

Ana Vogrinčič

University of Southampton / ISH,
Ljubljana Graduate School of the Humanities

Gossip, Gift and Commodity in Francis Coventry's *History of Pompey the Little, or, The Life and Adventures of a Lap-Dog* (1751)

Summary

Francis Coventry's *History of Pompey the Little* represents one of the better known examples of today otherwise neglected eighteenth-century English novels of non human-characters. By pointing at thus far unacknowledged dimensions of the text, the article challenges the established reading of the book as put forward by Liz Bellamy in the theory of the 'novels of circulation'. According to Bellamy, the peregrinating animals and objects of these narratives represent circulating commodities and thus symbolize alienated commercial society. Demonstrating that Pompey the lapdog rather functions as a gift and a gossip, this essay offers an alternative interpretation which opens up a different perspective on Coventry's representation of society. Following from this, the paper aims at situating *Pompey the Little* within broader socio-cultural context of eighteenth-century England, as well as reflects on its place in fiction of the period. As such it advocates socio-historical approaches to literature.

Key words: eighteenth-century English fiction, novels with non-human characters, commercialism, sociability, gossip.

Obrekovanje, darovanje in potrošništvo v delu *History of Pompey the Little, or, The Life and Adventures of a Lap-Dog* (1751)

Povzetek

History of Pompey the Little Francisa Coventryja je eden najbolj znanih primerov danes sicer že precej pozabljenega žanra angleške proze osemnajstega stoletja, tj. romana, kjer v vlogi glavnega junaka nastopa predmet ali žival, v našem primeru pes Pompey. S tem ko pokaže na še ne opažene dimenzije besedila, članek preizprašuje etablirano razumevanje dela, kot ga v svoji teoriji t.i. 'romanov kroženja' uveljavi Liz Bellamy. V njenem branju pohajkujoče živali in predmeti, ki prehajajo od enega k drugemu lastniku, predstavljajo krožeče tržno blago in posredno simbolizirajo odtujeno potrošniško družbo. Pričujoči esej pokaže, da je vloga Pompeyja bolj kot prodajnemu artiklu bliže funkciji daru in da pes deluje predvsem kot opravljivec, kar ponudi alternativno interpretacijo romana, ki omogoči drugačen pogled na Coventryjevo podobo družbe. Prispevek želi Coventryjevo zgodbo umestiti v širši družbeno-kulturni kontekst Anglije osemnajstega stoletja in ponovno premisliti njen položaj znotraj proze tega časa. Kot tak tukajšnji premislek sodi med primere družbeno-kulturnega pristopa obravnavanja literature.

Ključne besede: angleška proza osemnajstega stoletja, romani z nečlovečnimi junaki, opravljanje, družabnost, potrošništvo.

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1. Introduction

Although considered minor eighteenth-century fiction, *Pompey the Little* received its share of attention in past literary debates. The popularity it gained in its time, the non-human narrator, Coventry's connections with Fielding – all of this incited sufficient interest for it even to be published by the elite Oxford University Press.¹ A considerable number of things regarding the book have therefore already been told.²

Rather than lingering on the already known, I would like to discuss Coventry's narrative through the lens of the subgenre to which it is said to belong – the novel of circulation³ – and try to think about how it engages with certain issues of its time – notably the representation of the society – thereby assessing fiction as a social, historical and cultural form. After redefining the title hero as a device rather than a character, and briefly locating the work in the wider contextual frame with regard to the contemporary fiction, reception, and the generic conventions, I will move away from the literary aspects into exploring the more particular traits of Pompey's peregrinations, and conclude by framing the essay within the socio-historical approaches to literature.

Nearly all discussions of *Pompey the Little*, almost as a rule, refer to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's praise of this short narrative.⁴ Indeed, it is curious how this 'learned lady', an avid reader and respected writer, singled out this rather peculiar book. After receiving "the case of Books" from her daughter and reading for a whole day and part of the night, Lady Mary reports back. In a letter from February 16th 1752 she comments on *Peregrine Pickle*, on the inserted *Memoirs* by Lady Vane, on the *Parish Girl*, but she does not get too excited about any of the books in particular, until towards the evening, when

Candles came, and my Eyes grown weary I took up the next Book merely because I suppos'd from the Title it could not engage me long. It was Pompey the Little, which has really diverted me more than any of the others, and it was impossible to go to Bed till it was finish'd. It is a real and exact representation of Life as it is now acted in London, as it was in my time, and as it will be (I do not doubt) a Hundred years hence, with some little variation of Dress, and perhaps Government. I found there many of my Acquaintance.

1 The Oxford edition came out in 1974, which is even before the reorientation of literary studies into the less canonical literature of the eighteenth-century from the mid-1980s onwards (Hunter 2002).

2 The introduction to the Oxford edition by Robert A. Day certainly represents an authoritative study of the work. It also includes a list of bibliographical references and of related criticism.

