Lovelace displays a curious and contradictory attitude towards dress: On the one hand, he purports to say that clothing is an outward display of the inner person, an assertion of which Clarissa is living proof. Yet, on the other hand, he appears not to believe this entirely, thinking that everyone, even Clarissa, conceals something beneath his or her outer garments. As an astute observer of dress, he delights in his power to cloak the inner corruption of individuals, including himself, under the attire of respectability—and, in his case, exquisite taste.

In his personal correspondence, Samuel Richardson writes, “The rake is, must be, generally, in dress a coxcomb”¹, yet he takes pains to assure that Lovelace’s personal attire is not foppish. Anna Howe, furious at Lovelace’s brazen public appearance after the rape of Clarissa, nonetheless takes a moment to admire his dress: “So little of the fop; yet so elegant and rich in his dress … no mere toupet-man; but all manly” (6:416). Clarissa, as well, views Lovelace’s dress in positive fashion: “But he is so graceful in his person and his dress, that he generally takes every eye” (4:67). It would seem that Lovelace, in his person and dress, provides the masculine counterpart to and complement of Clarissa. Like Clarissa, Lovelace possesses “so happy an ease” (1:279) in dress; his attire is elegant, rich, and seemingly natural.

Yet indications exist that something is slightly awry with Robert Lovelace’s wardrobe. At one point, Clarissa notes that Lovelace is “too proud of” his dress (3:335). Another time, she writes, “one may see, that he values himself not a little, both on his person and his parts, and even upon his dress” (1:279). Pride in dress suggests the opposite of natural expression, as it betokens conscious superiority in relation to others, rather than a largely unconscious expression of self. One need only think of the cunningly disheveled curls or the starched, “carelessly” tied

¹ K. M. Oliver, Samuel Richardson, Dress, and Discourse
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cravats of George Bryan Brummell to comprehend the art underlying this casual elegance of dress displayed by Lovelace. (Brummell’s toilette reportedly took over two hours to complete.) The fact is that Lovelace’s elegant attire is carefully studied, as he himself admits to Belford: “the gracefulness of dress, my debonair and my assurance?—Self-taught, self-acquired, these!” (1:199). Thus, on one level, Lovelace’s dress is artful, in eighteenth-century parlance, because it something learned and studied, because it is not innate and natural.

In addition, Robert Lovelace, “so elegant and rich in his dress” (6:416), “so graceful in his person and his dress” (4:67), reveals little of himself through his clothing. The seamless perfection of his attire discloses no small eccentricity, no foible, no folly; this very perfection suggests that his dress is like the costumes he fashions for his confederates—attentive to the minutiae, yet lacking the mark of the personal. This lack of impersonality in dress suggests deceit of some sort, as it demonstrates an unwillingness to reveal the full self to others. The elegant and exquisite, yet superficial, nature of his dress argues more persuasively than words for the duplicity and falseness of rakes. When Lovelace mocks Belford’s attire, Belford retorts, “As to my dress, and thy dress, I have only to say, That the sum total of thy observation is this: That my outside is the worst of me; and thine the best of thee” (6:391). A rake who does not dress like a fop or a coxcomb conceals his “thinking highly of himself, meanly of the sex”2, and, thus, deceives his unwitting victims by his outward appearance.

The real masquerade begins, however, once Lovelace begins his elaborately contrived plot for stealing Clarissa’s virtue. He makes his associates don costumes and personas, and he himself alternates in his own disguises, wearing either the attire of a gouty old man, or a metaphorical domino and mask. At Sinclair’s brothel, Lovelace comments, “I must make all secure, before I pull off the mask. Was not this my motive for bringing her hither?” (4:128).

Perhaps because of his extensive study of dress, Lovelace understands that it is the details that make an outfit convincing. Lovelace proudly notes, “I never forget the Minutiæ in my contrivances. In all matters that admit of doubt, the minutiæ closely attended to, and provided for, are of more service than a thousand oaths, vows, and protestations made to supply the neglect of them” (3:185). Lovelace is aware how thoroughly, yet how unthinkingly, people rely on clothing to evaluate others. According to Susan B. Kaiser, “It is hard to imagine how clothing could be more relevant to everyday life, more concrete as an illustration of basic social processes, or more visual in terms of impact. Yet we are