

# Ogling, Quizzing, and Spying: The Eyeglass

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**Abstract:** The eyeglass was a distinctive accessory of the long eighteenth century. Contrary to contemporary conduct advice, which enjoined a self-disciplined gaze and a polite use of the eyes, this accessory made a fashionable virtue out of staring. Using textual sources and the more abundant visual evidence of portraiture and satirical prints, this paper opens by exploring the origins, appearance, and naming of the object. It then turns to examine the different ways of looking enacted with the eyeglass: lascivious and voyeuristic, connoisseurial, and dandiacal. The distinct but intersecting contexts in which it appeared are considered, as well as its passage from male to female fashion in the nineteenth century. Finally, the paper situates the quizzing glass within the broader pattern of eighteenth-century developments: rapid urbanization, commercial expansion, the rise of the middle and aspirant classes, and an Enlightenment epistemology that grounded knowledge in empirically tested observation. In the midst of such developments, the eyeglass became a tool with which to enact visual criticality, the small piece of glass both arming the viewer and providing a way of deflecting the critical looks of others. In graphic satire however, its presence references a satirical gaze being directed from outside the frame of the print. In a small but significant way, the eyeglass came to stand for both the discerning eye, and its absence.

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## KEYWORDS

- eyeglass
- quizzing glass
- accessory
- long eighteenth century

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I came to the quizzing glass via the novels of Georgette Heyer (1902–74), the writer who could be said to have invented the Regency romance. In the “Heyerverse,” Georgette’s version of history, this now all-but-forgotten object appears frequently, employed by her characters according to their role in the narrative. In one novel, *The Talisman Ring* (1936), it even forms the crux of the plot, the heirloom of the title hidden in plain sight in an eyeglass handle. But what of the non-fictional world? How and when was the quizzing glass used by real historical actors? Researching this intriguing device turned out to be a surprising challenge. Secondary sources revealed only that the quizzing glass was a fashionable accessory in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and primary written evidence was fleeting and scarce. Instead, what I found were images, numerous pictorial sources in which an eyeglass featured sometimes centrally, more often peripherally. Using this visual evidence, and the hints and assumptions gleaned from textual sources, this article explores the phenomenon of the eyeglass over the long eighteenth century, asking why it was worn, how it was wielded, and by whom.<sup>1</sup>

## The Eyeglass

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The eyeglass appeared around the middle years of the eighteenth century — though its exact origins are unknown — reaching its height of popularity in the decades before and after the century’s turn. Thereafter it entered the sluggish current of fashion’s backwaters, its purchase on the cultural imagination more or less dislodged by the related forms of the monocle and lorgnette. Although the eyeglass persisted into the twentieth century, insofar as it was still possible to purchase one from new, it represented a niche market at best. Its period of ascendancy was late Georgian.

In form, it consisted simply of a monocular lens set in a frame to which a small handle was attached. Sometimes, especially in earlier varieties, this was housed within a hinged carrying case from which it folded out, rather in the manner of a pocket knife.

Because round lenses were easier and cheaper to grind the glass was generally circular, however fashion is seldom constrained by ease of production, and oval and rectangular varieties were also common. (The twentieth century even saw novelty triangular lenses.)

The rim and handle of the eyeglass were made from a variety of materials, including solid silver, gold, or polished steel. Most generally, however, surviving examples are gilded metal or pinchbeck, an imitation gold. Often these frames, particularly in the later years of its popularity, were highly ornamented, being cut into facets, set with real or imitation gemstones, or designed to display other decorative fancies. At times, decoration became drollery — as in quizzing glasses set into the handles of fans, or with spaces for carrying locks of hair, or incorporating compartments for scent or vinaigrette. In all instances, the loop that formed the handle was used for attaching to a ribbon or chain, which was then hung from the wearer's neck.

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**The lens itself corrected for short sight.  
This meant that although it looked like a  
magnifier it was not held close to an object  
to bring up its detail, but rather was held to  
the eye to increase the clarity of the view in  
the distance.**

In pictorial representations, this positioning of the eyeglass in use is often its only identifying clue, enabling us to differentiate between it and a magnifying glass. Along with other visual aids, it was generally bought readymade from opticians or optical instrument makers, although a jeweller might be involved in the production and decoration of the frame and handle. The lens was therefore not ground to a personalized optical prescription; rather, a customer would choose from the selection on offer, picking a lens and frame whose corrective strength and decoration best suited their individual eyesight and taste.

The appearance of the eyeglass is well attested by the many surviving examples — indeed, in the British Optical Association Museum, full display drawers and packed storage boxes indicate their once popular nature (see fig. 1).