3 See L. Bellamy (1998), but also C. Flint (1998), F. Johnston (2003).

4 Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762) was a poet and a writer, but is most famous for her letters, which represent a valuable account of eighteenth-century society in England and abroad.

Lady T[ownshend] and Lady O[rford] are so well painted, I fancy'd I heard them talk, and have heard them say the very things there repeated.

[*Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, ed. R. Halsband 1967, III/4]

This lucid insight certainly draws one's attention. It is exact, informative and – gossipy. As I will try to show, the notion of gossip is something which importantly characterizes the book itself.

2. Where is the dog?

It is significant that Lady Mary nowhere mentions that this is (supposed to be) a history of a dog. Because in fact, it is not – the subtitle notwithstanding. Pompey is indeed a lapdog, and we do learn about his life, but we learn much more about his successive owners. This makes the title itself a sort of a statement, inscribing the text within a certain tradition, while escaping it at the same time.⁵ It quickly becomes clear that the scrupulously-recorded Pompey's date of birth, his family origins and the time of his death, with a summary of his character traits in the end, is in fact all that resembles a proper biography. The presence of Pompey the lapdog is theoretical rather than practical. He is simply not very important. Throughout the book we are offered very little sense of what he is like or what he thinks; he functions like a cipher, at most mirroring his owners' characters and thus adapting a new role with each ensuing chapter. This impression is strengthened by the third person narrative in which Pompey is passively handled from one owner to the other, being either lost or found, given to or disposed of, bought and sold, but never actively engaged in what is happening, which makes Coventry's constant referral to him as a hero even more ironic, and again underlines his play with the established generic conventions, a common occurrence in the print culture of the time.

All this, however, only makes Pompey a much better narrative device. The dog obviously serves as a string on which the episodes are threaded, and as such functions as an efficient handle to introduce a variety of characters and events, a motley range of morals and manners. Characters differ in status, as well as in age and genre; each brings his or her own stock of concerns (and gossip!), and so the reader is presented with a whole panorama of issues, although they more or less all, each from its own angle, shed light on the fashionable London society.⁶ While moving spatially from Italy to England, from London to Bath, then to Cambridge and back to London, Pompey goes through 23 different owners. Despite some attempts for unification – such as establishing superficial, usually retrospective connections between the characters, and in the end returning Pompey to one of the first owners – the narrative dissolves in a number of micro plots which generate new stories and amplify the impression of all-inclusiveness, and of encompassing all social types, personality profiles and different occurrences. It is at once universal and particular, just as Lady Mary observed.

5 In the introductory chapter Coventry first scoffs at the “present taste for life-writing, where no Character is thought too inconsiderable to engage the public Notice”, and then offers the readers a history of a dog, asserting that his hero is just as entitled to one as all the “Vagrants, Parish Girls, Chamber-Maids, Pick-Pockets and Highwaymen” (1974, 5).

6 Among others, Pompey resides with an Italian courtesan, with an English fop, a widowed countess, with a nouveau riche family, a milliner and a nobleman.

What might be read as a failed attempt to produce a story of a dog thus reveals itself to be a well-planned strategy. As his repeated apologies for having so long neglected the hero clearly show,⁷ Coventry seems to know exactly that he was subverting expectations and he even appears to be having fun with it.

Relocating the hero from representing a character to serving as a device opens up many new possibilities. First, it allows the introduction of a variety of topics without an effort to tie them together, thus avoiding the often difficult task of bringing various scenes within the perception of one hero: A non-human protagonist can report on what is otherwise concealed, it can go or be present where other people cannot. And second, being devoid of volition, of human comprehension and moral judgement, it can serve as a very convenient technique for the satirical representation of the world: the author can hide behind the uninterested observer, an innocent dog, and even though the account is offensive in itself, the reader can be the only one to blame for perceiving it as such. It hardly needs to be stressed that *The History of Pompey the Little* is indeed a satire.

3. Historical and literary contextualization

This device was not new. Non-human narrators appear already in ancient legends and folktales; even before the Aesop's talking animals (*Fables*, 6th century B.C.), and examples of them being used as a device for linking picaresque narrative through a satirical lens also date at least as far back as Apuleius' *Golden Ass* (about 160 B.C.). Cambridge-educated Coventry might have well been familiar with these and also with medieval literature of the sort, but he was much more likely to have read the more recent French and English examples.⁸ This notwithstanding, *Pompey* was the one which ignited the mid-century boom in novels about non-human subjects or inanimate objects and "established it as an autonomous narrative form within Britain" (Bellamy 1998, 119). What was regarded as new and innovative, and was indeed distinctively different from historical prototypes, was the stress on the satire, using the naïve onlooker to ridicule the chosen target; or, as observed by Walter Raleigh, "the novelty [...] consisted in the scandal and scurrility that [these novels] made it excuse" (1894, 192). As such the device was very convenient for *roman à clef*, "a work of fiction in which actual persons are presented under fictitious names" (Cuddon 1999, 475), originating in seventeenth-century France and, by the time of 'our' book, already well established in England. According to Lady Mary, this is obviously the case with *Pompey*.⁹

7 E.g. "If the foregoing dialogue appears impertinent and foreign to this History, the ensuing one immediately concerns the Hero of it; whose Pardon I beg for having so long neglected to mention his Name" (1974, 17); and the title of chapter vii reads: "Relating a curious dispute on the immortality of the soul, in which the name of our hero will but once be mentioned" (1974, 34).

