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AUTHOR(S):

YOKOUCHI, Kazuo

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Reading Thackeray Reading Steele:

Henry Esmond and Politics in the Bedroom¹⁾

Kazuo YOKOUCHI

The following is an extended note on a single passage in William Makepeace Thackeray's historical novel, *The History of Henry Esmond, Esq.* (1852). Though the full-length novel, especially that of such an "idle" and "careless" writer as Thackeray²⁾, might seem unfit for close inspection, I would argue otherwise. *Esmond* certainly commits many errors, partly because of the author's lack of training as historian and partly because of his rather rash writing, yet we might notice that behind each scene and each invention lies Thackeray's extensive reading of Augustan literature that heavily informs the novel. To prove this, I take up the scene of Harry Esmond, the protagonist of the novel, staying overnight at Dick Steele's home and overhearing a noise in the next bedroom (Book II, Chapter XV; Dick Steele is modelled on the Augustan writer Richard Steele). What happens in a couple's bedroom at night is the extremity of privacy—even a secret—and least likely to survive in historical record, and yet it somehow finds its way into the novel. One interpretation would be of course that the episode is a pure invention on the author's part, entirely free from historical fact or plausibility, but I would like to propose an alternative possibility that it is based on Thackeray's close reading of Steele's text. To fully appreciate Thackeray's perhaps lewd humour in this scene as well as his historical imagination, we would need to follow his reading process and try to catch up with its rich imaginative potential.

As historical fiction, *Esmond* is set in Augustan England, its plot involving some political events of the time, from the Stuart Restoration and the Hanoverian Succession to the War of the Spanish Succession, the Tory-Whig conflict and Jacobitism, but its main interest lies not so much in these public affairs as in Harry's personal fate and love.

1) This essay is based on a paper read at a meeting of the Kansai branch of the Johnson Society of Japan on 24 March 2018.

2) J. A. Sutherland mentions "a culpable deal of 'idleness' and 'carelessness' in the composition of Thackeray's fiction" (7).

In the opening pages of the novel, preceding Chapter I, Harry as author of his own memoir differentiates his narrative from the old tragedies or histories in which the muse “wears the mask and the cothurnus, and speaks to measure”; he proposes instead to “have History familiar rather than heroic: and think that Mr. Hogarth and Mr. Fielding will give our children a much better idea of the manners of the present age in England, than the *Court Gazette* and the newspapers” (14).³⁾ This apologia is undoubtedly Thackeray’s own. He depicts public figures in the novel not as great heroes who speak and act with dignity but as real-size characters who have their merits and weaknesses and casually associate with each other. Dick Steele appears as one of such lovable fellows, and stands out for his intimate friendship with Harry from the early stage of the narrative.

Thackeray’s choice of Steele as mentor and companion to his protagonist is arguably deliberate. Besides William Hogarth and Henry Fielding, we have good reason to believe that Steele was the author who provided the model for Thackeray’s historical imagination. In *The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century* (1853), which collects the series of lectures he gave around the time he prepared *Esmond*, Thackeray spares a whole lecture for Steele, and begins it with a meditation on the aim of historical studies. He suggests that historical studies aim to “make ourselves acquainted with the life and being of the time,” and that reading a volume of Smollett or *The Spectator* will meet that purpose: “Out of the fictitious book I get the expression of the life of the time; of the manners, of the movement, the dress, the pleasures, the laughter, the ridicules of society—the old times live again, and I travel in the old country of England” (543). In fact, such details of daily life were the subject of Steele’s periodical essays and surely helped much in Thackeray’s reconstruction of Augustan life in *Esmond*. In addition to this merit as chronicler of Augustan life, Steele’s all too human character must have recommended him to the novelist. Compared with Joseph Addison, who kept aloof of human errors, Steele committed many sins—“Steele says of himself that he was always sinning and repenting. He beat his breast and cried most piteously when he *did* repent: but as soon as crying had made him thirsty, he fell to sinning again” (553–54)—and yet maintained his gentle and kind nature. Thackeray confesses his preference for such a weak and lovable man in most passionate terms: “He is by no means the most brilliant of wits nor the deepest of thinkers: but he is our friend: we love him, as children love their

3) All references to *Henry Esmond* and *The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century* hereafter are to The Oxford Thackeray edition and indicated with the page numbers in parentheses (both texts are contained in vol. 13).

love with an A, because he is amiable" (572).

