Abstract

Safe Sex--The Dislocation of Satire onto Female Characters in Eighteenth-Century Nabob Comedy: a reading of satire in Samuel Foote's *The Nabob* and Elizabeth Griffith's *A Wife in the Right*

Little is known of eighteenth-century dramatic performance. What remains are early printings of scripts and performance reviews buried in archives. In order to deal with a lack of knowledge of performance style and convention, literature scholars specializing in the eighteenth-century have tended to ignore the period’s drama as a live and interactive event and treat only the primary dramatic text in their analyses. I offer authorial testimony and theatre reviews to support a reading which relies upon reception theory coupled with a view of performance as cultural barter, ala theatre anthropology.

This study identifies a trend in nabob comedy of the mid-late eighteenth century in which the satire is dislocated onto economically enterprising female characters outside the marriage plot. I first investigate the practicality of this dislocation onto the “safe” and less investigated female character through a reading of a successful and often revived play by Samuel Foote--*The Nabob*. I attempt to prove the prudence of this dislocation by providing evidence of severe and physical audience reaction to the play.

I then observe another dislocation of nabob satire onto women in the little known play, Elizabeth Griffith’s *A Wife in the Right*. In this reading, I focus on women as a natural site for relocating nabob satire. As established internal Other in the patriarchal British society, it is a lateral shift for them to represent the threat of a cultural Other in British society—a threat realized by increased international travel. The physical theatrical space foregrounds this cosmopolitan shift in society. The staged physical representation of the female body as a canvas for wealth shown through jewels mined in the East also figures into the female characters tendency to subsume nabob satire in the highly visual medium of the theatre. In this play, the female nabobina figure must be expelled from the nation in order to mitigate the threat of the internal Other—Other in both gender and culture.

Ultimately, I argue that through the dislocation of nabob satire onto women, the dramatists make progressive and influential statements about the increasingly diverse and cross-culturally inflected state of British society. In Griffith’s case, I offer her nabobina character as an exercise in proto-feminism as well. All of this serves to elevate the oft dismissed genre of eighteenth-century drama and performance as a simultaneously catalytic and reflective site of change.

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1 “nabob”—A pejorative term for a British citizen employed in India by the East India Company who quickly gains wealth and returns to Britain where the new wealth may be used to purchase social status through political office and arranged marriage.
Research Strategies and Application of Library Resources

Research Path

This project began with a class assignment to read an eighteenth-century satire by Samuel Foote called *The Nabob*. The class focused on eighteenth-century England as a globally inflected space as evidenced through its literature. My independent research began with a search of the Modern Language Association (MLA) database for recent critical articles which engage *The Nabob*. In the course of this search, I happened upon an article by historian Tillman W. Nechtman. Though outside of my discipline, I found his reading of the merchant character as Foote’s attempt to mitigate the largely merchant-class audience’s identification with the aggressively satired nabob\(^1\) character intriguing. I then began to look for a possible purpose for the unusual inclusion of two minor female merchant characters in terms of dramatic device. I realized that these characters also mitigate the satirical bite by displacing some of the most biting satire onto minor characters of the often overlooked gender.

I focused my research on the audience reception of female characters, actors and playwrights in eighteenth-century nabob comedies. Rice offers me the unique opportunity to access little-studied early eighteenth-century printings of dramas through use of the Axson collection housed in The Woodson Research Center. This access allowed me to pair a little known comedy—Elizabeth Griffith’s *A Wife in the Right*—with Samuel Foote’s well-known work in order to further illustrate the dislocation of satire onto female characters in nabob comedy.

My personal history of theatrical performance and my current position as regular audience member draws me toward Reception Theory because it empowers the audience in the

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construction of drama and performance. The global slant of the course and popular scholarship in the wider field of eighteenth-century studies, a trend I’ve tracked through several years of American Society of Eighteenth Century Studies journal issues, brought me to Eugenio Barba’s theory of Theatre Anthropology in which theatre is viewed as the primary source of cultural barter between societies. Though never directly applied to eighteenth-century drama or any drama without a clear record of minute performance devices, a review of Barba’s theory and my prior knowledge of eighteenth-century England as a site of national anxiety due to increased traffic and influence allowed me to pair them relying while relying on performance reviews published in eighteenth-century periodicals, a playwright’s explanation of performance in a forward to the published edition of the play, and playwright and actor memoirs as well as dramatic text to fill in the gaps in knowledge of performance convention.

**Application of Library Resources**

In dealing with reception theory, I required evidence of eighteenth-century audience reception. Eighteenth-century newspapers regularly published theatre reviews, but as newspapers were organized based on special requirements rather than topical sections, there is no searchable full-text electronic archive of such newspapers which includes theatrical reviews. In attempt to locate such an archive, I contacted Fondren’s reference librarian who pointed me toward hours of microfiche and microcard scouring in hopes of happening upon an appropriate review. Ultimately, I relied on Google Books which provided a full-text of *The Monthly Review*, an eighteenth-century periodical. Though the text was unsearchable, I located the plays relevant to my study by date.

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2 Eighteenth-Century Collections Online (ECCO), while an invaluable source, does not include theatre reviews.
The time spent in the library basement accessing the microfiche and microcards was not, however, wasted. In the process of my search for theatre reviews, I located Samuel Foote’s memoirs which were written by his friend, William Cooke. These memoirs included the first published account of Samuel Foote’s violent interaction with two irate audience members upset by the satire in *The Nabob*. Though I’d read the account before in more contemporary scholarship, Cooke provided a source for the tale lending it more credibility and inclusion in my study.

