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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *PMLA*, Vol. 105, No. 2 (Mar., 1990), pp. 223-232

Published by: [Modern Language Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/462558>

Accessed: 05/01/2012 09:58

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# Why Selima Drowns: Thomas Gray and the Domestication of the Imperial Ideal

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*Yet might your glassy prison seem  
A place where joy is known,  
Where golden flash and silver gleam  
Have meanings of their own.*  
William Wordsworth, "Gold and Silver Fishes in a Vase"

**I**N A MOMENT paradigmatic of the conventions of eighteenth-century English literary culture, Thomas Gray, gentleman, responds to the drowning of a friend's pet by writing a witty, mock-elegiac ode. Students of the period recognize in these circumstances a familiar scenario of literary production as cultured exchange; they are less attentive to how such incidental verse often draws strength from, and facilitates, the larger historical and sociopolitical discourses of mercantile and imperial expansion. The literary contours of these discourses, and literature's shaping role in the eighteenth-century definition of a British national identity, have been traced by the critics and historians who have surveyed the many "patriotic" or "panegyric" poems of the period (Courthope 20–43; Moore; Dobrée; McKillop). A few critics have noticed that many of these poems also function as imaginative apologies for commercial empire or as deliberate and consistent mystifications of the imperial process (Dobrée 60–63; Cunningham 11). While we would expect to (and do) see continuities of images, themes, and worldviews in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poems on public themes (Lord), such continuities also extend into, and structure, the most "occasional" private poems, which turn into palimpsestic records of the influence of empire on the poetic imagination.

If there is a single recurrent imperative in what might be described as the ideological project of such poems, it can be characterized as the

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impulse toward domestication (a getting ready for by getting used to), toward repeated and varied enactments of certain cultural, political, and economic themes so that they are assimilated and consolidated as the hegemonic outlook of the nation-state. Of the ensemble of motifs that make up this repetition and variation, this essay examines, in particular, the way that negative representations of “femaleness” and female desires function as ideological surrogates for the playing out of the more anxious scenarios of imperial desire. Gray’s ode, which takes the overt form of the animal fable, is also an allegorical satire on women and a displaced account of the eighteenth-century British domestication of the imperial ideal. The point will be to unravel the representational, literary, and sociohistorical codes that enable the ode to perform equally and effectively at all these levels.

In February 1747, Gray wrote a short “memorial” poem in response to a request from Walpole, one of whose cats had drowned in a goldfish bowl. This poem, which Gray thought “rather too long for an Epitaph,”<sup>1</sup> is “Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes.” It has usually been read as one of the many eighteenth-century moralizing tales that take women as their satiric or ironic subjects. This reading of course recognizes the appropriate formal or generic context for the ode, but we must remember that such subgenres served a particular historical and ideological purpose. As recent, especially feminist, criticism is making us increasingly aware, the “late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries mark a critical point in the codification of modern strategies for conceptualizing women” (Pollak 2), and moralizing tales on (“characters” of) women centrally represent such codification. When poets of this period wrote about women, Ellen Pollak points out, “they were inescapably confronted with the necessity of establishing some relation to what were becoming, to what to some extent already had become, the representational codes of modern sexual ideology” (8).

The maxims that constitute the last stanza of Gray’s allegorical ode make quite clear that the poem is addressed to the figure (representational code) of woman as excessive, mindless, amoral consumer:

From hence, ye beauties, undeceived,  
 Know, one false step is ne’er retrieved,  
 And be with caution bold.  
 Not all that tempts your wandering eyes  
 And heedless hearts is lawful prize;  
 Nor all that glisters gold. (37–42)

Addison, in the *Spectator* 15, draws a parallel moral from a similar set of cautionary tales: “I have often reflected with myself on this unaccountable humour in womankind, of being smitten with everything that is showy and superficial; and on the numberless evils that befell the sex, from this light fantastical disposition” (263). In this *Spectator*, Addison also recounts details of the death of Camilla in book 11 of Vergil’s *Aeneid* (a passage that lines 16–24 of Gray’s ode allude to as well) and concludes on this note: “This heedless pursuit after these glittering trifles, the poet (by a nice concealed moral) represents to have been the destruction of his female hero” (265).

