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Chasing Eliza: Shifting and Static Women in Elizabeth Craven's *The Miniature Picture*

Abstract

Georgian actress and author Mary Robinson famously wore a miniature portrait of her royal lover, the Prince of Wales, whom she captivated in the Shakespearean breaches role of Perdita. Intriguingly, Robinson's final stage appearance was as the cross-dressing heroine of *The Miniature Picture* (1781), a three-act comedy penned by writer and socialite Lady Elizabeth Craven, later Baroness Craven and Margravine of Brandenburg-Ansbach. The play's action, initiated by the threat of exposure, is driven by Eliza Camply, who aims to retrieve her miniature from the man who left her. Craven, like the actress playing her enterprising protagonist Eliza Camply, was no stranger to celebrity and infamy. Craven's preoccupation with image-management in this play aligns with the experiences and views she recorded in her travel narrative *A Journey through the Crimea to Constantinople* (1789), and her *Memoirs* (1826). This article reads *The Miniature Picture* as a generically fluid comedy about female objectification, the misuse of women's bodies and images in practices of courtship and marriage, and in the celebrity culture the playwright negotiated throughout her life as an aristocratic woman embroiled in both sexual scandal and theatrical life.

Keywords

Elizabeth Craven; miniature picture; eighteenth-century comedy; theatre; celebrity; genre; cross-dressing

Author Biography

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When Mary Robinson took the stage on Friday, December 3, 1779 as Perdita, “the lost she” of David Garrick’s successful adaptation of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, the breeches-clad actress instantly captured the heart of the teenage Prince of Wales. Robinson was wooed with the lavish offer of a £20,000 bond and a series of gifts, including a tiny diamond-set picture of the prince done by Jeremiah Meyer, the famous miniaturist to Queen Charlotte.¹ Courting attention as a celebrity of the *beau monde*, Robinson appeared in public venues wearing this royal love token.² In the late eighteenth century, miniatures were stylish accessories and tools of social practice, for “To wear a miniature or an eye portrait,” explains Elizabeth Fay, was “to make a statement about oneself and one’s affective bonds” (56). Yet when the prince’s ardour cooled and he ended the affair, Robinson kept the miniature and, rather than hiding this reminder of her lover’s broken promises, she used it as a potent symbol of her ill-treatment. Robinson commissioned Thomas Gainsborough’s sympathetic 1781 portrait of her mournfully holding this miniature on her lap, the lens of art softening sex scandal into sentimental tableau. Laura Engel, exploring the actress’s project of “highly stylized self-construction,” argues that “Robinson authorized and orchestrated her own objectification” (59, 60).³ Paradoxically active in her self-presentation as a passive victim, Robinson—as scholars have argued—transformed the public gaze from censorious scrutiny to sympathetic looking, thus negotiating her social and economic fate.⁴

These intersections between life and art and between material culture and the theater extend in another fascinating direction when we look at Robinson’s last stage appearance, as Eliza Camply in the play *The Miniature Picture* (1781) by Elizabeth Craven. Robinson played the heroine of a play that revolves around an abandoned woman’s management of a miniature picture—a portable keepsake and symbol of constancy. *The Miniature Picture* is a three-act comedy set in Oxford by Lady Craven (later Baroness Craven and Margravine of Brandenburg-Anspach).⁵ On the surface, Craven and Robinson were very different, the former titled and wealthy and the latter socially and financially disadvantaged as a professional actress saddled with the debts of a feckless husband. Despite their class disparity, however, both women were subject to similar kinds of public scrutiny and critique. The play literally and figuratively stages this mirroring through the miniature picture: a significant signifier of potential female objectification and power that links playwright, actress, and character.⁶

The Miniature Picture is a direct descendent of Susanna Centlivre’s *The Gamester* (1705),⁷ another play featuring a miniature picture and a cross-dressing female character. What is a subplot in Centlivre’s comedy—a miniature portrait embodying sexual reputation—is Craven’s central and titular trope. This foregrounding of the miniature reflects a noteworthy shift in English material culture. By the late eighteenth century, luxury items such as miniatures were becoming increasingly attainable for more people. They were commissioned and then meticulously crafted, painstakingly painted on ivory, and opulently set in jeweled frames or cases; these little pictures were often worn as necklaces, pins, rings, and bracelets. Queen Charlotte’s habits of dress fueled this trend, as she publically wore miniatures of her husband King George III and had full-sized paintings done that showcase these markers of her conjugal loyalty and affection. According to scholar Marcia Pointon, miniatures had reached their height of popularity as accoutrements in the 1780s, when Richard Cosway’s creations were much sought-after.⁸ Unsurprisingly, miniatures became increasingly ubiquitous in fictional narratives of love and loss, as “wearing miniatures entered popular discourse as a topos of affective private

engagement” (Pointon 53).⁹ Craven capitalized on these sartorial and literary trends with *The Miniature Picture*.

It is likely that the theatre manager, popular playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan, intentionally cast Robinson in the principal role, banking on the sensationalism of the actress’s offstage drama.¹⁰ Such confounding of worlds was a key component of the eighteenth-century culture of stage celebrity; Felicity Nussbaum states that “the theatre challenged the boundary between public and private, between the virtual and the real, as ordinarily clandestine domestic affairs and political intrigue spilled over into the larger public culture” (45). Though the onstage miniature may slyly allude to the liaison between Robinson and the Prince of Wales, the titular object of Craven’s comedy is no mere gimmicky stage prop. Rather, it is a significant locus of anxiety and tension between characters and a stimulus to both thought and action within the small Oxonian society of the play. The plot of *The Miniature Picture* focuses on the heroine’s attempts to retrieve her own miniature from a former lover. When the play begins, Eliza Camply has been abandoned by her beau Mr. Belvil, who has gone off with the neighbourhood coquette, Flirtilla Loveless. Eliza’s brother, Mr. Camply, is secretly in love with Flirtilla, who is also being wooed in a farcical subplot by Lord Macgrinnon, a mercenary, misogynistic Scotsman. Eliza presented the miniature picture to Belvil believing he was soon to propose; her determination to retrieve it, after the relationship ends, motivates her to disguise herself as her male cousin, the rakish Sir Harry Revel, supposedly visiting from the university. Resisting the passivity of a forsaken sentimental heroine, she asserts her self-worth, her personal pride, and her privacy by acting to retake her portrait, thus circumventing its shameful exposure to a larger audience. As she machinates the repossession of the miniature, she also furthers her own romantic interests by drawing Belvil away from Flirtilla and promoting a match between her lovelorn brother and the heiress coquette, whom Eliza shames into reform. By recapturing the portrait through role play by a protagonist of the “laughing” tradition of comedy, Craven’s heroine stands to reclaim not just a mislaid possession, but control over her identity; contingent on her good character are her prospects on the marriage market, the ability to secure her future comfort, both material and emotional.

