really the solution: wouldn't it be better to dismiss a system requiring both such extravagant preparation and idealization of women in favor of one that acknowledged reality? (Swift 141–144). Either way, Swift's poem's meditation on the nature of things and on the effect of close observation of the aspects of things that don't relate directly to their central purpose seems to suggest that he was participating

in a sort of proto-thing-theory, or perhaps a mixture of the materialism of his day with a contemplation of the purpose of objects.

The intense disgust registered by readers when experiencing “The Lady’s Dressing Room” demanded a reply from those who felt the poem was improper and unpoetic: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu was one of these. When she wrote “The Dean’s Provocation for Writing the Lady’s Dressing Room,” Montagu imitated Swift’s style in many respects, and not least was the construction of her characters by the objects with which they interact. Hence we get Swift as a hypocritical and conspicuously flashy clergyman characterized by a “clean starch’d Band,” a “Golden Snuff-box,” and a “Diamond Ring” within the first three lines of the poem (Montagu 1–3). Similarly, the greed of the prostitute whom Montagu’s depiction of Swift visits is characterized by her trunk and her pocket, both receptacles of money.

Montagu thus engages in the same sort of Lockeian, materialist character-construction as Swift, but she does not necessarily cross into a meditation of the purpose and nature of things by such an act. In fact, what in Swift’s poem might be read as an earnest interest in the nature of objects and their relationship to humanity is belittled by Montagu in scathing satire as simple and pathetic outrage at the impotence he claims is caused by the offensive state of the prostitute’s dressing room and her personal hygiene: “your damn’d Close-stool so near my Nose, / Your dirty Smock, and stinking Toes, would make a Hercules . . . tame” (Montagu 74–76). Additionally, while Swift removes Celia from the poem to instead contemplate her construction through objects directly, Montagu instead leads with her characters: “the Doctor,” like Celia, emerges ready to woo in the first lines of the poem, but then, instead of being abandoned, is closely followed and narrated, with plenty more to do than to be simply characterized by objects he has left behind. According to Benedict, Swift “frequently explores the ambiguity of the human-object relationship to reveal the agency in objects and the objective element of bodies, and often depicts objects as superior to humans” (201). The same would be difficult to assert in Montagu’s case: objects simply don’t have the same power in Montagu’s poetry to define and even replace characters as they do in Swift’s. In Swift’s poetry characters come first, and objects, while utilized to characterize them, do not usurp their position in the narrative, and are never contemplated in the same way that Swift spends much of his time doing.

This difference in technique suggests a difference in attitudes between members of two extremely strict gender groups: where Swift is comfortable making a woman an object created by other objects, and then swiftly ushering her out of the poem so that he can philosophically contemplate reality alongside a male subject of the poem, Montagu's refusal to objectify her characters in this way may be indicative of her position as a woman writer and somewhat of a feminist. At a time when other poets were largely writing of men as pursuing subjects and women as pursued objects, Montagu refused to objectify either, instead asserting the agency and humanity of both (Deutsch). While a broader survey of eighteenth-century men's and women's poetry and a closer reading of Swift and Montagu's work, both of which humanize their characters in different ways and can be seen as satirizing the misogyny of their culture, (Real and Vienken) would be needed to establish this difference in their satire as representative of either the poets or their period, it seems at a first glance to track with notions of masculinity and femininity popular in poetry during the time, and with assertions made about female poets being closer to a more human and Romantic sensibility by Romantic authors (Mowry and Bate).

Because of this difference in technique, Montagu's engagement with thing theory is not found in this aspect of her poetry (the construction of character through objects and subsequent contemplation of the roles of those objects and things). Her leading with character and her lack of close investigation instead make it difficult to assert that she is engaging in the type of thing-contemplation that Bill Brown argues constitutes the need for thing theory in the first place (Brown 4). No, Montagu's contemplation of things comes from a different *type* of object or thing in her reply to Swift: the poem itself. As an object with a purpose, what is a poem? More specifically, since Swift and Montagu were engaging in the writing of satire in the eighteenth century, what is an eighteenth-century satire? What is it meant to do? The answer may be found in what Montagu argues Swift and Pope are failing at in their poetry:

Wit is the Citizen's Ambition'
 Poor [Pope] Philosophy displays on
 With so much Rhyme and little Reason;
 But tho' he preaches ne'er so long,
 That *all is right*, his Head is wrong (Montagu 44–48).

Eighteenth-century satire evidently valued a rational, reasonable depiction of reality, laced with wit, that philosophically explored morality. Since Montagu

found this lacking in her reading (or misreading) of Swift's poetry, she perceived or invented other aspects of the poem she was reading that didn't seem to track with its stated purpose as a satire: namely, a personal vendetta by a slighted and impotent aged lover against a prostitute who didn't take very good care of her hygiene.

It could be argued that Montagu experienced, in her reading of Swift's work, just such an instantiation-destruction of her ideas of satire that Brown argues we are confronted with when we are met with broken things. Montagu's "Digression" on the lamentable failure at satire (which ironically, should show reality in order to deconstruct and reinforce the ideal) by her fellow poets, including Swift, turns her poem into a meta-satire on satire itself as she sees it existing in Pope and Swift (Montagu 34). The fact that she infers that their satires result from personal motives and experiences rather than objectively observed reality makes them broken satires, broken objects that are now things. Montagu essentially confronts us with the thingness of a broken poem: all the things that a poem can be while simultaneously *not* being what it is supposed to be.

The effect of this encounter is to suggest to us that satire should be something else, while simultaneously highlighting the fascinating, disgusting, and celebratory aspects of an object we may never have thought to put under a microscope before: a poem. Just as the effect of encountering a broken thing requires us to reevaluate it, Montagu's presentation of a "broken" satire that has failed to achieve its *telos* and has thus disrupted her (and therefore our, through the lens of her poetic voice) expectations of satire, forces us to reevaluate our idea of what satire should be, what it was during the eighteenth century, and consider other possibilities for the purpose that a satire, or a poem in general, could accomplish under closer investigation.

In conclusion, the answer to Blackwell's question comes through as a resounding "yes." While thing theory may not have been named as such until the early 2000s, Swift's intense contemplation of and encounter with the thingness of things when removed from the context of their stated purpose, and his trouble over how to deal with such thingness when it intrudes on the human beings that he constructs from objects in his materialist worldview, suggest that eighteenth-century contemplation of things existed vibrantly in poetry, not just in prose, as has already been established. Further, Montagu's meta-satire on satire itself, which posits satire, and poetry itself, as a thing with a purpose, forces us to encounter what she considers a broken satire,

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and then asks us to reexamine our notions of what satire and poetry are and should accomplish, while simultaneously relishing the hilarity and beauty of her imagination of what they might be while they fail to accomplish their own purpose. As would be expected from its obsession with commercialism, consumer culture, and materialist philosophy, thing theory was indeed alive and well during the eighteenth century.

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