To further exemplify eighteenth-century audience reception, I read through several plays in the Axson collection with titles that promised nabobery. Elizabeth Griffith’s play was of this group, but came with the added bonus of a foreword in which she describes the disastrous opening (and only) performance of her play. As my bibliography illustrates, I also utilized the regular library catalogue and the MLA database to acquire recent scholarship on satire, nabobery, and the plays specific to my study—much of which I received through Interlibrary Library Loan.
Thirty years after Samuel Foote’s death, his friend, William Cooke, penned and published Foote’s memoirs. Cooke relates a tale of violent audience reaction to Foote’s 1772 comedy, *The Nabob*. Taking the main character, Sir Mathew Mite, for a direct satire of their acquaintances (Sir Mathew White and General Smith):

> two gentlemen who had been in high situations in the East Indies undertook personally to chastise the author for this insolence. In pursuance of this design, they furnished themselves with oak cudgels, and sallied out for Suffolk-street, being resolved to make [Foote’s] house the scene of his chastisement and disgrace.¹

Cooke claims it was one of these very cudgel-bearing men from whom he heard the tale. Upon arriving at Foote’s residence, the playwright offered food, drink and humorous conversation, ultimately convincing the would-be ruffians that, “He thought he was perfectly secure from giving offence to individuals, particularly to the honourable part of the East India company’s servants, by satirizing in a general way those who had acted otherwise.”² So convincing was Foote that *The Nabob*’s audiences swelled with East India corps members through the rest of the season.

² *Ibid.*, 100. (Original Emphases)
Less than a year before *The Nabob*’s opening night, playwright Elizabeth Griffith debuted her own nabob comedy called *A Wife in the Right*. Though it ran for only one performance, Griffith sought a successful printing of the work in 1772. In the printed edition’s preface, Mrs. Griffith attempts to explain the performance’s failure as she expresses “a desire of vindicating herself from some of the charges brought against the following comedy [*A Wife in the Right*].”\(^3\) She goes on to blame an ill prepared and inebriated actor portraying the role of Governor Anderson, the nabob character, for the performance’s inconsistency and incoherence. “This unlucky failure in the performer was, by some, unfortunately imputed to the writer, and appeared to be a sufficient reason for condemning the piece.”\(^4\)

In both these nabob comedies, the authors bear personal responsibility for the satire and quality of the performances. As a female author, Griffith may not be accosted by men with cudgels, but though she is an established author, her play is given a limited chance at financial and critical success on the stage. Eighteenth-century audience reactions relied heavily on the precise location of the satire in both Foote and Griffith’s works. This study examines nabob satire in these two mid-eighteenth-century comedies. The longer running and more oft studied of the plays, Samuel Foote’s *The Nabob*, offers the most severe critique of nabobery in the form of two briefly appearing female merchant characters—Mrs. Match’em and Mrs. Crocus. I use eighteenth-century theatre reviews and Foote’s memoirs to reveal adverse and sometimes violent audience reactions to the Nabob satire as seen in the character Sir Mathew Mite to justify the relocation of satire onto the less scrutinized female characters. Though Foote reproaches the nabob at the play’s conclusion, the women continue to operate in English society as silent threats to the Empire’s morality, coffers, and deluded self-awareness. In short—the merchant women,

\(^4\) Ibid.
peddlers of flowers and flesh, simultaneously mitigate and illuminate the culture clash inherent in the nabob figure.

In the play by Elizabeth Griffith, *A Wife in the Right*, the nabob figure is also satirized, this time accompanied by a woman fond of Eastern jewels and in search of a nabob husband--a nabobina. The female ability to display Eastern riches both in eighteenth-century society and theatrical costume support this dislocation of satire, a more physical display of satire than found in *The Nabob*. In this play, as well as Foote’s, the female characters offer the playwrights a “safe” space for satire. While Foote uses female characters to circumvent his East India Company corps-filled audience’s sensibilities, Griffith employs her gender and reputation as a “woman writer” and directly implicates women in the practice of nabobery for a more progressive political end. Furthermore, both satires react to and inflect the changing genderscape of the theatre then populated by numerous actresses and female playwrights. Women on and behind the stage operate much like the East India Company’s nabobs as they are at once British Self and non-masculine Other, returning to the former space of the theatre in a new influential capacity amidst much criticism. Female satire in nabob comedies thus becomes the ultimate in metatheatre--a concept that this project approaches from a sociosemiotic perspective.

Though comparatively little is known about eighteenth-century performance conventions, it is nonetheless important to view the study of drama as a study of performance as well as of literature. The actors operate as culturally produced signs, the audience members as receptors for those signs. The informal and almost interactive nature of the audience-performer relationship in the eighteenth-century dramatic space suggests a reflexive relationship between sign producers and sign receivers. I owe a theoretical debt to Eugenio Barba’s theory of theatre anthropology and performance as cultural “barter,” but, for the sake of disciplinary continuity,
will refer to Jean Alter's *A Sociosemiotic Theory of Theatre* for theoretical principles of performance in which Alter asserts, "theatre is a form of live communication, and hence always involves a constant interaction between senders and receivers of signs." Feminist studies of mid-late eighteenth-century drama still largely rely on canonizing female playwrights and biographing popular actresses. Recently, Lisa Freeman, Kathleen Wilson, and Felicity Nussbaum, in tying femininity to national and racial identifications, renewed the study of women and theatre of the period by tying into global discourses of postcolonial theory. Nussbaum offers the most focused analysis of theatre as performance, though she too struggles with the dearth of evidence on female performance conventions. By considering performance as a sociosemiotic event for which the text provides the written signs, and theatrical criticism as well as authorial testimony to reconstruct the physical embodiment of those signs on the stage as well as the audience's reception of them, I hope to mitigate the lack of information on female staging and acting style.

First, I locate *The Nabob* and *A Wife in the Right* within the eighteenth-century tradition of satire and performance, a tradition which finds women still relatively new to the stage and the pen. A close reading of the female merchants' interactions with the nabob character in Foote's comedy and a further examination of audience's reactions to that work and others by Foote suggests a dislocation of satire onto female characters for fear of censure and for a nuanced critique of nabobery while avoiding direct offence of his audience. A close reading of Griffith's

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nabobina, Mrs. Frankly, in *A Wife in the Right* reveals a similar dislocation, but for different ends. Her gender-conscious critical response and her equally gender-conscious reactions to it push toward female agency both within the theatre and abroad. Ultimately, instances of metatheatre and use of gender in the plays cements *The Nabob* and *A Wife in the Right*’s positions within the transformation of the theatre and of England from an enclosed space governed by cultural and gendered homogeneity toward a reflexive space reflecting and absorbing the increasingly diverse audience of cultures, “races” and genders.