**FIGURE 1**

**Drawer full of quizzing glasses, 18th–19th century. Dr. Susan Vincent, photograph, British Optical Association Museum at the College of Optometrists, London.**

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They are difficult to date, however — their design and materials changing only little and slowly — and the examples in most collections are generally only attributed to a broad and approximate time span. Even what they were called proves contentious. Intriguingly, for most of the eighteenth century they were referred to by a variety of names, not only as “eyeglass,” but also as “looking glass,” “spy glass,” and “perspective glass.” As these names were also applied to entirely different objects like mirrors and telescopes, it can be very hard to establish from the written sources alone what the intended referent actually is. This ambiguity was apparently resolved after the appearance in the lexicon of “quiz” and its cognates. From around 1780, a host of related words popped into being — such as “quizzable,” “quizzish,” “quizee,” “quizzity,” and, of course, the variation that we still used today, “quizzical.” The cluster of meanings that these words served — to do with mockery, eccentricity, or visual appraisal — settled also onto the eyeglass, and the already-existing accessory was reconfigured into the newly named area of social practice (**see fig. 2**). From this point onwards — the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives its first attested use as 1802 — the monocular hand-held lens also became known as the “quizzing glass” or “quizzer,” which it has remained ever since, even when describing its use in a period before the term was coined. In the following, I use quizzing glass/quizzer and eyeglass interchangeably.



FIGURE 2

Hand-coloured etching, published in London by Thomas Tegg. Thomas Rowlandson, Caleb Quizem, Esq., 1809, etching, Lewis Walpole Library, Farmington.

**Contrary to contemporary conduct advice, which enjoined a self-disciplined gaze and a polite use of the eyes, the quizzing glass made a fashionable virtue out of staring.**

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The proscription on such uncontrolled looking was both long-standing and widely applied, present all but unchanged in advice from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. It was a benchmark of polite behavior for both men and women, and the elite and middling classes (Dallet Hemphill 26, 79, 111, 115, 145, 208). As bodily control became an ever-more important exercise of politesse in the eighteenth century, it is not surprising to find that Chesterfield advised it was unmannerly “to stare any person full in the face” (qtd. in Dallet Hemphill 79).

Also predictable are strictures aimed at women that made overt the sexualized nature of looking — “the wanton turn of the Head, the leering Look” — and enjoined instead a modest mien and downcast eyes (Essex 47, 24).

In contrast to these unequivocal pronouncements, the quizzing glass stands as an astonishingly unrepentant device for gawping. Everything about its design, decoration, and use was about noticeable staring.<sup>2</sup> First, far from being simply utilitarian, the eyeglass was, as we have seen, elaborately decorative. Its workmanship was not only made to be admired, but rather than retiring discreetly into the background, its faceted edges, polished surfaces, and gems would catch the light and throw it back to the eyes of any viewers. The quizzing glass was made to be noticed. This extended even to the ribbon or chain from which it hung. The dark color of the ribbon contrasted with the pale hues of men’s neckwear. The chains, associated particularly with women’s use in the 1820s–30s, were long and made to be attractively looped in wear, with links that were often decorative in their own right. Second, the whole undertaking of using a quizzer drew attention to itself: the glass was raised, set to the eye, the head turned to the object of view, the gaze leveled. It is easy to imagine the “graceful and ostentatious hand movements” that such a performance and such an accessory invited (Davidson and Macgregor 12). However, this small device encouraged more than elaborate gesture; such overt acts of appraisal as the quizzing glass called forth suggest that a whole bodily demeanor might be engaged in the task of looking.



**FIGURE 3**

**Mrs. Joseph Mee (attributed), 9.2 x 7.3 cm.  
Princess Sophia, 1800–06, watercolour on ivory,  
Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen  
Elizabeth II, London.**

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These decorative and performative aspects of the quizzing glass outweighed any utility it had as an optometric device. The difficulty of closing one eye and squinting through a single lens or, most probably, keeping both eyes open and ignoring the binocular view, coupled with the challenge of maintaining the best focal length, meant that as an ocular corrective it would always be compromised. If functionality was the primary motive, wearers were much better served by spectacles, a more banal but optically superior alternative. Something of this tension between use and ornament is revealed by the portrait miniature ascribed to Mrs. Joseph Mee of Princess Sophia (1777–1848), fifth daughter of George III (**see fig. 3**). Wearing the muslins and high waistline of the early nineteenth century, the most remarkable thing about Sophia are her large and exophthalmic eyes; around her neck and attached under the bust line of her dress is a looped gold chain that holds a quizzer.

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According to Fanny Burney (1752–1840), who thanks to her position as Keeper of the Robes became close to the queen and princesses, Sophia was so nearsighted as to be “almost blind,” which indeed she sadly became later in life. It is noteworthy that although she always wore spectacles, she nevertheless chose to be depicted here with the more stylish alternative of the quizzing glass. As conceivably Sophia could have been painted without either specs or eyeglass, the inclusion of the latter suggests that it was not just the better alternative, but, as we shall see, had a positively fashionable status in and of itself. So early is this depiction — the first reference to the female use of an eyeglass that I have so far found — that it is possible Sophia may even have had a role to play in disseminating its fashionable status for women.

Sophia’s self-consciousness in regard to needing spectacles is borne out by a conversation concerning her that took place between Fanny Burney and Princess Augusta, Sophia’s elder sister:

**“And I want her”, said Princess Augusta, “to wear them at the play, where we are going tonight; but she is afraid, she says, of some paragraph in the newspapers; but what, I ask her, can they say? That the Princess Sophia wears spectacles! Well, and what harm can that do her? Would it not be better they should say it, than she should lose all sight of the performers?” (qtd. in Fraser 171)**

Burney’s reported conversation bears unusual witness to the longevity of self-consciousness felt by some glasses wearers, not to mention also the vulnerability experienced by those whose high-profile status led them to be the subject of journalistic comment. It shows also that spectacles, unlike quizzers, were the functional eyewear, as well as decidedly unfashionable: “it was not considered attractive, especially for ladies, to wear them in public” (Ward 1: 432).