Both Gray and Addison mean the connection they make between women’s desire for the “showy and superficial” and an inevitable moral downfall to be normative and paradigmatic. To that extent, Gray’s and Addison’s efforts are of a piece with what John Sekora calls the larger eighteenth-century attack on “luxury.” As Sekora demonstrates, such moral criticism expresses not only “a theory of value, an ethic for both individuals and nations,” but also “a theory of history, an explanation of both personal and collective decline in the past” (67).

For some of Gray’s contemporaries, history offered compelling evidence that moral corruption caused the social and historical decay of nation-states and civilizations. Such evidence was seen as having more than just a retrospective explanatory power—read appropriately, signs of contemporary moral laxity could prefigure and foretell decline and fall. This predictive capacity gave such theories of history a particular and partisan urgency in the eighteenth century. In this age of mercantile expansion and nascent empire, the warnings of history were constantly invoked by those who were made uneasy or rendered marginal by commercial and imperial “progress.” Gray’s response too is based on the connectedness of moral and national decline: “The doctrine of Epicurus

is ruinous to society: It had its rise when Greece was declining, and perhaps hastened its dissolution, as also that of Rome; it is now propagated in France and in England, and seems likely to produce the same effect in both" (Lonsdale 91).

Perhaps the best example of the contemporary use of theories of "collective decline in the past" is John Dyer's *Ruins of Rome* (1740), which concludes with a diagnostic warning:

Vain end of human strength, of human skill,  
Conquest, and triumph, and domain, and pomp,  
And ease and luxury! O luxury,  
Bane of elated life, of affluent states,  
What dreary change, what ruin is not thine?

Dreadful attraction! while behind thee gapes  
The unfathomable gulf where Asshur lies  
O'erwhelmed, forgotten; and high-boasting Cham;  
And Elam's mighty pomp; and beauteous Greece;  
And the great queen of earth, imperial Rome.

(533-45)

Laurence Goldstein's reading of Dyer emphasizes the tightrope that eighteenth-century ideologues of imperial power had to walk in their efforts to propagate, and to warn against, the doctrine of empire:

Rome, according to Dyer, became the victim of her own success; she perished by the surfeit of goods accumulated as her due reward for strength and skill. So long as empire is motivated by "proud desire / Of boundless sway, and feverish thirst of gold" (454-55) so long will it remain virile, orderly, and the possessor of "proud security." But the quest of gold must remain pure; when it degenerates into a quest for ease, when gold is alchemised into the leaden riots of hedonism, then the national will becomes soft, a prey for vandals. (44)

The eighteenth century is full of texts like Dyer's, generated by poets responding to the possibilities and the anxieties attendant on the prospect of a British empire. These texts, as Laura Brown says of Pope's construction of Vergil, "serve as a nationalist and expansionist ideal, and yet sustain an anti-materialist moral standard"; it is thus that they are "the supreme exemplar[s] of Augustan humanism" (Pope 43). One feature of this human-

ism, one important way in which these texts of caution and warning serve to perpetuate a "nationalist and expansionist" ideology, is that they deflect, or reinflect, general arguments against "luxury" and moral corruption by retelling these arguments as tales of errant female figures. Two complementary effects are registered: social anxieties are focused—displaced onto, and contained by, a thematically appropriate negative construction of the female; simultaneously, the functional mythology and discursive strategies of contemporary sexual ideology are further consolidated.

As Louis Landa writes, Pope's *Belinda*

and others like her, were [represented as] the beginning and the end, the stimulus to "the adventurous merchant" whose ships roamed "securely o'er the boundless main" from Lapland to "the sultry line"; and they were the final recipients of the exotic products, "the glitt'ring Spoil" from Indian grottoes, from the frozen north and the southern seas. (223)

Landa goes on to quote from James Ralph's *Clarinda: Or, The Fair Libertine* (1729):

