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The Narrative and Moralising Lives of Public Women in Eighteenth-Century England

Women's bodies have long been a site of cultural projection. The prominence of this in the eighteenth century forms the basis of Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace's *Consuming Subjects* monograph, which analyses the use of female figures as a symbolic site of projection for societal anxieties.² Her study exposes the violence representational images of women can take, as she establishes the role fictional women and caricatured images played in articulating social anxieties and judgements about a growing trend of consumerism. The role of the female body as representational has also been explored in celebrity studies of this century. Scholars such as Laura Engel and Stella Tillyard have looked at contemporary understandings of public and private life and how this was influenced by notions of selfhood; that is, how representations of public figures were shaped by Georgian ideals of gender and class, and the importance of reputation in the self-representations of public figures.³ Importantly for the subject of this paper, the representations of public women provide a window for the analysis of feminine ideals and stereotypes in the eighteenth century. Unpicking the narrative conventions and gender roles allocated to women in print sheds light on contemporary attitudes and understandings of personality, as well as revealing a history of female representation in the press which still has resonance with, and which has helped to birth, the media culture we see today.

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² Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997)

³ Martin Postle, Mark Hallet, Tim Clayton & Stella Tillyard, *Joshua Reynolds: The Creation of Celebrity*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2005); Laura Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity: Eighteenth Century British Actresses and Strategies for Image Making*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011); Laura Engel, 'The Muff Affair: Fashioning Celebrity in Late-Eighteenth Century British Actresses', *Fashion Theory*, Vol.13.3 (2009) pp.279-298

How, then, were narrative expectations for female representations established and fulfilled in the print culture of the eighteenth century? What were these expectations, and to what extent was this trend in publication material established during this century? Using a few examples this paper will explore these limitations of female representation in print, and reveal a narrative ‘mirroring’ between media representations of transgressive public women and the trends of fictional characters which populated the same period. It will explore the narrative expectations set up through stories of fictional characters and how this informed audience expectations for the way real life public women would be handled, understood and treated.

Looking at the impact of a growing print culture upon mid-century readers helps to explain the moral framework which publications often adhered to. Print culture was the mechanism by which the public audience became aware of narrative expectations and the supposed consequences of immorality, which they then anticipated in the printed documentation of scandalous women’s lives. Where audience engagement with printed materials was previously very limited in reach due to the expense of production and lack of literacy, the eighteenth century, particularly the latter half, saw an explosion in the accessibility and affordability of print.⁴ John Brewer provides some figures to chart the increase in literacy during this period, but these statistics only act as a rough guide as they are not differentiated by class and hide a wide range of literate abilities. The most consistent historical sources used in these figures are signed historical documents, but of course this does not equate with the ability to read a pamphlet. Male literacy he places at around 10% of the population in 1500. By 1714 this figure is 45% of the male population. This then jumps rapidly in the middle of the century to 60%. The numbers for female readership see a big jump in this century too, as Brewer quotes that while 1% of women were able to read and write in 1500, this is increased to 25% by 1714, and almost doubles by mid-century to 45% in 1760.⁵ If these figures can be taken

⁴ Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp.98-106

⁵ John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, (London: Routledge, 1997), p.141

as a guide to the accessibility of print culture, a more significant portion of Georgian society were open to the influences of the printed word than ever before; particularly when we consider practices of reading aloud to the illiterate, the oral dissemination of current affairs, and the universal access of printed images over text. The sheer quantity of printed works available seems overwhelming even when looking at single genres, as does the rate at which audiences purchased these materials: by mid-century the Stationers' Company sold between 350,000 and 400,000 almanacs a year and in 1740 Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* was so popular it went through five separate editions in the first year of its publication, while still only making up only around 1% of England's annual print production. Increasing engagement with printed works sparked a social panic about the negative influence of the written word on contemporary understandings; most specifically, about the moral lessons these texts should provide for young women. As literacy increased, moralising texts gained popularity: sermons and conduct books dominated the market, with the most fervent concerns and criticisms of behaviour focused on women. This is important for our understanding of the relationship between fictional expectations and the lives of real women in the public eye. Public transgressive women, whose lives were presented as a narrative through textual devices to a wide audience, fulfilled this representational and symbolic role just as much as the fictional women of novels and conduct or sermon examples did. As these representations and discussions were carried out in the very cultural development that fuelled societal anxiety, printed materials, they made this material culture morally safe and thereby promoted its positive consumption and purchase by a public readership that was broader than ever.

