

GILDON'S GOLDEN SPIES: OR, MINTING REMARKS ON MODERN SOCIETIES

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ABSTRACT

The sub-genre of fiction known as the “novel of circulation” (or the “it-narrative” or “object narrative”), in which inanimate objects and animals come to life to tell tales of their adventures, gained increasing popularity throughout the eighteenth century. The currency trope was a rather common one: in Britain alone, there are 37 recorded titles up to 1900. Often, the lower the face value of the numismatic narrator, the shorter the story. The first so-called novel of this kind was Charles Gildon's *The Golden Spy* (1709). In this book, the unlikely narrators, a French Louis d'or, an English guinea, a Roman crown, and a Spanish pistole, constantly quarrel to defend the greatness of their respective nations. This article aims to examine the complex relationships of both companionship and rivalry between the coins, as well as how concerns and anxieties regarding the general state of affairs were very much similar throughout the courts of Europe.

KEYWORDS: eighteenth century, novel of circulation, satire, Charles Gildon, *The Golden Spy*.

LOS ESPÍAS DE ORO DE GILDON, O IMPRESIONES SOBRE SOCIEDADES MODERNAS

RESUMEN

El subgénero de ficción conocido como novela de circulación (o «narrativa-it» o narrativa de objeto), en el que objetos y animales inanimados cobran vida para contar sus aventuras, ganó popularidad a lo largo del siglo XVIII. El tropo monetario era bastante común: solo en Gran Bretaña, hay 37 títulos registrados hasta 1900. A menudo, cuanto menos valía el narrador numismático, más breve era su historia. La primera novela de este tipo fue *The Golden Spy* (1709), de Charles Gildon. En este libro, los improbables narradores, un luis de oro francés, una guinea inglesa, una corona romana y una pistola española se pelean constantemente para defender la grandeza de sus respectivas naciones. El objetivo de este artículo es examinar la compleja relación entre el compañerismo y la rivalidad entre las monedas, y mostrar cómo las preocupaciones y ansiedades sobre los asuntos de estado en general eran muy similares en las cortes europeas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: siglo XVIII, novela de circulación, sátira, Charles Gildon, *The Golden Spy*.

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In the eighteenth century, the sub-genre of fiction known as the novel of circulation, it-narrative, or object narrative, became increasingly popular. From the early 1700s, there was a proliferation of autobiographies of inanimate objects, such as coins, toys, books, furniture, clothes, utensils, accessories, vehicles, statues, and food, as well as animate beings, like plants and flowers, insects, and animals, such as dogs, cats, horses, birds, and mice –even body parts narrated these stories. “For early eighteenth-century writers, objects challenge[d] subjectivity by blurring the boundaries between thought and thing, self and stuff. This challenge was especially acute because things were everywhere in the early eighteenth century” (Benedict 194).

In fact, the “transmigration of souls from person to thing became a running theme in eighteenth-century literature” (Trentmann, *Empire* 105). This sub-genre of fiction gained increasing popularity that continued well into the nineteenth century, and some forms have even appeared in recent decades.¹ As Trentmann put it: “Things are back” (“Materiality” 283). However, even in the eighteenth century, this literary device was not completely new. As Flint points out: “inanimate storytellers can be traced back to Pythagoras (who describes the oral capacities of rocks and trees) [...]” (“Speaking” 162). These narratives “are prose fictions that take inanimate objects or animals as their central characters, sometimes endowing them with a subjectivity –and thus a narrative perspective– of their own” (Blackwell vii). Indeed, the narrators display self- and other-awareness that is incompatible with the true nature of animals and objects devoid of conscience. It should be noted that these non-human protagonists have no power of decision regarding their whereabouts –they are continuously either lost or found, given away or disposed of, purchased or sold, and condemned or saved throughout their narratives. The narrators “are conveyed from person to person, borne by those who purchase them, exchange them, find them, or steal them, while others transport themselves, circulating to collect and deposit them” (Blackwell vii). It is interesting to note, however, that by consisting of “a transfusion of identity from human to thing” (Lamb, “Modern Metamorphoses” 147), the novels of circulation anthropomorphise while simultaneously reduce human beings to sources of entertainment. In fact, in novels of circulation “the transfer of moral initiative and speech from humans to things coincides almost always with the charge of inhumanity” (Lamb, “Crying” 959). In the case of *The Golden Spy*, “Gildon’s shower-gold establishes the value of its own soul at the expense of the human” (Lamb, *Things* 222).

The currency trope is a rather common one in novels of circulation from this period: in Britain alone, there are 37 recorded titles until 1900,² and often, the less the numismatic narrator is worth, the shorter its story. Some short narratives were

¹ See, for example, *Underworld* (1997), by Don DeLillo, in which the narrator is a baseball, or *Accordion Crimes* (1996), by Annie Proulx.

