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Men in gowns, nightgowns and the construction of masculinity in eighteenth-century Britain

Ariane Fennetaux

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- Voir, c'est donc saisir *immédiatement* à distance.
- ... immédiatement à distance et par la distance. Voir, c'est se servir de la séparation, non pas comme médiatrice, mais comme un moyen d'immédiation, comme im-médiatrice.

- Maurice Blanchot (*L'Entretien Infini*)

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1 William Hogarth, second scene of *A Rake's Progress*: 'The Levee', engraving, third state, 1735. Photo: Witt Library

Men in gowns: Nightgowns and the construction of masculinity in eighteenth-century England

Ariane Fennetaux

¹ The term 'undress' refers to loose informal garments as opposed to more formal clothes worn when going out. Samuel Johnson's 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language* defines undress as 'a loose and negligent dress' and nightgowns as 'a loose gown worn as undress'. The terms 'nightgown', 'bedgown', 'India gown' and 'morning gown' were used interchangeably. 'Banyan', according to Aileen Ribeiro, referred to a specific type of gown. See Ribeiro, A., *Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe, 1715-1789*, New Haven, 2002, pp.26-27. In the course of this paper the generic terms 'nightgown' or 'gown' will be used. Cultural historians use the phrase 'long eighteenth century' to refer to the period from the Restoration to the Victorian age.

² Gowns appear in accounts as early as the sixteenth century and are worn to this day, although they have been called dressing gowns since the nineteenth century. On the relationship between portrait, dress and constructed identities see Ribeiro, A., *The Art of Dress, Fashion in England and France 1750-1820*, New Haven, 1995, pp.3-31, and *A Gallery of Fashion*, London, 2000, pp.9-23.

³ On gender, and in particular masculinity, see Cohen, M., *Fashioning Masculinity, National Identity and Language in the Eighteenth Century*, London, 1996; Barker, H., and E. Chalus, eds., *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England: Roles, Representations and Responsibilities*, London, 1997; Carter, P., *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society*, London, 1997; Shoemaker, R., *Gender in English Society 1650-1850, the Emergence of Private Spheres?*, Harlow, 1998; Hitchcock, T., and M. Cohen, eds., *English Masculinities, 1660-1800*, London, 1999; and Kuchta, D., *The Three-Piece Suit and Modern Masculinity, England, 1550-1850*, Berkeley, 2002.

In the 'long' eighteenth century, the undress of the English, or indeed of the European gentleman consisted of a loose garment worn over his shirt and breeches that was alternately called a nightgown, a bedgown, a morning gown, an India gown or a Banyan.¹ Although nightgowns were not unique to the eighteenth century, their prevalence in portraits of men of the period draws attention to a powerful connection between the garment and masculine self-image.² Cultural historians have shown that the period witnessed the construction of gender identities through a series of practices, sartorial and otherwise, that mapped out segregated territories for men and women. Recent work has focused on the polemical nature of the emergence of modern masculinity in eighteenth-century England.³ This emergence was accompanied by numerous paradoxes and anxieties, as acceptable standards of masculinity were defined in opposition to a series of foils such as the licentious rake or the effeminate fop, two extremes that should be avoided. Dress played a key role in this troubled elaboration of a new definition of masculinity.



2 Joseph Highmore, *Pamela Fainting*, oil on canvas, c.1744-45.
© National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

⁴ Nienholdt, E., 'Der Schlafrock', *Waffen und Kostümkunde*, no. 9, 1967, pp.105-116; Swain, M.H., 'Nightgowns into Dressing Gowns. A Study of Men's Nightgowns, Eighteenth Century', *Costume*, no.6, 1972, pp.10-21 and 'Men's Nightgowns of the Eighteenth Century', *Waffen und Kostümkunde*, no. 15, 1973, pp.41-48; Tarrant, N., 'Lord Sheffield's Banyan', *Costume*, no. 11, 1977, pp.93-97.

⁵ Cunningham, P. A., 'Eighteenth-Century Nightgowns: The Gentleman's Robe in Art and Fashion', *Dress*, no. 10, 1984, pp.2-11.

⁶ Garsault, F.G., *L'Art du tailleur*, Paris, 1769, distinguishes between what he calls *la robe de chambre 'en chemise'* (the nightgown cut like a shirt), that is the kimono-type gown, and *la robe de chambre 'à manches rapportées'* (the dressing gown which has set-in sleeves), that is the fitted banyan. For studies of surviving nightgowns see Nienholdt, 1967; Swain, 1972 and 1973; and Tarrant, 1977.