8 Notably, Le Sage's *Le Diable boiteux* from 1707, translated into English a year later as *The Devil upon Two Sticks*; and Charles Gildon's *The Golden Spy* from 1709. The *Tatler* and the *Spectator* also published a few short stories, among others one with a shilling and one with a drop of water as the main character (*Tatler*, no. 249, 1710; *Spectator*, no. 293, 1712).

9 She recognized Lady Townshend, the wife of Charles third viscount Townshend, in Lady Tempest; and the Countess of Orford, the wife of Robert Walpole, 2nd earl of Orford, in Lady Sophister, but also saw her proper self in the hypochondriac Lady Qualmsick. Another sign for this being a *roman à clef* are the numerous concealed names with a dash between the first and the last letter, for which Day provides the proper reference (e.g. F-t for Foot, H-le for Hoyle etc.). There are other examples of the sort, e.g. Smollett's political satire *Adventures of the Atom* (1769).

If the linking device itself already enables the introduction of a variety of topical concerns,¹⁰ references to real, usually well-known personages create an even stronger sense of actuality and of the present. *Pompey the Little* abounds with the names of fashionable venues, contemporary celebrities and literary characters.¹¹ All these references are needed as, according to Ronald Paulson, the subject of a satirist is “the microscopic imitation of the topically and immediately commonplace” (1967, 22). “The presentness of the present”; “the language about and of the living”, which according to Mikhail Bakhtin represents one of the archetypal traits of the novelistic (2004, 15), is enhanced by the endeavour to accompany each episode and each individual profile with a characteristic discourse, resulting in an orchestra of voices and creating a vivid acoustic portrait of the age. Again, this is something that Lady Mary herself observed, admitting that she “fancy’s she heard them [Lady T and Lady O] talk.” This too contributes to the gossipy quality of the narrative. What is more, the panorama of idioms is reinforced by the hybridity of genres, creatively intertwined throughout the text. We are offered everything from a sentimental romance (Hillario’s duel story) to a theological dispute (on the immortality of the soul); a coffee-house debate, a moral tale, and much more, resulting in a proper Bakhtinian polyglossia.¹²

It is something of a contradiction that despite the hotchpotch of voices, the one of the author remains the loudest. In contrast to the majority of non-human heroes, Pompey is not the narrator. Consequently we meet with much more direct authorial presence. Even though the author is pretending to talk in the name of the dog and remains anonymous, the fact that he does not even provide a frame story – which was almost a rule with novels of non-human characters (and very common in general) – makes the dog disappear even more into the background, and more openly than is usual for this subgenre, suggests that what he is supposedly thinking stands for the author’s own commentary.¹³ Scorn against the *nouveaux riches*, contempt of the luxury of the times and critique of the general moral corruption in *Pompey the Little* thus reveal a great deal about conservative views and the general discontent of this young Anglican curate of aristocratic origin.

10 Issues referred to in the text include marriage, seduction, adultery, servants’ (mis)behaviour, duelling, wagering, and more generally: conspicuous consumption, politics, charity; all this and more along with a variety of occupations – from doctors and lawyers to students and inn-keepers. The range of themes perhaps accounts for many male owners of the lapdog – something which one would sooner attribute to the female kind.

11 Several titles Coventry refers to are the same as the ones Lady Mary mentions in her letter along with *Pompey* (see p. 1), which all the more proves the actuality of the context. Moreover, some of the stories very much resemble plots of the popular novels of the time; I think I have for example recognized allusions to *Moll Flanders* in Jack’s adventures (ch. xviii), and to *Clarissa* in the tragic story of Mrs Carlyle (ch. ix, part ii). Apart from that, Coventry uses many classical references. The name Pompey itself could in fact be read as a (mocking) reference to the great Roman emperor, alluding to the dog’s Italian roots and noble pedigree.

12 The origins of some of the chapters can be traced to specific issues of the contemporary newspapers: e.g. the mating scene in chapter vi very much resembles an episode described in the *Spectator*, no. 323, 1712. But what was upon the publication of *Pompey* seen as innovative and fresh, was later, after the trend took off, renounced as “ill farrago” of everything the writers can pick up (see the *Critical*, 1752, no. 52, 477–78 in Tompkins 1932, 49). The negative response these novels met with could be at least partly attributed to their abundance which revealed the repetitive pattern and perhaps diminished the appeal, if only in the eyes of the reviewers. There is much more to point at in *Pompey* regarding the bakhtinian understanding of the novelistic, notably the significance of laughter, but this cannot be explored in the present paper.