Eliza’s highly theatrical response to her own abandonment, and more generally to the fixed identities typically imposed on women, presents an imagined alternative to the acceptance of patriarchal control in both the public and private lives of eighteenth-century women. Craven’s play, I will posit, is a generically self-conscious—and thus generically fluid—comedy that uniquely deploys a stage-object to press issues of female objectification in Georgian society and culture. The first part of this paper will illuminate the ways in which *The Miniature Picture* reproduces Craven’s own anxieties about exposure and her concern for image-management, conveyed in her non-fiction writing. On the one hand, Craven enjoyed her position among leaders in fashion—seen, desired, and imitated—but on the other, this visibility came at a cost well-documented by scholars of Georgian celebrity culture and the eighteenth-century actress: the loss of anonymity and at times, independence.¹¹ In the next section of this paper, I argue that *The Miniature Picture* is a generically complex comedy about eluding society’s positioning of women as objects, the material correlative of this being the portrait and the literary correlative, the stock character. Horace Walpole’s observation about Elizabeth Craven’s appeal—“It was amazing to see so young a woman entirely possess herself” (qtd. in Rosenfeld 55)—can be applied to Eliza Camply, through whom the playwright continues to enact her resistance to

imposed legibility.¹² *The Miniature Picture* is worthy of further study as a play centrally about an object and about women-as-objects, the misuse of women's bodies and images in courtship and marriage, and, more obliquely, the celebrity culture the playwright negotiated throughout her life as an aristocratic woman with a penchant for self-display.

A playwright exposed: Elizabeth Craven

The Miniature Picture was initially performed privately, for charity, on April 6, 1780 at the Town Hall in Newbury, where Craven previously had the local gentry perform her 1778 translation of Pont de Vile's *La Somnambule*.¹³ Craven's original comedy was a success in this venue and subsequently made its public debut as an afterpiece on Wednesday, May 24, 1780 at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. Sheridan promoted Craven's work by writing the lengthy prologue to *The Miniature Picture*, identified within eighteenth-century criticism as the play's claim to fame. According to Craven's *Memoirs*, however, Sheridan tricked her, essentially stealing the manuscript and staging *The Miniature Picture* in the metropolis without her consent.¹⁴ Despite Sheridan's apparent betrayal, Craven nonetheless attended the second performance "in form," as Horace Walpole reported, sitting "in the middle of the first row of the stage-box, much dressed, with a profusion of white bugles and plumes, to receive the public homage due to her sex and loveliness" (qtd. in Doran 177).¹⁵ Late eighteenth-century audiences, either seeing Craven in the flesh or her name on the playbill, would have been aware of the playwright's own scandals, which, like the affair of the royal miniature, gave the play an aura of tacit eroticism. Nonetheless, the construction of her celebrity status often lay beyond her control, despite her social and financial advantages. Referred to by James Boswell as "the beautiful, gay, and fascinating Lady Craven" (242), the author of *The Miniature Picture* was infamous within the Georgian bon ton she entertained as a writer, socialite, and amateur actress.

Craven was the subject of much gossip and printed scandal-mongering, her reputation permanently scathed by rumors of extramarital affairs on both sides that allegedly drove the Cravens apart; in the same year that *The Miniature Picture* premiered in London, Lord Craven separated from his wife, upon whom he settled £1500, and never saw her again. Judith Hawley—pressing Craven's complicated relationship to motherhood in relation to her participation in amateur playacting, often alongside her favourite son Keppel—notes that in the world outside her private theatre, the playwright's "chief reputation was as an adulteress" (200). Though a reluctant celebrity when forced into the limelight, Craven refused to be cowed by public opinion. Like other Georgian women whose fame threatened to slip into infamy, Craven attempted to strategically manipulate her own celebrity with staged exposure on her own terms. Thus, she ended a period of continental exile after her separation from Lord Craven by buying Brandenburg House, a costly residence in Hammersmith where she constantly hosted visitors, many attracted by her private theatre. 'Private' is something of a misnomer, however, as Craven's lavish amateur productions at Brandenburg "made fashionable news and found their way into the newspapers and periodical columns" (Rosenfeld 7). This quasi-public domestic space was an elaborate simulation of the public stage, fitted with footlights, painted scenery, and stage machinery.¹⁶ Craven herself starred in several of the plays that she wrote and staged there. This well-funded vanity project, fueled by her desire for attention and admiration, shielded her from the direct animadversions of public playgoers.

Though lacking the purchasing power of her titled counterpart, Mary Robinson likewise craved approbation and abhorred notoriety. In her own memoir, *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson, Written by Herself. With Some Posthumous Pieces* (1801), Robinson reminisces about the lead-up to her theatrical debut in the part of Cordelia: “my ardent fancy was busied in contemplating a thousand triumphs, in which my vanity would be publicly gratified, without the smallest sacrifice of my private character” (34). As many scholars have documented, Mary Robinson—like Elizabeth Craven—was denied this unsullied fame; though Craven enacted this fantasy of celebrity at Brandenburg, neither she nor Robinson were immune to slander, despite their concerted efforts to fashion their own public personas.

