

Literary Insurgency

Tobias Smollett's use of wit, humor, and epistolary form in the novel Humphry Clinker to reveal class structure and national pride: a taxonomical approach

by

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Abstract:

Any reader of Tobias Smollett's novel *Humphry Clinker* will notice that, during the expedition, humor seems to exist more consistently and with greater frequency in the sections devoted to England in comparison to the more earnest and serious sections devoted to travel in Scotland. I will argue that *Humphry Clinker* stands as a brilliant example of literary insurgency. Smollett is crafty in his use of devices to force readers to take on his own views without realizing they have. Smollett has a point to make, that Scotland is a worthy northern neighbor to England with something to offer, and he uses every tool of engagement available to him in order to present his personal beliefs about Scotland to a prejudiced English audience. This is an audience long fed, by the likes of Samuel Johnson, that Scotland is a savage land full of uncivilized people and a complete lack of culture. No reader can walk away from *Humphry Clinker* without a favorable view of an under-appreciated, charming nation full of entrepreneurship, industry, and a strong moral foundation. The ways in which Smollett engages his unsuspecting readers so that they will also invest in his pro-Scotland ideals are his use of the epistolary form and the codified use of humor along class lines. This thesis seeks to build a taxonomy of the humor used in the novel to understand how Smollett reveals class as a weapon in converting readers. An examination of the formidable power of the epistolary form will also underscore the importance of reader engagement with multiple perspectives and nuanced layers of understanding. We will see how, with his final novel, completed just before his death, Smollett creates a work of genius that builds a new, more positive vision of Scotland against the deep prejudices of its southern neighbor.

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ABSTRACT

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“Reading Smollett is sometimes like eating too much raw bear, but that only acknowledges how authentic and strong his flavor is” (Bloom 39).

Introduction

It is a wonderful irony that the book I love so much took me on a physical journey that exposed me to a delightful and humorous cast of characters and locations. In the early 2000's, while visiting my home country of Scotland, I decided to go on a literary adventure. I had been introduced to Tobias Smollett's *Humphry Clinker* by Ohio State University professor John Sena, and I had also read about Smollett in some of James Boswell's letters. I discovered that he was born in the next town over from my childhood home, and I thought it might be a fun day to go and learn what I could about the man from the landscape of his youth. I mentioned my plan to my local friends, hoping that they would recommend additional not-to-be-missed Smollett sites along the way. They unanimously responded to my requests with “Smollett? Never heard of him.”

Smollett was a stalwart defender and proponent of Scotland, and here in 2014, as Scotland is mired in heated discussions of independence from the United Kingdom, it is unfortunate that he is largely forgotten. The humor used in *Humphry Clinker* to promote the nation of his birth is based on Smollett's vision of a Scotland and a people that still exist today. The spirit he so admired is still here. I started by driving to the place of his birth, Dalquhurn, now a part of the town of Renton. It is an awful little town. It has almost no redeeming features to speak of architecturally or otherwise, and it manages to take no advantage of its position along a lovely river.

Undeterred by the depressing reality of Renton today, I stopped in what appeared to be a main area of the town, and I asked a grim-faced man with a scruffy dog if, by chance, he knew the location of the memorial marker to Smollett. His reply was “whit are you on about wommin? Ah’ve no earthly idea what yer sayin’! You yanks aw sound the same ta me,” and he hustled past without another word. I realized I was near a school, so I thought to myself, “surely, in the halls of education, someone will instantly be able to tell me where a local literary genius’s marker can be found.” The woman at reception looked as confused as the man in the street, but she did offer that there was an odd stone in the playground, and that maybe I should have a look. I walked around to the playground. Odd stone? You mean the massive towering plinth that presides over the children’s play equipment? As I walked over to the stone during recess and narrowly avoided an errant dodgeball that bounced off its side, I thought, “this is how forgotten Smollett is. The most noticeable structure in this town, which has a massive inscription to him on its side written by Samuel Johnson, is something no one even realizes is here. In a way, it is fitting.”



Smollett Monument - *Author's photograph*

After my bittersweet visit to Renton, I decided to dig back into the text *Humphry Clinker* for an idea of where to go next. When the Bramble party visits this part of Scotland they stop at Cameron House, the seat occupied by Smollett's uncle. I made the assumption that the resort I know well as the Cameron House Hotel was, perhaps, the same place. I had visited this high-end resort before for its fine dining and excellent indoor pool, but that was before reading *Clinker*. On this visit, everything seemed different. As I drove up the chip-gravel drive to the large turning circle in front of the house, I imagined Bramble and his entourage arriving by horse and carriage. After all of the lesser housing they had endured on the journey so far, Cameron House must have seemed the height of luxury. A regal manse, although it has been increased ten-fold with modern additions, the front of the building is the same as it would have been for Bramble. I parked and approached the front door where I was greeted, as is the customary nod to American tourists in particular, by a handsome elderly man in a kilt. He asked if he could be of service, and I said I had an odd question. I asked if he knew whether Cameron House was in fact the same house mentioned in Smollett's book. He, surprised at having not being assailed with more a more typical tourist question, reacted with delight and an actual twinkle in his eyes. "Madame! You have indeed found Smollett's ancestral home! Allow me to take you on a tour." We wandered about the house in and out of rooms, some that are not open to the public, and ended in a parlor in which are hung the portraits of Smollett and his aunt and uncle. Sitting in the parlor of that house which Jerry Melford describes as "a very neat country-house...situated like a Druid's temple, in a grove of oak, close by the side of Lough-Lomond, which is a surprising body of pure transparent water, unfathomably deep in some places" and that Matthew describes as "too near

the lake, which approaches, on one side, to within six or seven yards of the window,” made *Humphry Clinker* feel all the more real, and I began to wish that I could visit every book I’ve read in this manner (Smollett 221, 232).



Cameron House - *author's photograph*

After my journey I made inquiries at the local historical archive which is essentially a small public library. The only librarian was otherwise occupied by “story time for tots,” so she gestured vaguely to a sinister door in the corner which hid stairs that led to the “archives.” She told me to enjoy myself, and that if I had any questions about the collection she would be glad to phone someone who might actually have the answer, as it certainly wasn’t her. The “archival wing” of the Dumbarton Library consists of a file cabinet and a dank set of shelves at the foot of a primitive staircase in an unfinished basement with exposed beams that smell of wood rot and boast the constant trickle of water...somewhere. The “files” on Smollett consist of one manila folder stuffed higgledy-piggledy with newspaper clippings and letters from other amateur sleuths

like myself asking for information. Nearby stands a wonky shelf of Smollett books all verging on spongy. Thankfully, none of them were of much value, so I dismissed my outrage and moved on.

The special collections room in the University of Glasgow library was much more interesting if a bit overly professional and intimidating. I was summarily stripped of my baggage, and when the librarian saw that I had secreted (unintentionally) a pen to my work station there was a suppressed shriek, and an attendant rushed to my side to pluck it from my hand. “We only allow pencils” she hissed at me. Feeling like a special collections tyro who deserved the pointedly irritated looks of the entire archival staff, I sheepishly handled an actual penned letter by Smollett to a friend and some of his first edition works. I like to imagine that the three- volume first edition *Humphry Clinker*, brought to me by the splenetic preservation librarian in a lab coat, was perhaps the very one that “when on his death bed he held in his feeble hands” (Graham 317). Simultaneously interacting with Smollett’s Scotland in the pages of his book as I wandered Scotland as a 21st century Scottish-American woman connected me with the man and his work on an intimate level that made me value the deftness with which he brings Scotland to life even more.

My own journey was as replete with humor as the book, and I am grateful that I could bond with Smollett on that point. There is humor in that alone.

Understanding the Importance of Smellfungus¹

Social strata change in the eighteenth century. There is now a middle class, and religion has ceased to be the bellwether for behavior. As a result, “the eighteenth century saw a blossoming of humorous writing in general...It reflects a wider reading public and greater interest in “decorum” of a kind” (Bremmer 102). This “decorum” is a reference to the expectations that while mores have shifted from a religious-centric space, people are expected to conduct themselves in a manner that is right and proper. This idea of decorum is a fixture in *Humphry Clinker* where one of the central figures, Matthew Bramble, is preoccupied by manners and propriety to such a degree that much of the humor of the novel comes from his inability to protect the decorum in and around his family. As the eighteenth century middle class grows, it tries to carve a niche for itself exclusive of the lower classes:

Since class membership was determined to a great extent by money, class boundaries were much more fluid than those between the old estates....the middle classes felt themselves to be in a constantly precarious position. They needed to shore it up by broadcasting their differences from the lower classes - they moved to the suburbs, behaved with what they saw as greater moral probity, and ... they spoke differently. (Mohr 206)

One of the ways the middle class moves to differentiate itself is through social decorum. The rules for speech and fashion as well as manners become points of distinction. Indeed, when characters in *Humphry Clinker* cross class lines by wearing the clothing of their “betters”, humor always results. In many cases, characters unintentionally breach decorum, and those moments, too are grist for the humor mill. Smollett is reliant on the reader understanding that:

¹ Smellfungus is the nickname given to Smollett by his foe Laurence Sterne.

swearing and other sorts of “bad language” - was identified as morally wrong...partly because it was thought to be lower class... [It] came to be seen as the language of the uneducated, who were also ipso facto the morally sketchy - people who would violate linguistic decency, it was thought, would not hesitate to commit any sort of outrage against moral decency. (207)

Smollett knows that while bodily functions, breaches of manners, and taboo language are not necessarily funny in and of themselves, they are when applied across class boundaries because readers can confirm for themselves that, indeed, the lower classes are a humorous and disgraceful bunch. Much of what makes *Humphry Clinker* funny is reliant on this assertion.