13 Even as an intermediary the author makes but for an unreliable narrator, oscillating between omnisciently reading Pompey’s mind and just *assuming* what he thinks, which only contributes to the general impression of the dog as an empty shell, used according to its role in the individual chapter.

His pushy and ironic, sometimes even openly manipulative voice, addressing the reader throughout the book, according to the opinion of the many, undoubtedly positions Coventry among the followers of the so-called Fielding school.¹⁴ Despite the many similarities¹⁵ and regardless of Coventry's own acknowledgment of the master,¹⁶ important differences, however, should not be ignored, especially as the two elements essential in Fielding – the complex plot and the heroes of flesh and blood – are at least underdeveloped, if not entirely missing from the life of a lapdog. Besides, other influences need to be acknowledged, and not only the ones Coventry pointed to himself (namely, Pope and Swift); certainly Smollett's harsh physical comedy (numerous scatological motifs appear throughout the book), farcical elements and grotesque episodes with caricaturized characters, as used in *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748).

But what concerns me more is the not entirely soluble question of the novelistic and the canonical. As superficial as this may sound, and despite the many references explicitly referring to it as a novel,¹⁷ the general impression after having read *Pompey the Little* is not one of a novel. We are inclined to think, somewhat teleologically, that novels should have a beginning, a middle and an end, a more or less clear storyline, an insight into the private; that they should offer the experience of empathy, a portion of psychological intimacy, emotions and some notion of individual subjectivity. *Pompey* hardly brings any of this.¹⁸ But even if I dare to suggest this is an episodic prose fiction rather than a novel, this does not in any way lessen its (socio-)historical and cultural value.

4. The circulating commodity

Even though *Pompey* inspired a whole flood of more and less bizarre chain-stories about non-human heroes that abounded throughout the second half of the eighteenth century, this distinct type of prose fiction was not granted with any particular label¹⁹ – not until fairly recently, when Liz Bellamy in 1988 significantly defined it as 'the novel of circulation'.

14 Fielding's school is usually referred to as being opposed to Richardson's, the other major influence in the development of the eighteenth-century novel. *Pompey* is certainly closer to Fielding's satirical, rather vulgar vagabond narratives, than to Richardson's sentimental, domestic epistolary novels.

15 What the two certainly have in common is the ever present mock-ironic attitude; a ridicule of the vanity and hypocrisy of fashionable life, the Tory rhetoric, but also the stylistic devices: characterizing names and self-referential chapter titles. Coventry even came to be regarded as "minor Fielding" (Day 1974, xi). For the cross-references, see also *An Essay on the new species of writing by Mr Fielding* (1751), allegedly written by Coventry himself; and Fielding's *Modern Glossary* (*The Covent Garden Journal*, no. 4, 1752).

16 Coventry himself openly refers to Fielding as his model in the dedicatory letter in the third edition (1752), as well as in the novel itself (1974, xli-xlv and 107).

17 Among others, see Raleigh (1894), Tompkins (1932), Bellamy (1998).

18 A level of unease with the label is apparent early on. Lady Mary Montagu does not refer to it in any generic sense; neither does the *Monthly Review* which simply describes it as the 'work' (February 1751, iv/316-317). Day rather oddly names it an "essay in fiction" (1974, x). Flint safely talks about prose fiction (1998) and so does, somewhat inconsistently, F. Johnston (2003). All this certainly accounts for it not being included in the canonical histories of the novel.

19 The contemporary reviews refer either to individual titles or use other already familiar genre descriptors. This perhaps tells us something about the literary culture of the mid-eighteenth century, when different things were tried out and then abandoned before they were even labelled, but it also says something about the modern literary scholarship and its tendency to order and classify, even retrospectively.

These were novels, based neither on the adventures of an individual, nor on the correspondence of a group of friends, but on the exchange of an inanimate object. The central character – a penny, a bank-note, a dog, a cat, a peg, a hackney carriage or whatever – is passed from person to person, sold, exchanged, lost, found, swapped and so on, and recounts its adventures, its thoughts, and the characters it encounters in the course of its life (1998, 119).²⁰

The argumentation behind the term was sufficiently persuasive and it was quickly picked up. Judging from what has already been said regarding *Pompey*, the shift in emphasis from who the heroes were to what they were doing makes sense indeed. Pompey is certainly primarily important in what is happening to him (in what he is ‘doing’ as a device), and not in what he is (a dog). As such he is effective even when he is passive. When pointing to another element that these characters have in common apart from being non-human or inanimate – namely, the fact that they all circulate – what comes into the forefront is the deeper meaning of the device, revealing a certain idea and image of the society behind the satirical surface, which ascribes to the subgenre a whole new meaning.

