

## Gossip, Liminality, and Erotic Display: Jennifer Crusie's Links to Eighteenth-Century Amatory Fiction

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**Abstract:** Links between contemporary popular romance and novels of amatory fiction in the eighteenth century have received limited critical attention, but today's authors of popular romance share significant topics and strategies with those early pioneers of the novel. Focusing on three novels by Jennifer Crusie and the amatory fiction of Delariver Manley, this paper explores the texts' depictions of voyeuristic images and gossip. Both erotic display and gossip function by negotiating and eliding boundaries delineating public and private spaces; this territory represents a liminal space, one which exists in what Victor Turner describes as the "betwixt and between." This liminality offers rich creative, transformative possibilities which Manley and Crusie capitalize upon to critique and re-define perceptions of sexuality and gossip. Extending this liminal territory to encompass the author and readers of the texts, Manley and Crusie ultimately encourage relationships with readers that blur boundaries and invite shared creation and possession of their novels.

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In a scene that combines eroticism, humor and a flying dolphin lamp, Jennifer Crusie's hero and heroine in *Welcome to Temptation* struggle to find passion and overcome "lousy" sex as they engage in the "Phallic Variation" for the first time (135). While Sophie

sinks into self-doubt about her own passionate nature, Phin realizes that she becomes aroused at the possibility of her sister Amy finding them in the bedroom. Phin throws an alarm clock and then the dolphin lamp, creating enough noise to prompt Amy to open the door to investigate—and Sophie reaches orgasm at the precise moment of the door opening. In the blissful aftermath, Sophie struggles with alternating embarrassment and satisfaction, while Phin smugly announces to her, “You have discovery fantasies” (141). Throughout the novel, Phin and Sophie will continue to explore these erotic discovery moments, linking their growing love for one another to their mutual exploration of the often hazy and shifting boundaries between their private moments and public spaces.

This scene represents a preoccupation with liminal spaces that Crusie develops in her first three single-title novels: *Tell Me Lies* (1998), *Crazy for You* (1999), and *Welcome to Temptation* (2000). These liminal spaces appear as borderlands that create what Victor Turner has described as the “gap between ordered worlds [in which] almost anything may happen” (Turner, *Dramas* 13). Such territories offer rich potential for creative and empowering social possibilities as Crusie’s characters negotiate these borderlands by engaging in private sexual explorations that take place on the border of public places. *Tell Me Lies* and the novels that followed in the next two years, *Crazy for You* and *Welcome to Temptation*, increasingly linger on moments where eroticism develops in the liminal space between private intimacy and public exposure. Crusie constructs scenes where her female characters explore the liberating possibilities of making their private sexual encounters into public spectacles, offering themselves as objects of a voyeuristic gaze which readers are invited to share<sup>[1]</sup>. In this series of Crusie’s novels, the female characters struggle against becoming powerless objects of the gaze by asserting their own active participation in making themselves sexual spectacles.

In the bedroom scene with Sophie and Phin, the moment of Amy opening the door underscores the momentary blending of the private space of the bedroom into a more public realm. While Amy’s quick shutting of the door on the scene seems to signal a return to the seclusion and separation of private space, such private moments frequently become public knowledge as they circulate in the small towns in which each novel is set. This communal gossip operates as another liminal territory in these Crusie novels. Gossip’s function as a form of communication and a means of social organization depends upon its constant exploration of the intersections between a person’s private and public life, as Jorg Bergmann has noted in *Discreet Indiscretions* (53). No other form of communication focuses so intently on borders as it simultaneously engages in “transgression and respect for boundaries” (Bergmann 134). Crusie’s links between erotic displays and gossip raise questions about the potential dangers posed when such boundaries are crossed. In her explorations of this liminal space that gossip creates, however, Crusie ultimately invites readers to understand gossip not simply as a negative form, but also as a mode of communication that strengthens communal ties and offers its participants tools for understanding and impacting the world in which they live. This positive power of gossip emerges, in part, from its function as a liminal territory—a realm of ambiguities that fosters creative re-imagining and restructuring of the social world. Gossip and liminality also present Crusie with a powerful model for developing an interpretive community which welcomes readers—such as the online group “The Cherries”—as collaborators in constructing meaning from her texts.

In the links she develops between liminality, gossip and erotic display, Crusie's modern romance draws upon territory first developed in the genre of the novel designated as "amatory fiction" (Ballaster). These texts, appearing in the early eighteenth century in England, played a crucial role in shaping the emerging genre of the novel. Works of amatory fiction were among the most popular novels of their day, and in fact "dominated the production of the early novel in Britain" (Backscheider and Richetti ix). This popularity certainly resulted in part because of their narration of what one critic politely terms "'warm' scenes" (Richetti 138), and what another pioneering feminist critic on amatory fiction has described as their "erotic fiction" centering on "voyeuristic attention to the combined pleasures and ravages of seduction" (Ballaster 33). The authors of this amatory fiction include figures like Aphra Behn, Eliza Haywood, and Delarivier Manley<sup>[2]</sup>; all three of these highly visible representatives of amatory fiction developed a form of amatory fiction known as a "secret history." These amatory novels create a confounding combination of private, erotic scenes along with the public circulation of salacious scandal about real political figures of the day. Delarivier Manley's secret histories offer especially provocative links to these works by Crusie, and showcase ways in which the liminal spaces of the novels define the readers' experience of the erotic scenes and the circulation of gossip. In developing novels that occupy these liminal territories, Manley and Crusie both point to possibilities for capitalizing on this notion of liminality as a model for the experience of readers encountering their texts. The notion of the liminal as a realm that inspires creativity and invites new possibilities underpins a model of authorship that playfully invites readers to participate in the communal act of making meaning from the textual details of their novels.

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The academic exploration of liminality began with Arnold van Gennep's work on rites of passage in the early twentieth century. Van Gennep broke down the stages of these rites of passage, identifying the liminal state as the middle period in which the subject is placed after separating from society but before returning to become reincorporated into the social structure (Rozelle 444). Victor Turner built upon this insight, particularly calling attention to the liminal as a state that hovers "betwixt and between" and offers rich creative potential for developing new social ideas and arrangements (*Dramas* 13). Turner further expanded the concept of the liminal beyond its role in rites of passage to identify what he described as "liminoid phenomena" in modern Western societies, including creative productions and events like film, art, television or carnivals (Spairosu 34). These liminal spaces on the margins of the culture act as thresholds; individuals inhabiting these liminal social spaces are "structurally, if not physically, 'invisible'; they occupy a space of "of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories" (Turner, *The Forest* 95, 97). From this disorder and confusion, however, liminality fosters the creative potential for significant transformations of the individual and society. In liminality, "the possibility exists of standing aside not only from one's own social position but from all social positions and of formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements" (Turner, *Dramas* 13). In a study of liminality and literature, Mihai Spairosu characterizes Turner's concept of liminality as one that produces from disorder the "seeds of cultural

creativity' that generate new models, symbols, and paradigms" (32). Liminality serves an essential function by providing a cultural space in which revitalization and transformation of individuals and cultures can fruitfully occur.