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That the use of the quizzing glass was less about clarity of vision and more about style and the performance of looking is further supported by contemporary remarks that mocked the fashionability of nearsightedness and the affectation of users whose eyesight required no correction. Faux myopia was a standard trope. For instance, in a spoof letter printed in two different periodicals in 1801–02, a young man about town declares that “Sometimes I am fashionably near-sighted; and the black of my riband of my pendant quizzing glass contrasts the white of my high cravat” (To the Female Spy; To the Editor of the Lady’s Monthly Magazine). This “letter” must be one of the earliest uses of the term “quizzing glass,” for its first publication pre-dates the *OED*’s earliest usage by a year and a half. The theme is canvassed amusingly in an anecdote from 1805, where it is embedded within the narrative of a fictional country gent recounting his recent visit to London. Here he is struck by many things — the predictable targets of this kind of comic commentary — including the ladies’ risqué-cum-vulgar dress, the gentlemen’s loud talking, the “finical” appearance of a young man of fashion:

**Presently this Mr. Beau held to his eye a kind of spying-glass. “Poor man, is he blind? (asked I:) what a sad misfortune!” “O! no, (said my friend,) not really blind; but it is the fashion to appear to be so; it is only a quizzing-glass.” — A quizzing-glass! thought I; what kind of glass is that. (A Fragment 239)**

**Despite any optometric benefits that may have accrued from its use, therefore, the eyeglass was much more about a particular style and performance than about real deficiencies of sight. It was less a corrective object and more a dress accessory. In fact, in many contexts what the eyeglass unequivocally said was: “Look at me looking at you.”**

## The Visual Sources

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The number of eyeglasses still extant might suggest that there is a corresponding mass of documentary material. However, despite its fashionability, the presence of the eyeglass in the written record is in fact sparse. This includes in the period's fiction. While Georgette Heyer's Regency bucks often reached for a quizzer, their historical fictional counterparts seem not to have. While there is talk of ogling or being quizzed, as for example by the odious John Thorpe in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (completed 1803, published posthumously 1817), as far as I can see this is seldom, if ever, overtly accompanied by the use of an eyeglass.<sup>3</sup> Instead, as is perhaps fitting of an object designed for viewing, it is in visual sources that it most often appears, and of these, graphic satire — that genre that burgeoned in the latter part of the eighteenth century — is the most vocal.<sup>4</sup> Looking at satirical prints, it becomes clear that there are distinct patterns of representation aligned to the quizzer. It was depicted in specific, albeit overlapping contexts, each of which involved a particular way of looking.

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## The first and most widely represented of these contexts is the lascivious and voyeuristic, in which the depiction gives visual form to the eighteenth-century preoccupation with ogling.

A relatively new term at the start of the eighteenth century, “ogle” migrated between a designation meaning just the eyes, and one that referred to a particular type of look and a particular manner of looking.<sup>5</sup> In 1711, one of *The Spectator’s* fictional letters set the scene for a theme that would remain a feature throughout the coming century. The letter purports to come from a gentleman who during his travels has accomplished himself “in the whole Art of Ogling, as it is at present practised in all the polite Nations of *Europe*.” With these qualifications he intends “to set up for an Ogling-Master,” with an obvious nod to the increasing employment of dancing masters to tutor in the polite arts of dance and deportment. “I teach,” wrote the gentleman, “the Church Ogle in the Morning, and the Play-house Ogle by Candle-light.” Again in an allusion — this time to Izaak Walton’s treatise on fishing — he also advises that he has written a book on the subject, *The compleat Ogler* (*Spectator* 1: 85).

Although in written sources such lascivious looking is sometimes undertaken by women, as far as I can tell in the satirical prints the scopophilic use of an eyeglass is always enacted by men. The gaze, in other words, is leveled in accordance with John Berger’s classic assessment that “*men act and women appear*.” The surveyed female is an object, “and most particularly an object of vision: a sight” (Berger 47). An example of this is the first print from *The Modern Harlot’s Progress, or Adventures of Harriet Heedless*, published in 1780 (see fig. 4).



FIGURE 4

Etching and engraving and detail, 17.6 x 27.2 cm, published in London by Carington Bowles, BM Satires 5808. *The Modern Harlot's Progress, or Adventures of Harriet Heedless*, 1780, etching and engraving, British Museum, London.

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Like Hogarth's series to which it alludes, the story is one of a thoughtless country girl whose move to London leads to her moral corruption and downfall. Pictured here newly arrived and seeking employment at a hiring venue, the eponymous Harriet, as the accompanying text makes clear, has been decoyed by a bawd. Behind her an older man familiarly caresses a young woman's face, itself a signal of prostitution or illicit sexuality. To the far left, almost unnoticed in the corner of the room, stands the rake separated from the main proceedings but framing them with his voyeuristic intent. He not only looks at Harriet, but actively eyes her, using his glass to perform his scrutiny, reinforcing her objectification and eventual, inevitable downfall.