A society represented through the lens of the circulating hero cannot possibly give a sense of a safe, unified realm. Featuring people only connected through a narrator in transit, it is depicted as fragmented, atomized and alienated. The fact that the central hero circulates, or is passed around randomly, necessarily implies the lack of human interaction: Pompey cannot share his experience with the owners, nor can they share theirs among themselves, which inevitably results in a lack of sentiments and affective links. In Bellamy’s words: “The novel of circulation provides a paradigm of the alienation” (1998, 120).

Add to this that circulation is primarily associated with currency, notably money, and given the fact that the predominant type of the eighteenth-century circulating hero was in fact a piece of money (a guinea, a rupee, a shilling, or a banknote),²¹ while many other inanimate objects took a form of mere commodities, and the genre reveals itself as being utterly engaged with the idea of commerce and exchange as the driving force(s) of the story, as well as of the society at large. Unsurprisingly, the anti-commercial rhetoric of Tory tradition, pointing at the “new commercial system as a source of social instability and a challenge to the values of the old nobility” (Bellamy 1998, 124) became characteristic of the subgenre. This clearly corresponds with Coventry’s political beliefs.

It is very easy to accept the new term, the novel of circulation, without further reflection. But Bellamy did not only provide a name, she also produced a concept. Therefore, by using the label, one inevitably implies a certain understanding of the subgenre. This necessarily had its

20 The term was first proposed in Bellamy’s (unpublished) PhD thesis ‘Private Virtues, Public Vices: Commercial Morality and the Novel, 1740 1800’ in 1988, but it did not attract much attention until her monograph came out ten years later (*Commerce, Morality and the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, 1998).

21 See for example: C. Johnstone: *Chrysal or the Advenures of a Guinea* (1760); H. Scott: *Adventures of a Rupee* (1781); *The Adventures of a Silver Penny* (anon., 1786); *The Adventures of a Silver Three-Pence* (anon., 1800).

consequences. The ensuing discussions²² only rarely addressed the question of the genre of these narratives (something that still obviously preoccupies Day in his study), and the type of the protagonist, too, ceased to raise interest. They all, however, saw the circulating hero as emblematic of the burgeoning consumer culture. Bellamy's label, avoiding reference to the protagonist, seems to have done away with many contested issues.

It is useful to check the broader context in which Bellamy carried out the (re)conceptualization of the subgenre. Her initial (1988) as well as the ensuing elaborated study (1998) both dealt with the larger social issues, the market relations and commerce in particular. This might well account for her 'slip' already in the definition itself, perhaps betraying her preoccupation with the currency and commodity narrators.²³ While acknowledging Bellamy's key contribution to the understanding of the long neglected subgenre, and recognizing the significance of the term, one should nevertheless remain attentive to its limitations.

5. The public and the private

There is no denying that Pompey also functions as a commodity, to an extent at least. He circulates through society in an arbitrary way, just as money does. It is true that he is not exactly being bought and sold, but he is certainly often exchanged (for a golden watch, or a pint of porter, for a dram of brandy, for oysters). As such he undoubtedly fits into the concept of the novel of circulation.

But there is more to it than that. Even though Coventry's lapdog is not a very convincing representative of his species, we are nonetheless dealing with a dog. This invites me to look behind the relationship of commodity exchange. Lack of emotions and Pompey's inertness notwithstanding, he nevertheless 'belongs' and 'is owned'. Different from a guinea or a pincushion, his (exchange) value does to a degree lie in the affectionate links, regardless of how cursory they are. Pompey is not only a commodity; he also functions as a gift and as property. The shifts of his status, of the way he is 'used', reveal his position in the relation to the public and the private, and indicate the extent of the emotional involvement.²⁴ As a commodity he belongs to the act of exchange, to the public realm; as a property he is part of the private; but as a gift he is somewhat conflating the two notions and pending in-between: while the idea of commodity implies multiple, repeated exchange, the gift is defined by a single gift-giving and getting act.²⁵

22 A. Douglas 1993, C. Flint 1998, F. Johnston 2003.

23 Even though her label successfully avoids the difficulty of bringing together ontologically different beings – from objects to animals and transmigrating souls – something the previous descriptive terms (such as the 'it-narrator novels' or 'novels of inanimate-characters') failed in doing – she herself does not seem to realize this, at least not according to the previously quoted passage (see the previous page). After exclusively referring to the inanimate objects in the first sentence, she readily mentions dogs and cats in the next one.

24 This does not need to be an affection expressed towards the dog himself, but rather the defining characteristic of the context in which he appears. When, for example, Lord Marmazet (ch. x, part II) sends Pompey as a surprise gift to his wife, neither he nor she shows any special feeling for the dog, but the idea the episode conveys is nevertheless that of their mutual attachment.

