Utopian Voyeurism: Androgynty and the Language of the Eyes in Haywood’s *Love in Excess*

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Encountering two reunited lovers near the end of Eliza Haywood’s *Love in Excess* (1719–20), the novel’s protagonist Count D’elmont declares, “if any credit ... may be given to the language of the eyes, I am certain yours speak success.” One of the fortunate lovers replies, “Had I a thousand eyes, a thousand tongues, they all would be but insignificant to express the joy!” The pairing of “eyes” and “tongues” is apt; throughout the novel, eyes offer “explanation[s],” speak their “meaning but too plainly,” and “testif[y]” more clearly than “words” have the “power to do” (224, 111, 196). The novel repeatedly contrasts a deceptive and limiting verbal language with the supposedly more expressive “language of the eyes” (240), a conventional staple of amatory verse and prose in which lovers “speak” to each other through killing looks and dazzling glances. Yet, as Haywood deploys a traditional rhetoric that evokes the languishing lovers of Petrarchan sonnets or Sidney’s Arcadian landscapes, her novel also infuses such rhetoric with a new set of values and motives in relation to gender.

Traditionally, the erotically charged language of the eyes is subversive of social and class norms to the degree that it permits a covert expression of forbidden desires: a male lover’s infatuation with a married woman or a poverty-stricken suitor’s courtship of a woman of wealth and caste. Further, the language of the eyes

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1 Eliza Haywood, *Love in Excess; or, the Fatal Enquiry*, ed. David Oakleaf (1719–20; Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2000), 240. References are to this edition.
may at first appear to unsettle gender relations, endowing women with a magnificent and terrible power, albeit often unconscious or involuntary; without knowing it, Petrarch’s Laura, his “sun” among women, can break hearts with a single striking ray from her “begli occhi.” At the same time, of course, the power imputed to the mistress’s gaze is in many respects illusory. Her lethally dazzling glances remain a function of the lover’s gaze; like the sun, she shines from a distance and on all alike. To dazzle with speaking glances is hardly a matter of choice; instead, it is simply her nature. As we might expect, the potentially subversive trope of the language of the eyes appears firmly grounded in patriarchal relations and norms. In traditional amatory verse, the male poet reads and interprets his beloved’s gaze; he both initiates the nonverbal language of the eyes by soliciting her glances and translates them into verbal language for his readers.

Love in Excess recontextualizes the conventional trope of the lover’s glance, extending its function and significance. Transforming the traditional lovers’ language of the eyes from a series of discrete and dazzling moments, the novel imbues it with the texture of an extended discourse, replete with nuanced meanings. In addition, Haywood deepens the subversive nature and content of the lover’s glance. In her fictive world, verbal language confines women and limits them according to rigid social codes, while the language of the eyes offers a realm of female agency masked as an instinctual bodily response; further, when modified by Haywood’s depiction of courtship and seduction, voyeurism (which traditionally privileges the male gaze over the female object) allows for a reversal of terms whereby the gaze itself exposes androgynous possibilities. Female characters can now claim the gaze, and supposedly powerful men can become objects of it. As Juliette Merritt argues, Haywood repeatedly struggles to move her woman characters into the position of spectator, beyond their relatively passive role as “spectacle” or as the object of the male gaze. Yet, as Merritt makes clear, this attempted repositioning heightens female vulnerabilities to male censure.


3 Juliette Merritt, Beyond Spectacle: Eliza Haywood’s Female Spectators (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004). As Merritt argues, in Love in Excess
My argument here is that Haywood’s *Love in Excess* utilizes the language of the eyes to sidestep the dichotomy between spectator and spectacle, eliding the boundaries between the two realms. The language of the eyes epitomizes a rich realm of nonverbal discourse available to both female and male characters; this body language includes not only glances, but also gestures that can be read in visual terms. As women and men engage in the duel of lovers’ glances, they push the limits of socially imposed gender roles, participating in a mutually empowering interplay of heightened sensibility that Haywood repeatedly stages as androgynous. Finally, Haywood’s celebration of the language of the eyes is supported by the increasingly insistent contemporary assertion that a gestural language could be both purer and more primal than the complex and often deceptive permutations of verbal language. For Haywood, as well as for diverse contemporaries such as the conventional poet John Whaley and the eccentric and original Bernard Mandeville, the speaking glances and signifying gestures of lovers carried connotations of Edenic innocence, derived in part from contemporary speculations about the origins of language.

**Speaking Glances:**

**Contemporary Depictions of the Language of the Eyes**

“Is There a ‘Language of the Eyes’?” demands the title of an article in the scientific journal *Visual Cognition*. Haywood’s contemporaries had little doubt that there was and that it could express relatively precise meanings. Philip Ayres, in “The Silent Talkers” (1687), describes a woman enjoining her lover to “Speak with thy Eyes” in furtive glances, “lest we by List’ners be betray’d.” And Dryden’s translation of Ovid’s *Amours* situates the language of amorous glances within an extensive code of bodily signs that signify specific meanings; thus, a lover teaches his married mistress a covert language of signs and glances with which to communicate her secret thoughts in the presence of her husband:

Alovisa’s struggle to claim the role of spectator enmeshes her in a web of conflicts and contradictions.

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4 Simon Baron-Cohen, Sally Wheelwright, and Therese Joliffe, “Is There a ‘Language of the Eyes’?: Evidence from Normal Adults and Adults with Autism or Asperger Syndrome,” *Visual Cognition* 4, no. 3 (1997), 311.