Previous work on nightgowns in the eighteenth century has mainly consisted of documenting surviving examples in textile collections and tracing the oriental origins of the garment.⁴ The large number of men in gowns in eighteenth-century portraiture is considered at some length by Patricia Cunningham, in her article 'Eighteenth-Century Nightgowns: The Gentleman's Robe in Art and Fashion', yet her perspective centres mainly on aesthetic theories and artistic practices that help to account for the phenomenon.⁵ Drawing from a variety of sources, this article seeks to place nightgowns within the larger context of the formation of modern masculinity in England.

From contemporary tailoring manuals and surviving garments, we can gather that nightgowns could be of two kinds.⁶ One was in a kimono shape with the arms cut in one piece with the body. It was flared towards the hem with triangular gores added to the side seams. It was loose and could be worn either simply draped over the body or held in place with a sash tied around the waist. The cut of this type of

⁷ See Ribeiro, A., *A Visual History of Costume, the Eighteenth Century*, London, 1983, p.142. However Swain (1972 and 1973) does not make any distinction between the kimono-style gown and the 'banyan'.

⁸ The Museum of Costume in Manchester keeps a dark green silk banyan very similar to that of the Rake (MCAG 1949-73).

⁹ Swain, 1972, p.17 and 1973, p.46.

¹⁰ Byng, J., *The Torrington Diaries, 1781-94*, Bruyn Andrews, C., ed., 4 vols., London, 1934-38, vol. 2, p.49.

¹¹ Richardson, S., *Pamela (1740)*, vol. 1, letter XXVII, London, 1985, p.100. 'Silver lace' was metal thread used for embroidery.

¹² Goldsmith, O., *The Citizen of the World or Letters from a Chinese Philosopher*, letter 3, in *The Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, Friedman, A., ed., Oxford, 1966, vol. 2, p.23.

¹³ Campbell, R., *The London Tradesman*, London, 1747, p.192.

gown did not change throughout the period, as can be seen when comparing the various illustrations supplied. The second type of gown was more tailored, with set-in sleeves and a closer fitting body that had flaring, pleated skirts. This is sometimes known as a banyan, a term derived from the name of Indian merchants who were erroneously thought to wear these garments.⁷ The more tailored gowns were either ankle- or knee-length, such as that worn by young Rakewell in William Hogarth's second scene of *A Rake's Progress* (c. 1733)(fig.1).⁸ They had a wrap-over front, were often double-breasted and fastened with buttons. Some came with a matching waistcoat sewn into the side seams. Because of certain similarities between the cut and construction of fitted gowns and late eighteenth-century coats, they are thought to be characteristic of the second half of the century, although the Rake's gown suggests that they did exist earlier.⁹

Nightgowns, whether loose or fitted, could have matching caps and slippers. Caps were worn indoors by men when they did not wear their wigs, as their shaved heads were thought to require some kind of covering against the cold and damp that plagued even the best houses. They came in a variety of styles, among which the bell-shaped tasselled cap (figs. 1 & 2) and the turbaned cap were the most popular.

Diarist John Byng writes of his relief when coming back home at the end of the day: 'at last, home I come, so happy, clap on my bedgown, my slippers, take off my gaiters, ease my neckcloth and am most comfortable'.¹⁰ In the eighteenth century, the passage from public world to private home was marked by the ritual gesture of slipping out of one set of clothes into another. With coats that were often stiffened by buckram, and waistcoats that could be so richly embroidered that they 'stood on end with silver lace', formal wear could be highly uncomfortable.¹¹ For most of the eighteenth century this was exacerbated by wigs whose stiff set curls, caked in a greasy combination of pomatum and wheat powder, added to the uncomfortable artificiality that governed formal wear. When making clothes, tailors and other artisans literally fashioned the body into a pre-established shape that was thought to be elegant. In *The Citizen of the World*, Oliver Goldsmith has his Chinese philosopher remark that in England, 'a fine gentleman [...] dressed up to the fashion, seems scarcely to have a single limb that does not suffer some distortions from art'.¹² In *The London Tradesman* (1747), R. Campbell wrote that the tailor 'must be able, not only to cut for the handsome and well-shaped, but to bestow a good shape where nature has not designed it'.¹³ Surviving garments show, for instance, how the construction of coat

¹⁴ See Giedion, S., *Mechanization Takes Command. A Contribution to Anonymous History*, New York, 1948, pp.312–313; Gloag, J., *The Englishman's Chair: Origins, Design, and Social History of Seat Furniture in England*, London, 1964; Cornforth, J., *English Decoration in the Eighteenth Century*, London, 1974; Girouard, M., *Life in the English Country House: A Social and Architectural History*, New Haven, 1978.

¹⁵ Once thought to be John Farr, the sitter's identity is now uncertain. See *Summary Catalogue of Paintings in the Ashmolean Museum*, Oxford, 1980, p.97, for original identification. When asked to examine the picture by the Ashmolean Museum, Aileen Ribeiro came to the conclusion that the sitter was not John Farr and might in fact be French (Aileen Ribeiro, in conversation).

