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The Nabob, National Identity, and Social Performance in Elizabeth Griffith's *A Wife in the Right* (1772)

Le nabab, l'identité nationale et la mise en scène sociale dans *A Wife in the Right* d'Elizabeth Griffith (1772)

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Article abstract

Elizabeth Griffith's play *A Wife in the Right* (1772) features a nabob character, a British man returned from India after having made his fortune through imperial pursuits. This article explores Griffith's use of the nabob and how the theme of national identity is linked to a discourse around the potential gap between external appearance and internal character in this drama. This article aims to contribute to the growing scholarship surrounding female dramatists in the long eighteenth century by providing an initial step in close reading this drama by Griffith in the context of philosophy and medical writing of the period. Applying, more specifically, Adam Smith's philosophical and George Cheyne's medical writing to a close reading of *A Wife in the Right,* this article reads Griffith's nabob character and her commentary on national identity as part of a broader social performance of self in this period.

The Nabob, National Identity, and Social Performance in Elizabeth Griffith's *A Wife in the Right* (1772)

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The varied roles that Elizabeth Griffith held throughout her career—as actress, translator, author, dramatist, and critic—all demonstrate a fervent desire to tackle socio-political issues and engage in the discourses of the late eighteenth century. Her 1772 drama, *A Wife in the Right*, is a prose comedy in five acts that received a poor reception on its first and only night of performance. This play, published in the same year as Samuel Foote's *The Nabob*, demonstrates Griffith's use of comedy to address wider social concerns about political corruption in Britain while also telling a love story. Griffith's relegation of her commentary on imperialism to the subplot is part of a tactful mediation of her own use of the increasingly popular antagonistic nabob character. Griffith tackled a range of topical social concerns in her writing while negotiating the pressures of the London scene and her personal politics and financial reality. This article focuses on Griffith's presentation of national identity through the complex figure of the nabob in *A Wife in the Right*, situating this representation in the context of Griffith's career. Furthermore, this article examines Griffith's characterization of the nabob as one part of her broader dramatic analysis of social performance and legibility of character by contextualizing this reading using the concerns about social performance and national identity found in the medical and philosophical writing of the eighteenth century. *A Wife in the Right* features a particularly complex dramatic treatment of the figure of the nabob that begins to challenge negative

attitudes towards the East and contemporary British anxieties around the destabilizing impacts of the British empire on national identity.

Griffith was born in Wales but grew up in Ireland. She was the "daughter of the actor-manager of Dublin's Smock Alley theatre, Thomas Griffith, and so grew up in the heart of Ireland's theatrical community."[1] Elizabeth's theatrical career began onstage, debuting in 1749 "on the Dublin stage as Juliet to the Romeo of Thomas Sheridan."[2] Her literary recognition came, in part, from *A Series of Genuine Letters Between Henry and Frances* (1757), a text she co-wrote with her husband, Richard Griffith. The letters express both the couple's ideals about romantic relationships and Elizabeth's defence of the role of the educated, literate woman in society. However, this overt defence of women was inconsistent throughout her work: "In later writings, Griffith … supported a more domestic role for women than was evident in *Letters Between Henry and Frances*."[3] Griffith's first staged play, *The Platonic Wife* (1765), however, was critical of the patriarchal benefits reaped from marriage at the expense of female liberty. This play received negative critical responses, including one from *The Monthly Review*, which avoided "too rigid an examination of a performance she [Griffith] may possibly wish to forget" and declared, "Let the curtain therefore descend, and all deficiencies of plot, character, sentiment, language, and moral, be for ever veiled from the eye of Criticism."[4] This condemnation of Griffith's dramatic work was informative for her. Elizabeth Eger explains how, following this response, Griffith realized that in order to make money from her writing, she "would have to conform to contemporary sexual stereotypes rather than challenge the orthodoxy."[5] The commercial and practical aspects of Griffith's involvement in the London theatre scene can

1. Fiona Ritchie, *Women and Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 81.

2. Ibid.

3. Gerardine Meaney, Mary O'Dowd, and Bernadette Whelan, *Reading the Irish Woman: Studies in Cultural Encounter and Exchange, 1714–1960* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 22.

4. Ralph Griffiths, ed., "Art. 19. *The Platonic Wife, a Comedy*," *The Monthly Review*, no. 42 (February 1765), 155, https://search.proquest.com/britishperiodicals/docview/4754543/B36FD08ABFEB49E9PQ/3?accountid=13827.

5. Elizabeth Eger, "Elizabeth Griffith," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004), https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-11596?rskey=0j7SXJ&result=1.

therefore be read as having influenced a degree of subtlety or reserve in the didactic social commentary of her later texts.

