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**“IT IS TO PLEASURE YOU”: SEEING THINGS IN  
MACKENZIE’S *ARETINA* (1660), OR, WHITHER  
SCOTTISH PROSE FICTION BEFORE THE NOVEL?**

*Rivka Swenson*

When it comes to Scottish vernacular prose fiction before Tobias Smollett, critics have said relatively little.<sup>1</sup> Granted, Scottish vernacular prose fiction was not plentiful, for a number of reasons, before the eighteenth-century “rise” of the novel in Great Britain.<sup>2</sup> Still, Scotland’s earliest novelistic romances predate Smollett’s first novel (*Roderick Random*, 1748) by a century; if the Scottish “long seventeenth century” was not marked by, for instance, a Restoration boom in vernacular prose fictions, neither was the landscape as bare as Samuel Johnson said Scotland was of trees. At the same time, the view is hardly so congested that the several specimens cannot be studied more closely on their own terms. If, say, George Mackenzie’s *Aretina; Or, The Serious Romance* (1660) is, as one critic says, “a king-sized haggis with perhaps too many ingredients,” this scarcely distinguishes it from its more-studied English fellows, so what happens if we take *Aretina* seriously?<sup>3</sup> Taking Mackenzie at his word in his exciting prefatory letter to the reader, I want to look beyond *Aretina*’s extravagant romance plot, its Anglo-Scottish historical allegory, and its

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<sup>1</sup> There are exceptions: see, for instance, Robert Crawford’s treatment of early Scottish vernacular prose fictions in *Scotland’s Books: A History of Scottish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> It is not my task to taxonomize, but I hew here to a tightened definition of the novel that distinguishes “novel” from early vernacular prose fictions that exhibit a discrete number of what would later come to be understood as novelistic elements.

<sup>3</sup> George Mackenzie, *Aretina; Or, The Serious Romance* (Edinburgh: printed for Robert Broun, 1660); Steven Moore, *The Novel: An Alternative History, 1600-1800* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 582. More than one reader has declared *Aretina* (if not its Letter to the reader) not worth the trouble for modern readers. More than a century ago, Andrew Lang, calling the work “totally unreadable, except by such insatiable students as Sir Walter Scott,” added himself to the number of “writers” who “have been daunted by *Aretina*” (Lang, *Sir George Mackenzie: King’s Advocate, of Rosehaugh, His Life and Times 1636(?)–1691* [London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1909], 27, 28).

Royalist symbolism, to scrutinize the book's studied appeal to the senses.<sup>4</sup> *Aretina*, like other prose fictions of the time, largely forgoes details about characters' specific physical attributes, but Mackenzie uses curiously sensual contextual description—spatial and sartorial—both to engage the embodied reader and to disclose characters' interior qualities.<sup>5</sup> Calling on readers to flesh out the contours of contextualized character according to their own personal predilections, Mackenzie conjures an ideal interlocutor whose imagination adds matter to form in *Aretina*.

**“the difference of the eyes which look”**

*Aretina*'s paratexts, the most engaging of which is a letter “To all the Ladies of this Nation,” amply establish the reader as the book's co-producer. In the letter, Mackenzie, posing as a “trembling mother,” begs that “many patronesses” will allow his “first born,” his little “*Moses* ... to suck the breasts of [their] favor” (iii). Prurient Mackenzie sees the copacetic feminized reader “dandl[ing] it” with “fair hands ... in the lapp of ... protection” (iii).<sup>6</sup> Begging that “the body of this Book” not “sink,” that “its head be handed up by ... admired beauties,” Mackenzie-as-*Aretina* hopes there might be a reader “who would be so excessively hospitall, as to lodge in her Cabinet or Chamber such an unacknowledged Orphelin” (iv). “It is” meant, Mackenzie croons, “to pleasure you” (iv). Mackenzie/*Aretina* applauds these “fair” readers who “claime ... all that drops from my pen” (iii). Insinuations aside, the reader who continues does so with the knowledge that she (the putative she of the implied reader) has been