*The Nabob* tells the story of Sir Mathew Mite, a nabob recently returned from India with a new fortune. He comes in search of a seat in parliament, an antiquarian seal and an English wife of good name and low fortune. In an attempt to counterfeit English gentility, Sir Mathew Mite commissions Hazard lessons, dons Maccaroni dress, and manages Eastern economic affairs in Britain through third parties. Ultimately, his attempt to marry Sophy Oldham is foiled when her uncle and English merchant, Sir Thomas Oldham, agrees to take over her father’s debt. In return, though also not without affection, Sophy is to marry Sir Thomas’s son.

*A Wife in the Right* is about a nabob, Governor Anderson, just returned from India and obsessed with all things Eastern—food, behavior and dress. He returns to marry Widow Frankly who counterfeits both virtue and affection in return for money and jeweled baubles, though she harbors a desire for an old acquaintance’s husband. Lady Seaton fears her husband has strayed, not with Mrs. Frankly, but with young Charlotte Melville—his friend’s betrothed. Lord Seaton is innocent of action, though not of thought. Ultimately, he and Lady Seaton reconcile, Miss Melville marries Colonel Ramsey, her betrothed, and Governor Anderson learns of Mrs. Frankly’s deception. The nabob may escape a bank-breaking marriage, but much of his India-born profits are transferred to Mrs. Frankly during courtship. In the epilogue, Mrs. Frankly, the
only female character to escape the marriage plot, vows to go to India and seek a nabob who can supply her with jewels and adventure. She plans to become a “nabobina.”

Both *The Nabob* and *A Wife in the Right* were written, performed and published near the end of what is now commonly called “The Age of Garrick.” Garrick was an actor, manager, general satirist, and, incidentally, Samuel Foote’s friend and professional rival. Satire, like the other forms of eighteenth-century drama had a specific purpose: “The primary, if not exclusive function of ... eighteenth-century drama was to affect its audiences, to move their emotions and appeal to their senses.” As a result, much of this period’s satire is tempered with sentimentality. Drama changed so as to best affect its audience. As theatre audiences were populated by an increasing number of merchants, sailors, and travelers of both sexes, the plays developed merchant and middleclass characters to replace the aristocratic heroes. While primary character class diversified, primary character morality stiffened. Of mid-century playwrights, Frances M. Kavenik writes;

> [they] made their heroes exemplary, no longer in need of reformation at all and capable of rectifying the world around them. While these plays still had a satiric dimension, their satire was directed primarily at secondary characters and blocking figures whose vices contrasted with the protagonists’ virtues.

At first glance, booth Foote and Griffith appear to defy this convention of relocating satirical elements to secondary characters within their plays. The nabob, Sir Mathew Mite, is the most obvious locale of Foote’s satire and the character’s lines easily outnumber those of the virtuous English merchant, Sir Thomas Oldham, who, by popular dramatic convention, should be the new middle class hero and primary character of the play. As for *A Wife in the Right*, it is once again the male nabob figure, Governor Anderson, who takes center stage. The other

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characters anticipate the Governor's entrance for pages. Before his first entrance, Lord Seaton describes the Governor as "as great a curiosity as has ever been imported from the coast of Coromandel." He may be their dupe, but his money, his clothing and his behavior act as ever-present fodder for the other characters. Yet, though Sir Mathew Mite and Governor Anderson are undeniably targets of nabob satire, both Foote and Griffith still manage to direct their wit at secondary characters whose vices diverge only slightly from those of the nabob figures. In The Nabob Mrs. Crocus and Mrs. Match'em, two minor female characters appearing in only one scene, occupy this space. In A Wife in the Right, deceptive vixen and future nabobina Mrs. Frankly takes on the role.

This dual model of satire was not without precedence in the mid-eighteenth century. William J. Burling describes this technique as "audience entrapment" and considers it a mode of satire. While the audience expects an absolutely virtuous hero, "the author catches the entire audience off guard. Thus the playwright offers a considerable challenge to the audience's interpretive sensibilities ... [The audience] must reassess their sense of art and life as recontextualized by the playwright's vision of both." The primary position and satire of the nabob characters keeps the audience from looking toward the expected secondary satire, yet this allows both Foote and Griffith to tweak their commentary toward political and arguably feminist ends.

The East India Company's (EIC) dominance and unsuccessfully regulated economic influence on England primed the 1770s for nabob satire. The nabob figure, an EIC employee and British native working abroad, was feared to return to England not only with increased wealth but increased and ill-deserved power and influence. The public feared a contamination of

\[11 \text{ Mrs. Elizabeth Griffith, } A \text{ Wife in the Right, 10.} \]
the landed gentry by Eastern customs and money. Nabob fortunes, often transferred to England in diamonds, jewels and other goods to avoid regulations, lacked a solid reference point of wealth for British citizens. With no way to trace nabob wealth, the nabobs became figures of suspicion and scorn even as they bought and controlled land and political office. Nabobs often began as working-class individuals, but upon gaining wealth and returning to Britain, they had to learn to function within the upper echelon of society for which their wealth now qualified them. Public anxieties about both Eastern and lower-class infiltration of British society left such characters ripe for satire. Nabobs performed a unique role as the British Self imitating the Eastern Other, imitating the upper-class British Self. When placed on stage, these figures acquire yet another level of performance, and nabob satire in drama becomes the ultimate metatheatre. The nabobs’ social performances draw attention to the actors’ performances and plays’ productions.

