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**LUXURY AND CORRUPTION: A  
LITERARY AND CULTURAL  
STUDY, 1800-1875**

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PhD in Nineteenth-Century Studies (English)

Birkbeck College, University of London

September 2013

## Declaration

I certify that this piece of work is entirely my own and that any quotation or paraphrase from the published or unpublished work of others is duly acknowledged. I also confirm that the thesis presented here is the one upon which I expect to be examined.

.....

Rachel Samantha Leonard

.....

Date

## Abstract

This thesis explores the connection between luxury and corruption – an eighteenth-century axiom – in nineteenth-century literature and culture. Literary critics have mostly interpreted nineteenth-century luxury in terms of material culture: fetishised commodity (Andrew Miller) or, an example of recent reaction to this approach, historical metonym (Freedgood). There is little interest in broader understandings, as if a concept held responsible for the downfall of civilizations disappeared overnight. My own work aims to open out our sense of its nineteenth-century meanings by extending Sekora's intellectual history of luxury (1977), which concludes with Smollett, and Berry's politically focused study (1994), to discover what happened between the age of luxury as pathology and fall and nineteenth-century fin-de-siècle notions of luxury as biological degeneration and decadence.

This study is structured around five key novels and corresponding themes that reveal nineteenth-century attitudes to luxury: Austen's *Mansfield Park*, 1814 (slavery), Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, 1848 (temperance), Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, 1848 (prostitution), and Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, 1865 with Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*, 1875 (national decline). Combining an historicist approach with close reading, the thesis foregrounds political and economic ideas, from Ferguson's classical republicanism to Malthus's population theory. It attends closely to nuanced language use in representing human wants: valorised 'necessities', moralised 'luxuries', sometimes evasive 'comforts' and 'refinements'.

Despite luxury's apparent rehabilitation in an economically liberal age, persisting concerns are found regarding its corruption of individuals and nations, especially at the beginning and towards the end of the nineteenth century, when national decline was more feared.

This thesis finds a liberty-slavery dichotomy as *the* nineteenth-century luxury issue, whether manifested negatively – other-enslavement to procure luxury, self-enslavement to luxurious appetites, or national enslavement caused by luxury-led emasculation and political decay – or positively – free trade, affirmation of acquisitive desire or celebration of luxurious excess as antidote to rigid control.

## Contents

Acknowledgements .....	5
Introduction .....	6
Chapter 1: ‘Satisfactions very sweet if not very sound’: Luxury, Slavery and Barbarism in Jane Austen’s <i>Mansfield Park</i> .....	29
Chapter 2: ‘That bowl of rack punch was the cause of all this history’: Thackeray’s <i>Vanity Fair</i> , the Joys of Drink and Luxury as Freedom in an Age of Control .....	78
Chapter 3: ‘Need was right’: Luxury and the Economies of Lust and Hunger in Elizabeth Gaskell’s <i>Mary Barton</i> .....	134
Chapter 4: ‘The downward fortunes of those enervated and corrupted masters of the world’: Rome, Luxury and Corruption in Dickens’s <i>Our Mutual Friend</i> and Trollope’s <i>The Way We Live Now</i> .....	190
Conclusion .....	264
Bibliography .....	282

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## Introduction

In this thesis I explore the connection between the ideas of luxury and corruption in nineteenth-century literature. The link between luxury and corruption was axiomatic in the eighteenth century, and there has been a great deal of critical work on eighteenth-century luxury.<sup>1</sup> However, literary critics working on the nineteenth century have tended to assume that the debates relating to a broader ethic, or moral theory, of pernicious luxury went away. Instead, they have read the idea of luxury – negatively or positively – as relating mostly to forms of material culture, and this usually in terms of commodity fetishism (from Barbara Hardy (1972) to Andrew Miller (1995)).<sup>2</sup> It is my contention in this thesis that a much broader idea of harmful luxury, over and above the material, persisted through the nineteenth century, being especially prominent in its early and later stages, whilst being more subdued, but still apparent, in the middle of the period.

In the eighteenth century the ideas of luxury and corruption were so intertwined that they ‘even pass[ed] for synonymous terms’,<sup>3</sup> as Adam Ferguson, a leading figure of the Scottish Enlightenment, put it. Ferguson was attempting to separate the two terms, whilst at the same time identifying a pernicious form of luxury that did lead to corruption. His attempt at a neutral definition of the terms luxury and corruption is a helpful starting point for this thesis:

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<sup>1</sup> A useful compendium on eighteenth-century luxury, which includes a discussion of the debates as well as literary and cultural readings, is *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, ed. by Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Hardy, *The Exposure of Luxury: Radical Themes in Thackeray* (London: Peter Owen, 1972); Andrew Miller, *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 1<sup>st</sup> edn collated with variants of 7<sup>th</sup> edn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966 (1767/1814)), p.248.

by the first we may understand that accumulation of wealth, and that refinement on the ways of enjoying it, which are the objects of industry, or the fruits of mechanic and commercial arts: And by the second a real weakness, or depravity of the human character, which may accompany any state of those arts, and be found under any external circumstances or condition whatsoever. (pp.248-249)

But the connection between luxury and human depravity had been an historical given until at least the latter half of the eighteenth century. As late as 1800, rector Adam Sibbit was taking the polemical view:

Luxury has been the bane of every nation, and the efficient cause of its destruction. Most of the celebrated nations of antiquity, which formerly commanded the homage and admiration of the world, by the extent of their conquests, by the greatness of their riches, or by the elegance of their arts, have become victims to this insidious corrupter of mankind, and bear ample testimony to its ravages and devastations.<sup>4</sup>

Luxury's conflation with corruption had encompassed the personal and the political. A distinction was drawn between a valorised need, or necessity, and a moralised desire, or luxury. It was felt that once the purposive nature of need was overturned, human appetites became insatiable. The human mind or soul became unable to govern the body's appetites and passions, as befitted humanity's special status within creation or the natural world, and so humans became no better than animals. People became internally corrupted or, metaphorically, self-enslaved.

This state of human pathology then spread to the body politic. Within the masculinist classical republican or civic humanist paradigm, still influential in the eighteenth century, it was thought that luxury led to political slavery. As a nation's wealth increased, men became not only softened and feminised by luxury itself, but increasingly unable and unwilling to put public before private good. Cowardice set in. Too attached to private gain and private indulgence, they handed over defence of the state to hired mercenaries, who had little allegiance to any given political entity.

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<sup>4</sup>A. B. Sibbit, *A Dissertation, Moral and Political on the Influence of Luxury and Refinement on Nations* (London: T. Cadell, Jun. & W. Davies, 1800), pp.9-10.



Private faction and internal disorder led to internal tyranny, and eventual susceptibility to external conquerors. One of the most persistent and trenchant tropes of these ‘mechanics of corruption’,<sup>5</sup> as Christopher Berry defines the process of decline and fall, was the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. The Roman Republic had comprised a manly, courageous and virtuous citizenry, but following extensive conquest and the acquisition of vast wealth, it declined into tyranny (becoming the Empire) and anarchy, eventually leaving itself susceptible to overthrow by still manly barbarian conquerors.

If luxury threatened men’s masculinity, women were considered particularly susceptible to its pernicious effects because they were more driven by their bodily economy, and thus their appetites and passions. The perceived insatiable nature of female desire, together with women’s artful influence over men, led to a boundless extravagance which ruined families, and at worst triggered the downfall of empires. The position of a male contributor to women’s periodical, *La Belle Assemblée*, at the turn of the nineteenth century, was typical of this attitude:

I shall state one grand truth, a truth confirmed by the experience of every age, by the testimony of all nations that the luxury of women destroys population, private happiness, and the harmony of families; that it undermines public morals, nay, even overturns the fundamental constitutions of empires, and at length effects their total subversion.<sup>6</sup>

With the rise of political economy in the eighteenth century, an opposing discourse of positive luxury emerged. Writers such as David Hume and Adam Smith stressed the role of commerce in creating civilization. Hume thought that ‘industry, knowledge, and humanity, are linked together by an indissoluble chain’, and that these were ‘peculiar to the more polished, and, what are commonly denominated, the more

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<sup>5</sup> Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.70.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Of the Luxury of Women’, *La Belle Assemblée*, 1 January 1807, pp.14-15 (p.14).

luxurious ages'.<sup>7</sup> It was argued that increasing national wealth led to increasing national greatness, rather than its opposite. In times of national exigency, such as war, workers employed in luxury manufactures could easily be spared and turned to soldiering, unlike key agricultural workers who were needed to maintain the food supply. Also, increasing private fortunes actually increased national political power (that of the sovereign and government) because these additional resources could be drawn on by the state when necessary. The manufacture of luxury goods increased employment opportunities for the poor, at the same time raising their standard of living. Smith argued against the assumption that this would make the poor lazy and discontented (under the prevailing idea of the utility of poverty, it was felt that the naturally lazy lower orders could only be got to work if their lives depended on it, that is through the achievement of a bare subsistence). Instead, increasing incentive would increase productivity. Besides, it made sense and was only just that the bulk of a population should be contented and rewarded for their contribution to society.

Servants, labourers and workmen of different kinds, make up by far the greater part of every great political society. But what improves the circumstances of the greater part can never be regarded as an inconveniency to the whole. No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable. It is but equity, besides, that they who feed, cloath and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, cloathed and lodged.<sup>8</sup>

These economic pro-luxury arguments, or what was at the time called political or civil luxury,<sup>9</sup> were sometimes able to provide a half-way house between old and new. So that, although luxury could still be seen as morally harmful to the individual, it was at the same time beneficial to the nation. For example, political freedoms increased,

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<sup>7</sup> David Hume, 'Of Refinement in the Arts' (1760), in *David Hume: Writings on Economics*, ed. by Eugene Rotwein (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1955), pp.19-32 (p.23).

<sup>8</sup> Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 5th edn (New York: Modern Library, 2000 (1789)), p.90.

<sup>9</sup> See Berry, p.101.

spreading more fairly to different classes of the community as the great landed estates disintegrated due to the extravagance of landowners, now drawn into conspicuous consumption.

It was thought that the spread of commerce encouraged the spread of peace (trade not war). By the second quarter of the nineteenth century, this blessing was being taken for granted. James Phillips Kay, a doctor, educationalist, politician and acquaintance of the Gaskells, eulogised the commercial system as one 'which promotes the advance of civilization, and diffuses it over the world – [and] which promises to maintain the peace of nations'.<sup>10</sup> By mid-century, Thomas Baines, writing a history of Liverpool commerce, predicted that England would never again be an aggressor in war, because 'commerce has created innumerable ties of friendship and interest, among nations formerly hostile and rival, which will not be easily broken'.<sup>11</sup> An emphasis on peace meant that the importance of male warrior courage could henceforth be downplayed, though advocates of luxury also tended to deny that cowardice and commerce went together. Hume thought that men lost their ferocity but not their martial spirit, and cited the English and French nations, 'whose bravery is as uncontestable, as their love for the arts, and their assiduity in commerce'.<sup>12</sup>

However, I will find concerns about male luxury and its relationship to a loss of martial spirit extending into the nineteenth century. Indeed, although stereotypes about female susceptibility to luxury certainly continued through the Victorian period, it was the corrupting influence of luxury on the male that was emphasised, particularly in

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<sup>10</sup> James Phillips Kay, *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes Employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester* (London: James Ridgway, 1832), p.47.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Baines, *History of the Commerce and Town of Liverpool, and the Rise of Manufacturing Industry in the Adjoining Counties* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans; Liverpool: the author, 1852), p.844.

<sup>12</sup> 'Of Refinement in the Arts', p.26.

relation to concerns about national decline and fall. E. J. Clery finds a ‘masculine ethic’ operating in Jane Austen’s novels, because, during times of war, ‘men’s behaviour, even more than women’s, is placed under the spotlight’.<sup>13</sup> Although this thesis is not the place for an in-depth study of literary masculinities relating to the post-Austen nineteenth century, in terms of the luxury debates it is worth stressing that Clery’s observations about Austen will also hold validity for the later Dickens and Trollope. Following the relatively long period of peace between the Napoleonic wars and the Crimean conflict, Britain’s place in the world became less certain, and the confident assertions about peace and commerce more shaky. John Tosh identifies one particular strand of critical work on nineteenth-century masculinities as that relating to ‘public discourse – a metaphor for the nation’s virility in the case of the eighteenth century, and a set of prescriptions for the virtuous and profitable life in the nineteenth century’.<sup>14</sup> My emphasis with regard to Austen, Dickens and Trollope will be on manliness as still a ‘metaphor for the nation’s virility’, even though that metaphor was coloured by new ideas of virility, for example by the bourgeois work ethic.

E. J. Clery has helpfully identified the two opposing strands of the eighteenth-century luxury debates in gendered terms, as a negatively viewed ‘effeminization’ and a positively viewed ‘feminization’. The former discourse, part of the classical republican paradigm, connected luxury with decline, and was ‘employed as the sum of a complex of derogatory ideas [...] gendered “feminine”, including corruption, weakness, cowardice, luxury, immorality and the unbridled play of the passions’.<sup>15</sup> The

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<sup>13</sup> E. J. Clery, ‘Austen and Masculinity’, in *A Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. by Claudia L. Johnson and Clara Tuite (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp.332-342 (p.335).

<sup>14</sup> John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2005), p.72.

<sup>15</sup> E. J. Clery, *The Feminization Debate in Eighteenth-Century England: Literature, Commerce and Luxury* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.10.

latter discourse, a counter to classical republicanism, connected luxury with progress, and: ‘approve[d] or even advocate[d] the acquisition of certain characteristics gendered “feminine”: sociability, civility, compassion, domesticity and love of family, the dynamic exercise of the passions and, above all, refinement, the mark of modernity’ (p.10).

The problem of defining exactly what luxury was – where the line crossed from necessity to luxury, and thus where moral judgement should begin – had been long standing, and proved helpful for advocates of luxury. As far back as the early eighteenth century, Bernard Mandeville, in his highly controversial defence of luxury, *The Fable of the Bees* (first published 1714), had stated:

If every thing is to be Luxury (as in strictness it ought) that is not immediately necessary to make Man subsist as he is a living Creature, there is nothing else to be found in the World, no not even among the naked Savages; of which it is not probable that there are any but what by this time have made some Improvements upon their manner of Living.<sup>16</sup>

One way round the issue, as we shall also find in the nineteenth century, was through a circuitous or synonymous use of language. For example, the term ‘refinement’ could replace ‘luxury’ to imply a positive interpretation of the concept. Hume even changed the title of his essay, ‘On Luxury’ (1752), to ‘Of Refinement in the Arts’ (1760).

These battles over the idea of luxury have led one historian to suggest that ‘A history of luxury and attitudes to luxury would come very close to being a history of the eighteenth century’;<sup>17</sup> and another, in characterising the fundamental change that occurred in the nineteenth century, to state that luxury ‘underwent a lasting devaluation: from a myth to a fiction, from an ethic to a prejudice, and from an

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<sup>16</sup> Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (London: Penguin, 1989 (1725)), pp.136-137.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783* (Oxford: OUP, 1989), p.3.

essential, general element of moral theory to a minor, technical element of economic theory'.<sup>18</sup> In this thesis, I contend that the luxury myth, ethic and moral theory did not just disappear as the nineteenth century turned. Although the idea variously changed shape and weight, it remained persistent. I find that the eighteenth-century or neoclassical critique was most apparent at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and again towards the 1870s, when fears of national decline and fall were more prominent. In the middle of the century, debates began to shift or transform. The neoclassical interpretation of pernicious luxury was still present, but less visible. Luxury could still be criticised, but this was done on different terms. Rather than emphasising luxury's role in the corruption of private and public virtue, critiques of luxury now tended to emphasise unfair resource distribution: the immorality of a society allowing extreme wealth alongside extreme poverty. For example, when John Ruskin set out his critique of luxury in 'On the Political Economy of Art' (1857), he felt that his message would be more palatable if he left out the ethical dimension, even though he clearly believed in it:

Luxuries, whether national or personal, must be paid for by labour withdrawn from useful things; and no nation has a right to indulge in them until all its poor are comfortably housed and fed. The enervating influence of luxury, and its tendencies to increase vice, are points which I keep entirely out of consideration in the present essay: but, so far as they bear on any question discussed, they merely furnish additional evidence on the side which I have taken. Thus, in the present case, I assume that the luxuries of civilised life are in possession harmless, and in acquirement, serviceable as a motive for exertion; and even on these favourable terms, we arrive at the conclusion that the nation ought not to indulge in them except under severe limitations.<sup>19</sup>

In order to focus my discussion of nineteenth-century attitudes to luxury I concentrate on five key novels, reading them in their cultural, political, economic and

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<sup>18</sup> John Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett* (Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1977), p.112.

<sup>19</sup> John Ruskin, 'The Political Economy of Art' (1857), in *Unto This Last & Other Essays on Art and Political Economy* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons; New York: E.P. Dutton, 1907), pp.1-106 (p.96).

religious contexts, and identifying for each a particular, related theme. The novels are: Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848), Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) and Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1875). For ease of explanation, in my discussion I use the terms 'old luxury' and 'new luxury' to refer, respectively, to the range of negative and positive ideas highlighted above.<sup>20</sup> I conclude that the question of luxury in the nineteenth century remains fundamentally one of liberty and non-liberty, freedom and slavery, even though these freedoms and non-freedoms vary in definition.

Before I set out my chosen themes and my reasons for choosing them, I need to acknowledge a heavy debt to two secondary sources on luxury: John Sekora's *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett* (1977) and Christopher Berry's *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (1994). Although both are now some decades old, they remain essential reading on the luxury issue. Berry's work is an extensive political history with an emphasis on how societies have defined and policed luxury to create their idea of good and politic order. I am indebted to his historical definitions of need and desire, or necessity and luxury, the former valorised as rational, natural, purposive, the latter demonised as irrational, unnatural and insatiable. As Berry points out, the need/luxury pairing constitutes a unity, and the two things define each other, like male/female (p.231), and 'since needs/necessities are ineradicable then, because it stands in oppositional relation to these, luxury too is ineliminable' (p.232). So although the idea of luxury was to a certain extent de-politicised during the nineteenth century, we should bear in mind that it has always

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<sup>20</sup> My use of the labels 'new' and 'old' differs from that of Berg and Eger, who use them to describe specific kinds of eighteenth-century luxuries: 'New luxuries were created out of the division of labour and the expansion of commerce, in contrast to old luxuries, which relied on excessive displays of large bodies of retainers' (p.9).

remained to some degree political, for example in the decisions that governments make about taxation. Since need and luxury are two halves of the same thing, Berry defines luxury as always a refinement (qualitatively or quantitatively) on a need, and places need and luxury into four categories: food, clothing, shelter and leisure. Berry does not include sex in his categories, but I do so in my discussion of Gaskell. As I will demonstrate, this is because I see Gaskell as reaffirming the poor's God-given right (the satisfaction of a need) to marry and procreate at a time when this right was so strongly under attack under the influence of Malthusian population theory. Because Gaskell sets this right against the luxury-driven sexual corruption of the rich, we can read sex in Gaskell as necessity or luxury, the first carried on purposively within the union of marriage for the propagation of children, the second carried on without marriage to satisfy mere animal instinct, thus unnaturally, artificially and perversely.

Sekora's work is a sweeping intellectual history, which finishes, in the eighteenth century, with a literary study of Tobias Smollett's *Humphrey Clinker* (1771), the novel that, according to Sekora, was 'the last major English literary work to be informed by the older sense of luxury'(p.x).<sup>21</sup> I have drawn heavily on Sekora's observation of Smollett's – and eighteenth-century – usage of the term luxury as three things: 'the intellectual concept, the moral vice, and some concrete thing' (p.xiv), and have found especially helpful his distinction between pre-nineteenth-century 'internals' and nineteenth- and post-nineteenth-century 'externals':

states of interior wholesomeness, whether of persons or nations, [is a] characteristic alone [...] sufficient to distinguish the classical or pre-nineteenth-century concept of luxury from its modern version, with its emphasis on externals like extravagant spending and the waste of natural resources. (pp.5-6)

This distinction has helped me think through an idea of internal, self- or metaphorical slavery, which I discover in Austen and which continues to crop up in nineteenth-

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<sup>21</sup>Sekora, p.x.



century luxury debates. For example, Trollope's idle and spendthrift aristocrats in *The Way We Live Now* are self-enslaved, that is addicted to their appetites, such as drinking and gambling, with little capacity for useful exertion. I therefore take Sekora's conclusions about pre-nineteenth-century luxury through into the nineteenth century itself, noting continuations, changes and deviations as I go. And I take up the literary tale of luxury where Sekora leaves off.

For Austen's *Mansfield Park* (chapter 1), then, I have chosen the theme of slavery, one of the biggest moral issues of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and one which captures my overall thesis on luxury as a concept of freedom and non-freedom. The theme of slavery has been much critically debated in relation to the novel, and I share the recent consensus that Austen's position was broadly anti-slavery.<sup>22</sup> But what I am interested in is a total idea of slavery – that is slavery in both its external and internal forms – and thus a total idea of luxury. I see Austen as critiquing the slave trade and the institution of slavery itself (other-enslavement, or external slavery) through a mirroring of home and abroad, whereby the wealthy inhabitants of Mansfield, and by extension the nation, are in a slave-like state (self-enslavement or internal slavery), a state produced by luxury which chattel slavery in the West Indies has enabled them to acquire. Luxury's relationship to individual corruption, or self-enslavement, then threatens national political slavery, so that a further mirroring is signalled. The state of barbarity that the anti-slavery campaigners equated with the slave trade and the institution shadows the state of barbarity of a potentially fallen or conquered Britain.

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<sup>22</sup> Gabrielle D.V. White, for example, has devoted a whole book, *Jane Austen in the Context of Abolition: 'a fling at the slave trade'* (2006), to claiming Austen as both committed abolitionist (supporting the ending of the slave trade) and emancipationist (also supporting the ending of the institution of slavery itself).

A host of luxurious, self-enslaved characters also feature in Thackeray's mid-century *Vanity Fair*. The self-indulgent and selfish George Osborne, for example, borrows money to buy a present for Amelia, but is unable to resist spending it on a jewel (a shirt-pin) for himself (VF136). But *Vanity Fair*, which begins its chronological setting (from c. 1813) at the time when Austen wrote *Mansfield Park*, displays a very different sensibility to that novel. *Vanity Fair* also shares with *Mansfield Park* a colonial backdrop, this time in India rather than the West Indies, but the tone is less serious, and in fact the connections between the colonial and luxury are celebrated through the comic Indian 'nabob', Jos Sedley, and the colonial commodity, rack punch. The latter, or rather alcohol more generally, is the key to my discussion of luxury in this novel, and to the crucial question of freedom and non-freedom. But Thackeray's case was an opposite one to Austen's: for him, luxury was liberty.

The sombre, moral and even puritanical tone of *Mansfield Park* can be perceived as 'Victorian', and it is the controlling moral tone of the Victorian period – 'Society the despot'<sup>23</sup> – that Thackeray is reacting against in *Vanity Fair* with its celebration of alcohol as freedom. This moral tone was symptomatic of the rising Victorian temperance ethos, which could encompass simply the Victorians' idea of themselves as moderate and 'temperate' in alcohol consumption compared to their indulgent Georgian forebears, or more specific and political positions such as the anti-spirits, teetotal, and, eventually, prohibition movements. The narrator's tribute to alcohol in Thackeray's later novel, *The Virginians* (1858-69), might sum up Thackeray's rebellion against the new ethos: 'may we not say a word of thanks for all the pleasure we owe to you? Are the Temperance men to be allowed to shout in the public places?' (I. p.319). Thackeray saw luxury as sensual pleasure, and through the

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<sup>23</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Virginians: A Tale of the Last Century*, rev. edn, 2 vols (London: OUP, 1863), I, p.425.

medium of alcohol in *Vanity Fair* he reasserts the right to consume to excess, and also celebrates the freedom of the state of intoxication, a state which overturned the rational, controlled, civilized consciousness that the Victorians prided themselves on. Cocking a snook at Victorian morals and earnestness, ‘the pure and outraged Nineteenth Century’ (I. p.425), he delights in the drunken excess of luxurious, Georgian high society and the pleasure, joie de vivre and humour it entailed.

But for Elizabeth Gaskell in *Mary Barton* (which I discuss in chapter 3), which was published at the same time as *Vanity Fair*, an earnest tone was essential. This is not in the sense of trying to proscribe other people’s pleasures, but in the service of highlighting working-class pain and suffering. Thus here the crux of the luxury issue shifts to a question of rights, rather than freedoms. Against the backdrop of Manchester’s wealth-creating cotton economy, Gaskell turns her attention to the industrial poor, and highlights the necessity/luxury dichotomy in stark terms. Because the gap between rich and poor was so extreme, there was little murky middle ground, just the clear moral message that need should be privileged above luxury.

I have chosen two themes that cluster round the luxury issue here: food and sex, or the appetites of hunger and lust. The appetites of the poor were clearly considered a problem in the early to mid-nineteenth century. In the temperance debates, for example, it was often assumed that the problem of upper-class excess, which had concerned Austen and her contemporaries, had been resolved, and that drunken brutishness was a working-class problem. Under the increasing influence of political economy, especially the ideas of Thomas Malthus, it seemed that the very existence of the poor was being called into question, for their right to eat, as well as their right to reproduce themselves, was under attack. By setting abject poverty alongside great luxury, Gaskell shows that there were clearly enough resources to go

round. Gaskell's defence of the poor's right to a virtuous satisfaction of the sex drive especially manifests itself in her sympathetic depiction of the prostitute. One influential discourse on prostitution in the Victorian period was that women fell due to their own luxury. The latter was perceived principally as vanity, a susceptibility to flattery and a love of cheap 'finery', which led to them being bought easily. Although Gaskell to some extent subscribes to this idea, ultimately she shifts the blame from fallen women to their seducers: sexually corrupt, richer, higher-class men.

It is the problematic, luxurious appetites of, principally, higher-class men that again come to the fore in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* and Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (my focus in chapter 4); and I find that luxury again becomes a question of liberty, as fears of national political slavery reassert themselves. This is exemplified in these novels by the use of the trope of the luxury-led decline and fall of the Roman Empire, which captures my theme for this chapter, national decline.

As we have seen, the question of social class was an integral part of the luxury debates. Sekora identifies a crucial difference between Thackeray's and Smollett's interpretation of luxury, and thus between the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries, as its social locus:

for the one man, luxury as a vice could not, by definition, reach down to the lower levels of English society; it was a vice of the rich. For the other, luxury [...] could not, by definition, directly touch the behaviour of royal, noble, or gentle society; it was a vice of the middling and poorer sort of Englishmen. (p.19)

So for Smollett luxury was principally a question of insubordination. A 'flood of luxury and extravagance'<sup>24</sup> was overtaking the land as the lower orders clamoured for a social position they were not entitled to, and thus caused the breakdown of the proper ordering of society. However, these fears certainly continued into the nineteenth

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<sup>24</sup> Tobias Smollett, *Humphrey Clinker* (London: Penguin, 1985 (1771)), p.87.

century. In *The Way We Live Now* the ostentatious and financially profligate Melmotte, of dubious origins, buys his way into society and power. In *Our Mutual Friend* the shallow and showy Veneerings, also of mysterious origin, gain a foothold in society. But it is true that nineteenth-century fears about luxury-led decline and fall were associated with the higher classes. Although, as we have seen, the appetites of the lower classes were condemned, it was the luxurious appetites of the upper classes that first signaled potential fall, since the latter were the natural leaders and defenders of the nation. This is clearly demonstrated in *The Way We Live Now* by the avaricious, enervated and ineffectual aristocracy, who are a poor match for the energetic outsider, Melmotte. For Dickens, a luxurious, voracious and useless aristocracy has already sapped the life-blood of the nation, resulting in a profound sense of exhaustion in *Our Mutual Friend*.

But whilst the old idea of luxury was persistent at this period, it had somehow lost its bite, so that it manifested itself in sometimes complex and contradictory combinations with new luxury. Trollope, for example, really seemed to believe in the old idea of luxury, the cyclical nature of civilizations and their luxury-driven rise and fall. This is exemplified in one of his earlier works, his state-of-the-nation *The New Zealander* (c. 1854-6) – a work devoted to this subject and one on which I draw closely in my discussion – which took as its motif Thomas Macaulay’s image of a future New Zealander sketching the ruins of London in a post-fallen Britain.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, Trollope described himself as a political (if conservative) liberal, one who believed in an idea of linear progress. Britain would fall as all great civilizations did, but in the

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<sup>25</sup> See ‘Ranke’s History of the Popes’, *Edinburgh Review*, October 1840, in Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Critical and Historical Essays*, 3 vols (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co, 1899), III, pp.1-47 (p.3). Project Gutenberg ebook #28046.

meantime she would progress, as material comforts and political freedoms spread slowly throughout society. By remaining vigilant as to the corrupting effects of luxury, a society might delay its inevitable fall. Dickens, apparently more liberal, more progressive, yet grew profoundly disillusioned with the state of the nation. Less influenced by old luxury he nonetheless turned to the trope of the Roman decline and fall to capture the state of the modern world in *Our Mutual Friend*.

My emphasis in this thesis, then, is on the idea of luxury in its totality, an idea that still variously manifested itself, to reiterate Sekora's terms, as 'the intellectual concept, the moral vice, and some concrete thing' (p.xiv). Nineteenth-century literary critics have focused on only aspects of this total concept of luxury. For example, the field of material culture has been of immense interest in the last few decades, and in terms of luxury this has tended to be reduced to the externals or 'some concrete thing[s]' – that is, the wealth of objects that pile up in Victorian literature – that Sekora pinpoints as defining attitudes to luxury in the nineteenth century.

Barbara Hardy, for example, signaled an early trend towards a critical emphasis on fetishised commodity culture with her *The Exposure of Luxury: Radical Themes in Thackeray* (1972). Describing the wealth of material luxuries in Thackeray's work as the 'envelope of objects' and 'social envelope',<sup>26</sup> Hardy acknowledges Thackeray's personal pleasure in luxury objects but suggests that his work is a radical indictment of commercial civilization. Such a view of the novelist's relation to commodity culture informs Andrew Miller's more recent *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (1995), in which he sees in Victorian fiction more broadly a 'social and moral world [that] was being reduced to a warehouse of goods and commodities, a

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<sup>26</sup> Barbara Hardy, *The Exposure of Luxury: Radical Themes in Thackeray* (London: Peter Owen, 1972), p.29.

display window in which people, their actions, and their convictions were exhibited for the economic appetites of others'.<sup>27</sup> But around the turn of the twenty-first century there was a move away from an emphasis on the fetishised commodity and its corollary, the reified subject, to a more capacious interpretation of 'things'.<sup>28</sup> Elaine Freedgood's *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (2006) is one example of this approach. Freedgood identifies a 'thing culture' that preceded commodity culture, whereby the things that pile up in Victorian novels 'are symbolically unencumbered; they are not always semiotically severed from their materiality or their relations to subjects and objects beyond the narrative frame'.<sup>29</sup> By recapturing the 'thingness' or materiality of things, and discovering their history, Freedgood attempts to restore fugitive meanings, such as the story of imperial domination via the mahogany furniture in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.

I am sympathetic to Freedgood's suggestion that we may have been guilty of projecting our own anxieties about a material age onto the Victorians: 'our readings are often more symptomatic of our own immersion in commodity culture than of the critical dictates or demands of realism itself' (p.142). Freedgood's observation resonates with anthropologist Daniel Miller's approach to material culture in *Stuff* (2010), where he sets out to rescue it from the (predominantly Western) charge of superficiality. Miller's dialectical theory of material culture, or mutual constitution of

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<sup>27</sup> Andrew Miller, *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.6.

<sup>28</sup> For a review of and examples of this trend, see 'Victorian Fiction and the Material Imagination', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 6 (2008), full edn <<http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk>>.

<sup>29</sup> Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp.142, 158. In *Commodity Culture in Dickens's Household Words* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), Catherine Waters counters this approach by questioning the dichotomy between the thing and the commodity, and by defending the concept of commodity culture as a much broader category of interpretation than a narrow Marxist definition might suggest: it 'is more capacious as an analytic category and remains open to the fluidity of relations between people and things' (p.5).

subject and object, shows that ‘stuff’ can enhance, as well as sometimes diminish, humanity. For example, in a study of a North London council estate Miller found that:

It was the people blessed with strong relationships to other people that also had effective and fulfilling relationships to the material world, while those who felt they had failed in their relationships to either things or persons also tended to be unable to construct satisfactory relationships in the other domain. This was an important conclusion since it was the very opposite of that common assumption made in accusations of materialism, a word that implies that people who become focused on their relationships with things tend to do so at the expense of their relationships with other people.<sup>30</sup>

Whilst the arguments about a dark world of commodity fetishism in the nineteenth-century novel have not lost their validity, there is room also for a more positive interpretation of the nineteenth-century material world. We might note quickly, for example, the value that the working classes in Gaskell’s work attach to their simple household objects, or the delight that Thackeray’s narrator in *Vanity Fair* takes in the whirl of commodities that make up his social world. Neither does this approach negate my overall thesis about the relationship between luxury and corruption. Because, to re-emphasise the thesis, material culture is only one, if an important, aspect of my broader interpretation of nineteenth-century luxury, which I read as comprising both external and internal features.

Austen, for example, who struggled to pinpoint a precise level of wealth and luxury that was not deleterious to morality and freedom, got round the problem by valorising an idea of ‘comfort’. This captured both material wellbeing – a happy medium between wealth and poverty, desire and need – and a state of emotional ease to create a totality of comfort. To achieve comfort was to achieve internal and external control, virtue and liberty. But luxury (as well as its opposite, poverty) could lead to

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<sup>30</sup> Daniel Miller, *Stuff* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p.87. Miller looks at communities in developed and developing nations, or pre- and post-commodity cultures, to show that all cultures are material cultures and that the idea of a noble savage culture, unsullied by stuff, is largely a myth.



internal and external disorder, corruption and slavery. In *Mansfield Park*, Mary Crawford, too much invested in wealth, is unable to make the ‘comfortable’ choice of Edmund, which would combine affection and a comfortable if not luxurious lifestyle. At the opposite end of the scale, Mrs Price has married for love alone but ends up ‘comfortless’, materially downtrodden and degraded.

In my discussion of Gaskell, I explore a specific formulation of ‘comfort theory’, which by the second quarter of the nineteenth century was increasingly being aimed at the poor as an incentive for them to raise their standard of living. Indeed, Austen anticipated the trend in her last novel, *Sanditon* (1817), in which Mr Parker claims that the new seaside resort ‘would excite the industry of the Poor and diffuse comfort and improvement among them of every sort’.<sup>31</sup> A positive response to Malthusian thinking, comfort theory held that in their desire to better their material condition the poor would happily put off marriage and procreation in order to acquire greater material comforts. Thus whilst the sexual desire of the poor was condemned, they were now encouraged to develop their acquisitive desire. Whilst the emphasis appears to be on the material, or ‘externals’, in fact comfort theory was a moral theory of luxury, a combination of internals (bodily – sexual – self-control) and externals (transferring desire to the material). The difference here is that luxury, or rather a level of the material above absolute need, is positive, part of a new ethic of sexual morality and general virtue. The poor who were deemed to be choosing sex instead of ‘stuff’ were thus choosing vice rather than virtue. Whilst Gaskell appreciates the pride and pleasure that the poorer classes take in their relatively humble material goods, she ultimately places higher value on the emotional side of Austen’s comfort equation:

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<sup>31</sup> Jane Austen, *Sanditon* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1978 (1817)), p.14.

whatever choices the poor made, the complex, bewildering and fickle world of trade and international markets would always leave them susceptible to material destitution.