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<sup>4</sup> For other approaches, see, in addition to Crawford: David Allan, ““In the Bosome of a Shaddowie Grove: Sir George Mackenzie and the Consolation of Retirement,”” *History of European Ideas*, 25 (1999): 251–73 (p. 251); Irene Basey Beesemyer, “Sir George Mackenzie's *Aretina* of 1660: A Scot's Assault on Restoration Politics,” *Scottish Studies Review*, 4.1 (2003): 41–68; Louise Hutcheson, *Rhetorics of Martial Virtue: Mapping Scottish Heroic Literature c.1600–1660*, PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2014; Clare Jackson, “The Paradoxical Virtue of the Historical Romance: Sir George Mackenzie's ‘Aretina’ (1660) and the Civil War,” in *Celtic Dimensions of the Civil Wars: Proceedings of the Second Conference of the Research Centre in Scottish History, University of Strathclyde*, ed. by John R. Young (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1997), 204–25; M. R. G. Spiller, “The First Scots Novel: Sir George MacKenzie's *Aretina*,” *Scottish Literary Journal Supplement*, 11 (1979): 1–20; Amelia A. Zurcher, *Seventeenth-Century English Romance: Allegory, Ethics, and Politics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), esp. 64–65, 163–7.

<sup>5</sup> See Cynthia S. Wall's extended discussion of the historical norms for literary detail and description in *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this essay, as here with “lapp,” I have preserved the strange difference of Mackenzie's misspellings and unusual word usages.

explicitly asked to internalize *Aretina*, feel for it, feed and grow it, correct its mistakes (a list of errata precedes the body, accompanied by a command: “Readers, Correct these Errors with thy Pen, before thou read the Book” [xv]), and fill out its contours.

Having called on the embodied general reader in the paratext, Mackenzie grapples in the body of *Aretina* with how to appeal to the individual one. Despite the insistence of “the Physiognomist” that “different tempers have different faces” from “the Melancholian” to “the Flegmatician” (372), Mackenzie allows readers to personalize the type. Why? Because he is mindful that individual people have “different inclinations” and “love ... different faces” (353). Moreover, “the difference of the eyes which look, makes the difference”; simply put, “some eyes judge that beautifull, which others account ugly” (356). Accommodating this unpredictable “variety in the love of faces,” the book’s title character is the least described of all major characters (and many or most minor ones). We get more in one paragraph about the colorful appearances of the strangers that *Aretina*’s beloved Philarites meets on the road than we ever do about her. Having promised (in the prefatory “Apologie for Romance”) to satisfy readers who desire “a Philoclea, or Cleopatra, depenciled” (v), Mackenzie teases: *Aretina*’s outline remains the formal equivalent of a blank marble statue (by contrast, we hear a lot about her friend Agapeta’s curling golden hair); she is the “hyeroglyphick of comliness” (16). Philarites finds her so beautiful that he swoons and must “vomit up Melancholy” (16), but, although we are permitted to “glance a little at *Aretina*,” we see what we decide to see (370). Just as Philarites, enamored of *Aretina*, “did draw *Aretina*’s portraiture upon every object that presented it self to his sight,” the reader is free to personalize the image of *Aretina* according to individual interest (37). Has the “dye” of strong emotion permanently “tinctured” our thoughts in some way (371)? We will see what we see, “not unlike a person affected with the yellow jaundice, to whom every thing appears of that colour” (112).

