Getting a Taste of the Other: The Eighteenth-Century British Novel as the Epitome of Masquerade

LAURA BARRIO-VILAR
UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY

Mediante el análisis de Moll Flanders *de Daniel Defoe, se argumenta que el nacimiento de la novela en las Islas Británicas se definiría por el carácter híbrido y dinámico de un género en búsqueda de su identidad literaria. Esto le permite configurar un imaginario colectivo en el que el público lector asume el poder y la capacidad de subvertir simbólicamente las restricciones sociales al nivel de la lectura. La inversión carnavalesca, según la definición de Mijail Bajtín, se manifiesta en la novela inglesa del siglo XVIII a través del recurso de la «mascarada», tanto en su sentido de género espectacular como en su sentido figurado de transgresión, lo que dota al género narrativo de un discurso de oposición accesible a un amplio espectro de la sociedad. Por esta razón, se explicaría el rechazo inicial hacia esta forma literaria emergente por parte del estamento literario y cultural.*

1. Introduction

The eighteenth century saw the proliferation and consolidation of two unlicensed forms of entertainment –the masquerade and the novel– whose symbolic potential for social and cultural reform generated numerous critiques attacking their scandalous nature, but never truly undermining their popularity. In her ground-breaking work, *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnivalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction*, Terry Castle (1986: 2) points out the cultural and political significance of the eighteenth-century masquerade as «a highly visible institution and a highly charged image –a social phenomenon of expansive proportions and cultural sign of considerable potency». Throughout the century, the popularity and visibility of the masquerade ran parallel to those of the novel, whose reading public increased every year thanks to the widespread availability of the novel that the new publishing industry and institutions such as the circulating library afforded.

Castle (1986) characterizes the masquerade as a «rebellious ritual», following Victor Turner's (in Castle, 1986: 86) definition of the concept, referring to «any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms, be they linguistic, literary, artistic, religious, or social and political». Given the number of similarities between masquerade and novel, which I will explore later in this paper, I argue that both constitute a rebellious ritual, following similar conceptual transgressions that have not been thoroughly

explored in the case of the novel. The purpose of this paper will be, then, to establish a comparison between the eighteenth-century masquerade and novel, grounded on Castle's theory of the masquerade. By reading the eighteenth-century British novel as a masquerade, working on different levels of complexity, I seek to underscore the novel's symbolic potential for transformation and disruption of the social order and cultural codes that constrain the middle and lower classes. The idea of psychological freedom and momentary self-transcendence that the novel grants to all its participants –characters, writers, and readers– will be, then, fundamental to my argument.

Eighteenth-century critics considered masquerades synonymous with scandal, frivolity, eroticism, promiscuity, and moral duplicity. This form of counterculture, however anarchic and immoral it might have seemed to its detractors, provided masqueraders with the necessary psychological release and freedom to act out their individual and collective cultural fantasies of the Other. According to Castle (1986: 4-5),

> The masked assemblies of the eighteenth century were in the deepest sense a kind of collective meditation on self and other, and an exploration of their mysterious dialectic. […] One became the other in an act of ecstatic impersonation. The true self remained elusive and inaccessible –illegible– within its fantastical encasements. […] The pleasure of the masquerade attended on the experience of doubleness, the alienation of inner from outer, a fantasy of two bodies simultaneously and thrillingly present, self and other together, the two-in-one.

Castle thus highlights the subversiveness of this popular form of entertainment, given its constant transgression of cultural categories through the use of masks and costumes. Furthermore, the symbolic space of the masquerade provided its participants with momentary freedom from «every social, erotic and psychological constraint» (Castle, 1986: 53). Castle (1986: 55) underscores the symbolic potential of the masquerade derived from the safe environment in which the masqueraders openly interact with each other: «by ensuring anonymity, […] [masquerades] promoted a kind of group "Liberty", a psychological release». Masks, costumes, and disguised voices helped masqueraders conceal their true self and safely perform / live the experience of the Other represented by their costume.