Thackeray's celebration of drunkenness brings a literalness to Miller's subject-object constitution, or to my theory of luxury as a question of internals and externals, as the object, alcohol, physically transforms the subject, the person, into a state of intoxication. The material can become problematic in Dickens and Trollope, associating itself with the old luxury idea of corruption and decline. So the piles of dust and bones in *Our Mutual Friend*, or Melmotte's association with debris in *The Way We Live Now*, indicate a collapsed, collapsing, or potentially collapsing, civilization. All three novelists believed in commercial freedom. Thackeray especially emphasises this belief in his celebration of commodities as creating civilization, and this celebration counters a temperance ethos which bespoke a control of consumption which was essential pre-modern in spirit. Whilst Dickens and Trollope were also economic liberals, they increasingly realised that commercial freedom also contributed to the fever of financial speculation that characterised the era, and its resulting scandals, crises, and villains. This was thought to feed, or be fed by, an increasing money greed at all levels of society, the desire to get rich quick and live the requisite luxurious lifestyle.

The subject of money and finance has been another aspect of the nineteenth-century luxury debates covered by literary critics, and the field is extensive.<sup>32</sup> Though now some decades old, I have found that Barbara Weiss's *The Hell of the English: Bankruptcy and the Victorian Novel* (1986) comes closest to capturing an idea of old luxury, even though her subject is not luxury but financial bankruptcy. Weiss charts

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<sup>32</sup> Recent, general studies include: Tamara S. Wagner, *Financial Speculation in Victorian Fiction: Plotting Money and the Novel Genre, 1815-1901* (2010), and Francis O'Gorman, *Victorian Literature and Finance* (2007).

the move in Victorian fiction from bankruptcy as representative of personal moral failure, then redemption (such as Dombey's in Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1848)), to bankruptcy as metaphor for broader societal apocalypse, as in Dickens's *Little Dorritt* (1857) and Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*. Weiss sees Merdle and Melmotte as representing both the fall of empires such as Rome's and the biblical myth of apocalypse 'because both swindlers, who are perceived as demi-gods by their followers, are depicted as anti-Christ, reigning in the brief decadent era that anticipates the final end'.<sup>33</sup> In my discussion of Dickens and Trollope, I find that financial disaster is just one symptom of apocalypse, or potential apocalypse, rather than its total representation, and I differ with Weiss in finding a greater level of optimism in Trollope's novel. Melmotte's fall is symptomatic of a potential but not an actual or necessary British fall, and he gets his comeuppance. Dickens's vision in *Our Mutual Friend* is post-apocalyptic, so a step on from Weiss's reading of apocalypse in *Little Dorritt*. This can be seen in the replacement of the grand and heroic speculator of the Merdle type (still present, as Melmotte, in *The Way We Live Now*) with the low-level, uncharismatic stockbroker of the Fledgeby type, who, like the rest of this fraternity, breaks out in erratic bouts of feverish speculation like the last, feeble, gasps of a dying body.

My focus on money in my analysis of *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Way We Live Now* also places more emphasis on the insatiable appetite for it. As Marx had said, the desire for money lent itself to insatiability because of the dual nature of money itself. Unlimited in its useful quality – as the commodity that was convertible into every other commodity – but limited in its useful quantity, there could never be enough.<sup>34</sup> As we

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<sup>33</sup> Barbara Weiss, *The Hell of the English: Bankruptcy and the Victorian Novel* (London: Associated University Presses, 1986), p.150.

<sup>34</sup> See Karl Marx, *Capital*, 3 vols (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1933 (1867)), I, p.85.

know, the quality of insatiability was one of the pernicious aspects of old luxury, and in these two novels especially an endless appetite to eat up everything displays itself. In *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (2000), Regenia Gagnier describes the result of a late-nineteenth-century economic normalisation of an endlessly desiring subject as follows:

*Modern* man would henceforth be known by the insatiability of his desires, and Others on the road to modernity needed only to be inspired by envy to desire his desires, to imitate his wants, to be on the road to his progress and his *civilization*. His nature, insatiability, was henceforth human nature itself. His mode, consumer society, was no longer one stage of human progress but its culmination and end.<sup>35</sup>

My interest centres on how the idea of insatiability, as associated with the idea of luxury, manifested itself in the period between the eighteenth century and Gagnier's notion of a normalised, insatiable nineteenth-century *fin de siècle*. We know that around mid-century, the poorer classes of society were encouraged to be more acquisitive, to be on the road to a form of insatiability. Yet by the time we reach *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Way We Live Now* excessive acquisitive desire is clearly considered a problem. Whether it manifests itself through the figure of the miser, spendthrift or speculator, the individual desire to eat up everything could only result in chaos because resources were not limitless, however much a figure like Melmotte was imbued with the magical ability to make and multiply something from nothing. Whilst Dickens and Trollope would not have condemned private wealth (quite the opposite), there is something in their novels of the old luxury, or classical republican, notion, that too much private wealth was subversive to the state. In *The Way We Live Now*, for example, political good is sacrificed to private gain as the impecunious aristocracy help the corrupt Melmotte into Parliament in return for personal financial favours. As

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<sup>35</sup> Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p.94. Also see her more recent work: *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1859-1920* (2010).

Smollett's Matt Bramble puts it in *Humphrey Clinker*: 'we are all a pack of venal and corrupted rascals; [...] in a little time, I am fully persuaded, nothing will be infamous but virtue and public-spirit' (p.107).

My thesis ends in 1875, then, with echoes of the old, eighteenth-century understandings of luxury. In my conclusion I reflect on my findings about literary luxury in the nineteenth century through the lens of the present day. Looking at John Lanchester's recent state-of-the-nation novel, *Capital* (2012), I discover similar preoccupations and anxieties, and explain why this makes it the right time to look back at nineteenth-century luxury in its totality, as a question of insides and outsides.

**Chapter 1: ‘Satisfactions very sweet if not very sound’: Luxury, Slavery and  
Barbarism in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park***

‘It was too horrible a confusion of guilt, too gross a complication of evil, for human nature, not in a state of utter barbarism, to be capable of’<sup>36</sup> is Fanny Price’s reaction to the adultery of Maria Bertram (Mrs Rushworth) with Henry Crawford in Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814). This extreme verdict from the seemingly puritanical heroine of the novel can be deemed as typical of the latter’s didactic moral tone, with its strictures against amateur theatricals and its apparent approval of submissive womanhood and severe punishment for female transgressors. But Fanny’s sentiments capture much more than all this; they get to the much discussed issue at the heart of the novel: slavery. It is my contention in this chapter that in *Mansfield Park* Austen critiques the slave trade and the institution of slavery through a mirroring of home and abroad. This entails the rich residents of Mansfield, and thereby their corollary, the nation, living in a slave-like state, a condition caused by the luxury which West Indian chattel slavery has enabled them to acquire.<sup>37</sup> Without the ‘advantages of early hardship and discipline, and the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure’ (MP 456), and spoilt by their wealth, the younger Bertrams (Tom and Maria especially) and the visiting Crawfords (Henry and Mary) are in a state of internal slavery: in thrall to their animal appetites and passions, or worldly views, their minds have become corrupted and they are unable to choose a virtuous path.

Because for Austen and many of her contemporaries private virtue and public virtue were still inextricably linked, individual corruption (self-enslavement) led to

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<sup>36</sup> Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973 (1814)), p.430. Subsequent references are parenthesised in the text as MP with the page number.

<sup>37</sup> In accordance with critical consensus I work from the premise that the Mansfield estate is upheld by slave labour, though, as J. A. Downie points out, this is not made explicit and cannot be assumed. See ‘Who Says She’s a Bourgeois Writer? Reconsidering the Social and Political Contexts of Jane Austen’s Novels’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 40 (2006), 69-86.

national corruption and potential national enslavement. As we know, within the classical republican paradigm – still an influential, if declining, system of thought in Austen’s lifetime – luxurious lives led to corrupted, emasculated men, unable to defend a nation in danger. Thus, like the idea of the luxurious and effeminate Roman Empire conquered by the still manly barbarian nations, a British nation embroiled in the continental Napoleonic wars risked defeat and political slavery. Late eighteenth-century historians and philosophers, such as Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson, saw conquered empires such as Rome’s as sites of barbarity and ‘confusion’,<sup>38</sup> riot and disorder. Adam Sibbit, in his polemical essay on pernicious luxury (1800), referred to ‘the fall of greatness and the confusion of guilt’,<sup>39</sup> words closely echoed by Fanny in her judgement of Maria and Henry. Sexual corruption itself could be considered another symptom of approaching barbarity, breaking down family ties and spreading depravity and lawlessness. Although Austen condemned sexual vice in both sexes, and pointed up the double standard which punished women more severely – ‘in this world, the penalty is less equal than could be wished’ (MP 453) – Maria is made to pay the higher price that society demanded. This state of potential national barbarity and confusion, caused by luxury-driven self-enslavement, mirrors the barbarous state of affairs in the West Indies, the guilt, evil and barbarity of slavery.

Since the backlash against Edward Said’s discussion of *Mansfield Park* in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), which accused Austen of silent complicity with the slave trade and with the wider imperial project,<sup>40</sup> critical consensus has placed her, with

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<sup>38</sup> For an example, see Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, p.380.

<sup>39</sup> Sibbit, p.7.

<sup>40</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994). See chapter 2, part II, pp.95-116.

varying degrees of reservation, in the anti-slavery camp.<sup>41</sup> The evidence for this view includes the naming of the novel itself (Lord Chief Justice Mansfield making the celebrated Somerset decision in 1772, that no slaves could be forcibly returned from Britain to the Caribbean); the harsh Mrs Norris bearing the same name as the famously cruel pro-slaver, John Norris; Austen's sailor brother (Francis Austen) and some of her favourite writers (including the poet, William Cowper, referenced in the novel, and the famous anti-slave trade campaigner, Thomas Clarkson) being vehemently abolitionist; and not least the fact that the anti-slave trade cause was fashionable and vocal, far from subject to the guilty silence which Said claimed. Surely Austen was too intelligent and subtle a thinker to reference all this without intention. It is difficult, though, to gauge how far Austen's sentiment went, whether it just applied to the British slave trade (abolished 1807), for example, or extended to the institution of slavery itself (not fully abolished in British colonies until 1838).<sup>42</sup> I work from the basic premise that Austen's sentiments were broadly anti-slavery, at the very least on humanitarian grounds. The moral imperative behind the campaigns against the trade and the institution remained a fact, however much history has since pointed out complicating factors such as economic arguments, or the muddying tones of racism, misogyny and colonialism.<sup>43</sup>

The symbol of all this slavery is sugar, both in its very real manifestation as the commodity made by chattel slaves and sold to make British fortunes, and in its

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<sup>41</sup> For a position more sympathetic to, whilst not wholeheartedly endorsing, Said, see Jon Mee, 'Austen's Treacherous Ivory: Female Patriotism, Domestic Ideology, and Empire', in *The Postcolonial Jane Austen* (London: Routledge, 2000), ed. by You-Me Park and Sunder Rajeswari, pp.74-92.

<sup>42</sup> George E. Boulukos reads Austen as against the slave trade but condoning an ameliorated form of slavery itself: 'The Politics of Silence: *Mansfield Park* and the Amelioration of Slavery', *Novel*, 39 (2006), 361-385.

<sup>43</sup> For an example, see Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670-1834* (New York: Routledge, 1992), which discusses feminist anti-slavery discourse as unintentionally contributing to the damaging of future race relations.



metaphorical association with luxury – ‘satisfactions very sweet if not very sound’ (MP 180) – a sweetness that created an insatiable appetite for something that promised happiness but which was essentially worthless and unfulfilling. One problem for Austen, as it was for so many, was to identify what constituted luxury (and hence led to slavery); as Ferguson put it: ‘We are far from being agreed on the application of the term *luxury*, or on that degree of its meaning which is consistent with national prosperity, or with the moral rectitude of our nature’ (p.244). One of Austen’s most utilised words was ‘comfort’, which captured not only an emotional or psychological state but a range of states of material life, from something just above necessity to great luxury. Most often ‘comfort’ in her work describes a morally acceptable state of material wellbeing (the actual level is relative) as opposed to a morally dubious and potentially corrupting level of luxury. We might read this as the line between comfort and confusion: cross the line into luxury and then slavery, confusion and barbarity beckon.

## I

As Park Honan in his biography of Austen has pointed out, the perils of luxurious excess were on the novelist’s mind a few years before and during the period of her writing *Mansfield Park*.<sup>44</sup> Her closest access to significant wealth was through her brother, Edward, who had been adopted by the wealthy, childless Knight family. Austen initially enjoyed her visits to his grand estate of Godmersham in Kent, writing playfully to her sister, Cassandra, in 1808, of making the most of the ‘Elegance & Ease & Luxury [and the chance] to be above vulgar Economy’.<sup>45</sup> But a few years later her tone was more serious. Writing to Cassandra in 1813, she complained about the

<sup>44</sup> See Park Honan, *Jane Austen: Her Life* (London: Phoenix Giant, 1997), chapter 17.

<sup>45</sup> *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. by Deirdre Le Faye, 3rd edn (Oxford: OUP, 1997), p.139 (30 June–1 July 1808).

behaviour of her nephews, Dordy and Edward, worrying that 'these two Boys who are out with the Foxhounds will come home and disgust me again by some habit of Luxury or some proof of sporting Mania'.<sup>46</sup> She feared that Edward's indulgence of his children (especially following his wife's death) could be dangerous for them. Cassandra shared her concerns, having written on the same subject a year earlier to a family friend: 'I hope those young people will not have so much happiness in their youth as to unfit them for the rubs. [...] But with so indulgent a Father and so liberal a stile of living I am aware there must be some danger of it'.<sup>47</sup> The sisters knew that the world outside closeted Godmersham, a country at war, was a dangerous and difficult place.

The backdrop to life at *Mansfield Park* is the same dangerous and difficult place, but heir to the estate, Tom Bertram, seems oblivious to this fact. Tom has entered into life 'with all the liberal dispositions of an eldest son, who feels born only for expense and enjoyment' (MP 54). As far as we know Tom is not a womaniser, or at least he is ultimately immune to Mary Crawford's charms. But he is bent on other forms of pleasure – drinking, gambling and sport – and soon begins to follow the usual course of a dissolute elder son, frittering away his inheritance. Like the other characters in the novel who are enslaved to luxury, and have become internally corrupted, Tom takes on some of the negative, stereotypical qualities identified with chattel slaves. Tom's character, for instance, shows 'the natural improvidence of slaves'<sup>48</sup> suggested by the *Quarterly Review* in May 1809. The Tory *Quarterly* frequently discussed events in the West Indies, including issues arising post abolition

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<sup>46</sup> *Jane Austen's Letters*, p.234 (11-12 October 1813).

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Honan, p.329.

<sup>48</sup> 'The History of Barbadoes, 1801, by John Poyer', *Quarterly Review*, I, May 1809, pp.258-268 (p.265).

such as trade problems, maltreatment of slaves and slave rebellions. The *Quarterly* is notably the publication that the party of pleasure to Sotherton, Maria's future home on marriage to Mr Rushworth, flick through. Much as they will later respond with "dead silence" (MP 213) to Fanny's question about the slave trade, here they are caught up in their own selfish preoccupations of vanity and romantic conquest, and are either oblivious to or entirely uninterested in the issues that keep Sir Thomas in Antigua. Tom's early extravagance, or improvidence, leads to debts which can only be paid at his brother, Edmund's, expense. The Mansfield clerical living meant for the latter is given to an outsider, Dr Grant, and the Grants introduce the corrupt Crawfords to Mansfield, who will cause so much havoc. Tom's momentary guilt at this outcome is brushed away, and he quickly returns to his old courses; but Tom's luxurious habits will soon lead to a much more serious consequence, his life-threatening illness.

A fear of internal slavery was an integral part of the ethos of classical republicanism. Although freedom in the classical world was constituted through political citizenship, it was also a condition of self-mastery, an assertion of mind, the thing that raised humanity above the brutes. This idea was also a commonplace of Christian discourse, featuring heavily, for example, in the hugely popular sermons of Hugh Blair, the Scottish Enlightenment divine and philosopher (and friend of Hume, Ferguson and Smith), to whom in *Mansfield Park* even the anti-clerical Mary Crawford pays grudging tribute (MP 120). Austen was a committed, if not dogmatic, Christian within the Georgian Anglican church. Critics have debated how much the Evangelical revival of the early nineteenth century influenced *Mansfield Park*, a novel more sombre and serious than Austen's previous works. But her enduring aversion to 'Regeneration

& Conversion'<sup>49</sup> suggests that this was not very significant. Rather, as Peter Knox-Shaw puts it, the novel is 'about it, but not of it'.<sup>50</sup> The novel participates in contemporary debates (which were influenced by the Evangelical revival) about the need for the upper classes to become more serious and responsible in an age of revolution, slavery and war: 'Reform or Ruin: Take Your Choice!', as the project was christened in a 1798 work by John Bowdler.

One of Blair's sermons, 'On the Slavery of Vice', is especially pertinent to the states of luxury-led internal slavery experienced by Tom and Henry (and which even threaten the sober Edmund via the luxurious Mary). Blair discussed the nature of individual liberty: 'We are not to imagine that to be free imports our being let loose from restraint or rule of every kind'.<sup>51</sup> In one of several body/state analogies, Blair likened this state to internal anarchy, a position as un-free as tyranny:

That unbounded licentiousness [...] which sinners prefer to every regulation of conduct, is altogether different from true freedom. It is in moral behaviour the same as anarchy is in a state, where law and order are extinct. Anarchy, surely, is no less incompatible with true liberty than absolute despotism; and of the two it is hard to say which is the least eligible, or the most miserable state.<sup>52</sup>

Man's corrupted and slave-like state mirrored the external state of national enslavement, like the degenerated Roman Empire overtaken by barbarians. Man's 'soul is rendered the receptacle of many repugnant and jarring dispositions; and resembles some barbarous country, cantoned out into different principalities, who are

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<sup>49</sup> *Jane Austen's Letters*, p.322 (8-9 September 1816). A few years earlier, Austen had expressed sympathy towards Evangelicalism, but more in defence of the 'Goodness' of a potential suitor of her niece, Fanny: p.280 (18-20 November 1814).

<sup>50</sup> Peter Knox-Shaw, *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.174.

<sup>51</sup> Hugh Blair, 'On the Slavery of Vice', in *Sermons*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn, 4 vols (London: T. Cadell Junr. and W. Davies, 1795), IV, pp.201-223 (p.203).

<sup>52</sup> 'On the Slavery of Vice', IV, p.204.

continually waging war on one another'.<sup>53</sup> Tom and Henry embrace liberty as licence, or freedom from restraint and rule: the apparent freedom to do what they want, when they want, mainly based around the calls of pleasure. But as Blair suggested this freedom turns into bondage, to internal anarchy, barbarity and confusion.

In Tom's case luxury becomes bodily pathology when he falls seriously ill. Moving from one scene of pleasure, or disorder, to another – London to Newmarket – a neglected fall and 'a good deal of drinking' (MP 416) bring on fever and bodily 'disorder' (MP 416). Blair saw vice as thwarting liberty by depriving humankind of its principal characteristics: freedom of choice, independence of mind, and boldness and security. By the time of Tom's life-threatening illness, he has reached the final stage, that 'abject, cowardly, and disquieted state which is essentially characteristic of bondage'.<sup>54</sup> In addition to alarming physical symptoms, Tom's 'nerves [are] much affected, spirits much depressed' (MP 420). It is as if, as Blair suggested, 'the terrors of a slave dwell on his mind, and often appear in his behaviour'.<sup>55</sup> It is notable that Tom has spent time in Antigua with his father, and whilst there are no obvious changes in his behaviour on his return, there is something of a return of the repressed in his illness.<sup>56</sup> The reality of the source of the Bertrams' wealth – indeed, the guilt of a nation – the violence and barbarism at the heart of the system of slavery, can no longer be ignored and they ravage Tom's body and mind. The fear and guilt that Blair associated with

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<sup>53</sup> 'On the Slavery of Vice', IV, p.221.

<sup>54</sup> 'On the Slavery of Vice', IV, p.206.

<sup>55</sup> 'On the Slavery of Vice', IV, p.214.

<sup>56</sup> There is an interesting if vague footnote to Tom's life, the use of the qualification 'apparently' in the following description of it: 'how little useful, how little self-denying his life had (apparently) been' (MP 417). Patricia Rozema's fascinating if controversial – she changes the plot by incorporating elements of Austen's own life into Fanny's, and also makes the latter spirited and energetic – film adaptation of *Mansfield Park* (Miramax, 1999) brings the slavery issue to the fore; and suggests that Tom's dissipated behaviour is the result of the trauma he experiences from witnessing the cruelty and depravity to which slaves are subjected on his father's Antigua estate.

enslavement to vice are also the terror of the slave and the guilt of those living off slavery's profits. But Tom's illness is also his redemption. For Blair individuals could find salvation from sin before it was too late through improving company, the call of important business in a different sphere of action, or 'if some reasonable stroke of affliction should in mercy be sent, to recall them to themselves, and to awaken serious and manly thought'.<sup>57</sup> In this way Austen purges Tom of the disease of luxury. He 'gradually regained his health, without regaining the thoughtlessness and selfishness of his previous habits. He was the better for ever for his illness. He had suffered, and he had learnt to think, two advantages that he had never known before' (MP 447). Tom has learnt to regulate himself, to impose internal order and stave off internal barbarism.

The overall tone and message of Blair's sermons adhered to the classical 'mechanics of corruption' (Berry, p.70) highlighted by secular commentators, the luxury that would lead not just to barbarism of the individual mind but to the potential collapse of a nation into barbarity. As background for his sermon on luxury and licentiousness, Blair cited Israel in the time of Isaiah, rather than the final years of the Roman Empire, but the message remained the same:

in his days great corruption of manners had begun to take place among the people of Israel. Originally a sober and a religious nation, accustomed to a simple and pastoral life, after they had enlarged their territories by conquest, and acquired wealth by commerce, they gradually contracted habits of luxury; and luxury soon introduced its usual train of attending evils. In the history of all nations, the same circulation of manners has been found; and the age in which we live resembles, in this respect, the ages which have gone before it. Forms of iniquity may vary; but the corrupt propensities of men remain at all times much the same; and revolutions from primitive simplicity to the refinements of criminal luxury have been often exhibited on the stage of the world.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Hugh Blair, 'On the Progress of Vice', in *Sermons*, 8<sup>th</sup> edn, 4 vols (London: A. Strahan, T. Cadell, W. Creech, 1794), III, pp.108-128 (pp.114-115).

<sup>58</sup> Hugh Blair, 'On Luxury and Licentiousness', in *Sermons*, Vol. IV, pp.113-134 (pp.113-114).

This older idea of ‘criminal luxury’, and the part it played in the fall of civilizations, held resonance for Austen, but she was aware of the different sides of the luxury debates. We know that in *Sanditon* Mr Parker takes the new luxury approach to arguments about the poorer classes,<sup>59</sup> but Mr Heywood sticks firmly to the old luxury view, believing that seaside resorts are ‘Bad things for a Country; sure to raise the price of Provisions and make the Poor good for nothing’ (p.14). In fact the ambivalence on the luxury issue which comes through in Austen’s work reflects the period of her lifetime (1775 to 1817), straddling as it did the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and marking the period when the idea of pernicious luxury was increasingly challenged. It was an ambivalence also captured by *The Loiterer* (1789-90), a periodical produced by Austen’s older brothers, James and Henry, whilst at Oxford University. Broadly confident and sometimes eulogistic about Britain’s place in the world – as the epitome of political and commercial progress, and all that implied about politeness, humanity and liberty – it sporadically lapsed into satirical denunciations about the luxury and degeneracy of the age, where refinement could be ‘carried to too great an excess, and degenerate into folly and effeminacy’.<sup>60</sup>

It is helpful, here, to draw on E.J. Clery’s definition of effeminacy in this period, that is that it did not mean camp or homosexual. Rather it meant its opposite, an excessive desire for or attachment to women; or it could mean a resemblance to women; or in general the laziness and prosperity of man in commercial society.<sup>61</sup> If Tom is idle and pleasure-seeking, Henry Crawford, as another effeminate man, is idle,

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<sup>59</sup> *Sanditon*, p.14.

<sup>60</sup> Austen Family, *The Loiterer: A Periodical Work in Two Volumes Published at Oxford in the Years 1789 and 1790 by the Austen Family*, ed. by Robert L. Mack (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 23 May 1789, pp.92-97 (p.92).

<sup>61</sup> See Introduction in *The Feminization Debate in Eighteenth-Century England: Literature, Commerce and Luxury*.

pleasure-seeking and excessively desirous of women. Henry has been ‘brought up in a school of luxury and epicurism’ (MP 399), the extreme opposite to the school of struggle and endurance valorised by Austen as most conducive to private and public virtue and freedom. The ideas of luxury and epicurism were intimately connected in the discourse of pernicious luxury, with the philosophy of Epicurus read, or mis-read, as a doctrine of extreme self-indulgence and devotion to pleasure. Sibbit’s essay on luxury represents the ideas of Epicurus as the final factor in Rome’s destruction. Once frugal, public-spirited and warrior-like, Rome declined into corruption after a long train of conquest and prosperity, and the introduction of foreign (Eastern) luxuries and refinements. Weakened Roman minds were then assailed by the doctrine of Epicurus – that ‘eminent teacher of luxury’ – who ‘may be justly considered as the grand corrupter of the doctrines and morals of antiquity’ (p.30).

Henry exemplifies ideas of the epicure in both his connection to life as taste, and his commitment to pleasure. Henry’s connection with taste, rather than anything deeper, manifests itself especially in his appetite for and relations with women. In John Millar’s contemporaneous history of societies and the origins of ranks, he saw a similar sexual licentiousness operating in both the savage and luxurious stages of societal development, so that in some ways the latter was reverting to the former. Women were especially degraded in luxurious civilizations, the natural tendency of which was ‘to diminish the rank and dignity of the women, by preventing all refinement in their connection with the other sex, rendering them only subservient to animal enjoyment’.<sup>62</sup> Henry treats women as an animal enjoyment, much like food. As Mary Wollstonecraft, who shared Millar’s view of the brutalisation of women in luxurious ages, put it,

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<sup>62</sup> John Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks: Or, An Inquiry into the Circumstances which give rise to Influence and Authority, in Different Members of Society*, 4th edn (Edinburgh: William Blackwood; London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, & Orme, 1806) p.102.



women became 'standing dishes to which every glutton may have access'.<sup>63</sup> For Henry women are just another gratification of his epicurean senses – 'the epicure must have his palate tickled, or he will sink into apathy'<sup>64</sup> – and metaphorically like sugar: a sweetness that is needful to him but does not leave him fulfilled. In Sidney Mintz's essay on sweetness and the language of love, he discusses the traditional association of sweetness (historically, first through honey, then sugar) with positive qualities, emotions and desires, and especially with love and sexuality. Mintz speculates that one reason for the use of sweetness as a vehicle for affective terminology is connected to the taste of sugar, which produces an emotion that he 'can only label "covetous" since "lecherous" is no longer associated with food'.<sup>65</sup> Here Mintz echoes the historical connection between luxury, sensuality and sexuality. Indeed, luxury was repeatedly described as 'wanton', a word which could refer to sexual immodesty or promiscuity as well as other qualities that implied insatiability, such as lack of control, unpredictability, violence and cruelty. An 1803 contribution on thrift and luxury to women's periodical, the *Lady's Monthly Museum*, stressed repeatedly the wantonness of the age, a word which was used as adjective, noun and verb. It described the 'wantonness of luxury'<sup>66</sup> and the 'wantonness of expence',<sup>67</sup> as well as 'the choice spirits which wallow in wealth, and wanton in luxury'.<sup>68</sup> Making the sexual connection

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<sup>63</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), in *The Vindications: The Rights of Men: The Rights of Woman*, ed. by D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Ontario: Broadview, 2001), p.273.

<sup>64</sup> *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 138.

<sup>65</sup> Sidney Mintz, 'Sweet, Salt, and the Language of Love', *MLN*, 106 (1991), 852-860 (p.854).

<sup>66</sup> 'To the Editor of the Lady's Museum, Thrift and Luxury. An Essay', *Lady's Monthly Museum*, 1 September 1803, p.4.

<sup>67</sup> 'To the Editor of the Lady's Museum, Thrift and Luxury. An Essay. Cont'd', *Lady's Monthly Museum*, 3 October 1803, p.1.

<sup>68</sup> 'To the Editor of the Lady's Museum, Thrift and Luxury. An Essay. Cont'd', p.1.

more explicit, Wollstonecraft saw women as becoming merely 'the wanton solace of men'.<sup>69</sup>

## II

The question of the taste of sugar, rather than any intrinsic, valuable quality it might possess became a crucial question in the slave-trade debates of the 1780s and 1790s. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, sugar's status as necessity or luxury in the British diet was still open to question. The early slave-grown sugar-boycott campaigns of this period could therefore stress that sugar was a frivolous or trifling luxury which could be done without easily; and the pro-slave trade campaigners could stress that sugar had become an everyday necessity essential for wellbeing. Calling for a sugar boycott, William Fox, for example, labelled sugar as 'a luxury which habit only can have rendered important',<sup>70</sup> and Mary Birkett referred to the 'plant of which 'tis lux'ry gives the use'.<sup>71</sup> In 'Pity for Poor Africans', William Cowper reversed the luxury/necessity paradigm to sarcastic effect: 'sugar, so needful we see/What, give up our desserts, our coffee, and tea'.<sup>72</sup> On the other side of the debates, Bryan Edwards argued that ending the slave trade would lead to the price-rise of British 'staples, sugar among the rest',<sup>73</sup> and William Spence presented sugar as a highly nutritious and

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<sup>69</sup> *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p.284.

<sup>70</sup> William Fox, *An Address to the People of Great Britain on the Propriety of Abstaining from West Indian Sugar and Rum*, 25th edn (London: R. Gurney, 1791), p.7.

<sup>71</sup> Mary Birkett, 'A Poem on the African Slave Trade: Addressed to her Own Sex' (1792), in *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period: Vol. 4: Verse*, ed. by Alan Richardson (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999), pp.197-217 (p.214), IV. 321.

<sup>72</sup> William Cowper, 'Pity for Poor Africans', in *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period: Vol. 4: Verse*, ed. by Richardson, pp.77-79 (p.77), II.7-8.

<sup>73</sup> Bryan Edwards, *A Speech delivered by a Free Conference between The Honourable The Council and Assembly of Jamaica, Held the 19th November, 1789, on the subject of Mr Wilberforce's Propositions in the House of Commons, concerning the Slave-Trade* (Kingston: Alexander Aikman, 1789), p.155.

palatable article of food, 'consumed, though sparingly, even by the most needy of the labouring poor'.<sup>74</sup> By 1811, the *Quarterly* thought that 'sugar, in spite of all of our efforts to render it a mere luxury, is become one of the necessaries of life'.<sup>75</sup>

Those against the slave trade, who presented sugar as a luxury, often described it as 'trifling', a word denoting something frivolous, insignificant, useless, worthless. A 1792 address to the Duchess of York, for example, soliciting her to set the example of giving up sugar, was asking only for 'the sacrifice of a trifling gratification'.<sup>76</sup> The word was closely associated with the idea of luxury. Ferguson used it frequently, for example in his reference to luxury as the 'pursuit of trifling accommodations' (p.247). More seriously, as men increasingly lost their public character, trifling became the business of their lives: 'men, being relieved from the pressure of great occasions, bestow their attention on trifles' (p.256). Blair complained about the 'trifling pleasures' of the times, also warning that trifling pleasures led to worse, to 'gross and brutal'<sup>77</sup> pleasures, a hint of the barbarism that was creeping into the luxurious age. For the anti-slave-trade campaigners, it was also the trifling pleasure of sugar which masked the gross and brutal reality of slavery and the slave trade. In *Mansfield Park* Tom's likeminded friend, Mr Yates, is 'trifling and confident, idle and expensive' (MP 209), though following his marriage to Julia, 'there was hope of his becoming less trifling' (MP 467). Above all Henry is depicted as 'trifling' with women. On his return to Mansfield, both Maria and Julia think he favours them, and 'he was welcomed thither

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<sup>74</sup> Quoted in 'Pamphlets on West Indian Affairs', *Quarterly Review*, II, August and November 1809, pp.1-24 (p.9).

<sup>75</sup> 'Notices respecting Jamaica, in 1808, 1809, 1810, by Gilbert Mathison, Esquire', *Quarterly Review*, VI, August and December 1811, pp.147-166 (p.165).

<sup>76</sup> Anon, *An Address to Her Royal Highness The Duchess of York, Against the Use of Sugar* (London: [n. pub.], 1792), p.5.

<sup>77</sup> 'On Luxury and Licentiousness', p.124.

quite as gladly by those whom he came to trifle with farther' (MP 142). When Henry's preference for Maria becomes clearer, Julia realises that 'he had trifled with her feelings' (MP 181). Fanny considers Henry's overtures to herself 'as nonsense, as mere trifling and gallantry, which meant only to deceive for the hour' (MP 304) and that he 'meant but to trifle' (MP 306). Henry's character is to be all for present, thoughtless enjoyment, disregarding future consequences: 'he would not look beyond the present hour' (MP 141). In this he resembles the ostensibly happy position of slaves described by W. Beckford: 'A slave has no feeling beyond the present hour, no anticipation of what may come, no dejection at what may ensue'.<sup>78</sup>

Even as Henry becomes drawn to the virtuous Fanny, admiring her love for her brother, it is still a question of taste: 'it was a picture which Henry Crawford had moral taste enough to value' (MP 244). And when he is finally in love, and relating Fanny's virtues, it seems to be a predominantly aesthetic experience, as 'he had in fact nothing to relate but his own sensations, nothing to dwell on but Fanny's charms' (MP 297). Fanny is all 'sweetness' (MP 297), a word frequently applied to her. For Henry she is 'dearest, sweetest Fanny' (MP 341) and Mary tells him that he 'will have a sweet little wife' (MP 296). But, in fact, Henry's attachment to Fanny is genuine, and he sees her as the real sweetness of love rather than the sugary trifles of sexual conquest. Austen suggests that a marriage between the two would have been a happy and successful one, because for Henry Fanny is a woman 'whom he had rationally, as well as passionately loved' (MP 453). The potential union elevates Henry because it is based on the mind, as well as the body, and it is the rational mind which seeks happiness in something virtuous, raising him above mere animal need. The eventual union between Fanny and

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<sup>78</sup> W. Beckford, *Remarks Upon The Situation of Negroes in Jamaica, Impartially Made from a Local Experience of Nearly Thirteen Years in the Island* (London: T. & J. Egerton, 1788), p.84.