25 The notions commodity, gift and property have been the subject of many theories and appear in various, often contested definitions (see e.g. A. Appadurai, C. Campbell, M. Douglas), but my interest was not in the concepts themselves; only in what they reveal in relation to the text and the subgenre.

The above sketch brings forth other dimensions of the circulation which go beyond the focus on the mere economic relationship and invite a somewhat different sense of eighteenth-century society. Without impinging on the idea that the subgenre underlines the nature of the commercial state, I will try to show that the circulating device also illuminates other, less visible, but nonetheless crucial effects of commercialization.

To that end two crucial long-term effects of the eighteenth-century commercialization boom first need to be outlined.²⁶ On the one hand, the increased (financial and 'physical') availability of goods (luxuries, or at least imitations of luxuries) accelerated the already extraordinary upward mobility of the English people²⁷ and contributed to confusion on the social map. This made social divisions, which had once been much more visible, difficult to discern, producing a need for new orientation signals, especially as the side-effects of commercialization also aggravated city anonymity.

On the other hand, commercialization and industrialization importantly affected the relationship between the public and the private. That eighteenth-century England saw a growing division between the two realms has, by now, become "a received wisdom" (Meyer-Spacks 2003, 3). Although the theory of separated spheres, notably the extent of the division, has been thoroughly contested (see e.g. Vickery 1993, Shoemaker 1998), the general idea of the divide remained more or less unchallenged. I cannot afford to reflect on this any further, but suffice it to say that the separation of home and workplace, with working men and home-alone wives, substantially re-defined gender roles and, alongside this, significantly changed the nature of the public and the private themselves. The two realms transformed in a way which, on the one hand, opened up the sphere of pronounced intimate privacy (something which Meyer-Spacks elaborates on (*Privacy* 2003)); while on the other, established the specific type of the public, the proto-democratic, state-concerned public sphere, as it was famously defined by Habermas (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* 1962, Eng. transl. 1989).

What concerns me here, however, is the often neglected, albeit crucial, dimension of the above described reformation, namely a large 'belt' left in-between, an intermediary space that could be described as the sphere of sociability. Because of the enhanced divide between the private and the public, sociability, providing the 'ground' where the two could be breached, became the context of marked importance. Belonging just as much to the private as to the public,²⁸ it at once exposed and helped to order the confusion. Because it always to some degree classified its audience, creating easier discernible micro societies, it provided a context where the signposts could successfully operate and where labelling as such was the subject of conversation. It is no coincidence that eighteenth-century England was recognized as the 'age of sociability'.²⁹

26 I am referring to the so called 'commercial revolution', the shift from mercantilist to capitalist economic system with all its effects, as outlined by N. McKendrick, J. Brewer and J.H. Plumb in *The Birth of the Consumer Society The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (1982).

27 For comparison with other nations, see R. Porter (1982).

28 Although sociability is in itself a fluid intermediary sphere, it is nevertheless possible to talk more specifically about either the private or the public sociability, with a tea-party at home as an example of the first and a visit to a pleasure garden as an example of the second. There are many references to various types of sociability in the studies of the eighteenth century, but only few attempts to define it (see Simmel 2000; Russel, Tuite 2002, Langford 1989).

29 G. Russell and C. Tuite assert that eighteenth-century England regarded sociability as a value in itself (2002, 5 6); L. Klein discusses

This is the area where *Pompey the Little* is predominantly at work. There is no trace of the proper public sphere there. In fact, it seems the lack of it is deliberately enhanced. By depicting *the* place of the public debate – the coffee-house – as a stage of irascible men feigning knowledge (chapter XIV), and not as the one of serious and reasonable conversation, Coventry seems to suggest that the public sphere, if it at all exists, is definitely not functioning. The public in *Pompey the Little* is limited to the (public) sociability, the leisure and pleasure, where the opinion of the aristocratic ‘world’ is all that counts.³⁰ This is the platform against which the private is measured.

Alternating between a commodity, a gift and a property, Pompey successfully exposes the gulf between the private and the public, *alias* the sociable. What we are allowed to see by witnessing the owners’ behaviour in their individual or family privacies on the one hand, and in the sociable context in the other, confirms the deception of appearances.³¹ Another thing which contributes to the general impression of hypocrisy is that even when given as a present, Pompey is never an honest gift. To be sure, the recipient might take it as such, but in fact the previous owner just wants to get rid of the animal.³² Meanwhile, those who really want the dog (Hillario, Lady Tempest, Aurora), openly ask for it, which does not fit into the concept of a gift either; and even in this case Pompey rarely comes gratis.³³ In revealing the state of things and juxtaposing the two sides, Pompey is taking the role of a guide, removing the masks and pointing at the contradictions. A legitimate heir of the ‘spies’ in the preceding novels of the similar kind, he takes advantage of being allowed to be present where other people cannot be, which makes it easy to lay bare the duplicity and fraudulence of almost everybody he encounters. It is very important that he can hear the gossip. In fact, the sphere of sociability is manifestly the sphere of gossip.