Craven’s preoccupation with image-management in *The Miniature Picture* aligns with experiences and views she recorded in her published non-fiction, namely her travel narrative *A Journey through the Crimea to Constantinople* (1789), and her autobiography, *Memoirs of the Margravine of Anspach, Formerly Lady Craven* (1826), penned in Naples as the author neared the end of her eventful life. While stories of her sexual indiscretions fueled viperous detractors, Craven sought to project and preserve her own image, both proactively and reactively. Though Craven was often the curator of her own charms and enjoyed being on display, she recoiled from the spotlight when there under duress. The account of her courtship by her future husband, Lord Craven, reveals the writer’s propensity to resist enforced objectification. Before the dinner arranged for her formal introduction to this eligible aristocrat, she altered her appearance: “As I conceived that he had never seen me, I muffled myself under my hat, which at that time was very large, which with my handkerchief and cloak concealed my face; and I was amusing my gay mind with the idea of seeing him mistake my sister for the young unmarried person, and begin to pay her his devoirs” (*Memoirs* 8: 39-40). This trick, which she recollects was unsuccessful, cannot simply be chalked up to youthful mischief-making. It is more convincingly interpreted as an act of rebellion against the incursions of patriarchal control; throughout her writing Craven directly and indirectly articulates the importance of creative self-presentation, a necessary source of emancipatory power and pleasure for women in a world that subjects them to “either indifference or oppression” (*Memoirs* 9: 153).

At other junctures in her self-recorded life, Craven attempted to evade or defer objectification, shielding herself from the aggressive, intrusive, and uninvited male gaze. In her *Memoirs*, Craven describes an incident on the road to Florence that expresses her desire to refuse being an object of male looking. Her figure on horseback attracts the interest of another traveler, a man who was “determined on seeing me” (8: 91). She will not allow this leering stranger to “gratify his curiosity” and lowers her hat over her face as she speeds by his phaeton (8: 91). Craven resisted exposure, discomfited by the prospect of her face being on display without her consent. Also like her heroine, Craven decisively acted to regain control of the situation. Katrina O’Loughlin examines this same episode in her discussion of eighteenth-century “Strolling Roxanas.” Underlining Craven’s gift for self-authoring, O’Loughlin avers that “throughout her travel letters, Craven pointedly refuses the anonymous, public, and sexually curious gaze, attempting to contest this scrutiny with a carefully mediated self-display” (129). Mary Robinson also recoiled from intrusive looking; several times in her own memoir, she describes being subjected to the rude stares of male strangers. For example, while at the playhouse with her mother, an officer enters their box and the writer complains: “His eyes were fixed on me and his persevering attention at length nearly overwhelmed me with confusion” (*Memoirs* 35). Other

anecdotes and vignettes about Robinson from the period show the actress as she attempted to simultaneously court and control male attention. In one case, in what could be construed as a publicity stunt, the actress appeared at a Covent Garden masquerade in her breeches costume from Benjamin Hoadly's *The Suspicious Husband*.¹⁷ Her deliberately provocative off-stage theatrics scandalized—and of course interested—leisured Londoners. For both Robinson and Craven, their pleasure in being gazed upon clearly hinged on their sway over this gazing and, hence, their own image.¹⁸

Lord Craven's flagrant infidelity presented the most serious threat to Elizabeth Craven's image, one that she relates in both *Memoirs* and *A Journey through the Crimea to Constantinople*. His mistress, engaging in her own play-acting, appropriated both his wife's name and her coach, riding in this vehicle not simply as "a lady," but as Lady Craven. Largely disempowered as an abandoned wife, Elizabeth had limited opportunities for reprisal when this woman "called herself Lady Craven, and conducted herself at inns in such a manner as to reflect upon and tarnish my character" (*Memoirs* 8: 55). Using her dedication to *A Journey through the Crimea to Constantinople* to air her grievances and clear her name, she likens her husband's mistress to counterfeit currency: "it having been a practice for some years past, for a Birmingham coin of myself to pass in most of the inns in France, Switzerland, and England, for the wife of my husband—My arms and coronet sometimes supporting, in some measure, this insolent deception; by which, probably, I may have been seen to behave very improperly." Craven uses politically-charged language to describe her victimization—"this curious and unheard of treason to my birth and character"—and recoup a measure of agency with a calculated claim to the status of wronged virtue, something Mary Robinson also designed with the well-timed Gainsborough portrait. The rhetorical strength of Craven's dedication is less important, however, than the printed letters themselves, which *prove* Lady Craven's whereabouts, the author voicing her relief that the "Letters see at least for some time where the real Lady Craven has been, and where she is to be found." Significantly, Craven is attempting to control the circulation of her own name through society, her reputation threatened by not only the press fabricating lies and half-truths, but also by her own husband, his mistress, and the double standards that facilitated their misbehaviour. Though this troubling episode in Craven's life occurred in the years of continental exile after Lord Craven left her and after *The Miniature Picture* was produced, this comedy can nonetheless be read as an imaginative response to the playwright's unease with imposed feminine identities.

A heroine concealed: *The Miniature Picture*

The Miniature Picture was for the most part forgotten after the playwright's death in 1828. Few literary critics have attended to this three-act comedy, which is briefly treated in Wendy C. Nielsen's *Women Warriors in Romantic Drama* (2013) and, less recently, Susan Stewart's *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1984). Most compelling is Julia H. Fawcett's reading of *The Miniature Picture* within a chapter on Mary Robinson in *Spectacular Disappearances: Celebrity and Privacy, 1696-1801*, which has just been published. Nonetheless, *The Miniature Picture* is disappointingly absent from most studies of Georgian theatre, though Craven's play aligns with Misty G. Anderson's assessment of late eighteenth-century plays by women as works that show "an awareness of the social experiences of women as well as creative responses to their situations" (156). Yet this unusually thing-

focused play has much to recommend it as a case study beyond its adherence to this recognizable pattern. Elizabeth Craven's comic vision, one of feminine power and independence through generic self-awareness and female-directed theatrical action, is unique.