² As per Bellamy’s list in “It-Narrators and Circulation: Defining a Subgenre” (2014), to which she added four more titles in the index of *British It-Narratives, 1750-1830, Volume 1-Money* (2012).

typically published in magazines or newspapers. Arguably, there is no more fitting narrator for these novels since banknotes and coins are objects of circulation *par excellence* as they continuously exchange owners and functions. As Smith points out in *The Wealth of the Nations*: “[...] the same guinea [that] pays the weekly pension of one man today, may pay that of another tomorrow, and that of a third the day after” (177), so perhaps there is no more appropriate narrator for novels of circulation since they are prime examples of this type of story. The very nature of money means that it can be quickly moved around in a short amount of time, and it holds no prejudice in terms of class, gender, religion, or race. A numismatic narrator, disguised as an inconspicuous object surreptitiously gathering information of both private and public life, makes it a privileged observer of human behaviour, and “[a] fresh coin was a kind of Gazette that published the latest news of the Empire” (Addison, “Dialogues” 159). Furthermore, the fact that gold coins have often undergone numerous metamorphoses, having been different objects at different points in time (such as jewellery), passing along mostly from sinner to sinner is particularly significant, especially if one bears in mind that these satirical tales may also be perceived as cautionary tales to the reader. This realisation is further strengthened by the notion that “[e]ighteenth-century commentators were describing a world they saw as replete with rogues and desperadoes of all kinds [...]” (Bell 9), and the numismatic protagonists not only described but also harshly criticised what they saw as the degradation of society.

Charles Gildon (1665-1724), “a prolific literary hack, who turned his hand to a variety of genres, among them literary criticism, biography, poetry, and drama, including adaptations or imitations of plays [...]” (Beal n.p.), penned “the first, fully fledged it-narrative in English” (Lamb, “Modern” 153). Indeed, Gildon’s work, *The Golden Spy: Or, a Political Journal of the British Nights Entertainments of War and Peace, and Love and Politics: Wherein Are Laid Open, the Secret Miraculous Power and Progress of Gold, in the Courts of Europe. Intermix’d with Delightful Intrigues, Memoirs, Tales, and Adventures, Serious and Comical* (1709),³ “inaugurated a storytelling fad –the speaking object” (Flint, “Speaking” 162). In fact, “*The Golden Spy* extended the trope’s logic of exaggerated mobility, inaugurating what would become the widely imitated inanimate object-narrator, and more specifically, the money-narrator” (Englert 219). Moreover, “[o]nly gold coins, most notably Louis d’or, Spanish pistoles and English guineas, dominated the international commercial activities in this period, while silver coins, copper coins or banknotes were largely confined to domestic circulation” (Wu 245). Gildon’s choice of gold numismatic narrators, the “metal of princes, successful merchants, and the Church” (Connor 86), is particularly noteworthy since it suggests that his satire targets the upper class. It should be noted that “Gildon’s work and the object narratives it inspired [...] are particularly engrossed in textual objectification that their inanimate narrators duplicate” (Flint, *Appearance* 164).

³ Henceforth referred to as *The Golden Spy*.



One of the most popular numismatic narrators was found in Charles Johnstone's four-volume *Chrysal; Or, the Adventures of a Guinea* (1760). A sequel was published in 1764 and it had reached 20 editions by 1800. In the introduction to the 2011 edition of *Chrysal*, Bourque notes that "the 1700s gave rise to a panoply of cultural forms that exploited the noteworthiness of individuals while evading responsibility for naming them directly, carefully tempering celebrity with seeming anonymity" (Johnstone xxv). One year after the publication of *The Golden Spy*, Addison published "Adventures of a Shilling" (1710), which exhibits a much more imperial facet, as the coin has to undergo a cosmetic change so as to be accepted in the empire's metropolis. In Addison's story, the author enters an oneiric-style "delirium" (123) and dreams of a storytelling shilling that came to England as an ingot from Peru in Sir Francis Drake's convoy. Upon its arrival, the first metamorphosis happens as it is "taken out of [...] the Indian habit, refined, naturalized, and put into the British mode, with the face of Queen Elizabeth on one side, and the arms of the country on the other" (Addison, "Adventures" 123). Therefore, the very identity of the precious metal is stripped away, making it no longer an alien by virtue of having had a sort of facelift and disguising its true origins so as to assimilate into the new country. Indeed, as Pasanek observes, "the stamping of coins with the bust of an emperor or with the profile of a king or hero advances associations of character and currency" (51). Notwithstanding the fact that object narrators "seek a unified national identity [...] they are subject to a variety of dislocations that not only disrupt their storytelling but also complicate the meaning of citizenship" (Flint, "Speaking" 162).

By assuming the narrative voice of objects or animals, contemporary writers could write more freely than if they were to assume their own narrative persona, and "voice becomes an agency of moral impetus, when spiritual morbidity is able to be characterised ventriloquially" (Crowe 12). Besides, the speaking object/animal "can move unlimited by class, gender, character development, or social affiliation though diverse spheres of the society" (Lupton, "Knowing Book" 403). Indeed, these narrators are able to explore social systems through various ideological positions from a satirical perspective. Furthermore, the loose form of these narratives "enabled them to combine general social satire and social comment with elements of the *roman à clef* or *chronique scandaleuse* tradition, presenting real characters in a satirical light" (Bellamy, "Novel" 121), "often paint[ing] a grim picture of vice and folly" (Trentmann, *Empire* 105). "Satire," as defined by Johnson, is "a [text] in which wickedness or folly is censured" (4: 222), and one must not forget that

Satire has traditionally had a public function, and its public orientation remains. Although the satirist may arraign God and the universe [...] he usually seems to believe –at least to hope– that change is possible. Personal change, in his view, leads to social change; he insists that bad men make bad societies. He shows us ourselves and our world; he demands that we improve both. And he creates a kind of emotion which moves us toward the desire to change. (Spacks 363)