6. Gossip

As one of the instruments to find a way around the puzzling social world, gossip gained importance in eighteenth-century England. In *The Fall of Public Man* Richard Sennett traces the meaning of gossiping from the court culture of the middle of the seventeenth to the urban society of the mid-eighteenth century (1978, 60–3). While in the former, gossip was understood as a legitimate type of public discourse, a way of establishing social contact,³⁴ in the latter – in a period when “material conditions of life made people appear like unknown quantities to each other” (Sennett 1978, 62) – it becomes a privileged source of information, a sign of confidence and friendship, more personal and more valuable, but important overall as an aid for locating people on the social map.

how the eighteenth century importantly defined public in terms of sociability (in Haslett 2003, 4). See also P. Clark’s introduction to *British Clubs and Societies* (2002).

30 In chapter IV (part II) Count Tag defines ‘the world’ as the *grand monde*, “the people who are in the round of assemblies and public diversions” (1974, 129–130). For similar understanding, see Fielding’s *Modern Glossary*, under the entry “*No body*: all the people in great Britain except for about 1200” (*Covent Garden Journal*, no. 4, January 14, 1752).

31 Walking around in rags at home, but wearing lavish cloths for the public, father Frippery provides a typical example (ch. VI, part II).

32 After Pompey interrupts her romantic dreams, Aurora ‘gives’ him to her milliner (ch. IV, part II); and when Lord Mazmaret grows weary of the dog, he ‘donates’ him to the poor Rhymer, thus somewhat perverting the concept of the patronage (ch. XI, part II).

33 By giving her the dog, Hillario, for example, secures himself a free entry to Lady Tempest’s *ruelle* (ch. IV).

34 “Gossip was unrestrained exchange of information about other people; their sins, affairs, or pretences were dissected in the greatest detail because in the court most of these intimacies were common knowledge” (Sennett 1978, 60).

What Pompey is doing could in many ways be described as inviting us to participate in gossip. The feeling after reading is indeed one of skimming through a tabloid or glancing at a series of snapshots. The fact that we are dealing with a type of *roman à clef* certainly contributes to this impression.

The importance of gossip in *Pompey the Little* ties in well with the aforementioned role of Pompey as a gift and as a commodity. Gossip can well be defined as a type of news, as it certainly “involves an exchange of information” (Meyer-Spacks 1985, 21–2). As such, and depending on the context, it might operate as either: a gift or a commodity. This was undoubtedly the case in eighteenth-century England. Consider about buying magazines with gossipy sections which multiplied from the mid-century onwards,³⁵ or about paying an entrance fee to be able to catch some gossip at a *ridotto*. Buying *roman à clef*, or even more importantly, the Key to go with, could also count as gossip commodified. But just as well, gossip could have come as a certain kind of gift, creating “a feeling bond” (Hyde 1983, 56). Considering that a gift is never just a gift, as it always implies commerce in social capital,³⁶ which is certainly true of gossip, the notions seem all the more connected.

Throughout the book, Pompey conveys and incites gossip; he is a subject of gossip and – for the most part – witnesses gossiping.³⁷ It is only when he becomes a part of the dispute, whereupon his legal status is about to be defined, and where he is reclaimed as a property, that the circulation stops and the story comes to an end. The marble monument with an epitaph in his honour, erected in Lady Tempest’s garden, functions as a badge of ownership. However, it also bears a mark of conspicuous consumption – together with property another defining notion of eighteenth-century England.

If Sennett offers historical explanation of the significance of gossip, Patricia Meyer-Spacks (1985) explores the uses of gossip as a narrative device. In *Pompey the Little* gossip is indeed much more than just a motif. It assumes many functions. Most explicitly it appears as an action in itself. Characters gossip all the time: when Cleora and Cleanthe backbite Hillaro (ch. III) gossip takes on a function of confident intimacy; Count Tag’s gossiping about what’s new in high society (ch. IV, part II) provides also an efficient self-portrait. That Coventry refers to these trifling chit-chats as ‘conversations’ only enhances their triviality. But gossip also impels plots. Once the news about the real Jack-the highwayman is spread, he has to fly Bath (ch. XX). Idle talk as it is, gossip is nevertheless of consequence. Operating in the transit field of sociability, as “the most ‘public’ form of a private mode” (Meyer-Spacks 1985, 5), it affects both. When the eminent Bab Frightful appears at Mrs. Frippery’s drum, she assures it will be mentioned in the circulating gossip of the town. Recognizing references, notably the allusions to real personae, the reader receives his or her share of gossip as well.