For them the Gold is dug on Guinea's Coast,  
And sparkling Gems the farthest Indies boast,  
For them Arabia breathes its spicy Gale,  
And fearless Seamen kill the Greenland Whale.  
For them the Murex yields its purple Dye,  
And orient Pearls in sea-bred Oysters lye;  
For them, in clouded Shell, the Tortoise shines,  
And huge *Behemoth* his vast Trunk resigns;  
For them, in various Plumes, the Birds are gay,  
And *Sables* bleed, the savage Hunter's Prey!  
For them the *Merchant*, wide to ev'ry Gale,  
Trusts all his Hopes and stretches ev'ry Sail,  
For them, O'er all the World, he dares to roam,  
And safe conveys its gather'd Riches home.<sup>2</sup>

In this construction, women are seen as requiring, justifying, and legitimizing the expansion of the British overseas trade. In Laura Brown's formulation, "Mercantile capitalism itself, with all its attractions as well as its ambiguous consequences, is attributed to women, whose marginality allows them to serve, in the writings of celebrants and satirists alike, as a proxy for male desires, male anxieties" ("Commodity"). This double displacement not only conceals the real acquisitive agency

but also deflects onto women (“For them . . .”) the ultimate authority for the violence that accompanied mercantile and imperial expansion. The poet can thus be appropriately moral, sympathetically enumerating the victims of this search for riches—whales, murexes, oysters, tortoises, elephants, birds, sables—even as his verse celebrates the daring merchant’s safe conveyance of the world’s “gather’d Riches *home*” (emphasis added).

At this historical moment, the en-gendering of figures of vanity, luxury, and consumerism is often explicitly tied up with the creation of structural alibis that will validate and affirm overseas expansion.<sup>3</sup> It is in such a context that Gray’s drowned-cat ode must be read.

’Twas on a lofty vase’s side,  
Where China’s gayest art had dyed  
The azure flowers, that blow;  
Demurest of the tabby kind,  
The pensive Selima reclined,  
Gazed on the lake below. (1-6)

This opening stanza resonates with two specific pre-texts, John Gay’s *Toilette* (1716, 1720) and Pope’s *Rape of the Lock* (1714). In Gay’s poem, Lydia, a London belle past her prime, mourns her faithless beau (who has left her for a younger woman, Chloe) as she is at her morning “toilette.” In compensation for his absence, she thinks she might

dress, and take my wonted range  
Through ev’ry *Indian* shop, through all the *Change*;  
Where the tall jarr erects his costly pride,  
With antic shapes in *China’s* azure dy’d;  
There careless lies the rich brocade unroll’d,  
Here shines a cabinet with burnish’d gold. (51-56)

Appropriately, it is there, in the “*Change*,” that Lydia’s faithless Damon “first convers’d with *Chloe’s* eyes” (60). The site of the celebration of mercantile commodities is, as we might expect, also the location of the inevitable moral downfall of the female consumer.

Selima, like Belinda, and perhaps even more immediately than Lydia, is juxtaposed with an object whose repetition functions as an index of the literary nexus between the figuration of women

and the mercantile and imperial process: the “lofty” Chinese vase.<sup>4</sup> Pope’s *Rape of the Lock*, in a memorable zeugma, had firmly established an ironic cultural equivalence between women’s honor and imported commodities. In that poem, Belinda’s guardian spirit Ariel wonders uneasily about the catastrophe to come:

Whether the Nymph shall break Diana’s Law,  
Or some frail *China* Jar receive a Flaw,  
Or stain her Honour, or her new Brocade.<sup>5</sup>  
(2.105-08)

In lines 1-5 of the ode, Gray’s strategic placing of the reclining Selima on a lofty vase of Chinese design insinuates a similar connection, one whose implications become obvious only later, once the sexual theme is made explicit.

At this moment, Selima is “pensive,” but lest we read her as somehow intellectual (a feline “thinker”), we are quickly told that her pensiveness is a product of her narcissism; she is gazing “on the lake below”:

Her conscious tail her joy declared;  
The fair round face, the snowy beard,  
The velvet of her paws,  
Her coat that with the tortoise vies,  
Her ears of jet and emerald eyes,  
She saw, and purred applause. (7-12)

Like Eve in *Paradise Lost*, who “pin’d with vain desire” for her own image (4.466), Selima is pleased with what she sees. Her narcissism, however, celebrates more than just natural charms. Selima’s very image seems composed of the commodities that Laura Brown, writing of Pope’s Belinda making herself up in her toilet mirror (1.121-44), describes as “the spoils of mercantile expansion . . . these are the means by which her natural beauty is ‘awakened.’ In other words, imperialism dresses nature to advantage here” (Pope 9). Selima, made up of “velvet,” tortoiseshell (cf. line 7 of James Ralph’s *Clarinda* quoted above), “jet,” and “emerald,” is very much the creature (the creation) of a commodity culture.

