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**IMAGE AND DISCOURSE:
THE RHETORIC OF VIRTUE AND VICE
IN EARLY 18th CENTURY ENGLAND**

Dita Hochmanová

THE contrast between virtue and vice has always been shaping our perception of what is right and wrong as well as our distinction between those who resemble us and those who differ. The potential of this contrast to create an image and affect power relationships between groups and individuals did not remain disregarded in eighteenth-century England. Focusing on the use of concepts of virtue and vice in the political and literary discourses in the first half of the century, the article analyses the ways in which figurative language highlighted the differences between the classes and various social groups. To demonstrate the effects of the rhetoric of virtue and vice, the related tropes of patriotism, greed, and luxury are examined as examples of valuable arms against political as well as personal enemies in the eighteenth-century paper war.

Exploited mainly by the English gentry and aristocracy, the trope of patriotism served to differentiate various political factions and undermine the authority of the opponents. Similarly, the motif of greed was employed to emphasise the gap between the social classes in order to suppress the increasing powers of the dangerously rising moneyed commoners. Finally, after the Third Earl of Shaftesbury presented luxury as the symbol of moral decay which results from foreign trade, the trope was used by the upper classes to proclaim the illegitimacy of the new emerging wealthy businessmen to political influence. Since the article is furthermore concerned with the reflection of these rhetoric strategies in social satire, namely in the works of Jonathan Swift and Henry Fielding, it also aims to reveal the close interconnectedness of the literary and political discourses at that time and shows that the tropes moved from one discourse to the other in order to serve as means of ideological support and social criticism.

As at the centre of the following analysis always remains the struggle between the English aristocracy and the commoners, let me start with a brief historical context which would give some reasons for the pressing needs of the upper classes, suddenly threatened by the changing picture of the state's oligarchy, to defend their leading position. After the great changes caused by the Glorious Revolution of 1689, when William of Orange overthrew the sovereign King James II of England and re-established constitutional monarchy, the main beneficiaries of the revolution were the aristocracy, Whigs and Tories alike, and, to a lesser extent, the gentry. Those were in control of the Parliament, which had become "already sufficiently master of the government to arm it with powers that it would have never dreamt of tolerating in previous reigns" (Wingfield-Stratford 1930, 625). Therefore, since they got into a position of the most influential group in the society, the members of Parliament felt the need to safeguard their advantage.

After acquiring their new rights, the ruling elite were urged to create an appropriate image and distinguish themselves from the rest of the society. As Philip Ayres shows in his study *The Idea of Rome in Eighteenth-Century England*, it was necessary for the members of the British Parliament to protect themselves from the risk of any other and possibly even more thoroughgoing revolution:

Anxious for legitimacy, they assumed for themselves the defining and self-keeping of the principles of political liberty and civic virtue more or less as these had been understood by the Roman-republican senatorial oligarchy. In so doing they clearly distinguished themselves from the more obviously self-indulgent and less self-consciously virtuous aristocracy under Charles II and James II. (Ayers 1997, xiv)

So, as they identified themselves with the Roman oligarchy and adopted the image of virtuous Romans, they became successful in securing their privileges and dignified their position of the ruling class.

In their efforts to create an image which would fortify their powers, the English nobility managed to establish what Ayres calls an "oligarchy of virtue," which helped them to produce a unified way of self-fashioning and thus, differentiate them-

selves from the commoners. The necessarily unified image of the English oligarchy was however only superficial. Although they managed to achieve a distinct position within the society, the struggle for power between their various factions continued. Since they covered their reputation by the aura of Ancient virtues, they were forced to adopt relatively moderate ways of attacking the opposing parties. Roman culture being based on the devotion to one's country, the most fashionable discourse strategy became the blame for faked patriotism. "An immense amount of windy bombast was expended on the subject of patriotism, and with the prudence that always tempers such fervour, great care was taken to find a conveniently weak enemy, with enough riches to give patriotism some chance of paying its way" (Wingfield-Stratford 1930, 681). Thus, the way the ruling class identified itself with the heritage of the Ancient tradition to reassure the public about their privileges serves as an example of the effective use of patriotism as a trope in political rhetoric of virtue.