Edmund is not the only potentially happy outcome and if Henry 'had persevered, and uprightly, Fanny must have been his reward' (MP 451). But Henry's indulgent upbringing means that habits of luxury are internalised. Enslaved to himself and his appetites, he therefore sacrifices the woman he loves for the sake of instant gratification with Maria: 'the temptation of immediate pleasure was too strong for a mind unused to make any sacrifice to right' (MP 452). He then becomes so entangled that he goes off with the married Maria, 'because he could not help it' (MP 452), and is 'regretting Fanny, even at the moment' (MP 452) he does so. Henry has lost that freedom of choice which Blair identified as essential to liberty. Henry's choice is Fanny but he is driven, even against his will, to lose her. The apparent freedom, the life of luxury, which Henry has always enjoyed has at last become a form of slavery, and his desires have led to the destruction of his own, as well as others', happiness.

Henry's constant trifling has turned his life into 'a riot of gratifications' (MP 149). The word riot in context meant dissipated and/or rowdy behaviour, but it was a capacious word, like and connected to wanton, and it contained the seeds of its developing and later meaning of a violent disturbance of the peace by a crowd. Blair talked of 'riotous pleasures' and the 'haunts of riot', and warned that 'the spirit of riot grows and swells, till it end in brutal excess'.<sup>79</sup> Like 'confusion' and 'disorder', 'riot' could be both an internal state – Sibbit's soul that 'resembles some barbarous country' (p.221) – and an external state of barbarity that presaged the fall of empires or signified their post-fallen state. Henry is excited by the thought of acting, which 'in all the riot of his gratifications, [...] was yet an untasted pleasure' (MP 149). It is a pursuit which Sir Thomas refers to as the "'bustle and confusion of acting'" (MP 205), and which Henry, in a later attempt to placate Fanny, describes as "'more pleasant than prudent.

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<sup>79</sup> 'On Luxury and Licentiousness', pp.130, 121, 117.

We were getting too noisy” (MP 237). The noise, confusion and riot of acting contributes to the dangerous intimacy of Maria and Henry –Wollstonecraft spoke of the male sensualists who ‘rioted among women’<sup>80</sup> – which points to the breakdown of the family unit on which society was based as well as a breakdown of law and order in a barbarous state.

### III

Although Henry has initially connected luxury and riot with happiness, instead it has proved both unfulfilling to himself and dangerous to wider society. The nature of happiness and its illusory association with luxury and pleasure was a theme much dwelt on in the luxury debates, and one which Austen played with in her novels. In *Emma*, Mr Knightley jokes with Mrs Weston that she has nothing to bear, with such a good husband, unless “Weston may grow cross from the wantonness of comfort”.<sup>81</sup> And Emma jokes to Frank Churchill that his bad mood is because he is “sick of prosperity and indulgence” (p.239). In *Persuasion*, the narrator comments ironically that the relentlessly cheerful Mrs Smith ‘might have been absolutely rich and perfectly healthy, and yet be happy’.<sup>82</sup> In a more serious tone, Anne Eliot, in her engagement to Captain Wentworth, counsels herself not to become too elated with her new-found happiness: ‘an interval of meditation, serious and grateful, was the best corrective of every thing dangerous in such high-wrought felicity; and she went to her room, and grew steadfast and fearless in the thankfulness of her enjoyment’ (p.243). *The Loiterer* and Sibbit had warned of the dangerous ‘elation’ which could ensue from too much wealth and luxury, when people were ‘elated by the security of affluence’ and ‘elated by prosperity and

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<sup>80</sup> *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p.274.

<sup>81</sup> Jane Austen, *Emma*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002 (1816)), p.23.

<sup>82</sup> Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (London: Everyman, 1992 (1817)), p.249.

wealth'.<sup>83</sup> It seemed that high-wrought felicity in itself could lead to recklessness, but more especially so when brought on by wealth, which tended to cause irreligion. Thomas Sherlock, whose sermons Austen enjoyed, thought that the greatest danger riches posed to the individual was in giving them a false idea of independence and complacency: they 'steal the heart from God, and render it insensible to the duties of religion, by taking away the foundation of all religion, the sense of our dependence on the providence and care of Heaven'.<sup>84</sup>

In *Mansfield Park* Fanny finds that the riotous theatricals are not creating the happiness she has imagined: 'So far from being all satisfied and all enjoying, she found everybody requiring something they had not, and giving occasion of discontent to the others' (MP 185). Ferguson saw happiness as the least understood term in society. It was not, as Henry's behaviour suggests, about 'the gratifications of animal appetite' (p.43), which, 'on too frequent a repetition, [...] turn to satiety and disgust' (p.43). Then 'a new passion succeeds, and the imagination, as before, is intent on a distant felicity' (p.41). This pattern was endless and addictive, with a person enslaved to the 'cravings of luxury' (p.262) and their 'craving imagination' (p.143). A constantly desiring state was actually a state of sickness and chronic unhappiness, as its victims

feel a dissatisfaction and languor which they cannot explain: They pine in the midst of apparent enjoyments; or, by the variety and caprice of their different pursuits and amusements, exhibit a state of agitation, which, like the disquiet of sickness, is not a proof of enjoyment or pleasure, but of suffering and pain. (p.260)

Sibbit made similar points, dwelling on the slave-like state which eventually ensued from 'a false idea of searching after happiness' (p.57):

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<sup>83</sup> Austen Family, *The Loiterer*, 26 December 1789, pp.269-273 (p.272); Sibbit, p.77.

<sup>84</sup> Thomas Sherlock, 'Irreligion a Frequent Attendant on Great Riches', in *Family Lectures; or, Domestic Divinity, being a Copious Collection of Sermons, Selected From the Polite Writers and Sound Divines, of the Present Century* (London: C. Dilly, 1791), pp. 280-285 (p.283).

Man then becomes a wretched slave to a variety of wants and propensities, which are merely factitious and ideal. [...] Every passion becomes more craving and immoderate by indulgence, and more tyrannical in its demands; the sensualist may, therefore, be truly called the most abject of slaves, ever subject to the cruel despotism of low desires and low pursuits, and equally incapable of public and private virtue. (pp.59-60)

Anti-slave trade campaigners also stressed the illusory idea of happiness in their efforts to draw a line between need and luxury. Luxury symbolised imaginary, rather than 'real' needs, and sugar was one such example. Samuel Taylor Coleridge made the point in a lecture on the slave trade: 'Whence arise our Miseries? Whence arise our Vices? From *imaginary* Wants', and 'the evils arising from the formation of *imaginary* Wants, have in no instance been so dreadfully exemplified, as in this inhuman Traffic'.<sup>85</sup> Even W. Beckford made a similar point, but instead used it to suggest that Africans were better off in a less desiring state:

We must look for the African in a wild state; the European in a civilized one; the last may be the most useful in the supply of those wants imagination has made; the first more independent, as not having those wants to gratify. Which of the two is the most happy, the one that always craves, without the accomplishment of its wishes, or one that is satisfied, without having its appetites to reform, I leave to those, who are fond of speculation to determine.<sup>86</sup>

The imagination – 'that lying, yet constantly trusted guide',<sup>87</sup> according to Wollstonecraft – was considered an abettor of pernicious luxury and vice. Richard Payne-Knight thought that a restless imagination produced 'a state bordering on intoxication'.<sup>88</sup> Although Austen did not always specifically relate the imagination and luxury or vice, she was aware of its seductive, intoxicating and sometimes dangerous

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<sup>85</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'On the Slave Trade' (1795), in *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Vol. 2: The Abolition Debate*, ed. by Peter J. Kitson (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999), pp.211-220 (pp.211, 212).

<sup>86</sup> W. Beckford, p.87.

<sup>87</sup> *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p.237.

<sup>88</sup> Richard Payne-Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*, 3rd edn (London: T. Payne and J. White, 1806), p.139. Payne-Knight was best known as a classical scholar and for his theories of the picturesque.



powers. In *Emma*, Emma Woodhouse is ‘an imaginit’ (p.218), whose romantic projections for other people cause temporary unhappiness to others and to herself. Further, her attempts to promote an advantageous marriage for Miss Smith risk the overturning of societal hierarchies as the latter is discovered to be the daughter of an undistinguished tradesman, unequal to the gentlemanly matches Emma has in mind for her. In *Northanger Abbey* Catherine Morland nearly loses the man she loves by projecting gothic horror fantasies onto his family. And in *Pride and Prejudice* Lydia Bennet’s unbounded romantic and sexual imagination – ‘In Lydia's imagination, a visit to Brighton comprised every possibility of earthly happiness. She saw with the creative eye of fancy, the streets of that gay bathing place covered with officers’<sup>89</sup> – contributes to her sexual transgression with Wickham, her ‘fall’. In *Mansfield Park*, it is the dangerous theatricals that lead to Maria’s sexual fall, allowing her to turn her illicit fantasy for Henry into a very real and dangerous physical intimacy.

#### IV

As we know, in the discourses on luxury and slavery and luxury and corruption the emphasis on the mind/body or soul/body dichotomy was key, whence arose the idea of internal slavery. The mind or soul became tainted and enslaved – a state often encouraged by an overactive, craving imagination – because it could no longer govern the body, as befitted man’s special status in creation or within the natural world. Blair described the mind as ‘the native seat of liberty’,<sup>90</sup> and a state of vice and corruption as one in which the mind itself was held in bondage. Ferguson saw ‘sensuality [as] but a distemper of the mind’ (p.43), and noted ‘the subtle transitions of the imagination’ (p.253) that gradually occurred as luxury encroached. Sibbit pointed up the final,

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<sup>89</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1972 (1813)), p.259.

<sup>90</sup> ‘On the Slavery of Vice’, p.218.

fundamental transformation of mind in a luxurious age as a 'moral revolution in the minds of men' (pp.22-23). Due to the subtle and insidious corruption of the mind, Sibbit, like Austen, stressed the importance of early habit because 'when the mind has once got its bias, it is a most arduous task to draw it to a contrary direction' (p.122). Austen stresses the weakness and corruption of Henry's mind, created by his indulgent upbringing and the bad moral example of his uncle. Fanny is horrified to hear Henry describing the Mansfield theatricals as a joyous time, a time when he has trifled with and hurt two women: 'Oh! what a corrupted mind!' (MP 236).

The idea of the natural liberty of the mind raised a problem in relation to the question of chattel slavery. If, as Blair suggested, enslavement of mind, or 'mind-forged manacles', as William Blake termed it,<sup>91</sup> was worse than a body enslaved by others, could this neutralise the arguments against chattel slavery? 'Let the slave have freedom of will', suggested W. Beckford.<sup>92</sup> Moira Ferguson suggests that Wollstonecraft's emphasis on the possession of reason as more important than physical freedom did tend to elide the issue of the colonised slaves, even though Wollstonecraft believed unequivocally in the abolition of slavery.<sup>93</sup> Wollstonecraft had said that 'poverty, shame, and even slavery, may be endured by the virtuous man – he has still a world to range in [*Coriolanus*] – but the loss of reason appears a monstrous flaw in the moral world'.<sup>94</sup> And it was 'the right use of reason alone which makes us independent

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<sup>91</sup> See William Blake, 'Poems from the Notebook' (c. 1791-2), in *Blake: The Complete Poems*, ed. by W. H. Stevenson (London: Longman, 1972), pp.143-171 (p.154), XIX. 8. Blake was strongly opposed to slavery.

<sup>92</sup> W. Beckford, p.99.

<sup>93</sup> See Moira Ferguson, 'Mary Wollstonecraft and the Problematic of Slavery', *Feminist Review*, 42 (1992), 82-102.

<sup>94</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, in a Letter to The Right Honourable Edmund Burke; Occasioned by His Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), in *The Vindications*, ed. by Macdonald and Scherf, p.59.

of every thing – excepting the unclouded Reason – "Whose service is perfect freedom".<sup>95</sup> But stressing the natural freedom of an uncorrupted mind was also a way to assert the enduring dignity of humanity – a humanity that slaves shared – under the worse conditions, and the continued sovereignty over self even when forced under another's power.

Thomas Clarkson, one of Austen's 'loves',<sup>96</sup> insisted that 'the *mind* cannot be confined or bound: it will be free, though its mansion be beset with chains',<sup>97</sup> as did another favourite, William Cowper: 'Minds are never to be sold/Still in thought as free as ever'.<sup>98</sup> Clarkson went on to assert that

if, in every sale of the *human species*, you are under the necessity of considering your slave in this abstracted light; of alluding only to the body, and of making no allusion to the mind; you are under the necessity also of treating him, in the same moment, as a *brute*, and of abusing therefore that nature, which cannot otherwise be considered, than in the double capacity of *soul* and *body*. (p.56)

Thus to enslave others was to treat them like animals. Despite Beckford's assertion that slaves could have freedom of will, he also hinted that they had no or little mind, and thus were in effect animals. Dressing up his position as concern for the welfare of Africans, he suggested that a thinking mind was the privilege of the enlightened and that 'as the sufferings of the mind are infinitely more acute than bodily sensations; in the reverse proportion, is the slave more happy in ignorance, than those of an opposite

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<sup>95</sup> *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p.251.

<sup>96</sup> See *Jane Austen's Letters*, p.198 (24 January 1813). Austen jokingly claimed to have been in love with Clarkson and others, before they were supplanted by C.W. Pasley.

<sup>97</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African*, 2nd edn (London: J. Phillips, 1788), p.56.

<sup>98</sup> William Cowper, 'The Negro's Complaint', in *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period: Vol. 4: Verse*, ed. by Richardson, pp.75-77 (p.75), I&II.7-9.

colour are in science'.<sup>99</sup> So just as the latter were happier as less desiring, they were happier as less thinking: slavery had 'comforts, of which liberty is frequently deprived'.<sup>100</sup>

Henry's debilitated and enslaved mind makes him a tragic character because his luxurious upbringing has left him unable to develop his natural talents and abilities and fulfil his masculine telos as a virtuous, useful, public citizen. The problem of want of vocation in men is a recurrent theme in Austen, as E.J. Clery points out with her idea of Austen's literary 'masculine ethic'.<sup>101</sup> In *Sense and Sensibility* Willoughby is another tragic case, who becomes spendthrift and sexually licentious from

the irreparable injury which too early an independence and its consequent habits of idleness, dissipation, and luxury, had made in the mind, the character, the happiness, of a man who, to every advantage of person and talents, united a disposition naturally open and honest, and a feeling, affectionate temper.<sup>102</sup>

Ferguson dwelt on this fracturing of male personality in a luxurious age, stressing that man was naturally a creature of action. Like Austen with her emphasis on struggle and endurance, Ferguson thought that for men 'the most animating occasions of human life, are calls to danger and hardship' (p.45). In fact, the need for purpose and action is still prevalent in Henry's character, but has become so perverted that pleasure has become the business of his life. As Millar observed, a man like Henry has converted 'the amusements of gallantry [...] into a serious occupation' (p.108). Henry even discusses his plan to seduce Fanny – his "'wicked project upon her peace'" (MP 298) – in language that nods both to political economy and biblical injunction. When he and Mary discuss how he will occupy himself in Northamptonshire, he tells her that he will

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<sup>99</sup> W. Beckford, p.84.

<sup>100</sup> W. Beckford, p.84.

<sup>101</sup> E. J. Clery, 'Austen and Masculinity', in *A Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. by Johnson, p.339.

<sup>102</sup> Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (London: OUP, 1970 (1811)), p.290.

be hunting three days a week, and walking and riding with Mary for some of the rest of his time. But this will "be exercise only to my body, and I must take care of my mind. Besides *that* would be all recreation and indulgence, without the wholesome alloy of labour, and I do not like to eat the bread of idleness" (MP 239). Henry wilfully perverts the virtue of labour into the vice of seduction.

Fanny might be shocked when Henry describes the "exquisite pleasure" (MP 236) he feels on looking back at the Mansfield theatricals, but for him it has been rewarding labour: "We were all alive. There was employment, hope, solicitude, bustle, for every hour of the day. Always some little objection, some little doubt, some anxiety to be got over" (MP 236). Henry is experiencing his own, perverted form of struggle and endurance, but he has enough self-awareness to feel shame when he compares himself with the ideal, manly hero of *Mansfield Park*, William Price:

He longed to have been at sea, and seen and done and suffered as much. His heart was warmed, his fancy fired, and he felt the highest respect for a lad who, before he was twenty, had gone through such bodily hardships, and given such proofs of mind. The glory of heroism, of usefulness, of exertion, of endurance, made his own habits of selfish indulgence appear in shameful contrast; and he wished he had been a William Price, distinguishing himself and working his way to fortune and consequence with so much self-respect and happy ardour, instead of what he was! (MP 245)

The contrast is stark. In a time of war, William is proving himself on the high seas and Henry is proving himself in amateur theatricals. William's virtues are the 'proofs of mind' that Henry's corrupted mind is unable to rise to. The noble sentiments inspired in Henry by William prove to be momentary – 'the wish was rather eager than lasting' (MP 245) – and Henry's mind is diverted by plans for the next day's sport. The only sort of 'attack' (MP 452) in which he will next engage is again in conquering women, in overcoming the pride of the hurt Maria, only for it to ruin his chances with Fanny.

## V

If Henry's mind is 'unused to make any sacrifice to right' (MP 452) and he is unable to resist pleasure, this could be potentially fatal to the nation's wellbeing and liberty. For Ferguson, there was 'no distinction more serious than that of the warrior and the pacific inhabitant; no more is required to place men in the relation of master and slave' (p.150). The serious danger faced by Britain during the Napoleonic wars was highlighted in C.W. Pasley's *Essay on The Military Policy and Institutions of The British Empire* (1810). Austen read the essay in early 1813, finding it 'delightfully written & highly entertaining', and jokingly claimed that Pasley was 'the first soldier she ever sighed for'.<sup>103</sup> Pasley advocated an aggressive, expansionist approach to winning the war against France, which was unusual for the period. And most commentators concerned about luxury, including Ferguson and Sibbit, had viewed this imperialist approach as exactly the sort of thing which had contributed to the eventual collapse of Rome. But Pasley claimed he was no lover of war for its own sake. The approach he advocated was the only way to combat Napoleon Bonaparte, who by this time was being identified with Julius Caesar:

We are now the only barrier, the last step of the ladder to be surmounted, before these new Romans seat themselves on the proud pinnacle of exaltation, and look down upon the prostrate nations as the slaves of their invincible arms.<sup>104</sup>

It was a case of conquer the French way, or be conquered. An ambition to extend the power and dominion of a nation was only criminal when it passed the limits of necessity, and in the war against France this kind of ambition was a necessity.

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<sup>103</sup> *Jane Austen's Letters*, p.198 (24 January 1813).

<sup>104</sup> C.W. Pasley, *Essay on The Military Policy and Institutions of The British Empire* (London: Edmund Lloyd, 1810), p.10. Napoleon was crowned Emperor of France in December 1804, signifying the country's switch of political model from Republican to Imperial Rome.

Pasley thought that the British were superior in public spirit and patriotism and, like Ferguson, was not anti-commerce or anti-luxury per se, as long as these arts were mixed with other pursuits such as war, letters, and agriculture. But we needed to be careful of 'carrying our own commercial spirit to excess' (p.469), when

wealth will be power, and will be believed to confer happiness. Every thing will be calculated by notions of profit and loss. Valour and learning will be trampled under foot, or may altogether desert such an ungenial soil; and the laws will be destroyed either by a foreign conqueror, or by a domestic tyrant. (p.469)

The duties of military life were underestimated and the only way to achieve a true soldierly character – brave, firm, disciplined, immune to hardship –was through practice and action, through 'the stern unrelenting discipline and constant habits of years' (p.43). It is not safe to assume that Austen was an imperialist because she found Pasley's work entertaining,<sup>105</sup> but his concern that British citizens might not be warrior-like enough to prevent Britain sinking into slavery is certainly reflected in *Mansfield Park*, as are fears that the commercial spirit may have gone too far. William Price is enduring discipline and hardship at sea, but Henry (when not seducing women) is seduced by another object, "the most interesting thing in the world, [...] how to make money" (MP 237).

Pasley also expressed a dislike for tyranny in government and for the institution of slavery (which Napoleon had reinstated in May 1802), seeing the French empire as 'an uniform system of slavery and oppression, both at home and abroad' (p.481). His claim to be no lover of war might seem disingenuous given the zeal with which he advocated a Roman approach to it: 'any nation, that would again adopt the martial

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<sup>105</sup> See Moreland Perkins, 'Mansfield Park and Austen's Reading on Slavery and Imperial Warfare', *Persuasions On-Line: The Jane Austen Journal*, 26 (2005) <<http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol26no1/perkins.htm>> [accessed 13 August 2013], for the view that, 'whereas Thomas Clarkson's book inspired her empathic imagination, Charles Pasley's invigorated her imperialistic sympathies'.

policy of the Romans, might overthrow all others, and obtain the empire of the world' (p.132). And he was not above seeing the potential for commercial profit in such an approach. As we know, war was generally considered to be harmful to trade, but Pasley claimed that instead it could be in the merchants' best interests: 'for by the sabre and the bayonet, and by these alone, we may establish a free market wherever we please!'(p.477). Pasley thought that national aggrandizement was not incompatible with civil liberty. As Britain extended its dominion, it would spread the blessings of liberty to the inhabitants of its new colonies, who would otherwise be subjected to the slavery of the tyrannous French:

whilst we defend our own King and country, we may also stand forth as the general protectors and deliverers of the rest of mankind, from a state of slavery, that, after exhibiting to the world a second race of imperial monsters and ideots, like those of Rome, of Ravenna, and of Byzantium would end in a renewal of the history of the dark ages. (pp.449-450)

In Pasley's mind, the British would civilize the world and the French would return it to a state of barbarity. With some reservations, a review of the essay in the *Quarterly* agreed with him, concluding that the essay was 'one of the most important political works which has ever fallen under our observation'.<sup>106</sup>

Despite Pasley's advocacy of a Roman imperialist approach to international affairs, Julius Caesar was not generally a popular figure in Britain during this period, especially given this connection with a tyrannous Napoleon.<sup>107</sup> As several critics have pointed out, Austen provides a subtle but biting critique of tyranny in *Mansfield Park* through the figure of Sir Thomas Bertram, who stands for tyranny at home and abroad,

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<sup>106</sup> 'Essay on the Military Policy and Institutions of the British Empire, by C.W. Pasley', *Quarterly Review*, V, February & May 1811, pp. 403-437 (p.437).

<sup>107</sup>See Norman Vance, *The Victorians and Ancient Rome* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp.75-79.



both literally and metaphorically.<sup>108</sup> For all Sir Thomas's apparent moral uprightness, there are repeated references to his tyrannous character. Before Mary meets him she is already imagining "his dictatorial looks" (MP 182), and Mr Yates has never seen a father 'so infamously tyrannical as Sir Thomas' (MP 207). Mary and Mr Yates might not be set up as the best judges of character but even Fanny feels relief, 'quite equal to her cousins' (MP 66), when he is forced to go to Antigua. At the ball given in her honour, Sir Thomas advises a tired Fanny to go to bed. Though motivated by concern, it is also a command: "'Advise" was his word, but it was the word of absolute power' (MP 285). Sir Thomas is 'master at Mansfield Park [and] when he had really resolved on any measure, he could always carry it through' (MP 365), and Henry thinks of him as "'arbitrary'" (MP 301), a word often associated with tyrannous power. Sir Thomas treats his family at Mansfield much like he might treat his slave plantation, albeit with a milder regime. The manifestations of his tyranny might seem relatively innocuous, but they are symptoms of the 'absolute power' of the slave owner, as well as the metaphorical despotism of sugar and luxury, to which various of his family members are enslaved. Her father's tyranny leads Maria to rush even more quickly into the mercenary marriage with Rushworth, as she becomes 'less and less able to endure the restraint which her father imposed. The liberty which his absence had given was now become absolutely necessary. She must escape from him and Mansfield as soon as possible' (MP 216). Like slaves on a plantation rebelling or plotting in secret to free themselves, Maria pays lip service to her father's power but behaves very differently when he is not present.

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<sup>108</sup> Examples include Susan Fraiman, 'Jane Austen and Edward Said: Gender, Culture, and Imperialism', *Critical Inquiry*, 21 (1995), 805-821, and Deidre Coleman, 'Imagining Sameness and Difference: Domestic and Colonial Sisters in *Mansfield Park*', in *A Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. by Johnson, pp.292-303.

For Mary, Sir Thomas functions as a sort of Caesar, as, while they are awaiting his return from Antigua, she thinks "of the old heathen heroes, who after performing great exploits in a foreign land, offered sacrifices to the gods on their return" (MP 135).<sup>109</sup> And Tom connects his father with a Shakespearean version of Caesar when referring to the amateur acting they indulged in as children: "how many a time have we mourned over the dead body of Julius Caesar, and to be'd and not to be'd, in this very room, for his amusement!" (MP 152). The neoclassical paradigm of masculinity could be in tension with an anti-slavery stance since classical liberty was generally only for the privileged few, which was supported by the institution of slavery, a natural and appropriate state for many others. In this case Sir Thomas would be the upright and manly figurehead of the ordered, classical Mansfield estate, which is sustained quite naturally on the labour of slaves. James Boswell, companion and biographer of the famously anti-slavery Dr Johnson (the latter was another of Austen's favourite authors) used the paradigm to defend slavery in his poem, *No Abolition of Slavery; or the Universal Empire of Love*. Boswell lampooned key figures in the anti-slave trade cause such as Clarkson and Wilberforce, and addressed William Windham MP as follows:

Shalt THOU, a Roman free and rough  
 Descend to weak *blue stocking* stuff  
 And cherish feelings soft and kind  
 Till you emasculate your mind.<sup>110</sup>

Boswell deflected the charge of effeminacy from those living off slavery's profits to those who had become womanish and soft in their sympathy for slaves. And he saw luxury instead as a symptom of the levellers of the age, who wanted to overturn the natural hierarchy and make equal what could never be so:

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<sup>109</sup> The 'sacrifices' Mary refers to are Maria's marriage to Rushworth and Edward taking orders.

<sup>110</sup> James Boswell, 'No Abolition of Slavery; or the Universal Empire of Love: A Poem' (1791), in *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period: Vol. 4: Verse*, pp.171-191 (pp.178-179), XI.83-86.

What frenzies will a rabble seize  
 In lax luxurious days, like these  
 THE PEOPLE'S MAJESTY, forsooth  
 Must fix our rights, define our truth.<sup>111</sup>

Nonetheless, a commitment to the liberty of all humankind was perfectly consonant with a concern about the corruption of manhood in a luxurious age. The idea of humanity was essential to modern man's image of himself, and the slave trade and slavery, in its encouragement of tyranny, cruelty and violence, degraded the men who perpetrated it. According to Clarkson, it 'hardens their hearts, and makes them insensible of the misery of their fellow-creatures, [and] begets a turn for wanton cruelty' (p.110). Half a century later, Dickens's take on slavery in the southern states of America was typical in its depiction of brutalised slave-owners and its connecting the brutal institution of slavery with a violent, barbarous society more generally: 'Do we not know that the man who has been born and bred among its wrongs [...] whenever his wrath is kindled up, will be a brutal savage?'.<sup>112</sup> In Fox's address on the necessity of boycotting West Indian sugar and rum, he praised the Quakers for their 'steady, manly and uniform opposition to our colonial slavery' (p.8). It was not humane feelings but the indulgence of luxury that had softened male minds; and it was debilitated male minds that became inhumane. The anti-slavery Evangelical, Hannah More, deplored the 'WHITE SAVAGE'<sup>113</sup> who perpetrated it, and thought that

nothing hardens the heart like excessive and unbounded luxury; and he who refuses the fewest gratifications to his own voluptuousness, will generally be found the least susceptible of tenderness for the wants of others. In one reign,

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<sup>111</sup> Boswell, p.177, IX.55-58. Boswell started out as a supporter of the anti-slave trade cause and William Windham also went on to renounce his support for it.

<sup>112</sup> Charles Dickens, *American Notes: For General Circulation* (London: Penguin, 2000 (1842)), p.264. Despite his anti-slavery stance, Dickens clearly saw American slaves as an inferior race and imagined their gradual extinction. See *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Graham Storey, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), XII, pp.24-26 (29 January 1868).

<sup>113</sup> Hannah More, *Slavery, A Poem* (1788), in *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period: Vol. 4: Verse*, pp.105-125 (p.120), XVII. 211.

the cruelties at Rome bore an exact proportion to the dissoluteness at Capreae. And, in another, it is not less notorious, that the imperial fiddler became more barbarous, as he grew more profligate.<sup>114</sup>

In a successful effort to impress Fanny, Henry does some good work on his estate: 'to be the friend of the poor and oppressed! nothing could be more grateful to her' (MP 397). The word 'oppressed', often applied to slaves in the slavery debates, conjures up a wider sphere of suffering than the English poor. Yet Henry's persistence in pursuing Fanny against her will reminds her of that 'gross want of feeling and humanity where his own pleasure was concerned' (MP 327). Henry shows the inhumanity of the slave traders and owners who put their selfish desire for wealth, luxury and pleasure ahead of the humane treatment of others, as well as the inhumanity brought on by luxury. Henry has a potential for benevolence but the habits of luxury have corrupted his natural humanity.

## VI

Debilitated female minds were considered as problematic to society as male ones. Indeed, women were thought particularly liable to become inhumane and cruel when it came to the treatment of slaves. It was a charge Mary Wollstonecraft gave credit to,<sup>115</sup> but not because women were naturally sadistic; rather, leading lives of pampered animals, they were more susceptible to the degenerating effects of luxury than men. Women, like men, should achieve freedom and virtue by self-mastery, though the focus was on their private sexual and domestic character, and its wider effects, rather than an active public character. Despite their father's severity Maria and Julia Bertram have been brought up with every luxury and indulgence, symbolised by

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<sup>114</sup> Hannah More, *Thoughts on The Importance of the Manners of the Great to General Society. And An Estimate of the Religion of the Fashionable World*, new edn (London: T. Cadell & W. Davies, 1809), p.9.

<sup>115</sup> *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, p.79.

their childhood approach to leisure: 'they adjourned to whatever might be the favourite holiday sport of the moment, making artificial flowers or wasting gold paper' (MP 51). This luxurious upbringing has not been counteracted by lessons in self-control – or the 'heroism of principle' (MP 271) and 'self-government' (MP 271) that Fanny attempts – 'that higher species of self-command' (MP 119). Maria has been the more spoilt of the two sisters due to Mrs Norris's favouritism, and this, combined with her lack of self-control and natural 'high spirit[s] and strong passions' (MP 448), will lead to her downfall. Participating in contemporary worries about the frivolous nature of fashionable female education, Austen shows Sir Thomas regretting his 'grievous mismanagement' (MP 448) of his daughters' upbringing. On his return from the West Indies, Sir Thomas can be read as chastened on the slavery issue,<sup>116</sup> a plantation owner who has mismanaged his estate, perhaps leaving it in the hands of a cruel overseer ('amelioration' arguments were put forward by those arguing for a more humane system of slavery, instead of or as a prelude to its total abolition). Similarly, at home, Sir Thomas's mismanagement of his daughters' education has led to their inability to master themselves, to internal slavery.

something must have been wanting *within*, [...]. He feared that principle, active principle, had been wanting, that they had never been properly taught to govern their inclinations and tempers, by that sense of duty which can alone suffice. They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice. To be distinguished for elegance and accomplishments – the authorised object of their youth – could have had no useful influence that way, no moral effect on the mind. He had meant them to be good, but his cares had been directed to the understanding and manners, not the disposition; and of the necessity of self-denial and humility, he feared they had never heard from any lips that could profit them. (MP 448)

Once married to the rich but foolish Rushworth, Maria is unable to impose internal control on her sexual nature and resist her passion for Henry. Maria's comment to

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<sup>116</sup> See Moira Ferguson, *Colonialism and Gender Relations: From Mary Wollstonecraft to Jamaica Kincaid: East Caribbean Connections* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp.65-89.

Henry – "I cannot get out, as the starling said" (MP 127) – as they encounter a locked gate during their walk in the grounds of Sotherton, might be a veiled reference to her engagement to Rushworth, but it also works as a metaphor for this enslavement to Crawford and the enslavement of her mind. The comment references the caged starling in Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*, one of several anti-slavery references in Sterne's work.<sup>117</sup> The metaphor of slave as caged bird was also used by Wollstonecraft to refer to women's slave-like condition in society: 'Women are confined [...] in cages like the feathered race'.<sup>118</sup> Their minds were also enslaved: 'the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison'.<sup>119</sup> Maria's comment that the "iron gate, that ha-ha, give me a feeling of restraint and hardship" (MP 127) shows a mind unused to struggle and endurance, a belief in the necessity of which Wollstonecraft shared with Austen: 'Happy is it when people have the cares of life to struggle with'.<sup>120</sup>

Wollstonecraft also compared women's position to African slaves specifically, and metaphorically to the sugar they slaved for: 'is one half of the human species, like the poor African slaves, to be subject to prejudices that brutalise them, when principles would be a surer guide, only to sweeten the cup of man?'.<sup>121</sup> This, in retrospect, somewhat distasteful, discourse was utilised by feminist and non-feminist alike. Hannah More, for example, applied it to the practice of 'coming out', when girls

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<sup>117</sup> See Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy By Mr. Yorick: With The Journal to Eliza and A Political Romance* (Oxford: OUP, 1998 (1768)), p.71.

<sup>118</sup> *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p.171.

<sup>119</sup> *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p.157.

<sup>120</sup> *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p.169.

<sup>121</sup> *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p.282.

reached marriageable age and were taken into society to find a husband.<sup>122</sup> This was the discourse Austen nodded to – working with the metaphor of Sir Thomas’s slave-owning tyranny – with her comparison of the slave trade and Fanny’s ‘coming out’ ball: ‘Miss Price had not been brought up to the trade of *coming out*’ (MP 273). So Maria sweetens Henry’s cup for a short time, but then the taste turns to bitterness. Though they live together for a period, Henry’s refusal to marry Maria makes her feelings for him ‘so like hatred, as to make them for a while each other’s punishment’ (MP 448), and they voluntarily separate. As Wollstonecraft suggested, ‘without virtue, a sexual attachment must expire, like a tallow candle in the socket, creating intolerable disgust’.<sup>123</sup> Both, though Maria more especially, have been the victim of ‘those emotions which rather imberter than sweeten the cup of life, when they are not restrained within due bounds’;<sup>124</sup> and Maria’s internal slavery is now ‘a bitter draught’.<sup>125</sup>

Maria’s adultery with Henry and subsequent divorce signify more than disgrace for her family. In Millar’s discussion of the relations between the sexes in different stages of society, he cited the sexual corruption (the high prevalence of adultery, divorce and prostitution) of the latter (and luxurious) stages of the Roman empire as warning, though thought that the strong authority of the clergy in modern Europe had so far prevented the worst sexual excesses of Rome (p.103). But given the fears about declining religion in the upper orders,<sup>126</sup> that is, the loss of Millar’s ‘check’ of the

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<sup>122</sup> See Hannah More, ‘The White Slave Trade’ (1805), in *Selected Writings of Hannah More*, ed. by Robert Hole (London: William Pickering, 1996), pp.36-41.