In 1711 Joseph Addison builds a theogony of humor when he identifies Truth as the “Founder of the Family” who fathers good sense, who in turn fathers wit, who marries mirth to produce humor.

Truth
I
Good Sense
I
Wit = Mirth
I
Humor

While he designates Wit as the aegis under which humor exists, the two are inseparable, and they stand together against impostors like false humor and nonsense. Although he creates this hierarchy of the components of wit and humor, Addison concedes that it is simpler “to describe what is not Humour, than what is; and very difficult to define it otherwise than as *Cowley* has done Wit, by Negatives” (Addison). The Albion professes that “to distinguish wit from humor is as difficult

a task as defining wit itself” (Albion). As wit and humor are interdependent, and wit is such a fixture of eighteenth century literary theory, that I will use the terms interchangeably.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries mark a transition in use of the word “wit.” Until this point wit has meant “the faculty of thinking and reasoning in general,” and is exclusive of the idea of humor (OED). During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the definition shifts to include the idea that wit should be “calculated to surprise and delight by its unexpectedness” and that it should always be recognized as “reference to the utterance of brilliant or sparkling things in an amusing way” (OED). As wit evolves to include humor on the heels of shifting social and religious hierarchies, both humor and wit become markers of class. A writer “must needs have as much Wit, Humor, Art, and good Sense as *Montaigne* was Master of, to be allowed so great Irregularity in Writing, and even to please by it” (Trublet 9). In order to employ humor successfully, a man must have many other defining characteristics brought about by education and social class. Trublet and Addison note that many of Smollett’s contemporaries are concerned with this coupling of humor and intelligence, and both of those as markers of good breeding:

As Wit has been called Seasoned Reason, Good-breeding might be called Seasoned Goodness. Good-breeding is to a good Heart, or to a good Disposition, what Wit is to good Sense. Wit, Good-breeding, are an I don’t know what fine (sic), delicate and brilliant (sic), the one added to Reason, the other to Goodness. But as great Intercourse with the World oftentimes gives an Air of Wit to Persons, who to the Bottom have very little; so, and yet more frequently, does it give an Appearance of Goodness to People, who are, in reality, very malicious and ill-natured. Their Good-Breeding is but a seasoned Ill-nature, as the Wit of the others is but a seasoned Folly (Trublet 183).

Trublet warns that people “to the bottom” may appear to have wit, but they will inevitably be outed as men of folly. True wit comes hand in hand with good breeding. Over and over again a link is created between education, social status and the ability to generate or understand wit.

Much like his contemporaries, when appraising a man and his abilities to hold forth with excellent wit, Richard Flecknoe cautions that:

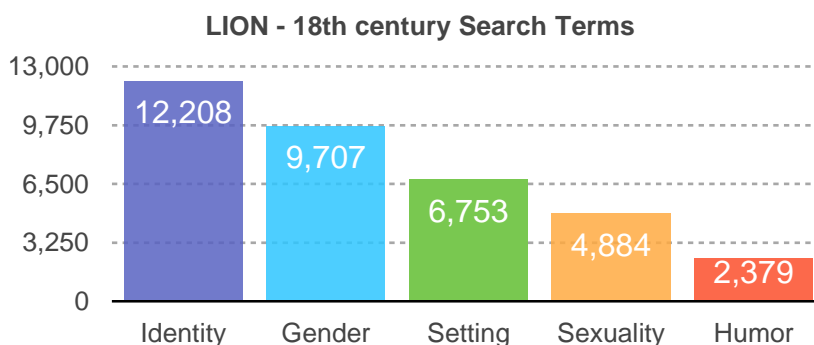
he is so far from a courtly wit, as his breeding seems only to have been i'th' Suburbs; or at best, he seems only graduated good company in a Tavern (the Bedlam of wits) where men are mad rather than merry; here one breaking a jest on the Drawer, or a Candlestick...for no musick can be heard for them; so while he utters nothing but old stories, long since laugh thrudbare, or some stale jest broken twenty times before: his mirth compared with theirs, new and at first hand, is just like Brokers ware in comparison with Mercers, or Long-lane compar'd unto Cheap-side: his wit being rather the Hogs-heads than his own, favouring more Heidelberg than of Hellicon, and he rather a drunken than good companion (Flecknoe 10).

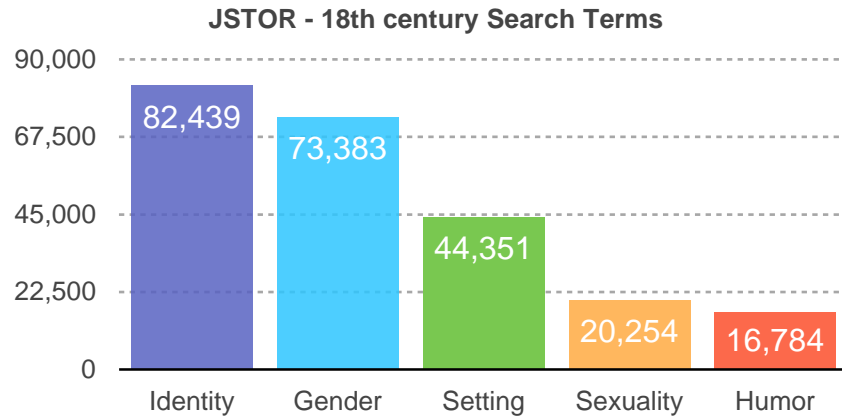
Flecknoe reminds us that humor is not enough. Intelligence and breeding are needed, and without those, a man is simply crass and best suited to mingle with his brethren in a pub as no high minded individual would bother with him. True wit comes with higher social status and cannot be found among the rabble in an ordinary pub.

Defining humor can be polemical. Some scholars claim that it is like pornography: although you can't necessarily define it, you know it when you see it (Bremmer). Quantifying the humor of *Humphry Clinker* in my own empirical study becomes necessary, and my examination includes Smollett's use of epistolary form, a taxonomy of sorts to help organize what

Smollett does to make the reader laugh, and finally, a possible social reason for Smollett’s decisions in the text.

This thesis will discuss both the epistolary form and the connection between humor and eighteenth century class structure and Smollett’s end by examining the motives behind Smollett’s promotion of his own national pride; in addition, much of the discussion will taxonomize the humor employed by Smollett in the novel. This is in part because not much of this sort of discussion exists in general literary theory. In comparison to subjects like identity, gender, setting, and sexuality humor is woefully underrepresented in eighteenth-century studies. In fact, database searches reveal that roughly 80% more criticism is devoted to “identity” alone than to humor. “Gender” accounts for 75% more, setting 65% more, and sexuality commands about 50% more criticism. Humor just barely makes an appearance by comparison. In some ways, delving into a subject that is regularly eschewed by scholars is intimidating. In other ways, it is liberating to develop and test one’s own theories and observations without constraint.





The Power of the Postie² - Epistolary form in the eighteenth century

How is it possible that words written in 1771 can make a reader laugh out loud in 2014? How does an eighteenth century author connect with the humorous sensibilities of a twenty-first century reader? In trying to answer some of these questions, while analyzing Smollett's craft in the context of his time, I rely on Ian Watt's comments about epistolary form which help explain Smollett's decision to use it. By choosing a narrative style in which multiple characters voice their perspectives and observations without the interference of a narrator, Smollett immerses the reader in a first hand accounting of all action and characterization. He builds realism, and he allows multiple views of the same events so that the event becomes more dimensional and nuanced to the reader. This is the great strength of the epistolary novel: "the advantages of the novel in letter form are that it presents an intimate view of the character's thoughts and feelings without interference from the author and that it conveys the shape of events to come with dramatic immediacy. Also, the presentation of events from several points of view lends the story dimension

² Postie is a Scottish term for the postman.

and verisimilitude” (Encyclopedia Britannica). As readers, we are able to step inside the eyes and ears of each character and respond to what each of them reveals. Whether it is simple-minded Win Jenkins, or fiery, and miserable Tabitha, or innocent and naive Lydia, we are given multiple perspectives fleshed out by class, gender, and personality that make us feel more immersed than the perspective of a single narrator could, and they offer us a more deeply nuanced sense of the humor Smollett is trying to convey.