Just as the image of the Roman ideal, the motif of patriotism became a tool in the speech of the ruling class. "Like all political discourses, the current in the century after 1688 was about power and self-promotion. The attractiveness of its central terms led to its being assimilated by all the major parties" (Ayers 1997, 29). In consequence, the Whigs and Tories reproached each other for the very same lack of virtue, and what is more, "throughout the 1720s and 1730s the Opposition Whig 'Patriots' had adopted this vein of patriotic indignation in their paper war against Walpole" (Ayers 1997, 29). The preference of financial interests to the wellbeing of the whole state then developed into an infamous universal disgrace, regularly criticized in oppositional magazines:

Thus no Man's Estate is safe; but the Property and Industry of the Subject is destroyed by *infinite Corruptions, Partialities and abominable Practices*; to the Shame and Reproach of *Justice*; Scandal of *well-order'd Government*; encouraging all Sorts of *Briberies and Perjuries*; and the Ruin of Multitude of *honest Families*, that fall into the merciless Hands of *lawless Thieves and Invaders*.

(D'Anvers 1732–1733, 108)

Walpole, however, did not feel threatened by the on-going attacks against the Whig government and his own person. He “had no high-flown enthusiasm on the subject of national honour, and he was never more scathing than when he was denouncing the cant of patriotism in others” (Wingfield-Stratford 1930, 679). Therefore, much repeated by all political groups, the criticism of fake patriotism became widely used to make one faction appear true and better than the others.

Even though in this war of words all parties employed the same trope to assail their opponents, on the whole, the situation represents another illustration of the rhetoric of virtue in the fight for power. Whereas in the first case the English patriciate exploited the analogy of its privileged position with the virtuous oligarchy in the Roman republic to secure their rights, in the second case, by blaming one another for not being virtuous enough, they used a similar policy for the very same reason – to get an advantage over their political enemies. As one can also observe, in both cases the trope of patriotism were used to distinguish one group from the other and to create a positive image of the “self” by contrasting it with the less perfect “them.”

Whether Whigs or Tories, in power or in opposition, they all nevertheless only professed to be like idolized Romans. In reality, “parliament was a close corporation of rich men, many of them, if they were Commoners, the nominees of men still richer than themselves” (Wingfield-Stratford 1930, 683). Their pretensions were naturally criticized by the intellectuals of that time, among others by Jonathan Swift, who was a redoubtable social critic and himself a great admirer of Roman culture. Remarkably, in the fake image of the English oligarchy it was not the iniquity which worried him the most—it seems that the major problem for him were the populist tendencies of the Whigs and Walpole’s interest in the financial means of the commoners who were becoming wealthy and thirsty for power. As Ayres points out, Swift was not so much opposed to the methods as to the “levelling tendencies and the threat they offered to the nobility,” for instance, he was concerned about “charity schools because they encouraged plebs to get ideas above themselves” (Ayers 1997, 20–21). Also in *Contests and Dissensions in Athens and Rome*, which he wrote in 1701, Swift shows his disapprobation of the popular side of Roman politics. He keeps adverting to the balance between what he believed to

be the three essential powers in the state – the king, the nobility and the commoners. By using a number of examples from Roman and Greek history, he then stresses that “Tyranny and usurpation in a state are by no means confined to any number” and warns against the rising power of the Commons (Swift 1919, 233). Drawing on the model of Ancient Rome at the time of Julius Caesar, he describes the menace of the imbalance of powers in a state and alerts to its bitter consequences in the dictatorship of a sovereign:

So that a limited and divided power seems to have been the most ancient and inherent principle of both those People in matters of Government. And such did that of Rome continue from the time of Romulus, though with some interruptions to Julius Caesar, when it ended in the tyranny of a single person. During which period (not many years longer than from the Norman Conquest to our age) the Commons were growing by degrees into power and property, gaining ground upon the Patricians, as it were, inch by inch, till at last they quite overturned the balance, leaving all doors open to the practices of popular and ambitious men, who destroyed the wisest republic, and enslaved the noblest people that ever entered upon the stage. (Swift 1919, 247)

Alarmed by the increasing wealth and greed of the middle classes, Swift tends to disregard the pretensions of the English parliamentarians and joins in their common efforts to protect the patriciate against the rising threat of the Commons.