While liminality offers powerful possibilities for envisioning new social modes, it does so in a playful way. This sense of the liminal zone as one that joyfully invites participation in its games resonates powerfully with the borders and boundaries featured in the novels of Crusie and Manley. Spariosu suggests that Turner "sees liminality as a game of disorder," and Spariosu's analysis of liminality as a function of literary texts insists upon the importance of "play" in understanding the function of these ambiguous in-between spaces (32). Whether representing liminal spaces through erotic scenes of voyeurism or through gossip's intersection of the public and private realms, Crusie and Manley's novels point readers toward embracing the sportive possibilities offered in such territories. The notion of liminality has been analyzed as a defining experience of the pleasures of romance itself in Eva Illouz's *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*. Her analysis of the cultural construction of romance in the Western world through items of consumption calls attention to the experience of romance as one that involves "the setting of new spatial boundaries" to mark lovers as separate from the public world in which they live (115). The rituals that define these spaces detach the lovers from their social world, offering the possibilities of re-imagining and renewing their connections to that social network. Calling upon Turner's insights into the "betwixt and between," Illouz points to romance as a "liminal experience" (183). The lovers withdraw to a self-created liminal territory dedicated to indulging their own pleasures in one another in a space set apart from the culture as a whole. Crusie and Manley call attention to such liminal experiences in their own novels and explore them as spaces to redefine stereotypical views of women as either scandalous gossips or as sexual objects displayed for others' pleasure.

Placing Crusie in the company of Manley also offers an important re-imagining of the territory of the romance genre itself. An influential scholar of the romance genre, Pamela Regis, begins her *A Natural History of Romance* with a founding novel, Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, and justifies her selection of that text by noting its status as "the first best seller" (63). In *Pamela*, Regis finds a text that fulfills her eight elements of a romance novel, yet she focuses on Richardson's work in isolation from the amatory fiction which recent critics of the period suggest actively shaped his novel. In "The Erotics of the Novel," James Turner argues that Richardson's novel must be understood as deeply connected to the amatory fiction that preceded it. Although critics have insisted that sentimental novels of romance like *Pamela* essentially abolish the erotic displays that defined amatory fiction, those displays play a key role in shaping Richardson's romance novel as one centered on sexual spectacle. In her exploration of the eighteenth-century novel's connection to "visual culture" like portraiture, Alison Conway notes that the scandalous spectacles and spying spectators that dominate amatory fiction by authors like Manley remain a "defining presence, rather than a ghostly trace" in later novels such as *Pamela* (50). As she contends, "despite protestations to the contrary, novelists like Richardson repeatedly take their cue, in representing vision and visual aesthetics, from the licentious texts" of authors like Manley, Behn and Haywood (10). Any "history" of the romance novel should embrace not only the male-authored sentimental tale of female virtue, but also the vital foundation of the female-authored amatory fiction and its erotic stories of love, seduction and betrayal.

Romance as a genre is inextricably linked, from its earliest developments, with the erotic reading experience of amatory fiction.

Critics focusing on amatory fiction of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries have often noted striking parallels with modern romance, although those insights also frequently denigrate contemporary romance novels. Regis cites one such critic, Toni Bowers, who claims that amatory fiction serves as a predecessor to “modern supermarket romances with their . . . sexually demanding men and innocent, desirable, passive women, and their insistence on sexual violence” (qtd. in Regis 54). Bowers’ characterizations fail to adequately capture the range of erotic characters explored in amatory fiction, which offers readers many stories of persecuted maidens, but also presents sexually desiring, assertive women and erotic scenes displaying men for the voyeuristic pleasures of readers (who, incidentally, were male as well as female). Discussing various critical approaches to amatory fiction, Paula Backscheider and John Richetti describe one type of “sociologically-oriented explanation” that considers these early novels as “the precursor of modern mass market or popular fiction, highly readable and in effect disposable entertainment, often topically scandalous or sensational or pornographic or merely sentimental” (xi). William Warner similarly argues against a critical approach which “reads backwards from the contemporary Harlequin romance” only to resolutely sidestep “questions of literary genre or aesthetic value” (90). Perhaps, though, the scholarly investigation of such literary and aesthetic questions in the eighteenth-century amatory novel can teach us how to raise these questions about the twentieth- and twenty-first century popular romance.

One emerging area of critical scholarship on amatory fiction, for example, has centered on the prominence of voyeurism and visual “discovery” (to use Crusie’s term from *Welcome to Temptation*). These scenes of voyeuristic display function as liminal spaces in these texts; readers are guided to look through thresholds like doors and windows as they are invited to experience private erotic encounters. Barbara Benedict, like James Turner, Alison Conway, and William Warner, points to the presence of erotic spectacle as a key feature of the early eighteenth-century novel. Benedict describes how stereotypical associations of women with curiosity allowed amatory fiction “to exploit new kinds of visual lust” (194). Some critics have in turn questioned the impact of such depictions of women as objects of mere “visual lust.” In an article focused on Eliza Haywood, a prominent writer of amatory fiction who was strongly influenced by Delarivier Manley, Juliette Merritt reflects on the ways in which Haywood’s erotic novels “may exploit a scopic regime thoroughly oppressive to women” by rendering them passive victims of a dominant male gaze (191). Merritt argues, however, that Haywood’s fiction ultimately overturns such notions by attempting “to colonize the position of the spectator” and by collapsing distinctions between the spectator and the object of the gaze (184; 189). Both Manley’s and Crusie’s novels also redefine the erotic display of their heroines and heroes by depicting liminal erotic zones as sites for creative power and transformation. In occupying these liminal erotic spaces, their heroines ultimately claim the erotic gaze for their own pleasure.

Delarivier Manley’s most popular secret history originally appeared in 1709 as *Secret Memoirs and Manners of several Persons of Quality, of both Sexes, From the New Atalantis, an Island in the Mediterranean*. *New Atalantis* made a powerful impact on the literary scene in the early eighteenth century. As John Richetti notes in *Popular Fiction Before Richardson*, all of London read her *New Atalantis*, and her scandal chronicles “were widely and continuously read during the first four decades of the eighteenth century”

(120). Her secret history of the licentious private lives of Whig political figures even gave rise to the use of the term “atalantis” to denote scandal; the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term as “a secret or scandalous history,” tracing its first use to 1709 and the publication of Manley’s novel. The word continued to convey this meaning throughout the eighteenth century, testifying to the impact of her novel well beyond the moment of its publication. One key reason for the novel’s popularity is what Catherine Gallagher describes as its “sheer voyeuristic eroticism” (103). That eroticism is channeled through an allegorical framework of three invisible feminine figures who discover the intrigues of the fictional world of “Angela” (Manley’s allegorical name for London). Astrea, a feminine representation of justice, views the private sexual lives of prominent Londoners with the assistance of “Virtue” and the Lady “Intelligence;” this Lady Intelligence, a figure who parallels the author of the secret history itself, narrates many of the scandalous scenes the reader will encounter. The readers’ exploration of various erotic scenes or episodes is filtered through the vision of these female characters. As Alison Conway has argued, Manley’s use of these female spectators “creates a defamiliarized visual perspective, effectively unmooring the gendering of the gaze from any fixed vantage point” (51). Women do not simply serve as helpless objects trapped in a male-dominated gaze; rather, even as they come into view as objects, they are also pervasively gazing, voyeuristic subjects in their own right.