As a result of the eighteenth-century writers' fascination with the exploration of human nature and social differences, especially the Other, the novel also became a symbolic masquerade where not only individuals of various socio-economic classes interacted with each other, but audiences of all classes participated in such interactions, identifying with whatever rank, gender, and ideology they desired. Thus, readers from the lower classes could satisfy their curiosity about the upper classes, the rich and the famous: a social experience of which they could never be fully a part especially due to the rigidity of socio-economic hierarchies. Likewise, the upper class could satisfy their curiosity about the lower classes without ever having actual physical contact with them. The novel, like the masquerade, allowed them the possibility of experiencing the lower-class «adventurous» lives that social decorum would have otherwise forbidden.

2. Anti-Masquerade and Anti-Novel Rhetoric

The aura of immorality, corruption, and promiscuity, together with the violation of conventional roles associated with both the masquerade and the novel, made these two forms of popular entertainment the main focus of critical discussion. The anti-masquerade and anti-novel rhetoric developed in the eighteenth century presented remarkable resemblances. Despite its enormous popularity as a means of collective entertainment in urban England, cultural and moral authorities denounced the masquerade as «a foolish, irrational, and corrupt activity perpetrated by irresponsible people of fashion» (Castle, 1986: 2). Unlike the theater, the carnivalesque performance was neither scripted nor did it consist of actors on stage addressing a particular audience. All masqueraders interacted with each other, disregarding their actual rank, gender, sexuality, and race, among other defining categories. This sense of liberty and its subsequent erasure of social boundaries destroyed the inhibitions of masqueraders, who temporarily experimented with lifestyles different from their own. For example, women dressed as men; prostitutes masked as queens; heterosexuals had homoerotic or homosexual encounters; and inexperienced young women had sexual intercourse. Consequently, not only was the masquerade surrounded by an aura of criminality and impropriety, but also «going to a masquerade is equated with the sexual act itself» (Castle, 1986: 43). Masquerading constituted a dangerous, purposeless frivolity embedded in chaos.

The same sense of instability and fluidity stemming from masquerades was the focus of the anti-novel discourse. As a genre, the novel was in its first stages of development in the eighteenth century. It had not been critically defined, and it lacked a solid artistic tradition. The novel's form and style had not been concretized and no corpus of critical theory about it had been developed. Novels were neither poetry, nor theater; neither fable, nor history. Their permeability as a genre was too disruptive for the intellectual authorities, who took all these characteristics as a sign of illegitimacy. Moreover, the novel was condemned not only because reading it did not seem to require much intellectual effort (after all, the increase of literacy made them available even to the lower classes), but also because writing novels seemed to be an easy task (even women, supposedly devoid of «true» intellectual and artistic skills, could produce them).

The eighteenth-century novel, like the masquerade, was a corruptive form of entertainment available to individuals of all backgrounds. Circulating libraries allowed easy access to these pernicious works of fiction, which could mislead and seduce innocent and inexperienced readers, especially young women. The popularity of the novel among the middle and lower classes preoccupied cultural and religious authorities, who made the novel, its readers, and its writers the target of their continuous attacks. According to John T. Taylor (1943: 1), the anti-novel rhetoric focused on two types of critique: 1) «the moral judgments imposed upon the novel by a middle-class conception of conduct and practical morality», and 2) «warnings of critics and moralists who considered any wide reading by the lower orders to be inconsistent with their life of manual labor». Critics considered novel readers mindless automata: they did not consume novels because they wanted to cultivate their intellectual capacities; they read only for the sake of being entertained.