The specifics of the revelatory types of humor Smollett employs will be detailed in the next section of the thesis, but in terms of structure, it is important to recognize and appreciate just how much this form of narration adds to the success of humor in the novel. Each character’s reaction to a single event make the event humorous in a primary way, but these reactions also expose the true nature of both the character reporting and the person reading. When the carriage overturns early on in the journey and Clinker is found to replace the rude driver, Jerry Melford narrates the bulk of this scene, and he shares that Tabitha, his ill-tempered aunt reacting to Clinker’s exposed rear-end “found new matter of offence; which, indeed, she had a particular genius for extracting at will from almost every incident in life.” He has distilled the very nature of Tabitha in this one humorous description. Clinker is poor and reduced to rags that no longer cover his posterior properly. On its own, Clinker’s bottom is a humorous detail. Through Tabitha’s reaction it becomes a hysterical breach of decorum. Jerry also shares the maid, Win Jenkins’s, reaction. She “confirms [Tabitha’s] assertion, with respect to his nakedness, observing, at the same time, that he had a skin as fair as alabaster” (Smollett 75). Again, Jerry captures the essence of one of his traveling companions. Win is obsessed with appearing above her class. She adopts her mistress’s thoughts, actions, and cast-off clothes in an attempt to better herself. However, she cannot restrain her improper response of admiration for Clinker’s nether regions and

compares them favorably to the alabaster one might expect from a Greek sculpture. Later, in her own letter to Mary Jones, she compares Clinker proudly to a good mousing cat and unwittingly compares the two when she proclaims of the scalded cat “thos he has not narro hare on his buttocks” (101). Jery’s ability to show us lower class impropriety adds a layer of humor to Clinker’s nudity. Smollett again heightens the humor of the ludicrous scene by using Clinker, the most literal character in the book, to comment aloud about his own exposed *derrière*, “may it please your ladyship’s worship (cried he) to pardon and forgive my offenses, and, with God’s assistance, I shall take care that my tail shall never rise up in judgement against me, to offend your ladyship again” (79). At this point the reader has reached a crescendo of laughter. Once the laughter dies down, the reader sees this same moment captured by Lydia, the most innocent, naive and proper of the characters on the journey without any attention at all to Clinker’s nudity which, for a demure and proper young lady, would be inappropriate to mention. In stark contrast to Tabitha’s colorful outburst, she tells her friend Letty that “we were overturned, and met with some other little incidents” (86). The epistolary form allows Smollett to “organise these major compositional units in such a way that there is a significant relationship between the action and the mode of its telling” (Watt 210). You want scatological and sexually fired rhetoric? Smollett gives us an oversexed maidservant. You want propriety in its most uptight, emotionless, and rather hard to swallow form? Smollett gives us Lydia, the impossible, fainting, blind to coarseness, maiden. The epistolary form is infinite in its ability to engage us in the arena that befits the action.

Eighteenth-century England saw a shift in the private lives of its people: “one of the most distinctive features of eighteenth century literary history... the great increase in the leisure and literacy of middle-class women; and it was materially assisted by a very great improvement of

postal facilities” (189). By dint of this new access to one another through postal service, men and women were able to share ideas and personal observations in ways they never had before. Instead of isolation being the predominant characteristic of a life in the suburbs, letter writing allowed people to connect without losing the privacy of their chosen life outside the hustle and bustle of the city. Privacy became simpler because “the new pattern of personal relationships made possible by familiar letter-writing, a pattern which, of course, involves a private and personal relationship rather than a social one, and which could be carried on without leaving the safety of the home” (188). In fact, given the constraints of distance and inefficient modes of travel, “familiar letter-writing” became “the form of personal intercourse most suited to the way of life which the suburb represents” (190). As letter writing becomes a prominent fixture in eighteenth century life, it is easy to see why Smollett would choose it as his narrative style for *Humphry Clinker*. His audience would understand the importance of communication via post and would appreciate its ability to portray multiple narrators’ perspectives. Where letters had until this century been largely formal missives confined to court and about high-minded subjects, the eighteenth century leveled the playing field, and “the majority of the literary public cared little for the traditions of courtly rhetoric, and used letters only for the purpose of sharing their daily thoughts and acts with a friend; the cult of familiar letter-writing, in fact, provided [eighteenth century writers] with a microphone already attuned to the tones of private experience” (193). A shift in public outlook encouraged “the transition for the objective, social and public orientation of the classical world to the subjective, individualistic and private orientation of the life and literature of the last two hundred years” (176).

Smollett, then, while likely cognizant of the limitations of epistolary form such as that, “many actions have to be recounted separately and therefor repetitively,” and “there is a danger

of dispersing the reader's attention," chose to forge ahead possibly recognizing the advantage of being able to "break with the traditional decorums of prose and use a style that was wholly suited to embody the mental process with which his narrative was concerned" (194). In other words, offering epistolary perspective allows Smollett to showcase the private thoughts of maidservants, gentlemen, and women in a way that accurately reflected their station in life. This sort of direct connection with individual characters allows his reader "the same complete engrossment of their inner feelings, and the same welcome withdrawal into an imaginary world vibrant with more intimately satisfying personal relationships than ordinary life provided" (196). And although this sort of escapism could be had in other narrative forms, the epistolary form offers readers the deeply voyeuristic sensation of having spied on a private life, much in the same way reading a non-fiction diary might.

It is easy to imagine that there might be a sort of voyeuristic appeal in holding in one's hand a collection of letters that offer windows into strangers' souls. The idea that an educated reader could access the workings of a maid's inner thoughts, or the idea that a woman could have access to the private thoughts of a 'squire, all of these must have been compelling reasons among the many that Smollett considered before writing the novel. Unfettered access to the observations and inner thoughts of characters of different genders and class must have been an attractive quality in a novel for the eighteenth century reader. In addition to providing access to the inner minds of his characters, Smollett could also avail himself the more varied ability to share his own feelings on a variety of subjects by capitalizing on a written form that was so pervasive in his society. "The familiar letter, of course, can be an opportunity for a much fuller and more unreserved expression of the writer's own private feelings than oral converse usually affords, and the cult of such correspondence was one which had largely arisen during [the eighteenth century]" (176).

Smollett, indeed, not only uses his characters to explore his own thinking, he makes two cameo appearances in his own novel. In this sort of meta-letter, Smollett is able to offer direct commentary to his reader in a way that does not interrupt their engagement with the progress of the story. Rather than an aside or apostrophe, Smollett becomes a character himself in the reporting, and without losing credibility as someone commenting from without, he harnesses the power of being a character in the novel and sharing his very real thoughts; we shall soon investigate the possible motives for Smollett's choice of humor and epistolary form.

All narration must contend with subjectivity, but the epistolary form reduces the instinct a reader has for discrediting the narrator. Konigsberg argues that "the subjective element that brings these descriptions of places and people alive came from the epistolary novel" (Konigsberg 186). Rather than being forced to ingest the beliefs of an omniscient narrator, a reader can choose, based on whatever criteria he or she desires, whether or not to respect the veracity or perspective of the writer of each letter. If the reader, for example, encounters a passage of ignorance in one of Win's letters, he or she can dismiss it out of hand as the unsurprising thoughts of an uneducated laborer. The reader can align his or her sympathies on a case by case basis which, in truth, allows for the potential for increased reader engagement.

When a reader begins to look forward to the next letter that a particular character writes, Smollett has succeeded in pure reader engagement. Perhaps "we enjoy [Matthew Bramble] because of his responses to the external world, because of his perspective, because he sees things from a personal viewpoint we find entertaining and often truthful" (186). Perhaps we prefer Win Jenkins because she gives us a titillating glimpse into a naughty, ribald world fraught with scatological humor and sex. Or perhaps we prefer to align ourselves with the pure, honest and emotionless Lydia. The choice is ours, and Smollett gives us many chances to engage at will, and,

ironically, he gives us the tools with which to pass judgment on our narrators much as they pass judgment on those they come in contact with. Such is the power of the epistolary form. Smollett has the power to reveal his reader's inner judge. He makes him or her react to the private thoughts of the characters in his novel. If you laugh at Win's admonition to her fellow servant to "shit the gate," your approval of toilet humor has been revealed. "Smollett's work, then, is concerned with credible human beings and their relationship to the outside world; the aesthetic experience he creates is dependent upon a stance the reader takes with certain characters as they perceive that outside world" (187). Go ahead and judge the lowly behavior or the uncouth actions of character in the novel, but if you laugh, Smollett wins.