*New Atalantis* centers on a continual interplay between the world on view to the public and the secret, private spaces that the privileged view of the female spectators leads readers to experience vicariously. This exploration of these liminal territories appears from the very first encounter with naval ships and officers. The naval fleet is seen in its public role at first as “proud” and “magnificent” vessels that ensure the continued safety and glory of England (9). These glorious images of national prestige, however, are quickly countered with images of men acting in servitude to the passions they feel for their mistresses. We are taken from the grand exterior of a ship into the private berth of a commander, one who is “stretched at his full length upon the crimson damask couch” (10). He is exposed and placed on display for readers as a man consumed with desire who abandons the duties of naval command to please the whims of his mistress. Throughout the volumes of *New Atalantis*, Manley repeats the pattern of these journeys between the public and private territories occupied by her characters, using these liminal territories to create scenes of voyeuristic pleasure that also call into question any sense that private lives can remain safely separated and distinct from the public realm. Rather than simply calling our attention to the boundaries between the private and public, Manley’s novel insists upon a recognition of their intersections.

One of the earliest and most developed displays of spectatorial pleasure in *New Atalantis* presents a young male lover, Germanicus, arranged for the erotic titillation of the Duchess de l’Inconstant. As readers, we share the gaze of the Duchess, along with that of Astrea, Virtue and Intelligence. Germanicus has carefully arranged himself to entice the Duchess to become his lover, and he displays himself in a lush bedroom scene of exotic flowers:

It was he that was newly risen from the bath, and in a loose gown of carnation taffety, stained with Indian figures. His beautiful long flowing hair, for then ‘twas the custom to wear their own tied back with a ribbon of the

same colour; he had thrown himself upon the bed, pretending to sleep, with nothing on but his shirt and nightgown, which he had so indecently disposed, that slumbering as he appeared, his whole person stood confessed to the eyes of the amorous Duchess; his limbs were exactly formed, his skin shiningly white, and the pleasure the lady's graceful entrance gave him, diffused joy and desire throughout all his form. His lovely eyes seemed to be closed, his face turned on one side (to favour the deceit) was obscured by the lace depending from the pillows on which he rested. (20-21)

While Manley later provides her readers with similar spectacles of women on display (including a scene with young Charlot that visually recreates Germanicus's post-bath revelation), her first extended erotic scene places women in the desiring position of power. Although Germanicus seems to have control of the scene by carefully orchestrating his body, Manley emphasizes the mutual desire that sparks between her characters. In Germanicus's case, this pleasure is exposed on his body (the "diffused joy and desire throughout all his form"), and he submits the visual control of the scene to the Duchess by seeming to close his eyes and partially covering his face. Each of these gestures toward concealment, however, reminds both the Duchess and the reader of the erotic appeal of uncovering the intimate body for display. The lace on his face, a visual representation of a liminal border, symbolizes this conflation of concealment and voyeuristic discovery as the material's openings reveal as much as they hide. Manley presents a sophisticated understanding of how voyeuristic pleasure operates, underscoring how the objects of the gaze can find pleasure and power in putting themselves on display to be discovered by others.

The scene with Germanicus also displays the discovery of the Duchess's own erotic pleasure and participation in the scene. The visual scene of the young man's exposure stimulates her desire: "giving her eyes time to wander over beauties so inviting, and which increased her flame, with an amorous sigh she gently threw her self on the bed, close to the desiring youth; the ribbon of his shirt-neck not tied, the bosom (adorned with the finest lace) was open, upon which she fixed her charming mouth. Impatient, and finding that he did not awake, she raised her head, and laid her lips to that part of his face that was revealed" (21). The Duchess shifts here from enjoying the position of invisible and powerful spectator to becoming an object herself of the readers' own voyeuristic pleasure in the scene. Alison Conway explores this complicated negotiation of the voyeuristic gaze in her analysis of *New Atalantis*. While acknowledging that women in Manley's novel often seem to function merely as objects of the male gaze, Conway argues that Manley ultimately undermines this apparent powerlessness of women in several ways. The women are both "objects of pleasure" and figures of "authority within the court circle" (59), and they gain agency by "transfixing the spectators who behold" them (63). Further developing this experience of the voyeuristic gaze, the Duchess's focus on the places on her lover's body that call attention to the border between exposure and concealment—the partly visible bosom and face—highlights the readers' experience with erotic liminality. Such enthusiastic participation in voyeurism and desire has an empowering effect on both the Duchess and the reader of amatory fiction. In his consideration of amatory fiction, William Warner contends that a text like *New Atalantis* "incites desire and promotes the liberation of the reader as a subject of power" (93). This liberation of the reader is signaled here

through the discovery of the Duchess's own erotic engagement with sexual spectacle in this liminal territory.

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Like Manley and her secret history, Jennifer Crusie crafts a series of novels that depict sexual spectacles that take place in liminal zones at the borders between private sexuality and public display. Although Maddie, the heroine of *Tell Me Lies*, initially recoils from willingly exposing her private acts of intimacy, she finally claims her newfound access to the territory of public spaces as she redefines her identity for herself and for the town of Frog Point. She learns to playfully challenge and appropriate the power of the liminal space between private intimacy and public exposure. In *Crazy for You*, Crusie explores the risks women face in that liminal space. The book's heroine, Quinn McKenzie, finds herself stalked by an ex-boyfriend who becomes a sinister and disturbed peeping Tom. Quinn struggles against the controlling and possessive gaze of ex-boyfriend Bill, but her attempts fail to fully undermine this dynamic. *Welcome to Temptation*, the third novel in the sequence, returns to the more empowering model of *Tell Me Lies*. Sophie, the heroine of *Welcome to Temptation*, indulges in her own discovery fantasies as she finds the confidence to assume her own newly defined identity in private and public. Of these three Crusie heroines, Sophie most fully embraces the notion of blurring boundaries between her private sexual encounters and public knowledge. Not only does she engage in public sex, but she crafts these intimate moments as scenes for public consumption as the movie that she and her sister are filming for the town of Temptation.

Crusie's novels challenge the notion that women must occupy a disempowered position when presenting themselves in voyeuristic self-display. Literary and film scholars have similarly argued for reassessments of what has been seen as voyeurism's debilitating impact on women. Laura Mulvey, in a pioneering essay from 1975, applies the psychoanalytic insights of Freud and Lacan to film to argue that the controlling, pleasure-seeking gaze of the cinema is gendered male, while the object of the gaze is both feminine and passive. Recent film theory has actively challenged and reassessed Mulvey's initial interpretations of Lacan's theory of the gaze, arguing against the understanding of the gaze as "complete mastery" (McGowan 30). Some literary scholars have also debated the too-ready identification of women with powerlessness in scenes of voyeuristic display. Such challenges include Regina Schwartz's "Rethinking Voyeurism and Patriarchy," which asks readers to consider the complex workings of erotic gazing in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Focusing on the spectacle of Eve, Schwartz provocatively asks, "what happens when the watching subject is watched and the object of sight looks back?" (86). Such transformations of the subject and the positions of power in the erotic gaze occur in Crusie's fiction as well as she exposes and ultimately dismantles the negative power of the gaze.