While audience attitude toward theatre and nabobs played a prominent role in shaping mid-eighteenth-century satire, the Theatrical Licensing Act of 1737 was still in effect in the 1770s. Plays required the Lord Chamberlain’s seal of approval before public staging. The Licensing Act prohibited personal satire as a reaction against the satire of contemporary persons and issues which had gained popularity on stage. At first, the Licensing Act resulted in a surge of revivals, but, in an attempt to freshen the Shakespearean standbys, managers like Garrick began to include the now banned personal mimicry not in new text, but in performance.13 By the 1770s, non-subversive satire began to creep its way by the censors. The Nabob is an example of such a work. The satires that survive the censor’s pen “emphasize positive examples and a moral

sympathy between the satiric object and the satirist and audience." Though Sir Mathew Mite is too dangerous to British society and order to illicit sympathy and Governor Anderson too dim, the secondary characters which bear the slightly altered satire arguably earn an intellectual, if not moral sympathy.

As women, Mrs. Crocus and Mrs. Match’em lack the power to directly threaten English society and order. Mrs. Crocus expresses dissatisfaction with her ineffectiveness. “If gentlemen would but give directions, I would make it my study to suit ‘em” Her position as an untraveled woman subjugates her to Mite, but he an unwilling teacher, she is left to learn only from the goods and monies of Eastern origin with which he pays her. Othered as a woman in the patriarchal British mercantile system, a system which she is as of yet still exploring and navigating—her recent foray to Cheapside stands as an example, Mrs. Match’em’s female gender uniquely qualifies her to advise Sir Mite on his proposed London seraglio. Yet, it is her race and gender which disqualify her from operating such an establishment on English soil. She and Sir Matthew Mite discuss the difficulties of such a venture at length, but ultimately he forecloses the possibility of any future progression for Match’em because, “In the East we never confide that office to your sex or complexion […]” As for Elizabeth Griffith’s nabobina, she must ultimately leave England to seek her fortune and escape her shame, thus neutralizing the unique female threat of corruption as internal Other.

By gendering the secondary characters as female and dislocating the most complex satire onto them, Foote and Griffith create progressive examples of nabobery with which the audience can identify. This satire gets around the censor and “entrap” the audience into an uncomfortable identification, forcing an assessment of their own roles within the melding of East and West.

14 Ibid., 13.
16 Ibid., 307.
The female nabob satire simultaneously marks the possibility and impossibility for female participation in cultural exchange while residing within England, yet the female actresses had participated in just such cultural exchange since a 1660 royal proclamation required all female parts be played by women rather than boy actors. Women performed before the 1660 proclamation, but only in private theatres and at court.

The multi-classed and, by the 1770s, multi-cultured audiences made public stage performance a culturally internal and external barter of gender performance and gender roles. The actresses, though allowed on the stage, were still Othered by the male dominated theatre companies and barred from owning shares. Thus, female satire in nabob comedy created the situation of a figure both at once masculine British Self and feminine Other. This hybrid actor performs the role of a figure both at once cultural British Self and Other staged for an audience of varied gender, culture and travel. This hybrid existence of the staged female nabobina and nabob sympathizer creates a space for a hybridized cultural exchange of female rights between East and West. England was well behind France, Italy and other European nations in allowing women on stage. The French and Italian ballets were in demand all over Europe, and England was no exception. Audiences long used to viewing scantily-clad female dancers and associating such costume and reputation with lady performers of all sorts may have been more open to morally corrupt, though economically practical female characters like those in the nabob satires because of external cultural influence.

Audiences and readers still saddled female authors with questionable moral reputations through the end of the eighteenth century, though their work was sought and consumed on its own terms. Female authors capitalized on their uniqueness in an attempt to compete as successful dramatists. Felicity Nussbaum explains that a female writer possesses “a defect which
makes [her] a commodified object of wonder and spectacle.”

In Nussbaum’s analysis, a woman’s gender is her defect. Elizabeth Griffith knowingly situates herself as a female author and acknowledges a debt to a long history of female dramatists. She addresses the audience with her prologue, “By your leave, critics! To a female play/ A female prologue may prepare the way.” After defending a woman’s right to write and accusing men of driving women from every other profession, she continues:

Let females then compose as well as play,
And strive to please you in the noblest way! [...] 
But marks of authors past the valu’d file,
And owns Centlivre tempted him to smile.
Why may not Ladies too in future plays,
Strike a Bold Stroke, and, anxious for the bays,
New Busy Bodies form, new Wonders raise?

By calling upon Susannah Centlivre’s success, Griffith simultaneously emphasizes her own uniqueness as female writer and establishes an already successful history for her audience’s use as a reference to guide their interpretation of the sign given by author and actors.

Samuel Foote was already a comedic cultural icon before The Nabob’s 1772 debut. He needed not include a lineage of his work or his predecessors in his prologue. His individual celebrity and reputation attracted audiences on their own. Foote plays the title role of The Nabob, so audience members are left to negotiate the dual signified of Foote/Mite comprised of written signs from Foote the playwright and acted signs from Foote the actor. While Foote as Mite awaits various merchants and visitors vying for entry to his private chamber, the little known

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actresses Miss Craven and Mrs. Gardner as Mrs. Crocus and Mrs. Match’em enter to ply their wares. Without the complication of public personas beyond their characters, Crocus and Match’em become single, though certainly not fixed, signifieds for the audience to cue in on, thus rendering the first level of performativity less visible and less suspicious. The character Mr. Touchit describes the East Indian natives as “a little better than Tartars or Turks,” but Mr. Mayor counters, it is “just the reverse; it is they that have caught the Tartars in us.”19 In fact, it is the women that have caught the “Turks” in the English through their mirroring of Eastern culture and freedoms in their fair English bodies—at once embracing English citizenship and East Indian culture and economy. Their feminine gender makes Crocus and Match’em especially accurate cultural mirrors. As Lady Oldham says of young ladies, “young girls are easily caught with titles and splendour; magnificence has a kind of magic for them”20 Susceptible to the little-known splendours of the East and capable of embodying such magnificence in jewels and dress as well as marginalized manner, the ladies are given more rope than the nabob, Sir Matthew Mite, in Foote’s satire. Women are presumed “catchable” creatures, like fish in the sea. This presumed passivity of their subjugated gender allows the threat of Eastern influence to go under the audience’s sensitive merchant class radar.