¹⁶ 'Elle moulait tous les plis de mon corps, sans le gêner', Diderot, D., *Regrets sur ma vieille robe de chambre ou avis à ceux qui ont plus de goût que de fortune. Salons 1769, Oeuvres complètes*, ed. L. Versini, 5 vols., Paris, 1996, vol. 4, p.820 [my translation].

sleeves would have forced back men's shoulders, thereby shaping the male body into the fashionable, straight posture.

At odds with the engineering of fashionable dress, nightgowns epitomised a new yearning for comfort. Made in soft linens or cottons in the summer and fur trimmed or quilted in the winter, gowns were easy garments that adapted to the body. In a nightgown, one could enjoy such simple domestic pleasures as reading or writing in a house made cosier by better heating, more cushions and plump upholstered chairs.¹⁴ The serene portrait of an unknown gentleman by François Xavier Vispré (c.1765) (fig. 3) illustrates how nightgowns liberated the body from any constraint, allowing it to adopt the easy, relaxed postures that the new comfortable furniture seemed to entice.¹⁵ Denis Diderot's illuminating *Regrets sur ma vieille robe de chambre* (1769) beautifully exemplifies this sense of ease. He praises his gown, saying: 'it closely hugged my body, without cramping its movements'.¹⁶ Nightgowns signalled the triumph of the body over the constricting hand of the tailor, the triumph of the organic over the mechanic.



3 François Xavier Vispré, *Portrait of a Man Reclining on a Sofa, Reading*, pastels on vellum, c.1765.

© The Ashmolean Museum Oxford

¹⁷ Matthias Otto sold 'all sorts of banyans, common gowns [...] of the newest fashion', HEAL collection of trade cards, undated trade card no. 86-54, Prints and Drawings Department, British Museum. See also HEAL 70-78.

¹⁸ Lemire, B., *Fashion's Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1660-1800*, Oxford, 1991, and *Le coton et la mode*, Exh. Cat., Paris, Musée Galliera, 2000.

¹⁹ Nightgowns had first been imported from Asia by the Dutch East Asia Company in the seventeenth century. See Nienholdt, 1967, and Ribeiro, A., *The Dress Worn at Masquerades in England, 1730 to 1790, and its Relation to Fancy Dress in Portraiture*, London, 1984, pp.103-135, 217-248. See also 'Turquerie: Turkish Dress and English Fashion in the Eighteenth Century', *Connoisseur*, no. 201, 1979, pp.16-23.

²⁰ Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's letters from Constantinople were greatly influential. See Ribeiro, 1984, p.218.

²¹ Bizarre silks were decorated in abstract or strange patterns characteristic of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. See Thornton, P., *Baroque and Rococo Silks*, London, 1965. The Victoria and Albert Museum has a fine example of a gown made of bizarre silk on display in gallery 40 (T&D: T.281-1983).

²² *The Gentleman's and London Magazine*, 1777, cited in Cunnington, W. and P., *A Handbook of English Costume in the Eighteenth Century* (1964), Boston, 1972, p.219.

²³ *The Guardian*, no. 149, 1713, cited in Buck, A., *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England*, London, 1979, p.99.

²⁴ Goldsmith, O., *Life of Richard Nash of Bath Esq.*, London, 1762, p.33.

²⁵ *The Spectator*, Bond, D., ed., 5 vols, Oxford, 1965, no. 49, 26 April 1711, vol. 1, p.209 and no. 320, 7 March 1712, vol. 3, p.168. For a print of a begowned man in a coffee house, see British Museum, Satire, vol. 2, i, no. 1610.

However, gowns were not only a comfortable alternative to formal fashions, they were also modish items that featured in fashion plates, or merchants' trade cards.¹⁷ Cotton — which in the second half of the century had become 'fashion's favourite' — was increasingly used by elegant gentlemen for their undress.¹⁸ Its associations with the exotic made it particularly appropriate for a garment with oriental origins.¹⁹ In Britain, the vogue for exotica had started with the foundation of the Honourable East Asia Company (1600) and was fuelled in the eighteenth century by travellers' accounts and letters.²⁰ Nightgowns were part of this trend and, with terms like 'Indian gown' or 'banyan', the very terminology used in the eighteenth century reveals the distinctive oriental connotation that the garment had retained even long after it had stopped being imported from India. Decorative features often associated with gowns such as bizarre silks, striped fabrics or fur trimming made them the sartorial epitome of the fashionable exotic. A tasselled or turban-shaped cap lent the finishing touch to the oriental appearance of the gentleman in his undress.²¹