<sup>123</sup> *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p.341.

<sup>124</sup> *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p.141.

<sup>125</sup> Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey*, p.72.

<sup>126</sup> For an example, see Hannah More’s *An Estimate of the Religion of the Fashionable World*. (first published 1790).

church, the potential for sexual depravity and thus national fall was apparent. In Sibbit's polemic, adultery pointed to nothing short of this national destruction:

The violators, then, of this most solemn of all contracts [marriage], are to be deemed the most flagitious members of a community; as the most daring offender both against the laws of God and of man; and whose crimes go directly to the subversion of all morality, to blast the peace of families, and to destroy the very existence of society. All vice leads, in its consequences, to the destruction of nations. But to trample upon the sanctity of marriage, is to tear up every vestige of morals by the roots; it is to poison the purity of our domestic establishments, where Virtue should erect her throne; and it is to undermine that great and capital pillar, upon which all civil polities are principally supported. The base seducer, [...] and the shameless adulteress, dishonoured by illicit love, are, therefore, never to be shielded from ignominy, contempt, and neglect; but to be considered as the most dangerous enemies to the morals, and, consequently, to the happiness and prosperity of their country. (pp.160-61)

Although sexual vice in men was also frowned upon, for women it was the ultimate corruption (a loss of sexual virtue was a loss of total virtue). As we know, Austen highlighted the sexual double-standard but she also reinforced it. Henry is regretful at losing Fanny but can re-take his place in society, and Rushworth can re-marry following his divorce. But for Maria there can be 'no second spring of hope or character' (MP 449) and she is banished to a remote part of the country with only Mrs Norris for company. As in the Victorian trope of the fallen woman, Maria is considered a pollutant that must be kept away from Mansfield and its neighbourhood, and Sir Thomas

would not by a vain attempt to restore what never could be restored, be affording his sanction to vice, or in seeking to lessen its disgrace, be anywise accessory to introducing such misery in another man's family, as he had known himself. (MP 449-450)

Although Sibbit blamed both parties in adultery, he clearly thought that women bore the greater responsibility. Women had been given a high degree of influence over the male sex in modern nations, and thus sexually corrupt women 'may be considered as principal instruments in corrupting and ruining a nation' (p.140). Once



the majority of the women of any country become dissipated, faithless to the marriage vow, rapacious, and vain, we may justly consider the morals of the people to be corrupted in the highest degree. Banish *modesty*, that queen of the virtues, from the earth, and you destroy every sentiment that is noble and pure; without her generous influence and magic refinements, mankind sink into brutes. (pp.140-141)

As we know, women were considered especially dangerous because of the supposed natural insatiability of their appetites. Their appetite for luxury was insatiable and the appetites created by luxury – including an uncontrollable sexual passion – were insatiable, thus the *La Belle Assemblée* article referred to above explained why women especially were to be singled out for censure:

because among them it makes such rapid progress, which nothing is able to check, as the history of the luxury of the Roman ladies evinces; because in women, no consideration whatever can stem the destructive torrent of their desires; because women who have once launched out into the career of pleasure, never set bounds to it; ever running into extremes, they would consume in an instant the fortune of ten families, witness Cleopatra. Why, because women are never satisfied, and because the pleasures of luxury, like all others, fatigue without satiating them. Why, because the luxury with which they are environed, gives them an influence too powerful, an influence invariably pernicious to all that surround them.<sup>127</sup>

Since women were incapable of self-mastery, their luxury ought to be restrained by law – a sure method of reducing crime. More subtle hints of women's insatiable appetites were found in the sugar boycott campaigns, as women were the principal targets of the campaign given their natural inclination for and propensity to become addicted to sugar.<sup>128</sup> In *Mansfield Park*, we do not know if the indolent, sofa-bound, Lady Bertram takes sugar in her tea, but she does provide an image of the typical, enervated, female consumer. Women, therefore, signified both appetite, in their 'devouring luxury',<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup>'Of the luxury of women', p.15.

<sup>128</sup> For discussions of the scapegoating of the white lady in anti-slave trade discourse, see Deirdre Coleman, 'Conspicuous Consumption: White Abolitionism and English Women's Protest Writing in the 1790s', *ELH*, 61(1994), 341-362, and Clara Tuite, 'Domestic retrenchment and imperial expansion: the property plots of *Mansfield Park*', in *The Postcolonial Jane Austen*, ed. by You-Me Park and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.93- 115.

<sup>129</sup>'Of the luxury of women', p.15.

and food; they were at once the cravers and consumers of sugar, and the sugar which men craved and consumed. As such they were the very definition of luxury, the never ceasing circle of craving and satisfaction.

In this light Fanny's apparently extreme reaction to the actions of Maria and Henry – 'it was too horrible a confusion of guilt, too gross a complication of evil, for human nature, not in a state of utter barbarism, to be capable of!' (MP 429) – seems more commonplace, both in its horror at sexual vice and in the assumption of the latter's connectedness to societal breakdown and national slavery, Sibbit's 'fall of greatness and the confusion of guilt' (p.7). This is not to suggest that Austen thought that women were responsible for the fall of empires. But against a background of war and slavery, of 'reform or ruin', she took a strong interest in the need for both sexes to become more serious and responsible, and this is reflected in the chain of consequences she puts in place for those whose lives have been too easy, selfish and luxurious. Thus the societal boundaries already in place for women are drawn tighter for those unable to impose internal boundaries. In contrast to Maria, Fanny represents Millar's woman around the middle stage of the Roman Commonwealth, before the rot began to set in: 'In this situation, the women become, neither the slaves, nor the idols of the other sex, but the friends and companions' (p.89). They are

accustomed to live in retirement, and to keep company with their nearest relations and friends, they are inspired with all that modesty and diffidence which is natural to persons unacquainted with promiscuous conversation; and their affections are neither dissipated by pleasure, nor corrupted by the vicious customs of the world. (p.90)

Fanny has led a sheltered, if not cushioned, life, and is easily shocked by the manners and morals of the worldly Henry and Mary. As wife of Edmund, she will be friend and companion rather than idol or slave, the ideal woman for a time of national danger. The *Lady's Museum* article discussed above advocated a return to these apparently

more simple female manners as the best way women could help their menfolk in a time of war. The writer contrasted the sacrifices made by early Roman and Spartan women with the profuse and wanton spirit of the age, where women were barbarian-like in their 'continual whirl of dissipation [and] who are now to be met with in all public places, more than half naked, almost without fixed habitations, like Tartar hordes'.<sup>130</sup>

## VII

Mary Crawford, though at first seeming to symbolise liberty with her wealth, beauty and relative freedom of movement, will also manifest symptoms of internal slavery. Both she and Maria value wealth, but Maria falls victim to her unnatural (because adulterous) passion for Henry, whereas Mary is a victim of an opposite case, a hardening of heart against a natural and virtuous passion, a genuine inclination for Edmund. A marriage to Edmund would not leave her poverty-stricken, but Mary's warped mind, perverted by 'habits of wealth' (MP 412), cannot calculate a comfortable mean between wealth and poverty, luxury and need. She is like the heroine of one of the morality tales in *The Loiterer*, who ends up unhappily married to a spendthrift baronet rather than a worthy clergyman: 'I had entirely flung away my own happiness, by mistaking luxury for comfort, and affluence for enjoyment'.<sup>131</sup> But Austen knew that defining the ideal level of 'comfort' could be a difficult task, and several characters in her work struggle to do it. In *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth Bennet is horrified that Charlotte Lucas chooses to marry Mr Collins in order to gain an establishment, but she is keen to acquit her early favourite, Mr Wickham, of the charge of venality: "What is the difference in matrimonial affairs, between the mercenary and the prudent motive?"

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<sup>130</sup> 'To the Editor of the Lady's Museum, Thrift and Luxury. An Essay.', *Lady's Monthly Museum*, 1 September 1803, pp.150-153 (p.152).

<sup>131</sup> *The Loiterer*, 30 January 1790, pp.297-302 (p.302).

Where does discretion end, and avarice begin?""<sup>132</sup> And in *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne Dashwood chides Eleanor Dashwood for stressing the value of money, yet her own idea of enough to live on proves to be an extravagant catalogue of servants, carriages and horses. As Eleanor tells her: ""your competence and my wealth are very much alike, I dare say; and without them, as the world goes now, we shall both agree that every kind of external comfort must be wanting"".<sup>133</sup>

Though difficult, finding the virtuous mean, 'comfort', was important. Austen knew that poverty could degrade as much as wealth. As Emma Woodhouse puts it: ""a very narrow income has a tendency to contract the mind, and sour the temper. Those who can barely live, and who live perforce in a very small, and generally very inferior, society, may well be illiberal and cross"".<sup>134</sup> In fact poverty, as well as luxury, could lead to confusion and disorder. The Price household in Portsmouth is such an example. It is ""always in confusion"" (MP 366), an 'abode of noise, disorder, and impropriety' (MP 381), a place of 'ceaseless tumult' (MP 384) and 'the scene of mismanagement and discomfort from beginning to end' (MP 383). As the theatricals at Mansfield become rowdy, so the young boys of the house indulge in 'riotous games' (MP 383). The Portsmouth household is in marked contrast to the (at least) surface classical order of Mansfield, its 'elegance, propriety, regularity, harmony, [...] peace and tranquillity' (MP 384). The chaos extends to Fanny's mother, whose general appearance is 'so comfortless, so slatternly, so shabby' (MP 400). In chapter 3 of this thesis we shall find the term comfort in use as an incentive for those lower down the social scale to better their material condition. 'Comfort theory' held that the poor would put off breeding in order to acquire more material comforts, the 'diffused

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<sup>132</sup> *Pride and Prejudice*, p.188.

<sup>133</sup> *Sense and Sensibility*, p.78.

<sup>134</sup> *Emma*, p.56.

comfort' that Mr Parker hopes for in *Sanditon*.<sup>135</sup> Indeed, the size of the Price family (originally numbering ten children), as well as Mrs Price's inability to manage (another accusation against the nineteenth-century poor), is a significant factor in the relative poverty of their household. As Knox-Shaw puts it, 'over the Price family Malthus seems to hover'.<sup>136</sup> We might see the 'comfort theory' of the early to mid-nineteenth century as a way for the working classes to escape the chaos and confusion of abject poverty.

If Mrs Price is 'comfortless', this is a degraded condition for Austen, whose idea of comfort is especially important for the women in her novels, confined to the domestic as they are. Fanny loves the old school room at Mansfield, which has become hers: 'the comfort of it in her hours of leisure was extreme' (MP 173). Although relatively shabby and cold, Fanny has built up in it a 'nest of comforts' (MP 174), so that her comfort there is both emotional relief from her sometimes difficult relations and pleasure in a range of material objects with personal associations. Austen's work suggests that in marriage women should feel affection (though not necessarily passion) for their husbands, but this should ideally be matched with a certain level of material comfort which together achieves an overall feeling of comfort or of being comfortable. In *Emma* Miss Taylor's happy marriage to Mr Weston provides this totality of comfort. In her new home she finds herself 'in the centre of every domestic comfort, [with a] pleasant husband [and] a carriage of her own'.<sup>137</sup> In *Mansfield Park*, Mary writes to Fanny: 'you will wish to hear of Maria's degree of comfort as a wife' (MP 428), a statement implying Maria's emotional and material state. Maria's comfort is all on the latter side, the side that Mary values most. Mary knows that Maria does not love

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<sup>135</sup> *Sanditon*, p.14.

<sup>136</sup> Peter Knox-Shaw, p.174.

<sup>137</sup> *Emma*, p.10.

Rushworth but feels that materially ‘she has got her pennyworth for her penny’ (MP 400) and that she should be satisfied ‘with moving the queen of a palace, though the king may appear best in the background’ (MP 400).

Edmund offers Mary ‘comfort’, the totality of comfort that Mrs Weston achieves. He stresses to Mary that he “‘does not mean to be poor’” (MP 226) – which as we know, can also lead to ‘confusion’ – and is anxious for her not to look down on “‘the something inbetween, in the middle state of world circumstances’” (MP 227). But Mary must have luxury, and cannot quite reconcile herself to a clerical second son, and even hopes that Tom might die of his illness so that wealth and consequence will fall to Edmund in his place. Mary's self-willed loss of Edmund leaves her wounded and changed, making it hard for her to find 'any one who could satisfy the better taste she had acquired at Mansfield, whose character and manners could authorise a hope of the domestic happiness she had there learnt to estimate' (MP 453-454). Like Henry, Mary has lost ‘freedom of choice’, one of Blair’s defining characteristics of liberty. Her value of wealth and consequence leads her to reject life with Edmund, a ‘comfortable’ and therefore virtuous choice based on affection and a decent level of material comfort. This is the ideal union that Edmund and Fanny achieve in marriage: ‘their home was the home of affection and comfort’ (MP 457). However, their comfort is soon increased – ‘to complete the picture of good’ (MP 457) – by the convenient death of Dr Grant, ‘just after they had been married long enough to begin to want an increase of income’ (MP 457). Mary’s mockery of “‘moderation and economy, and bringing down your wants to your income, and all that’” (MP 226), proves to be not so very far from the mark after all. Mary is wrongheaded but by rewarding Edmund and Fanny with increased material comforts, Austen shows her value for a good income as well as the continual difficulty of drawing a line between virtuous comfort and corrupting luxury.

Fanny has been used to a relatively Spartan life in Portsmouth and is of semi-servant status at Mansfield; and ‘what was tranquillity and comfort to Fanny was tediousness and vexation to Mary. [...] one so easily satisfied, the other so unused to endure’ (MP 290). It is a telling indication of the corruption at Mansfield when Sir Thomas thinks that Fanny's refusal of Henry indicates a mind diseased by luxury. He hopes that a visit to Portsmouth, ‘a little abstinence from the elegancies and luxuries of Mansfield Park, would bring her mind into a sober state’ (MP 363). The experiment is ‘a medicinal project upon his niece's understanding, which he must consider as at present diseased. A residence of eight or nine years in the abode of wealth and plenty had a little disordered her powers of comparing and judging’ (MP 363-364). Indeed, Fanny ‘soon learnt to think with respect of her own little attic at Mansfield Park, in *that* house reckoned too small for anybody's comfort’ (MP 380). Yet Fanny cannot marry without love – ‘how wretched, and how unpardonable, how hopeless and how wicked it was, to marry without affection’ (MP 323). As Maria's fate shows, mercenary marriages were dangerous, and had the potential to lead to their breakdown, and thus to societal confusion and disorder. In *Pride and Prejudice* Charlotte marries the ridiculous Mr Collins only for “‘a comfortable home’”,<sup>138</sup> but remains safe and seemingly contented because of her unromantic and practical nature. Nonetheless, Elizabeth cannot think that “‘insensibility of danger [is] security for happiness’” (p.174), and when Mr Bennet thinks that Elizabeth is marrying Mr Darcy without love, he feels that she would not be “‘happy or respectable’”, that she would be placed “‘in the greatest danger’” and “‘could scarcely escape discredit and misery’”(p.385). This danger could imply any form of unhappiness but is suggestive especially of sexual danger, a susceptibility to affection outside the marriage and thus to a ‘fall’.

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<sup>138</sup> *Pride and Prejudice*, p.165.

In *Mansfield Park*, Mary's initial attempt to unite affection and luxury turns her into a sort of siren who will try and tempt Edmund away from his noble, clerical calling. Unlike Maria, she is not enslaved to her passionate nature but rather serves as potential enslaver of others, in this case Edmund. She is associated with the sweetness and addictive quality of sugar as Edmund becomes more and more drawn in and less able to see her clearly. Changing his mind about acting in the Mansfield amateur theatricals, a venture he strongly disapproves of, he enjoys spending the morning rehearsing with Mary, which 'wore away in satisfactions very sweet, if not very sound' (MP 180). These sweet, if not very sound, satisfactions, provide a broader metaphor for slavery and the slave trade, as the sweetness of sugar and luxury are founded on the inhuman and unnatural practice of slavery. Tom and Maria are pleased that 'Edmund had descended from that moral elevation which he had maintained before, and they were both as much the better as the happier for the descent' (MP 179). And Mary feels her power: "'his sturdy spirit to bend as it did! Oh! It was sweet beyond expression'" (MP 354). Edmund's capitulation is like a turn from the tough path of righteousness (the anti-slavery cause) to the easy road of corruption leading to moral bankruptcy.

Edmund continues on the slippery slope as his desire for Mary increases. His turn from God to the things of the world is symbolized by the scene where he turns from contemplating nature with Fanny to the promise of music involving Mary. Blair headed his sermon on luxury and licentiousness with the following quotation from Isaiah: 'The harp and the viol, the tabret and pipe and wine are in their feasts; but they regard not the work of the Lord, neither consider the operation of his hands'.<sup>139</sup> Blair went on to stress the value of standing still and quietly contemplating the works of God

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<sup>139</sup> 'On Luxury and Licentiousness', p.113.



in nature, which would form us to 'relish of uncorrupted, innocent pleasures'.<sup>140</sup> His words find their echo in Fanny, who says to Edmund:

"When I look out on such a night as this, I feel as if there could be neither wickedness nor sorrow in the world; and there certainly would be less of both if the sublimity of Nature were more attended to, and people were carried more out of themselves by contemplating such a scene". (MP 139)

Fanny and Edmund discuss going out to star-gaze, but on hearing the music beginning and 'turning his back on the window' (MP 139-140), Edmund is symbolically turning from the contemplation of God to the siren harp of Mary. He is falling by slow steps as the music advances and he advances with it, 'moving forward by gentle degrees towards the instrument, and when it ceased, he was close by the singers, among the most urgent in requesting to hear the glee again' (MP 140). Lost in the sugary sweetness of Mary, Edmund is also forgetting that 'from the harmony of nature, and of nature's works, [he] would learn to hear sweeter sounds than what arise from *the viol, the tabret, and the pipe*'.<sup>141</sup>

If Sir Thomas is a sort of Caesar, then Mary is a sort of Cleopatra, whose influence, according to Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, could draw Antony from the gods: 'Thy beck might from the bidding of the gods/Command me'.<sup>142</sup> Like Cleopatra's effect on Antony in the play (he becomes 'not more manlike/Than Cleopatra'<sup>143</sup>), Mary nearly 'unmans' Edmund, because she wants him to give up his public, religious calling. Mary's contempt for the clergy is clear – "a clergyman is

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<sup>140</sup> 'On Luxury and Licentiousness', p.122.

<sup>141</sup> 'On Luxury and Licentiousness', p.122.

<sup>142</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra*, in *The Norton Based on the Oxford Edition Shakespeare*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and others (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), pp.2619-2708 (p.2673), III. 11. 60-61. The play completes the narrative begun in *Julius Caesar* of the civil war and power struggles that resulted in Rome's transition from republic to dictatorship.

<sup>143</sup> *The Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra*, p.2637, I. 4. 5-6.

nothing” (MP 120) – and her attitude to religion more broadly is not much more approving. Fanny imagines Mary’s mind to be ‘led astray and bewildered, [...] darkened, yet fancying itself light’ (MP 362). On the visit to the chapel at Sotherton, unlike Fanny Mary sees the discontinuation of family worship in such a place as an improvement:

"it is safer to leave people to their own devices on such subjects. Every body likes to go their own way –to choose their own time and manner of devotion. The obligation of attendance, the formality, the restraint, the length of time – altogether it is a formidable thing and what nobody likes”. (MP 115)

Like the other luxurious characters in the novel, Mary associates liberty with licence and freedom from restraint, rather than internal control. As Hannah More put it in her chastisement of the lax religion of the upper classes, a religious life appeared to be ‘a hard bondage to one immersed in the practices of the world, and under the dominion of its appetites and passions [but] to a real Christian, it is "perfect freedom"’.<sup>144</sup> Edmund stresses the value of the ritual practice of worship because “the mind which does not struggle against itself under *one* circumstance, would find objects to distract it in the *other*” (MP 116).

So, like Maria, Mary struggles with the idea of restraint, but her final corruption of mind is symbolised by her relaxed attitude to sexual transgression and her advocacy of a marriage between the disgraced Maria and Henry. Edmund is horrified at the “perversion of mind which made it natural to her to treat the subject as she did” (MP 442), and sees her faults as ones of principle, and “of blunted delicacy and a corrupted, vitiated mind” (MP 442). It is this attitude, Mary's lack of “feminine [...] modest loathings” (MP 441) and her “recommending [...] a compliance, a compromise, and acquiescence, in the continuance of the sin” (MP 444), that finally awakens Edmund

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<sup>144</sup> Hannah More, *Thoughts on The Importance of the Manners of the Great to General Society. And An Estimate of the Religion of the Fashionable World*, new edn (London: T. Cadell & W. Davies, 1809 (1788)) p. 227.

from his infatuation. Like Fanny he sees Maria's and Henry's actions as "a dreadful crime"(MP 443), whereas Mary sees them as a foolish indiscretion. In Fanny's thoughts: 'if there was a woman of character in existence, who could treat as a trifle this sin of the first magnitude, who could try to gloss it over, and desire to have it unpunished, she could believe Miss Crawford to be the woman' (MP 429). Mary's lack of sexual 'modest loathings' aligns her further with the dangerous sexuality of Cleopatra, the woman who was held responsible for the emasculation of men and the collapse of empires. She represents the insatiability of sexual desire, in Shakespeare as in Wollstonecraft linked with gluttony in food, Antony's 'Egyptian dish',<sup>145</sup> that only leaves him more hungry:

Other women cloy  
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry  
Where most she satisfies.<sup>146</sup>

Antony is ruined by his enslavement, 'these strong Egyptian fetters',<sup>147</sup> but Edmund breaks the chain before it is too late.

Just as Tom and Henry have displayed slave-like characteristics, so Maria and Mary display the sexual immorality often levelled at slaves, especially the women. In Edmund Long's infamous *History of Jamaica*, he described negro sexual relations as 'bestial' and even credited with truth the charge that female negroes were so 'hot', they mated with baboons.<sup>148</sup> As Edmund and Mary part for the final time, Mary makes the mistake of sexual flirtation: "it was a smile ill-suited to the conversation that had passed, a saucy playful smile, seeming to invite, in order to subdue me" (MP 444).

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<sup>145</sup> *The Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra*, p.2656, II. 6. 123.

<sup>146</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra*, p.2648, II. 2. 241-243.

<sup>147</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra*, p.2633, I. 2. 105.

<sup>148</sup> Edmund Long, 'Negroes', in *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Vol. 2: The Abolition Debate*, ed. by Kitson, pp.1-22 (p.22).

Maaja A. Stewart reads this scene as Edmund 'invest[ing] Mary herself with inappropriate seductive powers at their last meeting, in a projection reminiscent of the white man's empowerment of the slave woman'.<sup>149</sup> Female slaves could be figured with the seductive powers of a Cleopatra and seen as over-empowered on plantations, given the frequent sexual relations that occurred between slave owners and their female slaves, and the ensuing complications of power and hierarchy which resulted.

Mary seems hurt by Edmund's shocked response, but her ingrained habits of luxury and wealth, her corrupted mind, mean that "'habit, habit carried it'" (MP 444) and she mocks him:

"A pretty good lecture upon my word. Was it part of your last sermon? At this rate, you will soon reform every body at Mansfield and Thornton Lacey; and when I hear of you next, it may be as a celebrated preacher in some great society of Methodists, or as a missionary into foreign parts". (MP 444)

This sarcastic, departing shot about missionaries in foreign parts aligns Mary with enemies of the anti-slave trade cause. Campaigners emphasised again and again their Christianising mission, the rights of slaves to be converted, and the inhumanity of the planters in denying them an immortal soul:

Where  
Your proofs of righteousness, when ye conceal  
The knowledge of the Deity from those  
Who would adore him *fervently*? Your God  
Ye rob of worshippers, his altars keep  
Unhail'd, while driving from the sacred font  
The eager slave, lest *he* should hope in *Jesus*.<sup>150</sup>

The religious dimension of the slavery debates was acutely sensitive, with the Bible being used as evidence on both sides.<sup>151</sup> But it was the anti-slave trade campaigners,

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<sup>149</sup> Maaja A. Stewart, *Domestic Realities and Imperial Fictions: Jane Austen's Novels in Eighteenth-Century Contexts* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1993), p.135.

<sup>150</sup> Ann Yearsley, 'A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave-Trade' (1788), in *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period: Vol. 4: Verse*, ed. by Alan Richardson (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999), pp.126-157 (p.149), XVII.291-296.

many driven by Evangelical zeal, who seemed to feel most strongly that they had God on their side. The slave trade and slavery not only violated both the positive and the natural laws of God, but, as discussed, turned the traders and planters into the very opposite of the meek, gentle and mild humanity of Christianity exemplified by the figure of Jesus. A language of apocalypse permeated some of the rebuttals to the Rev. R. Harris's claim that the Bible condoned slavery. The Rev. James Ramsay, for example, spoke of the historical 'draw[ing] down of divine vengeance on guilty nations',<sup>152</sup> or on Fanny's 'confusion of guilt, [...] complication of evil, [and] state of utter barbarism' (MP 430). In Anna Letitia Barbauld's poetic tribute to Wilberforce, she found vengeance operating through natural laws, as the 'soft luxurious plague',<sup>153</sup> which 'corruption follows with gigantic stride',<sup>154</sup> would eventually ruin and enslave the nation, and the slaves would be revenged: 'By foreign wealth are British morals chang'd/And Afric's sons, [...] smile avenged'.<sup>155</sup>

In Benjamin Moseley's eulogy to the sugar cane he was blinded by its dazzling qualities, even seeing in it the secret of life itself. In 'the precious fluid of its cells, [is] found that, which philosophers have so long searched for in vain'.<sup>156</sup> A paradise was come on earth:

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<sup>151</sup> For a position of the Bible as pro-slavery, see Rev. R. Harris, *Scriptural Researches on the Licitness of the Slave-Trade, Shewing its Conformity with the principles of Natural and Revealed Religion, delineated in the Sacred Writings of the Word of God* (London: John Stockdale, 1788).

<sup>152</sup> Rev. James Ramsay, *Examination of the Rev. Mr. Harris's Scriptural Researches on The Licitness of the Slave-Trade* (London: James Phillips, 1788), p.29.

<sup>153</sup> Anna Letitia Barbauld, 'Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq. on the Rejection of the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade' (1791), in *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period: Vol. 4: Verse*, ed. by Richardson, pp.161-169 (p.168), V. 88.

<sup>154</sup> 'Epistle to William Wilberforce', p.168, V. 96.

<sup>155</sup> 'Epistle to William Wilberforce', p.168, V. 104-105.

<sup>156</sup> Benjamin Moseley, *A Treatise on Sugar* (London: G.G. & J. Robinson, 1799), p.191.

In the season of this great – this fascinating work – a sugar-plantation represents the days of Saturn. – Every animal seems to be a member of the golden age. At home, the merchant, from his transatlantic operation, supports legions of manufacturers. With pointed finger on the globe, he follows the car of Phoebus, with anxious care, through the heavenly signs propitious to his views; collects his rays from equatorial climes; diffuses their genial warmth over the frigid regions of the earth, and makes the industrious world one great family.<sup>157</sup>

But like the perfectly ordered surface of the Mansfield estate, Moseley's fantasy smoothed over deformities and melted pain and suffering away, masking the barbarism underneath. Sibbit thought that the effects of luxury reversed human progress, so that 'from luxury and refinement [man] has so far corrupted his improved nature as to be reverging into his primitive situation, and sinking again into the savage' (p.53). It is this savagery that threatens civilized Mansfield Park and the wealthy nation beyond. And it is the savagery that mirrors the inhuman traffic in and holding of slaves, which, 'in an enlightened age, ha[s] greatly surpassed, in brutality and injustice, the most ignorant and barbarous ages'.<sup>158</sup> To avoid internal and external slavery and barbarity, Austen chooses 'comfort': 'Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore everybody, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and have done with all the rest' (MP 446).

In the next chapter, I will find Thackeray rejecting the new seriousness found in *Mansfield Park*. Increasingly influenced by the Evangelical ethos, seriousness and self-control were now the prevailing virtues of the Victorians. If this ethos was a reaction against the laxer morals and mores of the Georgians, in turn Thackeray reacts against the Victorian spirit with a celebration of just that luxurious excess that Austen condemned.

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<sup>157</sup> Moseley, p.191.

<sup>158</sup> William Fox, p.7.

## Chapter 2: 'That bowl of rack punch was the cause of all this history':

### Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, the Joys of Drink and Luxury as Freedom in an Age of Control

In William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, alcohol is a necessity of life. It pervades every aspect of life, in all walks of life. There is the rack punch at Vauxhall, which makes Jos Sedley so drunken and which was 'the cause of all this history'.<sup>159</sup> There is the fine port on offer at Miss Crawley's, in which James Crawley overindulges, ruining his chances of inheriting his aunt's money. There is the gin drunk by Becky Sharp's artistic, dissolute father and his friends, later partaken of by Becky herself when down on her luck. There is the fine champagne drunk in the pre-bankruptcy Sedley household, which mollifies Jos for his father's teasing - "'Boney himself hasn't got such in his cellary, my boy!'" (VF 36) - as well as the champagne Rawdon Crawley is asked to 'stand' for the company in Cursitor Street debtor's prison. There is the heavy drinking of George Osborne's regiment, at which he excels (VF 132), as well as the small, regular habits: the half-pint of wine consumed with a joint of mutton by the pompous Jones at his club, and the bottle of wine offered with seedcake to parents visiting Miss Pinkerton's Academy. Everybody drinks. Children drink. From Becky's pupils at Queen's Crawley, who are given ale and water with dinner and a small glass of wine after it (VF 87-88), to the somewhat larger consumption of the precocious, young George Osborne, who 'at dinner [...] invited the ladies to drink wine with the utmost coolness, and took off his champagne in a way which charmed his old grandfather' (VF 656). It is difficult to imagine a teetotal character appearing in this environment. This is historically accurate given that the novel's setting (1813 to c. early 1830s) largely predates the British temperance

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<sup>159</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (London: Penguin Books, 2003 (1848)), p.64. Subsequent references are parenthesised in the text as VF with the page number.

movement. The latter, which had begun in the late 1820s as a moderation or anti-spirits only movement, had by 1846 to 1848, when the novel was written, firmly established itself as a teetotal (total abstinence) movement.<sup>160</sup>

And yet like most historical novels *Vanity Fair* bears the mark of the time in which it was written as well as the time in which it is set. In fact, Thackeray uses the novel's historical setting – the excessive and indulgent Regency period – to critique contemporary British society – the controlled and restrained early Victorian period. The ubiquity of alcohol in the novel asserts its essential place at the heart of British life at a time when this position was under threat. By the mid-nineteenth century, there was a strong Victorian belief in the idea of temperance in its broadest sense. That is, a belief not necessarily in a specific temperance position, such as teetotalism (this was always a minority view, if a significant one), but in a moderate and controlled use of alcohol and an abhorrence of drunkenness as brutish, antiquated and uncivilized. This notion of temperance was intricately bound up with the Victorians' idea of themselves as a highly progressive and civilized nation. As Isabella Beeton observed proudly a decade or so after the publication of *Vanity Fair*, apparently the days of excess in alcohol consumption were over. In Beeton's first edition (1861) of her famous *Book of Household Management*, she stated:

In former times, when the bottle circulated freely amongst the guests, it was necessary for the ladies to retire earlier than they do at present, for the gentlemen of the company soon became unfit to conduct themselves with that decorum which is essential in the presence of ladies. Thanks, however, to the improvements in modern society, and the high example shown to the nation by its most illustrious personages, temperance is, in these happy days, a striking feature in the character of a gentleman.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> For a full history of the movement, see Lilian Lewis Shiman, *Crusade Against Drink in Victorian England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988).

<sup>161</sup> Isabella Beeton, *The Book of Household Management*, 1<sup>st</sup> edn (London: 18 Bouverie St., 1861), p.92.



In John Burnett's social history of drinks, he cites the example of Beeton's 'most illustrious personages' as indicative of the arrival of this broader notion of temperance. At Queen Victoria's court, in marked contrast to the Regency, she refused to sit in the drawing room after dinner until the gentlemen joined the ladies around fifteen minutes later (thereby drastically curtailing the traditional male-only, after-dinner drinking time). And at Osborne House, Prince Albert designed the billiard room (once a site for further male drinking) as open-plan to the more female space of the drawing room.<sup>162</sup> Thackeray, too, appeared to admire the restrained morality of the Victorian court. His meditation on Georgian England in *The Four Georges*, for example, contrasted 'the awful debauchery and extravagance which prevailed in the great English society of those days',<sup>163</sup> to the reign of the current monarch: 'I am sure the future painter of our manners will pay a willing allegiance to that good life, and be loyal to the memory of that unsullied virtue'.<sup>164</sup> And in *Vanity Fair* episodes of drunkenness tend to drive the plot to the characters' detriment. Jos Sedley is made a laughing stock at Vauxhall and is too embarrassed by his antics to propose to Becky. James Crawley horrifies his aunt and loses out on inheriting her money. Despite the novel's setting in a period of Regency excess, the very Victorian message seems to be that drunkenness does not pay.

But while the plot says one thing, the sentiment of the novel says another. The narrator never judges a character for drunkenness, and in fact seems to feel great

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<sup>162</sup> See John Burnett, *Liquid Pleasures: A Social History of Drinks in Modern Britain* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.148.

<sup>163</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Four Georges* (1861), in *Henry Esmond: The English Humourists: The Four Georges*, ed. by George Saintsbury (London: OUP, 1908), pp.695-811 (p.758). Thackeray is referring particularly to the reign of George III (not the individual man, whom he admired), although the comment is representative of his view of the whole Georgian period.

<sup>164</sup> *The Four Georges*, p.811.

sympathy for them. James Crawley is 'the unlucky boy' (VF 400) and 'poor Jim' (VF 401) for getting caught out by his aunt. Profound sympathy is felt for the hapless Jos, 'groaning in agonies which the pen refuses to describe' (VF 66) with the incomparable type of hangover induced by Vauxhall rack punch. And there is more than sympathy and humour in these representations, there is great joy and celebration. In this chapter, I explore how the ostensible message of luxury and corruption in *Vanity Fair* is consistently undermined by Thackeray's evident joy in luxury; more specifically, in one of its ideal manifestations, alcohol. In an age when control and strength of will were valorised, sensual excess was frowned upon, and the ideology of a middle-class work ethic was becoming increasingly dominant, Thackeray seemed instinctively drawn to an idea of a more leisurely age, one with room for luxurious excess. It is not that Thackeray explicitly advocates drunkenness. As James Nicholls, in his political study of alcohol, points out, by the mid-nineteenth century the climate had so changed that 'not even the most vehement opponent of temperance fanaticism publicly ascribed a positive value to intoxication'.<sup>165</sup> It is more that in Thackeray's vision there is room for excess with alcohol that may lead to drunkenness, and this behaviour is normal, commonplace, part of the fabric of life and one of its essential pleasures.