Read in my Looks what silently they speak,
And slyly, with your Eyes, your Answer make.
My lifted Eye-brow shall declare my Pain,
My Right-Hand to his fellow shall complain:

When e’re you think upon our last Embrace,
With your Fore-finger gently touch your Face.
If any Word of mine offend my Dear,
Pull, with your Hand, the Velvet of your Ear.  

Tellingly, Melliora and Count D’elmont, the duelling lovers of *Love in Excess*, debate the merits of Ovid’s poetry in an eroticized argument that ends with D’elmont’s confession of desire: “A thousand times you have read my rising wishes, sparkling in my eyes” (111). Dryden’s translation of Ovid wittily depicts a coded body language that prefigures the extensive conversations that Melliora and D’elmont will conduct by means of the language of the eyes.

Haywood’s best-selling novel exploited a growing fascination with the “language of the eyes” and may have helped to further popularize the notion that glances can be more expressive than words. Soon after the publication of *Love in Excess*, references to the “language of the eyes” appear to proliferate. Mary Chandler’s poem “A Description of Bath” (1736) catalogues the city’s sights, mockingly describing the “Rooms for Pleasure” where “Miss soon learns the Language of the Eyes” as her “witless Beau looks soft, and swears he dies.” In contrast to Chandler’s satiric vision, John Whaley’s poem “On a Couple lately Married” (1732) celebrates the courtship of “fair Anna” and Eugenio, which is initiated by the expressive “language of the eyes”:

First, by the silent Language of the Eyes,
Each knew the Motive of the other’s Sighs;
A thousand Conscious Looks they Daily stole,
And in each Feature read the speaking Soul.
The Cheek with red perfus’d, the down-cast Eye,
The Breast that strove to stop the rising Sigh,
Maintaining the fiction that the “language of the eyes” speaks for the “soul” even as it thrives on the sensual pageantry of the body (its red cheeks and heaving breasts), the poem carves out an ambiguous territory in which social conventions can be overstepped apparently with impunity. While verbal language is forbidden—the “tongue” is confined by the bonds of “modest silence”—the body speaks freely by means of an erotically charged lexicon of gestures, sighs, and glances. Tellingly, as the lovers exchange their speaking glances, it is impossible to distinguish observer from object, active agent from passive recipient. Separate identities dissolve into body parts that create an oddly unisex effect: “the Cheek,” “the down-cast Eye,” “the Breast.” Yet Whaley’s poem eventually pulls back from this ungendered vision, causing Anna, the “love-sick Maid,” to apologize for her weakness “with a Modest Virgin’s decent Pride” (lines 30–31). The introduction of verbal language re-establishes gendered difference, as Anna’s “Iv’ry white” skin, “panting bosom,” and “sparkling eyes” pass under Eugenio’s approving gaze and are finally reinterpreted by him (and the poet) as subordinate to her virtues of “Compliance” and “Modesty” (lines 40–42, 48). Ending with a happy marriage, the poem sanctifies its passionate and voyeuristic eroticism with a respectable union based on “Good Sense” and “Virtue” (lines 47, 46). For writers during the first half of the eighteenth century, the literary convention of the language of the eyes offered a range of tonal and thematic possibilities, from Chandler’s scornful disdain at a manipulative artifice to Whaley’s nostalgic celebration of a supposedly natural innocence.

During her long and strikingly flexible writing career, Haywood returns to the popular trope many times, adapting it to the effects and purposes of widely differing works. The Injur’d Husband (1722) utilizes the language of the eyes to underline its nearly obsessive concern with betrayal and deception. Revelling in a confusing myriad of “inauthentic” and “genuine” glances, the novel contrasts the dissembling Baroness, its faithless anti-heroine, with her true-hearted husband and male lovers. The
“tender-hearted” Baron cannot help “testify[ing] the secret Yields-
ings of his Soul ... by a Look,” revealing his love for his wife mo-
ments after she has betrayed and deceived him. In contrast, the
Baroness employs a barrage of deceptive glances to mime a love
she cannot feel: “she, who perfectly understood the language of the
Eyes, ... assum[ed] an Air full of Languishment and Softness.”

Twenty years later, in *The Fortunate Foundlings* (1744), Haywood
still draws on the device, this time to emphasize her innocent
heroine’s honesty and fidelity. Increasingly, in the second half
of the century, allusions to the language of the eyes became a
cliché of eighteenth-century fiction. In Smollett’s satiric novel
*The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom* (1753), “the expres-
sive language of the eyes” serves merely as a manipulative tool
employed by the disreputable picaresque hero. By means of lan-
guishing glances, Fathom exchanges wordless vows with a young
girl whom he hopes to seduce. In this case, “the exercise of the
doux-yeux” enables Fathom to pursue his seduction silently and
with impunity in front of the girl’s unobservant father and step-
mother. Mechanically conventional, Fathom’s repertoire of
lovers’ glances is as routinely deceptive as the lies and false oaths
he recites in the service of his numerous seductions throughout
the novel. Like Fathom’s empty promises, his battery of glances
only illustrates his destructive power over women.

Such formulaic and dismissive references to the trope should
not blind us to its vitality in 1719, as Haywood wrote *Love in

9 Haywood, *The Injur’d Husband: or The Mistaken Resentment* (1722), in “The Injur’d
Husband: or The Mistaken Resentment” and “Lasselia: or, The Self-Abandon’d,” ed.
Jerry C. Beasley (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 52.