Breaking from a long history of plots involving controlling parents, Craven's play includes no fathers or mothers. This absence immediately sets *The Miniature Picture* apart from the sentimental comedy, so often concerned with the reconciliation of romantic love and filial duty. Within a closed scenic context, Craven thwarts audience expectations raised by the initial stage action of *The Miniature Picture*. Though Act One opens in "Mr. Camply's Study" with "Mr. Camply writing" (1: 9), this character is neither the protagonist nor an authorial figure, as his romantic plotline is wholly managed by his enterprising sister.¹⁹ Craven diminishes a possible source of male rule, Eliza's brother, by relegating him to a minor and largely passive role shortly after the calm of the room is disturbed by a knock on the door. The source of disruptive creativity in the play, Eliza Camply, enters in the guise of a young spark named Sir Harry Revel, her cousin. Her assumed surname brings to mind the topsy-turvy indulgence of the carnival, which, like the play itself, is a vehicle for controlled rebellion.²⁰ Eliza, "dressed in a baronet's gown and cap" (1: 10), tests her costume on Mr. Camply, and when it proves effective, she un.masks, so to speak, and reveals her master plan. By posing as a feckless scholar, Eliza challenges male privilege and claims an imaginative stake in a "realm that excludes women," the eighteenth-century university (Nielsen 121). As well, clearly delighting in her temporary escape from normative values and gendered constraints of dress and conversation, Eliza experiences the individualistic pleasure of the masculine subject.

In this first exchange of the play, an overture of the internal drama she orchestrates, Eliza parodies a range of "manly" misbehavior. As Sir Harry, Mary Robinson's Eliza places the "glass" of satire before male audience members, to borrow a Swiftian image. Craven's cheeky heroine caricatures fashionable young Englishmen by affectedly bowing and taking snuff, interrupting her brother, and making decisive, often insensitive pronouncements like: "family attentions and family affairs are equally my aversion, cousin" (1: 10), pretending to be glib about matters that most eighteenth-century women could not easily dismiss. Ironically, Eliza's subversive cross-dressing ends up (re-)forging interpersonal bonds. Eliza's acting, prosocial rather than antisocial, will eventually bring individuals and families together, strengthening rather than cleaving the social fabric of Craven's dramatic world. Even in this first scene, she pushes her brother to become more aware of his own feelings by pretending to designs on the neighboring heiress. After successfully rousing her brother's jealousy, she laughs with perhaps a touch of Hobbesian mirth: "I shall die, ha, ha! I shall die at your poor disconcerted visage; ha, ha!" (1: 12)

Generic fault lines within the play are also illuminated by Eliza's hilarity in this first scene, which is key to unpacking the heroine's labile identity. Her laughter at the expense of Camply (and later, at her former suitor Belvil) evidences the cool self-possession of the laughing heroine rather than the passionate investment of the sentimental heroine. Mr. Camply is surprised by the sudden appearance of a vivacious Eliza in men's clothing, noting a total reversal in her dress and mood since the morning: "When we parted at breakfast your eyes were red, and your spirits were gone; I thought at dinner to have seen you the same sighing melancholy creature, and here you are all life and spirits, and in breeches too" (1: 13). As "sensibility," argues Patricia Meyer

Spacks, made women “culturally recognizable” (73), the apparently unmoved Eliza is illegible to Camply until she verbalizes her inward anguish. Though the wit and humour of the first scene seem to establish *The Miniature Picture* as a laughing comedy, the allusion to Eliza’s prior emotional state suggests that a very different dramatic work could have shared this play’s backstory of abandonment. Conceivably, Craven did not want her audience to take the comic mode for granted, generic precariousness standing in for the precariousness of female happiness in eighteenth-century patriarchal society. Eliza’s cross-dressing can be interpreted as more than the ploy of a trickster-satirist figure: her stratagem to collect her portrait and her lover is also one of self-preservation. The limited paradigm of distressed virtue offers no change or relief save what is levied externally, by coincidence or by men acting for her. Spacks perceptively identifies “Sensibility as a cultural concept marking female subordination to social imperatives” (72). Thus, Eliza *feels*, but subsequently chooses to *act*, to decline the role of the static, passive sentimental heroine. Mary Robinson’s *Memoirs* recounts a similar two-part reaction when the young actress is informed of her husband’s infidelity. Though Robinson greets this unpleasant truth with a “torrent of tears” and “indescribable” anguish (59), she nonetheless wastes no time in hiring a hackney coach to visit the lodgings of her husband’s mistress and confront her rival. Self-presentation, both onstage and off, can be understood as *genred* (i.e. circumscribed by literary convention) and therefore awareness of these synthetic identities renders them controllable.²¹ Both Robinson and her character Eliza embrace “comic pragmatism” (Morreall 29)—characterized by resourceful action and compromise—rather than the rigid idealism of more serious dramatic modes. Eliza Camply’s transvestitism is the means by which she can escape the submissive role of the female sufferer. As a kind of actor/playwright-character she dons a costume and self-made personality, at one point asking Arabella, Flirtilla’s spinster aunt who is in on the scheme: “How do you think my new character fits upon me?” (1: 19) By the end of Act Three, Flirtilla, confused by Eliza’s unfixed character, the hallmark of Craven’s brand of liberal independence, can only vaguely address her as “you odd creature” (3: 80). Though the “unsettling possibility that all women could act and appear as characters other than themselves” (Nachumi 12) pervades much of the drama of Craven’s period, *The Miniature Picture* presents this skill as socially, personally, and ideologically productive.

As a stage prop—“an object that creates and sustains a dynamic relationship with the audience as a given performance unfolds” (Sofer vi)—the miniature picture is central to the play as a theatrical event. Like the fans wielded by actresses on the Restoration and early eighteenth-century stage, the prop in Craven’s comedy is a thing with “expressive potential” (Sofer 124) that animates the affective relations within the play.²² I also posit that the miniature picture can be considered a generic touchstone, determining the generic registers in which different characters are operating. In essence, characters’ sundry responses to this object make known the instabilities of genre within Craven’s play.