In *Tell Me Lies*, Crusie presents a positive consideration of voyeuristic self-display with her heroine Maddy. Crusie disrupts the potentially negative effect of the male gaze by having Maddie embrace the experience of public self exposure, making her an eager participant in her voyeuristic exposure. This sexual self-exposure plays a crucial role in her development as a character and in her individual empowerment. After spending her life in Frog Point, Ohio, living as what she calls the "fake" Maddie and a "Good Girl" (168), she



decides to stop worrying about keeping her private concerns, and especially her sexuality, obscured from view. She claims the right to indulge in erotic encounters with her lover, C.L., in more public places, beginning with kissing him openly on her porch in view of her gossipy neighbors. Maddie defiantly asserts, "I'm through hiding" (314).

This small public rebellion intensifies as Maddie insists on staging herself as an erotic spectacle. Near the novel's end, she begins stripping off her clothes in a far more public space—C. L.'s convertible as it drives through farmlands on Porch Road. The road's name links this moment with her earlier, smaller-scale public exposure. Taking off her T-shirt and bra, Maddie convinces C. L. to pull over to the side of the road—a border that highlights the liminal space in which their encounter take place—where she strips completely bare and insists they make love behind the car in the grass. She links her sexual desire for C. L. to the idea of being a voyeuristic spectacle: "I want you *now*. Here. While the neighbors watch. So everybody knows" (327). Maddie makes herself the defiant object of the community's gaze, and links that embracing of self-exposure with her own self-assertion when she insists their intimacy take place "In the sun. In front of God and everybody. I don't want to hide anymore" (328). This sexual revelation of herself anticipates a similar public display that occurs when she makes a "scene" outside the bank to confront a bank employee, Candace Lowery, for theft and the murder of Maddie's husband Brent (337). Despite a lengthy and undignified struggle with Candace that seems to yield nothing but curious spectators, Maddie refuses to slink back into obscurity. And her insistence on making her stance a public spectacle ultimately yields a kind of climax of its own as hundred-dollar bills erupt from Candace's purse, sealing her fate with a dramatic outpouring of evidence of her guilt (338).

In *Crazy for You*, published just a year later, Crusie offers a more anxious account of voyeurism and display. Crusie presents Quinn's former boyfriend, Bill, as the sinister embodiment of men using a predatory gaze to possess women as objects. Bill's attempts to control Quinn's identity, even after she has left him, are linked to his persistent scopic obsession with her. After she has moved from their apartment into a house of her own, Bill pulls off the lower part of a shutter while reflecting on the importance of keeping her within his sight: "Anything so he could see her, see what she was doing, be with her until she came to her senses again" (111). For Bill, visual possession is linked with sexual possession. While the other Crusie heroines will find self-empowerment in claiming the liminal territory between their private and public lives by engaging in discovery fantasies, Bill usurps this territory in *Crazy for You*. As his psychotic obsession with Quinn escalates, he paces around her house and envisions a future for the two of them and their kids. He brings himself to the boundary dividing her private space from the outside world—a kitchen window covered in a lace curtain (203). The lace curtain evokes a liminal space that is both opaque and transparent, and also anticipates a symbol of sexual pleasure he will later claim when stealing her white lace panties from her bedroom when she is out of the house (218). This violation of Quinn's intimate, erotic territory is also an assault on her own sense of self, as Bill realizes. Quinn refers to her sexy underwear as "*My secret life*" (218); Bill's theft ultimately attempts to possess not just her sexuality, but also her own ability to define herself as an individual.

When Quinn, like the heroines of *Tell Me Lies* and *Welcome to Temptation*, does engage in public sex, the positive self-realization she discovers is compromised by a brutal male assault that follows. In the auditorium of the high school, Quinn and her lover, Nick,

have sex standing against a wall in the darkened theater, and Quinn finds this public sexual encounter the key to discovering her own authentic self: "It was breathtaking, astounding, going into herself like this, thinking about herself like this; she'd had men inside her before, but *she'd* never been there, never known herself thick with heat and succulent the way she loved herself now, could love herself now because she trusted him so completely" (256). This moment of self-confidence and power quickly transforms into a nightmarish scene as Quinn leaves the theater by herself to meet Nick in his truck. Walking out, Bill grabs her in a scene where his violent possession of Quinn hinted at in his peeping Tom moments finally takes brutal, physical form. He shoves her and then pins her against the wall in a nightmarish parody of the scene Quinn and Nick just enacted: "He pressed her wrists into the bricks, one hand on each side of her head so she couldn't turn away, putting his face close to hers so she'd have to look at him, have to see him" (262-63). Bill's act attempts to reclaim possession of Quinn's sexuality and of her newly confident sense of her own identity. In addition to Bill's violent re-enactment of this scene, Crusie further compromises Quinn's moment of discovery by having it viewed by Bobby, the Boy Principal, who recreates the scene verbally to Bill within Quinn's home: "'She was *fucking that mechanic.*' Bill flinched, and Bobby's voice went low and evil. 'Up against the wall, like a whore. Right there on stage. I watched them'" (282). Readers are left to contemplate how Quinn's moment of erotic discovery has been twice reclaimed by men defining and possessing her as a sexual object. These moments reinforce a sense of women's vulnerability to the male gaze that never quite dissipates, even though the novel ends with Quinn and Nick about to have public sex again in a pick-up at the drive-in (298). That potential image, which never actually gets described, fails to fully counteract the impact of Bill and Bobby's spectatorial violations.

Crusie reclaims the liminal territory for women in *Welcome to Temptation*. The novel is dominated by a series of striking visual images that constantly transform and playfully take on new meanings and identities. As liminal phenomena on the border between private and public spaces, these images exist in a state "of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories" (Turner, *The Forest* 97). From our earliest introduction to the town of Temptation with its "flesh-colored, bullet-shaped" water tower, Crusie signals the significance of erotic visual display in the novel (4). This unmistakably phallic symbol transforms in the novel when its peach-colored paint is coated in cheap red paint which makes it appear, as Phin claims, like "the Whore of Babylon" and "a bloodred bullet in the sun" (73, 74). Sophie's sister Amy further feminizes the water tower into an image of blatant, voyeuristic feminine sexuality by describing it as "a lipstick with a nipple" (117). This re-gendering of the tower symbolizes the transformation occurring within the novel from considering women as victims of a voyeuristic gaze to recognizing women who take command of the act of self-exposure for their own pleasure and power.

The infamous "cherry" wallpaper also indicates the importance of the visual and the erotic in *Welcome to Temptation*. The cherry image is initially linked to Sophie's humiliation at losing her virginity in high school and being taunted by a boy who mocks her by sticking on his finger a "big, gloppy cherry" (39). The male, with his manipulation of the cherry, is clearly in control of an oppressive visual regime that puts the woman firmly in her insignificant place. Like the water tower, however, the cherries on the wallpaper do not remain a stable visual image. We eventually learn they are actually apples which have faded through the years (110-111). Crusie's depiction of shifting visual images suggests the

need for readers to carefully question any too-ready assumptions about the significance of visual display. This emphasis on erotic spectacles also centers on the film being shot in *Temptation by Sophie and Amy*. The question of whether it is pornography constantly surfaces in the novel, and the various manifestations of the film—as a documentary called *Return to Temptation*, as a soft-core, female porn called *Cherished*, or as the poorly executed male porn flick *Hot Fleshy Thighs*—do not provide a simple answer or clear lines of distinction between them.

