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Objectifying Men: *Gulliver's Travels*, *Fantomina*, and the Dildo in Eighteenth-Century Literature

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Eighteenth-century literature is saturated with satires on the human body, especially the female body. This is most notable in the writings of men such as Jonathan Swift, Rochester (John Wilmot), and Samuel Pepys in which the authors depict the female body as being unclean and, in some cases, ugly or disproportionate. Women's bodies were often objectified sexually as if currency and were used as social exchanges between men. Most notably, this occurs between the characters of The Country Wife. When the dildo was introduced to eighteenth-century England, women were able to take their sexuality into their own hands, literally, and men became fearful that women would no longer have need of them.

Eighteenth-century literature is saturated with satires on the human body, especially the female body. This is most notable in the writings of men such as Jonathan Swift, Rochester (John Wilmot), and Samuel Pepys in which the authors depict the female body as being unclean and, in some cases, ugly or disproportionate. Women were often objectified sexually as if currency in William Wycherley's drama *The Country Wife*, as argued by Eve Sedgwick in chapter three of her book *Between Men*. But what about the men who wrote these narratives? Were men's bodies seen or treated any differently than women's? Were men unconsciously objectifying themselves? Could women objectify men?

In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, female writers were becoming more sexually curious much to the surprise of their male counterparts. This curiosity was, in part, aroused by the arrival of the dildo from Italy and France as a new form of female entertainment, a purchasable commodity that could literally be kept in your pocket. By transforming the male penis into an easy to access, hand-held toy, women now had more opportunity than ever to explore their sexuality free of the complex social boundaries and

class expectations that were so constraining for women of the era. They now had access to a safe and pregnancy-free sexual outlet. But we must remember that the narratives we will explore were written by men who wrote about what they imagined women might be doing in their private chambers. Men were both fascinated and disgusted by the idea that a woman would choose the “unnatural” dildo over their potential husbands’ or lovers’ “natural” penis. In writings like *Monsieur Thing’s Origin*, men imagined that women not only used these sexual objects but may have also exchanged them amongst themselves. Near the end of the poem the author evokes the image of the symbol of male sexuality being passed from one woman to the next in a way that, up until now, was something that only men practiced with the exchange of women’s bodies: “By this time Monsieur having thus infus’d His friendship in the maid, she introduc’d Him to her kind mistress’s first acquaintance” (McCormick 202). This theme of exchange occurs again in *Gulliver’s Travels: Part II* when the maids of Brobdingnag use Gulliver as a stimulating new toy. This new form of sexual currency that relied not on the exchange of women’s bodies but instead on the exchange of a substitute for the penis, threatened the eighteenth-century Englishman in a novel way; women could now buy a tool for sexual stimulation and enjoy sex by themselves. This building tension filtered into the writings of the time in the form of satires and bawdy songs. Men were curious to know what women were doing with these pocket penises and why they were so fixated on them. Oftentimes, though, male authors appear to be more fixated on the idea of the dildo than on the women who actually used them.

Jonathan Swift wrote *Gulliver’s Travels* in 1726. His work was received with varying views which prompted him to write a letter to Pope, stating that *Gulliver’s Travels* was created to “vex the world” (Swift 302). And vex the world it did. The story is told in the first person and thus gives an almost understandable allowance to its sometimes highly graphic content. Some of Swift’s more vivid imagery appears in *Gulliver’s Travels: Part II*, where Gulliver finds himself on the beach of Brobdingnag. A farmer and his family take Gulliver in and teach him how to survive in this new land. Everything in Brobdingnag is gigantic compared to Gulliver, and he is filled with the disconcerting realization of how the Lilliputians must have felt when they first set eyes on him and how they must have viewed him: “I reflected what a mortification it must prove to me to appear as inconsiderable in this Nation as one single Lilliputian would be among us” (Swift 348). Gulliver is seen as a small, strange oddity and is given the grand tour by his Master with the intention of making money by showing him to the public: “My master’s design was to show me in all the towns by the way” (Swift 354). It is when he is brought to see the Queen and her ladies that the reader gets her first glimpse of the future treatment of Gulliver: “Some of the latter had already been to see me and reported strange Things of my Beauty, Behavior, and good Sense” (Swift 355). The ladies have already recognized Gulliver as a small and interesting new item that has been recently imported from overseas. Gulliver’s beauty and behavior attracts them to him much like a new product on display, and his “good sense” is what any woman would look for when window shopping for a future product to be had. We also have to take into account that the Queen of Brobdingnag herself first purchased Gulliver from his Master and paid a good amount of money for his ownership. But she views him as nothing beyond a curious oddity, a new fad, an impulse buy, of which she is protective simply because he/it is hers.