In addition to layering the perspectives of different narrators, Smollett is able to manipulate time in the novel. The story moves about chronologically with ease. The incident involving Clinker's exposed bottom is first referred to in a letter May 19 by Jerry. Its last mention is June 2 in a letter written by Win. Much happens in the span of two weeks, and yet Smollett can return to this incident over and over again without losing narrative pace. Even outside of the chronology of the letters, the incident occurs over a span of twenty six pages. Using the epistolary form allows Smollett to jump in and out of a moment and return to it repeatedly to build the humor and nuanced perspectives without a stultifying effect on the reader's pace. And while critics might argue that "Smollett's characters mostly describe and respond to the external world in an immediate way and do not create within themselves a sustained or developed inner drama" (186), I would argue the opposite. I would argue that the layering of multiple perspectives serves to enhance the inner drama of each character in ways that the character him or herself could not. By reading Jerry and Matthew's commentaries on Tabitha the reader comes to understand and perhaps even empathize with her desperate desire for a mate. She is obsessed with finding com-

panionship and a husband, and yet she never betrays that in any of her own letters. Instead, the reader relies on the nuanced and honest observations of her traveling companions to gauge what must be Tabitha's troubling and relentless inner drama of spinsterhood.

Given that Smollett's ultimate purpose, which will be examined later, is to reveal a new kind of Scotland to his reader full of entrepreneurism, industry, and a strong moral foundation, his choice of the epistolary form is a sort of rearguard approach. By directing the attention of his audience on the characters and their perceptions rather than focusing on the pro-Scotland goal, he draws his reader in as a compatriot who trusts Smollett enough that when they reach Scotland, they are open to the possibility that much of what they suppose about the country is wrong. Using the epistolary form "was Smollett's achievement when he developed the subjective element of the letters, focused on the characters' perceptions, and made his chief structural force and unity the relationship of the epistles, thus creating a novel and not a travelogue or a fictitious travel book" (186). Had Smollett attempted the more standard travelogue form that he used on journeys to places like France, he would not have built the credibility or engaged the reader such that his personal opinions would have been taken on board. The epistolary form is a part of Smollett's literary insurgency. He slips in his own propaganda about his home nation and does it in such a way that the reader does not feel coerced, forced, or otherwise violated. It is brilliant to recruit the reader without him or her even realizing a message.

The breastie in the beastie³ - understanding the taxonomy of Smollett's approach with humor

The study of literary humor is difficult because of the large number of disciplines that would need to be incorporated: “the study of literary humor is in some ways as broad as the whole field of humor research, plus the whole field of literary criticism” which is, perhaps, why so few people have attempted it (Nilsen 246). Add to that the subjectivity of humor, and it becomes difficult to feel any authority in laying claim to a sort of taxonomy. Because “the eighteenth century saw a blossoming of humorous writing in general...It reflects a wider reading public and greater interest in ‘decorum’ of a kind (Bremmer 102), approaching humor in an eighteenth century novel and attempting to marry types of humor to corresponding levels in a social class hierarchy is a challenge that requires organization and a way to categorize information. In their essay “Literature and Humor” Alleen and Don Nilsen claim that “the most common features of humor and the characteristics that literary critics look for in narratives [include] ambiguity, exaggeration, hostility, irony, superiority, surprise, shock, word play, incongruity, and incongruity resolution” (Nilsen 246). Although these categories are undoubtedly useful, it would be helpful to address humor in a more simplified fashion that corresponds specifically to the type of humor the reader encounters in an eighteenth-century novel like *Humphry Clinker*.

Because humor exists in infinite variety, it is essentially taxonomy-free. Categorizing humor is a bit of a fool's errand because of its remarkable subjectivity. However, while I recognize that I am now calling myself a fool, I believe that taxonomy is such a useful tool, that as long as it is qualified from its outset, there is no reason that a taxonomy cannot be constructed to help elucidate on some level. Limitations acknowledged, the aim here is to organize the types of

³ a play on Robert Burns “To a Mouse” in which he imagines that which resides inside the panicking breast of field mouse.

humor extant in *Humphry Clinker* in order to try to match them to their relevant eighteenth-century social positions. In addition, in a book that places so much emphasis on decorum, the author harnesses quite a lot of power in that he forces his reader to laugh at things that are taboo, inappropriate, or riddled with impropriety. While stridently waving the banner of propriety, Smollett slyly makes his reader succumb to mirth related to excrement, nudity, foul language, and many other types of humor that relegate the reader of the eighteenth century to giggle behind his or her hand.

Addison organized humor into a taxonomy of sorts, and it is helpful, even if it is a bit of meta-humor in its construction, to examine humor for his categories of truth, good sense, wit, mirth, and humor. Just as Addison's model builds in a hierarchy in which truth supersedes all, the taxonomy I present will qualify each of five categories along a social hierarchy consisting of the ruling class, the middle class and the lower class which will ultimately reveal the link between class and humor. To that end, the taxonomy of humor I construct in this new territory of examining *Humphry Clinker*, or indeed the eighteenth-century novel for humor, will include the following five main categories: observational humor, situational humor, word play, negative humor, and bodily humor.

It is a braw, bricht, moonlicht nicht⁴ - Observational Humor

Movement through the taxonomy will move along a continuum from most linguistically or thematically sophisticated to categories that are more readily accessible and require less from the reader. To wit, we begin with Matthew Bramble, the character we rely upon for humorous observations about the people and places they all encounter on the journey. This reliance is based on his social position, which will, again, be discussed later in the paper. Rather than describing action, Matthew is finely attuned to the more nuanced and stationary objects along the way. He applies his humorous lens equally to buildings, landscape, and people. It is through him that we truly view Smollett's own thoughts and observations.

To begin, Matthew provides us with early working explanations of his fellow travelers. From him we receive reliable, because he's an educated gentleman, descriptions of his family. Liddy is "a poor good-natured simpleton, as soft as butter, and as easily melted- not that she's a fool- the girl's parts are not despicable, and her education has not been neglected; that is to say, she can write and spell, and speak French, and play upon the harpsichord...but she's deficient in spirit, and so susceptible - and so tender forsooth" (Smollett 11). Armed with this information, the reader is now prepared for the lack of humor in Liddy's letters. Of Jerry Matthew says he is, "a pert jackanapes, full of college-petulance and self-conceit; proud as a German count and as hot and hasty as a Welch mountaineer" (Smollett 11). The reader knows now to expect arrogance from Jerry, and the reader will be rewarded mightily in this regard. Finally he describes his own sister, Tabitha as "that fantastical animal...sometimes so intolerable, that I almost think she's the devil incarnate come to torment me for my sins" (Smollett 11). At this early stage of the novel

⁴ It is a beautiful, bright, moonlit night

the reader is already aware of how officious, miserable, miserly, and mean Tabitha is, and Smollett cements the reader's observations by confirming them with those of the most reliable narrator of the novel. Giving the reader early glimpses of Jerry, Tabby, and Liddy's letters is another brilliant stratagem on Smollett's part as he cleverly recruits reader perception and then confirms them with his own opinions through Matthew. Notably absent in Matthew's early descriptions of the people in his entourage is Win Jenkins. She is of the laboring class, and thus is not worth a mention. He concerns himself only with those people of a certain social stature.

His true feelings about those in classes lower than his are revealed when he describes "the wives and daughters of low tradesmen, who, like shovel-nosed sharks, prey upon the blubber of those uncouth whales of fortune" (Smollett 34). This is a response to his observation that there is an egalitarian system in Bath in which people of differing social classes are co-mingled in the Pump-room. He is forceful in his invectives, "I detest the whole of it, as a mass of ignorance, presumption, malice, and brutality; and, in this term of reprobation, I include without respect of rank, station, or quality, all those of both sexes, who affect its manners, and court its society" (Smollett 35). These sorts of observations are central to our vision of the people and places on the expedition, and they are good windows into the kind of man Bramble is, a man of dignity who expects decorum in the society around him. In a way, he is also an old-fashioned lump who reacts to the inevitable changes that are happening around him and earns his nickname, 'square-toes', a nod to his outdated choice of shoes, from his nephew, the egotistical Jerry.

In addition to our heavy reliance on Matthew for his descriptions of the people we encounter along the way, we rely on his descriptions of setting. In contrast to the general consensus of the time about some of the highly regarded architectural features of Bath, Matthew is decidedly unimpressed. Of the majestic circle, he grouses that it is "a pretty bauble; contrived for

show...which [is] both childish and misplaced,” and that its unorthodox division of homes into segments of a circle “must spoil the symmetry of the rooms” (Smollett 32). In his even grumpier assertions about the condition of the city, he reveals that “I am told, most of the houses in this hill are smothered with smoke...which (I apprehend likewise) must make the atmosphere here more humid and unwholesome than it is in the square below” (Smollett 33). At this early stage in the novel, the humorous descriptions Matthew gives the reader clearly indicated a splenetic, foul-tempered, hypochondriac. He is the grumbling uncle that every family has, at least while he spends time in England, and the reader is prepared to view the rest of the journey through a rather dyspeptic lens. His summation of the architecture of Bath is a humorous prediction in which he theorizes that “the same artist who planned the Circus, has likewise projected a Crescent; when that is finished, we shall probably have a Star; and those who are living thirty years hence, may, perhaps see all the signs of the Zodiac exhibited in the architecture in Bath” (Smollett 33).