The moralizing role that the satirist aims to play in society by implementing the Latin maxim “*ridendo castigat mores*” is an important part of *The Golden Spy*’s genesis since Gildon, as a satirist, “demands decisions of his reader, not mere feelings, [hence aiming to arouse the reader’s] energy to action, not purge it in vicarious experience” (Paulson 15). In this sense, Gildon’s work is a prime example of object satire since his “object-narrators can be both parodic versions and satirical observers of human behaviour” (Bellamy, “It-Narrators” 119). The human characters of everyday life depicted in the novels of circulation, with all of their inherent triviality, focus on the lives of not only ordinary people, but of prominent figures as well.⁴ The choice of narrators in *The Golden Spy* reveals new conceptions of knowledge since objects become “the subjects of literature and culture” as subjectivity collapses “into objectivity under the pressure of handling, collecting, owning, stepping around, and feeling things” (Benedict 194).

The reception of these kinds of narratives is rather controversial. A contemporary critic said the following of the literary technique used and the readers of these books:

It is indeed a convenient method to writers of the inferior class, of emptying their commonplace books, and throwing together all the farrago of public transactions, private characters, old and new stories, everything, in short, which they can pick up, to afford a little temporary amusement to an idle reader. (Smollett 477-478)

This claim that the writer is “of the inferior class” places this sub-genre of fiction and its advocates in a challenging situation, as it suggests that mediocre authors (presumably, from Grubb Street⁵) pen mediocre books consisting of little more than the patching together of previous works with little literary integrity. The hack writer of Jonathan Swift’s *A Tale of a Tub* (1704) had already asserted that “whatever word or sentence is printed in a different character shall be judged to contain something either of wit or sublime” (21). Moreover, the characterisation of readers of object satire as “idle” is also indicative of the contempt this critic had for these stories. Similarly, Addison complained about the power of “tasteless Readers”

⁴ It is worth remembering that the human characters of this sub-genre were meant to take a swing at real-life characters. For example, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, after reading Francis Coventry’s *Pompey the Little* (1752), one of the most popular English novels of circulation, wrote the following lines to her daughter: “It is a real and exact representation of Life as it is now acted in London, as it was in my time, and as it will be (I do not doubt) a Hundred years hence, with same little variation of Dress, and perhaps Government. I found there many of my Acquaintance” (Montagu 363). It is significant that Lady Mary Wortley Montagu classifies the portrayal of London’s society as timeless, referring to the past, present, and future, which may suggest she held a less fluid vision of the city’s society.

⁵ “Originally the name of a street near Moor-fields in London, much inhabited by writers of small histories, dictionaries, and temporary poems; whence any mean production is called grubstreet” (Johnson, 3: 798).



in *The Spectator*'s June 19, 1712 edition (384). Other reviews of these kinds of works also focused on their inferior nature, along with the inferiority of their authors:

Adventures of this kind are so hackneyed, that genius itself could scarcely lend them grace, or learning convey to them importance. Neither have any share in this work. All has been told before, in a better manner; and the reflections are trite, and tediously expanded: in short, all the bookmaker's art is exhausted; all the typographer's ingenuity employed, to spin out the meagre materials into a trifling and insipid volume. (Anon, "The Adventures of a Watch" 569).

The reception of this kind of narrative is not the only contentious topic, as this sub-genre of fiction raises several problems of "generic definition," according to Bellamy ("It-Narrators" 117). Some critics emphasise the character of the non-human narrator or protagonist as a defining element, while others highlight that what these works have in common is the fact that the object or animal telling the story passes through several hands. Nonetheless, Bellamy cautions that this is also controversial, concluding that the key features of these narratives are the following: "the first is a narrator that, whether animal, vegetable or manufactured object, lacks independent agency [...] the second [one is] the transference of the narrator or protagonist between otherwise unconnected characters" ("It-Narrators" 121).

It should be mentioned, however, that the denomination "novel of circulation" places the emphasis on the circulation of the narrator, and this in turn reflects the circulation of print culture itself and contemporary anxieties about the commerce of objects and books (Flint, "Speaking" 174-175). Denominations for these narrators include "eccentric-narrator," "it-narrator," and "circulating protagonist" (Englert 221). I choose to refer to works of this sub-genre as "novels of circulation" because their non-human narrators tell their tales as they circulate (or have circulated) in both distinct physical and social spaces. Furthermore, it should be noted that "[t]hings thus presented early eighteenth-century writers with a paradox: they connected identity to the material world, but they also threatened to usurp literary discourse" (Benedict 194). Classifications aside, these texts have received a great deal of attention and "have become particularly interesting as commentaries on new forms of subjectivity, imperial commerce, and the new world of commodities" (Downie 253). Moreover, their satiric vision of the world can certainly be an enticing line of study for scholars, especially when considering the reviews of such works at the time of their publication, whether good or bad. Literary criticisms of novels of circulation

focused on their limited generic, moral, or commercial function, often connecting them to British Imperialism. [...] More recently, scholars have linked [these] tales to broader economic, social and political issues, situating commodities in a complex signifying field that challenges international distinctions and complicates both nationhood and the public sphere. (Flint, "Speaking" 167)

