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Chloe Wigston Smith
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Introduction

"Expression is the *Dress* of *Thought*, and still / Appears more *decent* as more *suitable*," argues Alexander Pope in *An Essay on Criticism* (1711).[1] The analogy between expression and dress was not new to the eighteenth century. Pope's couplet draws on a long tradition of imagining tropes and figurative devices as the ornamentation of ideas within classical, medieval, and early modern rhetoric. Similar to the humanist tradition from which they borrow, eighteenth-century theories of poetics and oratory traffic in sartorial allusions, painting a verbal world draped in figurative pieces of clothing, accessories, and textiles. Pope's *Essay* offers one succinct model for the analogy between dress and expression in the period. This book, however, describes a counter-tradition to the longstanding correspondence between words and clothes. The eighteenth-century novels at the heart of this study remake the figurative ornaments of rhetoric and oratory into the material objects of fiction. In examining the distance between words and things, my argument recasts the relations between eighteenth-century novels and the material world they attempt both to represent and to reform.

The eighteenth-century novel's energetic engagement with objects – its earthenware pots, baskets, teapots, bundles, muffs, petticoats, wigs – has long been perceived as evidence of its investment in material culture and formal realism. The relationship between the novel and material objects has been considered reciprocal, in which literary and material culture together engaged the expanding commodity culture of the period. This study rereads the novel in the context of a wide range of print and visual artifacts, such as criminal trials, periodicals, engravings, garments, accessories, trade debates, and memoirs. These juxtapositions demonstrate how novels flout the rhetorical tradition by calling attention to utilitarian and pragmatic clothes and accessories. In novels the ornaments of style and fashion are transformed into the "practical habits" of fiction: ordinary clothes that can be reworked and manipulated through manual labor. This book scrutinizes why and how characters exploit, stitch, wash, purchase, sell, and steal garments. Instead of focusing on the familiar theme of clothing's transformative potential – or its role as an index to identity and character – the chapters remap the

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history of the novel by describing how fiction revises and reshapes material culture within its pages. The practical habits of eighteenth-century novels present flexible and progressive representations of material culture, gender roles, and women's work.

When we picture the clothes of eighteenth-century literature, we may allow ourselves to imagine lavish masquerade balls, cross-dressed actresses, and disguised rakes, rather than the moment when Daniel Defoe's Moll Flanders washes the dirt from her lace trimmings or Frances Burney's Juliet Granville stitches a plain white dress from rough linen. Although scholars such as Terry Castle and Catherine Craft-Fairchild have unearthed the sartorial metaphors that gripped the period, the masquerade – and the harlots, nuns, and harlequins that populated it – constitutes an anomalous event in prose fiction.[2] In novels by Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Frances Burney – as well as in a rich collection of prose fictions by other less-studied authors – ordinary clothes tell a different story about the tactile role of clothes, accessories, and textiles in the period's fiction.[3] Representations of plain gowns, secondhand clothes, functional garb, and utilitarian disguises challenge the exchange-value of powdered wigs, cosmetic patches, and dominoes.[4]

The novels included here focus on the pragmatic ends assigned to clothes by fictional characters. These novels resist the common conflation of dress and character that turned clothes, fabric, and accessories into symbols of status and identity, thereby anticipating Pierre Bourdieu's interest in the ineffable markers, or distinction of taste, embodied by the garments, behavior, and cultural practices of twentieth-century Parisians.[5] My own coinage of "practical habits" nods both to the period view of clothes and Bourdieu's *habitus*, but it offers a different set of possibilities for the ordinary clothes of eighteenth-century novels. Rather than emphasizing custom and convention, many eighteenth-century novels stress the practical qualities of garments, textiles, and accessories. Pragmatic clothes are not the purview of the educated elite or sophisticated aristocracy, but comprise instead tools, materials, and resources available to the middling and laboring classes (and to upper-class characters down on their luck). While these commonplace clothes reference some cultural codes of dress (such codes were, to some degree, inescapable during the period), they function first and foremost as tangible objects that characters put to strategic use, as novels evade and reimagine the old hierarchical and cultural codes of dress and style. The chapters that follow draw examples from the period's canon as well as from understudied treatments of laboring women, in order to show the genre's extensive commitment to ordinary dress and accessories. The novel's deep interest in solid, sturdy, and sensible apparel – as well as the labor