What becomes a dependable humorous style of observation about the landscape and its people takes a dramatic shift when Bramble reaches Scotland. Here, his descriptions belie the true literary insurgency of Smollett. His desire to set apart the nations with a light of favor upon Scotland is evident in moments like this one in which Bramble elucidates his overall impression of Scotland:

This country is amazingly wild, especially towards the mountains, which are heaped up on the backs of one another...All is sublimity, silence, and solitude. The people live together in glens or bottoms, where they are sheltered from the cold and storms of winter: but there is a margin of plain ground spread along the sea side, which is well inhabited and improved by the arts of husbandry; and this I take to be one of the most agreeable tracts of the whole island; the sea not only keeps it warm, and supplies it with

fish, but affords one of the most ravishing prospects in the whole world; I mean the appearance of the Hebrides, or Western Islands, to the number of three hundred, scattered as far as the eye can reach, in the most agreeable confusion. As the soil and climate of the Highlands are but ill adapted to the cultivation of corn, the people apply them-selves chiefly to the breeding and feeding of black cattle, which turn to good account. Those animals run wild all the winter, without any shelter or subsistence, but what they can find among the heath. When the snow lies so deep and hard, that they cannot penetrate to the roots of the grass, they make a diurnal progress, guided by a sure instinct, to the sea-side at low water, where they feed on the alga marina, and other plants that grow upon the beach (Smollett 234).

This pastoral scene in which almost the entirety of Scotland's natural landscape is laid forth, is notably devoid of *any* humor whatsoever. As readers have come to depend on Bramble for his irascibly humorous paintings of his negative vision of the world around him, this is an important contrast. Smollett has, again, used his form to draw in the reader, and at the most important point remove the humor to focus a nationalist lens on what is near and dear to his heart, Scotland. Yet again, building an ethological bond with his reader by using humor allows Smollett to craftily engage his reader in sympathy with his personal vision of Scotland.

Whit's fur ye'll no go by ye!⁵ - situational humor

Situational comedy, or sit-com as it is referred to today, relies on plot elements to drive the humor. While Matthew Bramble makes observations about the people and places of their journey, much of Jery's focus is on the events or situations of the journey. Practical jokes, mistakes in identity or interpretation, and physical humor all work to generate this kind of humor in literature. In *Humphry Clinker* situational humor is most often revealed by Jery Melford, a high society Oxford man. It is also most often focused on people of a lower class than he is. Jery reports scenes involving those lesser than he, and he is conscious of their lower status in the telling. He refers to the subjects of his humorous letters as "beasts," "lessers," and people who are essentially there to "amuse" him and his peers. Even in moments in which people of higher classes are embroiled in Jery's stories, it is always because of the appearance of someone of a lower class. This use of humor as a class distinction will be examined later in the paper. For now, the focus will simply be the use of situational humor for humor's sake, and the examples chosen will offer a sampling from various spots in the novel of the ways in which Jery, from his upper class perch, pokes fun at those around him.

Jery is the most reliable narrator for moments of situational humor in *Humphry Clinker*. His lengthy epistles to his friend at Oxford University include many of the humorous plot points of the novel. Through Jery we learn of characters like Dr. L in the Pump-room in Bath. The doctor, who plies his trade in the halls at the Well attaches himself to people like a limpet. So attached to the Bramble group, he holds forth with an earnest tone about his preposterous theories of "stink." Jery takes us all the way through the doctor's professional statements like the his

⁵ What ever is meant to be will be

proclamation that, “every person who pretended to nauseate the smell of another’s excretions, snuffed up his own with particular complacency” (Smollett 16). Furthering the ridiculousness of the situation, the doctor quickly looks to his captive audience of men and women for confirmation of his medical opinion. As if this moment was not enough, the doctor summarily accuses Matthew in the same mixed company of possibly having a venereal disease. This scene forms the bulk of Jerry’s letter to Sir Watkin Phillips, and his inclusion of situational comedy is the hallmark of almost all of his letters.

In his next letter to Phillips, Jerry describes an event that could easily be recreated in a modern-day sit-com. Matthew has taken a private audience with a young woman in his parlor. Thinking that his uncle may well be engaging in an illicit tryst, Jerry secrets himself in the next room and peeps through a chink in the wall. He realizes that Matthew is, in fact, offering financial aid to a woman in dire straits. In her joyous relief, the woman in question falls to her knees and wraps her arms around Matthew’s legs. While Jerry watches in admiration of his uncle’s generosity and gentlemanly behavior, his busy-body aunt Tabitha bursts into the room having completely misunderstood the scene before her eyes. She sees a woman on the floor with her arms wrapped around her brother clutching a large sum of money in her hand and draws dubious conclusions. Before Jerry can assure her that what transpired was ethical generosity, she snatches the money out of the woman’s hand in a fit of rage and screams, “Fy upon you, Matt! What doings are these, to disgrace your own character and disparage your family?” (Smollett 20). Moments like this are central to the novel in that they give us a voyeuristic glimpse into the daily actions of people at the micro level. Jerry is our steadfast companion in delivering plot centered humor.

Even when Jery is not the only character sharing the details of an anecdote with the reader, he is the most reliable. The example used earlier of the carriage turning over is a good sample of his ability to render the moment with detail and gusto. We rely on him for the central particulars of the moment, and then we rely on the other characters, in this case Win, Tabby, and Liddy, to give us a more nuanced perspective. However, some of Jery's most humorous stories are his alone, and they are not referenced by other characters. While there are many moments to choose from, one of the most memorable for its description of Clinker falling in love, is when it is thought that a house fire has broken out in their abode, and the family is trapped in an upstairs window. In the urgency of the situation, Mr. Micklewhimmen, who has characterized himself as an invalid who cannot attend to his own basic needs, like walking, and must have a bevy of willing woman to fawn over him, has been discovered as a fraud. He selfishly and agilely races down the stairs, clobbering everyone in his way, and saving himself. The reader is already delighting in this ne'er-do-well being revealed as a malingering scoundrel when Jery shares that Clinker has found a ladder to help them all escape from their upstairs window. Though social decorum would dictate that the upper class ladies be first down the ladder, the ever-panicky Win Jenkins cannot restrain herself and flings herself down the ladder. The important detail that Jery shares here is that she is dressed as she was when she leapt out of bed, which is to say, she's not wearing very much:

Mrs. Winifred Jenkins, in a transport of terror, threw herself out at the window upon the ladder, while Humphry dropped upon the ground, that he might receive her in her descent—This maiden was just as she had started out of bed, the moon shone very bright, and a fresh breeze of wind blowing, none of Mrs. Winifred's beauties could pos-

sibly escape the view of the fortunate Clinker, whose heart was not able to withstand the united force of so many charms (Smollett 164).

In a bit of humorous foreshadowing, Jery has used the hilarity of this otherwise terrifying scene to identify the very moment in which Humphry Clinker falls in love with his future bride. It is a love brought on by the literal descent of her nether naked regions into his awaiting arms.

Kilt the Messenger⁶ - Word Play

One of the easiest levels of humor to apprehend is word play which includes malapropisms, puns and double entendres. This sort of humor can often be unintentional which often makes it even more humorous. Most of Smollett's use of word play comes at the letter-writing hands of Win and Tabitha. This has much to do with their position in the social hierarchy, but this relationship between class and humor will be explicated later. In *Humphry Clinker* much of the humor of word play comes from its least educated character, Win Jenkins, a housemaid, and although she can construct missives to her friends that are easily understood, her letters are plagued with unfortunate word play. Her letters are the shortest of the book, and they generally appear as comic intermissions revealing a woman trying hard to seem above her class, and failing in the offing. In her letter of October 4, Win shares with Mary Jones the hope that Mary will air out the bedrooms back at home because "both our gentlemen have got a sad cold by lying in damp shits at Sir Tummas Ballfart's" (Smollett 283). A modern reader might wonder if this malapropism, which centers on the word shit, would have had the same meaning and induced laughter in the eighteenth century reader, and the answer is a resounding yes. Humor and oaths or

⁶ The clever name of a pipe band in Vero Beach, Florida.

swearing had evolved in the eighteenth century away from religion as its focus. A reader could no longer be counted upon to have an emotional reaction to an exclamation of “good God” by a character in a novel. On the other hand, with the increase in privacy because of things like improved plumbing, humor that violated that privacy could provoke a response:

in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Holy and the Shit were mixed, neither one nor the other predominating. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, the balance swings entirely toward the Shit. Obscenities experienced a tremendous growth in strength, even as they disappeared almost entirely from public discourse. Obscene words for body parts and actions (sex and excrement) took oaths’ place as the words that shocked and offended; that insulted; that expressed extremes of emotion, positive or negative. To a degree, obscene words even adopted oaths’ ability to signify the truth of a statement, a capability that harks back to the “plain Latin” of ancient Rome (Mohr 175-6).