It should be remembered, however, that "the fragmentation of transit at a moment when disciplined, systematic travel was starting to dominate (Ewers 101)"



is a central aspect of the novel of circulation since it revolves around fortuitous encounters between objects/animals and people they find while in transit:

The readiness to center fiction on moving goods –and indeed on property that repeatedly ceases to be *personal* but which instead [...] resumes its habit of circulation is not really a violation of the premise that novels ought to trade on objects of *human* interest. Better to consider it testimony to the gusto with which the novel throughout the eighteenth century defined itself as a machine for social interconnection and reflected on the marketability permitting it to fulfil that role. (Lynch 140)

Additionally, it is important to address the question of authorship since authors and narrators are separate entities in novels of circulation. *The Golden Spy* was published anonymously, and in the preface, Gildon poses as a bookseller whose customers are found in both the public and private spheres, such as “White’s Chocolate House, Tom’s and Will’s Coffee House, and the Temple [...] the Court, the Great Man’s Studies, and the Ladies’ Closets” (Gildon A3-A4). The fact that Gildon chose to pose as a bookseller is significant because there was much instability in the printing business at the time that *The Golden Spy* was written. Therefore, it follows that “[t]he speaking object figures the author’s position in a print culture in explicit (though not always systematic) ways, echoing Gildon’s claim that the author is both rewarded and threatened by the opportunities of print” (Flint, “Speaking” 163). Indeed, Gildon seems more concerned with the material consequences than with the intellectual significance of authorship (Flint, “Speaking” 163).

Ross argues that the eighteenth century epitomised a “swivel moment” (236) as “print becomes the cause of authority rather than merely its effect” (245). The Copyright Act of 1710, also known as “The Statute of Anne,” ascribed rights to authors instead of printers, representing an “Act for the Encouragement of Learning, by Vesting the Copies of Printed Books in the Authors or Purchasers of Such Copies During the Times Therein Mentioned” (full title), and signified “the divorce of copyright from censorship and the reestablishment of copyright under the rubric of property rather than regulation” (Rose 48). This act did manage to “bring stability to an insecure book trade” (Deazley 13) while simultaneously establishing “an entirely pragmatic bargain involving the author, the bookseller and the public” (Deazley 14), which, as stated in the preamble, aimed at the encouragement of public learning and to make knowledge more available and accessible. However, its shortcomings and omissions caused some apprehension, since it confused as much as clarified issues of literary intellectual property. The unprecedented development of bookselling and publishing in the eighteenth century was symptomatic of “the burgeoning material culture of the period, driven in large part by the wealth of the middling classes and their pursuit of cultured past-times” (White n.p.). The case of Charles Gildon’s works, Flint argues, “not only demonstrates that authorship, reading, and book-making interpenetrate at crucial moments in a text’s various incarnations, but also complicates the writer’s corresponding claims to intellectual property and social status” (*Appearance* 62).



Despite not having “the immediate relevance of a more political satire” (Orr, Location no. 4106), *The Golden Spy* provides invaluable information about its time. In Gildon’s book, the “narrators” are several coins that circulate through all social ranks, recounting sensational and scandalous events. Through Gildon’s work, we follow the adventures of a Louis d’or, a guinea, a Roman crown, and a Spanish pistole that constantly quarrel to defend the greatness of their respective nations of origin. And in this sense, as with spy novels, “[t]he action is self-evidently political since it involves national rivalries and constantly veers towards a paranoid vision of ‘violation by *outside* agencies’ and ‘violation of individual autonomy by *internal* agencies’” (Seed 115).⁶ Indeed, “[t]his internationalism both widens the boundaries of the cultural realm and indicates that national bias, competing languages, and imported ideologies continually disrupted sites of public discourse in Britain” (Flint, *Appearance* 177). The human interlocutor who puts the coins’ stories to paper acts as a mediator somewhat, but one might consider him as also playing a censoring role since the tales the coins tell are sometimes so unflattering (to say the least) to humanity that they had to be edited “for fear the Sense of Things should destroy all Confidence betwixt Man and Man, and so put an End to Human Society” (Gildon 116).

These “golden spies” come to life not only to share their experiences but also to pass judgement on all that they have witnessed. A close reading shows the similarities, but also the differences, between the eighteenth-century European courts –particularly those of London, Rome, and Versailles– as narrated by the coins. Interestingly enough, apart from defending the superiority of its country above all others, the Spanish pistole mostly remains silent. The coins take turns narrating their experiences in several courts and across several eras. The “animated coin[s] spin[-] tales of human degradation, [their] consciousness explained through a satiric discussion of materialistic ideas familiar in the Restoration period” (Nowka, “Talking” 197). The unlikely narrators, a Louis d’or, a guinea, a Roman crown, and a Spanish pistole, accomplish “most of [their] greatest Exploits in the dark” (Gildon 7), inconspicuously acting as spies, unveiling a “particular Mark of [...] Excellence so invisible to human Eyes” (Gildon 30). It should also be noted that

[b]y multiplying the number of ‘spies’, choosing as spies objects likely to be frequently exchanged, and giving those objects different national stamps and thus distinct spheres of circulation, Gildon was able to generate an even more comprehensive narrative mechanism for assembling the varied stories of characters from across Europe. (Blackwell xi)