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that produced such garments – builds an argument for the centrality of the genre itself as it emerged during the period. The novel defined itself against fashion, refusing to align itself with modish trends by marking its allegiance to a material world represented as reliable, robust, and durable.

Milliners, mantua-makers, haberdashers, seamstresses, servants, and actresses contributed to Britain's new role in the eighteenth-century textile and dress marketplace. As John Styles notes, foreign visitors to the British Isles routinely praised the high quality of the everyday clothing of working people.[6] Over the century, British men and women developed a national sense of style and for the first time became forerunners of fashion on the Continent and in the Atlantic world. Residents of Anglo-American port cities looked to London for the latest modes and sought out tailors and dressmakers who had acquired their training in the British capital.[7] By the 1780s, the English gown, fitted at the waist back in contrast with the full folds of the French sack, had formalized its fashionable status with a French name: *robe à l'anglaise*.[8] Critiques of French fashion and court culture, in turn, helped to shape a British aesthetic from the late seventeenth century onward.[9] By mid-century, Britain was a fashion leader in Europe, "associated with more 'egalitarian' styles in dress, with simpler fashions and more practical fabrics."[10] The expansion of commodity culture, in particular in the textile and clothing industries, streamlined and facilitated access to clothing for all classes.[11]

The simplicity of British fashion in the eighteenth century has been linked primarily to men's garments, in particular the plain fabrics of the three-piece suit, identified as the "great masculine renunciation" by fashion theorist J. C. Flügel.[12] Within the story of the great renunciation, women's fashions occupy a secondary role in the shift toward simpler fabrics and styles. Garments such as riding habits and chemise dresses represent the feminine counterparts to the dominance of the somber three-piece suit.[13] Apart from these examples of simple attire, the history of clothing credits men with the advent of inconspicuous consumption, in which, to use Erin Mackie's phrasing, "the absence of conspicuous stylized display itself becomes stylized and conspicuous."[14] To this day, inconspicuous consumption continues to signal the modern individual, whose well-cut garments or anti-fashion clothes function as a form of cultural capital.[15] Eighteenth-century novels, however, position their heroines as the most effective practitioners of simplified apparel via the clothes they create, wear, wash, purchase, and steal. By focusing on practical clothes, these novels attempt to claim a place for women within ideals of British style and selfhood, as coded through simple, egalitarian attire.

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The shared figurative and physical bonds between clothing and paper cut across literary representations of clothes, textiles, and accessories during the period. The British print industry developed in tandem with the textile industry: both domestic markets depended on similar technologies and on the same primary materials. Over the century, Britain's textile manufacturing and fashion industry matured far beyond the largely wool-based markets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By the late eighteenth century, London's sophisticated shops showcased textiles produced with new spinning and rolling technologies, and sold relaxed, informal fashions inspired by an idealized vision of simple country life.[16] Even Paris looked to London's haberdashers, milliners, and tailors for exceptional fabrics, trimmings, accessories, and styles. At the same time, the British reduced their dependence on Continental paper thanks to a growing domestic paper industry, buoyed by advances in woven frame technology.[17] The textile industry borrowed technological innovations, such as copper-plate printing, from print, while the designs of figurative fabrics drew on travel accounts, books of ornaments, poetry, and drama for visual inspiration. Clothing's incorporation of paper has been largely overlooked in both literary and art-historical studies, apart from famous scenes such as the moment when Samuel Richardson's Pamela stitches her letters into her petticoat. Paper – particularly the harder pressboards – provided structural support for garments and served as linings for pocketbooks, stays, and hats. Objects such as paper patterns, template quilts, and dressed prints, as reviewed in Chapter 2, all evoke the physical ties between text and textiles, offering a tantalizing material analogue to the rhetorical links between dress and expression.