This focus on women, to criticise and to direct the reader's own opinion of good or bad femininity, is seen often in the sentimental and conduct tradition. There is such an overlap that one of the century's most popular novels, *Pamela*, was initially conceived as a conduct book and developed

into a novel as Samuel Richardson composed it.⁶ In this type of narrative, most commonly seen in the second half of the eighteenth century, a pure heroine is often beset by temptation and ruin from rakish men and from immoral, foolish or wicked women. The tale will follow her strength of character in resisting and overcoming these obstacles. If successfully untouched by ruinous conduct the heroine is generally granted a happy marriage, if not, the consequences usually include: poverty, despair, sexual exploitation, isolation and ultimately death. The consequences of failed virtue are often demonstrated through side characters, as the fiction of this period is full of fallen and jealous old women, eager to bring young heroines down to a similar fate. This formula can be seen in a number of the century's best-known novels and fictional works: in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, the fiction of Eliza Haywood, or Frances Burney and serialised periodicals or sermons in publications such as the *Ladies Magazine*. It may seem contradictory at first for certain public women to also stand as a trope or a stock character, mirroring those of fiction. Individual women came to public attention for that individuality – and audiences were hungry for images of these women and for descriptions of their differentiating factors, yet they were often written about and articulated in the public media of newspaper and magazine articles or in print as stock characters.

The mysterious and unsolved case of Elizabeth Canning is one such example of a public figure openly drawing parallels between her own story and the role of the fictional heroine. In 1753, 18-year-old Elizabeth Canning went missing. When she returned home a month later she was described as emaciated, filthy, with a head injury and her ear cut and bloodied. She claimed that she had been kidnapped by gypsies, and that she had been stripped and urged into prostitution by her kidnapers. When she refused she claimed that the two old gypsy women, Susannah Wells and Mary Squires, had locked her in the hayloft keeping her only on bread and water for the month before she escaped. This case was inconclusive as much of the evidence did not match up. There

⁶ Thomas Keymer, 'Introduction', in Samuel Richardson, *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) pp.vii-xxxiv

was little evidence of the escape Canning described at the house, Susannah Wells and Mary Squires claimed at trial that they had never met one another before the day of their arrest, and Mary Squires had witnesses that she had not even been at Enfield Wash, where Canning claimed to have been imprisoned, during the time Canning was missing. From the beginning of Elizabeth Canning's claims the case gained an enormous amount of public attention because of its relation to preconceived narrative structures. In novels of the century there is a common trope where pure young maidens are wronged, mistreated and encouraged into immoral behaviour, most commonly prostitution. Yet they prove their purity of character by refusing to sacrifice their virtue, and withstanding any of the hardships used to push them into immoral conduct. This same trope is visible in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, when the eponymous heroine, who is once more pure, virtuous and innocent, is secured at the brothel keeper Mrs Sinclair's house where Mrs Sinclair has to drug Clarissa to enable Lovelace to rape her and thereby gain power over her and bring her to his will, as she has previously avoided all his advances.⁷ Elizabeth Canning's own story placed herself in the role of just such a heroine, and played into audience expectations of the evil nature of both gypsies and old crones to provoke pity and public support for her position. This was then accentuated by the published representations around her case and audience responses to these.

The predominant narrative public women played into (particularly women who gained public attention for scandal or transgressive behaviour) was often that of the pure and wronged heroine, beset by either manipulative older women, who themselves have fallen into the immoral life they wish to lure the heroine into, or by a rakish male character that the heroine must either reform or avoid. Heroines in these stories are identified by their goodness and nurturing behaviour particularly towards male characters, whether as the idealised daughter or wife, and these descriptions predict their suitability as mothers. Evelina, the heroine of Frances Burney's novel of the same name, is described in such terms, and is repeatedly advised in this coming-of-age story

⁷ Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady*, ed. by Angus Ross (London: Penguin Books, 2004)

on how a woman ought to behave. Her guardian and father figure, Mr Villars advises, ‘Though gentleness and modesty are the peculiar attributes of your sex, yet fortitude and firmness, when occasion demands them, are virtues as noble and as becoming in women as in men’.⁸ This firmness in maintaining her virtue is the feminine attribute that Elizabeth Canning claimed she had displayed. She strengthened her parallel to this narrative pattern by describing her attack on the road by two men who took her to a brothel house, where she was confined for a month before she was able to escape. There are clear parallels here with the story of Clarissa’s confinement at the house of Mrs Sinclair and with the heroine’s victimisation and strength of character against immorality. This story was retold through published accounts of the trial of Susannah Wells and Mary Squires, the two women accused of keeping her captive, where they and the male robbers and Canning herself are positioned within the aforementioned narrative tropes:

‘As she was returning home in the Evening of the same Day, she was seized by two lusty Fellows in Moorfields, directly at the Gates of Bethlehem Hospital: After they had rifled her pockets, they took her into the middle Walk of the said Fields, where they stripped her of her Gown, Apron, Hat, &c. She crying out, Murder! one of the Fellows struck her on the right Temple, which immediately deprived her of her Senses. When she recovered, she found herself in an open Road between the two Robbers, who soon conveyed her to a House, in which she saw an old Woman and two young ones. The old Woman told her, if she would do as they did (which was whoring and thieving) she would want for nothing: But upon her Refusal, the old woman cut off her Stays, and then forced her up a Pair of Stairs, with horrid Imprecations and threatening to cut her Throat [...] the unhappy Sufferer, whose melancholy Situation since her miraculous Escape, is worthy the

⁸ Frances Burney, *Evelina*, ed. by Susan Kubica Howard, (Ontario: Broadview Literary Texts, 2000), p.341

Compassion and charitable Contributions of all public-spirited People [...] it is not doubted but a Subscription, or Contribution will soon be raised'.⁹

In this telling of the case the two male attackers, described as 'lusty', work in conjunction with the 'old woman' to trap Canning into a life of prostitution. Her loss of senses as she is knocked unconscious mirrors Clarissa's loss of her senses as she is drugged by Mrs Sinclair, her vulnerability emphasised by her loss of clothing. The sympathy audiences were expected to feel for a young woman positioned in this role, and which they responded to, is underlined by the calls for charitable donations to support Canning's case. Her supporters, the Canningites, raised a fund to keep her and played into the emotive nature of a heroine in this situation to fuel their own political cause against Sir Crisp Gasgoyne, who started a counter investigation against Canning. Accounts of Canning receiving monetary relief from her supporters record her receiving a staggering income: one report in the *Gentleman's Magazine* states that she had 'upwards of 30L collected for her' at White's chocolate house, which when we consider that as a domestic servant she would have earned an average of £6-8 per year, is an enormous collection.¹⁰

Canning's positioning of herself as a pure heroine was reproduced in published images as well as in textual references and audience responses. Endorsements of Canning's story depicted the two women accused of holding her hostage and pushing her into prostitution within the trope of evil brothel women. The immorality of these women is underlined by their presentation as unfeminine. To return to the comparison with Mrs Sinclair as an example of this literary tradition, this same kind of unfeminine othering is seen in the passages of Clarissa which depict her: 'Mrs Sinclair herself (for that is the widow's name) has an odd winking eye; and her respectfulness seems too much studied'.¹¹ The fact she is a widow works as part of this, as Susan Lanser discusses the cultural power of the female body and behaviour to destabilise patriarchal authority, and explores the

⁹ [No Author], 'London', *London Daily Advertiser*, Saturday 10 February 1753, p.2

¹⁰ [No Author], 'Historical Chronicle', *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol XXIII, Friday 2 February, 1753, p.145

¹¹ Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady*, ed. by Angus Ross (London: Penguin Books, 2004) p.1208

anxieties caused by this which led to a proliferation of material disempowering single women and widows through the image of the ‘old maid’ in eighteenth-century Britain.¹² Printmakers worked towards the same bias, producing images to sell for Canning’s story and others which portrayed the same character expectations. Hogarth’s series *The Modern Harlot’s Progress* from 1732 shows this formula in the first plate young protagonist Moll Hackabout being inspected by the notorious and pox ridden brothel keeper Elizabeth Needham, who wants this young heroine to become a prostitute.¹³ The same trend of image construction is visible in images of Canning, such as the print by William Herbert in 1753 *Elizabeth Canning at the House of Mother Wells at Enfield Wash* which depicts Canning as a buxom young woman, who appears startled, pale, and vulnerable in her state of undress.¹⁴ At either corner of the image, surrounding and crowding her, stand Susannah Wells and Mary Squires, holding implements to beat her with and each sporting a forbidding expression. Another print, *A True Draft of Elizabeth Canning with the house she was confined in, also the Gypsies flight and conversing with the Inspector General of Great Britain*, demonstrates the multiple narrative representations of the case.¹⁵ The image of Canning is generalised, focusing more upon her respectable clothing than any individuality of character, thereby presenting her as the atypical ‘good woman’ who has protected her virtue. The top right image and the bottom left both depict Mary Squires as a witch. The bottom image shows her in conversation with the Inspector General of Great Britain, where she appears manipulative and capable of misleading him or casting a spell to influence his mind due to the mirroring of their arms and body positions, and she points, notably in this assemblage of images, directly towards Canning herself. This refers to Sir Crisp Gasgoyne’s mistrust of Canning’s evidence, which led him to make a counter investigation to that being held which found Mary Squires and Susannah Wells guilty. His investigation eventually found Canning

