Our culture's focus on physical appearance and the current plastic surgery craze may seem strictly the stuff of 21st-century reality TV shows. But even 200 years ago, people were undergoing painful, experimental, and seemingly gruesome procedures merely for the sake of aesthetics and social status, according to Mark Blackwell, associate professor of English and chair of the Department of English in the College of Arts and Sciences.

In late 18th-century England, says Blackwell, straight, white, teeth were a sign of beauty, affluence, and moral fortitude, perhaps because tooth loss was a common result of venereal disease and its treatment with mercury. Wealthy and fashionable citizens engaged in a fad known as live-tooth transplantation similar to the way today's socialites and celebrities purchase foreign substances, like Botox injections and saline implants, to augment their bodies.

At a time when dentistry was still new, ladies and gentlemen had their damaged or rotten teeth pulled out and quickly replaced with teeth taken from the mouths of live donors—indigents who were forced to sell their teeth for cash. Fear of disease transmittal and criticism of the exploitive nature of the practice contributed to its disappearance at the turn of the 19th century.

But why would this bizarre and short-lived dental procedure attract the attention of a 21st-century English professor? Blackwell believes that live-tooth transplantation provides insights into many aspects of late 18th-century life, including divisions between the rich and poor, changing standards of beauty, and the rise of a consumer culture.

Live-tooth transplantation also marks the emergence of a culture in which people's bodies play a key role in their personal and social identities, and where body parts are viewed as commodities that can be bought and sold. "Many contemporary trends, such as cosmetic surgery, tattooing, body piercing, and the sale of organs on the black market, can be traced to this strange and largely unknown fad," Blackwell says.

Blackwell did extensive research on live-tooth transplantation and explored its significance in an article he wrote in 2004 for the journal *Eighteenth-Century Life*. The article, entitled "‘Extraneous Bodies’: The Contagion of Live-Tooth Transplantation in Late-Eighteenth-Century England," earned him the prestigious 2004-05 James L. Clifford Prize. The Clifford Prize, conferred by the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, honors an outstanding study of some aspect of 18th-century culture, regardless of the field of study.

Much of Blackwell's award-winning research was supported by a Greenberg Junior Faculty Research Grant. These grants, made possible by a gift from former chairman of the board of regents Arnold (Hon. '89) and Beverly Greenberg, promote high-quality research, scholarship, and artistic activity by faculty members just beginning their careers.

Blackwell's grant helped him conduct research at the British Library and the British Museum in London. He also did extensive research at Yale University's Lewis Walpole Library in Farmington, Conn. The Walpole Library has one of the world's best collections of 18th-century prints—including a number of cartoon-like engravings depicting the primitive dental practices of that time.

One of Blackwell's areas of expertise is the "it-narrative," a sub-genre of 18th-century fiction in which a story is told by a nonhuman narrator—either an animal or an inanimate object such as a coin. The narrating object or animal recounts its adventures as it passes into the hands of different, unrelated characters. When he came upon an it-narrative in which a character complains that someone else has his teeth, Blackwell was intrigued. He decided to investigate, and that is how he discovered the late 18th-century vogue for live-tooth transplantation.

Although Blackwell's interest in this procedure may seem unusual, it is a logical extension of his fascination with the it-narrative. Both shed light on a growing consumer culture where people were becoming increasingly focused on objects and their circulation on the open market, he says.

As he continued his research, Blackwell was struck by differences in how objects are defined in the it-narrative (where things can speak) and in descriptions of live-tooth transplantation (in which human parts are sold). "These texts explore the fluid relationship between people and their things, with the sale of teeth serving as an example of people being commodified," Blackwell says.

In the case of live-tooth transplantation, that increasingly blurry line between people and objects was driven by fashion, consumerism, and the desire to look a certain way, Blackwell says—forces that continue to play a powerful role in today's society.

"Many contemporary trends and problems have their beginnings in the 18th century," Blackwell says. "We live in a culture very different from [that of the 18th century], yet there are remarkable echoes and parallels because we have inherited a world they helped create."
Associate Professor Mark Blackwell did much of his research on 18th-century live-tooth transplantation at the Lewis Walpole Library in Farmington, Conn.