Despite the pain engendered by her loss of the picture, Eliza’s pursuit of it allows her to exercise her wit and ingenuity, the comic protagonist’s prerogative. Instead of conforming to a sentimental female identity, she resists being conflated with her portrait—a one-dimensional representation of her beauty—even as she strives to regain possession of it, confounding at every step of dramatic action the containment of miniaturization. Varying assessments of her show that she is no stock character bounded by literary convention and conservative cultural stereotyping. Several other characters refer to “flat,” safely feminine versions of Eliza that the heroine

convincingly belies for much of the play as a “very lively coxcomb” (3: 86). Flirtilla, for instance, assures her aunt that she will never become “formal---prim---demure” (2: 31) like Eliza, “that prude” (2: 31). The heroine’s former suitor Belvil looks back with nostalgia at former days with a tender-hearted Eliza who pored over Henry Prior’s pathetic tale of female devotion, “Henry and Emma” (1709).²³ Indeed, these phantom Elizas with their “grave looks” (2: 46) and “blushes” (2: 44) bear little resemblance to the principal character of *The Miniature Picture*, the sharply droll, cross-dressing maestra of match-making and trenchant social critique. Clearly the heroine’s identity encompasses more than Belvil’s (senti)mental picture, which, like the miniature itself, only captures a facet of the complete Eliza.

The author of *The Miniature Picture* also was resistant to flat depictions of herself and noted in her life writing the inadequacy of visual representation. Like many other eighteenth-century aristocratic Englishwomen and actresses, she was painted several times over her lifetime; a portrait by a renowned artist was not only a status symbol, but a biographical mode of communicating character. “To Sit for one’s picture,” Jonathan Richardson, Sr. ruminates in *An Essay on the Theory of Painting* (1715), “is to have an Abstract of one’s Life written, and published” (qtd. in Conway 27). Though different artists tried their hand at Craven’s countenance, none of the final products satisfied her, as she discloses in her *Memoirs* that “It is a matter of regret to me, that there is no picture of me which has done me justice, nor is even like me” (8: 18). An anecdote involving the trio of Samuel Johnson, Elizabeth Craven, and the portraitist Sir Joshua Reynolds confirms Craven’s self-assessment as an elusive subject. Johnson, conversing with Craven and Reynolds, asked the painter why he has not finished the picture, though Craven has sat for it half a dozen times. Craven recalls that “Reynolds was much embarrassed, and said, laughing, ‘There is something so comical in the lady’s face, that all my art cannot describe it’” (*Memoirs* 9: 85). Craven’s strong autobiographical impulse perhaps explains her dissatisfaction with the visual biographies for which she sat. Like the similarly ineffable Eliza Camply, the Georgian writer is interested in the whereabouts of her various portraits, however imperfect; Craven does not forget to tell her readers that the Reynolds was purchased by Lord Egremont after the famous painter’s death.

Like Craven and her namesake heroine in *The Miniature Picture*, Miss Flirtilla Loveless (Eliza’s rival and one of the miniature’s temporary keepers) has a fraught relationship with her own image. As a vain man-collector, Flirtilla is the foil to the shifting yet constant Eliza. Having internalized patriarchal objectification, the coquette fixates on her own beauty, reducing herself to a physical commodity as she consults “a pocket-glass” (2: 38) onstage and compares her reflection to the portrait of Eliza that she persuades Belvil to relinquish. She is troubled by this rendering of her competitor, whom she cannot see as a full human subject, and admits in a telling aside: “well now I protest it is prettier than I thought” (2: 34). Her self-objectification is externalized by a full length portrait. Male (or rather “male”) attention within the play moves from the miniature to this painting, which arrives when Eliza, disguised as Sir Harry, pays her visit to the coquette. Eliza parodies the objectifying male gaze by viewing the painted Flirtilla “thro’ his glass” (2: 42) after first studying the continental masterpieces that adorn the salon walls. The offended coquette accuses him of being a lover of “inanimate beauties” (2: 42). Flirtilla’s assessment rings true, as she is treated as a living painting by Sir Harry; her false suitor requests that she pose in attractive ways, Flirtilla instructed as if she is an artist’s model: “Now look up to heaven” (2:42). Continuing to perform a problematic version of eighteenth-century

masculinity, the cross-dressed heroine articulates a crass plan of marrying one woman (Flirtilla) and keeping another as a mistress (Eliza). For obvious reasons, this scheme is comically impossible. Lady Craven, critical of the exclusively male privilege of libertinism, is hyperaware of the sexual double standards that perpetuate injustices against women; she renders these double standards ridiculous in *The Miniature Picture* through Eliza's role-playing. Rake manliness is burlesqued and exposed as a synthetic identity—artificial insofar as it is imitable. Performance destabilizes the rakishness that other writers accept as “a feature of innate and ideal masculine subjectivity” (Mackie 36). Moreover, this stock character of rake, when co-opted by a cross-dressing woman, is negated as a sexual threat; the virginity of the mock-rake's target is never in danger. Thus, the seduction plot with its *telos* of ruin and tragedy is comically transformed by Eliza, who is always at the helm of the generic revisionism within the play.