His elitist views were reflected not only in his essays but, as I suggest, also in his famous novel *Gulliver's Travels*. In the last part of *Gulliver's Travels*, called “A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms,” Gulliver finds himself positioned between two kinds of creatures, the noble rational horse-like Houyhnhnms and the vulgar beastly Yahoos. According to Charles Peake, Swift uses the two types of creatures to attack the definition of man as rational animal:

The rational race would be a projection of human notions of absolute reason, but would have to differ from humanity to show how poorly man measured up to the definition he had arrogated. The irrational creatures would have to be plainly brutes not men, since the satiric

effect would be achieved by noting similarities between human behavior and that of brutes. (1971, 182)

Therefore, Peake sees the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos as serving the function of “Two opposed vantage points from which to demolish man’s pride in being ‘the rational animal’” (1971, 182). However, in the context of Swift’s political views, I believe the contrast between the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos may also allude to the distinction between social classes and function as a caution against the populist tendencies of Walpole. Rather than a general projection of absolute reason, the Houyhnhnms may therefore represent the cultivated oligarchy of Ancient Rome.

During their first meeting with Gulliver, the behaviour of the Houyhnhnms is described as “orderly and rational,” “acute and judicious” (1960, 183), the very name of their species meaning “the perfection of nature.” Also, as we learn from Gulliver’s comments, “their grand maxim is to cultivate reason, and to be wholly governed by it” (1960, 216). When he converses with his master, the horse laughs at the English folly in designing systems of natural philosophy but “agreed entirely with the sentiments of Socrates, as Plato delivers them” (1960, 216). Moreover, Gulliver observes that

Friendship and benevolence are the two principle virtues among the Houyhnhnms, and these not confined to particular objects, but universal to the whole race . . . They have no fondness for their colts or foals, but the care they take in educating them proceeds entirely from the dictates of reason . . . In their marriages they are exactly careful to choose such colours as will not make any disagreeable mixture in the breed. Strength is chiefly valued in male, and comeliness in the female, not upon the account of love, but to preserve the race from degenerating; . . . Temperance, industry, exercise and cleanliness, are the lessons equally enjoyed to the young ones of both sexes. (1960, 216–217)

One can easily notice that the virtues of the Houyhnhnms are very similar to the cardinal Roman virtues of temperance, prudence, courage and justice. Thus, the portrayal of the Houyhnhnms does not offer a general ideal of human society

but it is closely linked with the very concrete idea of the Ancient Roman ruling class.

As opposed to the Houyhnhnms, the Yahoos represent the greedy and unworthy commoners who endanger the society by their aggressive selfish behaviour. They are depicted as smelly, unteachable, cunning, malicious, treacherous and revengeful, strong and hardy, but of a cowardly spirit, and by consequence insolent, abject, and cruel (1960, 215). Moreover, Swift stresses their greediness when he describes their unnatural appetite for shining stones, which “they will dig with their claws for whole days to get them out, carry them away, and hide them by heaps in their kennels; but still looking round with great caution, for fear their comrades should find out their treasure” (1960, 210). Also, as Gulliver’s master affirms:

there was nothing that rendered the Yahoos more odious than their undistinguishing appetite to devour every thing that came in their way, whether herbs, roots, berries, corrupted flesh of animals, or all mingled together: and it was peculiar in their temper, that they were fonder of what they could get by rapine or stealth at a greater distance, than much better food provided for them at home. (1960, 211)

So, by pointing out to the greediness for wealth and preference for things which are generally difficult to gain instead of those which are provided for, Swift refers to the acquisitiveness of the middle classes and their interest in the luxury brought by foreign trade.

At the end of the last book, Swift gives even a more fitting parable to the threat the lower classes represent, when he describes the forced departure of Gulliver from the island. After being identified as essentially a Yahoo by the Houyhnhnm council, Gulliver is compelled to either work like all the other Yahoos or to swim back to where he came from. The reason of such a decision, as Gulliver finds out, is his ambiguous position of an exceptional Yahoo who, nevertheless, is not able to achieve the qualities of a Houyhnhnm. Since he remains unable to acquire the prudence and pure reason-governed behaviour of his masters, he becomes a potential threat to their hegemony:

For they alleged, that because I had some rudiments of reason, added to the natural depravity of those animals, it was to be feared, I might be able to seduce them into the woody and mountainous parts of the country, and bring them in troops by night to destroy the Houyhnhnms' cattle, as being naturally of the ravenous kind, and averse from labour. (1960, 225)

The parallel between the worried aristocracy and the potential subversive force of the lower classes, which is embodied in the unfitting Gulliver aiming to cross the boundaries and mingle with the elite, clearly reflects the political situation of Swift's times as well as his own dispositions and views. When he contrasts the modesty and virtuosity of the noble Houyhnhnms with the greedy vulgarity of the Yahoos, he alludes to the danger which the ambitions of the lower classes represent for the nobility.