Griffith's negotiation between her more contentious personal beliefs, desire for marketability, and capitulation to the practical aspects of getting her work produced and published were motivated by her family's financial situation. However, Eger notes that "Elizabeth Griffith spent the last decade of her life free of the obligation to support her family, surely a relief for someone who had laboured under the weight of financial pressures for so much of her life."[6] The reason for Griffith's freedom in later life was her son, Richard's status as a wealthy East India Company employee who returned to Ireland and was able to support his parents in their later years. Betty Rizzo explains how Griffith "met John Manship, a director of the East India Company, susceptible enough to present her son Richard—a very likely boy—with the post of writer (or clerk) for the company in India."[7] The English East India Company, founded in 1600 by a royal charter, "not only proved to be the greatest of the joint-stock companies engaged in foreign trade but also a valuable instrument in the creation of English colonial and Imperial systems."[8] Rizzo also explains that there was a considerable financial investment required, with Griffith's concern for her literary success likely informed by an understanding that "Outfitting a prospective nabob for India was a costly business and the more assets he [Richard] took with him to invest in commercial opportunity the better."[9] Griffith's plan worked, as after ten years abroad, in 1780, "her son Richard Griffith reappeared from India not even thirty and a nabob, rich enough to buy an estate in County Kildare, marry two heiresses (serially), establish an important family, sit in the Irish parliament, and adopt his parents."[10] Griffith was aware of the benefits imperialism could offer families like her own, and this awareness paid off as she retired on the estate of her nabob son. With this knowledge, it becomes difficult to read her sympathy towards the nabob character

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6. Ibid.

7. Betty Rizzo, "'Depressa Resurgam': Elizabeth Griffith's Playwriting Career," in *Curtain Calls: British and American Women and the Theater, 1660–1820*, eds. Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1991), 132.

8. K. N. Chaudhuri, *The English East India Company: The Study of an Early Joint-Stock Company 1600–1640* (London: Routledge, 1965), 3.

9. Rizzo, "'Depressa Resurgam': Elizabeth Griffith's Playwriting Career," 133.

10. Ibid., 138.

without reading a degree of self-serving apology. However, her rendering of the nabob tells of her connections to the East India Company and ties into a broader discussion around national identity and social performances of self in this period.

A Wife in the Right centres on the married couple Lord and Lady Seaton and a potential love affair that Lord Seaton attempts to initiate with their friend, Charlotte Melville. Charlotte, who rejects these advances, is reunited at the end of the play with her true love interest, Colonel Ramsay. Ramsay, a character shown returning from overseas at the start of the play, stands in direct contrast to Griffith's nabob figure, serving as a foil to the nabob Governor's effeminacy and imperially informed national identity. Governor Ned Anderson is a man who has recently returned to Britain from India, having made his fortune there. The Governor is shown attempting to buy a seat in British Parliament, and his nabob status is made more explicit when Griffith describes him wearing East Indian clothing and declaring a preference for the imperial lifestyle. This includes eating curry and wearing clothing without buttons.

Griffith's presentation of the Governor's appearance and dialogue feeds into her analytical depiction of apparel and its ties to national identity in this play. In order to analyze her dramaturgical choices, I read Griffith's work alongside prominent eighteenth-century medical and philosophical theory, namely Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and George Cheyne's *An Essay of Health and Long Life* (1724). By reading Griffith's drama with a concomitant consideration of how the popular medical and philosophical theorists of the eighteenth century also addressed the topics of self, social performance, and national identity, this article highlights the complexity and topicality of Griffith's use of the nabob.

Griffith's nabob, Ned, is introduced and described to the audience by a servant character as "a great rich Nabob."[11] The nabob, an East India Company employee, frequently depicted as having returned to England after making their fortune in India, has been referred to as representing a cultural hybridity between East and West. Yoti Pandey Sharma explains how nabobs "on the one hand … adopted local habits

11. Elizabeth Griffith, *A Wife in the Right* (London: E. & C. Dilly, J. Robson, and J. Walter, 1772), 34.

such as Mughal-style clothing, smoking the *hookah* [hubble-bubble], eating *paan* [betel leaf], and indulging in Mughal leisure pursuits. On the other, they remained Europeans, retaining the cultural mores of their own countries."[12] Unlike the civil servants who went to settle in India, the nabob character commonly represented in literature from this period was, as Renu Juneja writes, "a species of merchants and adventurers who have come to India solely to acquire wealth and who aim to return home as soon as they have acquired enough of it."[13] The nabob was a cultural oddity, representing different political and national influences at play, and, by the 1770s, they were received in Britain with caution.

The term "nabob," however, has a more prestigious root than its widespread use as a derogatory term in the latter half of the eighteenth century would indicate. Tillman Nechtman explains, "Literally, *nabob* was an Anglicized transliteration of the term *nawab*, the title given to aristocratic regional leaders within the Mughal empire in South Asia."[14] Despite the roots of the term, "The notion that nabobs were a corrupting influence wherever they reared their heads took hold of the popular imagination in the 1770s."[15] Griffith, in this play, addresses the late eighteenth-century concern surrounding the East India Company's exportation of both goods and culture and the impact of this phenomenon on Britain. However, it is important to note that Griffith also demonstrates a degree of subtlety in her criticisms; her characterization of the Governor is not a mere caricature despite the socio-political climate of the 1770s.

The performance history of *A Wife in the Right* was short but not sweet. *The Monthly Review*'s description summarizes this lack of success in performance: "This piece hath afforded us so much entertain-

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12. Yoti Pandey Sharma, "Sociability in Eighteenth-Century Colonial India," *International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments* 31, no. 1 (2019): 10, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26952997.

