

Laura All

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The Expletive Eighteenth Century: A Prospectus

The chamber-maid had left no ***** *** under the bed:-----Cannot you contrive, master, quoth *Susannah*, lifting up the sash with one hand, as she spoke, and helping me up into the window seat with the other,-----cannot you manage, my dear, for a single time to **** * ** * ** * *****?

My project explores eighteenth-century texts that advertise what they can't or won't say. In this famous passage from *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, (volume V), the asterisks affect to obscure, while nevertheless revealing, the content of Susannah's request. Of course, we can guess what lies "behind" the elementary cryptograms, not least because Tristram assigns one asterisk per letter: Susannah the maid neglected to put the *chamber-pot* in its customary location, so she contrives for young Tristram to *piss out of the window*, which results in his accidental circumcision. Sterne/Tristram mocks such textual squeamishness by pretending to censor the salacious content while making it all too obvious to the reader. As Wayne Booth demonstrated about so many of Sterne's textual games, this use of asterisks didn't originate with Sterne. The literate public of the mid-eighteenth century could readily recognize in Sterne's parody a longstanding textual convention: using asterisks, dashes, and ellipses to signify that certain words have been omitted.

Even a casual observer will notice how frequently such placeholder marks appear on the pages of eighteenth-century novels, yet despite (or perhaps because of) their

ubiquity, readers may be tempted to dismiss them as quaint but meaningless conventions from a bygone era of print. But these blanks are anything but empty; they constitute a unique response to the threats and opportunities presented by print. Regardless of whether the reader can decipher the words or letters omitted, signaling an omission through typographic marks on the page is impossible to ignore, and it draws more attention to what *isn't* there than what is. Although we use such typography today only as a modesty patch for profanity, in the eighteenth century it could apply to a much wider body of content. What does a line such as *Jonathan Wild*'s “My ---- in a bandbox!” have in common with the attribution of a 1726 poem to B-ll M-rt-n or a snide reference to Mr. W----'s preaching in *Humphry Clinker*? Though these dashes present an identical graphic presence on the page, they accomplish very different goals, and they also derive from different strains in the history of the convention.

Scholars and readers have thus used a wide variety of words to code the practice, including ellipsis, eclipsis, lacunae, elision, and preterition, but none of these terms captures the full range of functions that an asterisk or dash can perform. Instead, I group these techniques under the category of expletives. “Expletive” does not denote the “bad” word itself (as in our modern usage), but anything that *takes up the space* where objectionable content would appear. More pointed than aposiopesis, less direct than occupatio, eighteenth-century expletives replace words ranging from the obscene to the sublime. By standing in for content that is either “beneath” or “above” the printable, expletives help print to calibrate itself, a balance that must be adjusted constantly. They also constitute an epistemological border between author and reader, navigating between public and private in print. Like all borders, they are never neutral territory, but prove contestable and shifting over time. Expletives are quintessentially print-based objects, non-vocables—literally unspeakables—that draw

attention to their own printed status. As such, they provide an axis for studying several interrelated issues in the rise of print culture, including the anxiety over female readership and the influence of print on the imagination, both issues that revolve around access, knowledge, and the reader's unstable participation in supplying elided words and concepts. Though their functions and histories range widely, they follow observable conventions, to the extent that they constitute a grammar of their own. Although the roots of the practice predate the dramatic rise of print culture at the turn of the eighteenth century, the expletive took on special significance and power at that time because of print's dangerous tendency to manifest that which was too private, too prurient, or too sublime.

Part of this project will reconstruct a history and theory of the eighteenth-century expletive in its widest sense, a kind of anatomy that covers not only punctuated examples but also tangential conventions such as anonymity and ineffability. Yet the expletive also promises to be a powerful hermeneutic aid for both canonical and less familiar works because it reveals how authors conceived of the relationship between themselves and their readers, and between readers and texts. Expletives are particularly interesting in the novel because, in a genre that draws the representable world ever wider, it becomes much more noticeable to draw attention to something you can't or won't write directly. Furthermore, novels can serve as reliable registers of changing print conventions; if a print technique makes it into a novel, we can infer that it has appeared in other contexts and would be familiar to most readers. Though each chapter will include examples of each type of expletive from the realms of poetry, nonfiction, and ephemera, it is the novel's propensity to take in every other form of text, as Bakhtin famously claimed, that cements its centrality to this project.

The critical conversation that surrounds expletives usually lumps them in with other

textual features such as punctuation, a topic that regrettably motivates few inspired studies. Far more critical space has been devoted to the use of eighteenth-century dashes as guides to oral performance. My project takes shape in part by following the pioneering work of Janine Barchas, whose *Graphic Design, Print Culture, and the Eighteenth-Century Novel* establishes visual print objects as worthy of study from both historicist and narratological perspectives. Barchas largely passes over expletives as here identified, with just one mention of them in *Tristram Shandy*. Still, despite her relative silence on the issue, expletives fit in beautifully with her conceptions of graphic elements as interpretive keys that also provide a direct link to the context of print culture's great experiments. Christopher Flint's recent book on *The Appearance of Print in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* concerns the subject more directly. He uses asterisks in the works of Sterne and Swift as touchstones for his psychoanalytic readings, maintaining that they indicate moments of heightened emotion that transcend normal type. Though my own interpretations of asterisks in *Tristram Shandy* and *A Tale of a Tub* will depart from Flint's, the very distance between our readings reinforces the idea that expletives in fiction open up new hermeneutic possibilities.