## I

In an advanced commercial (that is, luxurious) nation, individual, economic and political liberty were meant to go together. And yet, as the varying degrees of the temperance ethos showed, there seemed to be an increasing drive towards control. Civilization was increasingly ossifying into 'rigid refinement', to use Thackeray's description of the cold Pitt Crawley (VF 94), a sort of form with no content. For

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<sup>165</sup> James Nicholls, *The Politics of Alcohol* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p.125.

Thackeray luxury and civilization went hand in hand. But luxury implied form and content, beauty and sensual pleasure. And alcohol is not only a sensual pleasure but an intoxicant, and it was this quality which tied it so intimately to Victorian anxieties about luxury, progress and civilization. Intoxication threatens or overturns rational control, the rational control that was at the heart of the civilization project. At worse, it might expose humanity's baser, animal, even savage instincts. Thackeray clearly would not have applauded the latter, and found brutish drunkenness abhorrent: his Barry Lyndon, who dies of delirium tremens, is a cruel and violent drunk.<sup>166</sup> Yet in *Vanity Fair* he prizes alcohol's ability to overturn the rational because it nudges rigid refinement back towards a warmer, more joyous and humane civilization of luxury. At a time when they were being overtaken by temperance rhetoric, Thackeray rehabilitates the myths of the wine gods, Dionysus (the Greek version) or Bacchus (the Roman version), celebrating their association with freedom, pleasure, chaos and irrationality.<sup>167</sup>

For Thackeray sensual pleasures were integral to the art and beauty of life, what he conceived of as a form of 'social good'. This idea of the social good is captured in a letter Thackeray wrote to his mother from Paris, when he was writing for the *Constitutional*, a short-lived, advanced liberal newspaper. Although a lifelong liberal, at twenty-five he was already beginning to feel uncomfortable with the more radical sides of French and English liberal politics, and starting to demonstrate that streak of 'aristocratic Whiggism'<sup>168</sup> (as one of his biographers, D.J. Taylor, describes it) in his

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<sup>166</sup> See 'The Luck of Barry Lyndon, a Romance of the Last Century. By Fitz-boodle', *Fraser's Magazine*, January-December, 1844; later published as *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon, Esq* (1856).

<sup>167</sup> In *Bacchus in Romantic England: Writers and Drink, 1780-1830* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999), Anya Taylor explores the pleasures and pains of Romantic drinking. Whilst they struggled with what we would now call alcoholism, they also 'exulted in wildness and release' (p.222), a celebration of the wine god which could not be countenanced decades later.

<sup>168</sup> D. J. Taylor, *Thackeray* (London: Pimlico, 1999), p.131.

thinking, which became more pronounced as he aged. Thackeray wrote that he was afraid that he was 'growing a Tory',<sup>169</sup> feeling that

people in their battles about public matters, forget the greatest good of all, social-good. I mean fine arts, and civilization, dandyism as you call it: we owe this to the aristocracy, and we must keep an aristocracy (purged and modified as you will) in order to retain it.<sup>170</sup>

Thackeray's social good is 'fine arts, civilization' – a concept of luxury – as opposed to that other form of social good, 'battles about public matters' – social reform; and he privileges the former. Thackeray's mother seems to have labelled his idea of fine arts and civilization 'dandyism', and I will be exploring in due course Jos Sedley's function as the dandy, and as such a comic celebration of his idea of the social good.

For now, I wish to stress that for Thackeray the sensual pleasures of eating and drinking were akin to and a form of the 'fine arts', that is a form of luxury. As John Carey points out, for Thackeray 'the satisfactions of art and appetite are truly linked, and bring the same parts of the human organism into play'.<sup>171</sup> Thackeray himself said that 'all enjoyments are sensual enjoyments',<sup>172</sup> and that 'the senses are the arts'.<sup>173</sup> In his chapter on the French school of painting in *The Paris Sketch Book*, Thackeray

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<sup>169</sup> *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray: A Supplement to Gordon N. Ray*, ed. by Edgar F. Harden, 2 vols (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), I, pp.22-23 (p.23) (13 December 1836).

<sup>170</sup> *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray: A Supplement to Gordon N. Ray*, I, p.23.

<sup>171</sup> John Carey, *Thackeray: Prodigal Genius* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), p.93.

<sup>172</sup> Quoted in Carey, p.93.

<sup>173</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, 'Memorials of Gormandizing', *Fraser's Magazine* (June 1841), in *Catherine, A Shabby Genteel Story, The Second Funeral of Napoleon and Miscellanies, 1840-1* (London: OUP, [1908]), pp.509-536 (p.513).

compares paintings and drinks. He wrote ‘There is, to be sure, a hidden analogy between liquors and pictures’.<sup>174</sup> He goes on:

The eye is deliciously tickled by these frisky Watteaus, and yields itself up to a light, smiling, gentlemanlike intoxication. Thus [...] yonder landscape of Claude, – calm, fresh, delicate, yet full of flavour, – should be likened to a bottle of Chateau-Margaux. And what is Poussin before spoken of but Romanee-Gelee? – heavy, sluggish, – the luscious odour almost sickens you; a sultry sort of drink; your limbs sink under it; you feel as if you had been drinking hot blood.<sup>175</sup>

And he repeated the analogy several years later in *The Newcomes*, when he describes the artistic sensitivity, and sensuality, of young Clive Newcome:

The view of a fine landscape, a fine picture, a handsome woman, would make this harmless young sensualist tipsy with pleasure. He seemed to derive an actual hilarity and intoxication as his eye drank in these sights; and, though it was his maxim that all dinners were good, and he could eat bread and cheese and drink small beer with perfect good-humour, I believe that he found a certain pleasure in a bottle of claret, which most men's systems were incapable of feeling.<sup>176</sup>

In fact, Thackeray thought that eating and drinking could provide the highest form of sensual, and thus artistic, pleasure: ‘Shakespeare and Raphael never invented anything to equal Ay and oysters at 5.30 on a hot day’.<sup>177</sup> A proper appreciation of ‘the *art* of eating and drinking’ (Thackeray’s emphasis) was not unmanly or effeminate; rather it was the mark of the modern, sophisticated, open-minded man. Those who scoffed at such pleasures: ‘are indifferent because you are ignorant, because your life is passed

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<sup>174</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Paris Sketch Book and Art Criticisms*, ed. by George Saintsbury (London: OUP, 1908), p.59. Originally published in *Fraser’s Magazine* (December 1839).

<sup>175</sup> *The Paris Sketch Book*, p.59.

<sup>176</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Newcomes: Memoirs of a Most Respectable Family*, ed. by Arthur Pendennis, Esq. (London: Macmillan, 1926 (1853)), p.292.

<sup>177</sup> Quoted in Carey, p.93.

in a narrow circle of ideas, and because you are bigotedly blind and pompously callous to the beauties and excellences beyond you'.<sup>178</sup>

Thus Thackeray's epicurism is intimately related to civilization, a sentiment captured by Lady Morgan describing a dinner she attended at the Parisian home of Baron Rothschild in 1829, which was prepared by the famous chef, Careme:

With less genius than went to the composition of this dinner, men have written epic poems; and if crowns were distributed to cooks, as to actors, the wreath of Pasta or Sontag, (divine as *they* are,) were never more fairly won than the laurel which should have graced the brow of Careme, for this specimen of the intellectual perfection of an art, the standard and gauge of modern civilization! On good cookery, depends good health; on good health, depends the permanence of good organization; and on these, the whole excellence in the structure of human society. Cruelty, violence, and barbarism, were the characteristics of the men who fed upon the tough fibres of half-dressed oxen. Humanity, knowledge, and refinement belong to the living generation, whose tastes and temperance are regulated by the science of such philosophers as Careme, and such amphitryons as his employers.<sup>179</sup>

In *Vanity Fair* Thackeray makes clear the absolute need for sensual pleasure when Amelia and Dobbin are travelling in Germany and she feels guilty about the intense pleasure she feels on discovering opera: 'The tender parts of "Don Juan" awakened in her raptures so exquisite that she would ask herself when she went to say her prayers of a night, whether it was not wicked to feel so much delight' (VF 727). Predictably, Amelia's concerns stem partly from 'certain theological works like the "Washerwoman of Finchley Common" and others of that school, with which Mrs Osborne had been furnished during her life at Brompton' (VF 727). These theological works suggest the type of Evangelical tracts that became popular in the early nineteenth century. We saw in chapter one the early cultural impact of Evangelicalism, which Austen reflected in the serious tone of *Mansfield Park*. But Thackeray disliked the Evangelicals, and it

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<sup>178</sup> 'Memorials of Gormandizing', p.513.

<sup>179</sup> Lady Morgan, *Lady Morgan in France*, ed. by Elizabeth Suddaby and P. J. Yarrow (Newcastle upon Tyne: Oriel Press, 1971), p.238.

was their much stronger impact on Victorian society which had contributed to that serious, kill-joy tone which he abhorred. In *The Newcomes* he describes the childhood home of Colonel Newcome, whose stepmother is a member of the evangelical Clapham Sect, as ‘a serious paradise. As you entered at the gate, gravity fell on you; and decorum wrapped you in a garment of starch’.<sup>180</sup> The early Evangelicals were also open to the charge of hypocrisy, since though they zealously attacked a multitude of pleasures such as the theatre, the races, many sports, non-improving literature and non-religious music,<sup>181</sup> they were not in fact averse to the specific delights of eating and drinking. As *The Newcomes*’ narrator drily puts it regarding the second Mrs Newcome’s home: ‘in Egypt itself there were not more savoury fleshpots than at Clapham’.<sup>182</sup>

Because for Thackeray all pleasure was sensual, and the senses were the arts, works like the “Washerwoman of Finchley Common” were all one with the sanctimonious reforming types of the more extreme temperance position. For Thackeray, things created by art (human endeavour) or nature (the world as it is in nature) were all part of God’s gift, they were all worldly blessings, not worldly evils. Thus Dobbin’s response to Amelia:

for his part, every beauty of art or nature made him thankful as well as happy; and that the pleasure to be had in listening to fine music, as in looking at the stars in the sky, or at a beautiful landscape or picture, was a benefit for which we might thank Heaven as sincerely as for any other worldly blessing. (VF 727)

In fact, the novel’s overarching message, ‘Vanitas Vanitatum!’ (VF 809), tends to negate itself. Like Mandeville’s view of luxury – if all is luxury nothing is: ‘if once

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<sup>180</sup> *The Newcomes*, p.18.

<sup>181</sup> Ian Bradley’s *The Call to Seriousness: The Evangelical Impact of the Victorians* (1976) provides a useful overview of Evangelical influence on the wider Victorian culture.

<sup>182</sup> *The Newcomes*, p.16.

we depart from calling every thing Luxury that is not absolutely necessary to keep a Man alive, [...] then there is no Luxury at all'<sup>183</sup> – if all is vanity nothing is. Or at least, if everything worldly is vanity, this does not make it wrong, and we may as well live and enjoy it:

It is all vanity to be sure: but who will not own to liking a little of it? I should like to know what well-constituted mind, merely because it is transitory, dislikes roast beef? That is a vanity; but may every man who reads this have a wholesome portion of it through life, I beg: aye, though my readers were five hundred thousand. Sit down, gentlemen, and fall to, with a good hearty appetite; the fat, the lean, the gravy, the horse-radish as you like it – don't spare it. Another glass of wine, Jones, my boy – a little bit of the Sunday side. Yes, let us eat our fill of the vain thing, and be thankful therefor. (VF 586)

## II

The character who takes most delight in the 'fleshpots' and who exemplifies Thackeray's attraction to the luxurious life is the comic dandy, Jos Sedley. If Thackeray's mother associated fine arts and civilization, Thackeray's social good, with 'dandyism', Jos's grotesque dandyism works in some respects as a send-up of his own creed. The most famous dandy in the Regency period, described by Thackeray as 'the model of dandyhood for all time',<sup>184</sup> was Beau Brummell. Jos likes to associate himself in retrospect with the famous Beau, 'giv[ing] you to understand that he and Brummell were the leading bucks of the day' (VF 29). Brummell's dandyism was in fact associated with elegant restraint, so the exaggeration of Jos – 'Jos Sedley was splendid. He was fatter than ever. His shirt-collars were higher; his face was redder; his shirt-frill flaunted gorgeously out of his variegated waistcoat' (VF 243) – emphasises the parody of the creed. Yet Thackeray's relationship to the dandy was complex. In the early stages of his journalistic career he was closely associated with *Fraser's Magazine*,

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<sup>183</sup> Mandeville, p.137.

<sup>184</sup> See Thackeray's review – 'The Life of George Brummell, Esq. By Captain Jesse' – in *The Morning Chronicle*, 6 May 1844, p.5.



which, from its beginning in 1830, symbolised the Victorian reaction against Regency mores and habits (it was the first to publish Thomas Carlyle's tirade against dandyism, *Sartor Resartus*).<sup>185</sup> But Thackeray's daughter, Annie, later remembered of him: "I think my father had a certain weakness for dandies".<sup>186</sup> The painful refinement of Brummell's dandyism passed into a more flamboyant stage, as captured by that other famous dandy and friend of Thackeray, the Count D'Orsay, who Annie remembered as 'the most splendid person I ever remember seeing'.<sup>187</sup> The Count replaced Brummell's detached irony with great warmth and charm, and seemed to seduce everyone he met, even the severe Carlyle.<sup>188</sup> His admirers may have been puzzled by their positive reaction to something of which they morally disapproved. But as Ellen Moers suggests: 'behind the dourness, the prudery, the heavy earnestness of the Victorian pose lay a tentative nostalgia for anti-bourgeois virtues'.<sup>189</sup> When the French dandy, Jules Barbey D'Aurevilly, wrote a tribute to Brummell from the perspective of 1844, he saw dandyism as a rebellion against the sort of middle-class conformity and Puritanism that he felt was always Britain's natural position, and which it had fallen back into with the advent of the Victorian era.<sup>190</sup>

It was the life-denying, dour, puritanical side of the Victorian character which, according to its critics, came to the fore in the extreme temperance position. And it is with the excessive character of the 'splendid' dandy, Jos – in no greater way

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<sup>185</sup> See Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), pp.167-250.

<sup>186</sup> Quoted in Hester Thackeray Fuller and Violet Hammersley, *Thackeray's Daughter: Some Recollections of Anne Thackeray Ritchie* (Dublin: Euphorion Books, 1952), p.56.

<sup>187</sup> *Thackeray's Daughter*, p.55.

<sup>188</sup> See Moers, pp.167-250.

<sup>189</sup> Moers, p.14.

<sup>190</sup> See Jules Barbey D'Aurevilly, *On Dandyism and George Brummell*, trans. by George Walden (London: Gibson Square, 2002 (1844)).

exemplified than through his relationship with alcohol – that Thackeray rebels against the puritan sensibility. Jos and his drink function in two ways. Firstly, he represents drink as the thing that creates fun, humour and *joi de vivre*, all elements that can come from a Dionysian push towards the irrational. As an antidote to a spirit of sombre – and sober – control, Jos is a celebration of sensuousness, excess, and art, Thackeray’s instinctive idea of the ‘good life’. Secondly, as a man with the means to commit to a life of leisure, he represents a bygone age, an age less averse to excess, to lack of control. Jos is someone with the time both to indulge in excess and to nurse its consequences. As we shall see, there are other figures in *Vanity Fair* that represent similar instincts, such as Miss Crawley, James Crawley and even the tipsy<sup>191</sup> Sir Pitt Crawley. And in ultimate contrast to Jos and the latter figures stands the rigidly refined, restrained and puny Pitt Crawley, a figure who, as the novel’s time frame ends, symbolises an approaching dull Victorian respectability and life-denying frigidity, elements resulting from the push towards the overly rational.

Jos is a ludicrous figure in many ways, more to be laughed at than laughed with. He is greedy, lazy, peevish, ineffectual and 'as vain as a girl' (VF 29). With his large bulk, his excess, his vanity, and love of dress, Jos has been identified with the Prince Regent, later George IV, once an intimate acquaintance of Brummell. Thackeray appeared to have nothing but contempt for 'the great dandy'<sup>192</sup> George, whose appetites were notorious: for clothes, houses, women, food, and many other things, but especially for drink.<sup>193</sup> Satirists took advantage of the latter proclivity, with visual

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<sup>191</sup> 'Tipsy' in this historical context seems to bear more weight than it does now, meaning fully drunken/inebriated, rather than only mildly so.

<sup>192</sup> 'The Life of George Brummell, Esq. By Captain Jesse', *The Morning Chronicle*, 6 May 1844, p.5.

<sup>193</sup> Steven Parissien's biography of George IV focuses on his vast and varied appetites: *George IV: The Grand Entertainment* (London: John Murray, 2001).

images including 'Drunkenness' (James Gillray, 1792) and *The Coronation of King Punch* (J. L. Mark, 1821). Captain Gronow, a military dandy who moved in high society during the Regency period, comments in his memoirs: 'I really think that if the good society of 1815 could appear before their more moderate descendants in the state they were generally reduced to after dinner, the moderns would pronounce their ancestors fit for nothing but bed'.<sup>194</sup> Thackeray also lambasted George in *The Four Georges*, though, concurring with Gronow, he emphasised the context in which he thrived, particularly with regard to drinking habits:

Remember what the usages of the time were, and that William Pitt, coming to the House of Commons after having drunk a bottle of port wine at his own house, would go into Bellamy's with Dundas, and help finish a couple more.<sup>195</sup>

Thackeray seems a true Victorian in both his moral contempt for that period and his pride in the progress made in this respect in his own:

He is dead but thirty years, and one asks how a great society could have tolerated him? Would we bear him now? In this quarter of a century, what a silent revolution has been working! How it has separated us from old times and manners! How it has changed men themselves! I can see old gentlemen now among us, of perfect good breeding, of quiet lives, with venerable grey heads, fondling their grandchildren; and look at them, and wonder at what they were once. That gentleman of the grand old school, when he was in the 10<sup>th</sup> Hussars, and dined at the prince's table, would fall under it night after night.<sup>196</sup>

Thackeray's rhetorical questions strongly beg the answer: no, his own society would not have tolerated a George. There has been no less than a 'silent revolution' not only in manners and morals but, it seems, in the subject itself: 'men themselves' are fundamentally different.

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<sup>194</sup> Captain Gronow, *The Reminiscences and Recollections of Captain Gronow: Being Anecdotes of The Camp, Court, Clubs, and Society: 1810-1860* (London: John C. Nimmo, 1892), p.34. Gronow mentions 'the late lamented Thackeray' (p.310) in the context of views on George IV.

<sup>195</sup> *The Four Georges*, p.790.

<sup>196</sup> *The Four Georges*, p.792.

And yet it is not clear from Thackeray's own life and work that a change in 'men themselves' was wholly a good thing. And the wonderful, as well as ludicrous, excess of Jos also correlated with some of Thackeray's own appetites and behaviours. One aspect of alcohol as luxury that both author and character shared was the sensuous delight in the act of consumption of food and drink: the literal, physical pleasure as it is tasted and swallowed, or 'the delightful exercise of gobbling' (VF 30), as Jos experiences it. In Thackeray's 'A Dinner in the City', an article he wrote for *Punch* at the same time as instalments of *Vanity Fair* were being published, he combines disgust at the greed and excess on display with very apparent enjoyment:

Hobble-obbl-gobble-gob-gob-gob. A steam of meats, a flare of candles, a rushing to and fro of waiters, a ceaseless clinking of glass and steel, a dizzy mist of gluttony, out of which I see my old friend of the turtle-soup making terrific play among the peas, his knife darting down his throat. It is all over. We can eat no more. We are full of Bacchus and fat venison. We lay down our weapons and rest.<sup>197</sup>

The experience seems almost medieval in its heightened sensuousness, as sights, smells and sounds mingle with the delightful exercise of gobbling, in an overall dizzying mist of gluttony. Thackeray, as the narrator, Speck, then attempts to moralise:

“And, gracious goodness!” I said, “what can be the meaning of a ceremony so costly, so uncomfortable, so unsavoury, so unwholesome as this? Who is called upon to pay two or three guineas for my dinner now, in this blessed year 1847? [...] Are there no poor? Is there no reason? Is this monstrous belly-worship to exist for ever?”<sup>198</sup>

But the Victorian voice of disgust at the excessive consumption, the forgetfulness of the poor, and the reason sacrificed in the monstrous act of belly worship is soon forgotten. In fact, the sudden posturing is partly the result of drunkenness:

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<sup>197</sup> ‘A Dinner in the City’ (11, 25, 31 December 1847), in *Miscellaneous Contributions to Punch: 1843-1854*, ed. by George Saintsbury (London: OUP, 1908), pp.194-207 (p.202). Thackeray was closely associated with *Punch*, and contributed many articles from 1843 to 1851.

<sup>198</sup> ‘A Dinner in the City’, p.207.

“Spec,” the Doctor said, “you had best come away. I make no doubt that you for one have had too much.” And we went to his brougham. May nobody have such a headache on this happy New Year as befell the present writer on the morning after the Dinner in the City!<sup>199</sup>

It is notable that a portrait of George IV looks down upon the diners, as if approving of the excess. Thackeray is too self-aware, as well as too suspicious of cant, to moralise for long, and immediately undercuts it with an acknowledgement of his own gluttony and drunkenness, which equally highlights that of the other participants in the dinner in an age apparently growing in restraint. The image of the mind sacrificed to the flesh when progress implied the reverse might not be very savoury or moral. But it shows a propensity to sensuality and excess as very real and very human, and the impossibility as well as undesirability of trying to 'reform' this away.

### III

After the sensual pleasure of drink comes the possible inebriation, or 'tipsiness', the power of alcohol to transform the human brain and body, and overturn rationality. In Jos's drunkenness, this transcendence results in sheer playfulness, humour and entertainment. The most vivid incident of this in the novel is, of course, Jos getting drunk on rack punch at Vauxhall. During the time period at which the trip to Vauxhall would have taken place within *Vanity Fair's* chronology (around 1813), the Gardens was still a place for the fashionable (it gradually declined in status from the 1830s onwards – a symbol of the new morality – and closed in 1859).<sup>200</sup> George IV, who had been a frequenter of the place in his youth, sanctioned its official change of name in 1822 from New Spring Gardens to Royal Gardens, Vauxhall. George's association

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<sup>199</sup> ‘A Dinner in the City’, p.207.

<sup>200</sup> For a history of the Gardens, see W. S. Scott, *Green Retreats: The Story of Vauxhall Gardens 1661-1859* (London: Odhams Press, 1955).

with the Gardens is appropriate given its image as a site of excess, pleasure (and pain) and possibility. And given Jos's association with George-like appetites, the Gardens is the perfect place for his drunken antics and for these to instigate the whole history of the novel. Roland Barthes has described the power of wine as follows: it

is above all a converting substance, capable of reversing situations and states, and of extracting from objects their opposites – for instance, making a weak man strong or a silent one talkative. Hence its old alchemical heredity, its philosophical power to transmute and create *ex nihilo*.<sup>201</sup>

This is precisely the effect it has on Jos, an effect that provides such entertainment for the crowd at Vauxhall, the narrator and the reader of the novel.

Jos, that fat *gourmand*, drank up the whole contents of the bowl [of punch]; and the consequence of his drinking up the whole contents of the bowl was, a liveliness which at first was astonishing, and then became almost painful; for he talked and laughed so loud as to bring scores of listeners round the box, much to the confusion of the innocent party within it; and, volunteering to sing a song (which he did in that maudlin high key peculiar to gentlemen in an inebriated state), he almost drew away the audience who were gathered round the musicians in the gilt scollop-shell, and received from his hearers a great deal of applause. (VF 64-65)

Here is the normally shy, self-conscious Jos behaving like a stage performer. As Bob Logic describes the notorious Vauxhall punch's effects, in one of Thackeray's favourite childhood books, Pierce Egan's *Life in London*, 'the *punch* is so prime, and immediately follows the call, that it will soon make you as lively as a harlequin'.<sup>202</sup> Jos then continues with a reversal of or revelation of his true personality as he 'continued to drink, to make love, and to sing; and, winking and waving his glass gracefully to his audience' (VF 65). Once so shy with women he has to run away from them, he is now as 'bold as a lion' (VF 65) and calling Becky his "'diddle-diddle-darling'" (VF 65), much to the delight of the crowd: 'the laughter outside redoubled' (VF 65). Later

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<sup>201</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Granada Publishing, 1973 (1957)), p.59.

<sup>202</sup> Pierce Egan, *Life in London; or, the Day and Night Scenes of Jerry Hawthorn, Esq. and his elegant friend Corinthian Tom, accompanied by Bob Logic, the Oxonian, in their Rambles and Sprees through the Metropolis* (London: Sherwood, Jones, & Co., 1823), p.334.

notorious for his cowardice, he becomes "uncommon wild" (VF 67) on his way home and "wanted to fight the 'ackney-coachman" (VF 67).

An article that appeared in an 1843 edition of *Punch*, 'The Philosophy of Drunkenness – The Genius of the Cork', is worth quoting at length for its representation of the magical power of drunkenness that Barthes described. The context is an older man's letter to a youthful one on how to drink well, the joke being that he is clearly a drunk. This section is his eulogy to solitary drinking:

Pop! There – the cork's drawn. *Gurgle – gurgle – gurgle – good – good – good – good* – No! it is in vain; there is no type – there are no printed sounds (allow me the *conchetto*) – to describe the melody, the cadence of the out-pouring bottle. Well, the bottle has rendered its virgin soul. You have resolved to sate yourself from its sweetness. You think yourself alone. Oh, the vanity of ignorance! Why, the cup of what is called a solitary drinker, drawn from the bottle, is an audible charm that calls up a spirit – (angel or devil according to contending moralists) – to come and sit with the toper. You have, therefore, only to retire with a full bottle to your own garret to be sure of company – and of the most profitable sort too; for your companion carries away no drop of your liquor; but there he sits with a jocund, leering look, on that three-legged stool; and there he tells stories to you – and sings to your rapturous spirit – and now hangs your white-washed walls with Sidonian tapestries – and now fills your gaping pockets with ideal gold! What a world are you in! How your heart grows and grows! And with frantic benevolence you rend aside your waistcoat (how you'll hunt for the two dropt buttons in the morning!) to give the creature room for its uttermost expansion! What a figure you resolve to make in the world! What woman – nay, what women – you will marry! [...] And whilst you take your flight here and there, how the spirit evoked by the cork hugs himself, and grins at you!<sup>203</sup>

The joke is clearly on the older man, as *Punch*, aligning itself with broader Victorian temperance, laughs at one who thinks that 'the increasing effeminacy of the world requires of the ingenuous youth a less capacity for the bottle than when I was young'.<sup>204</sup>

And yet, from the lyrical sounds of the bottle pouring, to its drunken effects, the experience is celebratory. The drinker feels joy, benevolence, confidence, wild hope

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<sup>203</sup> 'Punch's Letters to his son. Letter XIX – The Philosophy of Drunkenness. – The Genius of the Cork', in *Punch, or the London Charivari*, (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1843), Vol. 3, p.229.

<sup>204</sup> 'The Philosophy of Drunkenness', p.229.

and experiences flights of philosophical fancy which ape the positive side of the Romantic Bacchanalian experience,<sup>205</sup> or even parody the reputed effects of that other Romantic emblematic substance, opium, as described by Thomas De Quincey.<sup>206</sup> Thackeray later reiterated the point in *The Virginians*, specifically defying the temperance reformers (the 'pumps'), also noting the fine line between wine's beautiful effects and its painful ones:

I say, in the face of all the pumps which ever spouted, that there is a moment in a bout of good wine at which, if a man could but remain, wit, wisdom, courage, generosity, eloquence, happiness, were his; but the moment passes, and that other glass somehow spoils the state of beatitude.<sup>207</sup>

The entertainment does not stop with the night of Jos's Vauxhall antics, but continues when the next day's hangover kicks in: 'What is the rack in the punch, at night, to the rack in the head of a morning?' (VF 66) Dobbin and George cannot restrain their laughter at the sight of the 'prostrate Bacchanalian' (VF 66), with his 'grimace so dreary and ludicrous' (VF 67). Even Jos's valet, 'the most solemn and correct of gentlemen, with the muteness and gravity of an undertaker, could hardly keep his countenance in order' (VF 67).

This playfulness and pleasure in the joys and pains of the effects of alcohol is all part of the more 'merry' life which Thackeray celebrates in *The Four Georges*, even while he is full of moral outrage at Georgian vices. Of George II's reign, he muses:

I fancy it was a merrier England, that of our ancestors, than the island which we inhabit. People high and low amused themselves very much more. I have calculated the manner in which statesmen and persons of condition passed their

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<sup>205</sup> As Anya Taylor explores in *Bacchus in Romantic England: Writers and Drink, 1780-1830*.

<sup>206</sup> See *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, first published in the *London Magazine*, 1821-1822.

<sup>207</sup> *The Virginians*, I, p.319.



time – and what with drinking, and dining, and supping, and cards, wonder how they got through their business at all.<sup>208</sup>

Thackeray seemed to find the verb 'reel' particularly appropriate with regard to drunkenness, as if explicitly linking it with the merriment and joy of dancing. In *Vanity Fair*, Sir Pitt is 'the reeling old Silenus of a baronet' (VF 91). The coach driver who collects Becky and Sir Pitt from London at 4am 'was stationed thus early in the neighbourhood of Swallow Street, in hopes that some young buck, reeling homeward from the tavern, might need the aid of his vehicle, and pay him with the generosity of intoxication' (VF 79). And the worthy Major O'Dowd 'when full of liquor, [...] reeled silently home' (VF 305). After the success of *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray himself wrote to Lady Blessington: 'I reel from dinner party to dinner-party – I wallow in turtle and swim in claret and Shampang'.<sup>209</sup> The pun had been made explicit in Egan's *Life in London*:

The *bottle* was not suffered to stand still by our heroes, the *punch* also moved off with great facility, till the lively military band invited them once more to join the merry dance, when LOGIC, full of fun and laughter, said, "he was now able to *reel* with any lady or gentleman in the Gardens." "Yes," replied TOM, laughing heartily, "I'll back you on that score, BOB; but not to *dance*".<sup>210</sup>

Thackeray's nostalgia for a pre-Victorian merriness finds its counterpart in Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers* (1837), which, set a decade before its publication, celebrates the often drunken adventures of the Pickwickians. This celebration is enhanced by the inclusion of a satirical account of a temperance society, 'The Brick Lane Branch of the United Grand Junction Ebenezer Temperance Association', which drinks copious amounts of tea and blames every ill on alcohol (see chapter 33). However, unlike Thackeray, Dickens also explored the issue of what we would now

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<sup>208</sup> *The Four Georges*, p.741.

<sup>209</sup> *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, ed. by Gordon N. Ray, 4 vols (London: OUP, 1945), II, p.535 (6 May 1849).

<sup>210</sup> Egan, p.337.

call alcoholism. For example, in *The Pickwick Papers*, ‘The Stroller’s Tale’ (chapter 3), a dark tale of a drunkard, is included, somewhat incongruously, amongst the tales of punch-fuelled fun. It seemed that for Dickens a celebration of alcohol was principally about the fun and sociability it engendered, and less about the pleasures of indulgence, whereas it was both these things for Thackeray. As Edward Hewett and W. F. Axton put it with regard to Dickens: ‘the poet-laureate of Victorian tipling was in life an unusually temperate, even abstemious, man. What he liked was not food or drink so much as the theatre of conviviality of which they were the essential stage properties’.<sup>211</sup>

#### IV

For Thackeray, Jos represents even more than the nostalgic, the ludic, the sensual, the comic – the ever-more necessary antidote to cold restraint. Or at least these things are all part of the excessive and celebrated body of Jos operating as a site for Thackeray’s ambivalent political instincts. With his idea of the social good, Thackeray was not suggesting that only the aristocracy could experience it, but that they led in its pursuit, and were the guarantors of its survival. The social good depended on the continuance of a class with the appropriate breeding, material means and leisure time. This sentiment seems at odds with some of Thackeray’s other expressed views, which align him with a more typically Victorian middle-class work ethic. As he stresses in *The Four Georges*, work is the watch-word and saviour of the modern man: ‘It is to the middle class we must look for the safety of England: the working educated men’.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Edward Hewett and W. F. Axton, *Convivial Dickens: The Drinks of Dickens and His Times* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1983), p.xvi. Claire Tomalin has suggested that Dickens became drink-dependent in later life (see *Charles Dickens: A Life* (London: Viking, 2011), p.381), but, if true, this does not negate the point. Dickens’s consumption seemed to be regular, but small, used in a fortifying way. This was not unusual for the period, when it could still be acceptable to have an alcoholic drink for breakfast. Thackeray appeared to imbibe both in this way and in a more excessive – what we would now call ‘binge’ – drinking.

<sup>212</sup>*The Four Georges*, p.761.

And these included 'the tradesmen rising into manly opulence',<sup>213</sup> a breed of men now seen as dignified by their profession rather than tainted by its grubby materialism. Thackeray contrasts the hardworking middle class with those who have become 'effeminate with luxury'.<sup>214</sup> It is the paradox at the heart of the luxury debates. The desire for luxury drives action (denoting manliness), but the possession of it, usually by succeeding generations, can corrupt, because it takes away the motivation to action, leading to effeminacy and stagnation.

But this is not quite Thackeray's position. Although his ideal of the gentleman can encompass the simple and unrefined – the awkward and ungainly Dobbin, for example – he thought that a refined material context was the ultimate maker of gentlemen:

nature does make *some* gentlemen – a few here and there. But art makes most. Good birth, that is, good, handsome, well-formed fathers and mothers, nice cleanly nursery maids, good meals, good physicians, good education, few cares, pleasant easy habits of life, and luxuries not too great or enervating, but only refining, – a course of these going on for a few generations are the best gentleman-makers in the world, and beat nature hollow.<sup>215</sup>

The comment is one of Mr M. A. Titmarsh's, one of Thackeray's older, old-fashioned narrators, but it is close to Thackeray's sometimes contradictory attitude to nature and nurture, to the striver and to the consumer. Here he embraces the good produced by 'luxuries not too great or enervating, but only refining', but the difference between a level of luxury that refines and a level that enervates cannot be explicitly defined. In Thackeray's world there is room for manly tradesmen and a luxurious aristocracy. But

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<sup>213</sup> *The Four Georges*, p.761.

<sup>214</sup> *The Four Georges*, p.761.