13. Renu Juneja, "The Native and the Nabob: Representations of the Indian Experience in Eighteenth-Century English Literature," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 27, no. 1 (1992): 184, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/002198949202700116.

14. Tillman Nechtman, *Nabobs: Empire and Identity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 11.

15. Philip Lawson and Jim Phillips, ""Our Execrable Banditti": Perceptions of Nabobs in Mid-Eighteenth Century Britain," *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 16, no. 3 (1984): 234, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4048755.

ment in the perusal, that we cannot help thinking it merited a better fate than it met with on the *first* and *only* night of its appearance, on the theatre in Covent-Garden."[16] Although *The Monthly Review* presents a sympathetic response, members of the audience were apparently not so generous, as "The epilogue was applauded but when the play was announced again, apples were aimed at the chandelier and Colman withdrew the play forever."[17] Griffith herself addresses this unsuccessful performance in the preface to the 1772 publication of the play. She clarifies her intentions for the nabob character Governor Anderson, observing that these were not met by the drunk actor, Mr. Shuter, playing him. Griffith explains how Shuter "made the Governor appear in a light which the author never intended; that of a mean, ridiculous buffoon."[18]

Despite the reactionary response to nabobs in the later eighteenth century, Griffith's work, by her own proclamation, does not deliberately portray Governor Anderson as a "mean, ridiculous buffoon." The Governor simultaneously operates as comedic relief and an indicator of Griffith's engagement with eighteenth-century anxieties surrounding national identity. Despite her sympathetic characterization, Griffith still engages in the popular use of the nabob by including this character. Lawson and Phillips note how "The unscrupulous East Indian with an insatiable lust for riches became a familiar and popular figure on the London stage."[19] The nabob figure in British culture of the 1770s was considered a threat due partly to the political actions of real-life nabobs. Nabobs "purchased country estates, solicited peerages and advantageous marriages, and sought seats in parliament."[20] The number of nabobs taking parliamentary seats in this period did rise: "There were twelve in 1761, nineteen in 1768, twenty-two in 1774 and twenty-seven in 1780. But at no stage was their behavior that of a unified and coherent lobby."[21] Although nabobs were present and active in this period, the literary and cultural responses to this group represented

16. Ralph Griffiths, ed., "Art. 34. *A Wife in the Right; a Comedy*," *The Monthly Review*, 47, August 1772, 152, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hxjfh3&view=1up&seq=166&skin=2021.
17. Rizzo, "'Depressa Resurgam': Elizabeth Griffith's Playwriting Career," 136.
18. Griffith, *A Wife in the Right* (preface), 3.
19. Lawson and Phillips, "'Our Execrable Banditti,'" 229.
20. Ibid., 227.
21. Ibid., 228.

an anxiety that did not necessarily match the realities of the nabob's political or social power. Ned, in *A Wife in the Right*, is alone onstage when he explains, "I must e'en be content to purchase a seat, on the best terms I can."[22] Although the Governor's potential political threat to the British social order is established early on, Griffith's play offers the satisfying conclusion of Ned failing to secure a parliamentary seat, as well as the happy resolution of the protagonists' romantic relationships. These plot aspects reinforce the play's comedic classification, yet the comedy does not detract from Griffith's social commentary. Griffith's commentary can be seen in the fact that Ned's character crosses the boundaries of disguise and revelation by simultaneously declaring his allegiance to one nation through clothing and dialogue and, in doing so, distancing himself from his original nationality. The social concern surrounding the cultural exchange between Britain and India and the potentially disruptive role of the nabob, especially as a character that does not present in expressly legible or expected ways, was also present in the philosophy of the eighteenth century.

The obsession with regulated social behaviour, performance, and spectatorship that is easily observable in eighteenth-century theatre can be clearly identified in Adam Smith's philosophy. Smith was openly critical of the role of the British Empire and the cultural effects of the East India Company on the nation-state of Britain in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). Siraj Ahmed succinctly explains Smith's personal and philosophical position on the East India Company and the works of the British Empire more broadly:

> In *The Wealth of Nations*—itself an attack on the very economic system that gave rise to merchant companies, written during the first decade of British rule in India—Adam Smith described how the East India Company's agents profiteered on grain during a famine that was thought to have killed more than one-third of Bengal's native population of twenty million people in 1770–71 and also suggested that they were unqualified for public office.[23]

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22. Griffith, *A Wife in the Right*, 14.

23. Siraj Ahmed, "The Theater of the Civilized Self: Edmund Burke and the East India Trials," *Representations* 78, no. 1 (2002): 31. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rep.2002.78.1.28.

Smith's explicit criticism is evident in his writing from 1776. Smith's earlier work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, does not address imperialism with the same directness but does address the fundamental issues that can be identified in the responses to nabobs and empire in the 1770s in his presentation of social order and behaviour. Smith drew on the passions in his philosophy, explaining their importance as motivators and originators of feeling and social expression. In the eighteenth century, the passions were often pointed to as keys to understanding the individual, functioning either as an external expression of internal feeling or as an inauthentic performative show of feeling. The expression of the passions, much like clothing and speech, was, therefore, something that could be read or misread dependent on the performer's intention and the spectator's experience.