Undoubtedly, Thackeray created the familiar relationship between Harry and Dick Steele to allow himself an imaginary friendship with his favourite author.⁴⁾ His depiction of Steele with many merits and defects is often sarcastic, yet always mingled with respect and affection. On his first appearance in the novel, for example, Steele betrays his short temper and vain pride. When he accompanies Captain Westbury to search Viscount Castlewood's household for evidence of his treasonable plots, he is summoned to interpret a seized document in Latin; as one of his company inadvertently addresses him Dick, however, Steele flies into a rage: "My name is Steele, sir, . . . I may be Dick for my friends, but I don't name gentlemen of your cloth amongst them. . . . Mr. Steele, sir, if you please. When you address a gentleman of his Majesty's Horse Guards, be pleased not to be so familiar" (62-63). The episode does not end here. After Steele construes the text for his company, he learns that there is a lad in the household who has translated the same text correctly. This discovery melts his ill temper at once, and he "put his hand kindly on the lad's head, and said some words in the Latin tongue" (63). The words spoken here are, as he renders into English for his company, 'I was not ignorant of misfortune myself, and had learned to succour the miserable' (63)—a quotation from Virgil (*Aeneid* I. 630).⁵⁾ This is the first meeting of Harry the lad and Steele the trooper in the disturbance following the Hanoverian Succession.

Since Steele seeks a friendship with Harry, his candid humanity comes to nourish occasional humour. Following the above episode, for example, Steele and Harry have a casual chat on religious matters, in which Steele mentions his friend Joseph Addison as a better mentor. Compared with him, he confesses, he is only a weak person who sees and approves the better course and follows the worse (based on Ovid). When Harry flatters him on his good points, Steele modestly declines the praise and—as the narrator goes—"indeed, as it turned out, poor Dick told the truth" (66). On that very night Harry finds him 'in a woful state of drunkenness', and severely offended on hearing his religion mocked at before he "swearing . . . made for his sword . . . and fell down flat on the floor under it" (66). When he learns Harry's fate of orphanhood another day, he takes special compassion for the lad and tells him how he met his first grief when he lost his father in childhood, concluding, "And this . . . has made me pity all children ever since; and caused

4) Dick Steele's role in the novel is, of course, not limited to the author's personal enjoyment. Richard Pearson argues that Steele's military and literary careers find their counterparts in Esmond's while his attitudes to women reflects on Esmond's (Pearson 74).

5) I owe the identification of the Virgilian source of Steele's remark to Osamu Takaya.

me to love thee, my poor fatherless, motherless lad. And if ever thou wantest a friend, thou shalt have one in Richard Steele" (70). His all too good nature is also seen when he confides his secret passion to Harry, having trust in his "sensibility above his years" and "great and praiseworthy discretion" and swearing him to secrecy (71). Harry "religiously" keeps his vow until he finds, to his amazement, not only that "officers and privates were all taken into Dick's confidence" but also that "while Dick was sighing after Saccharissa in London, he had consolations in the country" (71).