In the print *Mrs Lee's Dream – or – the Virgin in Distress of 1804*, the quizzing glass moves centre stage (**see fig. 5**). The image refers to a recent court case in which two brothers, Loudoun and Lockhart Gordon, were accused of abducting and raping Mrs. Rachel Lee (née Dashwood, 1773–1829). That the case was dismissed — Mrs. Lee stating she could not take the oath, being anti-Christian in her views — and the Gordons acquitted, explains the appearance here of the reclining "Virgin" as a more than willing party. In assessing her character, the court no doubt found it also significant that Mrs. Lee was herself the product of a long-running extra-marital relationship, and that while underage had eloped with her handsome husband, Matthew Allen Lee, from whom she was soon estranged.<sup>6</sup>

All this made her a clear target for the satirist's drawing. The figure within the print lies back in inviting abandon, the subject of her erotic dream — note the "dream" clouds around his feet — raising his eyeglass, the optical echo of the erect phallic sugar cane. Note, however, that although within the frame it is the woman who has the sexual fantasies, it is the male object of her ardor who bears the quizzer, a further indication of the eyeglass in this context being a masculine-only device.

One interesting feature of these depictions is the frequency with which the quizzing glass was associated with individual users. This is noticeable in the case of William Douglas (1725–1810) fourth duke of Queensberry, an infamous rake and roué. Regardless of whether or not he in fact carried an eyeglass, the iconography of his depiction often has him wielding one. By this means the artist calls up scopophilic associations without even necessarily having to depict an object for his lecherous scrutiny. The alliteration between “quizzing” and “Queensberry” must also have been hard to resist.

*Quiz-zing a Filly* (see fig. 6), for example, shows the Duke leering through his eyeglass, hand suspiciously slipped into his breeches. That Queensberry was a noted horse breeder who raced his stud extremely successfully gives added piquance to the title with its play on horse flesh and objectified young women.



FIGURE 5

Hand-coloured etching, 25.9 x 35.7 cm, published in London by S.W. Fores, BM Satires 10310. Charles Williams, *Mrs Lee's Dream – or – the Virgin in Distress*, 1804, etching, British Museum, London.





FIGURE 6

Hand-coloured etching, 12.6 x 8 cm, published in London by Hannah Humphrey, BM Satires 8714. James Gillray, *Quiz-zing a Filly*, 1795, etching, British Museum, London.

**A second context for the quizzer is the realm of scholarship, learning, and art, where it references knowledge and judgment or, more commonly, their lack.**



In this it occupies a small place in a larger pictorial schema of the eighteenth century in which all manner of optical aids are used to signal the intellectual blindness and flawed taste of the cognoscenti, or “the erroneous myopeia of connoisseurial vision” (Mount 183). In *A Connoisseur* (see fig. 7), a caricatured figure in (by then) old-fashioned dress is depicted in profile, his key attribute being a large quizzing glass held to his eye. This motif reveals the flaw in the empiricist method, “observation leads to truthful inferences about the world” (Crary 29). By itself, looking is not enough; also needed are perceptiveness and moral acuity.

The other appearances of the eyeglass in pictorial satire revolve around different interpretations of the dandy. The first is exemplified by a print by Isaac Cruikshank, *A Crop*, of 1791 (see fig. 8), named after the new short haircut that some young men had begun to wear at this time.



FIGURE 7

14.8 x 11.2 cm, published in London by Bowles and Carver, BM Satires undescribed. *A Connoisseur*, 1790s, mezzotint, British Museum, London.

In contrast with the long hair, wigs, and powder of earlier generations, its echo of the short styles in Revolutionary France gave the new crop a definite edginess. It was daring, refused the traditional polite norms, and hinted at danger and extremism, a message here underlined by the club grasped in the figure's assertively crooked left arm with its aggressively jutting elbow. Despite his balletic and precise pose, this is not spindle-shanked, wasp-waisted caricature of effeminacy; his skin-tight pantaloons reveal muscular legs and everything about his staging communicates hauteur and disdain. He brings to mind, in fact, Fanny Burney's description of a gentleman of her acquaintance, a Mr. Hamilton, of whom in 1779 she wrote "is extremely Tall, & handsome." She added that he also "has an air of haughty & fashionable superiority, is intelligent, dry, sarcastic & clever" (Burney 429).

Rees Gronow (1794–1865), one-time man about town, in his memoirs described the dandies of his Regency youth: they were "unspeakably odious," with "nothing remarkable about them but their insolence." According to him "they arrogated to themselves the right of setting up their own fancied superiority on a self-raised pedestal." Sitting in White's bay window, from which they could survey passersby, they "abused everybody" and "never laughed" (Gronow 227).<sup>7</sup> In this print, the quizzer the figure holds to his eye plays an important part in communicating the disdain and disengagement that Gronow describes.



**FIGURE 8**

Hand-coloured etching, 29.8 x 19.9 cm, published in London by S.W. Fores, BM Satires 7999. Isaac Cruikshank, *A Crop*, of 1791, 1791, etching, Lewis Walpole Library, Farmington.

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**It sets up a quality that today we might term “cool” and depict with opaque sunglasses (see Brown), which is based in the power of the gaze coupled with a refusal to engage emotionally.**

This is staring at its most powerful and fascistic, where surveillance gives dominance over another. “In other words, a harsh stare can do the work of a foot on the neck” (Garland-Thomson 41).