I divide the eighteenth-century expletive into four subcategories, each of which derives from a different history and serves a different function: 1) oaths, obscenities, and coarse words; 2) proper names; 3) covert references; 4) the blah-blah-blah, &c., &c.; and 5) the ineffable or sublime. Each chapter will center on an interpretive close reading of expletives in a canonical text, while also analyzing a host of contextual documents that trace that category's history, logic, and influence—from printers' manuals to Acts of Parliament. The list moves from most to least recognizable, beginning with Laurence Sterne's conspicuous games with asterisks and ending with Eliza Haywood's construction of ineffable passion, a

technique that, though not signaled with punctuation, belongs in the spectrum of expletive communication and connects it to later developments in the Romantic sublime. This project will strive for comprehensiveness in surveying the field of the expletive, aiming to map the borders of the printable and how they changed over time. As a supplement to the dissertation, I will compile a collaborative electronic archive of examples that users can navigate by author, era, or type of expletive.

Chapter 1: Playing with Prurience: Sterne and the Salacious

The most familiar use of expletives is the one that occasionally surfaces today: the use of typography to replace obscenities, curses, and oaths. What were the rules, written and unwritten, about describing the profane and the prurient on the page? This chapter focuses on Sterne and *Sterneiana*. Using Tristram's pose of self-censorship, Sterne accomplishes several things simultaneously: he characterizes Tristram, mocks his readers by implicating them in impure thoughts, and satirizes contemporary anxieties over printed prurience. He thus works within the restrictions of print to satirize them. How did Sterne's imitators interpret and carry forward his expletive legacy?

Chapter 2: Protecting the Pr-p-r N-me: Defoe and Urban Anonymity

The next chapter focuses on the elision and obscuring of proper names, revealing an unsteady relation between print and personal identity. I will trace the history of the proper name and its rules for its usage in print, which I suspect will involve the history of libel intertwined with cabalistic interdicts against using the n-me of G-d. This background allows us to consider Defoe's radically nameless heroines who go by the eponymous pseudonyms Moll

Flanders and Roxana. The name elisions in these two novels point to the newly fluid identities available in the urban exchange market, a dangerous freedom that Defoe finds especially seductive for women. This chapter will also involve satire and the venting of spleen through poetry addressed to expleted names. The convention becomes especially interesting in those cases when the name is all but revealed save for one or two vowels, truly observing the letter, but not the spirit, of the law.

Chapter 3: Pointing with Print: Covert References and Secret Histories

Like Chapter 2, this section will focus on expletives that invoke proper names, but in order to reflect upon real—not fictional—characters. The tradition of secret histories and *nouvelles scandaleuses* flourishes in the early part of the century, and it connects the work of Defoe and Haywood, among others, to continental expletive conventions. As the various “keys” to these secret histories reveal, the relationship between print and identity was never as simple as it appeared.

Chapter 4: Parodies of Pedantry: Swift and the Blah-blah-blah

This chapter focuses on Swift and his concern with the threats posed to contemporary scholarship and reading practices by the rising maelstrom of print. In *A Tale of a Tub*, he uses expletives to draw everything from the eroding manuscript culture to scholarly pedantry to print-induced boredom into his satire, and all are traceable back to the threats of a changing print environment. Importantly, Swift does not obscure “real” content at all, but instead, like Defoe, he gestures to an empty space in the syntax of his chosen discourse. Swift’s work points to an alternative strain of expletive functions and history that nonetheless provides a

complex and esoteric commentary on contemporary printing practices.

Chapter 5: Provoking Passion: The Haywoodian Sublime

The Haywoodian ineffable links the theory of the expletive with evocations of the sublime that characterize the century. By making her characters' passions uncomatable, Haywood can enlist her readers' own emotional experiences, for the imagination is always warmer and more stimulating than the printed page.

Although she does not punctuate the ineffable with typographical symbols like the authors in previous chapters, she repeatedly underscores the text's inability to narrate directly. She outlines these absences with well-defined contours, and in many cases, the key to their effectiveness is having the reader imagine what's not there. By the turn of the next century, expletives in fiction lost their piquancy, becoming a part of how novels look. However, it seems that the sublime may have been the place where expletives "went."

Coda: Pretending: The Afterlife of the Expletive

What happened to the expletive after the nineteenth century? The coda will discuss the fate of the convention and its occasional resurfacing in the work of nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, from Poe to the textual play of the Modernists. Although expletives seemingly flattened into empty conventions, they remained an active feature of the reading experience, as Molly Bloom laments in *Ulysses*:

like some of those books he brings me the works of Master Francois
Somebody supposed to be a priest about a child born out of her ear because
her bumgut fell out a nice word for any priest to write and her a--e as if any

fool wouldnt know what that meant i hate that pretending of all things. (619,
Gabler edition)

This chapter will also relate expletive theory to twentieth-century border theory and poetics, which explore how texts articulate the boundaries of knowledge and communication. Georg Simmel's observation in "The Sociology of Space" (1903) applies just as accurately to expletives: "The boundary is not a spatial fact with sociological consequences, but a sociological fact that forms itself spatially."