Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century

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Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century

Edited by

ROY PORTER *and* MARIE MULVEY ROBERTS

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*To Helen and Vivian
for being such endless sources of pleasure*

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Preface

Pleasure is the only thing worth having a theory about.

Oscar Wilde

When Oscar Wilde, the doyen of the pleasurable, wrote ‘I adore simple pleasures. They are the last refuge of the complex’,¹ he was acknowledging one of the many paradoxes that pervade the history of pleasure. Simple pleasure can not only be complex but may also be the last refuge of the nostalgia-monger, who is unable to resist the comfortable notion that the pleasures of the eighteenth century had managed to escape the complexities of modernity. As we are all only too aware nowadays, the pleasurable can often be a site of unease, against which we must ask such questions as: is it environmentally safe, morally acceptable, ideologically sound or politically correct? But were there not similar constraints surrounding pleasure during the eighteenth century, particularly when the enjoyment lay in transgression? Has not pleasure always been encumbered by the weight of its own inner complexities, ideology, discourse and paradoxes? The notion of simple pleasure has been too often a simplification of the past and a disavowal of the complexities of which it is constituted. On the other hand, problematising pleasure, whether simple or otherwise, may be part of a response to the perversities it can incite. It could also be, as Michel Foucault suggests, an indulgence in the discursive pleasure which is inherent within the ‘pleasures of analysis’:

It is often said that we have been incapable of imagining any new pleasures. We have at least invented a different kind of pleasure: pleasure in the truth of pleasure, the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of seeing it and telling it, of captivating and capturing others by it, of confiding it in secret, of luring it out in the open – the specific pleasure of the true discourse on pleasure.²

The editors of this volume hope that the reader will enjoy a Foucauldian ‘true discourse of pleasure’ which is long overdue. Considering how important eighteenth-century pleasure was to its participants, it is surprising that so little has been written directly on this subject. For the first time, this collection of essays brings together material history, theoretical perspectives and literary studies to explore the complexities surrounding the theory and practice of pleasure during this period. Here a number of leading scholars have broken through the taboo of writing about pleasure. To a great extent, its history has been marginalised by the more acceptable subjects of happiness or desire. Because of its associations with immediate gratification, the pleasurable has been devalued partly because it has been seen as being more accessible to the populace than to the elite. The class-bias in regard to prioritising desire over pleasure as a philosophical category is indicated by Roland Barthes who notes that ‘the “populace” does not know Desire – only pleasures’.³ When anyone dares to address the pleasure of the text, Barthes claims that there are two policemen ready to pounce on the transgressor; ‘the political policeman and the psychoanalytical policeman: futility and/or guilt, pleasure is either idle or vain, a class notion or an illusion’.⁴ He goes on to complain about the way in which epistemologies of pleasure have been neglected:

Pleasure is continually disappointed, reduced, deflated, in favor of strong, noble values: Truth, Death, Progress, Struggle, Joy, etc. Its victorious rival is Desire: we are always being told about Desire, never about Pleasure: Desire has an epistemic dignity, Pleasure does not.⁵

Trivialised and over-simplified remains the popular view of the pleasure-seekers of the eighteenth century – one that reinforces the stereotype of an Arcadian of simple pleasure. The prevailing image is of a large pleasure garden wherein lusty Boswellian males stalk white-thread-stockinged ‘nymphs’, where club-men consume claret with gusto and jolly hearty eaters gorge themselves, patriotically, on beefsteak. The eighteenth century was the era of the belly-laugh. Even though one of its most amusing writers, Jonathan Swift, is applauded for having laughed

only once, the fact that someone was counting is, in itself, significant. It is appropriate that it was during a performance of Henry Fielding's *Tom Thumb* (1730) when Swift erupted into laughter, since the taking of pleasure in company was regarded as the proper theatre of human enjoyment. As William Hogarth's engraving of a laughing audience on the front cover of this book signifies, the social face of pleasure was etched into a notion of enjoyment that was shared. While solitary mirth and delight were regarded as miasmic, the happiness arising from collective humour was seen to be healthy. For example, the pleasures of conversation, that had been refined to such arts as those of raillery and repartee, were represented best as a dialogue as opposed to a monologue. As an expression of communality, pleasure was predicated upon conviviality, and institutions such as the playhouse, the club and the coffee-house were formed in order to consolidate the joys of social intercourse. But to what extent was pleasure stage-managed in order to make it socially, morally and politically acceptable? Was it, in part, a performance, or was it a moral desideratum in being allied to notions of the social good, civic virtue and rationality?