In the prologue to The Nabob, Foote lists mitigating characteristics which he ascribes to Sir Matthew Mite so that the character might not closely mimic any individual nabob of the period. Foote forewarns, “If I halt or hobble thro’ a scene,/ Malice point out what citizen I mean:/ No foe I fear more than a legal fury,/ Unless I gain this circle for my jury”21 While Foote was clearly aware of the possible scandal associated with representing a nabob figure, scholar

19 Samuel Foote, The Nabob, 308.
20 Ibid., 292.
21 Ibid., 285.
Stephen Gregg includes Foote’s characterization of Sir Thomas Oldham as a morally acceptable and nationally bound merchant as a mitigating effect on the satire and audience’s presupposed anger. Gregg argues that the largely merchant-class audience could, if pressed, locate their reflection in Sir Thomas Oldham and not Sir Matthew Mite. Yet, while I agree with the reading of Sir Thomas Oldham as a safe space for audience reflection, I want to suggest Mrs. Crocus and Mrs. Match’em, the merchant women, as unexamined spaces of biting reflection and satire. Unlike Oldham, who serves as an alternative subject with which audiences could identify, the female characters’ gender keeps audience identification at bay. Because many female characters operate as objects of affection or farcical comic devices, eighteenth-century audiences were unconditioned to identify with female characters, especially two with such brief appearances as Mrs. Crocus and Mrs. Match’em. While Foote may have created Oldham to refocus the audience, the brief appearance of the female characters, their uncloaked goals of economic and cultural assimilation, and their non-farcical interactions with the nabob suggest a less individual yet broader critique, which unforecast in the prologue, goes unheeded by Foote’s contemporaries and critics of our own era.

Not only are Mrs. Crocus and Mrs. Match’em bodies of cultural convergence, they also hold power over constructing Eastern identity in Europe and in the nabob. While the male visitor instructs the nabob in counterfeiting an English identity, the female visitors enhance and embrace his Otherness. Though every bit as corrupt as the general supporting cast of male characters, the women, like the nabob, exist in a state of enclosed Otherness. They are English and female in appearance, yet culturally inflected and economically expanded by Eastern influence. The male visitor, an unnamed waiter, tutors Sir Mathew Mite in an eighteenth-century

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The first of the two female merchants enters following the Hazard-teaching waiter's departure. Sir Matthew Mite begins his interaction with the female flower seller, Crocus, by critiquing her last arrangement. He tells her, "Your last bouquet was as big as a broom, with a tulip strutting up like a magistrate's mace; and, besides, made me look like a devil."


Ibid., 303.
mindful of his altered appearance, having spent a great deal of time in the corrupting climate of
the East Indies, the nabob rejects the earlier flower arrangement based on the effects of its
origins. As the tulip is indigenous to East Asia, though brought to England in the sixteenth
century, he associates it with a garish representation of his Oriental wealth and manners. He
fears the flower’s origins color his appearance as an Eastern devil—the very image he attempts
to avoid with the hazard lessons from the male waiter and Maccaroni dress. Though the male
servant has the power to Westernize the nabob, the female merchant-servant can either
Westernize or Easternize the man. Both Crocus and, soon after, Match’em, seem predisposed to
Easternize both Sir Matthew Mite and themselves. Crocus and Mite go on to discuss possible
flower arrangements more suitable to Mite’s tastes:

_Crocus_: I hope your Honour could find no fault with the flowers? It is true, the
polyanthuses were a little pinched by the easterly winds; but for pip, colour, and
eye, I defy the whole parish of Fulham to match’em.

_Mite_: Perhaps not; but it is not the flowers, but the mixture, I blame. Why, here
now, Mrs Crocus, one should think you were out of your senses, to cram in this
clump of jonquils!

_Crocus_: I thought your Honour was fond of their smell.

_Mite_: Damn their smell! It is their color I talk of. You know my complexion has
been tinged by the East, and you bring me here a blaze of yellow, that gives me
the jaundice.²⁵

As with the tulips, Mite refuses the polyanthus, jonquil, and ultimately, “Crocus” flowers
because of their various associations with the East. The polyanthuses are weakened by “easterly
winds,” though Crocus prefers their “colour” and “pip” to any English bloom. The yellow
jonquil is eliminated because of the color’s racial associations with the Orient. Ultimately, it is
“the mixture” to which Mite objects, thus implying the “mixer” or arranger is at fault for his

²⁵_Ibid._, 303.
appearance and reputation as a nabob. The crocus flower, like the jonquil, is yellow. Unlike the tulip, it is indigenous to both Europe and Asia. The bloom, like the female flower seller’s taste and identity, straddles the Orient and Occident. Ultimately Mite dismisses Mrs. Crocus and calls upon his male servant, Piccard, to “Make [him] a bouquet with the artificial flowers [Mite] brought from Milan”\textsuperscript{26} Once again, Sir Mathew Mite turns to a male servant for Westernization, though clearly of an artificial and non-English sort.

The Crocus-Mite interaction dislocates the satire to Crocus by granting her the power to change Mite’s complexion and reputation. The script mocks her female taste, but her taste is simultaneously also that of a merchant seeking maximum profit. Foote continues to satire the female merchant, but does so without censuring her mercantile goals by focusing the satire on gender and not occupation. Allowing Crocus and later Match’em to serve as feminized proxies for the male merchant class is “a process typical in the feminization of mercantile capitalist ideology: women become the proxies for men, objects and agent of accumulation are reversed, and thus the female figure is made to bear the responsibility for Empire.”\textsuperscript{27} The next female merchant to grace Mite’s door is a peddler of flesh, not of flowers; though, to the nabob, both blooms and women are adornments with which to color one’s moral and political complexion.