35 E.g. the *Town and Country Magazine* (1769–1795) with the famed *t te t te* section, the *Rambler Magazine* (1783–1790), and the *Morning Post* (1790–1899).

36 The idea that gifts are never free as they create obligation of a reciprocal exchange, and that gift-giving can often be self-interested, was introduced by M. Mauss in *Essai sur le don* (1923–24), the first anthropological study on gift-giving.

37 Examples abound. In chapter IV Pompey ‘conveys’ the gossip about the Italian courtesan; in chapter IX (part II) he intentionally follows lord Marmazet to satisfy his curiosity by finding out more about the mysterious Mrs. Caryl; later on he is used in a prank which incites gossip about William, the womanizer (ch. XIV, part II); and throughout the book he listens to servants, gossiping about their masters (e.g. ch. V, XI).

The way characters are introduced also reads as gossip. Each new owner is represented with a summary of his or her background history – something which already implies that (s)he could not have been leading an exactly exemplary life, as it is usually the numerous (mis)adventures that make for someone's 'history'.³⁸ Neither the ones who gossip, nor the ones gossiped about ever appear in a very flattering light. As becomes a satire, Pompey indeed, does not meet many of the virtuous kind.

Summing all this up, gossip in *Pompey the Little* reads as a way of learning and knowing things; as a strategy for bringing in the topics, and as such almost represents a micro epistemology in itself. Even the concluding thought of the philosophical 'Dissertation upon Nothing' – "ex nihil omnia fuit" – reads as a kind of gossip motto (1974, 111).

What is most significant in relation to the subgenre in question, however, is the way in which non-human characters, by sharing the insight into gossipy secrets, turn the reader into a complicit voyeur. This links well with the observation that circulating heroes tend to be little (Johnston 2003). As slippers and pins, atoms and fleas, they can peregrinate freely in all the hidden corners of every day life and witness the titillating private scenes. Smallness links well with the gossipy particulars. It is exactly the smallness in size, duration and value that seems to allow for greater perception and offers a certain kind of power (Johnston 2003, 152–4). Not only is Pompey a *lap-dog*; the narrative abounds in detail. Lady Mary could not have made that remark about the dress, if this was not the case (see the quote on the first page of this essay).

But the fact that small protagonists circulate or 'are circulated' is just as important. The two elements readily connect. It is almost as if a circulating hero could best express himself in the form of gossip. This is what the term 'novel of circulation' seems to neglect.

7. Conclusion

There is no doubt that Pompey is a 'circulating' hero. But tackling 'his' story from the perspective of the gossipy narrative reveals a more complex picture of the society it satirizes in a manner that takes us beyond the term and points at other compatible, but nevertheless importantly different characteristics of the subgenre. The society as portrayed in *Pompey the Little* certainly is one of commodity exchange, but – figuring also as a gift (albeit not for free) and as gossip – Pompey enables us to read its characteristics on the level of changed codes of behaviour, revealing a society which is just as gossipy as it is commercialized.

So as it turns out, the dog is nevertheless important. It was the fact that I could not accept Pompey as a mere commodity that encouraged me to think what else he is telling the reader about how people felt about the world in which they lived. As such he certainly reveals a lot – enough to prioritize the socio-historical importance of *Pompey the Little* over the literary.³⁹

38 Especially with regards to women, 'having a history' in the eighteenth century implied they could not have been leading an exactly exemplary life, For a nice explanation of the phrase, see C. Lennox: *Female Quixote* (1752, book II, ch. IV., VII).

39 For the introduction to the socio-historical approach to literature, see J.P. Hunter: "The novel and social/cultural history" (in Richetti 2002, 9–34).

In this context it is well worth mentioning that real, ‘outside’ gossip accompanied the book from the start. Soon after being first published anonymously, in February 1751, rumours speculating about the author’s identity appeared, with Fielding as the most probable candidate.⁴⁰ Further hearsay was triggered by the peculiar, three-part review in the *Monthly*, with extracts as if by incident extending from February to April edition (1751) and thus repeatedly advertising the book. Day speculates that this might have been a deliberate token of approbation, a personal favour of the editor, Griffiths or Cleland (1974, xii). As behoves a book which makes gossip one of its central concerns, *Pompey* quickly became the talk of the town and attracted a considerable amount of attention.⁴¹ It is not certain whether the Key was ever written, but the characters undoubtedly evoked recognition. Lady Mary even recognized herself. Symbolically, her reception of the text brings together all the crucial elements I have dealt with: receiving the book as a gift and returning a gossipy letter about what she had read, Pompey’s journey comes full circle.

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40 Coventry himself revealed authorship only in the third, revised edition, thus sustaining an air of mystery for almost a year.

41 It attained at least eight editions by the end of the century (with two pirated in Dublin); two French and one Italian translation(s) and the name Pompey took off as well (Day 1974, xiii).

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