The pleasure of doing good is the subject of Carolyn Williams's essay. The rise of organised charities provided a catalyst for turning the abstracted cult of sensibility into the hands-on culture of the worthy cause. She concentrates on the aptly named Royal Humane Society, which specialised in life-saving and was therefore able to provide intense pleasure both for its Lazarus-like beneficiaries and for its benevolent members. As a further inducement to the pleasure of resuscitating a victim rescued from drowning, there were cash rewards for the lower classes and medals for their social superiors. The link between virtue and pleasure is one nexus in the web of philosophical underpinnings that are unpicked by Roy Porter in his essay on 'Pleasure and the Enlightenment'. Here, he also looks at the new hedonism that had emerged from the *philosophes*, which was posited upon the new materialistic doctrines arising from the Scientific Revolution. Pleasures were sanctioned by being redefined in the light of innovative ideologies. The revival of Classicism, which encompassed the pleasures of the Ancients, also granted a licence to the Epicurean, provided that it was tempered by the Augustan emphasis upon moderation.

Yet the excesses described in Simon Varey's guide to Georgian feasting suggest that the upper classes threw aside all restraint when gorging themselves upon Bacchanalian delights. Varey traces the great chain of food down from the aristocrats' banquet with its pyramids of sweetmeats, to the middle classes' penchant for a comfortable soup, through to the lower classes' more modest fare of potatoes and fatty pork. Gastronomic warfare was waged between the English and the French, which turned the dinner table into a battleground over nationalist pickings on both sides. Unlike France, which retained a greater variety of regional cooking, there developed in England a national cuisine. This tended to standardise tastes between the town and country, even though there was a sharp divide in regard to the quality of food available. While the rural communities enjoyed fresh nutritional products, the townsfolk often had no option but to buy over-ripe fruit and vegetables and stale meat from the urban market.

Consumerism is the theme of Roy Porter's other essay, which is on material pleasures. He points out that increasing affluence facilitated the growth of a consumerist society which helped characterise England as a nation of shoppers to the detriment of folk merrymaking. Forms of enjoyment that had once been the exclusive property of the elite were now becoming more accessible to the majority. His focus is upon how and why the middling classes aspired to buy into aristocratic pleasures and the emergence of a quintessentially bourgeois realm of enjoyment. The location of Georgian jollifications in the pleasure garden represents a matrix wherein the classes, nature, art, artefact, fashion, courtship and consumerism converged on common ground.

It was at Vauxhall Pleasure Garden where the elements of water and fire were celebrated through the first performance of Handel's *Water Music* and *Fireworks Music*. Derek Alsop discusses the influence of Handel on Italian opera, which was a spectacular, lavish and foreign import into London society. The absurd plots, sensuality, strutting tenors with their falsettos and, worse still, the castrati performers were all feared by patriots as un-English and by moralists as eroding the standards of popular taste. In an age when travesty was the 'norm', the permutations for sexual ambiguity were inexhaustible, as when

castrati would masquerade as women playing the roles of men disguised on stage as women.

Marie Mulvey Roberts looks at the cross-dressing 'Mollies' as another source of voyeuristic pleasure in her survey of clubs of Augustan and Georgian England. These various and varied clubs catered for the pleasures of their members as in providing them with roast beef, a place to consume claret and conversation with abandon, or to incite rakes and rogues in Mohock mayhem. Such was the vogue for clubs, that pleasure was to be found even in their fabrication, as in the Ugly Club, the No Noses Club and the Beaus' Club, also known as the Lady's Lapdog Club. She argues that single-sex clubs provided men and women with the opportunity to appropriate the characteristics of the opposite sex as well as focusing on the absent other. As contemporary taxonomies reveal, there was a club, real or imaginary, for almost every kind of pleasure, from the Lying Club for the mendacious to the Surly Club for the misanthropist.