### “black patches”

As for the unseeable interior, in *Aretina* context is key. Eager to excel as a “prudent Artist” who finds the “choicest cases” for revealing interiority, the subsurface, the “soul,” Mackenzie often directs readers to the “case” of the spatial-sartorial, over the physiognomic body (iii). It is not facial features but a piece of green taffeta sticking out of an “old sattin doublet” that indicates a wealthy man is really a poor man on the make (399), and it is conveniently supplementary that the “terrible mask” worn by the black-kirtled “old Hag” (she who lives in a “slime-tapestried” “Cave in the bosome of a Rock” and serves up sheep “half alive, and sent bleating to their bellies”) is actually just her own “horrid face” (11). Accordingly, the

worthy Megistus scolds Philarites for “mistak[ing] the Case for the Watch,” for (in other words) loving Aretina’s “Body” instead of her “Soul” (20), but when Philarites praises Aretina’s beautiful “body” as a fit “shell” for the “rare pearl” of her beautiful “soul,” she points him to paradox, implicitly challenging what the letter to the reader calls the “Orthodox maxime” of “Phisognomy” (iii): she insists to Philarites, “the body is in it self so frail, they are much to blame who are so enamoured with these colours which are so fading” (47). Accordingly, the book relies surprisingly little on classical bodily physiognomy to reveal clues about character; instead, it generates a pathetic contextual portraiture of the interior. For example, the Knight of Marswas’s “exquisite” horse-armor depicts a wounded knight because the Knight is love-wounded (61). For the same reason, Megistus’s white armor is “spangled here and there with bleeding hearts” (61). Their “faces” less than their raiment are “the horn through which” interior condition “may be easily perceived” (353).

Setting the tone for the melancholic book-scape as a whole, the opening scene of the body-proper establishes the pathetic capacities of even the simplest contextual description, when the worthy but depressed Monanthropus, father of Aretina and “lately Chancellour of Egypt,” seeks out a landscape that corresponds with how he feels inside: “Melancholy having lodged it self in the generous breast of Monanthropus,” he “frequented more Woods than Men” until he found “at last” a suitable ambience in the barren mien of a “deep Valley, ... Trees fruitfull of nothing but Melancholy, overlookt by Rocks, in whose wrinkled faces, aged Time had plowed thousands of deep furrows, whose gloomy brows threatned perpetually to smother the subjacent Valleys” (1). Personified trees and rocks’ riven faces reveal less a portrait of any actual face than a literalized projection of Monanthropus’s melancholic consciousness. We do not see Monanthropus himself any more than we see a bride walking in her own bridal procession; what we see is the supporting “troup of rare Beauties” that acts as a “black patch” to “set off with the greater advantage the beauty” of the bride (53). We see the black patch (the makeup of its day), which is to say that instead of the central figure we see the surrounding “company of beautifull Virgins, all wearing the Brides livery, which was white satin, enclining as it were to change its colour” (53). We see contextual signs: torn taffeta, filthy cave, valley of melancholy, the “black patch” of a retinue’s changeable white satin (53).

**“black, which was a pure scarlet dyed black”**

Having entered *Aretina* via the dark valley of melancholy (and its subspaces, like the awful hag’s awful cave), the reader is admitted to Monanthropus’s wonder-garden. There, Philarites echoes Sir Philip Sidney’s poet-maker, conceding “how hard it is for Art to imitate Dame

Natures perfection” (23), even as Mackenzie (via Monanthropus) celebrates Art’s fiction. Garden balances valley, expressing with it Mackenzie’s vision of *Aretina* as a holistic environment that indulges both melancholia and its antidote. Moreover, the garden, an organized but not-static tissue, lively with movement, thick with nuance, corresponds in part and whole with the book’s larger aesthetics of engagement.

The garden is pointedly a living system, integrated and animated, for producing sensual experience. Indeed, when not indulging melancholia, Monanthropus “used” the garden like a tonic “every morning and evening” (23). Here, he “recreates both his ears and eyes, with variety both of notes and colours” (23). Here, “fragrant odiferous trees and flowers” join singing birds of “all Nations” and “all colours” (23). Here, marble stairs are shaded by orange trees, “budding continually” (23). Here, from a marble basin, “issue waters of divers colours, receiving their tinctures from Minerals, purposely concealed” (23). Here, at the mount’s apex, within a gilded “house of pleasure ... all struck out in windows,” is a dynamically evolving concert at the heart of things: “a pair of Organs, moving with a Water-work, with which three cages of Birds, made a melodious consort” (24). If the garden does not comprise a entirely new zodiac of Mackenzie’s own wit (to borrow Sidney’s conceit), it comes close, and, “above” organs, water-work, and birds, is an interpretive “Closet, repleat with Mathematical Engins, whence *Monanthropus* observed all the heavenly motions” (24). The father of *Aretina* finds in the garden of *Aretina*’s father the spatial corollary to a fictional world in which “dissonant voices conspir[e],” not just with each other but with the engaged reader-interpreter, “to make one melodious harmony” (23).