These portraits of the humane yet sometimes troublesome trooper were to be criticized by subsequent biographers and historians. Henry R. Montgomery, the first full-scale biographer of Steele, complains of Thackeray's treatment being "rather a caricature than a portrait" which tends to "the depreciation of Steele" by mocking at his shortcomings (xv-vi). His successor and author of *The Life of Richard Steele* (1889), George A. Aitken mentions the difficulty to "remove the false impressions about Steele caused by Thackeray's somewhat condescending though affectionate compassion" and, quoting the scene of his first appearance in particular, suggests that Thackeray's "loving pity" caused "a false conception of Steele" as much as Macaulay's "avowed disdain" (viii and 47). Indeed, Thackeray tends to subject historical figures to his fictional design and give free rein to his imagination in characterizing them. But this does not mean that he created his historical characters out of nothing. His satirical and sometimes over-affectionate portraits of historical figures, especially of Steele, are based on his extensive reading of documents related to them. Although he did not leave any notes or bibliographies in preparation for *Esmond*, his implicit and sometimes explicit reference to a wide range of literature in the novel and the lectures attests to the rich sources from which he could draw his imagination. For example, his depiction of Steele's drunken habit is traceable to several sources, among which Dr. John Hoadly's account of Steele's blunder in intoxication is verbally quoted in *The English Humourists* (567), probably from John's Nichols's footnote to Steele's letter (II, 508n). His brimming kindness to the orphan lad as well as his account of his first grief could come from his article in *The Tatler*, no. 181, 6 June 1710, which is "reproduced virtually verbatim" in *Esmond* (70; Hawes 472). In other words, Thackeray chose as companion to his protagonist the author who could provide rich material for the fictional reconstruction of his personality. No doubt Thackeray's attempt proved so successful that subsequent biographers found it difficult to demythicize the popularized portrait of the Augustan man of letters.

In his "degrading" portraiture of Steele, probably the most embarrassing moment occurs when the grown-up Harry returns from the military campaign on the Continent and attends a gala entertainment at Lady Castlewood's home in Kensington. Lady

Rachel Castlewood is his fostermother and long-entertained adoration, and now he enjoys her motherly friendship after a long interval while his affection is divided by her beautiful daughter Beatrix as well. When the other guests start arriving, pioneered by Captain and Mrs Steele, the narrative makes a brief digression into the previous night when Harry stayed with the Steeles:

Captain and Mrs. Steele, who were the first to arrive, had driven to Kensington from their country-house, the Hovel at Hampton Wick, 'Not from our mansion in Bloomsbury Square,' as Mrs. Steele took care to inform the ladies. Indeed Harry had ridden away from Hampton that very morning, leaving the couple by the ears; for from the chamber where he lay, in a bed that was none of the cleanest, and kept awake by the company which he had in his own bed, and the quarrel which was going on in the next room, he could hear both night and morning the *curtain lecture* [emphasis added] which Mrs. Steele was in the habit of administering to poor Dick.

At night it did not matter so much for the culprit; Dick was fuddled, and when in that way no scolding could interrupt his benevolence. Mr. Esmond could hear him coaxing and speaking in that maudlin manner, which punch and claret produce, to his beloved Prue, and beseeching her to remember that there was a *distiwisht officer i the nex roob*, who would overhear her. She went on, nevertheless, calling him a drunken wretch, and was only interrupted in her harangues by the captain's snoring. (305)

After the serious account of Harry's battlefield experiences, this episode is a comical diversion containing a bit of vulgarity. It even runs the risk of falling into indecency, particularly at the time of emerging Victorian prudery, when Harry overhears the sound of the next bedroom overnight; it turns out to be the quarelling voices of Captain and Mrs Steele, but the first reader might well be misled to a coarser imagination. The exposition of their *curtain lecture* falls as a sort of bathos, followed by the next paragraph that unfolds more details of the couple's overnight quarrel and further the vulgar humour of the scene. Still the sexual overtones that haunt the scene will not escape the astute reader.⁶⁾ Why on earth did Thackeray insert such a lewd joke even at the risk of his admired author's dignity? This is the question I would like to consider in the following pages.

6) Pearson interprets this scene as 'a warning to Esmond's choice of Beatrix for his bride' (78). As to the motif of curtain lecture, see Rendell.

To anticipate my conclusion, I would argue that this episode is no less based on Thackeray's close reading of Steele's text than his other episodes in the novel, and even a credit to his historical imagination in depicting the life and manners of the time in plain clothes. It is not hard to imagine that the historical novelist who wanted to enrich his narrative with everyday details turned to the essayist who was known for his everyday topics, and indeed the articles in *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* must have helped the novelist a great deal. But Steele, among other writers of the time, left behind him another important set of materials for the later generations who would be curious about the real manners of Augustan life: his correspondence.