Smollett would have understood the reaction in his reader at the idea that the gentlemen on the journey were lying in their own damp shits, and in case there remains any doubt, Smollett cements his point by making Win render Thomas Bullford as Tummas Ballfart.

This sort of mistake is something Tabitha does quite often in her letters as well. She reminds Mrs. Gwyllim “don’t forget to have the gate shit every evening before dark” (Smollett 6) which plays nicely with what Tabitha’s contemporary readers knew about toilets. Until advances in the eighteenth century, toilets, or water closets as they were called, were “designed with an artificial passage fitted with a brass gate to release the contents when rinsed with water” (Morrisson). Users would quite literally “shit the gate.” While Tabitha is trying to give instructions regarding shutting a cellar gate to prevent the men of the house from accessing wine, she inadvert-

ently forces the reader to envision the housekeeper, Mrs. Gwillim, in the act of defecation instead. Tabitha's unintentional word play here is a violation of the new standards of decency of her time. Instead of directly referring to items of vulgarity euphemisms became de rigeur:

euphemisms enjoyed such prominence because the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth century were the age of decorum. The civilizing process that began slowly in the Middle Ages reached its height during these years; the shame threshold was at its widest extent. Bodily functions that formerly were performed unashamedly in public were now done only behind closed doors; the same functions had been discussed openly but were now subject to a parallel cloaking in language. (Mohr 205)

Once things like improved plumbing move bodily functions into the privacy of the home, they cease to be a part of the landscape, so to speak. With less exposure to bodily functions in day to day life, the need to comment upon or discuss those same functions fades to the background. Tabitha's unwitting scatological directive brings bodily function firmly to the foreground, and her reader is bound to laugh out loud.

In addition to language misuse, Smollett relies on puns and double entendres to engage his reader's sense of humor. In a heated diatribe, Tabitha decries the injustice that a servant, Roger, is taking more than his fair share from the household economy. "Roger gets this, and Roger gets that; but I'd have you know, I won't be rogered at this rate by any ragmatical fellow in the kingom" (Smollett 73). While what she intends to communicate is that she refuses to be abused by others on her journey as she is being abused in her absence at home, she is also communicating the truth that she will not be "rogered at this rate" by any man. Roger, in this sense of the word, means to engage in sexual intercourse, and as Tabitha is the embittered, miserable, desperate spinster who rails against every man in the book, she is correct. The humor in this

moment is layered because the reader quickly understands about Tabitha, that she would very much like to get “rogered,” and she spends the entire novel searching for a willing participant.

Jery Melford, one of the men against whom Tabitha routinely rails, uses many forms of humor in his letters including puns and double entendres. Jery recounts the story of a quackish doctor who suggests that Matthew Bramble has contracted a venereal disease for which the doctor claims to have the cure. Upon questioning the effectiveness of the nostrum, Jery questions whether his female patient was “as sound at bottom as you imagine.” The doctor, oblivious to the clear reference to the unfortunate woman’s infected genitalia, responds with the perfect double entendre, “I have had communication with her three times - I always ascertain my cures in that manner” (Smollett 18). While the doctor is certain that he has assured his potential patient of his competence, he has unwittingly suggested that the way in which he determines whether his venereal cure has worked is by having sex with the patient. The subtlety of a double entendre in this case allows Smollett to engage the reader’s intelligence, for if one is smart enough to decode the double meaning, one can feel smug in seeing the humor others may have missed. In this way, Smollett gains the reader as a conspirator in his humor.

Don't be a wee clipe! - Socially Negative Humor

Among the various types of humor that elicit laughter are those that readers are sometimes most ashamed to react to. Cruelty to others, gossip which often accompanies apophysis, and stereotypes are among the negative humor that Smollett regularly uses to get his audience to look in the mirror and laugh about. In almost all cases, this type of humor is exclusive to the lower class or disenfranchised characters like Win Jenkins and Tabitha.

In the first letter in the novel, Smollett reveals Tabitha as a gossip. She elicits Mrs. Gylim's help in watching over things at the house while she is gone. She cautions that, "I hope you'll have a watchful eye over the maids. I know that hussy, Mary Jones, rumping with the men." Whether her humorous assertion is true is not the point. The fact that she will speak ill of others, reveals her to be a relatively unsympathetic character. This is one of the many moments in the novel in which readers will likely laugh in spite of themselves. Because Tabitha is commenting on the behavior of a member of the lower class, the reader can feel justified in amusement. She is, albeit mean-spiritedly, simply revealing the maids as coarse and ill-mannered women. This is to be expected in the lower class, and it amplifies the juxtaposition of Win's characterization of Mary Jones in the very next letter. The humor of imagining this "rumping" maid is seen for the malicious gossip it is when Win creates a contrasting portrait of Mary. She reveals Mary as devoted and loving when she asks her and Saul to "take my poor kitten to bed with you this cold weather" (Smollett 7). Seeing Mary through this additional lens quickly allows the reader the humorous insight that Tabitha is completely out of touch with her own household and the way it works. This is a neat commentary on the lines between classes, and it will be explored later in this thesis.

While Win does paint a loving portrait of her friend, she, too is capable of gossip. She is also an expert in apophasis. She claims that "if God had not given me a good stock of discretion, what a power of things might not I reveal, consarning old mistress and young mistress," and then she goes on to do just that (Smollett 39). She peppers her missive with tales of the private goings-on of both her mistresses. In the same letter she claims, "you nose, Molly, I was always famous for keeping secrets," and immediately discloses the secret, that she is helping with hidden correspondences, in the very next line. The irony of her complete lack of awareness is what

makes this gossipy behavior funny. It is entertaining to wonder if any of Smollett's contemporaries read these moments and reflected on the state of their own homes and the staffs that kept them running. I like to think that Smollett took great pleasure in getting people to laugh at these larder secrets while also feeling the discomfort of recognizing that they were likely victims themselves of similar kinds of rhetoric.

A further form of negative social humor is that of stereotypes. These exist in *Humphry Clinker* mainly as the trope of gentleman Jery Melford. Whether he describes American Indians or Scottish people, he relies heavily on ill-informed stereotypes. In a letter to his Oxford pal he recounts Captain Lismahago's history. The captain has many horrible wounds and scars that he claims to have received at the hands of American Indians. Jery describes the Indians as, "women and children, who have the privilege of torturing all prisoners in their passage" and "too virtuous and sensible to encourage the introduction of any fashion which might help to render them corrupt and effeminate," and "too tenacious of their own customs to adopt the modes of any nation whatsoever" (Smollett 181). His observations are somewhat based on the stories that Lismahago tells, but, as is always the case with Jery, they reveal his feelings of superiority. As a member upper class, he takes great pleasure in describing those "lesser" than him. His understanding of Scottish people is that they are "generally supposed little subject to the impressions of humour." He operates under the assumption that Scottish people are a dour bunch who are uncivilized, unintelligible, unfashionable, rude, and bear ill will to people from England. He is positively mystified at his own reaction to the people of Scotland. "If I stay much longer at Edinburgh, I shall be changed into a downright Caledonian" (Smollett 206). In spite of his prejudices for the people of Scotland he finds them warm, hospitable, and well-mannered. He even claims that the women are more beautiful than his friends can imagine. That Jery, until he reach-

es Scotland, espouses the views held by many Englishmen of the time, including, quite famously, Samuel Johnson, is another brilliant tactic of Smollett's. In his pithy summation of the people of Scotland, Johnson famously defines oats as, "a grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people" (Johnson). Aligning Jerry with the likes of famed intellects of the time allows Smollett even more power when he proves them wrong. The humor here is not in the stereotypes, but, rather, in dispelling them.

Although many people would argue that gossip, stereotypes, and general cruelty to others are not inherently funny, Smollett harnesses their potential and makes the reader laugh in spite of him or herself, and, indeed, uses them to turn the table as he disabuse the reader of any prejudices he or she might have.

Yer bum's oot the windae⁷ - Bodily Functions

Perhaps one of the most pervasive types of humor in *Humphry Clinker* is the constant presence of bodily functions and scatological humor. Ironically, this is the most egalitarian feature of the novel. Although the lower classes are expected to be more crass, even the upper class narrators cannot help themselves in describing shitting, naked bodies, and general bodily discomfort. There is seemingly something deeply rooted in the human psyche that toilet humor can generally be relied upon for a laugh. In fact, in most of the sections in my taxonomy of the humor Smollett uses, bodily function creeps in. It seems no accident that the word humor is derived from medieval physiology. This concept of dark fluids coursing through the body fits nicely with our preoccupation with the body. It was generally understood by medieval physicians that if the

⁷ You're talking nonsense

humors were out of balance, people became “emotionally unbalanced.” Unbalanced people and their eccentric behaviors were the source of much amusement for others, and “from this idea came the meaning of *humor* that most people think of today, which is anything that makes them laugh in enjoyment because of being surprised by something absurd ludicrous, or exaggerated” (Nilsen 248).