Smith links the passions to wealth and status and, consequently, demonstrates their potential power as tools that can influence public opinion. For example, in the chapter "Of the origin of ambition, and of the distinction of ranks," Smith argues that "The rich man glories in his riches, because he feels that they naturally draw upon him the attention of the world, and that mankind are disposed to go along with him in all those agreeable emotions with which the advantages of his situation so readily inspire him."[24] The potential for wealthy men to influence the emotional states of those in their company is made explicit by Smith when he claims that in a gathering "it is upon him [the rich man] that their passions seem all to wait with expectation, in order to receive that movement and direction which he shall impress upon them."[25] The passions, therefore, are acknowledged by Smith as socially felt, easily transmittable via sympathy, and particularly powerfully wielded by the upper ranks of British society. Smith establishes the passions and the process of sympathetic observation as key to social interaction and maintaining social order. The potential for this order to be disrupted or diverted by individuals making their self, including their national character, less legible is respectively addressed in both Griffith's and Smith's writing.

Smith claims that "Upon this disposition of mankind, to go along with all the passions of the rich and the powerful, is founded the

24. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London: A. Millar, 1759), 110.
25. Ibid., 112.

distinction of ranks, and the order of society."[26] In this model, if the individuals reaching the higher ranks of society are those who, like the nabob, have gained status quickly and through foreign money, the order of society and the established social dynamic may be threatened. The failure of the nabobs to inspire public approbation and supplication can be read as tied to their social performances, which did not meet the national and cultural expectations of the British public that Smith describes. Smith asks, by what measures and actions are young noblemen taught to support their social position? He answers this question by stating that, for the young nobleman, "As all his words, as all his motions are attended to, he learns an habitual regard to every circumstance of ordinary behaviour, and studies to perform all those small duties with the most exact propriety."[27] Therefore, if British gentlemen were accustomed to performing the social actions necessary to inspire loyalty and maintain social order, the hybrid mannerisms of the nabob both failed to meet these customs and highlighted a possible instability to this social order.

While the nabobs did not necessarily possess the knowledge and understanding of how to socially perform like British gentlemen, they did possess sufficient wealth to put them in the social milieu of the upper classes. Wealth alone, however, did not equate to a straightforward classification of status, and in *A Wife in the Right*, Ned asks, "what is wealth without honours, to a person of my consequence, d'ye see?"[28] The Governor is still alone onstage for this line, and the rhetorical question can be read as Griffith involving those in the audience by asking them to perceive the attitude that the Governor holds. Here, Griffith explains Ned's motivations in a way that corresponds with Smith's social philosophy when he writes, "To be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency and approbation, are all the advantages which we can propose to derive from it [wealth]."[29] Smith argues that emulation and ambition come not from a desire for material ease or comfort but from vanity. Griffith's dramatic portrayal of the Governor indicates a similar attitude by directly representing his character's beliefs about the British social

26. Ibid., 114.
27. Ibid., 117.
28. Griffith, *A Wife in the Right*, 14.
29. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 109–10.

order and his role within it through an onstage aside where he expressly links wealth with honour. The performance of the nabob in Griffith's play can be read as critical of the financial status of these figures, especially when twinned with an awareness of Smith's argument that wealth often allowed the individual to manipulate others through their expression of the passions. Griffith's depiction of Ned's nabob character draws on clothing and speech to signify his status and role. Her use of these signifiers creates a space in the plot to work through the complexity of the nabob character, as both inherently legible as a nabob and potentially illegible as a culturally defined individual.

Throughout *A Wife in the Right*, Ned expresses his loyalty to and personal identification with imperial India in two important ways: his clothing and speech. These external signifiers of otherness are marked as "nabobery," and thus negative, by the other characters in the play. Ned's appearance is signalled as other by Griffith from his first appearance onstage when he enters "*in a loose Indian habit*."[30] His clothing is described in a stage direction, which is not the case for any other character in this play. Robert S. DuPlessis explains that "Clothing is materially and metaphorically multivalent,"[31] clarifying that clothing can denote "personal style or participation in a group's fashion, declare autonomy or exhibit conformity or subordination, reveal aspiration for economic and cultural capital or attainment of wealth and status."[32] For the Governor, his clothing serves as several of these displays, as his garb can be read as adherence to one nation's fashions and not another's while still indicating wealth and status that were clearly legible to the other characters in the play. Clothing, and the regulation of who could wear what, held an important role in ongoing historical discussions of how an individual should socially perform. The nabob figure tapped into an existing social preoccupation with clothing and the ongoing prescription of different elements of "luxury culture" to those of varying class statuses.

A primary example of this explicit desire to regulate the social performances of wealth and status was the sumptuary laws. As Giorgio

30. Griffith, *A Wife in the Right*, 11.

31. Robert S. DuPlessis, *The Material Atlantic: Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World, 1650–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 4.