This moment is clear in its moral valence; its ideological use soon becomes obvious as well. This scenario of vanity turns out to be a specific pre-

ude to an allegory of excessive and ultimately destructive desire for acquisition—and not only a prelude but, strangely enough, almost the entire cause. It seems that Selima’s narcissistic gazing into the mirrorlike water surface allows further events to transpire:

Still had she gazed; but ’midst the tide  
Two angel forms were seen to glide,  
The genii of the stream:  
Their scaly armour’s Tyrian hue  
Through richest purple to the view  
Betrayed a golden gleam. (13–18)

The goldfish are invisible for the long moment of Selima’s mirror stage, during, that is, the entire second-stanza articulation and pleasurable integration of reflected body parts (7–12). But underneath this surface, as it were, lurk the signifiers of the real essence of women, waiting for the moral lapse (in this case, Selima’s narcissism) that will bring them to the surface. The agency of sight in stanzas 2 and 3 is deflected by the syntax. In stanza 2, Selima “saw” her reflection (12), but in stanza 3, the goldfish “were seen” to glide (14). The shift from the active to the passive voice causes a momentary loss of certainty about who exactly is seeing. The implication seems to be that Selima when gazing narcissistically can clearly see her appearance, but that the moment of the emergence of her real signification is less clearly visible to her.

The fish, with their “golden gleam,” are not simply signifiers of wealth or riches.<sup>6</sup> Their “Tyrian hue” aligns them with mercantile commodities; they are, at this historical juncture, living reminders of the potential of a trading empire. Louis Landa refers to homiletic literature in which “London’s resemblance to the ancient city of Tyre is a constant refrain.” He suggests that the “mercantile zest or hunger, the feeling for material objects,” settled on Tyre as a symbol of national eminence (222). Tyre was seen as furnishing (in the words of Alexander Catcott, a clergyman)

all the western parts [of the world] with the commodities of *Arabia, Africa, Persia, and India*. . . . Its fleets brought in to *Tyre* all the useful and rare commodities of the then known world . . . silver, iron, tin, lead, brass, slaves, horses, mules, ivory, ebony,

emeralds, purple, embroidery, fine linen, coral, wheat, pannag, honey, oil, balm, wine, white wool, bright iron, cassia, calamus, precious cloaths, lambs, rams, goats, spices, precious stones, gold, blue cloaths and rich apparel.<sup>7</sup>

This enthusiastic cataloging of commodities pays homage to the effect that mercantile capitalism had on the imagination and rhetoric of eighteenth-century Britain, an effect condensed into the single signifier Tyre. Gray’s Tyrian goldfish, then, swim in overdetermined seas.

It is no surprise that the poem now makes explicit what animal fables usually keep implicit—the allegorical identification of animal characters with human figures—because from the beginning, the powerful logic of the mercantile subtext has been establishing the structural scapegoat, avaricious woman:

The hapless nymph with wonder saw:  
A whisker first, and then a claw,  
With many an ardent wish,  
She stretched in vain to reach the prize.  
What female heart can gold despise?  
What cat’s averse to fish? (19–24)

Noting the formal aberration in these lines, Samuel Johnson commented, “Selima, the cat, is called a nymph, with some violence both to language and sense; but there is [no] good use made of it when it is done; for of the two lines [23–24], the first relates merely to the nymph, and the second only to the cat” (466). When the formal requirements of pure allegory (the animal fable) confront the peculiar logic of the mercantile imagination, it is the logic that is decisive. An inversion of formal priorities results; the allegorical subtext emerges as text, even as dominant text: “What female heart can gold despise?” The fabular element lingers, of course, but it is anticlimactic, even reductive and redundant: “What cat’s averse to fish?”<sup>8</sup>

The next two stanzas, about Selima’s death by drowning, are written in a mock-heroic idiom that emphasizes the parodic, heavily periphrastic, and euphemistic language of the entire ode:

Presumptuous maid! with looks intent  
Again she stretched, again she bent,

Nor knew the gulf between.  
 (Malignant fate sat by and smiled)  
 The slippery verge her feet beguiled,  
 She tumbled headlong in.