The example of the English parliamentarians indicates that the rhetoric of virtue and vice in political discourse could serve to constitute an image of a group and also to gain the advantage of one group over another. Swift's writing demonstrates the similarity of these strategies in literature and, at the same time, proves the immense overlap between the two discourses. When reflecting on the political situation in England, Swift could not stay impartial. On the contrary, he openly expressed his concern about the purely commercial thinking of the Walpolean government which ignored noble models and ideologies. In his various writings, Swift adopted the rhetoric of Roman virtues to support the idea of noble aristocracy as the proper ruling class and to criticize the populism of the government. Moreover, by using the trope of greed in the depiction of the commoners, he added a warning against the materialist narrow-minded approach of the middle class. Therefore, the tropes used in the political discourse became repeated and accentuated in social satire which, at the same time, reflected and condemned the falsehood and dangerous alliances between rich commoners and the nobility.

The discourse strategies which the aristocracy used to restrict the powers of the middle class were also influenced by Antony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury. As a devoted enthusiast for Roman and Greek culture as well as a great idealist, he linked civic virtue with beauty and the arts in gen-

eral. In his philosophical treatise *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions and Times*, first published in 1711, he “maintained that virtue is a species of beauty, or that virtue and beauty are one and the same . . . In a similar vein, Shaftesbury equated bad taste with vice in that both constitute an opposition to the natural order of the universe. Developing good taste is, for Shaftesbury, a duty in the same way that developing a virtuous character is” (Ayres 1997, 25). As Shaftesbury asserts: “I am persuaded that to be a virtuoso, so far as befits a gentlemen, is a higher step towards the becoming a man of virtue and good sense than the being what in this age we call a scholar” (1999, 148). Therefore, since “the good, the true and the beautiful are ultimately one” in his theories, he can claim that “virtuoso understands the principles of harmony that underlie both good art and true character” (Grean 1967, 250). Moreover, Shaftesbury talks about luxury as of one of the major vices since, as Ayers summarizes, “virtue, which implies restraint, is properly unadorned, or not adorned to excess . . . Virtue hates luxury and excess. It sits best with simplicity and frugality” (Ayers 1997, 25). In *Characteristics*, Shaftesbury also warns against the negative effects of luxury and connects them with moral decay: “We see the enormous Growth of Luxury in capital Citys, such as have been long the Seat of Empire. We see what Improvements are made in Vice of every kind, where numbers of Men are maintain’d in lazy Opulence, and wanton Plenty” (1999, 214). The problem how to reconcile prudence with the expenses of an aristocratic virtuoso was solved by emphasizing the early Roman models of frugal farmers and thus, the virtues of the early Republic became closely linked with the land. “These models indicated that if one’s means were derived from land, as distinct from commerce and usury, there need be no contradiction between virtue and wealth. Even connoisseurship and frugality might be reconciled” (Ayres 1997, 25–26). So, by connecting civic virtues with the arts, Shaftesbury supported the idea of the ruling class as cultivated and therefore, superior to the commons.

These ideas, the so called “Shaftesburian cultural project,” obviously very well fitted into the propaganda of Walpole’s opponents, the ‘Patriot’ Whigs and the Tory Country Party. Consequently, they were immediately assimilated into the political discourse, especially thanks to Viscount Bolingbroke, who advocated a political theory which would go beyond the

borders of parties yet not beyond oligarchy (Ayers 1997, 26). Such a concept would enable the opposition to unify, and to undermine Walpole's sovereignty more effectively while preserving the image of ruling oligarchy as a class. The main strategy therefore became the criticism of luxury and corruption seen as the results of the rising trade, as for example in *Craftsman*:

Besides, the *Poverty* of those ancient Heroes was made easy to them by the fashionable and prevailing habits of *Temperance* and *Frugality*. It did not conflict with the *Want* of the *common Necessaries and Conveniences of Life*, like the *Poverty* we are speaking of, but only in *Abstinence* from all *Superfluities* and *Extravagance*; for as soon as *Luxury* and *Ambition* had made Them *really necessitous*, and their *Necessities corrupt*, They soon became a *Prey* to the *Invaders* of their *Liberties*. (D'Anvers 1732, 19)

Thus, with the help of the always present lessons of antique states, the attacks on luxury and corruption became a frequent means of the anti-Walpolean propaganda.