32. Ibid.

Riello and Ulinka Rublack explain, up to the end of the eighteenth century "sumptuary laws (from the Latin word *sumptus* meaning expense) sought to regulate social difference in many parts of the world and imposed policies about who could spend how much on what types of dress and accessories."[33] Sumptuary laws, although considered part of sartorial history, had "a much broader significance in medieval and early modern societies as they mediated between individuals and states to regulate consumer behaviour and values."[34] The state-enforced control over specific visual depictions of character and class tied into ongoing social anxiety across the centuries about the legibility and authenticity of the social actor. The eighteenth-century nabob not only represented a wealthy figure, but also a mixture of cultural influences (British, Indian, and the liminal imperial combination of both), as well as a hint of the disruptive social order that was based on appearance, wealth, and personality, as opposed to inherent class status and adherence to societal norms. In her deployment of the nabob, Griffith engages in this discourse, as well as in the theatre-specific history of costume as a visual language for the audience.

Chloe Wigston Smith explains how in this period, "men and women often agreed that dress could be read and telltale traits such as gender, status, and taste could be telegraphed through a person's choice of wig, buckles, stockings, and sword."[35] This reading process took place on and offstage, and "Theatrical costumes, for instance, relied on shorthand in order to register a character's status, nationality, or fashionability from the first appearance onstage."[36] Ned's clothing holds a significance founded upon questions of nationality and class. As exemplified by this character, the nabob represents a wealthy figure whose wealth, and therefore class status, is a source of potential conflict when placed in the context of a social system that explicitly regulates resources and clothing among those of different class statuses. Regarding the classed element of clothing, Adam Smith explains the social process of fashions being adopted: "The graceful,

33. Giorgio Riello and Ulinka Rublack, eds., *The Right to Dress: Sumptuary Laws in a Global Perspective c. 1200-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1.

34. Ibid., 4.

35. Chloe Wigston Smith, *Women, Work, and Clothes in the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 5.

36. Ibid., 5–6.

the easy and commanding manners of the great, joined to the usual richness and magnificence of their dress, give a grace to the very form which they happen to bestow upon it."[37] The reciprocal benefit of the wearer's rank lending status to the clothing, and the clothing reinforcing the wearer's status, is outlined by Smith and can be seen in the reactions of Griffith's characters to Ned's clothing. The threat of the Governor's choice of clothes is manifested in the rank and value he bestows on them as a public figure. Jennie Batchelor notes how "many eighteenth-century commentators argued that dress constituted a form of language through which meaning was generated by the wearer and read by the observer."[38] In *A Wife in the Right*, the Governor's clothing, and other characters' reading of it as transgressive, can be easily contextualized in relation to the social importance of the legibility of dress and its value as a signifier of character in this period.

The disconnect between Ned's appearance and national and social status is clearly identifiable to the audience and the play's characters alike. This disconnect is also informed by the shifting eighteenth-century norms and instruction on what to wear coming not just from the state but also from physicians and philosophers. In *An Essay of Health and Long Life* (1724), George Cheyne informs the reader that "*much* and *heavy* Cloaths, *attract* and *draw* too much by *Perspiration*."[39] Cheyne recommends that "those who are *sober*, or who would render themselves *hardy*, ought to accustom themselves to as few Cloaths, both in *Summer* and *Winter*, as is possible."[40] The looseness of the Governor's Indian clothing is not only suited to a warmer climate but also to the advice for creating a healthy and hardy Englishman that Cheyne indicated in 1724. In and by the 1770s, however, the cultural and national significance of this type of clothing far outweighed the possible medical benefits espoused by physicians earlier in the century. The influence of other nations on eighteenth-century British dressing was primarily seen in the figure of the macaroni.

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37. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 373.

38. Jennie Batchelor, *Dress, Distress and Desire: Clothing and the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 9.

39. George Cheyne, *An Essay of Health and Long Life* (London: George Strahan, 1724), 195.

40. Ibid.

Macaronis were described in 1788 in Francis Grose's dictionary of the vulgar tongue (with a variant spelling) as follows: "MACCARONI. An Italian paste made of flour and eggs. Also, a fop: which name arose from a club, called the Maccaroni Club, instituted by some of the most dressy travelled gentlemen about town, who led the fashions."[41] Peter McNeil explains how "Many macaroni men wore the tightly cut suit or *habit à la française* that derived from French court society, which also became the transnational and up-to-date fashion for many European men at this time."[42] The tighter clothing, and its links to Italian and French popular styles, stood in opposition to the Indian-associated loose clothing that had both cultural and social implications in Britain due to its evocation of empire and reminder of Britain's imperial aspirations. Adam Smith also acknowledges the impact of custom and place on fashion, stating that "in different climates and where different customs and ways of living take place, as the generality of any species receives a different conformation from those circumstances, so different ideas of its beauty prevail."[43] The Governor's adoption of a style of beauty or fashion that is not British is met with disapproval from the characters of Lord Seaton and Colonel Ramsay. Ned's lack of immediate legibility regarding his national identity, and yet, immediate legibility as a nabob character to an audience or the other characters, demonstrate his conflicting position concerning these external signifiers of character. Seaton and Ramsay's reactions to Ned's appearance present the issue of the nationally ambiguous social performance of character, specifically the potential threat of an influential figure wearing a fashion with imperial associations in a British society that held varied and complex relationships with other nations.