Eight times emerging from the flood  
 She mewed to every watery god,  
 Some speedy aid to send.  
 No dolphin came, no Nereid stirred:  
 Nor cruel Tom nor Susan heard.  
 A favourite has no friend! (25–36)

Earlier, in lines 16–24, the ode alludes to the death of Camilla in book 11 of Vergil's *Aeneid*, reading in the earlier text a fitting account of a heroic woman's death because of her inability to cleanse herself of a "woman's desire for booty and spoils" (11.782).<sup>9</sup> Such an allusion works not simply to trivialize, or trifle with, the Selima story but also to establish a continuity of reference to women and their wondrous desire for gold.

A simultaneous trivializing and taking seriously is, of course, only made possible by the form and conventions of the mock-heroic. The mock-heroic deploys an easily recognizable ethically normative discourse (Selima is a "Presumptuous maid" who tempts "Malignant fate") even as the genre subverts, through an incongruous misapplication, the ponderous weight of such discourse. The overall effect though is still ideologically appropriate. "If Selima were a woman," the form of the fable signals, "such language would of course be diagnostic and pertinent . . . (un)fortunately, she is only a cat!"

What the mock-heroic also allows Gray's ode is the humorous elaboration of Selima's drowning, while containing, in lines 30–34, the violence of that event in a series of stylized references. This conversion of the pathetic into the bathetic is a standard feature of the mock-heroic, but here it serves an even more important, ideological purpose. The social text that shapes, and is encoded in, this allegory includes an unavoidable perception of the violence that accompanied contemporary mercantile and imperial expansion. The catalog of victims in the lines from James Ralph's *Clarinda* quoted above demonstrates one way in which this perception surfaces, and Gray's own "Luna Habitabilis" also gives voice to an aware-

ness of this violence: the moonscape wonders at "the iron-clad ranks, the regiment of monsters, and gigantic beasts full of armed men, and the inimitable lightning" that is its first view of British colonists.<sup>10</sup> Even in a poem that is explicitly whimsical and fantastical, on the theme that the moon is habitable, the violent material basis of the dream of domination surfaces.<sup>11</sup> It does so by a structural displacement—the poem's speaker shifts to the perspective of the imagined "old" inhabitants of the moon to present this vision of barbarous power. Of course, the whimsy works to divert any serious engagement with the content of the poem.

In the ode, the symptomatic figuration of such violence is the drowning death of Selima, but the proper diagnosis of this symptom is inhibited by a formal and rhetorical encouragement not to take the cat's demise seriously. Line 31 ("Eight times emerging from the flood") therefore turns Selima's struggle into a parody of the epic's use of the number 3 and of the popular belief in the nine lives of a cat. More important, line 36 introduces a theme that has previously been latent—the sexuality of female desire, which earlier lines represent as primarily acquisitive, cupidinous. The innuendo in the word "favourite" is clear: Selima is linked to the long tradition of socially transgressive figures whose threatening sexual power and misdeeds are the constant theme of commentators on culture and morality (for a spirited anti-Johnsonian defense of the "double subject" of the poem, see Geoffrey Tillotson, who reads the subjects as Selima and Homer's Helen). As a kept woman, a mistress, Selima can certainly have no divine guardians (32–34) or allies among the domestic underclass (35–36); her fallen moral status rules out the guardians, as her illegitimate social position does the allies.

The surfacing of the sexual theme does not merely add one more negative feature to the representation of the female in the ode; it also marks a strategic rhetorical shift (between generic codes) in the progress of the poem. The use of the mock-heroic to represent the drowning death of Selima allows unsettling, even subversive, possibilities to disturb the surface of the allegory being constructed. The codes composing the form of the mock-heroic destabilize as much as assert meanings; as for the content, to elaborate ritually while

trivializing and thus to enjoy the imagined spectacle of Selima's death seems at best unfortunately conceited and at worst unfeeling and unsavory.<sup>12</sup> To recuperate and fix fabular meaning, a less recalcitrant, less wittily self-indulgent genre is called for, and the homily of the fallen woman serves ideally.