Nightgowns were not restricted to private wear. Welcoming friends or visitors in one's undress was common practice, as depicted in Francis Hayman's double portrait of Maurice Greene and John Hoadly (1747) (fig. 7). Indeed, the French-imported *Levée* made it a prerequisite of gentility and taste. Hogarth, always an astute semiologist, has the Rake receive in a fine frogged banyan in the second scene of the series, thereby showing his pretension to gentility (fig. 1). The description in a 1777 issue of *The Gentleman's and London Magazine* of a young gentleman entertaining 'in an elegant chintz gown tied over the breast with a rose coloured ribbon, his hair [...] *en papillote*' illustrates how dress was central to the practice.²² In the fashionable city of Bath, men were often seen around town in their gowns. In 1713, *The Guardian* records that men are 'showing themselves at the Pump in their Indian Night-gowns, without the least indecorum'.²³ Men took such advantage of this liberty that Beau Nash, Master of Ceremonies in Bath, had to ban the wearing of gowns in public. His 1742 'Rules for Polite Behaviour' advised that 'gentlemen of fashion never appearing in a morning before the ladies in goans [sic] and caps shews breeding and respect'.²⁴ Excursions to coffee houses were another occasion on which men would often sport their gowns, a practice frowned upon by satirists in essays and prints.²⁵

A final notable instance in which men wore nightgowns was in portraiture. In his diary, Samuel Pepys, whose 1666 portrait by John

²⁶ Entry for 30 March 1666 in Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, Latham, R., and W. Matthews, eds., 11 vols, Berkeley, 2000, vol. 7, p.85.

²⁷ Women's wardrobes did not seem to have one single undress garment equivalent to the nightgown. Nor does contemporary portraiture show women in undress garments to the same extent.

Hayls (fig. 4) depicts him in a golden silk gown, writes that he hired a gown 'to be drawn in, an India gown', adding that he 'see[s] all the reason to expect a most excellent picture of it'.²⁶ X-rays of the canvas studied in conjunction with entries from Pepys's diary indicate that numerous alterations to the painting were made at the sitter's request. The portrait was therefore a gradually constructed image of how Pepys wished to be seen, and, as made clear by his comments, the gown fitted in with this construction. The large number of eighteenth-century portraits showing men in their nightgowns, and the absence of such a phenomenon regarding women, point to the existence of a specific link between the garment and the male self-image.²⁷

In an age when people were increasingly aware of the fickleness of fashion, the timeless appearance of gowns seemed appropriate for portraits: reminiscent of the Roman toga, gowns bestowed the noble dignity so much admired in classical figures. As etiquette dictated that a man should appear in a nightgown only before social inferiors, being portrayed in a nightgown, however plain or common, subtly but force-



4 John Hayls, *Samuel Pepys*, oil on canvas, 1666.
©The National Portrait Gallery, London.

5 Sir Godfrey Kneller, *Jacob Tonson*, oil on canvas, 1717. © The National Portrait Gallery, London



²⁸ Richardson, J., *The Works of Jonathan Richardson*, London, 1773, p.108.

²⁹ Both a political and a social ideal, the concept of politeness is a key to the understanding of eighteenth-century English society.

³⁰ Solkin, D., *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England*, New Haven, 1993, pp.27-47.

fully evinced the sitter's social superiority, whilst seemingly playing down his social status through the adoption of a uniform, unobtrusive costume. Visually as well, the ample folds of the gown gave the sitter 'Grace and Greatness' and an air of gentility.²⁸ Moreover, where a suit might have suggested changeability, vanity and profligacy, the gown portrayed the sitter as a sober man above the vain vagaries of the fashionable world and conveyed the genteel dignity, restraint and sobriety central to the English ideal of politeness.²⁹ Sir Godfrey Kneller's Kit-Cat portrait series is often considered as the celebration of a community of thinkers linked by a shared allegiance to the promotion of politeness as the defining hallmark of their identity.³⁰ Many of these portraits feature begowned sitters, and thus illustrate the role of gowns in the construction of the polite ideal. As one of the founders of the club, and the person to whom the series was presented, Jacob Tonson is fittingly portrayed in a fine silk gown in Kneller's 1717 portrait. With his sober attire, his bold gaze, and the beautifully bound volume of Milton's *Paradise Lost* in his hand, he appears the very embodiment of politeness (fig. 5).

Tonson's portrait also points to connections between gowns and the world of the arts and humanities. The nightgown was a signifier used by artists to convey the sitter's involvement in intellectual or artistic work. Most artists' self-portraits and most writers' or philosophers' portraits feature gowns. The association of the nightgown with the home and naturalness, as opposed to worldly artificial fashions, made it a particularly becoming costume for men who spent their time in their study



6 Francis Hayman, *Maurice Greene; John Hoadly*, oil on canvas, 1747.
© The National Portrait Gallery, London

³¹ Alex Kidson argues that the bust is that of a Greek philosopher — see Kidson, A., *George Romney, 1734–1802*, Exh. Cat., London, National Portrait Gallery, 2002, p.59 — however, it bears a remarkable resemblance to Isaac Newton, an interpretation sustained by the telescope. It is unknown whether Romney could have seen Vermeer's *The Astronomer*, but the carpet and the globe are striking echoes.