As Johnson defined it, a spy was “one sent to watch the conduct or motions of others; one sent to gain intelligence in an enemy’s camp or country” (Vol. 4 502). It is interesting to note that “[s]py” is a very frequent word in the literary production

⁶ In this quote, David Seed cites Clive Bloom’s “Introduction” to *Spy Thrillers: From Buchan to le Carré*.



of the eighteenth century. A bibliographical query on the English Short Title Catalogue of the British Library in the time interval between 1700 and 1799 clearly reveals its extensive use” (Mattana 125). It should be noted, however, that “[t]he status of the spy’s disinterestedness took off [...] even as the motif of spying collapsed into that of innocuous voyeurism [...], [as with] Charles Gildon” (Backscheider & Ingrassia 59). The fact that “Gildon was able to unite the sinister ethnography of the spy [...] with the quality of the marvelous [...]” (Lamb, *Things* 204) is of particular relevance since he could criticise the current state of affairs, protected by using an inanimate narrative persona. Furthermore, it is significant that this work was first published anonymously.

The Golden Spy is not a cohesive work of fiction but rather a collection of tales of political and social satire, consistent with the sub-genre, taking “the episodic, fragmented world of circulation to its logical extreme, choosing objects of mobility and exchange as witness to events” (Ewers 101), such as a handful of coins, in this case. The book opens with “The Epistle Nuncupatory, to the Author of *A Tale of a Tub*,” which might suggest that Gildon recognises Jonathan’s Swift “conflation of story, object, and author [as] a conceptual foundation for later narratives” (Flint, “Speaking” 166). The following chapter, “The Introduction, or The First Nights Entertainment,” is dedicated to the “Power and Progress of Gold,” and notes that “there is no place so strong, or guarded with that Vigilance, to which Gold will not gain admittance and bring to a Surrender sooner, and with more Safety, than the Batteries of Cannon, and the Valour of Heroes” (Gildon 8). The power of gold is considered supreme. These “spies” may be perceived as a metonym for gold, an instrumental factor in isolating those who have it from those who do not. The coins “tell the human narrator what they have learned about the power of money in various scenes of life, from the court to gaming houses, and from love intrigues to the ‘reformation of manners’ movement in London” (Nowka, “Reason” 191).

The next chapter, “The Second Nights Entertainment,” addresses “The Court; or, the Male and Female Favourites” (Gildon 38), which offers myriad tales of women who capitalise on their beauty to manipulate men to their own benefit. The Roman crown narrates “[t]he History of Donna Olympia, sister-in-law and favourite of Pope Innocent X” (Gildon 49) and her power over not only Innocent X but also Urban VIII. On this topic, the guinea shares the story of “The English Female Favourite” (Gildon 79), who was the mistress of Edward III, “[a] Prince who for many years made a most glorious figure in the World [...] yet in his declining Years a Lady had the good Fortune to captivate his Heart, in so powerful a degree, as to sully his past Glories” (Gildon 79). The Louis d’or also recounts several tales of deviant women who manipulated powerful men to advance their positions and seek their fortunes, with perhaps the most famous being the liaison between Louis XIV and Madame de Montespan.

For the most part, the stories that the coins tell depict women as cunning and men, more often than not, as their unsuspecting victims: “a Whore has no Thoughts but to her herself, her own Interest, or her Pleasure; for when a Woman has once forsaken the Rules of Virtue, she has nothing to retain her within any



Bounds” (Gildon 207). However, the guinea distinguishes the English courtiers from their French and Italian counterparts thusly:

Here the Courtier or Favourite has a harder part to play to come off with Credit and Success, than in *Italy* or *France*, where they need only the Art to wheedle and impose on the Prince, and they are masters of their Desires. But here the Courtier, Statesman or Favourite must have as careful an Eye to the Good-will of the People, as to the favour of the Sovereigns, or their Prosperity will be of a very short date. (Gildon 77)

“The Third Nights Entertainment” is devoted to “Gaming,” as indicated in its subtitle (Gildon 113). The author, feeling horrified by the tales of Italy and France, privately asks the guinea: “since we are alone, pray be candid, and set my Judgement right in this Particular; Is not our Court always free from those Villainies of the first magnitude, which are so well known to prevail in all other Courts?” (Gildon 114). But the answer is predictably un reassuring: “I am willing to believe this Incredulity, from the charitable Opinion you have of your Countryman, imagining them free from all the Vices of other Nation: But that is a very great Mistake [...]” (Gildon 115). However, it is conceded that the English have a generally less aggressive temper: “The *English* it’s true, seldom make so little of Murder in their Revenge as the *Spanish* or *Italian*, but then they find to the full as small a Concern in the public Depredations as any country in *Christendom*” (Gildon 115).