Twin warnings, against rampant female cupidity and lust, close the poem (see lines 37–42, quoted above). The generality of the homiletic idiom is perfect for Gray's purposes, allowing easy transitions between the morals of the story. Selima's stretching for the gold(fish) is like the one "false step" that causes maidenly honor to be lost forever; women's "wandering eyes" and "heedless hearts" must be disciplined into learning that not all that seems attractive is "lawful prize" for sexual conquest. For those of us who (schooled in Johnsonian ways) find the "From hence" of line 37 an unconvincing connective, it is instructive to note John Barrell and Harriet Guest's formulation about such a rhetorical move in other eighteenth-century poems: "a successful 'transition' was not one which concealed discursive shifts, but which made them appear, at least, to be appropriate and 'natural'" (136).

In these stanzas, then, the fable of morally and personally destructive female-feline desire at once encodes, displaces, and retells a historical allegory of trade, mercantile hunger, and violence. The symptoms of this displacement are to be discovered in the fissured, multiple forms of its telling—the fabular and the mock-heroic—even as its uncomfortable effects are dissipated and contained by the homiletic idiom of the final stanza. Such a retelling serves both imperial and domestic ideological interests. It gestures toward the actual overseas theater of mercantile conquest in reductive, trivial terms but denies genuine perception by refusing to represent that arena adequately. Simultaneously, it creates a normative representational code for women that historically characterizes the British eighteenth-century consolidation of the domestic (both family and national) spheres. The process of mystification, then, is twofold: men's anxieties about the progress of Britain as a trading empire are systematically rewritten as narratives of women's lust and depravity, and the potential awkwardness of such a

rewriting is dissolved into heavily stylized textual play.

A comment on this distancing effect, which operates throughout the ode, may be in order here. There is no denying (indeed most critics have celebrated) the postured charm of this poem, its "gentlemanly" archness, its hyperbolic humor, its desire to be read as an elaborate literary joke, a witty *jeu d'esprit*. To overwhelm that playfulness in a reading designed to tease out the historical and ideological implications of the poem may seem like critical overkill. We must keep in mind, though, that notions of the cultured, the charming, and the gentlemanly (like all other aesthetic categories of discrimination) can be shown, in their historical deployment, to derive their substance not from any essential codes of literature and reading but from mechanisms of social and ideological consolidation. Thus the form and tone of the poem (which are precisely how the poem "means" its meanings), far from being proof against any serious discussion, must offer the exact ground that a historically sensitive critical reading maps.

We are only now beginning to become aware of how multifaceted and all-absorbing the discourses of British nationalism and empire were, especially in their efflorescence in the eighteenth century. The grand theme of a British national destiny is the discursive center not only for the efforts of the spokesmen of commercial and mercantile interests, for the political machinations of parliamentary chauvinists, and for the rhetorical zeal of the proselytizing missionaries who spread Christianity and "civilization" but also for the far more local (and perhaps more ideologically powerful) attempts by writers, teachers, and purveyors of daily culture to create a consensual national ideology. There is thus scarcely a poet in the period who did not, in public and in private verse, treat (or indirectly represent) the conjunction of the patriotic and the poetic.

Gray was no jingoist, but he was certainly part of the burgeoning, occasionally anxious, more usually bullish public scenario of British empire that was materializing throughout the eighteenth century. The writing of this master script took various forms, causing, among many more serious and powerful effects, an ode on the loss of a pet