In a note in *The English Humourists* (561n-4n), Thackeray reveals his debt to the 1809 edition of Steele's correspondence, which John Nichols collected from Mrs Steele's inheritors and originally published in two volumes in 1787. Although Nichols makes a modest claim on its literary values—"The subjects of many of them are trivial and domestic, such as may at first be supposed not very interesting to the publick, and from most men would be deemed insignificant and below attention" (I: v)—Aitken gives unreserved praise to its record during the eleven years of Steele's marriage of "events, passing troubles, successes, hopes and fears, such as cannot be paralleled in all literature"—even "entirely exempt from the limitations imposed upon Swift by his relations towards his correspondents" (I: 172). Unparalleled even by Jonathan Swift, in Aitken's view, Steele's correspondence with his wife reveals the candid truth about the married couple's life to such an extent that "Few men's character and innermost life have been exposed to anything approaching such a searching scrutiny, and very few could have passed through the ordeal with the honour that attaches to Steele" (I: 173). No doubt Thackeray was one of the happy few who fully appreciated the value Aitken attached to Steele's correspondence, referring to its merit in similar terms with Aitken's—"They contain details of the business, pleasures, quarrels, reconciliations of the pair; they have all the genuineness of conversation; they are as artless as a child's prattle, and as confidential as a curtain-lecture" (*Humourists* 565)—and here again we meet the phrase *curtain-lecture*! Of course, Steele's letters do not literally contain or mention any curtain lectures he might have received from his wife, but it is likely that Thackeray detected some hints of them there. Can we trace Thackeray's process of deduction?

It will help to follow Steele's correspondence with his wife from the stage of their courtship, as it might have caught Thackeray's attention. Fortunately, Thackeray gives a summary of the couple's history in his extended note in *The English Humourists*, quoting some ten examples of Steele's letters to his love and wife. According to Rae

Blanchard who edited the modern edition of Steele's letters, it was in early 1707 or December 1706 that Steele first met Mary (Prue) Scurlock, and his courtship began in early August; the first letter he sent to her is supposed to be dated 9 August by Nichols. But Thackeray begins in his note by quoting a letter dated 30 August—the fifteenth of the extant letters Steele sent to his future wife. It begins:

Madam

I begg pardon that my paper is not Finer, but I am forc'd to write from a Coffee-house, *where I am attending about businesse* [emphasis added, *1]. There is a dirty Croud of Busie faces all around me talking of *money*; while all my Ambition, all my wealth is Love! Love, which animates my Heart, sweetens my Humour, enlarges my Soul, and affects every Action of my Life. [...] (198-99)⁷⁾

No doubt a banal composition as a man's love letter, but it quickly becomes curious when placed alongside the following message sent later on the same day:

Dear, Lovely Mrs. Scurlock

I have been in very Good company [emphasis added, *2], where your Health, under the Character of the Woman I lov'd best has been often drank. So that I may say I am Dead Drunk for Your sake, which is more yⁿ I dye for you. [...] (199)

Here Steele betrays a quick change of style according to his mood and situation; in the first letter which he is writing during his business he sounds formal, tentative in addressing the girl and industrious in conveying his passion in choice words, but in the second letter written that night he is casual, familiar and impudent, having drunk her health with his male company. Perhaps he is an honest fellow, incapable of wisely concealing his mood or controlling his attitude which cannot help evoking laughter. Thackeray must be aware of this fun when he quotes both the letters in succession, with a curt comment inserted between them: “—obviously written later in the day!” (562n).

The next letter Thackeray quotes is also a case of Steele's silly indulgence in love. “*It is the hardest thing in the World to be in Love, and yet attend business* [emphasis added, *3]. As for Me, all who speake to Me find Me out, and I must Lock my self up, or other people will do it for Me” (199). He claims that he was incapable of checking his happy

7) Quotations of Steele's letters hereafter are from Rae Blanchard's scholarly edition. Thackeray, though, seems to quote from Nichols's 1809 edition and modernize the spellings at liberty.

feelings in business scenes, with the result that his company stopped talking to him. He goes so far as to give a few samples of conversation: “A Gentleman ask’d Me this morning what news from Lisbon, and I answer’d, She’s Exquisitely handsome” (199). No doubt this kind of response must have baffled his business partners to silence. But he was capable of quickly changing his tone again to a strictly business manner when he wrote to the young lady’s mother two days later. Although Thackeray only summarizes this letter without quoting it verbatim, part of it is worth reproducing here:

[. . .] The Young Lady Y^r Daughter told me she had a letter from You of 22d instant wherein You gave Her the highest marks of Your Affection and anxiety for Her Welfare in relation to Me. The Main prospect on these occasions is that of Fortune; therefore I shall very candidly give you an account of myself as to that particular.
[. . .]

