

## Sixteen, or Two to the Fourth

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Hello, I am Rebecca Spang and, as the Director of the Center for Eighteenth-Century Studies at Indiana University, it is my great pleasure to welcome you to this, the *sixteenth*, annual Bloomington Workshop. Since the Center's inception in 2002, we've sponsored a wide range of conversations, on topics from the Self and "Death," to Play, Hospitality, and the Eighteenth-Century Unconscious. This year's theme, "Number, Measure, Scale" arises from our collective sense that over the past decade and a half, the task of interdisciplinarity has been made all the more challenging by the vast expansion in the scale of materials available at our fingertips. There is a generational divide—one rarely acknowledged—between those of us who know what it is to go into the stacks looking for a certain volume of a bound periodical, and those whose entire research existence has been lived in the era of JSTOR. The changing scale of Eighteenth-Century Studies as a field is made even more obvious if we compare the first volumes of *ECS* to recent ones. While some early articles are nothing if not vast in their pretensions—in the very first issue, for instance, Paul Henry Lang covered all of "The Enlightenment and Music" in fifteen pages—they achieved these ends by working with a unitary sense of "Enlightenment" (such that a "movement" of that name became the only real actor) and a fairly limited, canonical set of sources.<sup>1</sup> Many *Eighteenth-Century Studies* articles from the 1960s and 1970s strike me, at least, as remarkably finite in ambition and execution: "Syntax and Substantive in [Swift's] *The Conduct of the Allies*" or "Christopher Smart: Some Neglected Poems."<sup>2</sup> Nothing in these first volumes gives a hint of a global eighteenth century, or a gendered or sub-altern one.

The shifting dimensions of our field—changes in the scope both of what we study and the scale at which it is studied—have not come without problems. Last year's Workshop included a participant from beyond Eighteenth-Century Studies, a self-styled "Orientalist" who teaches Arabic language and literature at UCLA (when he isn't perfecting his Maltese at the University of Valletta). In an affectionate, but slightly pointed exchange that followed the Workshop, he mapped our idiolect (as a linguist, this is what he does), proposing that one basic sentence template in our conversations takes the form "What does  $x$  tell us about how  $y$  was imagined?" So one example of this might be: "What does clock-making tell us about how time was imagined?" He went on to suggest, however, that many of our exchanges actually consisted not of *answering* those questions, but instead of "competing to discover increasingly microscopic items to fill the  $x$  slot and increasingly staggering items to fill the  $y$  slot. For example: "What do chocolate sprinkles tell us about how happiness was imagined?" The issue he raised, obviously, is one of scale: how to navigate from the detail (beloved of many—though not all—of us) to the

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<sup>1</sup> "The Enlightenment... depart[ed] from seventeenth-century writers when it combined the general doctrine of affective representation with the theory of imitation of nature," Lang, "The Enlightenment and Music," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 1:1 (1967), 103.

<sup>2</sup> Alan T. McKenzie, "Proper Words in Proper Places: Syntax and Substantive in *The Conduct of*

grand claim, from the specifics of past centuries to the “relevant” of today? Is it always a matter of moving between the two? Or is it—in some cases, at least—rather, the imperative of *choosing* between close readings and text mining, case studies and global histories, anecdote and data?

As we think about these questions, we will also want to consider the extent to which eighteenth-century individuals, texts, and institutions confronted them in their own terms. What did people *count* in the eighteenth century (and which people counted, in both senses of the term: who mattered, and who did the enumerating)? Today, in the aftermath of the metric system, we may imagine systems of measurement as universal (except, of course, they don’t apply to the United States of America), natural, and objective, but in eighteenth-century France, everybody knew that measurements were local, historical, and specific. We might even say the same of numbers at that time. Here, for instance, is what the *Encyclopédie* has to say about “sixteen”:

Sixteen (arithmetic). An even number composed of one ten and six ones, or two eights, or four fours; whether two is multiplied by eight, or eight by two, or four by itself, it can never produce anything other than sixteen. In common or Arabic numbers, sixteen is written *16*; in Roman numerals *XVI*; and in French accounting or finance figures as *xlj*.

So to write or talk of numbers is also to write and talk about signs. And if some numerical truths are understood as immutable and international—as the *encyclopedist* tells us, wherever you are, whatever you do,  $2 \times 8 = 8 \times 2 = 4 \times 4$ —our access to them and ways of rendering them will vary with time, place, and purpose.

A few comments, as well, about how we will proceed for the next few days. We are recording our conversations, many of which will be transcribed and published in our annual proceedings volume. We do this because while we know we cannot predict how our discussions will go, we also know that they are among the most cherished (and least well immortalized) of academic activities. To act, as Hannah Arendt writes in *The Human Condition*, “means to take an initiative, to begin... to set something into motion”—and each question posed, each comment offered, will be just such an act: the beginning of a new future for the conversation both here in person and, perhaps, later as well. Each conversation has a colleague to chair it (in most cases, though not always, who also serves as commentator). It is the chair’s task to keep our discussion convivial, shared, and more or less “on track.” Raise your hand if you have a question or comment; if you have a small intervention you want to make that follows directly on something that has just been said, make the “hook” sign and you will then be invited to speak immediately but please do make sure what you have to say does indeed follow directly and is concisely formulated. We also want to make sure that everyone—not just paper authors and commentators—feels welcome in the conversation, so to encourage student participation we continue with the house rule of allowing students to “jump the queue” in all contexts.