³² Diderot, D., *Oeuvres*, Paris, 1996, vol. 4, p.820, 'Un livre était-il couvert de poussière? Un de ses pans s'offrait à l'essuyer. L'encre épaisse refusait-elle de couler de ma plume? Elle présentait le flanc'. ('Were a book covered with dust, one of its flaps was at hand to wipe it. When the thick ink refused to flow from my pen, it would offer its folds') [my translation].

³³ Veblen, T., *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), London, 1994.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.820, 'On y voyait tracés en longues raies noires les fréquents services qu'elle m'avait rendus. Ces longues raies annonçaient le littérateur, l'écrivain, l'homme qui travaille' [my translation].

bent over preoccupations that placed them above the artifice of fashion. In portraits, men in gowns are also men at work: in Francis Hayman's 1747 portrait, Maurice Greene, a music teacher in Cambridge, is seen writing music. He looks up holding his pen, while on the table rest a pile of books and a musical score (fig. 6). George Romney's portrait of the Reverend William Strickland (c. 1765) (fig. 7) shows the sitter in an interior furnished with items denoting learning and science: a bookcase, folios on the table, ink pots, a bust, a telescope, a globe and even a carpet on the table, reminiscent of Johannes Vermeer's *The Astronomer*.³¹ In his *Regrets*, Diderot emphasises the importance of gowns in the pursuit of intellectual work by describing how he used his nightgown to wipe dust off his books or the dried ink off the nib of his pen.³² In these lines, he talks of his gown as of an old companion always ready to be of service; more than the usual garb of the industrious writer, it appears an active participant in the intellectual process. Conspicuously constricting garments, because they denoted idleness and by extension, wealth, had been the linchpin of aristocratic sartorial self-presentation for both men and women.³³ With nightgowns, an ideal of noble industriousness triumphed. Gowns were the dress of a new 'aristocracy', based not on birth or wealth but on individual genius and intellectual or artistic work. Diderot's soiled gown is the token of his sense of himself as a scholar: 'its often-rendered services could be traced in the long black streaks it bore. These streaks bespoke the man of letters, the writer, the man at work'.³⁴

³⁵ *The Spectator*, no. 305, 19 February 1712, Bond, D., ed., 1965, vol. 3, p.100. The eighteenth century saw the growing realisation that England had its own political, artistic and cultural identity, distinct from those of France or Italy. The notion of Englishness conceptualises this realisation.

³⁶ Dominos were long, full coats with loose sleeves and sometimes a hood. On masquerades as a place of debauchery and license see Terry Castle, *Masquerade and the Civilisation: The Carnavalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction*, London, 1986. See also Ribeiro, 1984.

³⁷ Richardson, S., *Pamela* (1740), London, 1980, p.95. Other examples indicate that this was a recognisable topos, for instance, the comical scene in Joseph Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, where Beau Didapper 'arose, put on his breeches and nightgown and stole softly along the gallery which led to [Fanny's] apartment' only to find Mrs Slipslop (*Joseph Andrews* (1742), Book IV, London, 1985, p.310. Another less well known example is Eliza Haywood's *Jemmy and Jenny Jessamy* (London, 1753, p.157), where Sophia, tricked into spending the night at the house of Willmore's 'aunt', has to fight off her seducer who has let himself into her chamber in his nightgown to take what he considers to be 'his own'. See also Penelope Aubin's *Lady Lucy* (1726), in *A Collection of Entertaining Histories and Novels, Designed to Promote the Cause of Virtue and Honour*, London 1739, p. 104.

More importantly, nightgowns helped to ascertain a modern definition of masculinity, as the values with which they were associated — industry, sobriety and politeness — mapped out a specifically masculine domain. Traditionally, intellectual work and the fine arts were exclusively male preserves. The gown therefore not only identified its wearer as an artist or a philosopher, but also reaffirmed his masculinity. Eighteenth-century gender constructs posited industry as masculine and idleness as feminine: women idled away their time in trifles while men studied and read books. Accordingly, while excessive attention to dress and appearance was construed as a defining feature of womanhood, sobriety in dress was associated with men. Politeness was also a primarily masculine concern, as it was men's manners that needed polishing, not women's. The seat of politeness, the coffee house, was itself the cornerstone of modern masculinity since it was almost exclusively patronised by men partaking in quintessentially male activities, such as reading the newspapers, discussing politics, drinking and smoking. Furthermore, coffee houses — 'our *British* schools of politics' as Joseph Addison called them — were also idiosyncratically English and played a major role in the formation of the notion of 'Englishness'.³⁵ The gown therefore helped to construct masculinity as genteel, polite, learned, and English.