In this context, it is interesting to note the chronological overlay between this image and Jeremy Bentham’s *Panopticon* (1791), both published in the same year. Both technologies that they describe — the large institutional building and the little optical aid — operate on the principle of visual dominance: “the more constantly the persons to be inspected are under the eyes of the persons who should inspect them, the more perfectly will the purpose ... have been attained” (Bentham 3). However, unlike Bentham’s invention for looking, which is predicated on hidden surveillance, the eyeglass also channels observation the other way. Viewers of the dandy figure are drawn to notice him and his public exhibition of staring, just as much as he brings his gaze to bear on them. To repeat and add emphasis, the eyeglass as a public performance says “*look at me* looking at you.” The requested visual validation implicit in this particular depiction finds an echo in Thomas Carlyle’s writings on “The Dandiacal Body,” published in 1831. What is it, Carlyle’s narrative voice asks, that the dandy asks for?

**Solely, we may say, that you would recognise his existence; would admit him to be a living object; or even failing this, a visual object, or thing that will reflect rays of light. ... [H]e solicits ... simply the glance of your eyes. Understand his mystic significance, or altogether miss and misinterpret it; do but look at him, and he is contented. (Carlyle 314)**

What may be termed a distinct subset of this dandy context is the eyeglass-wielding military figure. Dandy chic was in many ways built on military fashions — its tailoring techniques were developed first in the crafting of the anatomy of the uniformed male, and the influence on civilian society of the long-running Napoleonic Wars advertised the desirability of scarlet regimentals, fitting breeches or pantaloons, and a trim-waisted élan.<sup>8</sup> Added to this, many of the leading dandies of the opening years of the nineteenth century had previously had military careers (Parissien 110), the most famous of course being Beau Brummel, a former officer in the Tenth Royal Hussars. Considering this close relationship between the two intersecting variants of masculinity, it makes sense that an eyeglass can often be found in satirical depictions of the officer class. A drawing from 1788 is a fine example of the dandiacal soldier (see fig. 9). Posed here with his tailor — whose skill with scissors and needle has “made” him — he looks disdainfully through his eyeglass, refusing the impertinence of a tradesman who seeks payment for services rendered.



FIGURE 9

Drawing on paper, 21.3 x 16.7 cm. Frederick George Byron (formerly attributed to George Moutard Woodward), *print study/drawing*, 1788, drawing, British Museum, London.

It is useful here to place satiric portrayals next to those with serious intent. The British Museum houses a painting commissioned by Sir John Dalling, Commander-in-Chief in Madras from 1784 to 1786 (see fig. 10). The picture shows him and his fellow officers sitting in an open-sided tent, the audience for a performance by musicians and female dancers, the latter of whom are wearing bejeweled and colorful costumes that leave their midriffs bare. Two of the officers raise long-stemmed eyeglasses the better to view the performing women, and in doing so, incidentally, present us with an image in which the dandiacal elides with the scopophilic, both contained within the overarching survey of the colonizer.



**FIGURE 10**

Company School style painting on paper, mounted on canvas, and detail, 90.8 x 61.5 cm, painted in Madras. Painting, c. 1785–6, painting, British Museum, London.

While dandiacal masculinity and the military manhood of the period definitely overlap — both of them engaged on a project of self-presentation and spectacle — I wonder if there might not also be a further connector between the eyeglass and the officer. In 1780 the instrument makers Dollonds introduced what they called the Army Telescope.<sup>9</sup> Although devices like this were not official issue until a century later,<sup>10</sup> as Dollonds' instrument suggests, private individuals certainly might purchase their own. The advantages of such an ocular aid in the field are obvious. It may be possible, therefore, that there was also a metonymic process going on, whereby the known military and naval use of optical instruments gave the dandiacal representation of the soldier with a quizzing glass extra traction.

The final spin on satire's representation of the dandy is typified by *The Dandy Dressing or At Home. The Dandy Dressed Abroad of 1815–25* (see fig. 11).



FIGURE 11

Hand-coloured etching, 23.2 x 31.8 cm, BM Satires 13060. J. Lewis Marks (attributed), *The Dandy Dressing or At Home. The Dandy Dressed Abroad*, 1815–25, etching, Lewis Walpole Library, Farmington.



This is a later image than any of the preceding, and is similar to many around this time in which effeminacy is staged with the help of an eyeglass. Here the muscled and upright delineation of the subject of *A Crop* has been replaced by a corseted, padded, and puny figure. His identifying signature items include yellow gloves, spurred boots, umbrella, and quizzer. I suggest that the dating of this depiction is significant, for by this time the eyeglass had become highly fashionable for women's wear. Looking through contemporary issues of fashion periodicals, one finds illustrations of both day dress and evening wear that accessorize with a quizzing glass (**see fig. 12**).



**FIGURE 12**

Engraved fashion plate, 17.6 x 10.9 cm, published in Paris by Pierre de la Mésangère, object no. RP-P-OB-103.481. *Costume Parisien*, 1819, fashion plate, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. *Journal des Dames et des Modes* (15 December 1819).