The cornerstone to the novel's investment in practical clothes was its rebellion against the familiar comparison between the realm of expression and the trappings of dress, as encapsulated by Pope's couplet. Jane Barker's *A Patchwork Screen for the Ladies* (1723), a text discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2, conveys how the novel challenges the dressed/expressed analogy by juxtaposing narrative against the material world. Barker's title articulates her organizing metaphor, in which she compares her prose fiction to a patchwork screen – an ornamental, but functional, piece of domestic furniture decorated with remnant pieces of fabric. Barker revisits the explicit references to her patchwork structure in her preface in one of the most evocative episodes of the narrative. In it, the poet-heroine Galesia is invited to contribute some fabric pieces to a patchwork screen. In opening her trunks, however, Galesia discovers that her clothes have been replaced by pieces of paper – her own letters, poems, and romances – and so she agrees to contribute her writing in lieu of her clothes. Such a scene would

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seem to support the tight bonds between paper and clothes. Both the patchwork metaphor and the transformative potential of dress are literalized by the text, as clothes and fabric are materialized in manuscript form. Yet as Barker's narrative continues, the conceit develops the distinctions, as opposed to the similarities, between fabric and prose through the process of narrative displacement. The screen fades to the margins of the texts, as it is supplanted by Galesia's stories. The instability – and indeed fragility – of the patchwork conceit becomes even more prominent in Barker's 1726 sequel, *The Lining of the Patchwork Screen*. In her preface, Barker revives the conceit – this narrative is described as the interior lining of the previous "screen" – but, in practice, the patchwork structure disappears from the text. The analogy between dress and expression, between textile and text, functions as a mere prelude to the real focus of storytelling and conversation. Needlework, the narrative suggests, is only useful for the way it might foster the circulation of fiction; it remains secondary to the production of fiction and narrative experience. The patchwork screen thus constitutes an unstable and unconvincing conceit in a text that would appear initially to embrace the conventional correspondence between words and clothes.

The clothes of many eighteenth-century novels, as the following chapters demonstrate, resist the widespread correlation between text and textiles, fostered by the rhetorical tradition and inscribed by Britons in their writings, both private and public. In his journal entry of February 9, 1763, for instance, James Boswell adapts the analogy between dress and expression to his own writing habits:

> Style is to sentiment what dress is to the person. The effects of both are very great, and both are acquired and improved by habit. When once we are used to it, it is as easy to dress neatly as like a sloven; in the same way, custom makes us write in a correct style as easily as in a careless, inaccurate one.[18]

Boswell, a man interested in his self-presentation and appearance to a fault, exploits the analogy in order to place renewed emphasis on improving his prose. Boswell reminds himself that his somewhat private musings square with his sartorial appearance; both require work, ritual, and routine in order to produce pleasing and instructive results.

Boswell's efforts to forge his identity and style through external appearances represent a common consensus in eighteenth-century culture in which dress and identity were collapsed together. Eighteenth-century men and women often agreed that dress could be read and telltale traits such as gender, status, and taste could be telegraphed through a person's choice of wig, buckles, stockings, and sword. Theatrical costumes, for instance, relied

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on shorthand in order to register a character's status, nationality, or fashionability from the first appearance onstage (the outdated style of a somber Spanish costume generated an immediate laugh from spectators). It was no stretch for Thomas Jefferys to argue, in his introduction to his costume book, *A Collection of the Dresses of Different Nations, Antient and Modern* (1757), that "the Habit is become a kind of Index to the Mind, and the Character is in some Particulars as easily discovered by a Man's Dress as by his Conversation."[19] In print and in manuscript, writers such as Boswell and Jefferys reiterated the importance of understanding the hierarchical and symbolic codes of clothes and textiles – and the necessity of doing so in cosmopolitan London and the rural village. In Jefferys's formulation, dress precedes conversation – grammatically and visually. Character is made visible first through external appearances and then amplified through verbal expression. Waistcoats, petticoats, gowns, and gloves not only convey a person's social status, but also suggest the inner workings of a person's mind by indexing and collating the individual.