In apology for her unsuccessful procurement of loose women in Cheapside, Mrs. Match’em says, “I have had but little intercourse with that part of the world: my business has chiefly lain on this side of the Bar; and I was weak enough to think both cities alike. She continues comparing the “nations” of the upper and lower classes and brings in gender as an alternate dividing line: “[T]wo nations can differ widely! Though money is supposed the idol of

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid.}, 304

merchants, their wives don’t agree in the worship.” Match’em, like Mite, personally responds to monetary wealth. Masculinized in her response to cash-based commerce, she still remains open to the feminine and Oriental currency of diamonds. Unlike Mite’s reaction to the Easternizing flowers, he is open to procuring women with the internationally recognized Indian currency of diamonds. Upon finding cash an ineffective tool, Mite suggests Mrs. Match’em try the gems. He tells her, “I have sent some rough diamonds to be polished in Holland; when they are returned, I will equip you, Match’em, with some of these toys.” As it is not he who directly and openly bribes the Cheapside ladies with the stones, the Oriental influence of their trade, at least that which is not polished off in Holland, is displaced from the Nabob onto Mrs. Match’em. She then becomes a merchant middle woman in the dissemination of Oriental wealth and dress among women—a hybrid figure bridging boundaries of class, gender and nation to facilitate a barter of wealth, goods and culture through her performance as procuress. She bears the responsibility of Empire, but only as a proxy for audience members of the merchant-class and East India corps.

Match’em and Mite discuss the difficulties of opening a seraglio in England at length:

**Mite:** I have had some thoughts of founding in this town a seraglio; they are of singular use in the Indies: do you think I could bring it to bear?

**Match:** Why, a customer of mine did formerly make an attempt; but he pursued too violent measures at first; wanted to confine the ladies against their consent; and that too in a country of freedom.

Though the Nabob rejects an Orientalized physical appearance, hybridized business ventures are fair game. Sir Mite consults Mrs. Match’em because of her experience in the sale of the female

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29 Ibid., 304.
30 Ibid., 307.
body in England. Mrs. Match’em is experienced in bringing Eastern cultures to the West—she’s witnessed a failed attempt at such a venture with a former customer. According to Match’em, the concept of a London seraglio failed because the enslavement of the women as sexual slaves was impossible in the “free” nation of England. English women may conventionally lack sexual “freedom,” but they are used to a more powerful agency and power of self commodification. The scene captures “the contradictions faced by female players who were at once sexual objects and skilled subjects.”31 That female self commodification gains a layer of performativity as the female actress on the stage selling her sign-producing ability to the audience argues for individual female consent to body commodification.

Match’em accepts the need to modify the seraglio to European rights and sensibilities. She appeals to both the Nabob’s logic and vanity to persuade him to place her in charge of such a venture. Match’em, like Crocus before her, bows to the Nabob’s superior knowledge and experience of the East. In seeking direction, Match’em seeks to mitigate Mite’s fear of an improper male manager by suggesting herself as a female substitute, though to little avail. Mite responds, “Impossible, Match’em! In the East we never confide that office to your sex or complexion. I had some thoughts of importing three blacks from Bengal, who have been properly prepared for the service; but I sha’n’t venture till the point is determined whether those creatures are to be considered as mere chattels, or men.”32 Whereas eighteenth-century Western conventions supply women with economic agency to consent to the sale of their bodies, Eastern conventions bar them from any position of power in such an operation. This unsuccessful hybridization of Orient and Occident bars Mrs. Match’em from Orientalizing her role of carnal matchmaker to seraglio manager.

Female roles beyond the marriage plot are scarce in *The Nabob*, but Samuel Foote inserts the merchant females, Mrs. Crocus and Mrs. Match'em, as double-sided cultural mirrors of the Orient and Occident and of the freedoms and restraints placed on their gender by both English and Indian cultures. I argue here that, as women, their mirror-like effect on Oriental and economic cultural influences left Foote's mid-eighteenth-century audiences reflected in, yet unoffended by, his political and cultural satire. Foote may come down against nabbobery on the surface *The Nabob*’s conclusion, but by dislocating the satire onto the female characters of Crocus and Match’em, he “entraps” the audience into considering a more progressive and hybridized possibility of culture and gender roles than they might be comfortable with if not protected by the female characters’ unrealized potential—they are of the “safe” sex.

Foote may have entrapped the audience into considering the Other as always already internalized, but *The Nabob*’s audience was not without power of its own. The audience controlled each performance through a variety of means. Riveted attention, thrown fruit, and published reviews were popular means of audience speak back. Satirist playwright stalking by cudgel-bearing men was unique to Foote. Their visit to Foote’s residence and Foote’s ready response suggest an acute awareness of public opinion. Between navigating the Lord Chamberlain’s sensibilities and those of the theatre-going public, Foote was forced to dislocate the nabob satire onto the female characters that were not satires of individuals and with whom his audience would not directly identify. While his efforts largely succeeded, the play’s successful run and frequent revival attest to that, the rare reviewer found that “some parts of this comedy teem with a sentimental indignation not usually found in the works of this author”33 Favoring Foote’s lampoon of the antiquarian society, the play’s political warnings are lost on the critic from the *Monthly Review.*

Griffith’s treatment of nabobery differs vastly from Foote’s. While Sir Mathew Mite threatens English social order with his corrupt morals and funds of unknown origins, Governor Anderson returns to England from India with a hyper sense of morality and devoid of wit. It is his fondness for Eastern culture, food and dress, and his tireless desire to implement them in England that threatens social order in *A Wife in the Right*. The Governor wears a “loose Indian habit” compared to Mite’s Maccaroni dress and compares himself to the Englishmen whom Mite attempts to mimic. “Rather than ape your Mounseers and Maccaroni’s, why not follow the manners of the East, where a man may sit at his ease in spite of the fashion?” Because neither playwright gives his or her nabob enough masculine power and wit to pose a legitimate threat to the Empire, the nabobs are the principally satired characters in both comedies. Like Mrs. Crocus and Mrs. Match’em in *The Nabob*, Mrs. Frankly serves as a secondary figure of satire in which Elizabeth Griffith offers less a critique of nabobery and more a comment on London’s changing demographics and women’s role therein.