Since the critics' assumption was that readers eagerly consumed and passively processed the stories, as William B. Warner (1998: 5) puts it, «The power and danger of novels, especially to young women not exposed to classical education, arise from the pleasures novels induce». Novels distracted readers' attention from serious reading and proper cultivation of their intellect; they exposed readers to intense emotions and improper behavior; and they tempted the youth into challenging parental authority (as illustrated by the rebellious protagonist in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747-48), who challenges her parents' authority by refusing to marry the clumsy Mr. Solmes, for example). In «On Fable and Romance» (1783), James Beattie (in Taylor, 1943: 105) censures all fiction reading, including novels, for it «withdraws the attention from nature, and truth; and fills the mind with extravagant thoughts, and too often with criminal propensities». The subversive and misleading nature of the novel marked the genre's reputation from the mid-seventeenth to early nineteenth century. In 1804, for instance, the *Miniature* still referred to the novel as «a descriptive manual of speculative debauchery, with infallible rules for reducing it into practice» (in Taylor, 1943: 54).

Concerned by the effects of novel reading on readers, critics targeted especially the most «vulnerable», presumably women, who constituted a large part of the novel's readership. However, behind their expressed worries about the effects that novel reading could bring to women's individual reputations lay the critics' main anxiety about the possible destabilization of social hierarchies and authority. As Cheryl Turner (in Warner, 1998: 141) points out: «women's leisure reading, as evidenced by circulating library use, upset those who wanted women doing useful domestic or commercial work». Novels could ruin young women's reputation, as well as provoke their dissatisfaction with their life aspirations, for the genre «affectionately depicted the power of love as sufficient for transcending class barriers» (Taylor, 1943: 65). Nevertheless, as John T. Taylor (1943: 73) argues,

> Novels were condemned as having greater influence than merely inspiring extravagant notions or providing a romantic code of conduct for lovers. They became actual textbooks which furnished specific arguments to justify unusual behavior, and young ladies grew amusingly efficient in citing these works wherever the occasion arose.

Like the masquerade, novels definitely became the most detrimental source of entertainment, especially for women.

In addition to the threat female readers could potentially pose to gender and power hierarchies, the erosion of class boundaries caused great uneasiness among cultural authorities. Because the novel became a point of contact for different classes both inside (among the characters) and outside (characters and readers; authors and readers), anti-novel critics feared the potential social chaos. After all, novels portrayed the lives of characters from all backgrounds (from criminals to aristocrats) as part of the same story, sometimes even depicting their interaction with each other. Audiences from high to low social ranks, male and female, would read about these characters, often getting a taste of the outsider / Other.

3. Getting a Taste of the Other

Transcending social, gender, economic, racial, and historical boundaries was the main objective in masquerading. As Terry Castle (1986: 5) explains, «one was obliged to impersonate a being opposite, in some essential feature, to oneself. The conventional relationship between costume and wearer was ironic, one that replicated a conceptual scandal». The larger the gap between the real self and the costume, the greater the scandal and amusement of the masqueraders. After all, the masquerade provided the only safe space (other than the novel) in which individuals could behave as they pleased. In fact, according to Castle (1986: 73), «acts of disguise and self-transfiguration include an element of wish-fulfillment. The idea that a specific masquerade disguise might betray the underlying nature of the person wearing it –that costume could be a way of acting out repressed desires– was not foreign to the eighteenth century».

Performing one's darkest side and most secret fantasies through the masquerading process, which social and/or personal censorship suppressed in real life, constituted a powerful catharsis that threatened to disrupt the status quo both in the novel and the masquerade. According to Castle's (1986: 77) theory of the eighteenth-century masquerade,

> By making magically available the body of the other, the body of dream and taboo, costume collapsed the boundary between individuals. But this collapse in turn hinted at another, greater, indiscretion: the collapse of ideological polarities, those divisions around which culture itself was organized. For when the human body escaped its own boundaries, and disobeyed the laws of metaphysics by becoming its own opposite, the body politic, the civil body, was also affected.

The body became, for the masqueraders, the main channel through which to express repressed desires. However, in the case of the eighteenth-century British novel, transcending one's self and experiencing the Other (in terms of class, gender, sexuality, race, and morals) was a metaphorical act of masking much more threatening to the status quo, I argue, than attending masquerades, for the process of transgression was out of reach and free from authority's control.