Gulliver is made into a “thing.” His master was cruel to him and regarded him as a commodity rather than a person. He sold Gulliver only because he felt that his usefulness as a money-making curiosity had come to an end: “He, who apprehended I could not live a

Month, was ready enough to part with me” (Swift 355) and the Queen’s other pet, a dwarf, would often play cruel pranks on Gulliver until Gulliver’s relief comes when the dwarf, who is also treated like a commodity, is finally sent away: “soon after the Queen bestowed him on a Lady of high Quality, so that I saw him no more” (Swift 358) The maids of honor are particularly fond of Gulliver and often would have Glumdalclitch bring him with her to their chambers. In fact, Gulliver is often in the company of women in Brobdingnag. Glumdalclitch and the maids of honor are his main companions. The young women strip naked before him while thinking nothing of his being male in their presence. They either view him as being too small to care, since he would be incapable of molesting them, or they simply don’t view him as being a man at all. Gulliver also says that they “would often strip me naked from Top to Toe and lay me at full Length in their Bosoms” (336). The maids toy with him and his most revealing description of these antics follows:

The handsomest among these Maids of Honour, a pleasant, frolicsome Girl of sixteen, would sometimes set me astride upon one of her Nipples, with many other Tricks, wherein the Reader will excuse me for not being over particular. (Swift 336)

Swift leaves the details of this scene to the reader’s imagination. Swift was possibly playing with eighteenth-century male anxieties that revolved around growing fears of being treated as, or displaced by, a “thing.” Jennifer Saul mentions something similar to this in her paper, “On Treating Things as People: Objectification, Pornography, and the History of the Vibrator,” when she states that the words “having sex with” objectify an individual in that one could easily insert any name or object at the end of those three words and thereby “use a thing to fulfill the function of a person” (Saul 47-8). In this case, a dildo. This must have caused much distress among enlightened English readers. By taking away Gulliver’s physical maleness and ignoring his apparent protests, “I entreated Glumdalclitch to contrive some excuse for not seeing that young Lady any more” (Swift 363), the women reduce him to being simply a toy, an object that they might use for their own enjoyment. This further illustrates how Gulliver can be seen as a purchasable commodity that is then borrowed by the maids of honor and used as a sexually experimental toy. Armintor, in her paper “The Sexual Politics of Microscopy in Brobdingnag,” states that “this enormous woman uses Gulliver – in what might be called the ultimate act of female consumption – as a human dildo, rendering Gulliver’s own genitalia both physically and symbolically insignificant” (Armintor 632). Even the name that Glumdalclitch gives him signifies Gulliver’s purpose in this section of the narrative as a whole. Swift, using his invented language, named Gulliver “Grildrig” which, according to Paul Clark in this book *Gulliver Dictionary*, translates as “Girl thing” (Clark 20). Although Gulliver is not a sexual subject, he is a very literal sexual “thing” in Brobdingnag, and he is employed as a symbolically sexual toy to be used for the women’s self-gratification.

Gulliver’s life in Brobdingnag seems to go downhill after this naming. Later on, though, we have an interesting parallel to the vermin mentioned in a poem titled *Monsieur Thing’s Origin*. When Gulliver meets with the King to discuss England and its customs and cultures, the King, after hearing Gulliver out, picks him up in his hands and “stroaking me gently, delivered himself in these Words, which I shall never forget, nor the Manner he spoke them in” (Swift 369). The King proceeds to tell Gulliver that “I cannot but conclude the Bulk of your Natives, to be the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth” (Swift 370). This clearly points to the

status of Gulliver as sexually objectified and so captures, if a little abstractly, the parallel between Gulliver and his “invasion” into the bedrooms of the women of Brobdingnag and the “invasion” of the dildo in English women’s bedrooms as portrayed in *Monsieur Thing’s Origin* as a type of vermin.