The accompanying commentary is not always positive, as in the following case from the February 1817 issue of *La Belle Assemblée*, which rather testily refers to the stupidity of those wearers who have no need of a corrective device:

**eye-glasses, we are sorry to say, are too much in vogue: shall infirmity become a fashion then? or will the ladies of Great Britain, inferior in real good sense to those of no other nation, will they destroy a naturally good sight by the continual, absurd, not to say impolite elevation of an eye-glass? (Fashions for March 85)**

The disapproval in such remarks, however, is undercut by the desirability of the accompanying images. These, and similar outfits delineated in both text and image, bear a striking resemblance not only to the miniature of Princess Sophia (**see fig. 6**), but to contemporary society portraits by artists such as Sir Thomas Lawrence. As attested by such pictorial evidence and the material artifacts themselves, by this point the eyeglass was strongly feminized (**see fig. 13**).



**FIGURE 13**

**Will You Buy My Quizzing Glass, c. 1830, British Optical Association Museum at the College of Optometrist, London.**



Bearing in mind the quizzer also figured as part of a military look, we could see its appropriation into the female wardrobe as one of several similar that took place at this time. As the long-running wars with France saw the rise in status and social cachet of the armed forces, so details and forms influenced by military uniforms crept into garments for both men and women. In women's wear, braiding, tassels, and shoulder decoration, and the design of cuffs, bodices, and necklines were part of "[t]his infusion of military styles into fashionable dress" (Johnson 20). To this list we might now add the eyeglass. That contemporaries recognized this adoption of the quizzing glass by women as the recent and fashionably daring appropriation of a formerly masculine accessory is clear:

**Can I blame the full impertinent stare of rude indifference with which a modern beau enters an evening or morning circle . . . when at the same moment I perceive a modern belle walk into it, her quizzing glass raised to her eye to recognize with unblushing cheeks their various features, and with assured (I had almost said masculine) ease placing herself in the centre of it ... (Cockle 233-4)<sup>11</sup>**

Given this, it seems likely that as the quizzing glass settled into its nineteenth-century use as an item worn by women, its employment within the male wardrobe was increasingly seen as affected and effete. Supporting this is the dating of satirical representations of the eyeglass linked with foppishness, which belong to the decades after the century's turn. Indeed, it is highly pertinent that in the eighteenth-century macaroni prints, which as a whole caricature the inappropriate consumption of fashion — whether that impropriety is one of gender or class — the eyeglass appears only occasionally. Furthermore, on these occasions, it is rarely lampooned itself, being instead a prop for the print's narrative rather than its comedic target. So, in *The Covent Garden Macaroni*, it is used by the eponymous character to ogle a prostitute; *An Old Macaroni Critic at a New Play* raises his eyeglass to indicate his flawed literary and aesthetic judgment.<sup>12</sup> Only rarely does it form a part of a foppish, "unmanly" story. Instead, the signature items in these prints are first and foremost the macaroni's giant clubbed hair and wig, and secondarily his tiny hat, a cane or sword, swinging tassels, and garments made from sprigged and spotted fabrics. The quizzer only took on this connotation as the unfolding nineteenth century saw it adopted into female wear.

# The History

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It is no coincidence that the eyeglass developed as a fashionable accessory in a century that has been identified by scholars as “an age dominated by the sense of sight” (Mackie 58). Microscopes, dioramas, panoramas, camera obscura, magic lanterns, perspective boxes, and optical tricks not only exercised the scientific imagination but engaged the populace too, promoting “a shared inquiry about the possibilities and limitations of looking” (Bellion 5). In Marcia Pointon’s words, it was a time in which “gazing games” described new ways of both looking at each other and of thinking about the status and subjectivity of the self (Pointon *passim*). To see the eyeglass and the different ways of looking that it enacted as part of a gazing game is particularly apt.

**It is also crucial to understand that the rules of this game were determined by the broader pattern of eighteenth-century developments into which the eyeglass so snugly fit: urbanization, commercial expansion, the rise of the middle and aspirant classes, and an Enlightenment epistemology that grounded knowledge in empirically tested observation.**

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For a start, the eyeglass was constructed as a specifically urban accessory. As made clear by the “letter” above from the country gentleman visiting London and seeing what he took to be a blind man, the metropolis was the site with which such a fashion was associated.<sup>13</sup>

And London was expanding at an unprecedented rate, the population nearly doubling over the course of the century, rising from 500,000 to 900,000 (McCreery 3). Such an urban environment has been described as an eighteenth-century “laboratory for looking,” and scholars have been eloquent in their exploration of this new, spectacular urban culture (Bellion 8). It was full of new shops displaying new commodities, novel sites of public entertainment, social gatherings in which jostling crowds across the social spectrum mixed as never before. These were eye-catching sights, pleasures, and dangers.

We can see this sense of crowded confusion in many of the prints in which a figure using an eyeglass appears amongst an array of other types, including in the earliest of its depictions that I have been able to find.<sup>14</sup> *The Present Age, 1767* (see fig. 14) is a pictorial critique of the modern pursuits of fashion, folly, and excess. Amongst the many figures in this densely packed scene stands a man just to the left of centre who, in the manner of the flâneur, is observing the world through his eyeglass. He is the disengaged spectator, looking at others for his own idle interest. His legend in the key beneath runs: “The *Optical Ogle* or polite Curiosity.”



FIGURE 14

Etching and engraving and detail, 25 x 35.3 cm, published in London by Carington Bowles and John Bowles, BM Satires 4175. Louis Philippe Boitard, *The Present Age*, 1767, 1767, etching and engraving, Lewis Walpole Library, Farmington.