Not only did characters in novels but also readers and authors participate in the symbolic (sometimes even literal) masquerade of the novel, whether consciously or unconsciously. They, thus, fulfilled their own desires and fantasies about the Other, along with (re)creating a new self in order to release their collective and/or individual tensions. As in the actual masquerade, the fusion of the self and the Other was temporary and was favored by the participants' suspension of disbelief. The notion of a safe space, granted by the masking involved, becomes key in this process. In fact, like masqueraders, novel writers and readers immersed themselves in the novel's rebellious ritual, aware of the deception involved, i.e. knowing that they were going to deceive and be deceived by the other participants.

In the rest of this paper, then, I will analyze the masquerading process involved inside and outside the novelistic text and among all its participants. In order to clarify the various nuances of such a process, I will provide examples from Daniel Defoe's fictionalized version of a female criminal autobiography, *Moll Flanders* (1722), since his

novel constitutes one of the few eighteenth-century texts in which the novel's symbolic masquerading takes place simultaneously at all possible levels. I will refer to the process of masquerading and Othering that Defoe's novel offers only in terms of class and gender, the two self-defining parameters most clearly disrupted. By reading *Moll Flanders* (and the eighteenth-century novel by extension) as a conceptual masquerade, I will illustrate how the novelistic enterprise contains the symbolic potential for social subversion, for, inside and outside the text, gender and class become part of a continuum, instead of absolute categories of differentiation.

3.1. Characters

The eighteenth-century novel and the masquerade shared what seems to be an essential factor in both forms of entertainment: deception. In the same way that masqueraders deceived each other, hiding their identities, the novelistic plot relied on the pattern of deception in order to create different obstacles in the protagonists' adventurous lives and, thus, achieve a more complex and engaging story.[1] Dress and language, then, also became part of the masking process in the novelistic text. The novel was based on a polyphony of experiences, articulated by a variety of discourses and linguistic patterns which authors included in order to stress the novel's realistic endeavor. The novel, according to Mikhail Bakhtin's argument in «Discourse in the Novel» (1981), becomes a stylistically unique genre where the author does not possess as much control over the language as the poet. In fact, the novelistic text embodies the stratified and dialogized heteroglossia of different speakers, reflecting various ideological-saturated worldviews and subjectivities. In *Moll Flanders*, for instance, we find the linguistic registers and ideologies of: the editor, Moll, members of the justice system, and upper-class individuals, among others. Defoe's novel, therefore, introduces his readers to a series of subjectivities from various backgrounds, including the underworld of criminals and society's other outcasts, allowing readers (also of all backgrounds) to go through an experience analogous to attending a masquerade.

The criminal world in *Moll Flanders* is a constant masquerade where characters never entirely reveal their true identities to each other, and anonymity is essential to the effectiveness of their criminal activities. As if attending an actual masquerade, Moll moves around in her world as a travesty, always in disguise. She plays the roles of a woman and a criminal, which, according to John Rietz (1991: 183), «were perceived as mutually exclusive», for women were expected to be nurturing, passive, beautiful, and witty, whereas criminals were associated with traditional masculine traits (physically

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1. In Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747-48), Lovelace's *modus operandi* is entirely based on lies and deception, which facilitates Clarissa's fall and ultimately causes her death. In Frances Burney's *Cecilia* (1782), two factors contribute to the protagonist's social and personal anxiety: Delvile's identity and intentions are a mystery to Cecilia in the opening chapters of the novel; and Mr. Harrel constantly lies to Cecilia, his friends, and family about his debts and honor. In Jane Austen's *Emma* (1816), Frank Churchill's and Jane Fairfax's secret engagement creates a series of misunderstandings and tensions among the characters that only get resolved once the truth is revealed.

aggressive, active, and cunning). Although Rietz (1991: 190) argues that «Moll Flanders' disguises ease the cognitive dissonance that may go along with imagining a woman committing a crime in that a disguise gives the image a cast of artificiality», the fact remains that both author and readers never lose track of Moll's being both a woman and a criminal. Even when she cross-dresses as a man, Moll only deceives her partners and victims, not the author or the readers. Moll's physical disguises deceive only her victims and the bystanders, sometimes even friends and relatives, which turns the text into an endless masquerade, at the same time as it creates the illusion for the readers and the editor/writer of being in control about knowing who is who in the story.