10 In *The Fortunate Foundlings* (1744), Haywood reminds her readers that “the
mind ... never fails to discover itself in the eyes.” Here, in contrast to *The Injur’d Husband*,
the trope serves to emphasize the honesty of the heroine Louisa, whose thoughts and feelings, we are informed, “sparkled ... with an

Bouce (1753; New York: Penguin, 1990), 90.

12 As a result of Fathom’s machinations, one of his female victims enters a mad-
house, another a convent, and a third engages in prostitution. While pun-
ished (and then redeemed) at the end of the novel, Fathom initially escapes
with his reputation untarnished. For Fathom, the language of the eyes is
simply another valuable instrument in the rake’s arsenal of amatory weapons,
implying promises that need never be stated or acted upon.
Excess. Early in the century, the notion of a visual “discourse” constituted by signs and gestures had applications well beyond amatory verse and fiction. Near the end of the previous century, Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) emphasized the deceptive nature of words; for Locke, verbal language remains tainted by its origins, since it is not divinely created as a reflection of ultimate truth but rather developed by self-interested human beings as a vehicle of persuasion. Bernard Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees* (1714) draws on Locke’s vision, postulating a pre-verbal state of human interaction that seems both Edenic and Utopian in its innocence. According to Mandeville, “it is more natural to untaught Men to express themselves by Gestures, than by Sounds.” For our “wild” ancestors, who lived according to “the simple Dictates of Nature, the Want of Speech” could be “easily supply’d by dumb Signs”: “How universal, as well as copious, is the Language of the Eyes, by the help of which the remotest nations understand one another at first sight, taught or untaught, in the weightiest temporal Concern that belongs to the Species? and in that Language our wild couple would at their first meeting intelligibly say more to one another without guile, than any civiliz’d Pair would dare to name without blushing.”13 Like Whaley’s genteelly innocent lovers, Mandeville’s originary “wild” lovers are saved by the language of the eyes from the “blushing” shame and “guile” associated with an eroticism expressed in verbal language. In such eighteenth-century texts, the language of the eyes can appear both universal and timeless; thus, Whaley’s modern eighteenth-century lovers re-enact the innocent, sexualized courtship of Mandeville’s secularized Adam and Eve. In Mandeville’s work, as in Dryden’s translation, the language of the eyes coexists with and epitomizes a generalized language of “dumb Signs” and gestures; human beings not only read each other’s glances, but also scan certain “Tokens” of emotion “common to the whole Species,” including “Weeping, laughing, smiling, frowning, sighing, [and] exclaiming” (2:286, 286–87).

13 Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees; Or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, 2 vols. (1714, enlarged ed. 1723, 1728; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 2:286–87. References are to this edition. The actual speaker here is Cleomenes, whom Mandeville claims as his mouthpiece: “As it is supposed, that Cleomenes is my Friend, and Speaks my Sentiments, so it is but Justice, that every Thing which he advances should be look’d upon and consider’d as my own” (21).
To be sure, Mandeville’s depiction of a preverbal green world flies in the face of conventional Christian explanations of the origins of language. But even an explicitly Christian work such as Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, published in the same year as Haywood’s first instalment of *Love in Excess*, appears to accept the allegedly natural language of “dumb Signs” as a gestural lingua franca. When the shipwrecked Crusoe encounters the supposedly “wild” and primitive Friday, they communicate seamlessly in a strangely specific language of looks and gestures. In a paradigmatic encounter that illustrates Mandeville’s assertions, “the remotest nations” apparently “understand one another at first sight.” Friday’s display of “all the possible Signs of an humble thankful Disposition,” enacted by means of “many antic Gestures,” eerily conflates Friday’s transient bodily gestures with a presumably unchanging disposition. In other words, Friday is denied a social nature, just as he is denied a Lockean understanding of the deceptions and persuasive possibilities of language. For Crusoe (as for Defoe), Friday’s confinement in a truth-telling mode is facilitated by his reliance on the gestural. Like Mandeville’s “wild couple,” Crusoe and Friday read each other visually, creating their own variation of the language of the eyes.

Given the rich tradition and changing applications of the stylized language of glances and bodily “Signs,” Haywood’s repeated recourse to a semantics of gesture in *Love in Excess* emerges as more than a merely ornamental device derived from amatory verse. As we will see, the novel invokes a supposedly “natural” gestural language of the body in its dialectical relationship to the deceptions, confusions, and gendered inequities embedded in verbal language. Haywood’s early best-seller is particularly innovative in drawing out the often ignored implications of this conventional trope, utilizing it to equalize and androgynize amatory relations.

*The Perils of Words: Speech and Writing in “Love in Excess”*

From the start, *Love in Excess* both draws on and unsettles the conventions of traditional amatory verse. To state the matter in

more generic terms, novelizing the poetic trope of the lover’s gaze highlights its inherent ambiguities and complexities, possibilities already extant but obscured by the sharp focus and limited point of view of much amatory verse. Ranging over a series of varied amorous encounters, Haywood’s omniscient narrator probes not only D’elmont’s objectification of the women he desires, but also the desires of the women who objectify him. Scott Black argues persuasively that we need not limit ourselves to, or choose between, what he sees as two traditional models of reading *Love in Excess*: the first valorizing the claims of (female) victims, the second asserting identification with a (male) seducer; instead, he offers an account of a canny and active reader able to appreciate and shift between the novel’s “multiple subject positions.”