Even more strikingly, many of these urban scenes in which the eyeglass is delineated are specifically identified as these new venues of entertainment and spectacle that transformed eighteenth-century metropolitan life: exhibitions, theatre, the opera, pleasure gardens.

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**While the wearer of the quizzer is usually occupied in looking in one of the general ways identified above — ogling, affecting judgment or taste, being disdainful or dandified — it is noteworthy that this activity takes place within notoriously non-exclusive venues, where anyone who could pay the moderate admission fee was able to enter (Donald, *Followers of Fashion* 14).**

On the opening night of the Pantheon, for instance, the company was described as “an olio,” or heterogeneous medley, in which “peers, peeresses, honourables and right honourables, jew brokers, demireps, lottery insurers and quack doctors” all rubbed shoulders (qtd. in Donald, *Followers of Fashion* 14).

This same chaotic mixture of social type and degree is pictured in *Box Lobby Loungers*, from 1786 (see fig. 15). The setting is the Royal Theatre lobby at Covent Garden (identified by a playbill on the wall); the auditorium can be glimpsed through the open doors.



## FIGURE 15

45.5 x 62 cm, published in London by John Raphael Smith, BM Satires 8254. Thomas Rowlandson, *Box Lobby Loungers*, 1786, etching and aquatint, British Museum, London.

The *mêlée* of playgoers jostles together, squeezed into an intimate proximity by the confines of the room: prostitutes, pickpockets, idlers and all. On the left, two ugly and aged men engage in negotiations with a bawd; one of them slips her a coin. The central figure with the club (like the dandy of Figure 8) has been identified as George Hanger, a notoriously violent and dissipated crony of the Prince of Wales. While he engages with the two young and inviting women before him, a pickpocket in the shadows is making for the seals he wears dangling from the waist of his breeches. There are two men with eyeglasses, both of them scrutinizing their fellow playgoers. To the right of Hanger, a man is ogling the young women before him. Further right again at the front of the frame, a squat figure with a chest like a pouter pigeon quizzes a woman near the edge of the picture. Whether he is staring because of her surprising headdress, her younger and handsome companion, or because she is angry (at his unperceived standing on her dress) is not clear.

In such “unregulated social exchanges” (Donald, *Followers of Fashion* 14) the eyeglass was an accessory whose use passed beyond the functional, decorative, or theatrically self-publicizing. More than a counterpoint to an outfit, an aid to vision, or a self-reflexive prop in the practice of staring, the eyeglass became also a tool with which to gauge more clearly, to set at a distance, to discern. When the arrivistes rub shoulders with the aristocracy, careful scrutiny is required to tell them apart.

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**The eyeglass provides the performative space for this scrutiny, enacting visual criticality. It sets the wearer a little apart — at an “objective” distance — the small piece of glass both arming the viewer and providing him with the means to deflect the critical gaze of others.**

It is hard to imagine a better way of delivering a cut than through a quizzer’s cold, “unseeing” stare.

Implicit in this use of the eighteenth-century eyeglass to police the margins of social acceptance is the Enlightenment belief in observation as the basis for knowledge and the source of truth. The microscope and the telescope might reveal the workings of the natural world, but the eyeglass was the perfect instrument for “sustained intense looking” in the social arena (Garland-Thomson 28). These links with Enlightenment epistemology are sometimes made explicit, as in *Viewing the Transit of Venus* (see fig. 16), a print that elides the intellectual and lascivious. The young woman is engaged, of course, in the pursuit of astronomy. In star gazing, her conduct is blameless, indeed is concordant with the growing belief that women should be educated in a broader curriculum,



including in the basics of astronomy, optics, and natural history. As one conduct writer advised:

**Thro' Telescopes, sublime now lift your Eyes, To  
Globes immense, that shine in distant Skies; Now  
downward, in the Microscopic Glass, The slender  
Fabric of small Insects trace. (Marriott 194)**

In this print, however, the young woman's rational pursuit is of course subverted by the man's use of his optical instrument to make less cerebral discoveries.



**FIGURE 16**

19.9 x 24.7 cm, published in London by Sayer and Co., BM Satires 8410. *Viewing the Transit of Venus*, 1793, etching, Lewis Walpole Library, Farmington.



The contrast between enlightened and degrading viewing continued to be made even after the quizzer was adopted into women's wear. According, for example, to an article of 1814 in *La Belle Assemblée*, the eyeglass and the microscope/magnifier were two sides of an optic coin, offering morally and intellectually contrasting ways of viewing. The article "The New System of Botany" (1814) introduced readers to the wonders of moss, urging its audience to take up a magnifying glass or, better still, a microscope to discover botanical detail. This rational and superior pastime is contrasted with the shallow idleness of another optometric recreation: "peeping at a beau through a quizzing-glass" (The New System of Botany 120).

Although it is easy to appreciate the social power a quizzer was able to mobilize when directed with authority, in the satirical context the eyeglass is usually wielded by the socially questionable, the object of satire: the parvenu, the cit, the repellent lech, the affected, and the self-deluded (see fig. 17).



FIGURE 17

Hand-coloured etching, 30 x 37.6 cm, BM Satires 5116. William Austin, Sr T. R. & Madle. *G-d going to the Pantheon in their natural masks*, 1773, etching, Lewis Walpole Library, Farmington.