Nevertheless, Moll remains in disguise throughout the novel and never completely displays her true self to anybody inside or outside the text. Even though she deludes us into believing that her autobiography is a confession of a repentant sinner, she also lies to the readers and the editor (if we choose to believe that Defoe is only the editor of her story), for she never takes her mask off to reveal her true identity (she never gives us her true name in order to protect her family's reputation and herself from the authorities). As far as we know, she may have lied to both audience and editor about the authenticity of her account and even of her repentance. After all, readers and editor/writer have to rely on the word of a self-defined criminal (prostitute/mistress, pickpocket, thief, opportunist, and scam artist). Moreover, as Hal Gladfelder (2001: 128) points out, «Moll misleads by omission, glosses over her own most criminal actions, shifts guilt onto her victims or confederates, and guards her money, her origins, and her name as dangerous mysteries». Nobody outside the text really knows with absolute certainty Moll's true self and life experiences.

Although not the case in *Moll Flanders*, it is important to mention that writers often include episodes in their novels where the main characters participate in an actual masquerade, exploiting the comic potential of the event, or relying on its catalytic effect on the plot, as Terry Castle (1986) contends. The element of spectacle and intrigue that the masquerade brings to the story certainly attracted novelists who attempted to explore human relations and social definitions. In her analysis of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, Henry Fielding's *Amelia*, Frances Burney's *Cecilia*, and Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story*, Castle (1986: 120) illustrates how authors employ the fictional masquerade as a plot-producing device, usually marking «a point for narrative transformation». Further, she identifies the revolutionary effects that writers attribute to the masquerade's destabilization of the seemingly ordered reality to which the characters belong. Given the pedagogical and utilitarian function critics expected from the novel, Castle (1986: 126) reminds us of how, for some novelists, «the masquerade may function as a figure for ambiguous authorial intentions –the textual sign of an inward tension regarding the novelist's conventional role».

3.2. Writers

The novel's dangerous association with scandal led many authors to develop apologetic prefaces to their novels in order to avoid possible accusations of immorality (Warner, 1998: 148). Since «[a]ttention became directed toward the psychology of response and

toward the moral and pedagogical uses of novel reading» (Warner, 1998: 9), writers, aware of the critics' condemnation of the novel, attempted to create exemplary characters that would offer a proper role model to inspire readers into higher moral standards. Lennard J. Davis (1996: 123-24) argues:

> the precise nature of the danger of the novels comes not so much from the fact that novels tend to depict «low-life» activities […] but that the whole project of the novel, its very theoretical and structural assumptions, were in some sense criminal in nature, and that part of the nature of this criminality was specifically associated with the threat of violence and social unrest from the lower classes.

In *Moll Flanders*, for instance, the distinction between vice and virtue is blurred, for Defoe exposes his readers to a world of prostitutes, mistresses, thieves, and highwaymen, and makes such characters the heroes of the story. Assuming such examples of vice could lure innocent readers into a world of sin and destruction, Defoe needs to develop a strategy that justifies his use of immorality in the story.

Davis (1996: 126) suggests a double-edged strategy in the ambivalent use of the criminal in novels:

> First, the criminal is an example of sinfulness, evil, and degeneration. His life is to be avoided and his fate to be deplored. On the other hand, criminal autobiographies and novels lead the criminal to repentance and salvation. Thus, the criminal serves a double function as both example to be avoided and example to be imitated.