¹² Susan S. Lanser, ‘Singular Politics: The Rise of the British Nation and the Production of the Old Maid’ in Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide ed., *Singlenwomen in the European Past, 1250-1800*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999) pp.297-324

¹³ William Hogarth, *A Harlot’s Progress: Plate 1*, Engraving (1732)

¹⁴ William Herbert, *Elizabeth Canning at the House of Mother Wells at Enfield Wash*, Engraving (1753)

¹⁵ Unknown, *A True Draft of Elizabeth Canning with the house she was confined in, also the Gypsies flight and conversing with the Inspector General of Great Britain*, Engraving (1753)

guilty of perjury, stated that she had invented the story of her kidnap, and had her transported as an imposter in July 1754.¹⁶ The top image of Mary Squires is much more comic, and it highlights the issue with Squires' evidence as she could not have been at Enfield Wash when witnesses reported seeing her at Abbotsbury.¹⁷ It shows her on a broomstick and is titled: 'E Canning vindicated or Ms Squires by Gypsies Flight to Enfield Wash'. In the speech bubble she is saying, 'I can be at Abbotsbury and Enfield Wash both at the same time' while the audience below her are echoing the anxiety against these women. They say that 'The Witches Act must be put in force again' while the presentation of old women as witches, and this kind of stereotyping is mocked with one audience member's comment: 'There she goes'.

It is no coincidence that Canning's story was fabricated to fit within these narrative expectations, and that the published depictions supported these characterisations as the material their audience's desired. In the same year of Canning's initial accusations against Squires and Wells, a similar fictional narrative, of a young woman led to an old woman's house and forced into prostitution and ruin, was published in the *Gentleman's Magazine*.¹⁸ This formula of characters permeated the culture, and real-life characterisations were understood within the boundaries and understandings of personality these stories outlined. In the *Making of the Modern Self* Dror Wahrman sets out the ways in which eighteenth-century understandings of identity and selfhood differed from our own, and therefore how the expression of individual characters differed too.¹⁹ He explains how the expression of self-identity in the second half of this century, from the mid-1700s to the 1790s, was understood to be outward facing and broad. Rather than personal identity being concerned with personal introspection and the uniqueness of the individual, Wahrman persuasively argues that eighteenth-century British citizens understood themselves in relation to set types of personal

¹⁶ [No Author], 'Historical Chronicle May 1754, Thursday 30', *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. XXIV, 1754 p.242

¹⁷ [No Author], 'Historical Chronicle April 1754, Monday 29' *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. XXIV, 1754 pp.189-190

¹⁸ [No Author], 'Lady, a Young One Seduced', *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. XXIV, 1754, pp.519-522.

¹⁹ Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth Century England*, (London: Yale University Press, 2004), pp.7-83, 198-217, 265-311

identity. They understood the self broadly. The notion of an inner self with a personal psychology informed and shaped by individual life experiences did not start to develop until the very end of this century. Caroline Steedman sees this understanding beginning in the 1790s and developing onwards to the work of Freud.²⁰ In the period we are concerned with here, there was an emphasis on identity as ‘identity’ – or a collective grouping highlighting whatever a person had in common with others. One’s personality was thus seen as fitting within a broad character-type. There is a tension between this contemporary understanding and the voracious Georgian appetite for news, images and stories about particular public figures and fictional characters. This appetite was driven by the extent to which these public figures fed into expectations and understandings of set stock character types. Diana Donald has identified broad representational trends in caricatures and political prints before the late 1780s.²¹ Before the heyday of caricature heralded by the individualised drawings of Gillray, Rowlandson and Cruikshank, prints were commonly built in an emblematic mode. From 1740 to the late 1780s character representations relied on a language of symbols and representative motifs which conveyed individuals as stereotypical, impersonal and in line with stock characters. Routinely references were needed to identify persons of public renown within these types – this incorporated the person’s name and reference to places and titles associated with the individual. These broad stereotypes carried moral biases and these categories provided clear and generic examples of how to live in eighteenth-century society. It was easy, looking at stock characters and groupings of public women, female images and fictional characters, to see where you as the reader fitted within or against these categories. The simplicity of categorical self-comparison helped to appease anxieties about the moral influence of reading, as news stories and fiction worked within a clear structure to identify good and bad lives. With this cultural context in mind, the mirroring between fictional narratives and the shaping and presentation of real world events makes much more sense, and it becomes more obvious that simplistic character types could

²⁰ Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930*, (London: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp.4-5

²¹ Diana Donald, *The Age of Caricature: Satirical Prints in the Reign of George III*, (London: New Haven, 1996), chap. 2

be superimposed upon public individuals to emphasise cultural ideas of morality and behavioural principles.