As Kristina Straub writes about gender play on the stage, the cross-dressed actress interrogates “the construction of a stable oppositional relationship between male and female gender and sexuality” (131). Losing the miniature thus gives Eliza, a self-consciously literary character, the impetus to break out of genre as well as gender binaries. Satiric forces are unleashed within the play through the persona of Sir Harry. The cross-dressed Eliza not only parodies the objectifying male gaze, but also directly refutes the limited and limiting views of her sex and models alternative ways for men to treat women. In the guise of Sir Harry, Eliza demonstrates several courtship practices: she parrots the empty rhetoric of flattery and undying love; she initially treats a potential bride as chattel; but then she considers Flirtilla more respectfully as a rational subject—an equal. In conversation with another suitor, Macgrinnon, the disguised Eliza boldly contradicts the Scotsman's sexism. Macgrinnon advises Sir Harry to play the tyrant-husband and rule his wife by fear and privation: “keep the power and the pence together in your awn [sic] hands” (1: 27). Macgrinnon, invested in an oppressive dynamic between the sexes, is obdurate in his misogyny and admits that acquiring property is his chief goal in courting Flirtilla, for he callously declares: “once I have her fortune, she may go and hang herself for what I care” (1: 29). Eliza condemns the soulless mercenary marriage and the suppression of female liberty after wedlock by describing to Macgrinnon a very different prospective union. Wed to Sir Harry, the heiress would be allowed to keep her money; Flirtilla would be “entirely in her own power; that she may feel totally independent of [her husband]” (1: 29). The imagined future of Sir Harry and Flirtilla manifests Eliza's evolved ideas about the institution of marriage as a partnership of free agents. Craven's audience is presumably more receptive to Eliza's modern notions than the Scotsman's prejudices and Gothic marital narrative of neglect and abuse. Indeed, playgoers are encouraged to laugh at this risible suitor when he receives his comeuppance in Act Three. Such invitations to mirth are part of the playwright's interrogation of dominant patriarchal culture, or at least the hegemonic values and hierarchies that Craven as well as her leading lady have found so oppressive. Macgrinnon's objectification of the heiress is punished, appropriately enough, in a scene replete with physical comedy. Tricked by Flirtilla into a garden assignation with Miss Loveless' maid, Macgrinnon is doused with a bucket of water and then beaten by a male servant. A potential seduction scene is transformed by female ingenuity into farce. The Scotsman's humiliation is payback for overstepping the bounds of respectful wooing and for his intention to subject his future wife to worse material and psychological discomforts. Explicitly through Eliza's statements about marriage and implicitly through Flirtilla's prank, Craven humorously contests Macgrinnon's nightmarish vision of conjugal life. Between the moments of loss and recovery that bookend the primary romantic plot, female characters operate within a feminist

comic framework of ideological questioning.

Eliza uses the wayward miniature as an instrument for the reform of both individuals and ideals. Manipulating the movements of the portrait, the heroine uses this object to teach her unfaithful admirer, and in turn the coquette, a lesson. In her guise as Sir Harry, she makes a show of ogling the miniature portrait in Belvil's presence to demonstrate how he has left Eliza socially vulnerable. Sir Harry, whom the heroine now plays as a villain, becomes a caricature of male entitlement run wild, a menace in his total objectification of women. The play threatens to veer into tragedy when Sir Harry announces his cruel intentions. He tells Belvil that he will use the portrait to seduce and blackmail Eliza, the portrait serving as "as a passport to the good graces of the lady who sat for it" (2: 45). Essentially, Sir Harry has the ability to destroy Eliza's reputation because the possession of her likeness can be used as proof that he has possessed her body. "Should she be cruel and not surrender," he announces, "I shall shew this picture to the whole world, and swear she has, and that will do as well" (2: 50). Continuing to parody an objectifying male gaze, Eliza-as-Sir Harry kisses the miniature, an erotic article even in pseudo-rakish hands. Eliza is the play's manager of looking, directing and redirecting gazes and critiquing exploitative modes of observation. The scenario of public infamy Craven evokes here is not, however, far off from the scandalmongering endured by actresses and women of fashion in late eighteenth-century England, including herself and Robinson. Seized upon as "performative property" (Freeman 28), the actress's identity, howsoever self-authored, was public business. But while Craven struggled against printed slander and the sexualization of her public character, her heroine enacts a fantastic reversal. Eliza becomes an iconoclastic consumer of her own image. As a cross-dressed heroine playing the predator, she satirizes male rapaciousness within the theatre and beyond.

Craven continues to manipulate genre—recognized by scholars as a significant "framework within which subjectivity can be articulated" (Coleman 7-8)—to reinforce the heroine's positional and ideological superiority; the miniature picture itself continues to serve as a generic touchstone as characters interact. The play's internal clashing of dramatic modes is perhaps most evident when Eliza, again in possession of her picture, makes an appearance as her female self at the home of Flirtilla, where she encounters Belvil, whose antagonistic and amorous gazes, towards Sir Harry and Eliza respectively, she repulses. While her lover, anticipating a planned duel with Sir Harry, is deadly serious, Eliza is still in high spirits, still exercising the lively wit of her alter ego. Responding with sarcastic humour when urged by Belvil to "leave this fatal place," she teases: "I fancy you have been reading blank verse of late—perhaps living in society with the tragic muse. Nay, do not strut about so like a distres'd hero" (3: 69). He wonders at this unfamiliar version of Eliza for, instead of a susceptible sentimental heroine who "could ever drop a tear upon woes not her own," he finds a knowing, independent woman who has donned the armour of mockery. He entreats her "for pity's sake be serious" and hyperbolically declares "this gaiety of yours is worse than ten thousand deaths" (3: 72). Once she reveals that *she* was Sir Harry Revel, his exclamations take a different bent, Belvil proclaiming: "my heart overflows with joy—with gratitude—with love" (3: 73). Eliza urges him to curtail his romantic effusions and clarifies that her ruse was "not entirely for you: I wanted my picture, not knowing what imprudencies [sic] you might be drawn into about it" (3: 73). She emphasizes to Belvil her concern for herself as an independent entity that could—and does—emerge unscathed from romantic disappointment. Moreover, when Eliza resumes female dress, she retains aspects of her

alter ego, namely a cavalier attitude that is not so readily divested as the breeches.

Eliza's unmasking, which has the potential to devolve into a scene of high emotion, is punctuated by the play's antidote to sensibility: laughter. Eliza renders the world more knowable (while herself more unknowable) through "critical laughter," which Audrey Bilger describes as targeting "assumptions about female limitations and male superiority" (39). The heroine's mirth draws attention to hegemonic values and hierarchies and facilitates a questioning of dominant patriarchal culture. Craven's self-aware heroine also figures herself as a receptive audience member to the events of a play, *her* play, and declares: "were the fate of it to be well described in a modern play, I fancy it would teach many giddy girls like myself not to part with the one till the other was secured as fast as a lawyer and parson could bind it" (2: 52). Critical of the exposure of media-driven celebrity culture, Craven creates a model of self-possession in a protagonist who controls her own image—sometimes acting as playwright, actor, and critic in a female-dominated metatheatrical world of her own making. The comic plot then hinges on Eliza's generic self-consciousness, the heroine aware of how genre informs action and inaction in a literary text; her knowledge of these delimitations frees her from the inevitability of their performance, in other words from a static state of objectification. Eliza, through her quest to retake her picture, is able to reposition herself within her own personal narrative as a protean comic heroine; she is the regulator of romantic bonds that must be forcibly, albeit comically, refashioned. Eliza's mock-courtship of Flirtilla and the recovery of her miniature are key to the playwright's critique of female objectification, and *The Miniature Picture* is significant for positioning women as agents of change, both external (influencing others) and internal (identify-formation).