This should lead us to question its presence in the satire of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In these cases the policing is done by the satirist, and the quizzing glass is the identifier of a satirical gaze being directed from outside the frame of the print. The act of engraving the quizzer denotes the discerning eye, rather than the bearing of the object itself. In this way the eyeglass acts as a metaphor for the satirical vision and becomes an identifier of the prolific satirists of the late Georgian era. It is, in effect, a pictorial version of the titles of newspapers and periodicals that branded themselves as the keen-eyed watchdogs of the political and the polite world. These publications played with variations on "mirror," "spy," "Argus," "observer," and even "quiz" itself (Bellion 20-1). In the American context, Wendy Bellion has identified that between 1775 and 1820 fifty-five newspapers derived their titles from words relating to vision and optics. The most influential and the best known of them all however, was, of course, *The Spectator*.

## Conclusion

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The eyeglass of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is not easy to pin down. Its origins, dates, and even names are hazy. It migrated from male to female wear over the course of time, beginning as a masculine assertion but becoming implicated in both feminine and effeminate display. Despite the large numbers still extant and — once you look — its fairly common appearance in graphic sources, the eyeglass seems to have left little trace in the written record. And while ostensibly being an aid to vision, it was less about seeing and more about looking, for rather than effectively resolving distant blurs into crisp outlines, the quizzer enabled instead the *performance* of scrutiny.

As either an optometric object or an accessorizing item of dress, the career of the real-life artifact was probably always going to be relatively short-lived and of relatively restricted appeal.

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**Its functionality for the myopic was limited, its attraction as a performative fashion circumscribed by social context. It was, however, a fascinating development, whose appearance and mobilization occurred within a particular historical period.**

It was used in different ways, and had perhaps as lively a conceptual existence within social comment and cultural thought as when worn as an actual object on the body. There is one common thread, however, throughout all. In each of these different contexts and in every different inflection, in lived experience or pictorial representation, the eyeglass can be seen to stand either for the presence or the absence of the discerning eye.

# Notes

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1. My sincere thanks to Dr. Neil Handley, Curator of the British Optical Association Museum, for his generous help, and on whose expertise parts of this article relies. I would also like to direct readers to his brief guide to the history of quizzing glasses, online at: [http://www.college-optometrists.org/en/college/museyeum/online\\_exhibitions/spectacles/quizzers.cfm](http://www.college-optometrists.org/en/college/museyeum/online_exhibitions/spectacles/quizzers.cfm) (accessed 5 May 2014). My thanks also to Fashion Studies' anonymous reviewers for engaging so enthusiastically with the subject and for their insights and suggestions.

Where applicable, I have identified the prints mentioned in this article by their reference number in BM Satires: Frederic George Stephens and M. Dorothy George, *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum*, 11 vols (in 16), London: British Museum, 1870–1954.

2. A point also noted independently by Hanneke Grootenboer, "Treasuring the Gaze," 501.
3. In later novels, by which time the eyeglass was a female accessory, there is an occasional mention. In *Tremaine: or the Man of Refinement* (1825) by Robert Plumer Ward, it is used by women (London: H. Colburn, 1825, pp. 27, 32, 35). In *Pelham: or Adventures of a Gentleman* (1828) by Edward Bulwer Lytton, an eyeglass is worn by an aging, old-fashioned, and eccentrically dressed man (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1883, pp. 310, 322 n.).
4. The literature on eighteenth-century graphic satire is vast, but an excellent starting point is Donald, *The Age of Caricature* (1996).
5. The *OED* dates the cluster of meanings around "ogle" to the late seventeenth century.
6. See Rachel Lee's entry in the online edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.
7. Of relevance here is Vainshtein's study, "Dandyism, Visual Games, and the Strategies of Representation" (2009). This considers the nineteenth-century dandy's regime of looking, including his use of optical aids, in his presentation and performance of self. Unfortunately, this came to my attention too late to incorporate its insights, although in the main it deals with a later period. My thanks to Alison Matthews David for pointing me in its direction.
8. Matthews David, "Decorated Men" (2003), discusses the soldier as an object of visual scrutiny and desire, concentrating on France in the second half of the nineteenth century.
9. British Optical Association Museum, "400 Years of the Telescope," accessed May 1, 2015. [http://www.college-optometrists.org/en/college/museyeum/online\\_exhibitions/observatory/telescope/](http://www.college-optometrists.org/en/college/museyeum/online_exhibitions/observatory/telescope/).
10. Pip Dodd, National Army Museum, personal communication.
11. My thanks to Hilary Davidson for this reference.

12. *The Covent Garden Macaroni*, published by Carington Bowles, c. 1766–99; *An Old Macaroni Critic at a New Play*, published by Mary Darly and Matthew Darly, after Richard St George Mansergh, London, 1772, BM Satires 4699.
13. Sometimes this is articulated in graphic form: e.g. *Lawyers and Countryman*, published by Laurie and Whittle, after Richard Newton, London, 1797, British Museum.
14. Also dating to the 1760s is a drawing by Thomas Patch, entitled “Mr. Burke Standing, in Profile, Looking through a Quizzing Glass.” It is in the collection of the Yale Center for British Art and available at: <http://collections.britishart.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3665291>

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