Colonel Ramsay and Lord Seaton register their disapproval of Ned's choice of clothing by appealing to British social norms and gender politics while encouraging him to change. Ramsay announces that "the hour of dressing draws nigh, and as the Governor seems to have a good deal to do, in that way, I think it but fair to allow him leisure

41. Francis Grose, *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (London: S. Hooper, 1788), 310–11.

42. Peter McNeil, *Pretty Gentlemen: Macaroni Men and the Eighteenth-Century Fashion World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 14.

43. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 382.

for it."[44] These lines show that Ned's clothing is immediately marked by his peers as inappropriate, and his current state is far removed from the polite standards of British dressing. Ned's visual dissociation from British norms is further compounded by some of his own lines, for example, when he responds to Ramsay by exclaiming, "Dress!—What silly fops you Europeans are!—Why can't a man sit down and eat his victuals, in a comfortable easy habit."[45] The phrase "you Europeans," which Griffith assigns to Ned, highlights his separation from the other male characters through his East India Company identity and Griffith's process of characterization through language and clothing.

Griffith gives Ned lines that simultaneously mark his otherness while revealing the logic behind his choices; Ned argues for comfort and ease, especially when eating. Ned's defence of his choice of clothing continues when he claims his preference for comfort over "being cased up in a strait waistcoat, like a mad-man, d'ye see?"[46] The hyperbole of these terms, the connotations of the straight jacket and mental illness, show Ned's passionate defence of his logic. To Ned, wearing comfortable clothing is appropriate due to its utility, and the Governor separately defends the element of national identity tied to these clothes. Equally, here used in company, Ned's rhetorical "do you see?" becomes a call for Seaton and Ramsay to understand the logic of his clothing choices. By calling attention to the reasoning behind Ned's choices, Griffith slightly softens the impact of Ned's nationally dysphoric clothing in this scene.

Seaton and Ramsay counter this logic not with a clear explanation of the benefits of eating while wearing tighter clothing but with an appeal to both gendered and classed identity. Lord Seaton tries to convince Ned to change his clothes using an appeal to expected gendered codes of conduct, working on the basis of clothing reflecting one's social status as a Gentleman or Lady. Seaton tells Ned, "Why really, Governor, tho' your apparel may be perfectly convenient, to yourself, I should think it rather too easy and familiar a garb, for the company of ladies."[47] The concept of men, as well as women, having to be "uneasy" for the sake of social propriety, and the idea that clothing

44. Griffith, *A Wife in the Right*, 12–13.
45. Ibid., 13.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.

can restrain one both physically and metaphorically, adds to Griffith's deployment of costume to comment on the creation and presentation of the social self. Griffith makes this commentary explicit in Lord Seaton's reflective line: "We are all too much bound up in forms and fashions, I confess, Governor."[48] The Governor is not swayed by Seaton and Ramsay's appeals to social norms, however, stating, "Confound the fashion, I say; but if we must adopt the customs of other countries, why not chuse the best?"[49] He continues, "Rather than ape your *Mounseers* and *Maccaroni's*, why not follow the manners of the East?"[50] Griffith is referring to the influence of French and Italian fashions on British dress. Seaton responds, "I think we seem rather too much inclined to relish the eastern luxury and effeminacy, already, Sir."[51] Griffith, through this dialogue, presents the relative cultural disruption of the effeminizing French and Italian sentimental fashions as lessened when matched with the "luxury and effeminacy" of Eastern fashions. The close association of gender performance with class and nationality is again established in these lines, and the social concern about these elements of identity being readily legible is present in Griffith's drama through her pointed use of the nabob.

In this scene, Griffith raises the stakes of the dialogue by calling on the national and cultural "threats" of luxury culture and gender identity that the nabob embodied. The association of national identity with either the virtues of society or the vices of luxury and effeminacy is explicitly seen in Rousseau's dedication at the start of *Discourse Upon the Origin and Foundation of Inequality among Mankind* (1761). Contrasting Genevan citizens with people elsewhere in the world, Rousseau writes, "Let Pretenders to good Taste admire in other Places the Grandeur of their Palaces, the Beauty of their Equipages, the Sumptuousness of their Furniture, the Pomp of their Spectacles, all

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid. (Note this line in particular ties to important contemporary discourse on the topic of cultural appropriation. There is space for a critical reading of this articulated eighteenth-century thinking regarding the appropriation of one culture's fashions and customs over another's. This article is unfortunately unable to properly engage in this reading but notes the value of this work and its position in the field of eighteenth-century studies.)