In McCormick’s book *Secret Sexualities, A Sourcebook of 17th and 18th Century Writings*, the poem titled *Monsieur Thing’s Origin* brings deeper meaning to Gulliver’s conversation with the King in Brobdingnag. It is an anonymous poem that was printed on June 9, 1722 in the *Daily Journal* (McCormick 198) and caused such an outrage that one bookseller, who was female, requested that they stop printing it. It may have been intended to chastise women who chose the Italian dildo over the natural English penis. But at the same time it condoned the use of the dildo as a way to keep women occupied until they were married off: “Experienc’d Aesculapians did design, Him for the use of infants feminine, until they were fit to be put to nurses, of males most proper for to steer their courses” (McCormick 198-99). The poem quickly turns into a more severe satire when the above line is soon followed by “He first was made, to put a help to nature, But the art of nature now has got the better: His first progeny, and design’d descent, Was to relieve the poor and innocent; But now converted to a WORSE INTENT” (McCormick 199). And, in a later section, it further describes the dildo as being a type of vermin that is fondly doted on, much like how the King of Brobdingnag gently chastises Gulliver for being an “odious vermin” that has found its way into his own Kingdom.

Although he is not like to owl or bat, He’s downy, smooth, and soft as any rat
and; tho’ he is no bird of paradise, Can do the lady’s business in a trice; He’s often
by’em so caress’d and fondl’d. No child by them was e’er so dearly dandl’d. Or
e’er poor THING made use of or better handl’d. (McCormick 199)

Did men of eighteenth-century England have penis envy? Were they jealous of the dildo? Did they want to be the dildo, a penis free of the risks of disease, pregnancy, and social class complexes? Jennifer Saul again states, “The most general idea is that of treating people in a way that is appropriate for objects (and inappropriate for people). One form of treatment that is often taken to be paradigmatic for objectification is *instrumentalizing* treatment” (Saul 46-7). Gulliver is the instrument with which the women of Brobdingnag achieve their sexual freedom. Using Saul’s work I argue against Armintor; Gulliver is symbolically significant in this scenario because his use as an object, a dildo, is the direct means of sexual release for the young women in Brobdingnag. His instrumentation again points to his value as a commodity and not a person. By “having sex with” Gulliver as a dildo, the maids of honor have already stripped him of not only his maleness but also of his human identity after having thus reduced him to the status of a “thing” as defined by Saul.

We have further evidence of growing male sexual anxiety as found in ballads like “The Maids Complaint.” But this particular poem is different in that it does not chastise the dildo so much as it makes fun of the women who find the need to purchase one. Attributed to Samuel Pepys, “The Maids Complaint” was a broadside ballad composed sometime in the later 1680s. The poem is about a young girl who bemoans for the want of a dildo since, apparently, no man will sleep with her. She searches all over town, literally offering herself up to any man who will have her, only to be turned down repeatedly, even after an offer of payment, and so her last resort then is to invest in a dildo.

Tis money you see makes many a man rich:
 then come along, rub the place that doth itch
 For a dill doul, dil doul, dil doul doul
 take all my money, give me a dill doul. (Pepys)

Other evidence lies in the works of the Earl of Rochester, John Wilmot. In his oh-so-scandalous poem, “Signior Dildo,” we again see the dildo as a purchasable commodity that soon sweeps the street of England and, in their craze to buy one, brings the women of England to their knees:

At the Signe of the Crosse in St James’s Street,
 When next you go thither to make your Selfes Sweet,
 By Buying of Powder, Gloves, Essence, or Soe
 You may Chance get a Sight of Signior Dildo.
 You’ll take him at first for no Person of Note
 Because he appears in a plain Leather Coat:
 But when you his virtuous Abilities know
 You’ll fall down and Worship Signior Dildo. (Wilmot, lines 9-15)

Further into the poem Rochester writes of how the men of the town try to physically capture and remove Signior Dildo when they find that their women prefer the dildo over themselves, which appears more humorously than any previously-examined text:

A Rabble of Pricks, who were welcome before,
 Now finding the Porter deny’d ’em the Door,
 Maliciously waited his coming below,
 And inhumanly fell on Signior Dildo. (Wilmot, lines 81-84)

A vast majority of the eighteenth-century sexual fantasies about the dildo and women’s bedroom habits were written by men. But women writers also took on the theme of women’s empowerment through sexuality in stories like *Fantomina*, in which a young woman’s developing sexual curiosity leads her to perform an elaborate trick on a man who became the object of her obsessive desires.