Thus My Whole income is at present per Annum	1250: 00: 00
Deduct the interest of 3000 l.	180: 00: 00 } }
Taxes for my Employment	45: 00: 00 } <u>225: 00: 00</u>
Remains after these deductions	1025: 00: 00

This is Madam the present state of my Affairs, and tho’ this income is so large *I have not taken any regard to lay up any thing further than just what pays the interest abovemention’d* [emphasis added, *4]. [. . .] You have now the whole View of both Our Circumstances before You, and You see there is foundation for Our living in an Handsome manner provided We can be of one mind, without which I could not propose to my self any happinesse or Blessing were my circumstances never so plentiful. [. . .] (201-2)

This composition shows such a drastic change in style from his previous messages to the daughter that it is hard to imagine both styles flowing from the same pen. Indeed, with his formal vocabulary and long syntax Steele sounds a bit nervous in seeking a parental consent to his courtship, but his unabashed recourse to economic analysis and mathematical precision reaches the extent of ridiculousness.

So far we have traced Steele’s courtship to Mary Scurlock in letters, and found him versatile enough to adapt different styles and attitudes for different purposes; in his letters to Mary he ranges from a decent wooer to a spoony man in love while he addresses her mother and guardian in a businesslike manner to persuade her of his eligibility. On close inspection, however, these letters already betray some factors that can lead to his subjection to curtain lectures in the future. Note the words I emphasized

by italics in the above quotations. In the first letter, his mention of business attendance as an apology for bad letter paper (*1) predicts his future habit of mentioning business as an excuse of many things. For the women who were excluded from the business scenes, the pretext of business could sound peremptory—though there was no telling what kind of business was going on in the coffee-house. The second letter (*2) may sound no less unpleasant to women since it indicates men's tendency to put their homosocial company before domestic love and even offer the latter to the former's entertainment. Such a generous character as Steele could even sacrifice part of his income for the benefit of his fellow revellers. In the third letter Steele confesses his affection too strong to be controlled in his workplace (*3). This means, in other words, that he goes to business even while he is in love; his future wife cannot keep him always at home, however passionately they may love each other. And in his fourth letter Steele betrays his indifference to pecuniary matters (*4), which may enable him to act bravely and generously among his male company but is by no means desirable for a husband's behaviour. These factors may seem trivial at this stage of their courtship, perhaps unavoidable in any loving couple, but such small complaints may pile up everyday into a big seed of discontent and threaten the peace of the matrimonial bedroom.

Now let us proceed to examine Steele's correspondence after marriage. According to Blanchard, he married Mary Scurlock on 9 September 1707, just a week after he sent the above-quoted letter to Mrs Scurlock (though Thackeray conjectures their marriage to have taken place on 7 September). A month later, however, "traces of a tiff" began to appear in Thackeray's terms—and he adds, "she being prudish and fidgety, as he was impassioned and reckless" (*Humourists* 563n). Following this remark, Thackeray goes on to introduce seven letters Steele sent to his wife, of which five are quoted below:

[A] Pardon me if you do not see me till eleven of Clock having met a schoolfellow from India, by whome I am to be inform'd in things this night which extreamly concern y^r Obedient Husband (16 October 1707; 211)

[B] I begg of You not to be uneasy for I have done a great deal of business to-day very Successfully, and wait an hour or two about my Gazette. (22 October 1707; 211-12)

[C] I write to let You know I don't come home to dinner, being oblig'd to attend some businesse abroad of which I shall give you an Account (when I see You in the evening) as becomes your Dutyful & Obedient Husband (22 December 1707; 215)

[D] I have partly succeeded in my businesse to-day & enclose two Guineas as earnest of more. Dear Prue I can't come home to dinner. I languish for y^r Welfare and will never be a moment careless more. (3 January 1708; 215-16)