<sup>215</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, 'The Second Funeral of Napoleon' (1841), in *Catherine, A Shabby Genteel Story, The Second Funeral of Napoleon and Miscellanies, 1840-1* (London: OUP, [1908]), pp.397-449 (p.439).

although he is a true Victorian advocate of the former, he cannot help but be drawn to the latter's potential life of excess, indolence and beauty.

Thackeray also struggled with his middle-class striver status, since this was largely enforced. He had spent a great deal of his personal fortune early in life, but the bulk was lost in an Indian banking crisis of 1833, his stepfather having placed his father's money in one of the collapsed banks. He was now impressed with a real need to earn a living, rather than dabbling in art or writing for its own sake. This need was always a struggle for him. His temperament was naturally indolent but there was also, perhaps, a hesitancy about this call to labour. D.J. Taylor suggests that he was at odds with some of his contemporary writers – notably, Dickens – because he could not quite take seriously enough, or confer the necessary dignity upon, the 'profession' of writing: it was a trade like any other, and one he would have gladly relinquished at various points in his life.<sup>216</sup> One contemporary critic's observation of Thackeray's field of reference in his work – 'he stands on the debateable land between the aristocracy and the middle classes'<sup>217</sup> – would seem to sum up this uneasy social status.

Jos Sedley is not an aristocrat, certainly, but he has the freedom to pursue the life of the dandy – that comic representation of the social good – and to indulge his appetites to excess and to nurse their consequences. Jos's indulgence of the latter is signified by the liver complaint he acquires in India, for which he is prescribed the ubiquitous 'blue-pill' (a mercurial anti-bilious pill). The specific nature of Jos's complaint is not further specified but the blue-pill is symbolic of heavy drinking. Hard drinking was rife amongst all classes and ranks in India in the eighteenth and early

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<sup>216</sup> D. J. Taylor explores Thackeray's involvement in the 'dignity of literature' debate from approximately chapter XV onwards (p.305).

<sup>217</sup> William Caldwell Roscoe, 'W. M. Thackeray, Artist and Moralist', *National Review* (January 1856), in *Thackeray: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Geoffrey Tillotson and Donald Hawes (London: Routledge & Paul Kegan; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968), pp.265-285 (p.272).

nineteenth centuries,<sup>218</sup> though commentators noted increased levels of moderation as the nineteenth century wore on, in line with the broader trend towards moderation that was perceived in Britain. Indeed, with his great bulk and indulgent lifestyle, Jos would appear as an ideal candidate for the gout,<sup>219</sup> that great symbol of high (and usually inebriated) living. George IV was a notorious sufferer. By 1826 his bed at Carlton House was furnished with eleven gouty pillows,<sup>220</sup> and he was labelled 'Swellfoot the Tyrant' by Shelley.<sup>221</sup> Captain Gronow noted the results of the excessive alcohol consumption, or 'perpetual thirst',<sup>222</sup> of his day: 'How all this [...] ended was obvious, from the prevalence of gout, and the necessity of every one making the pill-box their constant bedroom companion'.<sup>223</sup>

Roy Porter and G.S. Rousseau have written a fascinating history of gout, exploring its medical, social and cultural identity as the 'monarch of disease'.<sup>224</sup> As predominantly a disease of the rich and the noble, it was an insignia of wealth and rank, a badge of honour, something to be worn with pride. Gout was usually seen as a product of both nature (inherited, along with gentlemanly blood) and nurture (a luxurious lifestyle), and as such was something to be both respected and laughed at. Porter and Rousseau cite Matt Bramble in Tobias Smollett's *Humphrey Clinker* (1771) as the last, great, gouty protagonist in literature, which provides an interesting parallel

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<sup>218</sup> See Percival Spear, *The Nabobs: A Study of the Social Life of the English in 18th Century India* (London: OUP, 1963).

<sup>219</sup> As Roy Porter and G. S. Rousseau point out in: *Gout: The Patrician Malady* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p.151.

<sup>220</sup> See Steven Parissien, p. 171.

<sup>221</sup> See Porter and Rousseau, p.82.

<sup>222</sup> Captain Gronow, p.38.

<sup>223</sup> Captain Gronow, p.38.

<sup>224</sup> Porter and Rousseau, p.150.

with Sekora's contention that Smollett's novel provided the last, grand luxury narrative. Whilst gouty figures continued to appear in literature throughout the nineteenth century, they were more likely in the guise of a shorthand (comic or serious) for rank, pedigree or excess, rather than, like Matt Bramble, expressing a 'complex set of psychological antitheses – sensibility-irritability; benevolence-misanthropy; regeneration-demise; country-city'.<sup>225</sup> Medically and proverbially, as well as a punishment for excess, gout was seen as an 'insulator', an illness that was an outlet for any trouble in the system, and that prevented the body from succumbing to something worse. It could therefore be managed but attempts at eradication might be dangerous.

Clearly Jos's condition has none of Bramble's complexity or nobility (apart from in his own view of it). His is mostly a comic disease, "'a complaint as arises from too much ease and comfort'" and an "'illness as is caused by too much jollity'", as Mr Weller describes it in *The Pickwick Papers*.<sup>226</sup> And yet, Jos's illness, whether gouty or otherwise, is emblematic of a more leisured time when the privileged could devote themselves to both the pursuit of excess and the management of its consequences (illness). Jos is both 'the great lazy gourmand' (VF 351) and a professional semi-invalid, whose illness is 'the source of great comfort and amusement to him' (VF 28) on his first return to Europe. As 'he scarcely knew a single soul in the metropolis; and were it not for his doctor, and the society of his blue-pill and his liver complaint, he must have died of loneliness' (VF 29). The narrator highlights sarcastically Jos's excessive consumption levels not only in spite of his illness, but because of it: 'being an invalid, Joseph Sedley contented himself with a bottle of claret besides his Madeira at dinner' (VF 32), and again, 'a goblet of Champagne restored Joseph's equanimity, [...]

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<sup>225</sup> Porter and Rousseau, p.147.

<sup>226</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* (London: Penguin, 1986 (1836-7)), p.355.

of which as an invalid he took two-thirds' (VF 36). Under the care of his doctor, the wonderfully and appropriately named Dr Gollop, Jos's life is defined. Thackeray spent his own life, much like Jos, overindulging 'that appetite with which Nature has bountifully endowed me',<sup>227</sup> and paying the price, without the luxury of not having to work. D.J. Taylor suggests that the regular vomiting fits that Thackeray increasingly suffered point to an organic cause, even a condition like Crohn's disease.<sup>228</sup> But his excessive indulgence, or 'an immoderate use of the fleshpots',<sup>229</sup> as he described it to a friend, exacerbated the situation, as he was well aware. He told an American friend, John Cordy Jeaffreson, that he had drunk enough during the course of his adult life 'to float a seventy-four-gun battleship'.<sup>230</sup> Like Jos, he found he could not, indeed, did not, want to restrain himself, despite its effect on his health: 'They tell me not to drink, and I *do* drink. They tell me not to eat, and I *do* eat. In short, I do everything that I am desired *not* to do, and therefore what am I to expect?'.<sup>231</sup>

Porter and Rousseau see the gout discourse, particularly in terms of how to treat the condition, as highly political: 'the gout debate is unintelligible unless its politics are foregrounded'.<sup>232</sup> If bodies and political systems were aligned, in the highly charged political climate of the late eighteenth century, for example, 'to deny that gout was hereditary smacked of radicalism, with the insinuation that the malady was not to be

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<sup>227</sup> 'On Some Dinners at Paris' (3 March 1849), in *Miscellaneous Contributions to Punch: 1843-1854*, ed. by Saintsbury, pp.476-481 (p.476).

<sup>228</sup> D. J. Taylor, p.364.

<sup>229</sup> *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, ed. by Gordon N. Ray, 4 vols (London: OUP, 1945), IV, p.67 (23 January-25 February 1858).

<sup>230</sup> Quoted in D. J. Taylor, p.438.

<sup>231</sup> Quoted in D. J. Taylor, p.391.

<sup>232</sup> Porter and Rousseau, p.124.

humoured but eliminated through a bold moral purge'.<sup>233</sup> In an analogous way, in the mid-nineteenth century, Jos's ludicrous and corpulent body might serve merely as a parody of a corrupt, bygone age, now, thankfully, purged and passed; or as something to be celebrated, cherished, a reminder of what was being lost in a utilitarian, workaday world. Jos's 'super-abundant fat' (VF 29) might need ruthlessly culling (in a radical reformist way), merely trimming (in a gradualist, moderately progressive way), tolerating (in a laissez-faire way) or celebrating (in a reassertion of individual liberty as the right to pursue one's own idea of the good life). Jos's large and dandified body might be all these things for Thackeray's ambiguous political instincts, but ultimately it becomes celebratory, a much-needed affirmation of a life devoted to his idea of the aristocratically-driven social good.

In Gwen Hyman's study of upper-class drinking in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, she reads in the drunkenness of the upper-class playboy, Arthur Huntingdon, his class protest, a rebellion against the rising middle-class striver ethic, which saw the landed gentleman as an increasingly futile entity: unproductive, wasteful, parasitic. Arthur asserts his position by taking refuge in the insatiable appetites of the depraved Regency rake, reinforcing his status by embracing the very things that the middle class despised (whilst also partly coveting). The drunken behaviour of Huntingdon and his friends revels in the body and refuses the tyranny of rational control. The civilizing force of the dining table is threatened by disorder and chaos. Jos Sedley is a very different figure to Arthur Huntingdon. Jos is personally harmless and Arthur is violent, abusive and destructive. But both stand as antidotes to the middle-class sober, sombre work ethic. The crucial difference is that while Arthur's behaviour is clearly condemned by Brontë, as 'the novel enacts a radical

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<sup>233</sup> Porter and Rousseau, p.105.



social revision, suggesting that the leisured class is killing itself off with its very leisured status, and that in order to remain healthy, the body politic must excise this parasite',<sup>234</sup> Jos's is celebrated by Thackeray. He would not have approved of an Arthur but his ideal of a leisured class manifests itself in the very different and 'splendid' Jos.

Jos is the comic dandy but is also the emblem of that other contended figure, the 'nabob', the British expatriate returned from India with a taste for luxury and the immense wealth to indulge it. Thackeray did not appear to think too deeply about race and empire, or, more specifically, about India in terms of a distinct nation and culture in its own right. One might at least pause for thought, though, when thinking about the hapless Jos Sedley as the representative of British colonial administration: hardly a ringing endorsement for the imperial project. Equally there is something subversive in the idea of a colonial product – rack punch (originating in India) – uncivilizing the colonisers on their own turf by making them so drunken, potentially unmasking the savagery of which the colonised were often accused. Anti-drink campaigners such as Peter Burne worried that the nation's drunkenness undermined its moral authority amongst nations; all the English must feel humiliation and sorrow that foreigners thought 'that England, though great in the temple of fame, is peopled generally with an immoral, brutal, ignorant, and drunken race'.<sup>235</sup> Again, Thackeray uses subtle, but subversive, strategies stemming from his instinctive need to undercut totalizing narratives – whether of temperance, empire, or a combination of the two – which could never reflect the (imperfect) truth about humanity as he saw it. Ultimately, though, Jos's immense wealth gives him independence and freedom, the

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<sup>234</sup> Gwen Hyman, "'An Infernal Fire in My Veins': Gentlemanly Drinking in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 36 (2008), 451-469 (p.465).

<sup>235</sup> Peter Burne, *The Teetotaler's Companion; or, A Plea for Temperance* (London: Arthur Hall; Ipswich: J.M. Burton, 1847), p.491.

things that Thackeray lost with his inheritance. India in Thackeray's fiction functions primarily as a fickle cash-cow. In *The Newcomes*, the worthy Colonel Newcome, like Thackeray in real life, loses his fortune in the fictional Bundlecund Banking Company. The narrator notes, rather nostalgically, the passing of the stereotypical nabob: 'The Nabob of books and tradition is a personage no longer to be found among us. He is neither as wealthy nor as wicked as the jaundiced monster of romances and comedies'.<sup>236</sup> Notably, too, the nabobs' 'livers are not out of order any more'.<sup>237</sup> Jos represents the great wealth of this lost nabob, which buys the freedom to pursue a life of luxury: ostensibly vulgar and corrupting, there is nonetheless something irresistible about its power.

## V

In complete contrast to the splendid Jos stands the cold and restrained Pitt Crawley, a 'man of such rigid refinement, that he would have starved rather than have dined without a white neckcloth' (VF 94). Pitt's general lack of passion extends to his long engagement to Lady Jane, but perhaps his worse offence for his creator is that he 'did not care for joviality, being a frigid man of poor health and appetite' (VF 524). Pitt, through a combination of cunning and luck, ends up with Miss Crawley's money. While the narrator notes approvingly his proper use of it through his improvement of Queen's Crawley and his commitment to the respectable life of a country gentleman, it is always with a sense of irony. Rawdon Crawley might have squandered the inheritance, but the reader's sympathy, despite his previous recklessness and selfishness, lies with his warm and growing heart. It seems that sober restraint must win the day, the kind of 'rigid refinement' that sucks the joy out of civilization, turning

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<sup>236</sup> *The Newcomes*, pp.92-93.

<sup>237</sup> *The Newcomes*, p.93.

it from beauty, art and sensuousness – the social good – to something cold, mechanical and frigid. Emblematic of all this is Pitt's relationship –or lack of relationship – with alcohol. A teetotal Pitt Crawley would have been anachronistic. However, he is early associated with various causes, 'for he was an ambitious man, and always liked to be before the public' (VF 95), which aligns him with the sort of reforming zeal that characterised the later temperance movement. Like the second Mrs Newcome, he takes 'a strong part in the Negro Emancipation question' (VF 95) – a very popular cause with Evangelicals particularly, and one which, unlike Austen, Thackeray did not have much sympathy with – and 'became a friend of Mr Wilberforce's' (VF 95). Temperance campaigners also noted the role that alcohol had played and still did play in the slave trade, for example in the exchange of slaves for rum. Peter Burne also thought that because alcohol brutalised humanity, temperance would restore it to 'moral feeling, peace, and Christian liberality',<sup>238</sup> striking a blow at slavery as a trade and an institution. And teetotal temperance campaigns had learned their campaigning methods from the earlier anti-slave trade campaigns, and compared the two abuses. Metaphorically, alcohol was the tyrant and the drinker its slave. Literally, especially as the idea of prohibition came increasingly into view in the second half of the nineteenth century, the drinks trade itself was labelled an evil trade or traffic, as the slave trade had been before it. Joseph Livesey had begun this tactic as early as 1833, calling it '*the trade*' and 'this nefarious traffic'.<sup>239</sup>

Pitt also patronises an Independent meeting-house and is 'an active visitor and speaker among those destitute of religious instruction' (VF 95), another connection to

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<sup>238</sup> Burne, p.390.

<sup>239</sup> J. Livesey, *A Temperance Lecture based on the Tee-total Principle; including An Exposure of the Great Delusion as to the Properties of Malt Liquor; the substance of which has been delivered in the principal towns of England* (Preston: the author; London: M. Pasco, 1836), p.7.

Evangelical seriousness, Evangelicals being notorious for their zealous attempts to convert people. The established and most dissenting churches did not actually begin to endorse the teetotal temperance cause until the 1860s, when it gradually became associated with Christianity.<sup>240</sup> It was felt initially that temperance zeal provided a secular replacement for spiritual Christianity, and it was sometimes associated with atheism. However, the majority of Christians who did support the movement in its early stages were dissenters.<sup>241</sup> Thackeray clearly also associated religious dissent with overly zealous, minority causes – the tyrannous Countess Southdown, for example, and 'her multifarious business, her conferences with ministers, and her correspondence with all the missionaries of Africa, Asia, Australasia etc' (VF 471) – so Pitt's church allegiances earlier in the story stamp him as the sort of character who would be drawn to the temperance cause. More particularly, Pitt has written 'a pamphlet on Malt' (VF 95), of which he is very proud. The content is never specified (it is implicit that it is dull and pompous) and, again, it would be anachronistic for it to be temperance-based. However, it is conceivable that Thackeray was associating Pitt with the temperance ethos, given the later notoriety of Livesey's *Malt Lecture* (1833) as representative of the teetotal temperance movement as a whole. As it is, Pitt's alcohol consumption is minimal and highly controlled, in contrast to Rawdon's regular and large consumption. The way Pitt 'sipped Madeira' (VF 391) makes him sound a bit girlish and effeminate, consonant with his Eton nickname of 'Miss Crawley' (VF 94) and Rawdon's and Miss Crawley's early view of him as a 'milk-sop' (e.g. VF 104). It is notable that Pitt warms up slightly as a character – agreeing to take care of Rawdon's and Becky's son, for

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<sup>240</sup> See Shiman, chapter 3: 'So Many Christian Icebergs to Melt', and Brian Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: The Temperance Question in England 1815-1872* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), chapter 8: 'Temperance and Religion', for a full analysis of the relationship between religion and temperance through the nineteenth century.

<sup>241</sup> See Brian Harrison, chapter 8.

example – as his enthusiasm for causes wanes. Paradoxically, the more establishment he becomes – embracing the life of the country gent, if not actively enjoying it – the more likeable he is.

But Pitt's lack of indulgence is due to more than a poor appetite and an inclination for causes. Pitt is the former diplomat and 'Machiavel' (VF 399), who utilises the personal and cultural power of (Victorian) sobriety. This is demonstrated in the scene at Miss Crawley's house, where he does all he can to make James Crawley drunk whilst staying sober himself. In Wolfgang Schivelbusch's history of spices, stimulants and intoxicants, he discusses the ideas and customs associated with the act of drinking as remnants of older magical thinking. The latter imbued eating and drinking with ambivalence: 'On the one hand, a person who consumes and incorporates things becomes their master. But on the other hand, he thereby delivers himself up to them, in a sense succumbs to them. For things have lives of their own'.<sup>242</sup> With drinking particularly, because fluid symbolised blood, and blood was the soul of a thing, the act of drinking had something menacing about it. The drinker assimilated the soul of something else (potentially poisonous or antagonistic to them) and thereby lost their own. These are the ideas explored in *Punch's* 'The Philosophy of Drunkenness'. Drinking rituals evolved to neutralise the menacing aspect. As communal activities, all could feel safe and watch one another. Drink instead became a 'guarantee and symbol of communality, friendship, and fraternity for those who were drinking'.<sup>243</sup> Shortly after the publication of *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray captured these ideas in an article:

If you have had a difference with a man, and are desirous to make it up, how pleasant it is to take wine with him! [...] The cup is a symbol of reconciliation.

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<sup>242</sup> Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants, and Intoxicants*, trans. by David Jacobson (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), p.168.

<sup>243</sup> Schivelbusch, p.170.

The other party drinks up your goodwill as you accept his token of returning friendship – and thus the liquor is hallowed.<sup>244</sup>

But Pitt is so calculating that he only pretends to take part in a drinking ritual with James, playing on the communality, friendship and fraternity element, whilst in ruthless and sober competition with him. Pitt cannot risk giving up his soul for another, or consume a level of drink which could 'wash [...] away the newer, "civilized" levels of consciousness, exposing the archaic level'.<sup>245</sup>

Becky, more artful than Pitt, uses the power of alcohol to her advantage when she butters him up in his London house with a little dinner and some wine she claims was picked up cheaply in France. In fact it is a bottle of 'White Hermitage from the Marquis of Steyne's famous cellars, which brought fire into the Baronet's pallid cheeks, and a glow into his feeble frame' (VF 514). For a second, Pitt, like Jos, becomes a transformed man, turning into a thing of heat and colour from a thing of coldness and opaqueness. The wine is the sort 'that would even the veins of an anchorite flush', as a poem in tribute to the wines of Vauxhall claimed.<sup>246</sup> Thackeray knew from personal experience the positive, transformative effect of a small amount of alcohol. He wrote to a friend a touching account of the effects of 'two glasses of the elixir'<sup>247</sup> (champagne) on his mentally-ill wife, Isabella, when he took her out for a walk and dinner from the French sanatorium in which she was temporarily staying:

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<sup>244</sup> 'On Some Old Customs of the Dinner-Table' (Mr Brown's Letters to His Nephew) (23 June 1849), in *Miscellaneous Contributions to Punch: 1843-1854*, ed. by Saintsbury, pp.313-318 (pp.316-317).

<sup>245</sup> Schivelbusch, p.176.

<sup>246</sup> The poem, 'The Pros and Cons of Vauxhall Gardens', which appeared in *Vauxhall Papers* (23 July 1841), a magazine devoted to the doings of the Gardens, is quoted in W. S. Scott, p.100.

<sup>247</sup> *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, 4 vols, ed. by Ray, II, p.15 (5 April 1841).

It did her a great deal of good and made her eyes sparkle, and actually for the first time these six months the poor little woman flung herself into my arms with all her heart and gave me a kiss, at which moment of course the waiter burst in. This only served to mend matters for the lady went off in a peal of laughter, the first these six months again, and since then I have had her at home not well, nor nearly well, but a hundred times better than she was this day week. [...] Only let her get well and I shall be the happiest man in the world. Ye Gods how I will venerate champagne – I always did.<sup>248</sup>

Isabella did not get well but the champagne had at least helped to create a temporary respite from her condition for both herself and Thackeray.

As with Jos and the rack punch, James's drunkenness turns the plot to his disadvantage. But the sympathy of the scene lies with James and not the artful Pitt, as the former's drinking creates the same joy, humour and comic pathos we find at Vauxhall. Pitt keeps encouraging James to drink more, and in a master stroke even invokes as a challenge the supposed greater sobriety of the age: "'You don't drink, James, [...]. In my time at Oxford, the men passed round the bottle a little quicker than you young fellows seem to do'" (VF 398). Pitt mimics the fraternity of the drinking ritual by becoming 'very communicative and friendly' (VF 397) and 'frank and amiable' (VF 397) towards James; whereas the latter's alcoholic loquaciousness is genuine: 'James's tongue unloosed with the port, and he told his cousin his life, his prospects, his debts, his troubles at the little-go, and his rows with the proctors' (VF 397). Pitt's idea of a toast is to give a false, pompous, politician's speech: "'What says the bard? 'Nunc vino pellite curas, Cras ingens iterabimus aequor'",<sup>249</sup> and the Bacchanalian, quoting the above with a House of Commons air, tossed off nearly a thimbleful of wine with an immense flourish of his glass' (VF 398). This is a response to James's equally ludicrous but more humane Latin grammatical errors and youthful naivety:

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<sup>248</sup> *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, 4 vols, ed. by Ray, II, p.15 (5 April 1841).

<sup>249</sup> Horace's *Odes* 1.7: 'Now banish cares with wine. Tomorrow we set off again on the vast ocean'.

"Come, come", said James, putting his hand to his nose and winking at his cousin with a pair of vinous eyes, "no jokes, old boy; no trying it on me. You want to trot me out, but it's no go. In vino veritas, old boy. Mars, Bacchus, Apollo virorum, hey?" (VF 398)

Pitt's uncommunicative communicativeness and statesman's oratory also contrast with James's earthy, Oxford slang, which imbues his drinking with a sort of poetry: "Get some more port, Bowls, old boy, whilst I buzz this bottle here" (VF 397). Pitt might take only a 'girlish' thimbleful of wine but James's appetite is keen. As he talks, he is 'gulping the ruby fluid down' (VF 398), and almost with the technical and creative skill of a dancer, he is 'filling rapidly from the bottles before him, and flying from port to Madeira with joyous activity' (VF 397). After disappointing Pitt by lapsing into silence at the dinner following this joyous display, James drinks as much the following evening but now becomes extremely vocal, turning into the entertainer Jos became at Vauxhall:

the unlucky boy's modesty had likewise forsaken him. He was lively and facetious at dinner. During the repast he levelled one or two jokes against Pitt Crawley [...]; and going quite unsuspectingly to the drawing-room, began to entertain the ladies there with some choice Oxford stories. (VF 400)

Poor Jim had 'had his laugh out: and staggered across the room with his aunt's candle, when the old lady moved to retire, and offered to salute her with the blandest tipsy smile' (VF 400-401). By smoking in his room, an activity his aunt abhors, and not realising that the smell would carry, 'being in an excited state' (VF 401), James has finished the business and bows out from the stage.

James's genuine fraternity is also demonstrated by the incident which gets him into even worse trouble with his aunt on its discovery, his buying rounds of gin and water for the boxers, the Tutbury champion and the Rottingdean man, and their friends, at the Cribb's Arms, the night before he transfers to his aunt's house. Jim, in contrast to the careful Pitt, 'was always of a generous disposition, and when in his cups especially hospitable' (VF 399). Jim is a wholehearted participant in drinking rituals. He knows



the rules of the game and is a genuine imbibor, thereby making the ritual fair. At Miss Crawley's, Jim also demonstrates his knowledge of old-fashioned table manners with regard to drink, as 'he made a point of asking all the ladies to drink wine' (VF 397). This ritual was becoming rarer by the mid-nineteenth century. Mrs Beeton explained how to observe the custom correctly but noted that it had been abolished at many tables and replaced by the newer trend of servants filling the diners' glasses with various wines suited to the different courses.<sup>250</sup> Temperance campaigners were especially averse to drinking rituals and customs because they saw them as a violation of their idea of individual freedom (it was very difficult not to partake), which in turn encouraged drunkenness. Burne found the custom of drinking healths to be a dangerous and 'most objectionable practice',<sup>251</sup> especially when women were involved, the sort of view *Punch* parodied as 'the deadly, the diabolical, the execrable custom of drinking healths'.<sup>252</sup> On the other hand, Abraham Hayward (a friend of Thackeray), in his *Art of Dining*, lamented the decline of the ritual of asking ladies to take wine at dinner, and its opportunities for conviviality and flirtation:

The ladies are deeply interested in discountenancing the prevalent fashion of being helped to wine by servants, as it has ended by nearly abolishing the old English habit of taking wine together, which afforded one of the most pleasing modes of recognition when distant, and one of the prettiest occasions for coquetry, when near.<sup>253</sup>

In *The Newcomes* there are several passages that dwell nostalgically on old-fashioned drinking rituals and their seeming demise. Colonel Newcome, the old soldier and expatriate, is a bit oddly vociferously anti-drunkenness; this is stressed repeatedly, over-insistently, as if Thackeray is making a point of his allegiance to contemporary

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<sup>250</sup> Beeton, p.91.

<sup>251</sup> Burne, p.99.

<sup>252</sup> 'Total Abstinence and Moderation', *Punch*, 23 August 1851, pp.92-93 (p.92).

<sup>253</sup> Abraham Hayward, *The Art of Dining; or, Gastronomy and Gastronomers* (London: John Murray, 1852), p.88.

temperance concerns so that he can make his otherwise celebratory description of drinking permissible. When the Colonel gives a dinner party,

All the time of the dinner the host was challenging everybody to drink wine, in his honest old-fashioned way, and Mr. Binnie seconding the chief entertainer. Such was the way in England and Scotland when they were young men. And when Binnie, asking Sir Brian, receives for reply from the Baronet – "Thank you, no, my dear sir. I have exceeded already, positively exceeded", the poor discomforted gentleman hardly knows whither to apply; but, luckily, Tom Norris, the first mate, comes to his rescue, and cries out, "Mr. Binnie, *I've* not had enough, and I'll drink a glass of anything ye like with ye".

The old-fashioned warmth, friendship and fraternity of the Colonel and his friends is contrasted with his brother, Sir Brian, who has 'positively exceeded' after a desultory amount. Sir Brian is another cold fish of the Pitt Crawley type, whose lack of warmth puzzles and hurts his brother. He even drinks like Pitt. Alarmed by the speech-making going on, he manages to recover himself and 'at its conclusion gracefully tapped the table with one of those patronising fingers; and lifting up a glass containing a least a thimbleful of claret, said, "My dear brother, I drink your health with all my heart, I'm su-ah". The night continues in merriment: 'The glasses went whack whack upon the hospitable board; the evening set in for public speaking', and when the party seems drawing to an end, the Colonel encourages it to continue:

"Close up, gentlemen", called out honest Newcome, "we are not going to part just yet. Let me fill your glass, general. You used to have no objection to a glass of wine". And he poured out a bumper for his friend, which the old campaigner sucked in with fitting gusto.

But Newcome is out of step with the age, and there is sadness in this. He tells his son, Clive: "You young fellows in this country have such cold ways that we old ones hardly know how to like you at first".<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> *The Newcomes*, pp.149,150, 151, 280.

## VI

In *Vanity Fair* even the lecherous, tipsy Sir Pitt Crawley contrasts favourably in some ways with Pitt. Of course, Sir Pitt is excess gone too far, the symbol of the worst side of Georgian life. As Jos's excessive body represents the joy of the period, Sir Pitt's 'stumpy' (VF 82) body is the site of old corruption, because he 'had rank, and honours, and power, somehow: and was a dignitary of the land, and a pillar of the state' (VF 98). To the mid-nineteenth century Sir Pitt looks like a disgusting relic of the less civilized past. But at least Pitt has an appetite for life (mostly in the form of an appetite for drink) and a stubborn streak of individualism. The loss of individuality in a morally censorious Victorian age was noted by the editor (writing at the end of the nineteenth century) of Captain Gronow's memoirs, which he felt showed a 'period which presented salient traits of individuality – when manners and morals were less restricted than in our day'.<sup>255</sup> In *On Liberty* (1859) John Stuart Mill spoke against what he saw as the prevailing tyranny of conformity, especially in the sphere of moral reform, where 'English philanthropists are so industriously working at [...] making a people all alike, all governing their thoughts and conduct by the same maxims and rules',<sup>256</sup> and in 'persuading or forcing other people to be as good as ourselves'.<sup>257</sup> This tendency for philanthropists, especially the evangelically minded, to mind other people's business by attempting to circumscribe any pleasures which they felt to be wrong was typified by the prohibition movement. Mill felt that the drinks trade should be in some, minimal, measure taxed and controlled, but that individual drunkenness 'in ordinary cases, is not

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<sup>255</sup> Gronow, p.xvi.

<sup>256</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001 (1859)), p.67.

<sup>257</sup> John Stuart Mill, p.66.

a fit subject for legislative interference',<sup>258</sup> unless the drunk caused violent harm to others.

At least Sir Pitt is free to pursue his own idea of pleasure for as long as he is capable, however much society might frown on that choice. Pitt shuns the respectable society of the neighbourhood and has 'abandoned himself completely to rum-and-water, and the odious society of the Horrocks family' (VF 392). Sir Pitt's action here to 'abandon himself completely' to drink is positive; he does not give in to alcohol but embraces it. There is something free, rebellious, spirited, almost heroic in this, a sort of unromantic Romanticism which embraces Bacchus. In contrast, Sir Pitt's weak and down-trodden second wife, 'had not character enough to take to drinking' (VF 93). Both Mill and *Punch* thought that the extremist nature of the teetotal/prohibition temperance campaigns was counterproductive because spirited people would simply be driven to rebel. *Punch* thought that this approach was 'likely to impel some persons to drink, out of bravado and contempt',<sup>259</sup> and Mill said: 'if there be among those whom it is attempted to coerce into prudence or temperance any of the material of which vigorous and independent characters are made, they will infallibly rebel against the yoke'.<sup>260</sup>

Old Miss Crawley is another emblem of this kind of rebellious liberty, if in a more socially acceptable guise. When Pitt Crawley is encouraging James to drink excessively, he tells him cunningly:

"The chief pleasure which my aunt has, [...] is that people should do as they like in her house. This is Liberty Hall, James, and you can't do Miss Crawley a greater kindness than to do as you please, and ask for what you will". (VF 397)

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<sup>258</sup> Mill, p.89.

<sup>259</sup> 'Teetotal Orgies', *Punch*, 27 March 1852, pp.125-126 (p.125).

<sup>260</sup> Mill, p.76.

The Francophile Miss Crawley, who 'was a *bel esprit*, and a dreadful Radical' (VF 105) in her time, has 'read Voltaire, and had Rousseau by heart; talked very lightly about divorce, and most energetically of the rights of women' (VF 105). Pitt knows that Miss Crawley's radical liberal persona is at least half posturing, as evidenced by her horrified reaction to Rawdon marrying Becky the governess (she disinherits him). Her liberty is not really the cause of liberty, equality and fraternity but the freedom for herself and those whom she sees as her equals to behave as they like. Miss Crawley might be a hypocrite, but, like Sir Pitt in his own way, at least she knows how to live: 'She was the most hospitable and jovial of old vestals' (VF 105). Like Jos, she 'ate and drank a great deal too much' (VF 105), which she pays for with bouts of illness and recovery. At first she finds Pitt, who sees her 'as one of the reprobate' (VF 105), a 'puling hypocrite' (VF 106). The puny Pitt and his causes – his idea of reform in the Victorian mode – are milk and water to her. Her ideal (if not her real idea) of liberty is the alignment of political and individual liberty. In her heyday, radical politics went with colourful characters, like her great hero, Fox. The latter pursued freedom in every way, including indulging all of the sensual pleasures to excess: drinking, womanising, gambling and fashion. During his tour of Ireland in 1842, Thackeray had playfully linked sensual excess with liberal politics, admiring the generous dinner given by a Whig landlord in Cork: 'how good the wine was too – the greatest merit of all! Mr. MacDowall did credit to his Liberal politics by his liberal dinner'.<sup>261</sup>

As evidenced by *The Four Georges*, Thackeray felt that excess – or 'abuse', in temperance parlance – could be taken too far. It might be as well that these abusers were increasingly anachronistic in the mid-nineteenth century and that political and moral progress was excising them. His view of those who lived absolutely for their

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<sup>261</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Irish Sketch Book and Contributions to the 'Foreign Quarterly Review': 1842-4*, ed. by George Saintsbury, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: OUP, [n.d.]), p. 64.

own indulgence was clear, as exemplified by his opinion of eighteenth-century playwright, Congreve,

to whom the world seems to have no moral at all, and whose ghastly doctrine seems to be that we should eat, drink, and be merry when we can, and go to the deuce (if there be a deuce) when the time comes.<sup>262</sup>

It is not that he condones Sir Pitt's and Miss Crawley's selfishness, but highlights those elements of their characters that were worth preserving. They blaze with life next to the abstemious Pitt (who is certainly not anachronistic to the mid-nineteenth century), a reminder that civilization could become a cold and brittle thing should the elements of sensuality, joy and individuality be reformed away. Queen's Crawley (under Sir Pitt's dominion) and Miss Crawley's 'Liberty Hall' are enclaves of individual liberty under siege from the moral police of the Victorian world.

However, the more extreme temperance enthusiasts felt that the liberty to drink was not liberty at all. Since alcohol was intrinsically a slavish thing, it would always create an insatiable appetite in the drinker, and there was no such thing as a harmless amount: 'the *use* itself [was] the *abuse*'.<sup>263</sup> Livesey claimed that the idea of moderation was either a snare that drew in initially moderate drinkers (who would eventually succumb to slavery), or it served as a (presumably temporary) bad example to those who were already enslaved, leading them to believe that they too could be moderate: a drunk was a better model since they served as warning. Since alcohol was an intoxicant even a negligible amount meant that the imbiber was to that degree intoxicated: 'Moderation in intoxicating liquors is incipient drunkenness'.<sup>264</sup> Dickens,

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<sup>262</sup> See William Makepeace Thackeray, *The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century*, 2nd edn (1853), in *Henry Esmond: The English Humourists*, ed. by George Saintsbury (London: OUP, [n.d.]), pp.465-690 (p.524).