The final role Eliza claims in Act Three reflects the centrality of generic play in *The Miniature Picture*: she dynamically blends the resourceful, resilient spirit of the comic heroine with the loving constancy of a sentimental one. With the pronouncement "I have good eyes and a feeling heart" (3: 82), Craven's self-positioning heroine selectively draws on both dramatic traditions, describing her own character in terms of the traits *she* recognizes in herself. Eliza contests and revises other generic constraints. Significantly, the play does not end with a wedding, but rather the promise of a wedding in twelve months' time. This deferral extends the ritual of courtship, a period of relative power when Georgian women enjoyed more influence—or at least its appearance—than they did as daughters and wives. By the end of Act Three, Craven's heroine achieves a comic triumph, simultaneously avoiding calumnious exposure in the public sphere *and* the abandoned woman's picturesque interment in private sorrow. Through cross-dressing and cross-courting, Eliza challenges the ways in which eighteenth-century women are circumscribed by gender expectations to accept rather than question or deflect the objectifying male gaze. *The Miniature Picture* also engages with theatrical and social concerns that Felicity Nussbaum describes as being specifically animated by eighteenth-century actresses. Playing with dramatic conventions, Eliza eschews the actions and reactions that these conventions script for her, instead writing her own comic part. *The Miniature Picture* can thus be situated within a larger collective effort by female playwrights of the period "to turn women from theatrical objects into theatrical subjects" (Sofer 164).

Recantations and jokes: concluding *The Miniature Picture*

Though Eliza indeed retakes her miniature, she also appears to step back from this achievement

by switching to the passive voice: “Here is then at last returned to me the copy of a very foolish original” (2: 52). She is both the “original” and the “copy”, the miniature picture a signifier of her naïve self. When Eliza finally has her picture “safe at last” (3: 64), she tells her brother in a moment of perspicacity, “never will I part with it, but to my husband, whoever he is” (3: 64), a line that suggests the miniature symbolizes her chastity. Though perhaps didactic window dressing, the play’s lesson to female audiences is that women should not relinquish their persons—in body or in miniature—before they have the social, legal, and financial securities of wedlock (however limited in the eighteenth century). As the manager of her own identity, she will henceforth protect her private interests not only through performance, as she did with her alter ego, but through “the dignity of self-concealment” (Spacks 67).

Similarly, in the play’s closing scene, Eliza, speaking in character but also potentially ventriloquizing the playwright (Craven) and the actress in the role (Robinson), acknowledges her audacity and seeks the house’s absolution.²⁴ *The Miniature Picture* ends with a rhyming couplet that may either support or deny the strain of subversion hitherto operating in this comedy. Addressing women theatregoers, Eliza counsels: “Ladies, I trust you will adopt my plan, / And only wear the dress to gain the man” (3: 87). This couplet is a recantation of the play’s profeminism, a palinodic assurance that Eliza’s cross-dressing is at heart socially conservative, a means to bring about appropriate heteronormative unions. The perceived threat of unknowability, what Spacks identifies as the period’s “intense concern about the ubiquity and impenetrability of disguise,” is potentially defused and the rebellious energies of transvestism contained (56). But these lines could also be interpreted as ironic moralizing or a tongue-in-cheek reminder of the allure of women in breeches, both onstage and off. The ambiguity of the couplet is redolent of other interpretive complexities within this comedy of shifting and static women. The miniature itself—as title object and stage prop—generates diverse, sometimes contradictory meanings. While the lost miniature initially serves as a visual metonym for the vulnerability of the sentimental heroine, the retaken miniature comes to symbolize the creative female comedian’s active resistance to the physical and ideological constraints of gender and genre; the heroine is both gender- and genre-bending. On the stage, Craven’s miniature is the material link between actress, playwright, and protagonist, an object that underlines what scholars have observed as the permeable boundaries of Georgian theatre; within the printed playtext, the miniature is a slippery emblem of female legibility in a play that experiments with generic conventions, which usually delimit female identities. Dialogic in representing women as both possessions and self-possessed subjects, Elizabeth Craven’s *The Miniature Picture* is an understudied work that merits greater scholarly attention and, perhaps most importantly, a modern edition.

Notes

¹ In *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson, Written by Herself* (1801), Robinson recollects: “I received, through the hands of Lord Malden, the Prince’s portrait in miniature, painted by the late Mr. Meyer. This picture is now in my possession. Within the case was a small heart cut in paper, which I also have; one side was written, *Je ne change qu’en mourant*. On the other, *Unalterable to my Perdita through life*” (115).

² Broadly defined as “the attachment of honorific or sensational status to an individual” (Rojek 84), celebrity has been the subject of much recent scholarly activity. My understanding of stage celebrity is influenced by the work of theatre historian Joseph Roach, who reflects on celebrity’s dependence on “public intimacy,” the illusion of availability and inwardness (93). Felicity Nussbaum considers female theatrical celebrity in similar terms, discussing the eighteenth-century actress as “projecting an accessible, layered interiority that traversed the boundaries between . . . public display and personal revelation” (16).

³ Michael Gamer and Terry F. Robinson also shed light on Robinson’s self-conscious social and theatrical performances. See “Mary Robinson and the Dramatic Art of the Comeback.” *Studies in Romanticism*. 48.2 (2009): 219-56.