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

their Refinements of Luxury and Effeminacy."[52] Rousseau, through the phrasing "Luxury and Effeminacy," contributes to the period's association of luxurious items and a lavish lifestyle with effeminacy; the cultural importation of goods or fashions and the desire to perform or display these forms of luxury were linked to the perceived corruption of masculinity in the eighteenth century. Lord Seaton's association of luxury with effeminacy in the play can be read in line with Tita Chico's observation that "Consumerism made the concept of fashion available to a greater range of people, and this availability had a particular parallel to eighteenth-century notions of femininity."[53]

However, it was not just the bigger threats of luxury and effeminacy that the nabob embodied, and Griffith also addresses the political dimension of Ned's nabob role. While Ned takes action throughout the play in an attempt to secure a parliamentary seat, his explanation to Lord Seaton of his intentions draws on the concepts of custom and fashion. Ned states, "as soon as ever I get into parliament, I will endeavour to have an act passed, that curry and pellow shall be the common food, and that there shan't be a button worn in all England."[54] Marcia Pointon charts the history of portraiture and clothing in the eighteenth century and, specifically referring to *A Wife in the Right*, states that "The Governor's fantastical plan to outlaw buttons would never have succeeded. The eighteenth century was the great age of buttons as a major fashion accessory."[55] Despite the lack of any realistic possibility, the Governor's plan and dialogue serve as reminders of the potential widespread and quotidian threat to British culture that the nabob individual could pose. By choosing a potentially humorous and small item, like the button, Griffith's commentary remains congruous with the comedic genre of the play; however, the ubiquitous nature of the button serves to plant a seed of the visual, political, and wider-spread social effects of this cultural transference.

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52. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse Upon the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality among Mankind* (London: R. & J. Dodsley, 1761), xliii.

53. Tita Chico, *Designing Women: The Dressing Room in Eighteenth-Century English Literature and Culture* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005), 38.

54. Griffith, *A Wife in the Right*, 13.

55. Marcia Pointon, *Portrayal and the Search for Identity* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2013), 155.

Griffith would have perhaps been unable to, and does not go so far as to, socially rehabilitate the figure of the nabob fully by removing the nabob's associations with a political and social threat to British order. However, in *A Wife in the Right*, Governor Anderson's verbal defence of his choice of clothing, which is marked as nationally other to the Western audience, is both comedic and more complex than might be expected from the figure of the nabob in the literature of this time. Griffith gives the Governor lines that both indicate his role as a potential political threat—"as soon as ever I get into parliament"[56]—and refer to reason and play off other British cultural clashes—"Rather than ape your *Mounseers* and *Maccaroni's*."[57] Ned uses a relational argument to defend his adoption of Indian clothing and diet.

There was a wider discourse in defence of and in contrast to other national fashions and ways of wearing clothing that took place throughout the eighteenth century. Theorists and physicians used the international exchange of ideas and the adoption or rejection of different styles, notably to strengthen their own claims. For example, in his *Essay of Health and Long Life*, Cheyne compares the German proverb "That *wise Men* ought to put on their *Winter* Cloaths *early* in *Autumn*, and put them off *late* in the *Spring*,"[58] with his theory that it is better to wear breathable clothing as "a great Heap of *Cloaths*, only *condenses* our own *excrementitious Atmosphere* about us, and stops the kindly *Influence* of this beneficial *Element*."[59] This process of reasoning, carefully positioned in opposition to, apparently, popular German medical theory, is also seen in Griffith's nabob character and the defence of his nationally ambiguous external presentation.

It was not just the varying fashions or clothing of different nations that was used to help define British national identity in the eighteenth century. This oppositional reasoning went much further, and, as Linda Colley explains, war and conflict were key tools for British self-identification throughout the century. Colley clarifies that a sense of common "Britishness" did not occur "because of an integration and homogenisation of disparate cultures. Instead, Britishness was superimposed over an array of internal differences in response to contact with

56. Griffith, *A Wife in the Right*, 13.
57. Ibid.
58. Cheyne, *An Essay of Health and Long Life*, 195.
59. Ibid., 197–98.

the Other, and above all in response to conflict with the Other."[60] Peter Sahlins also defines the formation and expression of national identity in Europe as "relational and contingent, focused on the contextual affirmation of a sense of difference."[61] Griffith's presentation of Ned fits with the oppositional model of national identity; however, she complicates this model in the final scene of *A Wife in the Right* with lines that define Ned's positive qualities as associated with both India and England.

At the conclusion of the fifth act, Griffith restores the social standing of the Governor for his peers and the audience when Ned decides to pay off a debt that he has inherited through the character of Mrs. Frankly. This act inspires Colonel Ramsay to announce, "Sir—I find you have brought over not only the wealth, but the humanity of the East Indians, along with you."[62] Despite the initial response of Ramsay and Lord Seaton to Ned's clothing and preference for Indian customs, Griffith acknowledges a positive element to his nabobery. Lord Seaton agrees but claims the positive qualities of the Governor's character as English, stating, "His tastes and manners may be foreign, perhaps, Colonel, but his good-nature and generosity are true English staple."[63] At the end of the play, Seaton and Ramsay claim an ability to see through the disguise of the Governor; his clothing, tastes, and manners can no longer hide his good English qualities from their view. The picture that Griffith paints here clearly also ascribes positive humanity to East Indian people and indicates that Ned has learned and grown from his imperial journey.