It may be too simple to regard the pleasures taken during the eighteenth century as a reaction against earlier ideologies, religious hegemony and social mores. The pleasures of the Augustans have been viewed as a rejection of the killjoys of the previous century. Since they had to contend with plague, fire, and civil war, it is hardly surprising to find that for them life was often nasty, brutish and, in view of such misery, mercifully short. Likewise, the prurience and puritanism of the Victorians have been represented as a backlash against the rollicking Georgians. It is easy to discredit these views by pointing out that the puritan and the libertine co-existed during the eighteenth century and that the Victorians were not averse to having a good time. But although no period can claim to have had a monopoly on enjoyment, neither has there been, during the course of history, a particular group of recipients who have had an automatic entitlement or inalienable right to it. For example, the rational Enlightenment was seen to endorse the pursuit of both pleasure and happiness as the prerogative of the reasonable man. Women, even when they were not blatantly regarded as *machines de plaisir*, were generally perceived as more of a source than a subject of pleasure.

The notion that pleasures became more refined the higher one advanced up the social hierarchy was an illusion that the

'well-bred' liked to cultivate. The polluting pleasures of the bawd house and bordello were not enjoyed exclusively by any one class. Individuals who were able to indulge in pleasurable activities could find that their delight was compromised by the moral or immoral burdens with which their pleasure could be loaded. The rationalising of forms of enjoyment into hierarchies and taxonomies can lead to a danger of the kind of exploitation of the powerless that characterised the division of labour which has been formulated by Adam Smith. Such divisions of pleasure can be seen to have distilled and intensified certain kinds of pleasurable activity, which helped incubate the seeds of Victorian fetishism.

The Enlightenment's high-priest of the perversity of pleasure was the Marquis de Sade, whose credo – that there should be a right to pleasure beyond guilt – disrupts the laws of reciprocity between even the most dangerous of acquaintances. Such an ideology was grafted on to some of the plots of popular fiction. Vivien Jones explores the perversities of the transgressive pleasures arising from conduct literature by juxtaposing it with the seduction plots of contemporaneous novels. She shows how conduct books can be titillating in the way that they stimulate the disruptive desires they seek to curtail. Although these prescriptive manuals could scarcely be regarded as progressive for women, as providers of subversive pleasures they expose an ideological instability within literature.

An antidote to the literary instability represented by the Gothic novel can be seen to have been provided by the flood of treatises on the sublime, that sought to explain the paradoxical pleasure of terror. Emma Clery draws on Edmund Burke's notion of the terrible sublime to argue that, once terror ceased to function as a guardian of civic virtue, it became domesticated through the Gothic novel into a commodity for the consumption of private pleasure. Although some writers in the terror mode took the civic responsibilities Burke indicated seriously, the majority were interested only in saleable sensationalism, and the notion of civic terror collapsed under the weight of its contradictions. Since Burke formulated many of the ideas that were developed by the Romantic poets, it is appropriate that the following essay, which concludes the book, is a textual analysis of the pleasures to be found in the poetry of Burns and

Wordsworth, culminating in 'The Pleasure which there is in life itself'. Susan Manning shows how simple pleasure is captured within Wordsworth's Romantic poetry, as that which does not aspire to the abstract or transcendent, but is grounded in the immediacy of the here and now.

As readers are doubtless eager to begin their vicarious enjoyment of the pleasures of the eighteenth century, they should be delayed no longer by this preface. Considering that the pursuit of happiness has already been given centre stage by scholars such as Peter Quennell,⁶ the time has arrived for the curtains to open and pleasure to be reclaimed from the wings. This urgency is particularly pressing when we consider how many of the pleasure-seekers of the eighteenth century would have agreed with Wilde in his 'Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young', that 'Pleasure is the only thing one should live for. Nothing ages like happiness.'⁷

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