Matthew Bramble does spend much of his time commenting on his bodily functions and illnesses, but the humor lies more in his over all hypochondriasis. Win and Tabitha, on the other hand, create direct humor with their persistent references to bodily function and, above all, their preoccupation with sex. The concrete language that both women use is ideal for revealing their sexual nature. Tabby’s letters are “often skewing to the scatological as Win’s have toward the sexual, Tabitha’s letters also demonstrate a rich use of language” (Warner 283). Tabitha seems to have an obsessive relationship with the word “shit” in her letters, but her sexual energy is openly disclosed by other writers like Jerry and Matthew. Every man that encounters the traveling group is exposed to her rather desperate sexual need. As Matthew notes about Tabitha meeting Lismahago, “whether our sister Tabby was really struck with his conversation, or is resolved to throw at every thing she meets in the shape of a man, till she can fasten the matrimonial noose, certain it is she has taken desperate strides” (Smollett 193). Tabitha has thrown herself, sometimes quite literally, at virtually every man of relatively equal breeding on the trip, and she routinely refers to her economic affairs at home as her accunts. ““Accunt” is one of Tabby’s favorite words, conflating, as it does her interests in economy and sexuality...[her language] reflects strongly her sexual rather than her economic appetite” (Warner 283-4). When she tells Mrs. Gwyllim that she hopes “you keep accunt of Roger’s purseeding in reverence the butter-milk,” the reader must

laugh out loud. In that line she has joined female genitalia (cunt) with a verb of sexual intercourse (roger) and progeny (seed). The woman is obsessed.

Win, too, shows an active interest in sexual thoughts. She mistakenly writes the word “grease” instead of grace throughout her letters. When she adds in her interest in Humphry Clinker and refers to him as an instrument to be seized, the sexual metaphor is complete. She further cautions Mary to pray, “without seizing for grease...of this wonderful instrument” (Smollett 147). Here she is quite candid in her desire that “she wants no one else touching Humphry’s wonderful instrument, however much she wants them to be spiritually moved by it’ (Warner 147). Win’s concrete use of language and consistent malapropisms hint to a woman most base in her observations and desires.

Whether in the examples shown throughout this paper of excrement, bodily stink, nudity, or sexual congress, bodily functions exist as the great unifier in Smollett’s novel. As the experiences that all humans have in common, this form of humor is the most readily available and requires the least amount of intelligence or education to be understood. Bodily humor is the great leveler, and Smollett uses it to keep the wit and humor flowing even as he explores more meaningful topics such as class and national pride.

Aye, she’s a dour lassie⁸ - Humorlessness in *Humphry Clinker*

Perhaps Smollett’s most brilliant use of humor to explore class and his love of Scotland, are the moments he leaves off of humor entirely to build his position through contrast. Smollett knows the power of meting humor out with restraint. His use of Lydia and Humphry as com-

⁸ Yes, she’s a sad girl.

pletely humorless individuals serves to highlight the humor in other characters. In a sense they act as foils to their counterparts. In a book that is so centered on Matthew Bramble's obsession with decorum, that two of the main characters, including the titular character, maintain dignity and propriety throughout is fitting. We know that Smollett values this sort of character because he puts himself in the book twice, and on both occasions he exhibits a wisdom and purity that relies entirely on integrity and decency. He applies this same lack of humor when he characterizes Scotland as a whole. In the cast of characters, the only people who emerge with dignity and purity are he, Lydia and Humphry. The rest are guilty of all of the expressions of humor above. Although it is tempting to say that Humphry is guilty of humor by association, he never has his own voice in this novel, and all of the moments in which he is humorously ensconced are generally at his expense by someone who sits at a higher social class. Although he would seem to be one of the more important characters, as the book is named for him, Humphry has not one letter in the series. Even through the scenes we have explored that include him, the humor is somewhat based on his complete obliviousness to it. Humphry is a situational target, and he is the most literal character in the book. He has no ability to deceive, cannot detect sarcasm, and believes himself a lesser creature than his benefactor, Matthew Bramble. When Bramble suggests that death might be the most fitting solution for Tabitha's miserable dog Chowder, Humphry takes Bramble at his word and makes a move to kill the dog. He acknowledges his own simpleton nature and says of himself that he is "innocent as the babe unborn" (Smollett 81).

Humphry creates a bit of a predicament for the reader. Laughing at this earnest and vulnerable creature feels wrong. Smollett gives us relief by instead allowing us to laugh at the reactions of those around him, as when he first arrived on the scene of the overturned carriage mentioned earlier. Unlike Humphry who frequently shows up in moments of humor, Lydia is entirely

removed from them. Her perspective in her letters seems much in keeping with her uncle's description of her. She is educated, as a young woman of her position would be, but she is a fragile creature, "susceptible...and tender" (Smollett 11). Here, again, there is no incentive to laugh at her, for to laugh at Lydia is to laugh at a segment of society that is protected from the common man. She represents what is sacrosanct, a flower that needs to be sheltered from unpleasant weather and nurtured with gentleness.

Smollett's choice to restrain himself with moments of humor serves to highlight what is most important to him, social decorum and national pride. The reader should note with careful sensitivity those moments in which there is a void of humor, for therein lies the true Smollett, a man described as:

Impetuous, impatient, splenetic, hot-passioned, with a sarcastic tongue, a corrosive pen, a temper which grew morbid through worry and work and ill-health, he was yet the most kindly and generous of souls, and the keenest of friends. As Hume said of him, "he was like a cocoa-nut, the outside was the worst." He was even more angry at wrongs done to others than to himself, indignant at anything mean or base. With dignity of nature as well as of manners, he would curry favour with no man and bow before no patron (Graham, "Scottish Men").

Despite his tendency towards some stereotypically negative Scottish characteristics, Smollett is, at heart, a warm, generous, dignified man of serious integrity, and these are the things that he so clearly values in his novel.

We're a' Jock Tamson's bairns!⁹ - humor in the social classes

As hinted at throughout this paper, there is an underlying essential thread to *Humphry Clinker*: Smollett's use of humor in his subtle exploration of class. While class distinction is rarely overtly discussed in the letters, the reader relies on a social hierarchy to give the humor layered meaning. Smollett also uses class as a means through which he can give civilized, cultured readers an excuse to laugh at something beneath them. In polite company, for example, a reader might not wish to be exposed to or, indeed, laugh aloud at a taboo subject like sex or excrement. Smollett gives the reader access to this humor through his use of servant, Win Jenkins. The reader, firmly ensconced in Win's private thoughts, can let go of any guilt associated with laughter, and can, instead, feel like a voyeur and see how this lower class, without its strict adherence to decorum, lives.

Win, as noted earlier, is particularly given to the more base categories of humor. She routinely expresses herself in a manner that depends on unintentional word play and bodily functions. Her letters, which speak to a lack of consciousness or reason, are out of touch with the prevailing intellectual culture. Her mental capabilities with language is "not abstract but intensely concrete" (Warner 279). Win is from the laboring class. She cannot be suspected of having had an education or good breeding, hence, her humor will necessarily resort to the most basic and universal form. In fact, Win often simply doesn't realize what she has communicated. In that way, "unlike Liddy, who tries to say what she means, Wins says more than she means" (Warner 284). Win is the character who elevates the reader's sense of himself or herself. If Win's humor

⁹ We're all God's equal children.

is based on an ability to apprehend double meaning or context, the reader feels superior to her by simply being aware of the moment.

Tabitha presents as a bit of a social conundrum in terms of her humor. She is, of course, of the landowning, upper class. She is of good breeding, and education; however, the strong presence of vulgarity in her letters does not belie her social standing. That Tabitha does not exhibit the features expected of a woman in her class is easily explained by her spinsterhood. In the eighteenth century the word spinster acquired the meaning is still has today, that of an unmarried woman or “old maid.” This meant that Tabitha had been unable to secure a spouse in spite of her social standing and was now beyond the normal marrying age. The term is used rather pejoratively as it suggests that there is something wrong with a woman if she has never married by Tabitha's age. As she is part of a subset of her own social class, and is segregated from the expectations of other women in her class, it follows that rules of decorum do not necessarily apply to her. She is rude, combative, inappropriate, and generally just tolerated by familial obligation by her brother. Readers can derive much pleasure and very little guilt when laughing at Tabitha as she has so clearly brought about her own unfortunate state. She is an easy target, and it can be assumed that since no one in the novel ever expects or holds her to a higher level of behavior, she is not regarded as the social equal of her brother. In addition, she is simply a woman living in a strongly male-oriented society. The only other female character of her social class is kept strictly away from any humor in the book. Lydia, by dint of her female fragility, is not so much regarded *as* an equal member of the upper class, as regarded *by* the male members of the upper class.