to turn into a somewhat baroque effort whose form, figures, and rhetoric bear eloquent witness to the influence of the imperial ideal. The ripples of Selima's death by water become in Gray's vision fabular versions of the waves that Britain's imperial progress generated—waves of desire, waves of warning. His little poem, much like the goldfish tub that Selima drowned in, was meant to allow a sparkling, untarnished, *aestheticized* view of its piscine and feline drama. Now, over 240 years later, the ode appears rather as an old curiosity, a somewhat misshapen and oddly appealing literary artifact, its textures and surfaces to be read for evidence of ideological overdeterminations and rhetorical determinations. If there is any urgency in our commitment to such reading, it must be that through these interpretative projects we can write our own academic scenarios, in which Selimas—favorite cats, figures of the feminine desire for acquisition—do not drown in vanity, and in vain.<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gray to Horace Walpole, 1 Mar. 1747 (*Correspondence* 1: 272). Roger Lonsdale records the details of the writing of this ode (78–79), and all citations of the poem refer to Lonsdale's edition.

<sup>2</sup> Landa also specifies a contemporary political-economic reason for the contradictory simultaneous celebration and satire of the woman consumer: "Belinda as a consumer, the embodiment of luxury . . . was . . . recognizably the final point in a vast nexus of enterprises, a vast commercial expansion which stirred the imagination of Englishmen to dwell on thoughts of greatness and magnificence. . . . This would be an affirmative response, which very likely would be leavened by a negative one. Whenas in foreign silks Belinda goes, she could not please the austere mercantilist. Defoe would see her . . . as one who has 'dethroned your True-born English Broadcloth and Kerseys'" (234).

<sup>3</sup> As we might expect, these ideological forms structured poems written by working women no less than they did those written by gentlemen. In her essay on the politics of Mary Collier's work, Donna Landry identifies a similar rhetorical move in *The Three Wise Sentences, from the First Book of Esdras, Chap. III and IV*, the text "published with, and conservative ballast to," the poet's more radical work *The Woman's Labour: An Epistle to Mr. Stephen Duck* (1739). Landry analyzes lines 132–235 as enacting "a displacement of the [poem's own

earlier] discourse of 'Woman' as agent of both production and reproduction, indeed also as chief subject of history. Displaced first, we notice, by 'Man' in his accumulative and imperialist mode, industrious at home or 'wandering' armed abroad in search of 'Booty' (164) to bestow on the woman at home. 'Woman' is thus transposed from material producer to consumer" (119).

<sup>4</sup> The somewhat improbable preposition "on" in the opening line of the poem seems momentarily to project the drama of fishes and cat, of desire, death, and exemplarity, onto the painted sides of the China jar. The confusing use of this trope of aesthetic distance, artistic self-consciousness, and cultural displacement might be the first suggestion that the assured, cavalier tone of the ode need not be read on its own terms. On the China jar, see A. R. Humphreys's fine survey of the effect the trade with the East—China, India, Arabia, Persia—had on literary ethics and aesthetics, architecture and gardening, fashions and hobbies in eighteenth-century England.

<sup>5</sup> Gay's "To a Lady on Her Passion for Old China" (1725) develops the analogy at length: "When I some antique Jar behold, / Or white, or blue, or speck'd with gold, / Vessels so pure, and so refin'd / Appear the types of woman-kind: . . . / How white, how polish'd is their skin, / And valu'd most when only seen! / She who before was highest priz'd / Is for a crack or flaw despis'd" (29–40).

<sup>6</sup> Humphreys sees goldfish as "a sign of the times. They were brought from China in the seventeenth century—whether early or late is disputed. In the eighteenth, still curious and delightful evidence of alien beauty, they were fit presents for a King's mistress—Mme de Pompadour received some as a gift" (19). This last reference finds an echo in the poem under discussion, when the innuendo in the description of Selima as a "favourite" (36) transforms her into another example of female sexual and moral illegitimacy.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Catcott, *The Antiquity and Honourableness of the Practice of Merchandize* (1744), quoted in Landa (222). John Edwards also identifies Tyre with London: Tyre "was deservedly reckon'd the Greatest Mart and Empory of that part of the Universe: Thither was brought the Riches of *Asia*, *Europe*, and *Africa*. In this also Britain resembles her, and was justly stiled by *Charles the Great* the Store-House and Granary of the Western World. The Great City of this our Isle may be call'd the Mart of Nations, as Tyre is, Isai. xxiii. 3" ("That Decay of Trade and Commerce, and Consequently of Wealth, Is the Natural Product and Just Penalty of Vice in a Nation," *Sermons on Special Occasions and Subjects* [London, 1698], qtd. in Landa 221–22).