A common vice described by the coins is that of gambling, as pointed out in this chapter’s subtitle. Unsurprisingly, the Louis d’or blames others for the French people’s shortcomings: “*Gaming*, which like other Vices has passed the *Alps* from *Italy* to *France*, and there has produced as many fatal Proofs of its Mischief as in most places where it reigns” (Gildon 125). The guinea criticises the practice, but places the blame on legislators: “I wonder why [Parliament] don’t put a stop to that Evil that may ruin their Sons, debauch their Wives and Daughters, and render their Families infamous” (Gildon 170). Several stories depicting the ill effects of gambling and strongly condemning it underline that this was a problem common to most nations. Numerous public establishments popular for gaming are mentioned and the guinea concludes its story on this topic with a note of caution: “Though there be a thousand Tricks in the Play between Man and Man, yet that Between Man and Woman is ten times more hazardous” (Gildon 159). Indeed, gambling was especially dangerous for a woman because she had only her body and honour to use to back the stakes. By gambling, a man might place his family, friends, property, job, and position in society at risk, but the stakes were much higher for a woman because the only “real” property she had to risk was her body (Assassi 95). The meaning of debt was very different for a woman since it inevitably implicated her sexual honour as the “specie” with which she had to trade. In fact, gaming by women was a volatile combination of flirtation and self-exposure, often becoming a sexualised activity, since well-born women gambled just as recklessly as men, as much to alleviate the tediousness of their lives as in the vain hope of growing even richer.

By the end of the eighteenth century, gambling had become a generalised obsession as everyone was drawn to the gaming table, and there were plenty of



options—from high society’s exclusive clubs to gaming houses for the lower classes. The newspapers and pamphlets of the age reflected society’s growing concerns over gambling and the added hazards brought about by cheating.

The next chapter, “The Fourth Nights Entertainment, of Love Intrigues” includes the premise that “Man differs more from Man, than Man from Beast” (Gildon 147), which is a very harsh comparison in terms. A number of tales of sexual lewdness are told in this chapter, with most featuring prostitutes. However, part of the blame for this is placed on legislators, highlighting the gendered and social double standards imposed on poor women: “[...] instead of our Reformers falling on the poor Whores who take up with Half a-Crown, they should search into these Scoundrels, that Revenge the Whores Quarrel on their Wives and Daughters” (Gildon 327). The hypocrisy of looking the other way when the female prevaricators are wealthy courtesans or adulterers, either because their wealth can procure a bribe or their lover is a man of influence in society, is also highlighted.

“The Fifth Nights Entertainment, of Godly and Reformers” addresses the clergy, and all of the coins are harsh when referring to this class. The guinea says: “In my Travels through England I have not escaped the Gripe of the *Godly*, where I have made notable Discoveries of their Hypocrisy; for while their Pretences would raise them above Men, their Practices lays them lower than the Wickedness of Devils” (Gildon 11). The godly class fares no better in France: “I have been too often in the Coffers of the Clergy, and many times in their Studies and Closets, which has brought me thoroughly acquainted with their Vicious Inclinations, Irreligion, Hypocrisy, Cruelty, Ambition, Avarice and Pride” (Gildon 9-10). The Roman crown follows suit, considering that “*Alexander* the sixth [...] was all Imposter, and applied his whole Study and Exercise in all Arts of Fraud and Malice” (Gildon 47).

The closing chapter, “The Sixth Nights Entertainment, of Peace and War, or, the Trade of the Camp,” focuses on military corruption, as the Roman crown observes: “This is the State of our Spiritual Warfare, where the Opposites being Immortal, and the Ammunition Imaginary, the Conceit is Perpetual, in which every one gets but the Devil: For the *Romans* get Peasant Sins, and the Pope gets their Money for his Pardons [...]” (Gildon 287). Undoubtedly, the Louis d’or dominates this exchange, admitting that “[...] no Man was so good as a *Louis d’Ore*, so that on any demand of Men by these fighting Generals, the Council of the King consulted how many of us were fit to be employ’ed in such an Expedition; if the Sum prove too little, Additions were made, and Success always reached” (Gildon 290-291).

It is interesting to note that the coins do not just tell their stories to the author. In a style reminiscent of the lively conversations (and debates) held at coffee houses and in salons, they quarrel quite often—usually about the greatness of their respective nations. Perhaps one of their most amusing exchanges is the following:

For there was a *Guinea*, a *Spanish Pistole*, a *Roman Crown*, and my little *Louis d’Ore* engaged in a deep dispute, in which, as the Terms went very high, so neither would yield to the other the pre-eminence, or even allow an Equality of Merit either in War or Peace.



But the most positive in this, was my little *Louis d'Ore*, who made extravagant Encomiums on those many Advantages that *France* has over other Nations; the Politeness of its Natives, and the Valour and Conduct of its King.

[...] he was interrupted by the *Spanish Pistole*, and with that Air of Haughtiness which is so natural to the *Spaniard*, said, that all other Nations were but the sweepings of the *Spanish Monarchy*; the supreme Lord of which was designed by Nature for the Empire of the World, and having already the title of *most Catholic*.

A bare Name and an empty Title, interrupted the *Roman Crown*, is of little importance without something more substantial to support it. But you must own (continued he) that all Nations submit to ours, for what we had in the Time of the old Romans by the Sword, we now maintain by the power of the *Keys*; the greatest Kings and Princes of *Europe* still paying their duty to Rome.

Not so fast, (said the *Guinea*) that time is now past, for Kings are no longer the Bubbles of the Pope; and since the days of our good King *Henry*, his Holiness has been taught, that the Subjection of other Princes is very precarious. But if conscious Worth may have leave to boast, what Nation can compare with the *English*, who are not content to be rich and free themselves when almost all the world is in Slavery, but extend their Power to the Relief of the distressed on the Continent. (Gildon 39-40)

The coins' occasional soliloquies express their personal feelings and thoughts through which they (and, by extension, Gildon) present their own vision of the world to the readers. Their assertion that they are "like the *Materia Subtilis*, the wonderful Effects of which are reveal'd by Time and Experience, tho' it entirely fly the cognizance of all the Senses" (Gildon 29), indicates that they speak from a position of authority. Furthermore, "the presence of these narrators as critical outsiders, unable to intervene in the scenes they relate, recalls the scenes in which powerless readers are represented within self-conscious novels" (Lupton, *Knowing* 42).