In the preface of *Moll Flanders*, Defoe, therefore, addresses «those who know how to read» and hopes «the moral […] will keep the reader serious» (*Moll Flanders*: 2). He proposes Moll's life of corruption and sin as a pattern of conduct to avoid, and her repentance as an ideal to imitate, claiming, «To give the history of a wicked life repented of, necessarily requires that the wicked part should be made as wicked as the real story of it will bear, to illustrate and give beauty to the penitent part, which is certainly the best and brightest» (*Moll Flanders*: 2). Ironically, the masquerading process of the novel allows the reader to consider Moll's delinquent life as an option to follow, particularly because Defoe does not have any control over the audience's reading. If not in real life, the reader can imagine and live Moll's adventures through the reading process with the safety of knowing he/she will never have to endure Moll's punishment if caught. It all depends on what aspect of Moll's life the reader decides to concentrate, whether the reader is willing to participate in the novelistic masquerade or not.

To complicate the interpretation of *Moll Flanders*, Defoe puts on the mask of an editor in the preface and claims to be a witness to Moll's «private history» (*Moll Flanders*: 1). «[T]he persuasion of authenticity», Gladfelder (2001: 114) argues, «is obviously crucial to the effects he wants to produce». As an editor and witness to the story, Defoe has partially altered the original text to polish Moll's harsh language and to make it more appropriate for the reader. Conversely, «This displacement of the original text, along with the editor's unwillingness, even after forty years, to disclose the Author's name, catches the work up in that more general climate of suspicion which has

come to surround all such publications [namely, novels]» (Gladfelder, 2001: 114). Defoe runs the risk of his readers' not believing in his fictional persona, of their noticing that he is wearing a mask. Nevertheless, he knows he can take such a chance because, like in a real masquerade, both writer and readers participate in the entire process, «pretending» that they are not aware of the reality behind the masks.

In addition to his mask of editor, Defoe further disguises his true identity under Moll's persona and linguistic patterns (language becomes another of his masks). This self-protective strategy causes a very interesting effect that redeems Defoe from any possible accusations of immorality. Although Moll's voice is actually Defoe's voice (a truth we may only admit when distancing ourselves from the novel's masquerading process), readers are forced to believe that what they are reading is actually Moll's words, altered by an editor. The moral implications stemming from the readers' suspension of disbelief redeem Defoe from any possible accusations of corruption. As Gladfelder (2001: 115) explains, «Any viciousness a reader may find in the book originates either in the woman's language or the reader's imagination». Since Defoe has removed from his readers the possibility of reading Moll's original text, they never know whether her conversion is real or a product of Defoe's didactic motivations.

Defoe's recreation of Moll's life and confession adds another layer of significance to our reading of the novel as a masquerade. In the eyes of eighteenth-century critics, Defoe is masking as a criminal. As Gladfelder (2001: 120) accurately points out, «Defoe, through his surrogate and alien voices, wrote of criminality not just as an object of warning of horror but *from inside the act, and the thought, of transgression itself* [my emphasis]». Thanks to the safety provided by the novel's masquerading process, Defoe can satisfy any possible curiosity and/or repressed desire about a criminal's life. Furthermore, even the audience's desires are gratified. For the lower classes, «The criminal action as well as the criminal tale often served as a form of social protest that expressed the class resentment of many who read novels and attended executions» (Davis, 1996: 130). In his fictional masquerade, Defoe is therefore aligning himself with the lower classes, voicing their socioeconomic anxieties, and offering them an escape valve through which they can see their frustrations about their political powerlessness and opposition to the oppressive authority expressed to the public in written form. Paradoxically, Defoe's mask also meets the upper-class's conservative expectations and moral standards, for «the moralizing of the repentant felon amounted to a form of social control and was […] an exercise of power and authority as tangible as that manifested during the ritual of execution» (Davis, 1996: 130).