Haywood clearly problematizes the gendered distinction between victims and seducers by offering readers an array of unruly characters who seem to push constantly and impatiently at the limits of their gendered roles. Strikingly, the amatory career of Count D’elmont, the novel’s male protagonist, opens itself to be read in two senses: embodying elements of the ruthlessly successful male rake (in his seduction of Amena, for instance), the Count conjointly exemplifies a passive and uneasy resistance to the seductive overtures of passionate women. D’elmont’s tale comprises a series of troubled erotic encounters, as the hero dazzles an extravagant array of women: his first wife Alovisa, tortured and manipulative; the docile Amena, seduced and discarded by him; the idealized Melliora, whom he marries at the novel’s end; Melantha, who disguises herself as Melliora in order to seduce him; Ciamara whose seductive overtures approach the force of a rape; and Violetta who dresses as a man and poses as his servant in order to pursue him. The sheer number of the women who desire D’elmont, along with their sympathetic and probing depiction, allows him to appear at times as a beautiful cipher, a passive trigger of others’ passions. Count D’elmont is “not an object to be safely gazed at”; like Petrarch’s Laura, he is, at least initially, a beautiful “insensible” (86) whose glances can be fatal.

Initially, the novel portrays D’elmont as an enchanting object, who draws the yearning gazes of both men and women: “The

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beauty of his person, the gaity of his air, and the unequalled charms of his conversation, made him the admiration of both sexes” (37). While men vie for his friendship, female admirers “in secret, curse ... that custom which forbids women to make a declaration of their thoughts” (37). According to this formulation, female modesty, far from being an essentialized trait, is merely a restrictive social and linguistic convention. As the novel goes on to make explicit, gaps and omissions are coded into women's speech. Repeatedly, verbal language undermines the agency of the novel's female characters and distorts the privileged realm of female desire, which is portrayed as preceding all language or gestural forms of signification. In the social world, verbal language operates as a medium of compromise and exchange, generally promoting social norms and gender limitations. Throughout the novel, spoken and written words enforce debilitating stereotypes of female weakness. Further, because it restricts the expression of female desire, the traditional rhetoric of love tends to betray the women who employ it, even when they believe that they are asserting their own will.

As the novel opens, the enamoured Alovisa’s first letter to D’elmont exemplifies how written language goes astray when women utilize it. Attempting to open D’elmont’s eyes to her own passion in a secret note delivered by her servant, Alovisa instead leads him to the discovery of her rival Amena’s unspoken love. Because she cannot openly acknowledge her identity as a woman who desires a male lover, Alovisa must couch her wishes in oblique terms. Consequently, her attempt to “court” D’elmont (as a male lover would court his beloved) unravels in a tangle of missed chances; and her letter reveals the degree to which the traditional language of love denies women the authority to initiate courtship. Struggling with gendered pronouns and referents, Alovisa inscribes a syntactical nightmare. Affirming a traditional vision of courtship in which men play the active role, Alovisa maintains the fiction that the male god of love is initiating her correspondence with D’elmont, while she herself remains the passionate but passive object of D’elmont’s future gaze: “The

little god [of love] lays down his arrows at your feet ... he will appear to you tomorrow night at the ball, in the eyes of the most passionate of all his voteresses; search therefore for him in her, in whom (amongst that bright assembly) you would most desire to find him; I am confident you have too much penetration to miss of him" (39). Note that Alovisa’s strained message allows only a single female pronoun, ambiguously placed and contextualized: “search therefore for him in her.” Alovisa’s attempt to appropriate a male role for herself creates not an effect of subversive androgyne but instead an awkward and rather shame-faced masquerade. Significantly, she invokes the language of the eyes, but in a traditional guise that privileges male authority and desire. D’elmont is to search for Cupid in her eyes, but his gaze must initiate their dialogue of glances. The letter imputes all the active desire to D’elmont, enjoining him to search for Cupid where “you would most desire to find him.” While hinting that the language of the eyes will open a realm of unimpeded communication that can ultimately satisfy both lovers, the letter—a tortured artifact of verbal language—implicitly confesses its inability to attain such clarity.

Thoroughly misled by Alovisa’s oblique letter, D’elmont wrongly attributes the missive to the more passive Amena, who, ironically, never dares to speak her love—except in glances—until D’elmont singles her out. Searching for the anonymous letter writer, D’elmont gazes at Amena “more earnestly than he was wont,” and “immediately fancie[s] he saw something of that languishment in her eyes, which the obliging mandate had described” (42). Here, early in the novel, Haywood strikingly contrasts verbal and bodily speech—the letter and the gaze—the two forms of language that will exist in a problematic and dialectical relation throughout her tale. Implicitly, in this instance, the language of the eyes trumps the language of the letter, since D’elmont favours the speaking glances of Amena over the halting phrases of Alovisa; the language of the eyes grants Amena a power of expression that the female letter writer lacks.

Recognizing that her first “letter bore no certain mark by which he might distinguish me” (43), Alovisa inscribes a second with “a world of passionate and agreeable expressions” (44), only to be shocked and terrified by her own frank words: “Frighted at her own designs,” she laments, “What bewitched me to harbour
such a thought as even the vilest of my sex would blush at?” (44). It is less the thought than the expression that so troubles Alovisa. Once translated into words, the passion that she would willingly express in an eloquent glance becomes, in her view, “a meanness which would render me unworthy of life” (44). While her first missive is awkward and oblique, her second is “shamefully” expressive, forcing her to destroy it: “‘To pieces then,’ added she, tearing the paper, ‘to pieces, with this shameful witness of my folly, my furious desires may be the destruction of my peace, but never of my honour, that shall still attend my name when love and life are fled’” (44). Located in a word—her name—Alovisa’s honour is portrayed as itself a verbal artifact, one that rigorously represses her “furious desires.”