Jefferys, however, hedges in placing too much emphasis on material objects. Clothes remain an index to character and thoughts, not a multi-paged treatment that fully articulates an individual's complexities. Clothes allow the discovery of "some Particulars" but not every detail; they function as easy shorthand, but fail to provide a comprehensive guide to identity. This study seeks to delineate and particularize such hesitations by investigating novelistic strategies for reading past the surfaces of clothes. Although the Jefferys passage constitutes just one example of the actual unease that surrounded the coupling of clothes and character in the period, many contemporary works question and challenge the familiar – and even facile – correspondence between style and substance. The novels I investigate argue that habits falter in their rendering of persons, particularly in the case of women, whose clothes were subject to more scrutiny, speculation, and criticism than those of men. Boswell and Jefferys may yearn to make themselves and others legible through appearances, but this yearning depends on a reading practice that prioritizes indexing, abbreviation, and truncation. Fiction, by contrast, proposes an alternative mode of interpretation to the reading practices offered by Boswell and Jefferys, who model their commitment to custom and convention. Indeed, the novel engages the kind of hesitation hinted at in Jefferys (and perhaps pushed aside by Boswell's strong desire to remake himself through visual and verbal style) by refuting the correspondence between clothes and characters.

We have inherited the linguistic metaphors of the period, as evoked by Boswell's eager embrace of the analogy between style and sentiment.[20] The

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rhetorical ties between clothing and language have provided critical frameworks for dress historians, such as Linda Baumgarten and Aileen Ribeiro, who position clothes as forms of both language and fiction.[21] Garments and accessories, however, constitute material objects that behave differently from words. As Deborah C. Payne has observed, "clothing, however much we want it to be meaningful, does not function like language, and there are limits to what we can say."[22] Although the novels discussed here exploit the same analogy featured in treatises on rhetoric, Pope's poetry, Boswell's journal, and Jefferys's costume book, they demonstrate that clothes and fashion approximate a kind of complex code rather than a legible language.[23]

True, in printed and private exchanges the British toyed with the expressive qualities of clothes and textiles. On February 10, 1779, Hester Thrale records a game devised by Samuel Johnson in which men and women compare each other to textiles:

> We were playing the fool today & saying everybody was like some Colour; & I think some Silk – Sophy Streatfield was to be a pea Green Satten, Fanny Brown a Jonquil Colourd Lutstring [*sic*] Miss Burney a lilac Tabby, & myself a Gold Colour'd Watered Tabby: My Master a mouse Dun & Johnson who helped this Folly forward was to be a Marone. Marone comes from Maron I suppose the French Word for a Chestnut.[24]

The company divides colors across gender lines, comparing women to either bright or pastel silks and men to somber colors. Thrale bookends her report with the phrase "was to be," suggesting the equivalencies between fabrics and people. Does Burney conjure up lilac taffeta because it is a "feminine" or a favorite color? Does Sophy Streatfield's "pea Green" represent Thrale's animosity toward a woman she saw as her rival? Although the precise meanings of the colors and fabrics might be lost to us, the game conveys the pleasures and violence of imagining people as things. Clothing here represents, as G. J. Barker-Benfield has noted, the potential for "self-expression" and "self-assertion" for late-eighteenth-century women.[25] Thrale and her guests were not alone in their interest in how clothes and fabrics might function as an index to the mind. The Streatham parlor game represents just one illustration of the period's widespread interest in the capacity of clothes and accessories to relay details about a person's character and mind.