Where Canning's alignment of herself as a fictional heroine was eventually undermined, the case of Jane Butterfield demonstrates the potential success of conscious and performative 'mirroring' of feminine ideals. Jane Butterfield used narrative expectations to secure her freedom. In 1775, she was charged with the murder of her lover, William Scawen. The pair had lived as though they were man and wife for over a decade, and the year before he had named her chief beneficiary of his will, so she was set to inherit £20,000.²² Following this he fell sick. Jane Butterfield nursed him, and fed him at his bedside until he was so ill that his death was inevitable. Scawen's surgeon, Sanxy, removed him from her care, as he had come to believe she was poisoning him after Scawen complained to him of a 'brassy taste' to his food, and Sanxy later gave evidence against her.²³ Just as Elizabeth Canning did, Butterfield played on the role of the wronged victim. She gave her account over to men to read for her, claiming she was too agitated and upset to do so herself, and the narrative she constructed fitted into the expectations and stereotypes of the pure heroine of fiction, who is misled and tempted, yet acts virtuously and is wrongly accused:

'at the early age of fourteen she was seduced from her parents by one of her own sex and brought to Mr Scawen, that through a variety of artifices she was prevailed on to continue in his house, and that the circumstance broke her father's heart; she confessed that Mr Scawen had spared no expense in perfecting her education, and that he had shewn so many instances of friendship and kindness to her that she tenderly loved him, and had, by a conduct of many years, convinced him of her affection and gratitude. During his illness, which was almost without intermission for the last six years of his life, she acted as

²² [No Author], 'Historical Chronicle July 1775, Wednesday 26', *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. XLV, 1775, p.350

²³ [No Author], 'Postscript', *Middlesex Journal and Evening Advertiser*, 27 July 1775, p.4

his nurse, had watched him with the most wary care, and the most constant attention, having sacrificed night after night to wait upon him and give him his food and medicines.²⁴

In her story Butterfield is the virtuous nurturing woman, whose beginning echoes the entrapment of a young girl by another woman into an immoral life (which would excuse why she and Scawen did not marry) and yet who acted as another of Samuel Richardson's fictional heroine's, *Pamela*, to transform her rakish lover into a nurturing male guardian. Audiences found her to fit so well into this character role that they were outraged that she could even be associated with the crime and refused to accept it, arguing instead that she was wrongly presented by the surgeon and the papers, and portraying Scawen as suffering from venereal disease and undeserving of Butterfield's goodness. One adherent insisted that 'Mr Scawen's disease was undoubtedly venereal [...] I have since made diligent enquiry into the private character of Miss Butterfield, and find that, for 14 years past she has manifested the utmost Affection and Tenderness'.²⁵ In an image of Jane Butterfield from the *Lady's Magazine* in 1775 we see she is dressed respectably, her face is clear with large eyes that speak of her innocence, and she is girlishly holding flowers in her left hand.²⁶ Stories and praise for Butterfield's care during her seducer's illness rang out in public print culture, and with no clear evidence to convict her, other than the opinion of one surgeon which was doubted by many other medical professionals, the jury made their decision based upon an assessment of her character. Jane was released and cleared of all charges, much to the celebration of the public.

Moral lessons are everywhere in these stories: they tell of how virtuous women are misled, but must fight to remain good and pure, the model of caring femininity in every situation. The form of personality through stock characters and stereotypes helped to portray ideas of identity for the readership to understand the world and people around them. By providing such clear lessons and

²⁴ [No Author], 'Account of the Trial of Miss Jane Butterfield, on an Indictment for Murder, at the Assizes for the County of Surrey, held at Croyden, on Saturday August the 19th', *Lloyd's Evening Post*, 21 August 1775, p.172.

²⁵ Signed Humanity, 'Letter to the Printer of the Public Advertiser' in *Public Advertiser* 18 August 1775, p.1

²⁶ Robinson, J., 'Miss Jane Butterfield, drawn from the life' in the *Ladies Magazine*, Vol. VI, September 1775

expectations, these narrative trends worked to actively shape and influence the culture they were informed by, which in turn strengthened audience's expectations of the truthfulness of these motifs. The line between fiction and reality was inescapably blurred, and femininity reduced and thereby made safe through broad and clear-cut understandings of what women had the potential to be.

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