However, nightgowns were far from being straightforward signifiers of modern masculinity. They also had darker connotations that reflected the many pitfalls awaiting men as they strove to adopt the correct masculine attitude.

The association of gowns with genteel dignity was an ambivalent one. The looseness of the gown, its association with undress as well as its resemblance to the dominos worn at masquerades, made it a potential signifier of deceit and perversion.³⁶ In literature, men often wear nightgowns in scenes in which they deceive women in order to force their sexual power onto them. The lascivious gentleman sneaking into the innocent young lady's bedchamber in his gown and breeches in the middle of the night is a topos of eighteenth-century literature. Mr B., who hides in Mrs Jervis's closet dressed 'in a rich silk morning gown' in an attempt to rape Pamela in Samuel Richardson's novel, is only the best known example of the motif.³⁷ In Joseph Highmore's illustration of this scene, *Pamela Fainting* (c. 1744–45) (fig. 2), Mr. B's initial lustful intentions towards Pamela are made obvious by his luxurious yellow satin gown and bright red slippers. His ambivalence in this scene echoes that of his character in the novel as a whole, which can be read as the story of masculinity gone awry, manliness turned into rakishness. The

³⁸ Goldsmith, O., *Works*, Friedman, A., ed., vol. 2, *The Citizen of the World*, Oxford, 1966, letter CIV, 'the arts some make use of to appear learned', p.406.

³⁹ *The Spectator*, no. 49, 26 April 1711, Bond, D., ed., 1965, vol. 1, p.209.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 320, 7 March 1712, vol. 3, p.168.

⁴¹ *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, Lewis, W.S., ed., New Haven, 1974, vol. 37, p.124.

⁴² The accounts of George Ballie of Jerviswood record the purchase of two gowns, one of velvet and the other of armosin (a kind of taffeta), both with 'gold loops and buttons', cited in Swain, 1972, p.15.

⁴³ See entries for 7 December 1790, 11 February 1794 and again 10 March 1801, Woodforde, P., ed., *The Diary of a Country Parson*, Beresford, J., ed., 5 vols, Oxford, 1981, vol. 3, p.231-32, vol. 4, p.95 and vol. 5, p.304.

⁴⁴ Cited in Sacha Llewellyn, 'The Dress Inventories of the Second Duke and Duchess of Montagu', M.A. dissertation, Courtauld Institute of Art, 1993, p.54.

⁴⁵ *The Spectator*, no. 485, 16 September 1712, Bond, D., ed., 1965, vol. 4, p.221.

⁴⁶ *The Tatler*, no. 186, 17 June 1710, Bond, D., ed., 3 vols, Oxford, 1987, vol. 3, p.12.

erring of Mr. B. illustrates the fragility of masculinity in this era.

The association of gowns with industry was equally unstable. Oliver Goldsmith's take on the English 'who want to appear learned' shows how 'a character of this kind generally receives company in his study, in all the pensive formality of slippers, night gown, and easy chair. The table is covered with a large book, which is always kept open, and never read, his solitary hours being dedicated to dozing, mending pens, feeling his pulse, peeping through the microscope, and sometimes reading amusing books, which he condemns in company'.³⁸ In 1711, *The Spectator* records the comings and goings of people in coffee houses and in particular notes how 'some come in their nightgown to saunter away their time' and 'rise early for no other purpose but to publish their laziness'.³⁹ A satirical letter on idleness published in *The Spectator* in 1712 identifies the nightgown as the very insignia of the members of 'the lazy club', who 'spend most of [their] days in a neighbouring coffee house', and are said to 'generally come in nightgowns with [their] stockings about [their] heels'.⁴⁰ Horace Walpole's cousin, Henry Conway, writes in 1742: 'now as nobody is more fond of idleness than myself, or loves loitering less, this drives me home, where I lead my days in a chintz nightgown reading both morning and evening'. The leisurely industry of the learned gentleman could easily slip into sheer laziness.⁴¹