Written by Eliza Haywood in 1725, *Fantomina* is a story about a young woman who realizes that in order for her to ever be near the man in whom she is interested (appropriately named Beauplaisir or “beautiful pleasure”) without suffering some penalty against her honor, she must disguise herself as a prostitute. Having successfully drawn Beauplaisir out, she greatly enjoys his company: “she found a vast deal of Pleasure in conversing with him in this free and unrestrain’d Manner” (Haywood 515). She soon finds that her acting skills are too good as he fully believes her to be a prostitute and is raped by him, although Beauplaisir believes that sex with her, no matter how she might fight back, is consensual. After the initial shock, *Fantomina* decides that the freedom of this disguise allowed her to do things she would never have been able to do otherwise. She keeps the farce going until Beauplaisir grows bored of her and she is forced to trick him with a new persona. Using various disguises, she continues this practice several times and keeps him from discovering that she is the same person in each of these guises. *Fantomina* has become

obsessed with the fantasy of the relationship. The real question here is whether she really loves Beauplaisir or just fell in love with the idea of Beauplaisir. Her desires appear to be based purely in the recreation of the swelling moments of first love, and she seems to take the most pleasure in him when he is at her mercy: “she enjoyed when the agreeable Beauplaisir kneel’d at her Feet, imploring her first Favours” (Haywood 519). Fantomina is an eighteenth-century dominatrix in that she enjoys the mental intrigue as much as she enjoys the physical relationship and so plays cat and mouse with a man, knowing very well what will happen in the end without him even realizing that it is all within her will. She has turned the tables on Beauplaisir, contesting their relationship by making him beg for what was supposed to be freely given by the prostitute persona that she has assumed. We can theorize that Beauplaisir himself enjoys this begging game just as much as Fantomina does. Otherwise, why would he waste his time on a prostitute who chooses when and where they meet and what activities are allowed?

To hear him sigh, to see him languish, to feel the strenuous Pressures of his eager Arms, to be compelled, to be sweetly forc’d to what she wished with equal Ardour was what she wanted and what she had form’d a Stratagem to obtain. (Haywood 519)

By pretending she doesn’t desire sex and must be “sweetly forced,” Fantomina makes herself appear more desirable to Beauplaisir as she puts the demand on him to beg harder for her favor. Beauplaisir has unconsciously given her the ultimate power over him by encouraging her behavior by not immediately demanding he get what he paid for. Fantomina enjoys the attention she receives while Beauplaisir, all the while, does not seem to realize that she wants him just as badly.

Of course, being an era in which birth control consisted of abstinence, or horrendous abortion practices, Fantomina finds that reality always returns to break into the fantasy. She finds herself pregnant with no way to tie her actions to her real person or to Beauplaisir, who is at least a gentleman about the whole affair once it is explained and offers to keep the child.

Swift’s self-objectification through Gulliver and his adventures in Brobdingnag and Fantomina’s obsession with Beauplaisir are very different fantasies about the same thing – female sexual empowerment which threatens to objectify men. The arrival of the dildo in England fed these fantasies all the more for both men and women. It became almost necessary for enlightened English writers to take these issues to the pen and paper, ejaculating their words across the pages, to help ease the social stress and anxiety with which most people were dealing. By satirizing and laughing at their own obsessions and those of others, these writers both infuriate readers and leave them laughing. If the best medicine is laughter, eighteenth-century writers were the most excellent doctors and their prescriptions were sometimes vulgar yet witty.

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About the Author

Andrea K. Gill received her B.A. in Asian Studies with a minor in Religious Studies from the University of Tennessee in the fall of 2010. She is continuing her studies in graduate school at the University of California, Santa Barbara in East Asian Studies with a focus on women's religious issues. Her lifelong goal is to work at a research university and pursue her interest in women's religious pilgrimage, folk religion, and religious literature. She is currently working on a paper exploring the Womb World Mandala and its meaning in Japan, presented a paper on the folk religion of Shugendō at the Seventeenth Annual Japan Studies Association Conference in January 2011, and gave a paper at the Asian Conference on Ethics, Religion & Philosophy in Osaka, Japan, in March 2011.

"Objectifying Men" was written for Dr. Misty Anderson's English 411 class, *Literature of the Restoration: Dryden to Pope*.

About the Advisor

Dr. Misty G. Anderson is an associate professor in the Department of English at the University of Tennessee. She teaches courses in Restoration and eighteenth-century literature, as well as literary theory. Dr. Anderson's current project, *Enthusiastic Bodies: Religious Transformation, Sexual Danger, and Methodism in Eighteenth-Century England*, extends her interest in the evolution of modern sexuality in eighteenth-century England to religious studies. Dr. Anderson's first book, *Female Playwrights and Eighteenth-Century Comedy: Marriage on the London Stage*, came out from Palgrave in 2002.