<sup>8</sup> The "natural" connection between cat and fish is designed to prove the previous question ("What female heart can gold despise?") purely rhetorical. At this point in the poem, however, it is not clear which equation—female-gold or cat-fish—is "natural" and which "rhetorical."

<sup>9</sup> This connection between a woman's death and women's desire is emphasized when the warrior Arruns, who eventually kills Camilla, prays to Apollo for success: "I seek no plunder and no trophy, / no spoils for defeating the maiden—my fame will come to me / from other deeds" (11.790–92).

<sup>10</sup>The last two paragraphs of Lonsdale's translation of Gray's college poem (written in 1737) are:

But I will not be silent about those praises which are mine by right, nor the deeds already predestined, prophesies of our country's reckown. The time will come when you will see whole crowds hastening aloft in a great procession, and the first colonists emigrating to the moon, giving up their familiar hearths; meanwhile, the old inhabitant gazes in astonished silence and from afar descries strange new birds, a flying fleet.

As once Columbus sailed across the watery plains of an unknown sea to see the lands of Zephyr, new realms; so the shores around and the waves look on in wonder at the iron-clad ranks, the regiment of monsters, and gigantic beasts full of armed men, and the inimitable lightning. Soon I see treaties made and traffic between the two worlds, and troops of men gathered under a sky with which they have grown familiar. England, which for so long has held sway over the sea and so often set the winds to work and ruled the waves, will assume the symbols of power in the sky, will bring her wonted triumphs even here and have dominion over the conquered air. (303)

<sup>11</sup>James Steele, in a full and stimulating account of the interrelations between Gray's politics and his poetry, revises certain biographical assumptions about Gray and suggests that Gray, "by virtue of his family background, his wealth, and his wider social and economic connections, was very much a part of the *rentier* stratum of the capitalist ruling class in England. He was in fact a life-long whig, with firm ideas about what constitutes true liberty, and with a partisan's knowledge of its historic roots. He also had an enthusiastic appreciation of the origin and development of the British Empire and strong opinions as to how it might be most efficiently advanced in his own time" (198).

While Steele is obviously right about Gray's class origins and politics, he tends to read Gray's poems as more or less seamless expositions of a "Whig" worldview especially dedicated to the extension of British imperial power and mercantile magnificence. For instance, he correctly says of the ideological scheme of "Luna Habitabilis" that although "war and gunboat diplomacy will provide the means of conquest [of the moon], Gray's justification for such an action is not merely *force majeure* but the superiority of English scientific knowledge. Gray's Muse Luna is also the goddess of astronomy and geometry, and she naturally assumes in a post-Newtonian age that her citizenship is English (l. 79)" (208). However, Steele does not sufficiently notice those occasions in Gray's poems when the suturing of the formal and the ideological, the poetic and the social, is less than smooth, those occasions when Gray's "utopian conclusions" include dystopian themes, when the ideological fantasy fissures under the pressures of the social and historical here and now. Thus "Luna Habitabilis" includes also a powerful vision of the violence of imperial conquest: "the regiment of monsters, and gigantic beasts full of armed men, and the inimitable lightning" that make British power possible.

<sup>12</sup>The general problematic is of the anxieties attendant on the voyeuristic male gaze as it guiltily enjoys the spectacle of female exposure, often as the prelude to enjoying further violence done to that female body. As Edward Snow remarks while discussing the ethical narratives contained in some traditional representations of the biblical Susanna and the Elders (such as Tintoretto's painting), there is a "convention that justifies male voyeuristic desire by aligning it with female narcissistic self-involvement" (38). The depiction of woman's narcissism, then, is meant to attract moral censure and thus to divert attention from (even perhaps to explain and excuse) the scenarios of violation that follow. As Snow suggests, the pleasure of the viewer or reader is "fixed" and rendered complicit through this maneuver.

<sup>13</sup>This essay is for the special committee and community whose comments helped it along: Rick Bogel, Laura Brown, Jonathan Culler, Janadas Devan, Judy Frank, Gerry Heng, and Sam Otter.

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