At the play’s open, Widow Frankly is in serious financial debt for both her own luxuries and those of her lover who publicly poses as her uncle, Samuel Bull. Not affectionately satisfied with Bull, she develops an attraction toward her friend’s husband, Lord Seaton. In an attempt to clear her debt and pacify her creditors, Mrs. Frankly also encourages the affections of Governor Anderson, a recently returned nabob. The dim-witted and naïve Governor doles out money to discharge her debt, furnishes her with diamond baubles for her ears, and offers his hand in marriage for more permanent financial security. Eventually, Mrs. Frankly’s servant and the Governor’s friends reveal the widow’s questionable chastity and precarious financial situation. She is able to deceive the Governor once more, but the marriage plot is ultimately sunk. The

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play’s close leaves Mrs. Frankly the only female character of rank outside a marriage or solid engagement.

The very nature of a nabob’s existence keeps him in a constant performative state—signifying Englishness while abroad and Otherness while in England—all the while attempting to blend with both cultures. At best, nabobs achieve a sort of multiple existence. Colonel Ramsay describes the Governor as “a person who has contrived to unite, in a single individual, such a plurality of characters [...].”\(^{35}\) Women bearing the burden of nabob satire, however, are more chameleon-like in their shifts. Rather than embody a “plurality of characters,” Mrs. Frankly convincingly shifts from one character to another in her juggling of lovers, debts and ambitions. Miss Melville speaks of a perceivable change in her old friend: “Nor could I have believed that the Widow Frankly, launched into the world at large, might become a very different sort of character, from what she first appeared in, as my school-fellow and friend.”\(^{36}\) Miss Melville attributes this change to Mrs. Frankly’s “launch into the world at large.” The already Othered position of women within England gives them the ability to shift to a variety of Othered positions. Their female bodies and dress are also far more writable than their male counterparts. Critical assessment of the possible danger nabobinas posed to English social order suggests:

that the material realities of India were actively present in Britain itself; the nation was being colonized internally by its empire. While their husbands, fathers, and brothers—the nabobs—were directly responsible for the construction of an imperial landscape in British India, nabobinas were better situated to personify the connections between empire and metropole because [...] it was women rather than men who wore the fabled diamonds of India as ornaments—in necklaces, rings, bracelets, and, as Mrs. Mattocks predicted [in the epilogue to *A Wife in the Right*], perhaps even their noses. The nabobina's body became, as a result, the

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 10.
\(^{36}\) Ibid., 32.
boundary at which questions of empire, luxury, commerce, morality, and sexuality met.  

Eighteenth-century women serve as a more credible threat to the empire’s cultural insularity because of their already Othered gender, writable bodies, and most relevant to this study, their ability to transgress and return across metaphorical boundaries under the guise of their “safe” and passive gender. Mrs. Frankly instructs Miss Melville in this duplicitous and hybrid art of womanhood: “The utmost that is required of feeble nature, now-a-days, is barely to conceal the vices we have, under the affectation of those virtues we are deficient in.” If women successfully conceal their vices under affected virtue, they can convincingly conceal and affect their English cultural identity as well.

This confusion of female identity and loyalty forms the crux of the plot. Over the course of the play, Governor Anderson describes Mrs. Frankly through a series of associations and comparisons with Eastern objects. As the action progresses and he uncovers her ploy, the Governor’s language shifts from passive comparison, to confusion, to active association. He contextualizes Mrs. Frankly as Eastern-like, but has trouble pinning down the connotation of that contextualization. Mrs. Frankly’s chameleon-like hybrid identity makes her difficult to categorize in absolute terms of East/West and feminine/masculine. Governor Anderson first compares the scent of Widow Frankly’s breath to “Otto of roses.” “Otto,” a derivation of the Persian word for “a very fragrant, volatile, essential oil obtained from the petals of the rose,” suggests a passive female role. The oil to which he compares her breath must be “obtained” by a second, presumably masculine, party. In calling Mrs. Frankly’s breath “Otto of roses,” Governor

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40 O.E.D.
Anderson passively Easternizes the woman. Two acts later the Governor attempts to upbraid Mrs. Frankly after discovering the dishonesty of her affections, but has trouble finding the appropriate “language.” He says, “I know not where to begin, nor in what language to speak of you.” Mrs. Frankly fails to exhibit his positive and passive Eastern assessment, but he is still reluctant to categorize her as English or in English terms. Something inherent to Mrs. Frankly leaves her between or beyond the linguistic boundaries of English and Hindi. Only after Governor Anderson confirms Widow Frankly’s lies a second time is he able to again Easternize her, though through an aggressive association with exotic beasts. He calls her, “the crocodile of the Nile, and the shark of the Ganges! Had she nobody to play off her monkey tricks upon, but me!”

A nabobina’s diamonds act as a visual display of wealth without a verified source. Early in the eighteenth century, wealth, land ownership and title were often bound together. Title still signified at least a façade of gentlemanly morality and adherence to code. By the 1770s, the rising middle class within England and the influx of wealth from abroad divorced title and wealth and wealth and an assumed moral code. By displaying diamonds upon their persons, the nabobinas become moveable centers of wealth. Before gracing nabobina bodies, the diamonds traveled from India to Holland, where they were cut and polished, and then to England, circumventing East India Company regulations on importation of wealth by its employees. The diamonds’ indirect path and the transitory ability of the female bodies on which they were displayed further muddied the origin and path of nabob wealth. After hocking jeweled earrings given her by the Governor, Mrs. Frankly directs her servant to “give [her] the paste earrings, for

42 Ibid., 86.
the present. They’ll pass on the Governor for his own brilliants.” Eventually, Mrs. Frankly uses the Governor’s own money to redeem the “dear little sparklers” to which she is highly attached. It is the possession of the authentic jewels that grants the woman her second reprieve from the Governor’s wrath when she presents them as proof of constancy in spite of her libertine behavior. This illustrates the no longer applicable association of wealth, which was once tied to the solid investment of land, with virtue. For a nabobina, “Youth and beauty are bills of exchange” with which she can “purchase” diamonds from a nabob. The diamonds put a monetary value on a woman’s self-commoditized body. Nabobina satire lends itself to a more visual performance than nabob satire because of the socially accepted display of wealth upon the female body. The satire gains a visual element to underscore the written and auditory signs from the playwright and spoken by the actors when nabobinas are the target.