For the character of Sophie, taking command of this public, visual, erotic space is crucial to her own transformation in the novel. Even before Sophie and Phin enact her discovery fantasy in her bedroom, their first sexual encounter takes place on a river dock (96-99). Although Phin takes charge of this erotic moment, Sophie transforms this private sexual encounter into an even more public discovery fantasy by creating its images and dialogue as a scene in her film. Writing this and other erotic encounters with Phin as script for the film, Sophie willingly exposes herself on screen. The dock scene in particular is enacted for readers of Crusie's novel as we watch the actors, Clea and Rob, strip and prepare to mimic the earlier erotic moment with Phin and Sophie. The movie scene highlights the pleasures of erotic visual display, illuminating the dock with lights to isolate the vision from the darkness around it. The dual borderlands here of light and dark, of water and dock, call attention to this space as liminal. Rob strips and unveils his own physical qualifications to perform in an erotic film, making him an object of voyeuristic pleasure just like the naked actress performing Sophie's role in the encounter. Although Phin had remained clothed in the initial dock scene in the novel, the recreation of their sexual spectacle puts both the male and female in equally vulnerable and desirable positions. As they film the love scene, Sophie turns to see fireworks bursting in the sky: "Fireworks exploded beyond the trees, and she stopped to watch them sparkle gold and blue and red in the sky. Beautiful" (258). Sophie's moment of pleasure in the visual scene, though, is interrupted by the intrusion of another spectator on the scene which appears as a glint from binoculars or a camera (259). Crusie's juxtaposition of these viewpoints suggests the difficulty of completely controlling visual display. Just like the distorted version of the film which ultimately airs on the town's cable network—thus obscuring the love scenes representing Sophie's self-display and discovery—this moment of filming at the dock presents a complicated dynamic of spectatorial control and display.

By the end of the novel, Sophie is no longer waiting for Phin to orchestrate discovery moments for her pleasure; rather, she assumes control of their erotic, public displays as she more fully assumes her identity as a Dempsey, family that defies conventions and operates outside social norms by manipulating others. In one of their final semi-public sex scenes, Sophie has to convince Phin to be with her by displaying herself on the hood of his Volvo—parked outside the house in which her brother is sleeping. She opens the jacket she is wearing to reveal her nearly naked self, but that enticement does not completely quell Phin's nervousness about her brother possibly seeing them together. In a final defiant move embracing her own active self-discovery (in a voyeuristic as well as personal sense), "Sophie moved her knees apart and leaned back on her hands" (291). Her pose mimics a more conventional sense of female submission to the male lover and male gaze, but Sophie has transformed that feminine exposure into a position of power, as her next move to straddle Phin on top of the Volvo underscores. Crusie's heroine has fully claimed the erotic gaze for her own pleasure.

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Like the erotic scenes which take place on the boundaries between private intimacy and public exposure, gossip also thrives in the liminal spaces explored in the novels of Crusie and Manley. My understanding of gossip's function in these novels is informed by recent theoretical approaches to gossip in fields such as anthropology, social psychology, philosophy, and history. Critical understanding of gossip's function outside of literary texts often splits between those who view gossip in a positive light and those who offer negative judgments about gossip's functions and morality. In the book *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip*, Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern summarize major critical assessments of gossip developed in anthropology and social psychology. While some studies of gossip in anthropology tend to emphasize the "positive social functions" of gossip, including its development of group unity and morality (40; 31), another trend has been to look at gossip as a more disruptive force serving individuals' "self-interest" (37). The book *Good Gossip* collects perspectives of philosophers and social scientists who have noted gossip's positive roles, highlighting its contributions to morality, friendship, and the resistance to oppressive power (Goodman and Ben-Ze'ev 1-5).

Gossip as both a mode of communication and a form of socialization functions by negotiating the liminal—the "betwixt and between"—of the public and private realms (Turner, *Dramas* 13). In spreading gossip, the gossiper functions as "transgressor," as Jorg Bergmann has argued in *Discreet Indiscretions*: "he penetrates—by crossing the border between the back stage and the proscenium—the inner space of another's social existence and then—disdaining the social system of inclusion and exclusion for the time being—pushes outward with his information as the booty of his raid. Expressed paradoxically, *the gossip producer externalizes what is internal.*" (66-67). This movement of gossip back and forth between the borders of the private and public echoes liminality's preoccupation with transitions and explorations of margins. In her pioneering literary study of gossip, Patricia Spacks points to a similar understanding of gossip as occupying a space apart from the world at large. She describes gossip as a mode of communication that "creates its own territory [. . .] using materials from the world at large to construct a new oral artifact" (15). Stewart and Strathern echo this sense of gossip's creative production of a distinctive kind of social space hovering on the margins of the social center when they insist that rumor and gossip do not simply reflect but rather create their own "social realities" (56). Like liminality itself, gossip is a model of communication and socialization that revolves around chaos and ambiguity. Turner's description of the liminal condition emphasizes concepts of "ambiguity," "paradox," and "confusion of all the customary categories" (*The Forest* 97). Analysis of gossip often calls attention to these same features, as Bergmann does when he describes gossip as a social practice that "disrupts order, [and] disdains social boundaries" (134). Literary analyses of gossip have also noted its "uncertain status" and "unresolvable ambiguity" (Brown 579), often contrasting gossip's murky model of communication with the more stable and controlled authority of a narrator (Gordon 7).

Gossip's occupying of these liminal spaces also contributes to its sense of erotic appeal, and provides a further link between gossip and the sexual voyeurism depicted in the novels of Crusie and Manley. The conflation of gossip and eroticism is addressed by

Patricia Spacks as she reflects on a possible reason for the enduring appeal of gossip; she notes that “the atmosphere of erotic titillation suggests gossip’s implicit voyeurism” (11). Writing in the early eighteenth century, during the time of Manley’s published novels, Alexander Pope vividly captures this association of gossip with erotic indulgence and also with femininity when he describes gossip as “a little lechery of the tongue in a lady” (1:170). Manley and Crusie exploit this feminized, erotic power of gossip in order to assert a newly positive model of this often denigrated form of communication. Although gossip has traditionally been viewed as predominantly feminine and threatening, as Bernard Capp notes in *When Gossips Meet* (50), Manley and Crusie appropriate gossip’s potentially destructive powers in order to transform their characters’ and their own authorial identities. Like the erotic discoveries that appear in their texts, gossip is another pleasure in which characters and readers learn to indulge.

In writing her *New Atalantis*, Manley not only narrates the circulation of gossip but herself engages in an act of politically-motivated gossip to expose the political party in power (the Whigs) as both sexually and politically corrupt. Clara Reeve, writing a history of the novel in the late eighteenth century, captures the sense of Manley’s scandalous, gossiping authorship: “She hoarded up all the public and private scandal within her reach, and poured it forth” (119). In a chapter on Manley’s narration of erotic gossip, Catherine Gallagher explores Manley’s appropriation of negative stereotypes of women and gossip: “Manley presents herself as politically useful because she is a disorderly woman vengefully gossiping about female ‘secrets’ and therefore doing the sort of low and frivolous work considered beneath real politicians” (117). By embracing the typical condemnation of women, Manley forges a defiant reformulation of her authorship and significance in her culture. Manley also capitalizes on notions of gossip as a collaborative endeavor by crafting her own distinctive model of female authorship that challenges conceptions of authorship as masculine, authoritative and proprietary[3]. Manley evokes this communal authorship through her insistent display of gossip’s circulation through legions of women. Her invitations to readers to share in the communal construction of the text were particularly suited to the changing power of the literary marketplace in the early eighteenth century. Moving away from traditional models of literary patronage, authors increasingly found themselves needing to cater to the public of readers as “the social group capable of conferring fame upon authors” (Donoghue 1). Manley’s strategy welcomed these newly significant readers to become partners in sorting through the meanings of her texts. She invites readers to join her in constructing the meanings of the text by going to another text—a key[4]. This new book that accompanies her secret histories becomes a liminal territory where author and readers meet in a space bordering the novel and the public world it represents.