Overall, when the Third Earl of Shaftesbury related civic virtues to the good taste in the arts and used the trope of luxury to symbolize the decline of true values, he provided a new invaluable source for the party line of the opposition. Since Walpole's interests were mainly in prosperity and peace, he very often disregarded the exigencies of the class struggle. "From the beginning, Walpole had bet that the politics of the future would be more concerned with portfolio management than religious passions or legal debates" (Schama 2001, 286). To him, the original idea of the noble ruling elite, which members of the aristocracy used to secure their powers, became unimportant in comparison with the opportunities represented by the increased wealth of the middle class. Using all the available financial sources, he simply ignored any ideologies which could menace his own economic interests.

Despite the resistance of Walpole's firm policies, Bolingbroke's political campaign became very influential in the cultural domain. The tropes of luxury and corruption as symbols of moral decay as well as Walpole's England in general appeared not only in newspapers but also in the literary discourse, which is apparent in the novels of Henry Fielding. The

main heroes of all his three novels are portrayed as young and naive young men who have to undergo a journey to the city and try to live there for a while but finally, they discover the corrupting force of the grand lifestyle and escape its snares to find love and happiness in a modest way of life.

In his first novel, *Joseph Andrews*, which he wrote in 1742, Fielding describes the trials of an innocent boy who is employed as a footman in the noble Booby family. After the death of his master, Lady Booby finds interest in Joseph's fresh youth and takes him to London, where he becomes her personal servant and frequent companion. In the big city, the naive Andrews gives in to the merry lifestyle of the rich and turns into a regular beau of the town. However, when his lonely mistress attempts to seduce him and he refuses her, Joseph is dismissed from his employment and, with great relief, travels back to the country. The folly of his former behaviour is underlined in the episode with Mr. Wilson, whose life story serves as a deterring example for all young boys like Joseph, who can easily overlook the dark side of luxurious living. When Wilson describes his beginnings in the city, he gives the reader a clear picture of city fashions:

The Character I was ambitious of attaining, was that of a fine Gentleman; the first Requisites to which, I apprehended were to be supplied by a Taylor, a Periwig-maker, and some few more Tradesmen, who deal in furnishing out the human body. . . . The next Qualifications, namely Dancing, Fencing, Riding the great Horse, and Music, came into my head. (Fielding 1967, 202-3)

Moreover, the other two necessary ingredients of urban pleasures were the knowledge of the town and "Intrigue," (Fielding 1967, 203) a polite word for an abundant sex life. In the story of Mr. Wilson, Fielding portrays the boundless vanity of city fops who spent money on clothing and diversions and instead of pursuing careers, amused themselves by ruining young girls. Lucky to escape the trap of a vicious life in luxury, Joseph marries a simple country girl and settles down in the countryside.

Seven years later, when Fielding writes his most successful novel, *Tom Jones*, he gives an even more blatant contrast between the nostalgic pictures of the countryside and those of the corrupted city. After being expelled from the idyllic country

estate of his patron, Tom Jones sets out for the capital. Not as pure in mind as the former hero, he manages to survive there by prostituting himself to Lady Bellaston, living at her expenses and gradually turning into another city beau. In exchange for fashionable clothes and small sums of money, Tom provides services to an aging lady

who had indeed been once an object of desire, but was now entered at least into the autumn of life, though she wore all the gaiety of youth both in her dress and manner; nay, she contrived still to maintain the roses in her cheeks; but these, like flowers forced out of season by art, had none of that lively, blooming freshness with which Nature at the proper time bedecks her own productions.

(Fielding 1996, 633)

Fortunately, in the end Tom is saved by his beloved beautiful Sophia, who gives him hope for a better life and compels him to fight for his own virtue.

Contrasted with the lovely Sophia, Lady Bellaston becomes the icon of the spoiled city manners, artificial and ruthless. When Sophia seeks refuge in her house, she takes the opportunity and sells her to lord Fellamar for “fourscore thousand pounds” (Fielding 1994, 680). However, Sophia escapes the rape thanks to the arrival of her father, who has no high opinion of the London society. When he hears Fellamar’s marriage proposal, he runs him down with an unexpected speech:

Don’t think I am afraid of such a fellow as thee art! because hast got a spit there dangling at thy side. Lay by your spit, and I’ll give thee enough of meddling with what doth not belong to thee. I’ll teach you to father-in-law me. I’ll lick thy jacket. . . . My daughter shall have an honest country gentleman. (Fielding 1996, 702)

Therefore, by contrasting the country squire’s daughter Sophia with Lady Bellaston, representing the unspoilt life in the countryside and the corrupted morals of the city, Fielding demonstrates the idea of luxury as a source of vice.