It is generally agreed that the protagonists of novels of circulation, by definition, must circulate –in both social and physical senses. However, such characteristics prove insufficient when considering the work of the unknown author of *Memoirs of the Shakespear's-Head in Covent Garden. In Which Are Introduced Many Entertaining Adventures, and Several Remarkable Characters. By the Ghost of Shakespeare* (1755),⁷ for example, which does not fit the profile because the static

⁷ This title appears in several catalogues from 1777. Henry Sotheran lists the work in his *A Catalogue of several Libraries and parcels of books*, etc., commencing Monday, July 14, 1777 (102), as do Ralph and George Edward Griffiths in *A Compleat Catalogue of All Books and Pamphlets Published for Ten Years Past, With Their Prices and References to Their Characters in the Monthly Review*, for the period between May 1749 to June 1759 (73). *A General Index to the Monthly Review from its Commencement to the Seventieth Volume* (1785), by S. Ayscough, who was Compiler of the Catalogue of undescribed Manuscripts in the British Museum, also mentions the title (509), as does R.P. More's 1815 *Catalogue of Moore's Subscription Library* (35). The 1827 *A catalogue of the theatrical and miscellaneous library of Mr. John Field, Bibliotheca Histrionica*, also includes the work (80). Similarly, there are mentions to *Memoirs of a Shakespeare Head in Covent Garden* in Henry George Bohn's *The Biography and Bibliography of Shakespeare*, published in 1863 (2316), and William Thomas Lowndes'



narrator (i.e. the Ghost of Shakespeare) is always in the same place, and the characters who revolve around it are the ones who narrate the stories of circulation. So, while there is circulation, it is of the characters, not of the narrator.

Similarly, Gildon's coins circulate no more, having lost their "agreeable Quality, which is only maintain'd by an absolute Freedom of circulating with the Sun about the World, where [they] make far greater Discoveries than that glorious Planet" (Gildon 7), as the author becomes attached to –and even enamoured by– his "golden spies" and cannot bear to part with them. This raises a number of questions about numismatic narrators' free will, since they have the freedom to tell all the stories they wish, but they have no power to choose into whose hands they fall or where they will eventually end up. Although "[they] are given perceptions, and thoughts, and voices, they are not given agency or the ability to move about like their human counterparts in eighteenth-century fiction" (Nowka, "Object" 847).

It should be noted that "[t]he value [the] owners attribute to their possessions is affective rather than economic: object and owner love one another for their virtues rather than their monetary worth" (Festa 324). The author's attachment to the coins does appear to be emotional, and some critics (Flint, *Appearance* 178) have even suggested there is an erotic component to this relationship since every evening the author rushes home, locks the door of his chamber, puts on his nightgown, gets into bed, and picks up his "bedfellows," holding them close to his ear and even giving them hugs and kisses (Gildon 6). Gildon even uses the pronoun "he" to refer to each coin, since "for after what passed betwixt us I may, with the Grammarians leave, call it He" (Gildon 6). This choice of gender is significant, hinting at the notion that the commanding force was of a male origin. It is nonetheless interesting to remember that a great deal of the circulating animals/objects were, in fact, the property of women, and moreover, that the consumer boom of the eighteenth century was owed in no small part to the pursuit of luxury by the women of the elite. By using the pronoun "he" and anthropomorphising them, Gildon places his coins in the human realm: "[...] the former Noise began to assume a Tone of the Humane Voice" (Gildon 4).

At the beginning of the book, the author is shocked at first but is soon delighted to discover that a handful of coins have the ability to speak and are keen to reveal what they have seen and learned as they have circulated around the world and through all social ranks. Indeed, the author had just been thinking as he laid in bed of "what noble and diverting Discoveries might be made, could any of the

The Bibliographer's Manual of English Literature Containing an Account of Rare, Curious, and Useful Books, Published in Or Relating to Great Britain and Ireland, published in 1864 (also 2316). This last reference is a new edition, revised, corrected and enlarged by Henry George Bohn, the same author who penned *The Biography and Bibliography of Shakespeare* (1863), and which includes exactly the same entry. Finally, Samuel Austin Allibone's *A critical dictionary of English literature and British and American authors, living and deceased, from the earliest accounts to the latter half of the nineteenth century*, published in 1870 (n.p.), also includes the title. All of these mentions above do not include its author. However, Dan Cruickshank, in his *London's Sinful Secret* (2009) attributes the book to Samuel Derrick (615).



Louis d'Ore's or Guineas reveal by discourse what Affairs they have negotiated, and those secret Intrigues, which have produc'd strange and terrible Effects in Kingdoms, and Families" (Gildon 3), and therefore he was "agreeably surpriz'd [...] with the humming noise like one struggling to speak, or not awake enough to give his Words their true Articulation [...]" (Gildon 3).