<sup>263</sup> Livesey, p.24.

<sup>264</sup> Livesey, p.24.

like Thackeray, disliked this sort of extreme approach to drink, labelling it 'whole-hogism'.<sup>265</sup> And *Punch* parodied the resulting tone of the movement, the intemperate temperance, or drunken sobriety, which manifested itself in fiery speeches and lively marches, when it seemed to be 'an object with the teetotalers to show how tipsy it is possible to get upon water'<sup>266</sup> and to 'let the public see how bacchanalian men can be without BACCHUS'.<sup>267</sup>

But for Livesey and his supporters true liberty was the 'whole-hog', that is liberty in its totality: '*Those who are not with us are against us*'.<sup>268</sup> Burne thought that drunkenness threatened everybody's freedom, that is national political liberty. Using the classical example of luxury leading to the decline and fall of Rome, he pinpointed alcohol (imported wine) as the specific luxury item which had initiated the mechanics of corruption. Britain, as Rome had, was 'fast approaching its crisis',<sup>269</sup> because 'her vitals are festering in corruption, and her moral constitution is being corroded by the ulcers of intemperance'.<sup>270</sup> Yet the vision of Britain portrayed in G.R. Porter's *The Progress of The Nation* (1847), published in the same year as Burne's *Companion*, could hardly have been more different. Porter felt that the present generation had 'made the greatest advances in civilization that can be found recorded in the annals of mankind'. And part of this was the new moderation in alcohol consumption to be found at all levels of society: 'this habit of temperance in the use of intoxicating liquors is one of the greatest, if indeed it be not the greatest, reformation

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<sup>265</sup> See 'Whole Hogs', *Household Words*, 74, 23 August 1851, one of many of Dickens's attacks on the teetotal temperance movement.

<sup>266</sup> 'Orgies for Teetotalers', *Punch*, 12 September 1846, p.112.

<sup>267</sup> 'Orgies for Teetotalers', p.112.

<sup>268</sup> Livesey, p.8.

<sup>269</sup> Burne, p.311.

<sup>270</sup> Burne, p.311.

that society has witnessed'. Porter contrasted the 'scenes of riot that forty years ago were still of too common occurrence even among reputable people, [...] with the quiet and rational enjoyment that attends our social meetings at the present day'. The age's pleasures might have been 'rational' but they were certainly not teetotal. A committed free trader, liberty for Porter was commercial liberty, and, in polar opposition to Burne, he suggested a need for more imported wine. A reduction of duties on good, cheaper, imported wines would put them in reach of the working classes, and a 'great addition would be made to the innocent enjoyments of the people'.<sup>271</sup>

## VII

Specifically alcohol as commodity was a fraught issue for the Victorians. The drinks industry generated vast wealth, but also caused social harm. In the free movement of goods, supply might not just settle down to meet a natural or reasonable level of demand, but create its own potentially unnatural, unreasonable and insatiable demand. As James Nicholls has pointed out, 'because alcohol represented intoxication as a commodity, it was especially problematic'.<sup>272</sup> Teetotal temperance campaigners like Livesey felt that their cause would benefit capitalism: a sober workforce was a more efficient workforce, and as drunkenness caused crime, sobriety was the safeguard of property.<sup>273</sup> Whilst the working classes were often blamed for wasting their wages on drink, this argument was not always palatable to employers, since teetotalism could divide a workforce which bonded around rituals involving alcohol. And it was a different matter altogether to advocate prohibition, since this would strike at the heart

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<sup>271</sup> G. R. Porter, *The Progress of The Nation, in its Various Social and Economical Relations, from the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century*, new edn (London: John Murray, 1847), pp.1, 782, 682, 570. The book was first published in parts, beginning in 1836, building gradually to the full 1847 version.

<sup>272</sup> Nicholls, p. 127.

<sup>273</sup> See Livesey, p.32.



of one of the most profitable industries in the country. Prohibitionists like F. R. Lees and Burne felt that this was a price worth paying. In fact, the drinks industry distorted the natural flow of trade, and capitalism would expand and flourish in all other directions as the workers' surplus cash could now be expended on other commodities. *Punch* strongly objected to this approach. In the vehemence of their attacks on the drinks industry, which, as we know, they compared to the slave trade, they were destroying livelihoods, 'blurt[ing] forth upon others a stream of fierce and fiery trash, which is poisonous to the reputation over which it is poured, [...] thrown recklessly about to the damage and destruction of the character of a whole class of the community'.<sup>274</sup> *Punch* insisted that 'it is the state of intoxication, rather than the cause of it, that is wrong'.<sup>275</sup> Mill later reiterated the standard use and abuse argument: it was wrong, and a violation of liberty, to punish those who consumed moderately for those who could not: 'dealers in strong drinks, though interested in their abuse, are indispensably required for the sake of their legitimate use'.<sup>276</sup>

In addition to alcohol's special qualities (its delight for the senses and – in direct contrast to the temperance reformers – its intoxicating power), for Thackeray alcohol as commodity simply took its place amongst all other commodities in shaping a world. In *Vanity Fair* 'that bowl of rack punch was the cause of all this history' (VF 64), that is the story within the novel; but it is also commodity as creating civilization, the cause of all progressive history. The connection is made explicit in the context of Becky and Rawdon managing, at least for a while, 'to live well on Nothing a Year' (VF 418):

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<sup>274</sup> 'Temperance out of Temper', *Punch*, 13 May 1854, p.199.

<sup>275</sup> 'Teetotal Orgies', *Punch*, 27 March 1852, p.125.

<sup>276</sup> Mill, p.92.

If every person is to be banished from society who runs into debt and cannot pay – if we are to be peering into everybody's private life, speculating upon their income, and cutting them if we don't approve of their expenditure – why, what a howling wilderness and intolerable dwelling *Vanity Fair* would be! Every man's hand would be against his neighbour in this case, my dear sir, and the benefits of civilization would be done away with. We should be quarrelling, abusing, avoiding one another. Our houses would become caverns: and we should go in rags because we cared for nobody. Rents would go down. Parties wouldn't be given any more. All the tradesmen of the town would be bankrupt. Wine, wax-lights, comestibles, rouge, crinoline-petticoats, diamonds, wigs, Louis-Quatorze gimcracks, and old china, park hacks, and splendid high-stepping carriage horses – all the delights of life, I say – would go to the deuce, if people did but act upon their silly principles, and avoid those whom they dislike and abuse. Whereas, by a little charity and mutual forbearance, things are made to go on pleasantly enough: we may abuse a man as much as we like, and call him the greatest rascal unhanged – but do we wish to hang him therefore? No. We shake hands when we meet. If his cook is good we forgive him, and go and dine with him, and we expect he will do the same by us. Thus trade flourishes - civilization advances: peace is kept; new dresses are wanted for new assemblies every week; and the last year's vintage of Lafitte will remunerate the honest proprietor who reared it. (VF 594-5)

The fact that Becky and Rawdon's debt ultimately makes Raggles bankrupt does not negate the crucial new luxury connection between stuff, trade, peace and civilization. As Daniel Miller has pointed out, with his dialectical theory of material culture and its mutual constitution of subject and object,<sup>277</sup> this commodity culture enhances rather than impoverishes humanity. Civilization here is inherently social, and stuff is connected with love and sociability. If people did not care for each other, they would wear rags and live in caverns. When they do not already care for each other, they can learn to do so: harmony is created by 'good' stuff, a luxury bottle of vintage Lafitte, for example. The howling wilderness – a world of savagery – is not a fallen world brought on by too much luxury, too much stuff, but a world without stuff.

As we know, it has been customary to read this world of stuff in Thackeray as a world of profound moral corruption.<sup>278</sup> After all, Thackeray did write of *Vanity Fair* as a story of 'people living without God in the world', behind which 'there lies a dark

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<sup>277</sup> See Introduction, p.22-23.

<sup>278</sup> For examples, see Introduction, pp.21-22.

moral'.<sup>279</sup> But this does not mean that Thackeray frowned upon commodity culture. Carey's 1977 reading of Thackeray and commodities remains one of the most astute critical interpretations available: 'he loved them, even while he saw through them and their prizers'. Carey goes further: 'whereas to regard a person as a bundle of commodities might seem, to a champion of human dignity, an impoverishing delusion, Thackeray is prepared to entertain the possibility of its being an enriching one'.<sup>280</sup> In fact the noble and gentlemanly Dobbin could be construed as a bundle of commodities. At school he is mocked for being a grocer's son – selling goods by retail being a 'shameful and infamous practice, meriting the contempt and scorn of all real gentlemen' (VF 48) – and 'he stood there [...] as the representative of so many pounds of tea, candles, sugar, mottled-soap, plums [...], and other commodities' (VF 47). But Thackeray's real celebration of the subject as a bundle of commodities is the subject as consumer of commodities, and ideally the consumer of luxury commodities.

One form of commodified alcohol, and specifically its luxury version, that *Vanity Fair* celebrates is the cellar. In a world of social snobbery the cellar satisfies two contradictory and yet harmonious instincts. It is a symbol of permanence: it is a household fixture, and ideally its contents should be aged. It is a symbol of impermanence: contents must be drunk to enjoy and show off the quality and luxury of the cellar and therefore need continually replacing (the logic of capitalism in its endless need to renew itself). Thackeray himself was very proud of the cellar he filled (with ninety dozen bottles of claret and port) in his final home at Palace Green, Kensington, and the sale of its contents at his death helped to provide financial security for his

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<sup>279</sup> *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, ed. by Ray, II, p.309 (2 July 1847).

<sup>280</sup> Carey, pp.63, 77.

daughters.<sup>281</sup> Indeed, Asa Briggs has noted the importance of alcohol in the Victorian economy in this respect, finding that 'the disposition of wines and spirits seems to have figured in wills more frequently than books'.<sup>282</sup>

In *Vanity Fair*, Mr Sedley's wine cellar demonstrates both the brutality and the beauty of the commodity. Sedley has taken great pride in a cellar whose contents rivalled 'Boney's'. But his pride is cruelly humbled when he becomes a bankrupt, and the contents of his cellar are auctioned off alongside the rest of his goods. Worse still, his erstwhile friend and now bitter enemy, Osborne, enjoys rubbing salt into his wounds, and makes the most of the sale: 'Certain of the best wines (which all had a great character among amateurs in the neighbourhood) had been purchased for his master, who knew them very well, by the butler of our friend John Osborne, Esquire, of Russell Square' (VF 186-187). Sedley is now reduced to drinking the very humble gin and water with his landlord and former clerk, Mr Clapp (VF 534), and when he embarks on a wine trading business it is a disaster because his 'former taste in wine had gone' (VF 455). Sedley finds that his status is not intrinsic to himself, it is a function of the things he possesses and the things he consumes. Once these are gone he loses his sense of identity and becomes a broken man: their alienation is brutal. And yet the cellar contents will give someone else the same pleasure that they gave him. At the auction of Dives, the proverbial rich man, which functions as a general auction, the narrator comments: 'he was rather dull, perhaps, but would not such wine make any conversation pleasant? We must get some of his Burgundy at any price, the mourners cry at his club' (VF 186). The point that good wine improves social bonds (wine moderates dullness) is reiterated, as well the fact that, rightly or wrongly, humanity can

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<sup>281</sup> See D. J. Taylor, p.449.

<sup>282</sup> Asa Briggs, *Victorian Things*, 3rd edn (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2003), p.24.

feel regret and acquisitiveness at the same time; the value and desirability of fine wine is the affirmation of life carrying on.

### VIII

Though Thackeray took immense pleasure in fine (luxury) drink, he knew the pleasure to be had in more humble fare. In *Vanity Fair*, the hypocrisy of Miss Crawley is shown up in her attitude to drunkenness and different types of alcohol. Despite her own excessive consumption, Miss Crawley, like Colonel Newcome in *The Newcomes*, is strangely the mouthpiece of sobriety. But sobriety for her is not a state of being, merely a description of the status of what one has consumed. With regard to James's drunken antics, Miss Crawley is more horrified by what he drinks, than by how much:

Had he drunk a dozen bottles of claret, the old spinster could have pardoned him. Mr Fox and Mr Sheridan drank claret. Gentlemen drank claret. But eighteen glasses of gin consumed among boxers in an ignoble pot-house – it was an odious crime, and not to be pardoned readily. (VF 400)

Miss Briggs is instructed to write to James:

Miss Crawley bids me say she regrets that she is too unwell to see you before you go – and above all that she ever induced you to remove from the alehouse, where she is sure you will be much more comfortable during the rest of your stay at Brighton. (VF 402)

Because James has committed the odious crime of drinking gin, his obvious social level is the alehouse. Equally, once Miss Crawley discovers the truth – real and exaggerated – of Becky's humble origins, she immediately assumes that the latter is drunken: “I am certain that woman has made Rawdon drink. All those low people do” (VF 291).

And she re-imagines Rawdon as smelling of gin:

”His nose has become red, and he is exceedingly coarse in appearance. His marriage to that woman has hopelessly vulgarized him. Mrs Bute always said they drank together; and I have no doubt they do. Yes: he smelt of gin abominably. I remarked it. Didn't you?”. (VF 291)

Miss Crawley's belief that drunkenness is 'low' aligns her with much Victorian temperance opinion. Given the rhetoric of increased temperance as a marker of Victorian progress and civilization, the increasingly radicalised nature of the anti-alcohol movements – from temperance, to teetotalism, to prohibition – seems puzzling. If the former premise is true, why the need for the latter? The apparent contradiction can be partly accounted for by the class prejudice often present in these campaigns. The old luxury fears that luxury would eventually lead to a triumph of the animal over the rational, and a state of disorder and anarchy, were now projected towards the working classes. Like Burne, Dr. F. R. Lees saw nothing less than 'the destiny of this country – nay, of the Saxon Race – [as] suspended on the issue<sup>283</sup> of drunkenness, and it was mostly the lower classes who were to be feared. Prohibition was the only way to

raise the degraded and dangerous classes, and stop the rapid manufacture of more, or [...] we permit the cancer and corruption to spread, and leave it to terminate, as assuredly it would, in the dissolution of social bonds and the reign of unbridled anarchy.<sup>284</sup>

Less extreme opinion, and despite Porter's egalitarian view, nonetheless increasingly judged that 'the vice of Intoxication has been for some years past on the decline in the higher and middle ranks of society; but has increased within the same period among the labouring classes'.<sup>285</sup> This is the conclusion of the 1834 House of Commons Select Committee inquiring into drunkenness. However, judging from the Committee's line of questioning – pressing the witnesses to agree that this was the case – it appeared to have made up its mind beforehand. Not every witness cooperated. Henry Bradshaw

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<sup>283</sup> Dr Frederick Richard Lees, *An Argument Legal and Historical for the Legislative Prohibition of the Liquor Traffic* (London: William Tweedie; Manchester: United Kingdom Alliance, 1856), p.316.

<sup>284</sup> Lees, p.316.

<sup>285</sup> 1834 (559) *Report from the Select Committee on Inquiry into Drunkenness, with Minutes of Evidence, and Appendix* (House of Commons, 5 August 1834), p.3.

Fearon, a wholesale spirit and wine dealer (clearly not an unbiased witness himself), insisted that drunkenness was declining in all classes and that it was hypocritical to target only the poor: 'if temperance is desirable [...] for the bricklayer, it is equally desirable for the minister of state, [and] it is desirable for the bishop', so 'if they look to gin they should also look to champagne'.<sup>286</sup>

Through highlighting Miss Crawley's class-based hypocrisy, *Vanity Fair* undercuts the bias of some contemporary temperance rhetoric. *Punch* made the point on several occasions. In the spoof 'Father Mathew in Hyde Park!: Grand Temperance Meeting of the Aristocracy', the aristocracy line up to take the pledge (of total abstinence);<sup>287</sup> and, a decade later, in 'Teetotal Truth!', they note the presence of an Earl at a temperance meeting at Exeter Hall: 'it is something to catch a live earl in water; a celebrity only second to the second coming hippopotamus'.<sup>288</sup> Father Mathew, a figure of whom *Punch* broadly approved, was an Irish temperance campaigner who had reputedly convinced several millions of Irish (as well as English and Americans) to sign the pledge: teetotalism could be appropriate for some individuals when moderation was impossible. Thackeray met Mathew during a trip to Ireland, and approved of his modest and straightforward persona, despite his '*one idea*'.<sup>289</sup> He couldn't help a touch of guilty nostalgia, however:

The delightful old gentleman who sang the song here mentioned could not help talking of the Temperance movement with a sort of regret, and said that all the fun had gone out of Ireland since Father Mathew banished the whisky from it. Indeed, any stranger going amongst the people can perceive that they are now

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<sup>286</sup> *Inquiry into Drunkenness*, pp, 202, 212.

<sup>287</sup> *Punch*, 19 August 1843, p.78. The pledge is extended to include a renouncing of vain-gloriousness, arrogance, pride and selfishness.

<sup>288</sup> *Punch*, 17 June 1854, p.248.

<sup>289</sup> *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, ed. by Ray, II, p.70 (29 July 1842).

anything but gay. I have seen a great number of crowds and meetings of people in all parts of Ireland, and found them all gloomy. There is nothing like the merry-making one reads of in the Irish novels. Lever and Maxwell must be taken as chroniclers of the old times – the pleasant but wrong old times – for which one can't help having an antiquarian fondness.<sup>290</sup>

And in a wonderfully and typically Thackerayan moment, he meets Mathew when hungover: 'there was the Apostle of Temperance seated at the table drinking tea. Some of us felt a little ashamed of ourselves, and did not like to ask somehow for the soda-water in such an awful presence as that'.<sup>291</sup>

Because commodities could be divided into necessities and luxuries, especially in judgement of how the poor spent their limited resources, it suited the temperance campaigners to classify alcohol as not just a trifling luxury, as the anti-slavery campaigners had done with sugar, but a harmful one. Teetotalers like Burne accused the poor of prioritising luxury over need: Burne quotes a story of a poor family in winter spending more on 'the most pernicious luxury' of gin than on 'one of the most important household necessities', coals.<sup>292</sup> In fact, historically, alcohol had been perceived as almost as essential to life as food.<sup>293</sup> For centuries beer especially had held this status, being formally recognised as the second necessity of life in the Assize of Bread and Ale in 1267. As John Burnett points out, it was only under the influence of the nineteenth-century teetotal temperance movement that this categorisation changed radically and some came to see beer as a poisonous drug that caused a litany

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<sup>290</sup> *The Irish Sketch Book*, p. 67.

<sup>291</sup> *The Irish Sketch Book*, p. 68.

<sup>292</sup> Burne, p.485.

<sup>293</sup> Livesey, founder of the first British teetotal temperance society, was one of the first to challenge this notion in his *Malt Lecture* (referenced above), first delivered in 1833. The point was still being debated in 1862, when, shortly after Thackeray's editorship ended, *The Cornhill Magazine*, published Francis E. Anstie's defences of alcohol against the teetotalers. See, 'Is it Food, Medicine, or Poison?', June 1862, pp.707-716, and 'Does Alcohol act as Food?', September 1862, pp.319-329. His answer to the latter question was 'yes'.



of social ills.<sup>294</sup> Whilst *Punch* was sympathetic to attempts to improve the lives of those poorest members of society whose lives were ruined by drink, it was angered at the idea of depriving the respectable poor of their moderate, alcoholic pleasures, especially beer: 'we cannot help thinking that everything has its use, as well as its abuse, and there may be some good in a pot of beer'.<sup>295</sup> An angry Dickens, too, spoke of 'the poor man and his beer, and the sin of parting them'.<sup>296</sup> Their sense is less that beer was a nutritive necessity, though that idea still played a part; it was more that it was a daily, simple pleasure that enhanced the life of working people. Porter happily acknowledged the importance of beer for the labouring classes as 'one of their chief luxuries',<sup>297</sup> because luxury for him was not a morally problematic category, and he saw it as inherently a good thing for all classes. In *Vanity Fair* Thackeray's narrator pays tribute to British beer in the context of Dobbin and Jos arriving home from India after many years. Alongside the beef, the sight of 'the silver tankard suggestive of real British home-brewed ale and porter, [is] so invigorating and delightful' (VF 675); and

the landlord said it did his eyes good to see Mr Sedley take off his first pint of porter. If I had time and dared to enter into digressions, I would write a chapter about that first pint of porter drunk upon English ground. Ah, how good it is! It is worth while to leave home for a year, just to enjoy that one draught. (VF 676)

Those antipathetic to the teetotal cause also objected to the paternalistic, or what we might call now the 'nanny state', approach to the poor, which in effect infantilised them. Dickens spoke of their being treated as the 'Great Baby'.<sup>298</sup> Mill feared 'a state of society in which the labouring classes are avowedly treated as children or savages,

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<sup>294</sup> Burnett, p.111.

<sup>295</sup> 'Temperance out of Temper', p.199.

<sup>296</sup> Charles Dickens, 'The Poor Man and His Beer', *All The Year Round*, 30 April 1859, in *Dickens' Journalism, Vol.4: The Uncommercial Traveller and Other Papers: 1859-70*, ed. by Michael Slater and John Drew (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), pp.3-11 (p.4).

<sup>297</sup> G. R. Porter, p.573.

<sup>298</sup> Charles Dickens, 'The Great Baby', *Household Words*, 4 August 1855, pp.1-4.

and placed under an education of restraint, to fit them for future admission to the privileges of freedom'.<sup>299</sup> And *Punch* saw a law similar to the US Maine Law (a local prohibition law)<sup>300</sup> – which it felt would principally target the working classes – as ‘a law for schoolboys’, telling its advocates to ‘desist [...] from urging Society to allow you to put it in a strait-waistcoat, and a high chair and a slobbering-bib’.<sup>301</sup> Whilst the extremist temperance reformers thought that liberty for all could only be achieved, paradoxically, through coercion, that is by a removal of temptation, *Punch* thought that rational self-control and virtue could only be achieved by practising and developing it in a free environment. Drunkenness was a price worth paying for the preservation of freedom: ‘Liberty for ever! even the liberty to get drunk. Where there is no freedom there is no virtue; where men are disabled from drinking there is no sobriety’.<sup>302</sup> A few years earlier they had disapproved of the decision not to allow anything stronger than ginger beer to be sold at the 1851 Great Exhibition in Hyde Park. Far from proving to foreigners that Britain was sober rather than drunken, this only made the opposite case: ‘it is clear if they gave you that permission [to drink] that you poor uncivilized English

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<sup>299</sup> Mill, p.93.

<sup>300</sup> The legislature of the State of Maine passed the first prohibition law in the Western world in June 1851 (it was repealed in 1856, then reinstated in 1858). It forbade all wholesale and retail traffic in liquor within state boundaries. The United Kingdom Alliance, formed in 1853 in Manchester, was set up to agitate in and out of parliament for a similar legal suppression of the drinks trade.

<sup>301</sup> ‘Monckton Milnes on the Maine Law’, *Punch*, 22 October 1859, p.164.

<sup>302</sup> ‘Monckton Milnes on the Maine Law’, p.164. This sentiment was later famously echoed by William Magee, Bishop of Peterborough, speaking in the House of Lords against a licensing bill proposing that local ratepayers should be able to vote on the number of licences granted in their area each year: ‘I should say that it would be much better that England should be free than that England should be sober. [...] with freedom we must eventually obtain sobriety; but on the other hand we should lose both sobriety and freedom together’. Quoted in ‘Parliamentary Intelligence: Intoxicating Liquors Bill’, *The Times*, 3 May 1872, p.5.

could not restrain your brutal appetites, and that you would *make beasts of yourselves*, to the peril of everything around you'.<sup>303</sup>

It is not that in *Vanity Fair* Thackeray explicitly makes a case for the freedom of the working classes, as Dickens espoused their cause in his novels and journalism. He felt uncomfortable with political 'reform' or 'cause' – that other form of social good – fiction, not believing that the two sat comfortably together.<sup>304</sup> He did not even see any particular virtue – or sobriety – in those lower down in the social scale. But that is the point. Vice and virtue, abuse and use, drunkenness and sobriety, are apparent at all levels of the social scale. All classes are naturally desiring and acquisitive, and as prone to sensuality. When the Misses Osborne realize that George's estrangement from his father will mean more money for them, the narrator points out that the same sentiments are occurring outside on the street:

And do not let my respected reader exclaim against this selfishness as unnatural. It was but this present morning, as he rode on the omnibus from Richmond; while it changed horses, this present chronicler, being on the roof, marked three little children playing in a puddle below, very dirty, and friendly, and happy. To these three presently came another little one. '*Polly*', says she, '*your sister's got a penny*'. At which the children got up from the puddle instantly, and ran off to pay their court to Peggy. And as the omnibus drove off I saw Peggy with the infantine procession at her tail, marching with great dignity towards the stall of a neighbouring lollipop-woman. (VF 257)

All classes want their daily pleasures and are as entitled to them as any other class, as the ubiquity of alcoholic pleasures in all corners of life in *Vanity Fair* shows. The clerks in Mr Osborne's attorney's office naturally talk about George's affairs 'over their pints of beer at their public-house clubs to other clerks of a night' (VF 300-301). The

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<sup>303</sup> 'The Crystal Palace – A National Reflection', *Punch*, 15 March 1851, p.111.

<sup>304</sup> For example, see his reviews of Disraeli's *Sybil* and Charles Lever's *St. Patrick's Eve* in the *Morning Chronicle*: '*Sybil*. By Mr. Disraeli, M.P.', 13 May 1845, pp.5-6; '*Lever's St. Patrick's Eve* – Comic Politics', 3 April 1845, pp.5-6.

undertaker's men who preside at Sir Pitt Crawley's funeral can relax with a drink when their duty is done:

their faces relapsed into a natural expression as the horses, clearing the lodge gates, got into a brisker trot on the open road; and squads of them might have been seen, speckling with black the public-house entrances, with pewter-pots flashing in the sunshine. (VF 488)

Dobbin, 'who knew the effect which good dinners and good wines have upon the soul of man' (VF 267), invites Mr Osborne's City clerk, Mr Chopper, to dine with him, when trying to win George's father round. Mr Chopper is delighted with the invitation, and although 'promising his admiring wife not to punish Captain D's port too severely that evening' (VF 267), he naturally returns home 'in a hiccupping state' (VF 271); and why would he not, is the implication. When better times come to Amelia, and she and Jos set up home together, the butler they employ 'never was more drunk than a butler in a small family should be, who had a proper regard for his master's wine' (VF 701). It is only natural that a butler, with such temptations, should be a bit drunk.

The narrator sympathises with those who nurse the sick, like Miss Hester nursing Sir Pitt Crawley, and the exhausting and thankless task they have: 'we quarrel with them because, when their relations come to see them once a week, a little gin is smuggled in in their linen basket' (VF 471-472). When old Osborne goes to Belgium to find the place where George was killed in battle, he gives a wounded soldier who helps him some money, and the soldier and his comrades 'went and made good cheer with drink and feasting, as long as the guineas lasted which had come from the proud purse of the mourning old father' (VF 411). When the staff in Becky and Rawdon's home in Curzon Street, Mayfair, decide to rebel, drink naturally plays its part. The cook encourages Mrs Raggles to drink Maraschino (one of George IV's favourite drinks), and takes a good share herself. As 'the liquor appeared to give the odious rebel courage' (VF 638), the cook tells Becky exactly what she thinks, staking the servants'

claim to the property (the Raggles own the house, though they are now ruined). Mr Trotter, the footman, also speaks his mind, as 'it was evident, from Mr Trotters' flushed countenance and defective intonation, that he, too, had had recourse to vinous stimulus' (VF 638). The servants' drunken rebellion shows that they are just as capable of asserting their independence and rights as anyone else. The scene equally serves as a parody of those higher up the social scale as they are drinking their drinks and mimicking their behaviour. Drink finds its place, and naturally so, in all life's situations: celebration, relaxation, comfort, conviviality, escape from the cares of life.

And even though Thackeray shared Lady Morgan's epicurean delight in fine dining, it was only true refinement if it also included warmth and humanity. Despite his being lauded by society after *Vanity Fair* and his wallowing in champagne, Thackeray complained to Lady Blessington that he was longing for something cosier: 'I would like a cozy dinner with you very much better if you please'.<sup>305</sup> He did not want to dine on the half-dressed oxen that Lady Morgan associated with the barbarian, but he did want the mixture of intelligent conversation, humour, merriness and warmth that suggested a more relaxed, pre-Victorian sensibility. His ideal model of life, work and pleasure seems best summed up by his opinion of the artists of the eighteenth century – Percy, Langton, Goldsmith, Boswell, Reynolds and 'dear old Johnson',<sup>306</sup> whose lives contrasted with the absolute excess of high society and yet were warm, convivial and merry:

Their minds were not debauched by excess, or effeminate with luxury. They toiled their noble day's labour: they rested, and took their kindly pleasure: they cheered their holiday meetings with generous wit and hearty interchange of

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<sup>305</sup> *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, ed. by Ray, II, p.535 ( 6 May 1849).

<sup>306</sup> *The Four Georges*, p.761.

thought: they were no prudes, but no blush need follow their conversation: they were merry, but no riot came out of their cups.<sup>307</sup>

In Thackeray's 'The Ballad of Bouillabaisse', a tribute to a fish stew served up in a Parisian inn, he reflects with melancholy and tenderness on his past life – the lost friends and love, the suddenness of aging – which is inextricably bound up with the cosy dinner table and 'the claret flowing'.<sup>308</sup> His attitude to life and the essential place of sensual pleasures are summed up thus:

And true philosophers, methinks  
Who love all sorts of natural beauties  
Should love good victuals and good drinks.<sup>309</sup>

In the next chapter I turn to – or return to – condemnation of luxurious excess, but less for its own sake, as we found in Austen, and more in the context of its immorality when set alongside abject poverty. Thackeray's prioritisation of a form of social good as fine arts and civilization, over its social reforming version, in effect meant that luxury could be prioritised above need. This did not make Thackeray heartless or careless of the poor; rather, it signified his absolute belief in the value of sensual pleasure. Gaskell's social good, however, is certainly in the political and reforming mode, however much, personally, she played down her campaigning instincts. It is not now a question of the freedom for all to indulge their appetites as they so wish, but of the right for the poorer classes of society to satisfy the absolute basic appetites that sustained life: hunger and the sex drive.

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<sup>307</sup> *The Four Georges*, p.761.

<sup>308</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, 'The Ballad of Bouillabaisse' (1855), printed in Anthony Trollope, *Thackeray* (London: Macmillan, 1936 (1879)), pp.180-183 (p.182), IV.71.

<sup>309</sup> 'The Ballad of Bouillabaisse', p.181, III. 18-20.

### Chapter 3: 'Need was right': Luxury and the Economies of Lust and Hunger in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*

In *Mary Barton* Elizabeth Gaskell develops a theme that was explored in Austen: that luxury leads to sexual corruption. Harry Carson, son of a wealthy factory owner, is the most sexually corrupt character in the novel. At the same time, and in a forceful intervention on their side, Gaskell presents the poor as sexually virtuous (the prostitute Esther is exceptional in that she is partly a victim of one such as Carson). This is in marked contrast to much social commentary of the early Victorian period, which linked poverty and sexual licentiousness. Gaskell was not the only one to link wealth and sexual immorality, however. In 'Why are Women Redundant?', W. R. Greg, manufacturer, essayist and friend of the Gaskells, blamed 'the growing and morbid LUXURY of the age'<sup>310</sup> for an increase in prostitution. In order to maintain or rise above a certain level of wealth, both men and women (but more particularly the former) were delaying marriage, and men were in the meantime satisfying their sexual urges with prostitutes. Trollope would later make the same complaint, with less specificity, in his autobiography (written 1875-76), referring to 'the luxury of young men who prefer to remain single'.<sup>311</sup> Although Greg did not write 'Why are Women Redundant?' until 1869, some years after the publication of *Mary Barton* (1848),

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<sup>310</sup> W. R. Greg, *Why are Women Redundant?* (London: N. Trubner & Co, 1869), p.19.

<sup>311</sup> Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography* (London: Penguin, 1996 (1883)). Trollope touched on the issue in several novels. In *The Vicar of Bullhampton* (Oxford: OUP, 1988 (1869-70)), Captain Marrable complains that: "According to the doctrines that are going now-a-days, [...] it will be held soon that a gentleman can't marry unless he has got £3000 a year. It is the most heartless, damnable teaching that ever came up. It spoils the men, and makes women, when they do marry, [...] expect ever so many things that they ought never to want" (p.150). And in *Ayala's Angel* (Oxford: OUP, 1986 (1881)), Colonel Stubbs says that marriage is "the only remedy for the consciousness of disreputable debauchery, a savour of which always clings, more or less strongly, to unmarried men in our rank of life. The chimes must be heard at midnight, let a young man be ever so well given to the proprieties, and he must have just a touch of the swinebuckler about him, or he will seem to himself to be deficient in virility. There is no getting out of it until a man marry" (p.183).

several commentators on prostitution in the 1840s had made the same connection.

Ralph Wardlaw, for example, thought that

the high notions, which, by the refinement and extravagance of our times, have been introduced, of the *style* in which young men entering on life must set up their domestic establishment, have, in many instances, laid restraints on the early cultivation of virtuous love, and prevented the happy union of hearts in youthful wedlock.<sup>312</sup>

And the translator of Leon Faucher's articles on life in Manchester in 1844, as an adjunct to his discussion of prostitution, commented:

We live in the age of Economy, and the married life is deemed too expensive, unless compensated by an adequate pecuniary consideration. The inordinate thirst for accumulation, and the ambition to maintain an expensive household, are formidable obstacles to the virtue of youth in an aristocratic commercial community; and a passion, legitimate in itself, and the source of the purest and most refined of pleasures when lawfully satisfied within the pale of the family contract, becomes, through false notions of what respectability really is, a powerful incentive to physical, and what is far worse, moral prostitution.<sup>313</sup>

In addition Greg thought that 'so many women are single because so many men are profligate'.<sup>314</sup> Men's recourse to prostitutes had become not just an expedient but a positive choice, as they preferred the apparently cheaper and better 'service' offered by the prostitute in comparison with that offered by a wife. Gaskell explores this perverted sexual appetite through both its perpetrators, such as Carson, and its victims, such as the fallen Esther and the in-danger-of-falling Mary Barton.

The idea of delaying marriage and procreation in order to maintain or improve one's material position was prominent during the early and mid-nineteenth century. According to the population theory of Thomas Malthus, which greatly influenced

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<sup>312</sup> Ralph Wardlaw, D.D., *Lectures on Female Prostitution: its Nature, Extent, Effects, Guilt, Causes and Remedy* (Glasgow: James Maclehose, 1842), p.89.