*Aretina*’s descriptive turn is marked by the same fascination with organic movement, shifting nuance, and interpretive agency that defines Monanthropus’s pleasure garden. The moving “beams” of light from a hatband’s “crescent of diamonds” are refracted by a waving “plummach of black feathers” (52). A black cloak is not simply black but is “black, which was a pure scarlet dyed black, ... as if a black curle” of hair “had been drawn over a cloath of gold” (52). Likewise, white satin is no mere “white satin” but is “white satin, enclining as it were to change its colour, and which appeared, when motion raised its pyle, that it hovered whether it should appear white or not” (53). *Aretina*’s luminous, numinous world is held together by just such movement of light over fabric, in sensual concert with “charming musick” and “clouds of smoak, which the burning myrrh, cinamon and frankincense spread over it” (54). A “cristal” wall casts “reflections upon the gilding,” with “a curious lustre” (24). Grass has texture, is “pleasantly pyled” (421). Mackenzie, over-stimulated, waxes almost-hallucinogenic, moving readers to rhapsodize over “imaginary colours in optick prismes and doves necks” (46). In sum, *Aretina*’s

approach to clothing and space approaches the kind of meaningfully sensualized world we associate with modern novels and their appeal to the embodied sensitive reader.

**“Cupid confines not himself to one way of gaming”**

Like the bridal party's display of color-shifting satin, or the rainbow-streams of Monanthropus's fountain, Mackenzie's big haggis accommodates more than one kind of readerly desire for the feminized Restoration audience evoked by the paratextual “Letter to the Ladies.” The light fancy of Monanthropus's garden of wonder permeates the book; what else is romance or fiction but “a sheet” strewn “with roses and violets,” placed over “a hole in the ground,” with “a rent in the coverlet, whereby” the reader “might suck in new supplies of air” (to borrow a fanciful spying-plot devised by *Aretina* for Pinasa) (113)? But *Aretina*, beginning and ending with liminal scenes of deeply melancholic pain and pleasure-in-pain, has a disturbing rich darkness that envelopes it, as if the book itself were “mantled with Melancholy, resembl[ing] a rich cloth of gold, concealed under a black Tifanie, where the coruscant splendor did but scarsly peep out” (420). One way to sum up the different energies that stimulate *Aretina* is to say that the book, like a cloth shifting its pile, seems engineered to entertain multiple kinds of readerly stimulation.

*Aretina* is sometimes unsavory, sometimes gratuitously and intricately violent. When the book begins, the reader is in the position of seeking out with Monanthropus the fittest scene for “pleas[ing] that passion” of “melancholy” wherein “nothing please[s]” but more of the same (1), even though entering this “fit grove of fancy” means “sacrific[ing] ... the choicest of ... thoughts to the worst of ... passions” (2). No wonder, then, that “this Wood correspond[s] with” and enables multiple “desires,” not all of them gentle (12): at this crossroads of multiple desires, we encounter “two Ladies, loaded with Iron sheckles, which chained them together” (2). This, the book's most lurid scene, moves soon to the women's rescue by knights Philarites and Megistus, and thence to melancholy's antidote (Monanthropus's garden of wonder), but not before we see how the women, who have been “stript of their cloaths above the middle, and stryped” by lashings, are practically “bathing ... in their own innocent blood” (5). Elsewhere, the narration lingers over the aesthetics of the Knight of Marswas's “white horse, whose flanks were stained with red spots, as if they had been dyed with the drops of blood, which seemed to trickle down from the wounds, which an exquisite pencile had made upon his armour, whereon was represented a wounded Knight” (65). In another vein, Megistus, rigid with lust, “shew[s] a desire to advance, like a Fencer” upon unwary Agapeta while she “pull[s] some Cherries” to her pouting mouth from bowing branches (81). As for Philarites, he pruriently remarks