This leaves us with the two men Jerry and Matthew. Matthew represents an older era of aristocracy. He is a bit outdated by his age, but he is dignified and highly regarded. He can be

accepted, by dint of his education, intellect, and social rank, as a reliable narrator. His humor is found in the equally intellectual arena of observation. He does not deign to lower himself to bawdy moments or mentions. He is a gentleman through and through. While he does frequently share his medical concerns, he does it in a decidedly couched fashion that could easily be shared with eighteenth century mixed company. Laughing with Matthew's letters means laughing at other people and at places. It does not involve laughing at Matthew. This is the upper class privilege awarded by Smollett to Matthew. We may chuckle at his fashion sense, his endless medical complaints, or even his descriptions of other people, but we will never laugh at his expense.

Like Matthew, Jerry Melford is a high ranking member of the upper class. He too, is immune from being laughed at. In fact, the only time we read anything negative at all about him is Matthew's description of him as a conceited "jackanapes," but this is a description from within his own class. Just as he calls Matthew "old Square-toes," the two engage in a sort of familial teasing that costs neither of them any social sting. Jerry behaves like a superior being who examines those of a lower class than him as an anthropologist might. He refers to the lower-ranked military man Lismahago as a "high flavored dish" that it was his "fortune to feed upon the best part of three days" (Smollett 179). Jerry is candid about his superiority, and this is what defines his humor. Most of his humor relies upon situation, and most of those situation are at the considerable expense of people beneath him in the social hierarchy. Like his uncle, Jerry does not deign to stoop to bawdy word play. In fact, his use of euphemisms is of such high-level thinking that it furthers the distance between he and those of his ilk and those beneath him. He describes a group of writers who "seemed afraid and jealous of one another, and sat in a state of mutual repulsion, like so many particles of vapour, each surrounded by its own electrified atmosphere" (Smollett 110). This kind of humor is designed to show off intellect, and it is impenetrable to a reader

without an education. In this way, Jerry sets himself about the shit-talking and accunts of those social creatures who resides beneath him.

In many ways, Smollett's *Humphry Clinker* is an excellent recording of the mores and behavioral expectations associated with the eighteenth century class system. Smollett marries humor and class in such a way as to reveal the clear differences of the social hierarchy. His decisions with the way he uses humor are revelatory, and they force the reader to contend with his or her own presentiments. He also wields significant power in his ability to force people to laugh at humor that shouldn't appeal to them based on their elevated class. When Smollett can get a high-minded, eighteenth-century reader (and the success of his novel suggests that he did) to laugh at a housekeeper shitting the gate, he has earned the moniker of literary insurgent.

Haste ye back!¹⁰ - Understanding Smollett's motivation for using humor as a weapon

Now that we have explored the ways in which Smollett uses humor in his novel *Humphry Clinker*, we can focus on the question of his motivation. Why did Smollett set out to write this book and choose humor as its guiding principle? While the answer is not precisely known from Smollett himself, it is easy to imagine that, as his last project, which was completed just before his death, Smollett was driven by a desire to leave an important legacy to his reader. That "when on his death-bed he held in this feeble hands the volumes of his novel, fresh from the press" and uttered his final words "all is well," suggests that *Humphry Clinker* represented a deliberate and final act. A man plagued by illness, poverty, and social friction throughout his life, Smollett was forced to adapt to a self-imposed life of exile in Italy in his last years. Once there, he seems to

¹⁰ Come back soon.

have settled a bit into the relaxed pace and salubrious environs, and “now he worked with the new vigor at *Humphry Clinker*, the old scenes at Bath, at Edinburgh and Glasgow and the roadies inns coming back to him with memories and fancies of richest humor... and at every stage of the road form the most humorous itinerary ever composed” (Graham, “Letters” 316). With the distance of perspective and the wisdom of a man approaching his last breath, Smollett reviewed his own life, and with an increasing reverence for his home country of Scotland, he delved back into life in the country itself. Life in Scotland, for the young Smollett, included a medical apprenticeship in Glasgow where Smollett’s observational genius was likely well-stoked. “Certainly there were many quaint aspects of society around him which appealed to any one with a sense of humour” (Graham, “Letters” 298). Anecdotes of snowball fights and caricatures of the people he encountered in life began to populate works of his ever-moving pen at the expense of his becoming a physician. When, ultimately, he moved to ply his medical trade in London, he gave up after a few years and embraced his life as a writer.

Although much of Smollett’s professional life was embroiled in controversy brought on by his candidly malignant written assessments of people who were generally in a position to help him, in *Humphry Clinker* he exhibits the style of a newly mellowed man. “The humor in [Humphry Clinker] is not that of the acrid satirist, but of the kindly observer of the world moved to genial laughter” (Graham, “Letters” 316). Smollett seems to have made some sort of peace with himself, and, as a result, his humor succeeds in a new way, and it is tragic that “he did not live to hear the chorus of praise that greeted his last and finest work” (Graham, “Letters” 317). As a last word, it seems likely that *Humphry Clinker* exists as a testament to Smollett’s true roots, a man of keen observational insight, biting wit, and national pride. With particular emphasis on his national pride, it is easy to see that Smollett had an important message for his reader.

If one were to break the books of *Humphry Clinker* into a continuum of humor, one would see a marked difference between England and Scotland. Book I is, by far, the most humorous of the books. Book II is also filled with humor up until the point when the expedition reaches Scotland. Here the novel takes a decidedly more serious and reverential approach. That is not to say there isn't the odd comical moment; however, the emphasis is most certainly focused on a defensive and nationalistic desire to reveal a Scotland that is under-appreciated by England. Book III occurs partially in Scotland, and then it returns to England which is also the point at which the humor begins again in earnest. This structure speaks to an intention of Smollett's to associate humor with England and a sort of earnestness and seriousness with Scotland, a nation long excoriated by its southern neighbor. Some critics have observed this shift and have criticized Smollett for corrupting the form of his novel because of his sentimental attachment to Scotland, "the idea that the Scottish material strays too far from the novelistic convention has become commonplace in Smollett criticism, where it is assumed that his enthusiasm for his native country caused him to lose sight of his novel as a novel (letters from Tabby and Win are nearly submerged in Matt and Jerry's more reportorial letters)" (Warner 285-6). I would argue that this simplistic dismissal of Smollett's intention misses the point. Given that one of the most successful rhetorical strategies is to build ethos with an audience through humor, rather than seeing this tonal shift as a negative, I prefer to think of it as a brilliant stratagem on Smollett's part. Assuming that Smollett's purpose is to focus gravitas on his nation, perhaps he wants the reader to be more attentive to the seriousness of his portrayal of Scotland. What more brilliant way to accomplish this by getting the reader to invest with laughter. Smollett uses humor as the most effective strategy to gain the attention and allegiance of his reader, and then he redirects the fo-

cus and intensifies the seriousness of his point by contrast. This seems a novel way to use the novel.

As is so often mentioned in *Humphry Clinker* by Jerry Melford, the English have unfounded prejudices about their northern neighbor. Jerry admits his guilt along with his fellow Englishmen that “if the truth must be told, the South Britons in general are woefully ignorant of this particular. What, between want of curiosity, and traditional sarcasms, the effect of ancient animosity, the people at the other end of the island know as little of Scotland as of Japan” (Smollett 199). Here Smollett reveals his belief that people of England have missed much of what makes his home country a place worthy of championing.

That’ll do - a final thought about Smollett’s *Humphry Clinker*

Smollett includes himself and another Scottish ambassador, the character of Captain Lismahago, in *Humphry Clinker*, neither of whom exhibit humorous tendencies. This goes hand in hand with another aspect of the book which is that travels through England and Scotland differ in their humorousness. When the action takes place in England, there is humor. When the action takes place in Scotland, there is reverence. In Scotland Smollett seems most restrained, and perhaps even defensive in his portrayal of his home country which speaks of his desire to educate his southern neighbors about the civilized nature of his own people.

As a literary insurgent, Tobias Smollett cleverly deploys many different methods to generate humor. His intentional choice of the epistolary form, which draws the reader in through multiple perspectives and modes of engagement and his linking of types of humor and social class builds an effective ethos with the reader. Smollett counts on this heavy reader investment so that he can be more effective with his ultimate goal, that of winning a new vision of Scotland

in the minds of those Englishmen who had, for too long, dismissed it as a savage, uncultured land. *Humphry Clinker* is a skilled piece of strategy that fulfills Smollett's last desires and longing for Scotland, but it does it through the back door, so to speak.

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