[E] M^r Edgcombe, Ned Ash, and M^r Lumley have desir'd Me to sitt an hour with them at the George in Pall-mall for which I desire your patience till twelve of Clock and that you will go to bed. (14 January 1708; 216)

Keeping in mind that letters only present fragments of truth, what can we read from the above five letters? First, Steele tended to be late for dinner at home, because of urgent business or unexpected visits from his friends as far as these five occasions are concerned; it is also surmised that he often stayed out at night. Second, he did not explain his business in detail and sometimes left it obscure to his wife. What “things . . . which extreamly concern y^r Obedient Husband” exactly are in Letter A, what “some businesse” are and where “abroad” is in Letter C, why he “can't come home to dinner” in Letter D, and what he “sitt an hour with them” for in Letter E—remain unexplained to Prue. In Letter C Steele promises his wife to explain the “businesses abroad” when he comes home, but in general, perhaps including that case, he seems to be reluctant to share the details of his business or social life with his wife. In Letter D he encloses some money, but this kindness may conceal his design to evade further inquiry. Third, despite his seeming reluctance to share his daily business, it can be deduced that he had the habit of explaining himself to Prue at night. Letter C exactly refers to his promise to give her an account of his business later in the evening, and the other letters might also cause his obligation to provide the same service. Letter E, in addition, suggests that the rite took place at midnight in the couple's bedroom. Fourth, while these letters are short and simple, they sometimes sound servile and show the husband extremely careful not to offend his wife. In the opening of the letters (omitted in the above quotations) Steele addresses his wife by various complimentary appellations, such as “Dearest Being on Earth” (A; 211), “My Dear Dear Wife” (C; 215) and “Dear Prue” (D; 215), and concludes them by calling himself “y^r Obedient husband² (A; 211), “Y^r Obliged Husband” (B; 212), “your Dutyful & Obedient Husband” (C; 215), “Y^r Faithful Husband” (D; 216) and “Ever Thine” (E; 216). Of course, these compliments are not unusual, but Letter C sounds unusually servile in the opening and ending, and Letter D confessing “I languish for y^r Welfare and will never be a moment careless more,” beside the enclosed cash, may arouse suspicion about his design. And fifth, to infer from the above deductions, Mrs Steele seems to have been quite an exacting wife, expecting her

husband to dine at home in principle and claiming to know every reason that kept him from that office. My hypothesis is that Thackeray, quoting or referring to the above letters in his lecture, must have followed this process of reasoning to reach his supposition.

To support this hypothesis, we have only to read on Steele's letters. To cut short our discussion, however, let us focus on two aspects of the couple's life in particular. First, Mrs Steele seems to have been a disobedient and perhaps troublesome wife. From the start of their married life, 'traces of a tiff' were visible between them, as Thackeray keenly discerns, arguably due to the unfathomable gap of their nature, but their discord became worse when they moved to a new house at Hampton Wick in August 1708. The actual circumstances in which they clashed each other are not clear—because Steele's letters only touch fragments of the fact and Mrs Steele's letters in this case are not extant at all—but it seems that Mrs Steele objected to her husband's decision about some points of their new household management. In his letter on 12 August Steele complains about her not being reluctant to bring in disturbance between them while it gives him "the greatest affliction" (226). On 16 August he hopes to convince his wife, apparently without success, that "the methods I have taken were absolutely necessary for our Mutuall Good" (228), and on 20 August he defends himself, saying: "You extremely mistakes me in beleving Me capable of any Cruelty or Unkindnesse to You" (228–29). And a month later, in his letter on 13 September, he proposes to settle their differences in the following terms: "if you knew how my Heart akes when you Speak an Unkind word to Me, and springs with Joy when you smile upon Me, I am sure you would place your Glory rather in preserving my happinesse like a good Wife, than tormenting Me like a Peevish Beauty" (232–33). To distinguish the real from the desirable, it is surmised that Mrs Steele was rather "a Peevish Beauty" who tormented her husband with unkind words. It is very likely that from these letters Thackeray drew the portrait of raging wife and soothing husband.⁸⁾