Ultimately, England is unable to physically contain an enterprising woman of oscillating and hybrid identity like Mrs. Frankly. An internally active nabobina poses too much of an active threat to the empire’s social order, so the woman must be expelled from the national boundaries. The play’s epilogue lays out her future as a nabobina in India while hammering home the dislocation of nabob satire onto women. Mrs. Mattocks, the actress who portrays Mrs. Frankly, speaks the epilogue:

‘Tis very fine, indeed! All match’d I see,
All happy, all provided for, but me:
Blown up and ruin’d here—‘tis a strange notion,
You’ll say, but I’m resolv’d to cross the ocean; […]

43 Ibid., 22.
44 Ibid., 26.
In order to dislocate satire onto a nabobina, the story still requires a nabob to procure the foreign wealth. The woman must still be “provided for,” though Griffith’s character actively seeks a provider by leaving the country.

Bull says he’s sure I need not despair,
For British features bear a premium there. […]
Pantheon, Opera, Playhouse, Fantoccini,
Farewell—I’ll go, and be a Nabobini:

In bidding farewell to the various performance spaces, the actress performing the epilogue moves from one sort of performance to another. Griffith invokes theatrum mundi to extend the metatheatrical performance across oceans and borders.

Or, if that scheme, perchance, should not succeed,
E’en wed a Seapoy chief, and mend the breed.
What if one’s husband is a little frightful,
Where everything besides is so delightful. […]
If I’ve a taste for baubles, my good man,
Will load me with old China and Japan.
Diamonds on diamonds heap’d, and pearly rows,
For hair, ears, neck, and breast, perhaps my nose: […]

But must I leave my little Bull behind?
No, hang it, after all ’twould be unkind.
The fellow may be useful, he shall go:
For he can write, or underwrite, you know. 45

The ironic tone in which the proud female playwright suggests bringing a man along to “write” insinuates a power reversal in gender relationships can occur with the geographical and cultural shift to the East. In this situation, it is a male proxy for a female author’s body offered by a female dramatist. Griffith’s epilogue offers a future space in which women can operate as full-fledged cultural influences without posing the feared threat of an internal Other to the British

social order. The impossibility for full actualization within England as well as the empire’s “safety” from women within its borders is expressed in the epilogue’s close, for “a writer here is quite another thing” from the progressive female characters in both The Nabob and A Wife in the Right. In her female nabob satire, Griffith calls the gendered internal Other to action, not passivity. In the process, the already internalized cultural Other is less demonized than in The Nabob. Governor Anderson, at least when not performed by a drunken Mr. Shuter, lucidly argues for English adoption of comfortable Oriental dress and uniquely spiced Indian food. Though both the nabob and would-be nabobina ship off to India separately at the play’s end, thus conveniently externalizing the influential figures of change, the Governor’s Eastern influence and Mrs.Frankly’s assertive female influence remain uncensored within the text.

A Wife in the Right’s truncated run did not affect its audience’s ability to critique the production and force Griffith to reframe the play for publication. An audience member threw an apple after the epilogue, and the “council behind the curtain” withdrew the play. When it reappeared in print, Griffith added a lengthy preface in which she explains and apologizes for a drunken actor and her choice not to pursue an argument with the theatre manager for an additional performance. A sympathetic review of the published work offers, “A subscription for the present edition was the consequence of its ill success on the stage: a mode of redress which may be considered as an appeal from the severity of the public, to its humanity. The audiences “severity” at the performance and its affect on Griffith is only underscored by the play’s final words: “The author for your passport trembling stands,/ And hopes you’ll grant it under all your hands.” The tossed apple and general audience malaise put the theatre-goers in

46 Ibid., Preface.
48 Elizabeth Griffith, A Wife in the Right, Epilogue.
direct conversation with both the author who wrote the request for approval and the actress who spoke the same request from the stage. Griffith continued the conversation with her preface and the critic picked it up in the widely disseminated Monthly Review. Author, actress and audience work in tandem to create signs and defer interpretation of the play's meaning.

The Nabob and A Wife in the Right occupy pivotal positions in the evolution of eighteenth-century satire and culture. The theatre was one of the first spaces colonized by Others. Women took to the pen and later the stage long before other professions became socially acceptable. Merchants mingled with East India corps and aristocracy in the pit. By the 1770s, blacked up actors could meet the gaze of actual black bodies in the audience. The theatre had long since accepted diverse influence of gender, class and culture, but the rest of England had yet to accept and acknowledge the influence of the already undeniably internalized cultural Other.

Specifically, Foote and Griffith’s works react to and inflect theatre’s new genderscape and the country at large by portraying nabobery and its satire as metadrama. It is England’s lagging behind the theatre in its acknowledgement of changing influence which allows the playwrights to use the dislocation of nabob satire onto female characters as a device to “safely” reveal the benefits of nabobery and its cultural exchange. Publication of audience response displays an awareness of drama as a genre shaped by and influential to English culture—the ultimate sociosemiotic form. What remains are questions about the future of dislocated satire and its lasting effects on female theatre workers and watchers. Once the culture meets the theatre on grounds of gender, to what stock characters will the real satire, the politically relevant satire, be relegated? Blacked up actors evolve into American blackface less than sixty years after nabob satires hit London stages. Are women empowered through assuming the burden of
Empire along with the dislocated satire, or are they merely as Laura Brown suggests, proxies for male empowerment? Were the satirists reacting to the women on stage and behind playbooks, or were they actually suggesting a progressive cultural move away from gender subjugation along with the move toward cultural hybridity and barter? The feminist in me is willing to give at least Elizabeth Griffith the benefit of the doubt.
Bibliography