This lesson in humanity is not always included in other stage representations of the nabob. In Foote's *The Nabob* (1772), "the wealthy and hard-hearted Anglo-Indian protagonist plays havoc with the traditional social ordering of the British gentry."[64] Susan Lamb takes

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60. Linda Colley, *Britons Forging the Nation 1707–1837* 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 6.

61. Peter Sahlins, "Boundaries and Identities in the Cerdanya," *Tractat dels Pirineus a l'Europa del segle XXI, un model en construcció* (2010): 29.

62. Griffith, *A Wife in the Right*, 88.

63. Ibid.

64. Francesca Saggini, "The Stranger Next Door: Identity and Diversity on the Late Eighteenth-Century Stage," *Restoration and 18th Century Theatre Research* 18, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 3, https://www.proquest.com/docview/1800894/fulltextPDF/3C9047DA84EF47A2PQ/1?accountid=13827.

a sympathetic view of Foote's writing, arguing that "*The Nabob* is an attack on imperialism as a threat to British familial, cultural, political, and economic integrity. It exposes as a fiction the orderly hierarchical flow of authority and power from imperial metropolis to colonizer to colonized."[65] Griffith's nabob character, however, is used to both satirize and comment on cultural exchange and national identity without being an irredeemable threat to the British social order. Griffith was writing in a tradition of popular representations of the nabob as a figure of satire, comedy, and anxiety, but her criticism of the British empire is complicated by her son's role in the East India Company and her desire to create commercially successful dramas. Francesca Saggini explains that Foote's nabob antagonist returns to England set on challenging and overturning the traditions and norms of English society because of his imperially gained awareness "that neither England's culture nor its social structure and laws are immutable constructs."[66] Griffith's nabob, in contrast, poses a threat by asking questions and declaring preferences, both of which are overruled by either the other characters' appeals to the logic of the period or by their scale. For example, as Pointon explains, the Governor could never have outlawed all the buttons in England. Griffith's comic figure poses a social challenge but is mediated and ultimately redefined by his association with both East Indian humanity and "true" English good nature and generosity. Griffith both makes a case for the positive cultural qualities of the Indian people with which the Governor would have met and for the positive attributes of Englishmen—qualities that are not necessarily defined through opposition but are firmly attributed to the English in this play.

In the eighteenth century, English identity was understood as complex, not innate, and influenced by international exchange. Daniel Defoe, in 1700, published *The True-Born Englishman*, which well encapsulates an awareness of English multiplicity and the contradictory idea of inherent nationality. Defoe writes,

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65. Susan Lamb, "The Popular Theater of Samuel Foote and British National Identity," *Comparative Drama* 30, no. 2 (1996): 251, https://www.proquest.com/docview/211723767/fulltextPDF/999B8D3D53BC423BPQ/1?accountid=13827.

66. Saggini, "The Stranger Next Door," 4.

For *Englishmen* to boast of Generation,
Cancels their Knowledge, and lampoons the Nation.
A *True-Born Englishman's* a Contradiction,
In Speech an Irony, in Fact a Fiction.[67]

Defoe's poem was, of course, not met with universal support or acceptance and gathered a fair few written responses and rebuttals. Colley, interestingly, explores Defoe's poem as not only an angry outcry against growing British nationalism and widespread xenophobia but as a privileged expression of this anger. She argues that "Defoe was deflating English conceit to be sure, but the fact that he—an Englishman—was prepared to do so in such remorselessly satirical language was in itself a powerful demonstration of English confidence."[68] Griffith's drama reinforces the social concept that individuals needed to perform their selfhood in ways that were recognizable to others in their social context. The necessity for individuals to achieve legible selfhood tied to their nationality and class was a way of reinforcing the power of those institutions and claiming that they were real and recurrent.

In *A Wife in the Right*, Griffith employs clothing as a symbol of national identity and, through the figure of the nabob, demonstrates the potential gap between external appearance and internal character. Griffith's drama, through her creation and depiction of the nabob character of Ned, walks the line between clear moralizing against agents of social confusion like the nationally disguised nabob, and a deeper sentiment regarding the characterization of the individual through actions and intent. My focus on Griffith's presentation of the nabob as socially (mis)understood through clothing, speech, and finally, action provides a more complex reading of a potentially overlooked character. There is still room for a deeper, specifically postcolonial, analysis of Griffith's use of the nabob figure in relationship to Britain's complex and changing definition of national identity in this period. This article, however, aims to contribute to the growing scholarship surrounding female dramatists in the long eighteenth century by providing an initial step in close reading of Griffith's writing in the context of various influences of the period, including Smith's and Cheyne's theories, and

67. Daniel Defoe, *The True-Born Englishman. A Satyr* (London: 1700), 22. (Note that in this edition available via Historical Texts Database the front page does not list a publisher or bookseller but does list publication date as MDCC.)

68. Colley, *Britons*, 15.

her evident socio-political interests. Focusing on Griffith's use of the nabob, her broader characterizations of social behaviour, legibility, and identity, as formed through observation, speech, and action, are slowly revealed. This case study provides a fascinating starting point for a deeper analysis of Griffith's complex literary interactions with the overarching social anxieties of the period.