Finally, Moll's gender turns Defoe into a travesty, subverting gender categories and emphasizing the gender continuum. Madeleine Kahn (1991 *a*: 2, 6) constructs the notion of narrative transvestism: «to describe [the] use by a male author of a first-person female narrator», a rhetorical strategy that «allowed […] authors to exploit the instability of gender categories» in eighteenth-century England. According to Kahn (1991 *a*: 6), through this process «a male author gains access to a culturally defined female voice and sensibility but runs no risk of being trapped in the devalued female realm». Applying the literary device to Defoe's *Roxana* and Richardson's *Clarissa*, Kahn (1991 *b*: 19) contends «that narrative transvestism allowed Defoe and Richardson to create provisional writing selves.

These selves are not in any sense «true» selves but fruitful illusions of self-knowledge and self-presence; they are the effect of a complicated response to the debates about gender in the period». Kahn thus emphasizes the idea of temporality and safety on which the author's masquerading hinges. Defoe, then, gets to mask as a woman and as a criminal in *Moll Flanders*, fearing no punishment from cultural authorities due to the safe space created by the novel's symbolic masquerading process.

3.3. Readers

The rise of literacy, the commodification of literature, and the massive production of novels radically transformed the eighteenth-century cultural landscape, forcing critics to recategorize their social scripts along with writers and readers. The violation of conventional boundaries and the freedom that the general public enjoyed became the critics' major concern. As Clive T. Probyn (1987: 8) states, «What the circulating library offered was the possibility of some degree of unsupervised choice, a limited freedom to exercise personal taste, and the chance to indulge in imaginative fantasies free from oppressive social duties». The novels to which the circulating libraries provided access also offered the same liberty that Probyn attributes to the libraries and similar institutions. The new reading practices emerging in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries introduce the notion of people devouring novels in private, freed from any authority control. Using the readers' own imagination as an empowering device to recreate their own fantasies becomes one of the most threatening characteristics of novel reading.

Critics foresaw the threat that novel reading posed to the social status quo, since «light reading», as Taylor (1943: 113) explains, «gave members of [the middle class] a taste for the unattainable and filled their heads with ideas about which they knew nothing and were therefore able to form no judgment». Although critics promoted the assumption that «the novel reader will become absorbed in an unconscious mimicry» (Warner, 1998: 143), novels paradoxically provided the milieu necessary for the excitement of the readers' imagination, stirring their desire for individual (and collective) self-improvement that cultural authorities feared so much.

Warner (1998) compares the transgressive nature of the theater (and, although Warner does not refer to it, we could add the masquerade to this category, given its theatricality) to that of the novel. He claims:

> the novel's dependence upon print media gave a specific new turn to the antirepresentational discourse directed against it. If plays could cause riots, *novels could act at a distance*. If plays put too much control in the hands of the playwrights, actors, and directors of the theater, novels put too much *power in the hands of the reader, and of those who wrote and sold what they read*. If plays offer an unseemly spectacle of vice, novels invite readers to produce this *spectacle within their own head*. While the play's concentration of spectacle increased its danger, it opened it to state control. The very diffuseness of novelistic spectacle made its effects *uncertain*, and *its control nearly impossible*. [my emphasis] (Warner, 1998: 129)

It was, therefore, the privacy and anonymity that novel reading offered what made novels the most forceful weapon against conventional categories of definition and

authority. In the refuge of their homes, audiences could secretly read how classes and sexes mingled freely and promiscuously in the stories, satisfying their voyeuristic impulses. They could identify with (i.e., mask as) characters whose gender, class, and ideologies were opposed to their own; and they could fantasize about the Other's life. The upper-class readers of *Moll Flanders* could choose simply to observe and inform themselves about the life of a female criminal, or to go a step further and imagine that they were Moll, getting a taste of what in real life was a threat to their socio-economic position.