Second, Mrs Steele seems to have been anxious to control her husband's social life. The following letter is estimated by Blanchard to be dated December 1708, though Thackeray must have found it in the section of undated letters in Nichols's edition of Steele's correspondence: "It is a stange thing because you are handsome, that you won't behave Y^r self with the obedience that people of Worse features do, but that I must be always giving You an account of every trifle, and minute of my time. I send this to tell

8) Although Thackeray does not mention this quarrel between the newly-wed couple, the letters quoted here are all found in Nichols's edition of Steele's letters to which he availed himself.

you I am waiting to be sent for again when my Lord Wharton is stirring" (250). Another letter, undated in Nichols's edition but estimated to be dated late August 1710 or May or June 1709 in Blanchard's, contains the following words: "Dear Prue Don't send after Me for I shall be ridiculous. I send you word to put you out of frights" (268). These remarks suggest that Steele was constantly required to report to his wife every detail of his social life when he was absent from home and, at least in a certain period around 1709 or 1710, even followed about and observed by her man. This is indeed an excessive way of controlling the husband, though reproaching Mrs Steele without hearing her claims would be unfair—perhaps Steele had committed many errors enough to lose her faith. Anyway, these letters are likely to have presented to Thackeray, who was ardent reader of Nichols's edition of Steele's letters, the portrait of nagging wife and escaping husband; and it would be a logical step from these sources to draw one possible conclusion of Mrs Steele's curtain lecture administered nightly to her husband in their bedroom. To take a further step, one might take the risk of suspecting that, in power politics in the matrimonial bedroom now turned into a pulpit all night long, Steele was kept from sexual contact as well—that is the lewd imagination justly aroused by the situation in *Henry Esmond* in which the protagonist overhears the unproductive noise in the couple's bedroom overnight. This is, I claim, the vulgar reality of Augustan life Thackeray drew from his reading of Steele's text, and attests to Thackeray's method in historical fiction, inserting in the grave historical narrative a comic twist and a bit of erotic imagination only to be appreciated by the attentive reader.

Thackeray's allusion to Mrs Steele's curtain lecture can thus be read as an exquisite example of his historical imagination in depicting familiar aspects of Augustan life; it brings into focus a minor yet very interesting truth about a *marriage a la mode* which tended to be buried in historical record until today's cultural historians began to explore daily life in the past. Put in a larger context, however, it can also be read as a significant moment in the history of gender politics. Mrs Steele's nightlong attack on her husband for his generous treatment of his male friends at the expense of his wife's burden could represent women's objection to men's homosocial bonds. As the above-quoted letters show, the historical Steele tended to absent himself from home in order to associate with his business friends at coffee-houses and clubs. Interestingly, Steele's social life thus maintained has been attached historical significance in the debate on the emergence of the public sphere. One of Jürgen Habermas's important arguments concerns how the social life spent in late seventeenth- to early eighteenth-century coffee houses found its way into journals and newspapers through Addison and Steele; as these coffee houses were only accessible to men, their debate soon extended to economics and politics, and

led to the construction of the arena of public opinions before it was transplanted to printing media (Habermas 31–43). In a way, while Mrs Steele was waiting at home, her husband moving between printing and coffee houses was engaged in the historical project of creating the public sphere. But as Habermas points out, the male dominated society thus established around coffee houses and gaining social power was not exempt from attacks from women who were “abandoned every evening” (33, 257n). Though the pamphlet he mentions, “The Women’s Petition against Coffee, representing to Public Consideration of the Grand Inconveniences according to their Sex from the Excessive use of that Drying, Enfeebling Liquor” (1674), seems to make less political than sexual complaints, the coffee-house politics’s exclusion of women—and even Habermas himself who placed value on the public sphere thus constructed—have provoked modern feminist critics.⁹ Mrs Steele was unmistakably their harbinger, and Thackeray who extended his imagination to the wife’s voiceless complaint was a faithful chronicler of Augustan gender politics as well.

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9) See the essays collected in Landes, especially Joan B. Landes’ own article, “The Public and the Private Sphere: A Feminist Reconsideration” (135–62). Moyra Haslett brings back this argument to the context of Augustan literature (138–72).

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