upon how the grass has “kiss[ed]” Aretina and Agapeta’s bare “feet” with “pearly drops” of “subjection” (348), and he maliciously leads a different barefoot woman into sharp stinging nettles:

my Lady was gathering nettles to make broth for us; I perceived she wanted her stockens and shoes, which she thought was concealed by the length of her gown; whereupon I took her hand and walked amongst a place with her full of nettles, which as I perceived by her countenance, did burn her feet; yet durst she not complain, fearing to discover her own nakedness. (399)

What Aretina herself makes of this sadistic story when foot-obsessed Philarites relays it with such lip-smacking relish, we can only wonder.

In another register but not one more gentle, Mackenzie borrows from sonnetteers by deploying Cupid’s archetype as a provocative homosocial device. Specifically, the book’s male characters depict love for a woman as akin to a violent physical wounding of their own bodies by another man. When Megistus looks at Agapeta, he sees her eyes less clearly than he sees *in* them “Cupid’s quiver, wherein he kept all his mortal darts” (81). And with good reason, for “Cupid, who had long hovered whether to shoot or not, fearing that Megistus heart (hardned by the continuall exercise of martial employments) should be unpenetrable by his darts, at last loosed a shaft”; it enters his heart “so deeply” that it stays “there-after” (80). For Ophni, too, love is “this barbed arrow which Cupid had stuck in him,” which “could not be drawn back, without leaving its head in the wound,” and “he resolves to drive it forward,” come what may (371).

Resonantly, the thematic drama of love’s contest is literalized by the jousting competition-of-suitors that takes place under Aretina’s desiring eye. “*Cupid* confines not himself to one way of gaming,” and the men’s shared desire for Aretina, tested by the joust, necessarily brings them into an intimate physical and affective proximity authorized by Aretina and *Aretina* (160). Naturally, the Knight of Marswas’s shield shows Cupid throwing a dart at Mars, and Mars breaking the dart (61). Naturally, after jousting, Philarites uses “his tears [to] wash those bleeding wounds” in the Black Knight’s body “which his sword had formerly opened,” even as the Black Knight gives Philarites “a Diamond Ring, as a memorial of his true respect, which he had after that same manner received from Pilades (Aretina’s dear cousin and friend) whom he had killed the year preceding in combat” (67). Appropriate to the complications of romance, *Aretina*’s world enables multiple strands of desire to overlap in a fabric, its parts no less interconnected than those of Monthanthropus’s garden.

If Aretina herself is the book’s chief licenser of homosocial desire (as the Cupidic trope suggests), she also models desire in her own right. Indeed, while “*Philarites* eyes dwelt upon each trait of ARETINA’S face,” Aretina rather more indelicately examines his comely physique: her “eye

travelled amongst all the proportions of his well limb'd body, whose proportion, his close armour shewed most remarkably" (118). Indeed, thanks to Mackenzie's aptitude for free indirect discourse, the men who compete for Aretina are delineated by the book's most finely drawn sartorial contours. Their shields, bridles, and horses' armor, which she observes as they gather to joust, boast a dazzling array of images: turtle doves; Paris giving Venus a golden apple; a variety of Cupids and bleeding hearts. Philarites, so weakened by love that he looks like an "Egyptian Mummie," depicts on his shield an image of the same: "This was Philarites," "all withered except one hand" that brandishes Aretina's scarlet ribbon in honor of how love can "make a fresh body become withered, and a withered hand become fresh" (62). Philarites's bridle and horse armor, emblazoned with images of denuded oaks and of lily roots with leafless stalks, complete Philarites's visual bid for rehydration and re-engorgement from the beloved who is eager to appreciate his "well-limb'd" body in tight armor (118).

