
11 · SENSIBILITY G. J. BARKER-BENFIELD

Britain became a consumer society in the period 1650–1750, although there were great *class [15], regional, and chronological differences in the new consumption patterns. Decline in the long-standing forms of suffering, brought about by natural and human causes, was accompanied by a widespread expression of the more refined kind of suffering that preoccupied the primarily middle-class cultivators of sensibility. Indeed, sensibility was the means whereby the middle class defined itself against a lower class still vulnerable to severe hardship [see *poverty, 12]. So great was the divide that as early as 1710 the *Spectator* could recommend perceiving the miserable and hungry in London's streets as 'a different species', and aggrandize the pleasure of 'a secret comparison' between 'ourselves and the person who suffers'.

Journals such as the *Spectator* were an important part of a public culture which encouraged its new middle-class audience to pursue the cult and language of sensibility. This word and its cognates denoted the receptivity of the senses—the material basis of consciousness—in a psychoperceptual scheme combining John *Locke's psychology with Isaac *Newton's explanation of the operation of the nerves. According to Locke, sensation was received by the organs and conveyed by the nerves to the brain, generating ideas, which were connected to each other by reflection. Locke later added the 'Association of Ideas' to sensation and reflection as the sources of consciousness. Newton's enormous intellectual authority provided sensational *psychology [39] with its understanding of the specific operation of the nerves: his view was that the nerves transmitted sense impressions by the vibrations of the 'most subtle spirit', ether, inhering in all solid bodies. The speed of such neurological transmissions depended on nerve elasticity, supposed by some to be highly developed among the middle class. Popularized by sentimental fiction and some popular forms of *religion [10] with which it coincided, this psychoperceptual scheme became a paradigm for consciousness in general as well as a particular kind of consciousness, one that could be further sensitized in order to be more acutely responsive to signals from the outside environment and from inside the body. Auditors and readers initially relished and eventually took for granted the system betokened by the words 'nerve', 'fibre', 'sensation', 'impression', and, of course, 'sensibility'. The flexibility of the term 'sensibility', synonymous with consciousness, with feelings, and eventually identifiable with sexual characteristics, generated a continuous struggle over its meanings and values.

As the new scheme was popularized, it was also gendered. Newton had not distinguished women's nerves and brains from men's, but his popularizing successors, especially the new medical experts, frequently questioned the operation of the will in women's putatively more delicate nerves, compounding the potential for passivity implicit in the association of ideas. The view that women's nerves were more delicate than men's, making them naturally creatures of greater sensibility, became a prominent convention of the eighteenth century. A high value was placed on this greater sensibility as grounds for imaginative capacity, but the refinement of the nerves (in 'effeminate' men, too) was also often identified with greater suffering, delicacy, and a susceptibility to disorder. Of course, late-seventeenth-century sensational, or environmental, psychology had promised women and men the power to construct selves and circumstance. However, the theoretical value attributed to the development of women's consciousness was in tension with a paradigm that could also rationalize their subordination on the basis of their finer sensibility. Eighteenth-century men cultivated sensibility, too,



13. 'Who can contemplate such a scene unmoved?', illustration by Charles Rolls after Richard Westall to the 1822 edition of Hester Chapone's conduct book, *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind*.

but this did not jeopardize other qualities or their participation in larger and more public goals.

Long having claimed regular, even daily, leisure at the alehouse, men found their pleasures amplified by the alehouse's absorption of the recreations banned from the churchyard since the Reformation [see *taverns]. Benefiting from the resurgence of internal trade, the alehouse became a new kind of economic centre, outside the old regulated market, more modern in its range and flexibility. However, puritan respectables apprehended it as 'a centre for public irreligion' and scorned it for its 'obscene talk, noise, nonsense and ribaldry . . . fumes of tobacco, belchings and other foul breaking of wind' that 'the rude rabble' esteemed 'the brightest happiness and run themselves into the greatest straits . . . to attain'. The attainment of this masculine happiness was, in large part, dependent on a sense of 'liberation' from the presence of 'womenfolk' in the place where most men spent the bulk of their time when not working. It was the base from which 'rakes' launched their individual and group assaults on people in the street, above all on women, marking men's traditional domination of public space. Physical and verbal assaults in the streets, along with cultural stereotypes in print, demonstrate the prevalence of a popular strain of misogyny. 'Rakes' or 'libertines' in eighteenth-century sentimental drama and literature can be seen as the most egregious representatives of a male culture being defined by its incompatibility with a new sense of public decency, that is, a new order in the streets and the non-brutalization of women.