Confusing fiction with reality, transcending the individual self and reality, constituted a destabilizing strategy in the novel's masquerading process. The novel's realistic impulses facilitated such a process, since readers could easily recognize not only some of the locations that characters visited, but also character types and antics.[2] In *The Progress of Romance* (1785), Clara Reeve contrasts the inverisimilitude of the romance with the realistic endeavor of the novel, concluding:

> The Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it is written. […] The Novel gives a familiar relation of such things, as pass every day before our eyes, such as may happen to our friend, or to ourselves; and the perfection of it, is to represent every scene, in so easy and natural a manner, and to make them appear so probable, as to deceive us into a persuasion (at least while we are reading) that all is real, until we are affected by the joys or distresses, of the persons in the story, as if they were our own. (*The Progress of Romance*, I: 111; in Probyn, 1987: 3)

The novel's realistic touch and sense of proximity obviously favored readers' identification with characters, but certainly the way in which our brains process information also contributes to it.

Ellen Spolsky (2001: 17) applies universal cognitive structures to cultural production, arguing that «An individual cannot as much as understand her own self *as* a self without cultural stories in words, pictures, and ritual. The genres of those stories fit together the fragments of memory, consciousness, and knowledge that the brain produces, generating an internalized narrative, even an autobiography». Spolsky (2001: 11) explains how our brains have «the ability to categorize, […] to decide to treat two or more distinguishable objects or events as equivalent, when the distinctions between them are not relevant in a given context», as well as the ability to produce «interfaces needed for the translation of, for example, visual information into phonological information. […] Where we do not find translations, we may use memories to produce analogies, or produce something like interferences». Thus, even if the readers of *Moll Flanders* belonged to a high rank in society and/or were male, they could apply their own memories and knowledge of criminal autobiographies and of their female acquaintances, for instance, in order to concretize their own fantasy and fill in the gaps left by Defoe's narrative.

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2. *The Diary of Mme. D'Arblay*, for example, includes a letter from Mr. Cambridge to Frances Burney in which Mr. Cambridge notices the similarities between the character Albany in *Cecilia* and an acquaintance of his, called De la Port. He states, «Mrs. L., when she talked of him to me, said, "the resemblance to the character of Albany was so very strong, that she thought it must certainly be meant for him"». (in Annie Raine Ellis's 1914 edition of *Cecilia*, fn. 1, vol. 1: 200)

The threat that many eighteenth-century anti-novel and anti-masquerade critics envisioned, therefore, was the possibility that the mass population decided to create translation interfaces that obscured the relationship between reality and fiction/masquerade. In fact, as Spolsky (2001: 16) points out, «The gaps between word and image, signifier and signified, mind and body, will and reason –the very gaps that cause the skeptic to suspect the reliability of knowledge– are precisely the sites of our freedom to hypothesize and test hypotheses, to reorganize and reinvent ourselves as needed». Imagining ways to fill in the gaps between fiction and reality, to make fiction one's reality, thus becomes an empowering tool against the social status quo for eighteenth-century novel readers and masqueraders.

4. Conclusion

Although the eighteenth-century novel was expected to be and was often designed as an expression of the middle-class ideologies, the masquerading process inherent to the genre's form, style, and conceptualization contributed to the challenge and transgression of those ideologies and their social script. In addition to facilitating the fulfillment of certain social fantasies about the Other's life, the novel functioned as a self-critique for the sometimes exaggerated experience of the classes represented in it. In other words, when eighteenth-century upper-class audiences read Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders,* for example, they had the opportunity to witness what it was like to live as a lower-class person, as in the case of Moll, as well as to engage in a critique of their own upper-class condition.

Since the powerless had the opportunity to mask as powerful and vice versa on all the levels of the novel's masquerading process, the most subversive element of the eighteenth-century British novel was the underlying idea that the process of becoming the Other, altering class, gender, sexual, and race categories became a rather easy task to perform. Regardless of the novelist's intentions for the text, engaging in a masquerading process and its subsequent disruptive power became almost unavoidable for characters, readers, and writers.

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