Furthermore, the air of superiority lent by the gowns was not always unobtrusive or sober. Since nightgowns had exotic origins, they were seen as luxury items. Some could be extremely lavish and costly, and their wearers sometimes proved rather vain about them, like George Ballie of Jerviswood, who acquired gowns made of velvet with gold buttons.⁴² Less extravagant, although equally vain, was Parson Woodforde, who always had his nightgowns made in the same colour combination of white and purple.⁴³ Mary Churchill's exclamation to her husband in 1720, 'I think I have bought the prettiest nightgown for you that is possible', shows that gowns could indeed be the object of great pride.⁴⁴ Consequently, they could be seen as a token of vanity and were ridiculed as such in contemporary newspapers. A letter in *The Spectator* describes the behaviour of 'Mr Prettyman' who has bought 'a new nightgown, either side to be worn outwards, both equally gorgeous and attractive' and strikes pensive poses at his window.⁴⁵ In an essay on vanity published in 1710, *The Tatler* chooses the gown as its ultimate symbol, ridiculing 'a youth of about nineteen years of age [...] in an Indian night gown and laced cap' who is seen 'pleading a cause before a glass'.⁴⁶

The emergence of a new definition of masculinity was thus accompanied by numerous anxieties, which the ambiguous connotations of nightgowns reflected. The strikingly similar compositions of Romney's portrait of William Strickland (fig. 7) and John Dixon's 1773 caricature (fig. 8) — with their identical spatial arrangements and similar use of lighting and drapery — draw attention to the sharp contrast between the two portrayals of masculinity. Dixon's print shows a man in a fashionable flower-printed cotton gown at his dressing table. The mirror into which he gazes, the picture of Narcissus on the wall, the late hour at which he rises (the clock reads 10 o'clock), the fake books behind him, onto which hair pieces are pinned, and the fool's cap, all point to the man's vanity, vacuity and sexual pretension, turning him into the very antithesis of the 'modern' definition of masculinity. His affected mien and posture, the make-up and perfume on the frilly dressing table, his cotton gown printed in a delicate sprig pattern and his (most certainly French) hairdresser hint at his effeminacy. Whereas Strickland is the embodiment of modern masculinity — manly, sober, learned and English — the old Beau is exactly what men were not sup-



7 George Romney, *Reverend William Strickland*, oil on canvas, c.1765. © The National Trust, Sizergh Castle, Kendal



8 John Dixon, *The Old Beau in Extasy*, mezzotint, 1773. © The British Museum

47 The pose of the sitter has been interpreted as a reference to *Captain Thomas Coram* (1740), Hogarth's 'Britophil' response to French grand portraiture in the Foundling Hospital. See *George Romney*, Exh. Cat., London, Kenwood, 1961, p.10, and Kidson, 2002, p.59. On permanent public display in the hospital-turned-showcase of British art, the famous portrait was the very symbol of Englishness. On the political agenda of *Captain Coram* and the Foundling Hospital see Paulson, R., *Hogarth*, vol. 2, *High Art and Low*, Cambridge, 1992, pp.157–161, 323–356. This incidentally lends weight to the identification of the bust as that of the very British scientist Sir Isaac Newton.

48 See Barker-Benfield, G.J., 'The Question of Effeminacy', *The Culture of Sensibility, Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Chicago, 1992, pp.104–153; Barker and Chalus, eds., 1997; Shoemaker, 1998; Carter, 1997 and 'Mollies, Fops and Men of Feeling: Aspects of Male Effeminacy and Masculinity in Britain, c.1700–1780', D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1995; Cohen, 1996; Hitchcock and Cohen, eds., 1999; Kuchta, *The Three-Piece Suit*, 2002.

49 On 'the great masculine renunciation' see Flügel, J.C., *The Psychology of Clothes*, London, 1930, p.111.

50 *The Tatler*, no. 26, 9 June 1709, Bond, D., ed., 1987, vol. 1, p.200.

51 On effeminacy and the French see Cohen, 1996, and 'On Manliness, Effeminacy and the French: Gender and the Construction of National Character in Eighteenth-Century England', Hitchcock and Cohen, eds., 1999.

52 The female nightgown was a specifically English type of gown that had a fitted back. Buck, 1979, p.41.

53 Catalogue numbers: VAM T. 84: N-1974 and VAM T. 846: N-1974. A photo and a discussion of the two gowns can be found in Snodin, M., and J. Styles, eds., *Design and the Decorative Arts, Britain 1500–1900*, London, 2001, p.115.

54 Baumgarten, L., *What Clothes Reveal. The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America, the Colonial Williamsburg Collection*, Yale, 2002, pp.182, 196.

55 To give but one example, the fabric of the flower-printed cotton nightgown dated c.1760–80 (MCAG 1951–11) kept in Platt Hall in Manchester is very similar to fabrics that were used in contemporary women's dress.

posed to be: an effeminate, vain, ignorant and 'Frenchified' fop.⁴⁷ The comparison between these two images neatly sums up the ambiguities of nightgowns, and illustrates how they could become the site of gender anxieties.