After two failed letters—the first “fatal” to her hopes (45), the second destroyed by her—Alovisa doggedly inscribes a third, which once again enjoins D’elmont to take the active part and “find ... who she is that languishes” (46). This letter too becomes problematic for Alovisa. Although it denigrates Amena, her supposed friend and actual rival, D’elmont accidentally allows Amena to see it, mistakenly returning it to her in place of a letter she wrote to him. As he passes Alovisa’s letter to her rival, D’elmont acknowledges presciently that “accidents ... happen to letters” (60). Writing, especially letter-writing, can be seen as a more extreme case of a generally restrictive and disempowering verbal language. The relative permanence of the letter—its status as speech turned object—renders it liable to fall into the wrong hands. Furthermore, since letters often function as secret speech, they entrap their female writers into revelations that may be used against them. For all these reasons, letter writers choose oblique phrasing, misleading their recipients, both intentionally and unintentionally. For women, letters are among the most destructive forms of communication in Haywood’s novel.

Like Alovisa, Amena becomes enmeshed in the web of dangerous letters that help to initiate the novel. In a striking example of the letter’s dangerous duplicity, Amena sends D’elmont a letter within a letter, utilizing different levels of riddling and deceptive communication. In an outer or covering letter—dictated by her suspicious father—Amena both denies that she has had a secret relationship with D’elmont and breaks off all future communication with him; yet buried within the folds of this
apparently cold and distant missive, she hides a “small note” (47) that contradicts the covering letter, revealing that she plans to continue her relations with D’elmont and promising to “unriddle the mystery” (47) of the letter enclosing it. Amena’s doubled letters embody the dynamic whereby women’s reputations are held hostage to a language that denies them the possibility of desire. Even the secret letter within a letter fails to be explicit, merely hinting at mysteries that it cannot explain.

Admittedly, the problematic nature of women’s writing and women’s words exists within a larger scepticism about language in general. As critics have noted, a consistent narrative commentary repeatedly devalues both spoken and written words. The narrator affirms the powerlessness of her words to describe D’elmont’s frustrated desires for Melliora, the novel’s major female protagonist: “all endeavours to represent his agonies would be vain, and none but those who have felt the same, can have any notion of what he suffered” (184). Similarly, when Melliora pities D’elmont because Alovisa, now his wife, plans to betray him, the narrator demands, “what words can sufficiently express her agonies?” (158). Repeatedly, the experience of desire is presented as antithetical to verbal expression; while such expressions of desire may be merely difficult or troubling for men, they can be “fatal” (45) for women.

Standing in opposition to the flawed communication of speech and writing, the language of the eyes opens a privileged realm of supposedly authentic communion—a mutual understanding associated with an unmediated expression of desire. Particularly for Haywood’s female characters, the lover’s repertoire of glances offers an enticingly varied form of nonverbal communication without the liabilities and dangers attendant on speech and writing. Terry Castle argues that the carnivalesque elements of

17 Tiffany Potter points out that both men and women are reduced to speechlessness by strong emotions. As Potter emphasizes, “female characters are rendered expressly inarticulate eight times while Delmont and Frankeville in particular are left without language thirteen times, almost always in moments of the emotional overwash typically constructed as feminine.” Although men can be silenced, Potter suggests that such a state of voicelessness is implicitly feminized. Potter, “The Language of Feminized Sexuality in Eliza Haywood’s Love in Excess and Fantomina,” Women’s Writing: The Elizabethan to Victorian Period 10, no. 1 (2003): 171.
eighteenth-century masquerades “suspended the archaic pattern of Western gender relations”: “The masquerade symbolized a realm of women unmarked by patriarchy, unmarked by the signs of exchange and domination, and independent of the prevailing sexual economy of eighteenth-century culture.” Paradoxically, the “anonymity of the mask” allows a species of unmasking. Veiling their identity in the outlandish disguise of the masquerade, eighteenth-century women arguably disembarrass themselves of the constricting costume of conventional femininity. The act of putting on a mask is actually a form of divestiture: in Castle’s words, by “divesting her of her name—a name inevitably associated with the power of husband or father—anonymity obscured a woman’s place within patriarchy.” As we have seen, Alovisa tears up her second letter to D’elmont out of fear for her name. As Castle reminds us, a woman’s verbal identity is synonymous not only with her honour but also with the patriarchal values and kinship network that define her.

While the conventional trappings of the masquerade facilitate anonymity and secrecy, at the same time they foster extravagant display, a voyeurism that delights in the exchange of glances, in “seeing and being seen.” In this sense, the masquerade is a pageant of desire that exults in excess. As Haywood employs it, the language of the eyes evokes a carnivalesque masquerade, one that serves as both “divestiture” and extravagant display, both unveiling and veiling. In Haywood’s novel, as in Mandeville’s parable, the language of the eyes fosters a supposedly natural and authentic form of communication, divested of the social and verbal conventions that normally constrain people. Yet if the language of the eyes sometimes represents itself as an emblem of transparent authenticity (in contrast to the deceptions of verbal exchange), at other times it delights in artifice, permitting a theatrical and extravagant performance akin to the flamboyance of the masquerade. In addition, given Haywood’s repeated hints that only lovers can fully interpret the messages exchanged by means of glances, such glances can serve the function of a covert