Finally, in his last book, *Amelia*, published in 1751, Fielding depicts a whole scale of the possible vices a young man can encounter in London. The main hero, Billy Booth, who already

lives in the city, undergoes a series of misfortunes which he mostly brings on himself by his fancy for city diversions. The first and probably the most illustrative example is Billy's desire to own a stagecoach, which causes the ruin of his family. When Billy gets a chance to set up a little farm in the country and he starts doing quite well, he succumbs to his childish fondness of driving a coach and buys himself one. As a result, he enrages all the neighbouring farmers, who have no understanding for such foppish manners:

The consequence of setting up this poor old coach is inconceivable. Before this, as my wife and myself had very little distinguished ourselves from the other farmers and their wives, either in our dress or our way of living, they treated us as their equals; but now they began to consider us as elevating ourselves into a state of superiority, and immediately began to envy, hate, and declare war against us. (Fielding 1882, 152-153)

Bankrupt and punished for his vanity, Billy then flees back to London, where he indulges in his favourite weaknesses for drinking and hazard. When trying to live like all the other people around him, Billy is pushed to ignore his financial limits and spins in a circle of unrestrained merriment. Constantly tempted by various friends and occasions, he is unable to control his passions and finally squanders all the remaining money of his family. So, as Fielding's depiction of the unfortunate Billy and his other heroes illustrates, the trope of luxury became frequent not only in political propaganda but also in the literary discourse.

The moral decay related to life in indulgence is also expressed in Fielding's descriptions of London masquerades which become a symbol of rich people's extravagance and depravity. Disguised in masks, the wealthy bourgeoisie are involved in backstage manoeuvring, coquetry, swapping partners, and selling their wives to lords. By setting his good-natured shy hero Billy in such company, Fielding stresses the wantonness of the city entertainments while at the same time improving poor Billy's reputation. Despite all the dreadful expectations, in a surprisingly happy ending, Billy does not end up in debtor's prison nor as a victim of amorous intrigues. Eventually, saved by his angelic Amelia and true religious faith,

Billy finds the right principle of prudence and happiness in a modest life. His case, however, serves as a warning against the vanity and luxury of the town.

Similarly to Swift, Fielding used rhetoric strategies and vice-related imagery to comment on the current state of affairs in England. Whereas Swift applied the trope of greed to support the political ideology of the ruling elite, Fielding adopted the trope of luxury from the political discourse, as it had already become widely dispersed, and employed it in his criticism of social vices. The cases of Swift and Fielding's fiction show how fiction can both fuel the political discourse with figurative language and adopt its tropes, bringing political propaganda nearer to the broad public.

To conclude, the analysis of the political discourse strategies in early 18th century England revealed that the tropes of virtue and vice were used as effective means in the struggle for power among numerous social groups. First, by identifying with the virtuous Romans, the English parliamentarians used the rhetoric of virtue to secure their rights against the lower classes. As they strived to be associated with the ancient virtues but at the same time needed to distinguish between their various factions, they used the trope of patriotism to blame each other for false pretences to Roman ideals. When reflected by Swift, the rhetoric of virtue was complemented by the trope of greed, symbolizing the money-grubbing tendencies of the middle classes and their dangerously rising ambitions. After Shaftesbury associated virtue with the arts and vice with selfishness and luxury in his *Characteristics*, Burlington adopted the trope of luxury to support his propaganda against Walpole. This motif became so dispersed in the public speech that it eventually also entered the literary discourse, which one can observe on the example of Fielding's novels. The comparison between Swift's trope of greed as a warning against the dangerously rising middle classes and Fielding's recognition of luxury as the symbol of Walpole's commercial thinking not only reveals the interconnectedness of the literary and political discourses, as literature both reflects and is influenced by political climate, but also shows how the talk about virtue and vice can function in constituting social groups as well as in stressing the differences between them.

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the rhetoric of virtue and vice which was used by the eighteenth-century ruling class to reassert its right to power and suppress the influence of their opponents. Focusing on the tropes of greed and luxury as one of the most prominent tools of denoting enemies, it reveals the strong potential of such tropes to create identities of social groups and affect their social power. The article also aims to stress the ongoing interaction between the political and literary discourses of that time and shows how the rhetoric strategies were reflected in social satire, namely in the works of Jonathan Swift and Henry Fielding.

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