In *New Atalantis*, Manley presents female gossip permeating all aspects of feminine society. Multiple agents of gossip circulate erotic scandal to one another and to the readers. The female narrators who provide the framework for encountering all the tales of gossip that unfold in *New Atalantis* embody a community of women performing gossip as they share information in order to define communal values and moral norms. In sharing their tales and their gossiping reflections on them, the women portray gossip’s forays into private spaces and the public exposure of that hidden knowledge—and represent for readers the ways in which they can perform that same intermixing of private and public realms. This constantly circulating gossip creates what Ros Ballaster has characterized as a

disruptive dismantling of clearly defined binaries and boundaries in *New Atalantis*: “Manley’s fiction stands perpetually on the borders of what are perceived as discrete discursive territories. The political and the personal, the erotic and the pathetic, the real and the fictive, scandal and satire, all undergo a series of inversions and re-articulations until their supposed exclusivity is undermined” (151). By dismantling such typically discrete borders, Manley makes her fictionalized gossip of private, intimate moments of thinly veiled public figures impact the world of politics in the reign of Queen Anne.

One of the central figures representing gossip in *New Atalantis* is Lady Intelligence, a character whose role in communicating the scandals of the capital is signaled by her clothing: “her garments are all hieroglyphics” (13). These mysterious symbols suggest the process of decoding that Manley’s novel prompted in her readers as they attempted to discern the real-life referents of the fictionalized lovers in the novel. Shortly after its initial publication, a “key” appeared to accompany *New Atalantis*. This “key” provided real names of some of the people scandalously depicted within her novel, but also offered just hints for many others (perhaps letting readers know, for example, that a certain man is “Lord L—”). Such a device reinforced the collective nature of Manley’s gossiping authorship by emphasizing the notion of printed gossip as a communal process of communication and interpretation. As Catherine Gallagher has argued, Manley’s use of these keys resists a simple process of decoding by “open[ing] the text to an ‘outside’ that they also continue to defer” (126). These supplementary texts create a visual representation of liminality; the notion of a “key” itself points to a threshold that can potentially open, a state of transition that can possibly be successfully accomplished. But like the liminal itself, the secret history and its keys suspend the readers in territory marked by contradictions, ambiguity and chaos.

The gossip circulating in *New Atalantis* offers considerable voyeuristic pleasures, for the characters and readers alike. One of the most memorable gossips encountered in the novel is Mrs. Nightwork, a gossiping midwife. Her occupation links her to the early meaning of a gossip as someone present at childbirth, and also emphasizes the amazing fertility of gossip that flows abundantly through the capital of Angela. While assisting ladies with labor and delivery, she also caters to ladies who “love to be amused with the failings of others,” insisting that she and her fellow midwives would not receive “so favorable and warm a reception, if we had nothing of scandal to entertain them with” (139). Manley’s emphasis on the powerful appeal of gossip as an erotic indulgence also appears in several tales in the novel, including the story of a woman named Harriat whom a Duke attempts to seduce in order to destroy her reputation. No strategies succeed until he turns to the erotic appeal of gossip itself: “he thought of attempting her in her own way and sacrificed the reputations of several who had obliged him and his friends (for he was forced to tell her all that he know or had heard), and then the lady, out of excess of gratitude for giving in to her darling foible, obliged him to his wish” (153). In a further volume of *New Atalantis*, Manley links gossip to erotic pleasure in a way that anticipates Crusie’s explorations of Sophie’s discovery fantasies. A maid gossips about ladies who themselves love the pleasures of gossip’s revelations: they “took as much Pleasure in discovering anothers Amour, as ever they did in concealing their own: Nay some have gone farther, and have wanted the true Pleasure in their own, ‘till they were discover’d” (*Memoirs of Europe 2*: 143). The allure of gossip seems nearly irresistible in Manley’s novel as it provides erotic enjoyment, political

capital for Manley's attempts to discredit the party of the Whigs then in power, and a successful model for Manley's own authorship.

Negotiations of gossip function in important ways in this series of Crusie novels as well. Like Manley, Crusie crafts a model of authorship that appropriates the dynamics of gossip's communal circulation and discovery of meaning. When she includes images open to multiple meanings, like the ambiguous cherries on the wallpaper in *Welcome to Temptation*, she invites commentaries and individual interpretations in the way that Manley's keys to her novels welcomed readers' attempts to discover meanings of her text. On the level of characterization, the heroines of Crusie's novels must battle the negative power of gossip which threatens to define and limit their own individual identities. Two of the heroines, Maddie and Sophie, ultimately develop strategies to defy gossip's power by embracing unruly images of themselves. They appropriate what has been previously defined by gossip as negative images, and in doing so establish a new negotiation of the gossip circulating in their small towns. In essence, they claim the liminal spaces of gossip as their own fertile territory—one that empowers them to redefine themselves and the communities in which they live.

Crusie begins her invitation to reconsider gossip in *Tell Me Lies*. In the small town at the center of *Tell Me Lies*, Frog Point, Ohio, Maddie has been designated, as her best friend Treva notes, "the Perpetual Virgin" (25). In this gossipy version of reality, even though Maddie has just discovered her husband's infidelity, Treva assures her, "Nobody would say anything bad about Maddie Martindale" (25). Although Treva intends to offer Maddie comfort, her comments underscore the degree to which Maddie finds that her life has been constrained by the force of gossip in her town. Gossip has crafted the "fake" Maddie that she sheds during the course of the novel. Maddie's mother represents the power of gossip's omnipresent voices circulating through Frog Point. Significantly, her first appearances in the novel occur via phone calls made to Maddie, emphasizing her function as the voice of gossip; communicating gossip through the phone also provides a visual representation of a liminal boundary that is linked to gossip in the novel. Shortly after Maddie's traumatic discovery of another woman's crotchless underpants in her husband's car, she receives a phone call from her mother while trying to sedate herself with a brownie. While Maddie struggles to accept the change in her life, her mother pours out an endless stream of words: "Her mother was still talking. Her mother would talk through the Second Coming, doing the play-by-play" (11). But her mother's voice is not just the communication of one woman; her talk evokes the communal gossip of the town. As Maddie listens, she "could hear Frog Point talking now. *She stayed with him the after the first time, what did she expect? The way she acts, you'd never think she was a Martindale*" (11). In imagining this anonymous, communal voice of gossip, Maddie pinpoints how she feels gossip will expose her own failures rather than dwelling on her husband's far more obvious failings.