19 Castle, 255.

20 Castle, 38.
language, a gestural equivalent of the masks and dominos that protect the transgressive masquerader.

The contradictory nature of the language of the eyes emerges clearly in the love triangle among Alovisa, Count D’elmont, and Alovisa’s new and unsuspected rival Melliora. Having disposed of Amena, her first rival, by informing Amena’s father of his daughter’s affair with D’elmont, Alovisa succeeds in marrying the count. Yet her willingness to push the limits of her feminine role—to express and promote her desires verbally, for instance—soon becomes a liability in the context of the novel’s uneasy gender politics. Cast as a ruthless female villain, Alovisa must be replaced by the idealized Melliora, D’elmont’s young and beautiful ward. Stronger and more independent than the passive Amena, Melliora nevertheless exudes a gentleness and empathy that Alovisa lacks. In a particularly fraught and conflicted passage, D’elmont and Melliora employ the language of the eyes as a covert code that is comprehensible to “all ... that truly love” (92), while simultaneously performing socially appropriate emotions in order to deceive Alovisa. Similarly, Alovisa herself is keenly aware of the expressive potential of glances and gestures, and consequently strives to conceal her own suspicions of D’elmont’s infidelity: “Melliora veiled her secret languishments, under the covert of her grief for her [dead] father, the Count his burning anguish, in gloomy melancholy for the loss of his friend [Melliora’s deceased father] ... All made it their whole study to deceive each other, yet none but Alovysa [sic] was intirely in the dark; for the Count and Melliora had but too true a guess at one another’s meaning, every look of his, for he had eyes that need no interpreter, gave her intelligence of his heart, and the confusion which the understanding those looks gave her, sufficiently told him how sensible she was of ’em” (97). 21

The passage begins by emphasizing the glance as a disguise that is theatrically enacted and ends by affirming it as a form of unmasking. D’elmont’s glance needs “no interpreter” when Melliora is the reader, but, earlier, Alovisa does misinterpret D’elmont’s glance; the esoteric experience of lovers enables them alone to decipher this covert form of speech.

21 David Oakleaf’s edition accurately reproduces the variant spellings of characters’ names to be found in the first edition of Love in Excess. As he notes, “Alovisa appears as Alovysa and even Aloisa.” Oakleaf, “A Note on the Text,” in Love in Excess, 26.
Simultaneously, the passage exemplifies the complexity and richness of the language of the eyes, which permits not just a series of dazzling moments but a sustained conversation between the lovers. Even as they baffle Alovisa with a display of dejected looks that signify the grief of mourning, Melliora and D’elmont enjoy a pleasurably illicit dialogue with each other. If D’elmont initiates the conversation with his lovestruck gaze, Melliora’s stylized “confusion” signals that she returns his regard (in both senses of the word); therefore, D’elmont clearly understands that she understands his visual overtures. Striking as the passage is, it does not fully convey the subversive appeal of the language of the eyes for a new configuration of gender relations. While Haywood’s novel lavishes attention on a series of destructive encounters in which women are often the losers, it attempts to carve out of the emotional wreckage a privileged sanctuary for its heroine Melliora. For most of the female characters, the all-consuming desire for D’elmont brings defeat or self-destruction; in contrast, Melliora, as numerous critics have pointed out, is granted the privilege of expressing desire with relative impunity. But Melliora’s emotions find their most effective expression, not in words, fraught with the perils of discovery, immodesty, and shame, but by means of the language of the eyes, which equalizes gender relations by undermining the social distinctions and gender assumptions coded into verbal language.

Unlike the more cumbersome communication by means of words, where the lips speak and the ear receives, the language of the eyes permits a vivid transmission from like to like, in which rich meanings are supposedly collapsed into a moment’s glance. At their first meeting, Melliora and D’elmont carry on an elaborate conversation in the privileged language of the eyes. For maximum drama, Haywood situates the lovers’ first encounter at the deathbed of Melliora’s father. In conventional terms,

22 Numerous critics have pointed out that Melliora’s fortunate fate is the exception that proves the rule of a generalized female victimhood. For Paula R. Backscheider, Melliora stands apart from the hapless women characters who cluster around D’elmont. In Backscheider’s words, she is a “complex woman character who introduces complicated subjects for serious discussion.” Backscheider, “The Story of Eliza Haywood’s Novels: Caveats and Questions,” in The Passionate Fictions of Eliza Haywood: Essays on her Life and Work, ed. Kirsten Saxton and Rebecca P. Bocchicchio (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 23.
the meeting dramatizes the transactions of patriarchal power, as Melliora’s father transfers his custody of her to a male guardian, his friend and designated successor. According to her father’s “last commands,” Melliora is to “endeavour to deserve the favours” of her new guardian, so that she will not be left “wholly an orphan” (86). But, even as D’elmont accedes to legal power over Melliora, the language of the eyes mutes the emotional resonance of that power: “Count D’elmont ... beginning to speak some words of consolation to her, the softness of his voice and [his] graceful manner ... made her cast her eyes upon him; but alas, he was not an object to be safely gazed at, and in spight of the grief she was in, she found something in his form which dissipated it; a kind of painful pleasure, a mixture of surprize, and joy, and doubt ran thro’ her in an instant” (86). Through the language of the eyes, D’elmont is converted from a legal guardian into an object of Melliora’s desire. As the lovers continue their visual and gestural dialogue, Melliora asserts her desires even more forcefully:

when her eyes met his, the god of love seemed there to have united all his lightnings for one effectual blaze; their admiration of each other’s perfections was mutual, and tho’ he had got the start in love, as being touched with that almighty dart, before her affliction had given her leave to regard him, yet the softness of her soul, made up for that little loss of time, and it was hard to say whose passion was the strongest ... they were exchanging glances, as if each vyed with the other who should dart the fiercest rays (86–87).