⁴ Alison Conway interprets this painting “as part of a larger publicity campaign surrounding Robinson’s bid to elicit a pension from the Prince of Wales, a campaign that she won” (118). Robinson finally received financial compensation and, despite the damage to her reputation, eventually returned to the limelight as a professional writer.

⁵ Significantly, the playwright and her heroine share the same Christian name and initials. It is probable that Elizabeth Craven performed in this role in private productions of *The Miniature Picture*, evidenced by a sketch of her in the masculine costume of the cross-dressed Eliza Camply. This drawing, by the noted miniaturist Richard Cosway, came into King George IV’s possession on May 24, 1821, according to the website for the Royal Collection Trust. See this image at: <https://d9y2r2msyxru0.cloudfront.net/sites/default/files/collection-online/d/f/264491-1333378232.jpg>

⁶ For a more Robinson-focused discussion of *The Miniature Picture*, see Chapter Five of Julia H. Fawcett’s *Spectacular Disappearances: Celebrity and Privacy, 1696-1801* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2016). Fawcett also reads this play as attune to eighteenth-century celebrity culture and powerfully argues for Robinson’s strategic defiance of containment as an actress in the role of Eliza Camply and later as a writer.

⁷ In *The Gamester*, the male protagonist Young Valere is tested by his lover Angelica, who gives him her diamond-set miniature. She uses this temptingly valuable object to see if his love is stronger than his addiction. Angelica cross-dresses to win her picture from Valere at the gaming table and in Act Five, thus shames him into repentance and reform: “Is this the Price you set upon my Favours. . . Is it possible thou couldst be so base to expose my Picture at a common Board, amongst a Crew of Revellers” (189).

⁸ Pointon argues that practices surrounding miniatures were gendered; men hid these tokens from view while women openly exhibited them.

⁹ Kamilla Elliott points out that “the heyday of miniature portraits in England, 1760-1840, coincides almost exactly with the first wave of Gothic fiction,” and explains how miniatures are deployed in this genre (126).

¹⁰ I agree with Julia H. Fawcett’s thoughtful evaluation of this likelihood.

¹¹ For more on actresses and Georgian celebrity culture, see: *Notorious Muse: The Actress in British Art and Culture, 1776-1812*. Ed. Robyn Asleson; Laura Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity: Eighteenth-Century British Actresses and Strategies for Image Making*; Felicity Nussbaum, *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theatre*; Cheryl Wanko, *Roles of Authority: Thespian Biography and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Britain*; David Worrall, *Celebrity, Performance, Reception: British Georgian Theatre as Social Assemblage*.

¹² I am in agreement with Martha Nussbaum, who defines objectification as: “treating as an object what is really not an object, what is, in fact a human being” (257). Nussbaum identifies the ways objects and objectified persons are treated, including in her list inertness, fungibility, and ownership, all characteristics that Craven’s heroine resists.

¹³ Craven’s other literary works include a musical farce called *The Silver Tankard* (1781), *The Georgian Princess*, which played at Covent Garden in 1799, a prose tale written for Horace Walpole, *Modern Anecdotes of the Ancient Family of the Kinkervankotsdarsprakengotchderns: A Tale for Christmas* (1779), and several plays and songs she wrote for performance at her private theatre in Brandenburg House.

¹⁴ In her *Memoirs*, Craven explains her dislike of Sheridan by recounting: “Under pretense of writing an epilogue for my play in three acts, of ‘The Miniature Picture,’ which was first performed at the Town Hall at Newbury, for the benefit of the poor, [Sheridan] borrowed it of me, and brought it out against my will at Drury Lane...” (9: 129), a story that is repeated in *Sheridaniana: or, Anecdotes of the Life of Richard Brinsley Sheridan; his Table-talk, and Bon Mots* (1826).

¹⁵ Unfortunately premiering at the end of the London season, her comedy was only performed four times according to *The London Stage*; and, despite Sheridan’s involvement and her own showy presence at the Theatre Royale, eighteenth-century critics were generally unimpressed by the play; *The Monthly Review* damned it as insubstantial: “This Miniature is confessedly a hasty sketch, not originally intended for public execution” (74).

¹⁶ For more on the theatrical entertainments at Brandenburg House, see Chapter Four of Sybil Marion Rosenfeld’s *Temples of Thespis: Some Private Theatres and Theatricals in England and Wales, 1700-1820*.

¹⁷ *The Morning Post* announced: “At the masquerade in Covent Garden on 21 May [1779] the beautiful actress attracted great attention wearing Jacintha’s breeches in public” (qtd. in Bass 67).

¹⁸ Michael Gamer and Terry F. Robinson discuss Mary Robinson’s social and theatrical spectacles of self-presentation in their article, “Mary Robinson and the Dramatic Art of the Comeback.” *Studies in Romanticism*.

¹⁹ There is as yet no modern edition of Craven's play. The edition I am using is only divided into acts; there are no scene divisions and/or line number. Therefore, my in-text citations will indicate act and page number(s).

²⁰ The close connection between masquerade and illicit desire—evident in Aphra Behn's *The Rover* (1677) and William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675)—is replaced in *The Miniature Picture* by masquerade as a way to achieve respectable personal fulfilment by unrespectable means. See Terry Castle's highly influential social and literary history of masquerading, *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnavalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction*.

²¹ Scholars have identified Mary Robinson's self-aware deployment of literary master narratives. After she was abandoned by the Prince of Wales, Robinson "portray[ed] herself as the victim of a Gothic romance" (Mellor 244).

²² I am drawing on Andrew Sofer's chapter on the fan as a "sexual semaphore" in Restoration drama.

²³ Henry tests Emma's faith, hiding his identity and posing as a banished criminal who must flee to the woods. The heroine of Prior's poem abjectly declares her loyalty, articulating her intention to suffer alongside her lover.

²⁴ Felicity Nussbaum, considering female performers' life writing alongside the dramatic vehicles of their fame, observes: "The memoirs—and some of the plays in which they acted and the epilogues they recited—offered exoneration for the actresses' lapses . . ." (112).

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