Eventually, Maddie's supposed culpability in the murder of Brent, her husband, becomes "the" news in Frog Point. As Treva informs her, "You are now the hottest thing on the Frog Point grapevine" (248). The town's gossip has already decided she killed him, but remains split between those who want to excuse her crime, and those who want her to "fry" (249). Maddie's fears about the accusatory voice of gossip in Frog Point have seemingly come true. At this point, however, her mother, who initially represented the stifling and overwhelming constraints of gossip, actually begins to wield gossip in order to discredit Maddie's main opposition, Brent's mother (249-50). Rather than succumbing to

despair and meekly accepting these judgments from others, however, Maddie decides to stop hiding from gossip. The novel's final scene—Maddie hanging her “baby blue bikini underpants” in anticipation of C. L.'s arrival on the front doorknob in plain view of the gossipy Mrs. Crosby—symbolizes her rejection of gossip's power to invade and limit her life (346). Her placement of the underpants on the door underscores her own insistence on claiming that liminal territory of gossip, signaling her defiance of gossip's power and voices. Her bold move here clearly contrasts with her earlier attempts to keep the crotchless underpants securely hidden and private. Maddie does not run away from gossip, but finally chooses instead to playfully engage with it on her own terms.

Like the appearance of gossip in Laurence Sterne's novel *Tristram Shandy*, gossip in *Tell Me Lies* is ultimately unveiled as a form of communication that can be “playful, pleasure-seeking” (Stovel 118). Maddie enters into the spirit of play by taking part in gossip's distinctively pleasurable style: “allusive, fully of veiled reference and innuendo, of nuance and *double entendre*” (Stovel 122). This spirit captures the essence of the liminal experience, one that offers “a playful opening toward alternative worlds” (Spariosu *xiii*). Maddie has taken advantage of gossip's liminal possibilities for transformation in order to redefine herself and her representation in the gossip of Frog Point. In a significant way, Maddie's creative production of gossip echoes the power of the author of fiction, and Crusie signals this link between authorship and the creative potential of gossip with the epigraph of *Tell Me Lies*, which presents Truman Capote's claim that “All fiction is gossip.”

Gossip in *Crazy for You* also functions by fashioning the ordinary lives of the townspeople into an entertaining story to be enjoyed—a kind of soap opera crafted from their own private lives primarily in the background of Crusie's depictions of life in the small town of Tibbett. Gossip about relationships and possible infidelities circulates in the beauty shop run by Quinn's best friend, Darla. The women there share information about other women like Barbara Niedemeyer, dubbed the “Bank Slut” for her string of affairs with other women's husbands. Debbie, one of the stylists, shares her theory that the Bank Slut changes her hair to mimic the style of the partner of each new man she has in her sights (40). This information is a clue the other women use to decipher Barbara's future maneuvers with other men, including Darla's own husband. While this gossipy designation of Barbara demeans and demonizes her, gossip is predominantly presented as a tool used positively in Tibbett and its beauty salon.

In *Welcome to Temptation*, Crusie charts the most complicated negotiation of gossip. While gossip certainly poses a threat to the heroine Sophie, she learns how to respect and acknowledge the power that gossip can offer women to gain their own freedom and to influence their community. Of all these Crusie heroines, Sophie most fully embraces the liminal territory of gossip as a space of creative transformation. Early in the novel, Crusie presents a stereotypical image of a gossiping woman, Virginia, who passes along a judgmental tidbit to the town council about the two women she and her husband just hit with their car: “a snippy little redhead, Stephen says, and a nice brunette who was sweet to me. Curly hair. Low-class. They're staying at the Whipple farm. And they're making a *movie*. . . .” (13). Her combination of information and snobbish judgment of Sophie and Amy reveals an ugly aspect of gossip's conservative assaults on individuals' characters. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Virginia is ultimately revealed by the end of the novel as the main villain responsible for such crimes as attempted murder and intimidation. Another main voice of gossip in the novel is Phin's mother, Liz, who employs gossip with more



devastating finesse than Virginia. Her gossip clearly works oppressively against Sophie, seeking to maintain a conservative status quo in the community while keeping disruptive elements like Sophie firmly in their place. Yet Liz ultimately offers Sophie the opportunity to experience the potential power of gossip to enact its own version of justice.

After experiencing attempts on her life, Sophie confronts Liz as the culprit. The two women meet, significantly, outside the courthouse—a setting that indicates how gossip will take on the function of dispensing justice in *Temptation* by occupying this space upon its very boundary (352). Although Liz flatly denies the accusation against herself, her knowledge of the town's gossip immediately indicates to her the likely suspect: Virginia. Joining forces with Hildy, another loquacious town gossip, Liz tries to wrangle a confession from Virginia, who refuses to admit her guilt. Gossip, then, becomes an alternative form of justice. “‘We don't have to prove it,’ Liz said, ‘We'll just talk’” (358). The women know that circulating their speculations about Virginia's motives will essentially convict her in the minds of the town. They promise to withhold that devastating gossip if Virginia uses her town council votes to support their causes, especially the censorship ordinance that has placed Sophie and her sister in jeopardy for their film. The threat of that gossip ultimately holds Virginia in check, allowing Sophie the opportunity to address the town at the meeting and to pave the way for a future run as the next Tucker mayor of *Temptation*. The collaborative mingling of information and judgments that has occurred with Sophie, Liz and Hildy demonstrates a positive model for the political future of *Temptation* as well. Early in the novel Liz had criticized Phin for not working to “build a consensus” among the council members (45). Phin rejected that approach, but Sophie has learned and benefited from its value.

In *Welcome to Temptation*, Crusie's narration of gossip and her focus on voyeuristic discovery are linked through a symbolic representation of liminal borderland territories. Gossip and erotic display both function by transforming private, intimate moments into public performance. These liminal spaces, which include the door which briefly grants access and then separates Amy from Phin and Sophie's first discovery fantasy, signal the often permeable boundaries between private and public expression. Sophie and Phin, along with Crusie's readers, often find themselves reminded of those boundaries. While beginning to disrobe with Phin on the kitchen table, Sophie “lifted her head to tell him how good he felt and looked through the screen door into Stephen Garvey's eyes” (169). The moment signals the voyeuristic gaze and also provides juicy details for Stephen to spread as gossip against Sophie. The emphasis on the screen door, which functions simultaneously as a barrier and an open, seemingly transparent point of entry, represents the liminal borderland between private and public life. At other intimate moments, Sophie and Phin find themselves viewed through a window, as when Rachel appears at the window of Phin's car as they begin to have sex (287). Even their encounter on top of the hood of Phin's Volvo outside the Whipple farmhouse is linked to a window as Phin expresses his concern that Sophie's brother will see them through his window (290).