Conventionally, Haywood claims that D’elmont has “the start of” Melliora in love; he is allegedly struck by the “almighty dart” while she is still afflicted by grief for her father. Such a proviso maintains the tradition by which the male lover must initiate contact; nevertheless, Haywood undermines this convention: she is quick to emphasize that such minor temporal discrepancies no longer matter, since Melliora’s impressionable intensity—“the softness of her soul”—“makes up for that little loss of time.”

Further, Haywood’s actual description of their encounter contradicts the notion that D’elmont initiates Melliora’s love by revealing his own. Only after Melliora gives free rein to her desire do we read an account of D’elmont’s feelings: “For now it was that this insensible began to feel the power of beauty, and
that heart which had so long been impregnable surrendered in a moment, the first sight of Melliora gave him a discomposure he had never felt before” (86). Haywood’s blow-by-blow account of their meeting describes Melliora’s passion first, in terms equally appropriate to a male lover. In contrast, D’elmont becomes “an object” to be “gazed at,” and his “charming person” only serves to “confirm” her desire (86). In this context, D’elmont’s conversion from “insensibility” appears as a narrative afterthought to justify Melliora’s developing passion.

As in Alovisa’s first message to D’elmont, the passage invokes Cupid to sanction and conventionalize the lovers’ meeting. In contrast to Alovisa’s letter, this lovers’ duel of glances allows Melliora to initiate contact in her own right (“when her eyes met his”) and then problematizes the location of the god’s dazzling “lightnings.” Does Cupid’s “blaze” appear in Melliora’s eyes, in D’elmont’s, or in the eyes of both? The answer is certainly ambiguous and ultimately irrelevant; both lovers make overtures, and both respond. Each is the object of the gaze, and each is a passionate observer. As their eye-to-eye communication intensifies, metaphors of language are replaced by conventional love images, including “lightnings,” “blaze[s],” “rays,” and “dart[s]”; and the lovers engage in a battle of fierce glances that increases their passion. Haywood’s rhetoric may strike the modern ear as overblown, suggesting an ironic reading in which the epic battle of the eyes is more comic than cosmic. And Haywood’s narrative, which not only revels in excessive behaviour, but also names “excess” as its subject, no doubt allows for this reading. Like the flamboyant costumes of the masquerade, Haywood’s language opens itself to moments of exuberant self-parody.

At the same time, the passage’s flamboyant language strains to delineate the parameters of the unmappable country of desire that the novel has claimed as its own territory. In this sense, the overblown language derives, at least in part, from its attempt to give voice to an indescribable realm in which desire and satiation know no divide. In Haywood’s time, the word “excess” could still mean the “overstepping of the limits of moderation” and “an extravagant or rapturous feeling,” a form of ecstasy (OED). As Merritt argues, the “transgressive, anti-authoritarian elements in the experience of compulsive desire” open the door for Haywood’s implicit “feminism”: “In the surrender to an
unconquerable passion, female desire can be viewed as a form of resistance to the ideological constraints on women’s lives; the demand that women govern their sexuality is forgotten in a single moment of ‘transport.’”23 Yet this subversive escape into “transport” is threatened as soon as women dare to translate the experience into the patriarchal power relations of verbal language. In contrast, the language of the eyes is associated (as we have seen in Whaley and Mandeville) with a syntactic breakdown of gender distinctions. Similarly, in *Love in Excess’s* Utopian rendition of a supposedly unmediated desire, both Melliora and D’elmont enjoy an untrammeled expression in which neither can be clearly designated as the initiator. Defying “that custom which forbids women to make a declaration of their thoughts” (37), Melliora “vies” with D’elmont for the “fiercest” and most dramatic expression of her desires.

In its depiction of D’elmont’s and Melliora’s battle of the gaze, this stylized passage charts a communication that defies verbal rules. Thus, the syntax conflates opposites, identifying multiplicity with oneness: “all” of love’s “lightnings” are “united” into “one effectual blaze.” Similarly, it identifies otherness with mutuality: “their admiration of each other’s perfections was mutual” (86). If to look is to desire, in another sense, to look is to be fulfilled. D’elmont and Melliora experience an ecstatic excess in their conjoined glances. Their erotically charged exchange of looks is a consummation, a question asked and answered. As in Whaley’s poem, the intensity of the lovers’ entwined gazes allows for equal and even identical expressions of desire. Unlike the poem, which pulls back from its evocation of a unisex sensuality, Haywood pursues the moment’s androgynous implications and possibilities: when Melliora faints on her father’s deathbed, exemplifying her “soft disposition,” D’elmont becomes similarly weak-kneed, “trembling” and “shaking in all his fabrick” (87). Like Melliora’s, D’elmont’s eyes not only “sparkle with desire,” but also convey a “bewitching softness” (56). Besides serving as a device for evoking sensuality without the shame attached to verbal expression, the language of the eyes also becomes a means of androgynizing its initiates: Melliora becomes “masculinized” as a warrior in a battle of glances, and D’elmont is softened into a supposedly “feminine” impressionability.