In the eighteenth century, gender roles became more precisely defined and as a result there was less toleration for sexual ambiguity.⁴⁸ As men's sartorial system moved towards what has become known as the 'great masculine renunciation', that is the surrender by men of colour and extravagance in dress, the strong feminine associations of gowns made them the focus of gender anxieties.⁴⁹ Comments on vain, unmanly fops posing in their nightgowns abound in contemporary newspapers. *The Tatler*, satirizing effeminate fops in 1709, notes:

some of them I have heard calling to one another as I have sat at White's [chocolate house] and St James's [coffee house] by the names of Betty, Nelly and so forth. You see them accost each other with effeminate airs [...] receive visits on their beds in their gowns and do a thousand other unintelligible prettinesses that I cannot tell what to make of.⁵⁰

Their association with the French-imported *Levée* gave nightgowns — along with almost anything else coming from France, the nation of dancing masters and hairdressers — even stronger effeminate connotations.⁵¹ Linguistically too, gender ambiguities were rife, since the terms 'nightgown' and 'gown' were both used to refer to women's garments: 'gown' being the term commonly used for what today would be called a dress, while the nightgown was a specific type of female gown.⁵² Furthermore, visually and materially, nightgowns could also be construed as 'feminine' to some degree, since the fabric used to make men's nightgowns was often the same as that used for women's. The Lord and Lady Clapham dolls (c.1690–1700) in the Victoria and Albert Museum neatly illustrate the linguistic and formal ambiguities of nightgowns, as the dolls come with a male and a female version of the garment, which are made in exactly the same fabric and lining.⁵³ While in the seventeenth century, fabrics had been used indiscriminately for men's or women's garments, in the eighteenth, they gradually came to be defined as specifically masculine or feminine.⁵⁴ Despite this distinction, men's nightgowns continued to be made in 'feminine' fabric, as can be seen when looking at surviving garments in museum collections.⁵⁵ Moreover, because of the high cost of fabrics, garments were often remade and altered. In the eighteenth century, such recycling was usually restricted to same-sex garments, with the exception of nightgowns

⁵⁶ Baumgarten, 2002, pp.195–196.

⁵⁷ Linda Baumgarten mentions a nightgown in the Williamsburg Foundation made from a woman's dress in her article 'Altered Historical Clothing', *Dress*, no. 25, 1998, pp.42–57. A sack, or sack-back gown, was a dress that had two large box pleats at the back — often referred to as 'Watteau' pleats — which originated from the neckline and were allowed to flow into a train.

⁵⁸ In the nineteenth century, for example, linguistic ambiguities disappear as the term 'dressing-gown' replaces 'gown' and the female nightgown disappears. With late nineteenth-century terms like 'Smoking Jacket' any gender ambiguity is cancelled and the link to manliness strongly reaffirmed. After the eighteenth century, the fabrics as well as the cuts of men's dressing gowns also become clearly different from those of women's undress garments.

which seem to have been the only items for which cross-gender recycling was practised.⁵⁶ Several surviving men's nightgowns show evidence of having been made from garments previously worn by women, in particular from women's sacks, which had large panels of uncut material.⁵⁷

All these ambiguities explain why the nightgown came to crystallise gender anxieties at this stage in the history of English masculinity.⁵⁸ At the same time, and precisely because of these ambiguities, the gown was a strategic instrument for dealing with the angst that must necessarily have accompanied the emergence of a new definition of masculinity. As it reconciled the conflicting demands that were being made on men — who were expected to be both sober and genteel, fashionable and learned, manly and polite — the nightgown constituted one of the key sites in which the polemical construction of modern masculinity took place.

Comfortable yet fashionable, private yet worn in company, the nightgown was far from being an unequivocal sign in the sartorial system of eighteenth-century England. It was both the dress of the polite gentleman and of the licentious rake, of the sober and wise man and of the vain, extravagant follower of fashion. It could be the symbol of both the industrious intellectual and of the idle good-for-nothing, of the manly English gentleman and the effeminate French fop. These ambiguities reflected the difficulty for men at this time of striking the right balance between elegance and foppery, fashion and ostentation, or intellectual industry and idleness. As gowns encapsulated anxieties over emerging concepts of masculinity, they also mediated them, providing men, in life and in art, with a means to display, perform, and experience masculinity, and thus to come to terms with its new definition.

Moreover, concepts of masculinity dovetailed into some of the key public debates of the time. The opposition between comfortable gowns and constricting formal wear echoed ongoing philosophical debates over the question of nature versus artifice, while the expense and extravagance of nightgowns placed them at the heart of the debate on luxury. Both timeless and fashionable, they were also central to the aesthetic controversy over whether the portrait painter should prefer general, non-descript dress to the minute particulars of fashion. Nightgowns, humble as they may appear, encapsulated many of the century's key gender, political, philosophical, economic and aesthetic preoccupations.