A final dramatic representation of this liminal space between public and private realms occurs when Sophie and Phin have just finished emerging from the afterglow of satisfying sex. As Phin struggles to remove the handcuffs connecting him to the bed, he notices that Sophie “was looking past him to the television” (330). On the screen, Sophie and Amy's film appears, or at least the soft porno version of it, *Cherished*. Sophie, like most of the townspeople watching that evening, is expecting a screening of her documentary,

*Return to Temptation*. Intruding into the intimate moment Sophie and Phin have just shared, *Cherished* presents the fictional recreation of their sexual encounter as a scene of voyeuristic pleasure which Sophie and Phin are compelled to watch. Rob and Clea act out for a third time in the novel the initial sexual encounter of Phin and Sophie on the river dock. As Phin and Sophie watch the screen, they also hear their own dialogue from that private moment (the dialogue Sophie wrote for the film) and stare in shock as that strangely familiar scene morphs into the raucous porno, *Hot Fleshy Thighs*—the re-cut version of *Cherished* crafted by Leo, the Porn King (331; 177). The film, now focusing on close-up shots of private body parts, showcases how dangerously reproducible and uncontrollable private experience can be once it enters the public realm. Even as the grainy hard-core porno plays on, another line from Phin and Sophie's first discovery moment intrudes as naked Rob tells naked Clea, "Your soul is a corkscrew" (331). This flickering vestige of their own private intimacy blurs even further the distinctions here between private and public spaces. Just like the disrupted boundaries Ballaster identifies at work in Delarivier Manley's fiction, the "series of inversions and re-articulations" of Phin and Sophie's intimate exchange creates a liminal space between private and public expression that is visually represented by the television and its screen. Such liminal spaces offer access to private knowledge, but also emphasize the dangerously uncontrollable nature of information that circulates in the public realm. These transgressions of boundaries offer voyeuristic thrills and creative possibilities, but also the chilling shocks of recognition when confronting a private self that has become transformed and claimed as public property.

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In their negotiations of the liminal spaces of erotic discovery and gossip, Crusie and Manley venture beyond the pages of their books, signaling another liminal space that emerges as readers respond to their texts. The novels themselves take on the function of a liminal border, serving as objects that resist closure by offering readers the ambiguities, paradoxes and contradictions that foster creative transformations. Their fiction, combining erotic titillation with sophisticated verbal games, invites and welcomes readers to join with the authors and with other readers in a communal act of constructing meanings from their texts. With Manley, this model of collaborative authorship stems from her narrative focus on gossip as a form of communal construction of meaning and from her use of devices like keys that gave readers opportunities to participate in extra-textual games to discover the real people depicted in her novels. Like Manley, Crusie has crafted an authorial identity that invites readers to participate in the discovery of meaning in her novels.

In *Welcome to Temptation*, the Dempsey family's use of movie quotes serves as one such collaborative act. Crusie's official website offers a list of many quotes, but reminds fans, "if we missed any or got the writing credits wrong, **let us know**" ("Movie Quote List"). This notion of an author helping craft a communal voice that welcomes readers is evidenced as well in "The Cherries," the online communities of Crusie's fans. In a posting on "All About Romance," Crusie explains how cherries became associated with her books and fans: "Well, it was just one of those things that got out of hand. There's a great cherry on the cover of *Welcome to Temptation*, and Susan Elizabeth Phillips made a bawdy crack about it in front of a bunch of booksellers once (and you thought she was such a lady) and I told the

people on my fan list about it and they took it as their logo, and I started putting cherries in all of my books as a shout-out to them, and now it's sort of my symbol" ("Writers Corner"). The cherry functions as a wink from author to readers and back again, creating a sense of a community forged through shared knowledge and insights about the novels. The cherry symbol is literally a signpost for members of the Cherries community, as their website explains: "Basically a Cherry is any participating member of one (or more) of Jenny's online communities. The nickname, Cherries, came about because they kept ending up in the same places without realizing it and missing each other. They needed a symbol so they could spot each other" ("The Cherries").

While the cherry makes visible a community centered on discussing Crusie's novels, the name also evokes the ambiguity of any symbol by referencing that notoriously slippery image on the kitchen wallpaper from within the pages of *Welcome to Temptation* ("The Cherries"). The cherries on the wallpaper first represent the repression of Clea's mother when she lived in the house with her daughter and husband. Only one wall was covered with "the truly ugly cherry wallpaper" because Clea's father forced her to return the other paper to save money (22-23). When Sophie later recounts the loss of her virginity, the cherries assume new symbolic importance when she describes how the best friend of her first sexual partner "came up and stuck his finger in the pie on my tray and scooped out this big, gloppy cherry and said, 'Heard you lost this, Sophie.' And then everybody laughed" (39). When the discovery of other rolls of the kitchen's wallpaper ultimately reveals the cherries are in fact faded apples (111), suddenly a new set of symbolic associations opens for readers to consider. Crusie's transformations of the symbol serve as a verbal nudge to readers to continue the game she has begun as they can develop new interpretations and shared discoveries of meaning in online collaborations.

The significance of these communal voices fostered through romance novels figures in an internet posting by Crusie on her blog, Argh Ink. She draws attention to the importance of communities outside of (and including) the lovers in romance novels. Asking for thoughts from readers, Crusie discusses a work-in-progress, a conference paper titled "A Book Where Everybody Knows Your Name." In her posting, Crusie suggests that "one of the most powerful aspects of the romance novel is the community that it makes in the reader's mind" ("A Book"). For Crusie's novels, that community takes shape in many ways, as when she invites her fans to offer suggestions and comments on drafts, or when she uses the inviting and familiar "Jenny" rather than the more formal "Jennifer" on her official website. That community also takes shape, though, in Crusie's conception of her books not simply as rigidly defined private property under her sole control, but rather as more open, liminal spaces that create a territory where the author's text gains new significance within the communal voices of its readers. Like the bedroom door that opens in *Welcome to Temptation* to bring Sophie the pleasure of her own discovery fantasy, Crusie's textual strategies and online postings slyly signal an opening into her novels' pages. Responding to her invitations, readers are encouraged to entertain their own discovery moments by exploring the liminal spaces that emerge between her novels and the communities that reflect on them. Crusie's books function like those erotic tales that Delarivier Manley crafted to entice and welcome readers into communal gossip that spilled from the novels' pages into keys that further teased and invited readers' interpretations.

Jane Lilienfeld argues that such authorial strategies are typical of modernist authors like Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison. Their fiction, she contends, exploits the power of

female gossip in positive ways by fashioning a reading experience in which “the implied authors incorporate the reader in a community that does not erase difference, but demonstrates through narrative strategies of reading postures the possibility of shared knowledge. Requiring the reader to share in the work of constructing the narrative merges artistry with political meaning” (57). The construction of shared knowledge fostered by Crusie and Manley’s novels also points readers toward such empowering possibilities for redefining female sexual and social identities, drawing upon the fertile, transformative power of liminal spaces explored through voyeuristic spectacles and gossip.

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### Notes

[1] This gaze, theorized as a means of masculine control over women as sexual objects, has long been the focus of film studies. Laura Mulvey first applied the psychoanalytic insights of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan to analyze the “gaze” of the film spectator as one that functions as masculine mastery over the eroticized female object onscreen.

[2] Female authors dominated the production of amatory fiction; in particular, Behn, Haywood and Manley were seen by contemporaries as developing remarkably similar works of erotic and gossip-centered fiction. Ros Ballaster argues that not only did readers associate these three authors, but that Manley and Haywood deliberately highlighted the connections among their works (114).

[3] Mark Rose identifies these qualities of modern authorship in *Authors and Owners*, and traces their beginnings to the eighteenth century.

[4] See Catherine Gallagher’s chapter on Delarivier Manley in *Nobody’s Story* for a discussion of keys and their function in early eighteenth century satire (124-27).

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