23 Merritt, 28.
If the ecstasies of love and desire serve as a means of social control in Whaley’s poem, as the language of the eyes ultimately inaugurates a respectable marriage with a “compliant” wife, Haywood allows the language of the eyes to perpetuate itself in a series of episodic encounters between a varied array of lovers, highlighting the androgynizing force of desire. Although Melliora and D’elmont serve as the centerpiece for Haywood’s tangled tale, two additional pairs of lovers—Camilla and Frankeville, Brillian and Ansellina—reflect and magnify the central plot, creating the effect of a fictional hall of mirrors. Recounting his first meeting with the beautiful Camilla, Frankeville emphasizes that love speaks most eloquently and authentically through the eyes: “never did any woman wear so much of her soul in her eyes ... I saw that moment in her looks, all I have since experienced of her genius ... t’was heaven to gaze upon her” (191). Tellingly, Camilla confesses that she has staged this meeting because she has previously seen and fallen in love with Frankeville. Once again, the language of the eyes subtly alters the balance of power between genders, allowing women as well as men to initiate the erotic gaze, even as both genders serve as the passive object of desire.

As the narrative nears its close with the impending marriages of the three pairs of lovers, androgynous desire finds its emblem in the ambiguous figure of Fidelio/Violetta, the young woman who dresses in male clothing in order to follow D’elmont as his servant. Toni Bowers argues that Violetta’s death—a result of her unrequited love for D’elmont—is an instance of “appalling abjection,” introduced in part to temper the threat posed by Melliora’s challenging sexual agency: “while Melliora continues to constitute a remarkably unorthodox model of female sexual agency, ... the model she offers is disciplined so as to remain consistent with—not too threatening to—traditional patriarchal notions of feminine virtue and availability.”24 Because of the intrusion of Violetta’s self-abasing and self-destroying love, Melliora’s display of “female sexual agency” appears “at the novel’s end as an eccentricity, an exception that functions

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primarily to prove the rule.” Bowers is clearly correct in arguing that Melliora claims “sexual agency,” and, unlike Alovisa, is not punished for it; yet Melliora can hardly be called the “exception ... that proves the rule,” given that Camilla’s relationship with Frankeville displays a similar shared agency, facilitated to a great degree by the language of the eyes. In addition, Bowers’s argument fails to explain the triumphant tone and extravagant eroticism that surround Fidelio/Violetta’s farewell scene. Even Fidelio/Violetta’s deathbed is eroticized in two pseudosexual encounters. First, Frankeville discovers his beloved Camilla “lying on the bed, with her arms round Fidelio’s neck, and her face close to his” (263). Frankeville’s jealousy is defused when Fidelio is unmasked as Violetta, and Camilla’s embrace becomes sanctioned as an attempt to comfort her lovesick friend. The unveiling of Violetta’s identity spurs D’elmont to yet another eroticized deathbed embrace: “he ran into the room like a man distracted ... throwing himself on the bed” (264). Informing D’elmont that she desires “to know no other paradise than you” (265), Violetta “die[s] in his arms” (266), her love approved not only by D’elmont, but also by Melliora, who enjoins her to live on in “friendship” with both of them (265). Tellingly, Fidelio’s fatal lovesickness inspires intense admiration in all the observers, including the narrator, who exclaims: “who would not envy such a death!” (266).

Fidelio’s “paradise” bears comparison with that natural paradise experienced by Mandeville’s “wild” originary lovers, who hover on the verge of the advent of verbal language. Her extravagant passion climaxes in a moment where words and gestures conjoin, as she dies with a lover’s sigh that is concurrent with speech: “receive in this one sigh,” she tells D’elmont, “my latest breath” (266). Here, female desire speaks its own name in both words and gestures, but exacts a high price, since such a full verbal expression proves fatal. As Bowers suggests, Fidelio must die at the novel’s close, but not because she offers a needed image of abjection; instead, Fidelio is removed because her daring masquerade offers too explicit and vital an image of androgynous desire. As in Castle’s paradigm, her masquerade serves as a form

25 Bowers, 62.
of “divestiture,” calling into question socially enforced assumptions about female otherness.

If the androgyne must die at the novel’s close, her death is not only presented as ecstatic and enviable; in addition, the novel imagines for her a paradisiacal immortality. Fidelio speculates that she may return as a benign and ghostly figure to haunt D’elmont’s vicinity: “to be permitted to hover round you, to form your dreams, to sit upon your lip all day, to mingle with your breath, and glide in unfelt air into your bosom” (265–66). These eerily potent and yet disembodied images take the discourse of “dumb signs” one step further, allowing the language of androgynous bodily gestures to become not only silent but also unseen and “unfelt.” In the rhetoric of gestural language surrounding Violetta’s death, we see the language of dumb signs at its most powerful and, paradoxically, at its most mute: Fidelio imagines, and invites readers to imagine, a complete and androgynous fusion between her body and D’elmont’s. At the same time, of course, that dream of fusion is so etherealized that it dissipates under the strained paradoxes of its own expression. Fidelio/Violetta, a woman who dresses in men’s clothing, who embraces, on her deathbed, both a woman and a man, epitomizes the androgynizing force of desire, and serves as an apt spirit to preside over Haywood’s conflicted tale. Like so many of Haywood’s works, Love in Excess speaks in two directions. In the words of Catherine Craft-Fairchild, Haywood “both reconstructs and deconstructs the masquerade that is femininity.”

Working within the limits of the available rhetoric of her day, Haywood also reconfigures that rhetoric to open new vistas and possibilities. Speaking without words, in traces and signs not visible to the uninitiated eye, Fidelio’s ghost may well continue to haunt D’elmont, and still has the power to haunt readers.

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