The end of *Aretina*, concerning a widower (new to the book in its final pages) and his remembrance (witnessed by Aretina's party) of his wife Piseta, synthesizes elements of the book's inaugural valley of melancholy and its garden of wonder. On the one hand, here is wonder in a "pleasant valley, ... so sweet a valley," with a "sweet river," fulsomely bordered by orange and fig trees and "curious flowers" (421). Here are oaks, firs, deer; here are "the Lyon, Leopard, and Tygre," all "tamed as it were" (422). On the other hand, here is also a melancholic "Hermitage" for mourning Piseta (419). Here is a garden full of hedges "cut out in Deaths-heads, and hemmed in with Dead-mens bones" (423). Here is a walk lined by cypress trees, "each whereof was topped by a skull" (423). Here is a chapel hung with "dead mens Skuls, in each whereof stood a great waxe-taper, which burnt continually," over a white marble floor with a pattern of "indented" black deaths' heads (421), no less striking than the marble floor of the "Bibliothick" in the garden of wonder all "cut out in the Shapes of Globes and Spheres" (24). And here is an altar done up in Mackenzie's favorite color combination: a swath of black velvet overlaid with "golden Embroidery," all "spangled with wormes, tears, and bleeding hearts" (421).

Why the skulls and velvet, why such fuss? And is *Aretina*—or its fellows—worth the fuss of fleshing out by modern readers? The answer to the first question lies in the contours of "a young Lady, in white Marble": Piseta, whose statue the party hails at her widower's request (422). The fuss is for her, and Aretina and the knights are enjoined "to share with" the widower "in his devotions," as he kneels before the statue "of his dead Lady" (422). Agreeable readers of the scene, they comply dutifully, and lutes and an organ aid the group in "trembl[ing] out" sad orisons: "Since she is gone, why stay I here? / Seeing we were one, and she my dear"

(422). Aretina, who “beg[s]” to know how Piseta “epilogued her life,” learns that she “uncloath[ed] her self, and went to bed,” and there she died (423, 432, 431). It is a strange way to end a book, even if a sequel was intended (if we are to believe the book’s self-presentation as “Part First”). What does it take for Aretina—or for us, spying the contours of “a young Lady, in white Marble”—to internalize a stranger’s “burden of grief” (422, 431)? In Mackenzie, it takes actively being “the eyes which look,” i.e., being the engaged reader who studies contexts and who, “not unlike an Artisan,” brings “several pieces” of our own choosing to “fill a void” whose borders are marked out by unfleshed skulls, white satin, black patches (356).

As for whether or not a modern reader should bother with *Aretina* or anything else from the small but unwieldy treasury of Scottish vernacular prose fiction before Smollett, the answer is as simple as it looks: yes, of course, to explode assumptions and to get a better sense of the ways in which Scottish writers worked within and against literary and other conventions to shape the lay of the land before “the novel.” For instance, one might assume that Michael Ramsay’s popular *Travels of Cyrus* (1727)—a crypto-Jacobite tale of travel and education published more than a half-century after *Aretina*, amid the craze for fictions in the vein of François Fénelon’s *Télémaque* (1699)—would have upped the descriptive ante, considering the opportunities presented by, say, Cyrus’s education in “the Human Body, the Springs of which it is compos’d” (Ramsay, 69), and in how vegetables are nourished by “Salts, Sulphur, and Oils” that enter the roots, and in how insects develop from eggs to worms to “Fishes swimming in Liquors” to winged things (Ramsay, 70).<sup>7</sup> But one would be wrong, for *Cyrus*, unlike *Aretina*, is at pains to “preserve the Mind from the poison’d Arrows of Sensuality,” and is up to other things (Ramsay, 14). In short, the Scottish “long seventeenth,” though its array of vernacular prose fictions be not vast, requires a flexible readership.

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Ramsay, *The Travels of Cyrus*, 2 vols. (London, 1727). François Fénelon, *Les Aventures de Télémaque, fils d’Ulysse* (1699), first translated into English in 1700.