At the same time, many Britons worried about the capacity of clothes to disguise and conceal these same traits, a worry that was reinforced by period fashions. In staging an aesthetic of concealment and disclosure, eighteenth-century fashions for women complicated the epistemology of clothes.[26] Gowns opened at the front to display the embroidered or

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furbelowed petticoat worn beneath. Pinned over functional stays, decorative stomachers screened the whalebone, wood, and linen supports of women's upper garments, but their designs often inferred the structural supports of the undergarments shielded beneath. For instance, popular designs for stomachers in the first half of the eighteenth century include criss-crossed gold and silver cords. Sometimes laid over brightly embroidered animal and botanical designs, these cords offered an ornamental variation on the laced stays they concealed. Like many eighteenth-century garments, the ornamental stomacher paradoxically shielded and disclosed the interior it covered.

The exteriors of decorative garments like stomachers, however, tell an incomplete story about how even luxurious garments were subject to practicality and function. Elite garments, like a *c.* 1768–80 hooped green brocade dress (Figure 1), showcase the surprising contrast between the spectacular exteriors of upper-class garments and their slap-dash internal constructions. The ensemble was made from French fabric, but probably constructed in England over a decade later (it was not uncommon to store lengths of quality silk for later use).[27] The capacious sweep of the gown and petticoat would have accommodated wide side-hoops, indicating that the outfit was probably destined for a court appearance (as women's silhouettes had narrowed and softened by late-century). The gown, stomacher, and petticoat are cut from a light green taffeta with pink stripes, broad silver brocaded stripes, and meandering flowers in silk pastel threads. Each separate garment features sophisticated trimmings, including ruched areas and tassels. The petticoat and edges of the sack-back gown parade a busy three-dimensional padded decoration, ornamented with flying braid that embellishes the already luxurious textile. The elaborate decoration conveys an aesthetic of opulence and the long hours of work that would have gone into creating the complex and dazzling ornamentation. However, the plain backside of the petticoat (Figure 2) illustrates how the decoration is strictly reserved for the external parts of the ensemble. Less than a third of the petticoat would have been visible at the front of this open gown. The dressmaker probably pieced out a large section of the expensive silk – perhaps using it to create the ruching at the front – replacing it with a plain green silk that conserves the expensive taffeta. In contrast with the decoration's delicate contours, the petticoat's interior is worked with loose stitches. Broad green stitches top a rough band of linen at the petticoat's hem.[28] Loose stitches and unfinished edges facilitated the work of alterations, during a period in which clothing was frequently reworked for new wearers. The green petticoat demonstrates how garments themselves embodied the tension between

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Figure 1 Hooped silk brocade dress, French fabric, 1766–70, English construction, 1768–80.

display and disguise, as well as exhibition and practicality, invoked by literary representations of clothes.

For Boswell, Jefferys, and Thrale, textiles and accessories could render the invisible qualities of the mind perceptible and discernible on the body. Their voices reprise the opinions of many Britons during the period. The

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Figure 2 Petticoat (reverse view), French fabric, 1766–70, English construction, 1768–80.

anecdotal commentary of a few writers might serve the purposes of an introduction, yet it does not provide a layered picture of the lived experiences of eighteenth-century women and men, or how they viewed, imagined, and used their clothes. The chapters that follow incorporate a trove of cultural and extra-literary documents and objects in order to contextualize the novel's resistance to the widespread conflation of expression and dress. On the one hand, these discourses transmit how unusual it was for the eighteenth-century novel to offer an alternative way of understanding the role of clothes. They explain why novelists felt compelled to return to the analogy between dress and expression in order to challenge and rewrite it from within. Such engrained ways of seeing and interpreting clothes and identity demanded repeat visits and reinventions across many decades of fiction. On the other hand, my readings of trade debates, garments, and engravings also seek to establish a textured reflection of the novel's encounters with other cultural forms and artifacts in the eighteenth century. My methodology situates the novel dialogically in relation to other discourses and material objects in order to reassess fiction's engagement with commodity culture. To understand the novel's reinterpretation of material culture requires an extensive sample of genres and objects (of which only a

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