That order was in part implemented by the century-long campaign for the *reformation of manners. Provoked by the post-Restoration proliferation of public pleasure centres, playhouses, and *coffeehouses, as well as of those uppity alehouses—and the freer expressions of behaviour associated with them—societies for the reformation of manners united their efforts with those of the government throughout the century [see *popular culture, 23]. Adherents to

this campaign ranged from monarchs to manufacturers, bishops to commonwealthmen, *Tories, *Whigs, and feminists. Their weapons included blank warrants, licensing laws, theatre, poetry, sentimental fiction, and sovereign edicts (for example, against night violence on the streets). By definition they campaigned for a different kind of manhood.

Campaigning Latitudinarian divines argued that human nature was instinctively sympathetic and that passions naturally inclined men to virtuous actions which were reinforced by associated pleasurable feelings. Derived from Cambridge Platonism, this was the germ of 'moral sense', which also entered the culture of sensibility. Latitudinarians, too, drew upon the paradigm of sensibility; their *sermons reflected the same relationship between the narrators' affecting stories and the audiences' tears and sighs that informed the sentimental novel. Wesleyanism softened Latitudinarian doctrine still further by appealing to 'reasons of the heart' associated with 'peasants' and 'women'. John *Wesley opposed the world of the tavern, its cock-fighting and bear-baiting, and the rough music and wife sales embedded in the same culture. He opposed the sexual double standard by calling for 'male chastity', and he urged the replacing of the gamut of 'coarse' public behaviour with the manners of reformed gentlemen.

Though eighteenth-century religion may have contributed to the modification of the public manners of men, the historian John Pocock believes that the new mobile forms of property entailed the 'construction of a new image of social personality', based 'upon the exchange of forms of mobile property and upon modes of consciousness suited to a world of moving objects'. In the view of contemporaries, this new image was brought about by the multiplying 'encounters with things and persons', evoking 'passions and refining them into manners', experienced in turn as male sensibility. Commercial capitalists changed their manners in fostering new modes of mass mannerliness among customers—both groups primed to change by appetite, by mobility, by religion, by successful rebellions and reactions, as well as by emulativeness and the other possibilities nurtured by alehouse culture.

Trumpeting of the reformation of manners marked anxieties over the triumph of moneyed interests and attempts to uphold an eighteenth-century classical ideal of the landed patriotic citizen. The 'degeneracy' linked to the rise of the moneyed interest and decline of the citizen soldier was expressed in the gender-specific term 'effeminacy'. Those who warned Englishmen that effeminacy was the inevitable effect of luxury had the most powerful of all precedents in mind: the history of the degeneracy of Rome, from virtuous republic to luxurious empire.

Tension between the high evaluation of refinement in men and the wish to square it with manliness permeated the eighteenth-century novel, whatever the gender of the writer. Samuel Richardson (1689–1761), the author of what is usually regarded as the founding British sentimental novel, *Clarissa* (1748), made softened manhood the central goal of his participation in the reformation of manners, saying in his own voice that 'the man is to be honor'd who can weep for the distresses of others'. He made Sir Charles Grandison, the eponymous hero of his 1753 novel, a mid-century emblem of the ideals upheld by Adam *Smith and David *Hume, whose writings illustrate the proper limits placed on sensibility in men.

Hume recorded the physiological distinctions of men congregating in the splendid new houses and public buildings of Georgian Edinburgh, withdrawing from 'the grimy vitality of old Edinburgh to the prim and properness of the New Town', just as the same men rejected 'Scoticisms' for English speech [see *language, 40]. The 'skin, pores, muscles and nerves of a day labourer are different from those of a man of quality, so are his sentiments, actions and manners'. Hume specified how the creation of cities, with consequent increase in human contact, organization, knowledge, and pleasure, produced 'an increase of humanity', that is, humanitarianism. He argued that the more men refined their pleasures, the less susceptible they were to indulge themselves in 'bestly gluttony' and 'drunkenness', though not necessarily in 'libertine love'. He attributed to women 'a more delicate taste in the ornaments of life' and 'the ordinary decencies of behaviour', and he suggested that it was the easier and 'sociable'