As Nowka points out: "Gildon's novel uses the figure of the coins to embody satirically the materialistic hypothesis" ("Talking" 204). Sure enough, the story opens with the author's reflection on the power of gold: "Were it not a receiv'd Maxim, that nothing is more Powerful than Gold, in War, and Peace; in Courts, and Camps; in Church, and State, with the Great and the Fair [...]" (Gildon 3).

The guinea, the Spanish pistole, the Roman crown, and the Louis d'or tell stories of human depravity that are common to all social classes, showing that the love of gold and therefore of power is not unique to a single country or era. The Louis d'or is the first to speak, followed by the Roman crown. Only then does the guinea come forward. Except on one single occasion, when the Spanish pistole speaks with an "Air of Haughtiness" (Gildon 139), this coin remains silent, which seems a very atypical behaviour for a Spanish character. The longstanding rivalry between England and Spain had been well-documented even before the defeat of the Invincible Armada in 1588, and the Anglo-Spanish War (1585-1604), a recurrent conflict between these countries, had come to an end five years before the publication of *The Golden Spy*.

Interestingly enough, the French coin has plenty to say about the depravity of the English—even more so than the guinea. This realisation is further complicated by the author's special fondness for the Louis d'or, calling him "my little Louis d'Ore" (Gildon 39) and lavishing this coin with particular affection: "I took him up in my Hand, gave him a thousand kisses, and hugging him close in my Bosom, full of Pleasure [...]" (Gildon 6).

These "golden spies" are very well-acquainted with all social echelons. The Louis d'or "[has been] in every Station of Life, from the *Prince* to the *Peasant*, and can unfold all the Mysteries of Iniquity, that in all Nations have always enriched Knaves, imposed on Fools, and baffled Men of Sense" (Gildon 14), and it professes to "know the Transactions in all the Climates of *Europe*, and Ages of the World, in War and Peace, in Love and Politics" (Gildon 14). The guinea and the Roman crown also assert their authority on all courts and ages, having experienced life first-hand in different places and times.

The worst criticism of England seems to come from the French coin. Regarding the country's political class, the following account is given: "I have been of all Parties and Factions, and am perfectly acquainted with all their Rogueries; their sham Pretences to the Good of the Public, to bubble the people into their measures, for their own private Interest and Advantage" (Gildon 12), adding: "I can teach you the Art of bribing Parliaments and public Assemblies, who, drunk with this *Aurum* potable, disembugue the Rights of the People while they vote against Arbitrary Power, and boast of *Magna Carta*" (Gildon 12). The Louis d'or is not any kinder when reflecting upon the English justice system: "I can inform you in the



Art of making a *bad* Cause *good*, before a Judge that weights the *Merit* of Plaintiff and Defendant by ounces of Gold, not Witness or Right” (Gildon 12).

Still, according to the guinea, a major shortcoming of its home country is its neglect of the arts:

And it is remarkable, that the two great Courts of Concourse, the Rivals of the *English* Court, I mean *Rome* and *Versailles*, have each had their Time in encouraging the finer Arts and Sciences, such as *Painting*, *Poetry*, *Eloquence*, *Music*, &c, but the *English Court* has never yet thought it worth its while to encourage Men of Art. (Gildon 115)

This statement is rather curious since the English Restoration represented a remarkable change in society through the renewed interest in the arts and science, mainly through patronage –a major characteristic of this period.

Regardless of their origins, all the coins narrate similar tales of humanity’s common vices throughout time, fuelled by a penchant for gold. When considering novels of circulation, one must keep in mind their satirical outlook on human mores, which, more often than not, blurs the line between fact and fiction. Moreover, one must also remember that these satirical tales may also function as words of caution to the reader, warning them of the pernicious effects of their dissolute conduct. History repeats itself, and Gildon’s coins indicate that we have learned nothing from the experiences of previous centuries:

Men were always the same in their Desires, in their Sins, in their Follies, and not very different in their Knowledge; if one Age lost it, the succeeding ones revived it, and though with little variation from what was before, yet the Reviver has challenged the Honour of Discovery. (Gildon 276)

Contrary to assumptions (that through the juxtaposing of stories narrated by coins of different nationalities, the aim would be to assert the superiority of one nation through a nationalist discourse that would convince the reader of that particular nation’s superiority over all others), we find in *The Golden Spy* a discourse that somewhat seems to aim at discovering which nation is most inferior. As Wu observes:

Four transnational coins –the Louis d’or, English guinea, Roman crown and Spanish pistole– are indeed deployed to diversify the tales in his book and to create a salon-like atmosphere in which every coin can freely share its opinions on a particular topic. Yet they are endowed with a more vital polemical purpose, namely, to demonstrate that, so far as moral depravity is concerned, England is the same as its two arch-enemies, France and the Roman Catholic Church. (246)

In Gildon’s book, the coins constantly push the boundaries of companionship by continuously engaging in passionate discussions; however, it is noticeable that they relish their humorous exchanges and ultimately enjoy each other’s company. Not forsaking their status as arch-rivals, the coins nonetheless make it apparent that they are united in a sort of “fellowship of the mint,” and it is their duty to bear witness



to all that they have seen. The topics they address and their underlying concerns do not change much over the centuries. Indeed, anxiety over questions of identity (as defined by nationality) and concerns regarding addictions (whether to gambling or alcohol) and more broadly destructive behaviour in general persist even to this day.

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