<sup>313</sup> Leon Faucher, *Manchester in 1844: Its Present Condition and Future Prospects* (London: Simpkin, Marshall & Co; Manchester: Abel Heywood, 1844), p.44.

<sup>314</sup> *Why are Women Redundant?*, p.26.



Victorian social policy, population always increased ahead of subsistence and the 'surplus' population could only be checked by misery or vice. These checks were 'positive', which raised the death rate (such as famine, disease, war and natural disaster), or 'preventive', which lowered the birth rate (such as delayed marriage, contraception and abortion). In the second edition of his *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1803) Malthus introduced the new preventive check of 'moral restraint', that is delayed marriage preceded by a period of celibacy rather than indulgence in the vice of non-marital sex. It was incumbent on every member of society to practice moral restraint until they were in a position to marry and support a family. The State should not intervene through vehicles such as the poor laws because these only encouraged the poor to breed with impunity, thereby continuing the over-population problem with its resulting cycle of misery and vice. Although the idea of (culturally<sup>315</sup>) enforced celibacy seemed a harsh fate for the poorest members of society (as those least likely to be able to afford marriage), under the developing guise of comfort theory the Malthusian theory of population was given a positive slant. Referred to by Malthus himself in his later thinking,<sup>316</sup> it was set out by the influential economist, Nassau Senior, in his *Two Lectures on Population* (1831). The idea was that as commercial civilization developed and comforts and luxuries became increasingly within the reach of all, even the poorer classes would gladly put off

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<sup>315</sup>Malthus did not advocate legal prohibition of marriage; the poor could choose to marry when they liked but would have to take individual responsibility for any adverse consequences. John Stuart Mill, however, felt that the prohibition of marriage without means to support a family would not exceed the legitimate powers of the State, because 'to produce children, beyond a very small number, with the effect of reducing the reward of labour by their competition, is a serious offence against all who live by the remuneration of their labour.' See *On Liberty*, p.99.

<sup>316</sup>Malthus always privileged agriculture over manufacturing but grew warmer towards the latter, believing that 'a taste for the comforts and conveniences of life will prevent people from marrying under the certainty of being deprived of these advantages', and this would raise the poor from the 'wretchedness' they now experienced. See *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1996 (1803)), p.593.

marriage until they could acquire their share. This motive would over-ride the pain of sexual denial and would happen naturally, rather than coercively, through the personal choice of individuals. Thus Senior:

as a nation advances in opulence, the positive checks are likely to be superseded by the preventive. [...] As wealth increases, what were the luxuries of one generation become the decencies of their successors. Not only a taste for additional comfort and convenience, but a feeling of degradation in their absence becomes more and more widely diffused.<sup>317</sup>

Whilst Senior had acknowledged the motivation for delaying marriage (or prudence) of rising in the social scale, he had laid emphasis on the fear of falling, ‘on an apprehended deficiency of necessaries, decencies, or luxuries’.<sup>318</sup> Later commentators laid greater emphasis on the desire to rise, so that, as Michael Mason has put it, the Malthusian theory of population had come to be glossed as simply ‘the desire of bettering our condition’.<sup>319</sup> One of Malthus’s disciples, The Reverend Chalmers, a popular and influential evangelical divine, who did much work among the poor, summed up the position as follows:

the more we elevate man into a reflective being, and inspire him with self-respect, and give him a demand for larger and more refined accommodations, and, in one word, raise his standard of enjoyment – the more will the important step of marriage become a matter of deliberation and delay. There is the utmost difference, in this respect between the man who is content to live on potatoes, and spend his days in a sordid hovel, and the man who aspires, and, indeed, will not be satisfied without that style of food, and furniture, and dress, which we find generally to obtain among a well-conditioned peasantry. There is a sense of character, as well as a taste for comfort, connected with this habit; and when these become general in a land, there is, of consequence, a most sure and salutary postponement in the average date of marriage.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>317</sup>Nassau William Senior, *Two Lectures on Population* (London: John Murray, 1831), pp.34-35.

<sup>318</sup> Senior, p.10.

<sup>319</sup> Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (Oxford: OUP, 1994), p.281.

<sup>320</sup> Thomas Chalmers, D.D., *On Political Economy in Connexion with the Moral State and Moral Prospects of Society*, 2nd edn (Glasgow: William Collins, 1830), pp.23-25.

The Rev. Richard Jones, Malthus's successor as Professor of Political Economy at the East India College, saw comfort theory operating throughout society, noting the gradation from those with least, who tended to marry earliest, to the aristocracy, who tended to marry latest. Population only increased up to and beyond the level of subsistence when there was an absence of 'secondary wants' (as opposed to 'primary wants' or subsistence) available. Put these within the reach of the poor, through such measures as money wages, free trade, and civil liberties (which allowed upward mobility) and their marriage age would soon increase. In another development away from Malthus, Jones even suggested the possibility of a diminishing sexual drive: 'there are not wanting facts and arguments to show that it diminishes as the minds and imaginations of men are directed to other objects'.<sup>321</sup> Taking it as stationary for the purposes of his argument, however, he nonetheless felt that 'the impulses which lead to its control are not stationary, – they go on increasing in number and joint power as the objects of men's desires increase – as the mass of what may be called their secondary wants increases'.<sup>322</sup> Jones used Malthus's original argument against Godwin, that man was 'a compound being'<sup>323</sup> – 'a tendency imparted by one part of human nature may be by no means the tendency imparted by the whole of human nature'<sup>324</sup> – against him. Whilst Malthus had originally argued that rationality could never supplant sexual desire, Jones argued that nor did sexual desire supplant other impulses which went up to make the man as mixed animal.

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<sup>321</sup> Richard Jones, *Literary Remains, Consisting of Lectures and Tracts on Political Economy, of the late Rev. Richard Jones*, ed. by Rev. William Whewell, D.D. (London: John Murray, 1859), p.470. The lectures were given in the late 1830s.

<sup>322</sup> Richard Jones, p.470.

<sup>323</sup> T. R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, 1st edn (Oxford: OUP, 1993 (1793)), p.104.

<sup>324</sup> Richard Jones, p.470.

But in reasserting the link between luxury and sexual corruption Gaskell sounds a warning note. Carson's behaviour in *Mary Barton* and Greg's vision of the profligate men of the age suggest that the idea of moral restraint was at least partly a sham. Greg's men were being good Malthusians by putting off marriage but were clearly failing to fulfil the injunction to celibacy: their sexual desires were as strong and as indulged as ever. At the same time the poorest members of society were vilified for failing to live up to the ideal of moral restraint and accused of wallowing in licentiousness. The problem of the poor was that they were not desiring enough ('politically *worthless* as having few desires to satisfy',<sup>325</sup> according to James Phillips Kay), or rather that they had not diverted their desires to their proper object in an age of commerce, greater material comforts. Kay was a thoroughgoing Malthusian and comfort theorist. He expressed the issue as a literal choice between sex and stuff, and the abject poor were actively choosing the former, 'denying themselves the comforts of life, in order that they may wallow in the unrestrained licence of animal appetite'. Because they did not want to better themselves they would continue to breed like rabbits: 'Amongst men so situated, the moral check has no influence in preventing the rapid increase of the population'. Kay insisted that 'no modern Rousseau now rhapsodises on the happiness of the state of nature. Moral and physical degradation are inseparable from barbarism'. Commercial society, with its ever changing and increasing 'artificial wants', was the only way to 'elevate the physical condition of every member of the social body'.<sup>326</sup> This re-evaluation of endless desire as an inherently positive thing (an assumption that Gaskell questions) marked a complete reversal of the older, axiomatic link between luxury (as insatiable desire) and corruption.

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<sup>325</sup> James Phillips Kay, p.50.

<sup>326</sup> Kay, pp. 15, 27-28, 48, 52, 47.

In *Mary Barton*, Gaskell explores and partially validates this new dynamics of desire through the positive relationship of the poor with their material comforts or ‘stuff’; a family like the Bartons has clearly been aspirational in this sense. More importantly, however, when bad times come, and the poor’s stuff has gone, Gaskell reasserts the primacy of need over desire, necessity over luxury. Malthus asserted that:

A man who is born into a world already possessed, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents on whom he has a just demand, and if the society do not want his labour, has no claim of *right* to the smallest portion of food, and, in fact, has no business to be where he is.<sup>327</sup>

Gaskell suggests that, on the contrary, when the poor are hungry, the rich, who have an excess of luxuries, should help to feed them. Stressing the poor’s stoicism in their endurance of their cravings, which also contrasts with the lack of control displayed by the wealthier classes in their indulgence of them, she nonetheless warns that endurance has its limits and that violent and even revolutionary consequences may ensue unless the rich bear their share of the burden. Further, and also in opposition to Malthus – ‘he is not to bring beings into the world for whom he cannot find the means of support’<sup>328</sup> – Gaskell shows that the poor have a right to marry and bear children, because human relationships, and not stuff, were ultimately the most important thing in life.

## I

Harry Carson, then, is one of the rising young men of the age. He is involved in his father’s factory business, particularly when it comes to standing up against the demands of the workers (MB 183). At the same time, however, he is spoiled, is surrounded by every luxury, and has ample leisure time, much of which he spends in

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<sup>327</sup>*An Essay on the Principle of Population*, 2nd edn, p.531.

<sup>328</sup>*An Essay on the Principle of Population*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, pp.505-506.

pursuing Mary. Carson's father has risen from humble beginnings, but although Harry has some energy, he is already displaying symptoms of that moral decline which, within the classical dynamics of corruption, emerged in later generations who no longer had, as Austen put it, 'to struggle and endure'. Harry could be the ideal middle-class hero, striving to maintain and improve his wealth whilst practising moral restraint. Indeed, in William Acton's classic discussion of prostitution (1857), he did feel that by that time a form of Malthusian comfort theory was increasingly establishing itself. He remembered a visit to London in 1840 when he had been disturbed by the sexual behaviour of young middle-class men, 'their promiscuous viciousness and constant craving after fresh artificial excitements'.<sup>329</sup> Now he noted the same class of man instead 'girding up his loins for the race of life in which he presses hard upon his betters'.<sup>330</sup> In this somewhat obvious, if possibly unintentional metaphor, Acton captured the essence of comfort theory, as the sex drive was diverted in pursuit of bettering one's material condition. These men were 'fighting their own battle, without assistance, against the flesh'.<sup>331</sup> But Harry Carson is not one of these men. Instead he is one of Acton's men of the 1840s and one of Greg's later profligate men who is delaying marriage whilst also indulging his sexual appetite.

Acton's use of the term 'artificial excitements' in relation to male promiscuity is appropriate. It was also used by Bracebridge Hemyng in his contribution on prostitution to Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* series in reference to the taste of some members of the male social elite for new supplies of

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<sup>329</sup> William Acton, *Prostitution: Considered in its Moral, Social, & Sanitary Aspects, in London and other Large Cities: with Proposals for the Mitigation and Prevention of its Attendant Evils*, 1st edn (London: John Churchill, 1857), p.165.

<sup>330</sup> Acton, p.166.

<sup>331</sup> Acton, p.166.

prostitutes.<sup>332</sup> In terms of the new dynamics of ever changing desire, which drove forward capitalism to everybody's benefit, artificiality was a good thing, as Kay pointed out. Yet this artificiality was meant to apply to the stuff people wanted, or their forms of leisure, or the range and quality of their comestibles, as Thackeray had observed, and not to their sexual appetites. Rather than all this artificiality countering the sexual appetite, then, for observers like Gaskell and Greg, it appeared to encourage it, and not just to encourage it but to render it 'artificial'. In this climate, the temporary expedient of the prostitute's service had become an ongoing preference. If the sexual appetite could be classified in terms of need and desire, necessity and luxury, men's sexual tastes had become depraved, preferring the luxurious or artificial service of the prostitute in contrast to the necessitous and virtuous institution of marriage. It seems inaccurate to describe the prostitute as luxurious given her association with dirt and pollution. After all Esther is one of the 'obscene things of night' (MB 234), the 'abandoned and polluted outcast' (MB 235), and 'hers is the leper-sin, and all stand aloof dreading to be counted unclean' (MB 159). But she is both this and the artificial/luxurious service, the nature of her profession and its association with artificiality being emphasised by her conventional prostitute's garb, her 'artificials' (MB 9).

In a luxurious state of society where men's tastes were considered no longer virtuous, a sympathetic observer like Greg felt the need to recommend that all women become more like prostitutes:

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<sup>332</sup> Bracebridge Hemyng, *Prostitution in London* (1861), in *The London Underworld in the Victorian Period: Authentic First-Person Accounts by Beggars, Thieves and Prostitutes: Henry Mayhew and Others* (New York: Dover Publications, 2005), pp.1-108 (p.69), based on contributions to the *Morning Chronicle*, 1849-50.

the only way in which virtuous women and women of the world can meet and counteract this disposition, is the very opposite to that they have seemed inclined to adopt of late. They must imitate that rival circle in its attractive and not in its repellent features, – in its charms, not in its drawbacks, nor its blots; in its ease and simplicity, not in its boldness or its license of look and speech; in the comparative economy of style which covers so much of its wastefulness, and in the cheerfulness and kindliness of demeanour with redeems or gilds so many of its sins.<sup>333</sup>

This ‘success’ of prostitutes, then, had pulled down the price (their wages, as it were) of all women, as the Irish immigrant workers into Manchester were accused of doing to the native workforce. Greg elides the distinction between prostitutes and non-prostitutes as all women are perceived to be operating in a market for their services. Like the workers in the Malthusian paradigm, women needed to reduce supply (their numbers) in order to increase demand. Of the 1.5 million ‘surplus’<sup>334</sup> women, Greg saw 0.5 million usefully employed in domestic service and another 0.5 million emigrating (demand was greater in the colonies). Only 0.5 million remained to be dealt with, and these would ‘rise in value, be more sought, and better rewarded’. However, Greg felt that the problem of female redundancy would simply disappear, if not be replaced by a deficiency, if moral restraint was not such a fallacy, that is ‘if only through marriage [men] could satisfy their cravings and gratify their passions’, and ‘their sole choice [lay] between marriage and a life of real and not nominal celibacy’.<sup>335</sup>

Gaskell does not show Carson as literally promiscuous, or suggest that he would visit prostitutes. Even if she had envisaged this, it would have been beyond the realms of decency even for her relatively daring pen. But Carson’s attempt to seduce Mary Barton is enough to mark him as one of the profligate men of the age. In essence he

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<sup>333</sup> *Why are Women Redundant?*, p.29.

<sup>334</sup> The Census report of 1851 had recorded a proportion of 100 women to 96 men. See Lynn M. Alexander, *Women, Work, and Representation: Needlewomen in Victorian Art and Literature* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), chapter 1.

<sup>335</sup> *Why are Women Redundant?*, pp.38, 26, 32.



treats Mary like a prostitute because he wants and expects sex without marriage, enough to constitute her as ‘fallen’ if it did happen, and to lead to her potential further degradation to an Esther, once her reputation is lost. When Mary attempts to call off their flirtation, she finds it

a relief to gather that the attachment was of that low despicable kind which can plan to seduce the object of its affection; that the feeling she had caused was shallow enough, for it only pretended to embrace self, at the expense of the misery, the ruin, of one falsely termed beloved.<sup>336</sup>

Although Mary has initially believed his intentions to be honourable (marriage), Carson’s view has been that ‘he must have her, only that he would obtain her as cheaply as he could’ (MB 135). Greg later echoed Gaskell’s sentiment more or less exactly, his profligate men being now ‘prone to seek that [female] society where they can have it on the easiest and cheapest terms’.<sup>337</sup> Carson sees Mary as a relatively easy and cheap option. As someone below him in social station, he assumes that she will not expect marriage and that her morals will be somehow laxer. We know that he has played with the affections of girls of his own class. His sister, Sophy, describes him as “a masculine flirt”, who “hardly knows the misery, the crime, to which indulged vanity may lead him” (MB 203). But it is the working-class Mary who he plans to seduce. As one review of *Mary Barton* put it:

His pursuit of the lowly beauty has not her happiness, but her sacrifice as its aim; his own selfish gratification being the end he has in view. With equal power and truth is the young man’s thoughtless immorality drawn – a portrait of that large number whose morals are only of, and for a class – merely conventional. A rich beauty, or one connected with relations having *station in society*, he would not have thought of approaching otherwise than with honourable offers; but a beauty in humble life might – without any blot on his

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<sup>336</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (London: Penguin, 1996 (1848)), pp.137-8. Subsequent references are parenthesized in the text as MB with the page number.

<sup>337</sup> *Why are Women Redundant?*, p.29.

class-character, detriment to his station, or remorse to his conscience – be made to serve the purpose of his mere animal indulgence.<sup>338</sup>

The idea of Mary as an easy and expendable class target is reinforced by Carson's view of how his father would regard any relationship between them. He tells Sally Leadbitter: "My father would have forgiven any temporary connection, far sooner than my marrying one so far beneath me in rank" (MB 138). Just as Mr Bellingham's mother in *Ruth* blames Ruth for her relationship with Bellingham, pays her off and suggests she enters a female penitentiary,<sup>339</sup> Mary might have served Carson's temporary sexual purpose until he moved on to more marriageable material. Carson does consider, as a momentary impulse, the idea of marriage when Mary first calls things off between them. Now realising that he is unlikely to get what he wants without it, that Mary is not the cheap option he had thought, he considers making a 'sacrifice' of himself (MB 137, 138). If this is the only way to satisfy his desire, he is willing to pay the higher price. But her continued refusal of him makes him angry. Now he must have her but the price he is willing to pay drops: "No; I do not mean to give her up [...] Mind, I don't say I shall offer her the same terms again" (MB 139). Harry sees the relationship with Mary as a transaction, an economic bargain. As she continues to avoid him her price hits rock bottom, as he determines to take what he sees as his right without payment at all; that is, potentially through rape: 'From blandishments he had even gone to threats – threats that whether she would or not she should be his' (MB 174). There is something of madness in Carson's later pursuit of Mary. She acquires a 'hunted look' (MB 156), as 'he beset Mary more than ever. She was weary of her life for him' (MB 174). Like Austen with Henry Crawford, but in a

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<sup>338</sup> William Ellis and Mary Turner Ellis, initialled review (W. E.) of *Mary Barton*, *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review* (April 1849), in *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Angus Easson (London: Routledge, 1991), pp.155-162 (p.158).

<sup>339</sup> See Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth* (Oxford: OUP, 1985 (1853)), p.92.

more extreme form, Gaskell shows a man who has been indulged with every luxury, that is one whose desires have been satisfied and pampered, now facing the prospect of a desire unfulfilled. The Owenite free thinker Charles Southwell blamed the luxury of rich men for their sexual corruption of poorer women, as it literally transformed their sexual appetite into a form of madness: ‘Maddened by luxury, filled with fiery juices and burning with desire, they cover the land with misery and destitution’.<sup>340</sup> The link between luxury and insatiability is apparent. The pampering of the senses in one respect encourages their indulgence in another (the very opposite of comfort theory); the pursuit and satisfaction of the never-ending desires of luxury heightens and intensifies the sexual appetite which in turn becomes crazed and relentless. Southwell’s old luxury rhetoric might sound apocalyptic but the desires of Gaskell’s luxurious men do cause misery and destitution. In *Ruth*, once abandoned by Bellingham, Ruth’s fate is seen as suicide or prostitution (she is saved from both by the Bensons), with death presented as the preferable choice. Shortly after the birth of her son Ruth dreams that instead of being a gift the boy turns out 'a repetition of his father; and, like him, lured some maiden [...] into sin, and left her there to even a worse fate than that of suicide. For Ruth believed there was a worse’.<sup>341</sup> In *Mary Barton* Esther is driven at last to street-walking, and like Ruth, believes that death would be a preferable fate to prostitution. In fear for Mary’s fate, she tells Jem: “‘I suppose it would be murder to kill her, but it would be better for her to die than to live to lead such a life as I do’” (MB 163).

Esther, whose fate, Gaskell stresses, Mary is in danger of repeating, has also been seduced by someone above her in the social scale, an officer. She lives with him

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<sup>340</sup> Charles Southwell, *Essay on Marriage; Addressed to the Lord Bishop of Exeter* (London: E. Roe, 1840), p.17.

<sup>341</sup> *Ruth*, p.120.

happily for three years, and has a child, but the promised marriage – “he promised me marriage. They all do” (MB 161) – never materialises. He is called to Ireland, never to return to her, leaving her with fifty pounds. Interestingly, this sum appeared to be the ‘going rate’ for ‘services rendered’ in such situations, judging from Bracebridge Hemyng’s accounts of prostitution.<sup>342</sup> The situation has been one of mutual affection but nonetheless the officer has satisfied his sexual instincts cheaply (without marriage) for a while, allowing him to move on when his career calls, and Esther has provided this service. In his study of English (particularly Manchester) working-class life, Friedrich Engels had also made the accusation that the career of many prostitutes had begun with a connection with someone of a higher class: ‘How many of them owe it to the seduction of a bourgeois, that they must offer their bodies to the passers-by in order to live?’.<sup>343</sup> The idea that many women began careers as prostitutes because of an initial seduction by a man above them in the social scale was clearly a cultural commonplace – and proved a helpful notion in increasing sympathy for fallen women – even though, as John Tosh points out, there is little evidence to suggest that it really was a common first cause of prostitution.<sup>344</sup>

## II

Gaskell also touched on some of the other commonly believed causes of prostitution, some of them less sympathetic to the woman. One of these was female vanity – a desire for admiration and a susceptibility to flattery – which, manifesting itself in a love of clothes or ‘finery’, presented another connection between luxury and

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<sup>342</sup> See the examples cited in Hemyng, pp.21, 59.

<sup>343</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), p.139. The book was published in Germany in 1844 but not in England until 1892.

<sup>344</sup> See John Tosh, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), chapter 6.

prostitution. Female vanity (or luxury) featured again and again as one of the main, if not the main, causes of prostitution in the many tracts on the subject in this period. William Tait, for example, said that ‘there is not perhaps in the lengthened catalogue of causes of prostitution, [...] one more general or more powerful than ambition for fine dress’.<sup>345</sup> Writers like Tait were usually sympathetic to women who fell, and most pointed up the double standard which lay the blame and shame at the woman's door. Yet the greatest emphasis was laid on the female faults that would lead them to fall. Tait devotes a whole chapter to these faults, before concluding in a couple of sentences only that ‘the male sex are in most instances more deserving of blame than the poor females themselves’.<sup>346</sup> In *Mary Barton*, Mary is already “‘a bit set up with her beauty’” (MB 177), in her admirer, Jem's, words. In being so, she determines on working in the dressmaking trade as the most genteel employment choice open to her:

while a servant must often drudge and be dirty, must be known as his servant by all who visited his master's house, a dressmaker's apprentice must (or so Mary thought) be always dressed with a certain regard to appearances; must never soil her hands, and need never redden or dirty her face with hard labour. (MB 26)

Mary's father approves of her choice, seemingly unaware of the centuries-old proverbial connection between the dressmaking trade and prostitution. But Gaskell's readers would have been aware of this linkage. At Miss Simmonds's, the atmosphere encourages vanity. When the situation between the masters and workers becomes critical, at Miss Simmonds's ‘the chief talk was of fashions, and dress, and parties to be given, for which such and such gowns would be wanted, varied with a slight-whispered interlude occasionally about love and lovers’ (MB 98). The seamstresses are exposed to, though indirectly, and seduced by a lifestyle above their station, a luxurious

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<sup>345</sup> William Tait, *Magdalenism: An Inquiry into the Extent, Causes, and Consequences, of Prostitution in Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: P. Rickard, 1840.), p.87.

<sup>346</sup>Tait, p.204.

lifestyle where no work was involved: 'Mary dwelt upon and enjoyed the idea of some day becoming a lady, and doing all the elegant nothings appertaining to ladyhood' (MB 81).<sup>347</sup>

Mary has been encouraged in this ambition by memories of her aunt Esther's promises to make her a lady one day (MB 10), and 'the old leaven, infused years ago by her aunt Esther, fermented in her little bosom' (MB 81). And Esther has been known for her vanity. Barton tells Wilson: "'You see Esther spent her money in dress, thinking to set off her pretty face; and got to come home so late at night'" (MB 9). Barton had assumed that this vanity and pride – "'Here was Esther so puffed up, that there was no holding her in'" (MB 9) – would lead her to prostitution: "'Says I, 'Esther, I see what you'll end at with your artificials, and your fly-away veils, and stopping out when honest women are in their beds; you'll be a street-walker'" (MB 9). Prostitutes were known for a distinct style of dress, and Esther for a while has been known as the 'Butterfly, from the gaiety of her dress a year or two ago' (MB 390). When Barton regrets his harsh words to Esther, he goes searching for her, trying to identify her by 'peering under every fantastic, discreditable bonnet' (MB 127). Gaskell was not above a liking for dress herself, though she did instruct her eldest daughter when buying a new winter bonnet to 'get a *thoroughly good one of its kind*, no make-shifts or pretences – I don't want any finery'.<sup>348</sup>

Mary believes that her beauty is the asset that will help her fulfil her ambition: 'she had early determined that her beauty should make her a lady' (MB 26). She is chastised by Gaskell for this, yet she is only making the connection that the world

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<sup>347</sup> Gaskell again shares Austen's contempt for the do-nothing lady, the 'elegant nothings' here echoing the life of Elizabeth Eliot in *Persuasion*: 'the sameness and the elegance, the prosperity and the nothingness, of her scene of life'. See *Persuasion*, p.9.

<sup>348</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. by J. A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Mandolin, 1997), p.208 (15 November 1852).

around her makes, that her body will be her fortune. When Barton goes out to seek a position for Mary, he is unsuccessful because he cannot afford to pay the high premium required to secure her a place, but 'he would have been indignant, indeed, had he known that, if Mary had accompanied him, the case might have been rather different, as her beauty would have made her desirable as a show-woman' (MB 27). The connection between the dressmaking trade and prostitution is again emphasised in that Mary's body, clothed in the dressmaker's latest designs, would seem to become an object of sale. Unconsciously, Mary is simply fitting herself into Greg's prostitute paradigm, and aiming to sell herself to the highest bidder, swapping her body for luxury. Beautiful women like Mary were considered to be exposed to especial danger outside the safety of the home. As John Barton says of Esther, "Not but what beauty is a sad snare" (MB 9). So much so that beauty as a quality in itself could be perceived as almost akin to whoredom. Barton sees Mary's potential fate in her body: 'He often looked at Mary, and wished she were not so like her aunt, for the very bodily likeness seemed to suggest the possibility of a similar likeness in their fate' (MB 127). At their first meeting, the kindly Mrs Sturgiss in Liverpool is suspicious as to Mary's character: "'Perhaps' [...] thou'rt a bad one; I almost misdoubt thee, thou'rt so pretty'" (MB 313). Mrs Wilson blames Mary for Jem's predicament, saying: "'thou bad hussy, with thy great blue eyes and yellow hair, to lead men on to ruin? Out upon thee with thy angel's face, thou whited sepulchre!'" (MB 226) That is, Mary's beautiful exterior hides the filth within, in the biblical words: 'like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness' (Matthew 23. 27). Mary's potential dirt is like the 'monster's hideous tail' (VF 747) of Thackeray's Becky Sharp, which beneath the waters is 'diabolically hideous and slimy, flapping amongst bones, or curling round corpses' (VF 747); or

Jemima's image of Ruth, in *Ruth*, in her initial shock and horror at the discovery of Ruth's fallen status:

The diver, leaving the green sward, smooth and known, where his friends stand with their familiar smiling faces, admiring his glad bravery – the diver, down in an instant in the horrid depths of the sea, close to some strange, ghastly, lidless-eyed monster, can hardly more feel his blood curdle at the near terror than did Jemima now.<sup>349</sup>

Mrs Wilson is not the only one to blame Mary for Jem's situation. Mr Bridgenorth, Jem's lawyer, tells Job: "I asked him if he was guilty [...], I said I understood he had had provocation enough, inasmuch as I heard that the girl was very lovely" (MB 301); and Job tells Mary:

"maybe thou may do him a bit o'good, for when they set eyes on thee, they'll see fast enough how he came to be so led away by jealousy; for thou'rt a pretty creature, Mary, and one look at they face will let 'em into th' secret of a young man's madness, and make 'em more ready to pass it over". (MB 257)

The world, then, puts a high price on beauty (which it prizes and blames), and Mary, knowing this, attempts to use it to 'better her condition', something she will later regret: 'why did she ever listen to the tempter? Why did she ever give her ear to her own suggestions, and cravings after wealth and grandeur? Why had she thought it a fine thing to have a rich lover?' (MB 230). Her feelings for Carson are artificial, like the luxury she craves; he is 'a lover, not beloved, but favoured by fancy' (MB 43), and 'her love for him was a bubble blown out of vanity; [though] it looked very real and very bright' (MB 116).

In addition to its encouragement of vanity, Gaskell shows how the exhausting work involved in the dressmaking trade could lead girls into temptation. Miss Simmons is not seen as an unusually cruel taskmaster, but Mary's days are typically long (starting at 6am in the summer) and she must stay until the work is done. The

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<sup>349</sup> *Ruth*, p.323.



long hours and monotony of the job make Mary and girls like her more susceptible to danger because they are more in need of a change and a rest, as Esther notes: “it’s a bad life for a girl to be out late at night in the streets, and after many an hour of weary work, they’re ready to follow after any novelty that makes a little change” (MB 162-163). Mary makes the same connection when looking back at her flirtation with Carson: ‘Oh! How she loathed the recollection of the hot summer evening, when, worn out by stitching and sewing, she had loitered homewards with weary languor, and first listened to the voice of the tempter’ (MB 157). Mary is also exposed to bold companions who might lead her astray: Sally Leadbitter encourages the relationship with Carson and plots with him for its continuance, much against Mary’s wishes.

Barton may be unaware of the proverbial risks to which girls and women were exposed when working in the dressmaking industry, but he is aware of the potentially dangerous factory environment: “My Mary shall never work in a factory, that I’m determined on” (MB 9). Engels was one of many who saw a host of dangers to women working in this field, including risk of seduction by fellow workers or masters, speedier or arrested sexual development and fertility problems (due to factory conditions such as the excessive heat and cramped positions the workers had to adopt).<sup>350</sup> Factory pay was also seen as relatively high – at least in good times – compared to other professions, almost too high for women. Because, according to Barton, “They can earn so much when work is plenty, that they can maintain themselves anyhow” (MB 9), they became too independent and bold to be controlled, as happens to Esther.

Whatever the specific dangers associated with specific jobs for women, the question of female employment (away from the private sphere) in itself was highly

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<sup>350</sup> See Engels, chapter 6.

controversial. In *Mary Barton*, Gaskell points to a perceived female neglect of home and family, as Mrs Wilson and Alice believe that women “oughtn’t to go at [out to work] after they’re married” (MB 121), because husband, home and children were neglected, forcing husbands into “gin-shops, where all is clean and bright, and where th’ fire blazes cheerily, and gives a man a welcome as it were” (MB 121). But most lower-class women, whether married or single, had little choice in the matter. Critics of women working away from the home blamed the relentless demands of the market and the ‘demon of political economy’.<sup>351</sup> In their thirst for wealth, employers drove down labour costs as far as possible, and the employment of women and children, who could be paid less than men, was one way to do this. We know that Greg thought that the purpose (marriage) of many women of the higher classes was being thwarted in an age of luxury, as men put off the expensive business of marriage and found cheaper and more convenient solutions, which encouraged prostitution. William Acton noted the same disruption of a woman’s telos in the lower classes, whose ‘diversion by capital from their natural functions to its own uses, is a curse to both sexes and an hindrance of the purposes of our Creator’.<sup>352</sup> Working-class women can thus be read as trapped in a double bind. The world of work took them away from their natural function, and at the same time exposed them to the risk of becoming the kind of woman, the prostitute, who hindered other women from fulfilling their function. Acton believed that women’s cheap labour forced down the price of all labour, which was further pushed down by technological developments. Prostitution became the only way that some women could make ends meet:

No more impious *coup d'etat* of Mammon could be devised than that grinding down against one another of the sexes intended by their Maker for mutual

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<sup>351</sup> Acton, p.182.

<sup>352</sup> Acton, p.183.

support and comfort. Free-trade in female honour follows hard upon that in female labour; the wages of working men, wherever they compete with female labour, are lowered by the flood of cheap and agile hands, until marriage and a family are an almost impossible luxury or a misery. The earnings of man's unfortunate competitor are in their turn driven down by machinery until inadequate to support her life. The economist, as he turns the screw of torture, points complacently to this farther illustration of the law of trade; the moralist pointing out how inexorable is the command to labour, too seldom and too late arrests the torture. He only cries enough when the famished worker, wearied of the useless struggle against capital, too honest yet to steal, too proud yet to put up useless prayers for nominal relief at the hands of the community, and having sold even to the last but one of her possessions, takes virtue itself to the market.<sup>353</sup>

Although Acton dismisses the idea of high factory wages, it was generally acknowledged by all that the dressmaking trade was poorly paid, especially in the guise of piece or 'slop' work, and women were thought to be driven to prostitution in order to eke out their pitiful living. Thus James Beard Talbot, another commentator on prostitution:

thousands of females, dress-makers, seamstresses, &c. are labouring for fourteen and fifteen hours per day at the trifling remuneration of 3s., 4s., and 5s. per week, with no other dependence. Might I not ask, and ask with confidence, whether this is not a premium to vice? Is it possible that these females can exist honestly, and creditably, and virtuously, upon so paltry a pittance? [...]; prostitution, therefore, presents, for the time being, the most ready means to supply their necessities, and they become prostitutes.<sup>354</sup>

The 'part-time' prostitute was a feature of much of the commentary on prostitution of the period. In the trope of famine and fashion – another connection between luxury and prostitution – the focus turned to the vanity of the greedy female consumer, who had to have her luxury at any human price, just as the early campaigns against sugar and the slave trade had done.<sup>355</sup> In *Mary Barton* Gaskell does not dwell on the rapacity of

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<sup>353</sup> Acton, p.183.

<sup>354</sup> James Beard Talbot, *The Miseries of Prostitution* (London: James Madden & Co, 1844), p.26.

<sup>355</sup> For an extensive study of representations of the Victorian seamstress, including the sexual danger to which she was seen to be exposed, see Lynn M. Alexander, *Women, Work, and Representation: Needlewomen in Victorian Art and Literature*.

customers, though it is clearly the unspoken background of the long hours, low pay, dressmaking environment. In *Ruth* she is more explicit, as Ruth has to mend the dress of the impatient and contemptuous Miss Duncombe, ‘a flippant, bright, artificial girl who sat to be served with an air as haughty as a queen on her throne’.<sup>356</sup> Mary Barton’s pay is very low: she has to work for two years without any payment, then afterwards gets ‘a *very small* [salary], divisible into a minute weekly pittance’ (MB 27), but with the additional benefit of meals provided, which are essential for Mary and the Barton household when desperate times come.

Indeed, it was poverty that was the ultimate threat to female virtue for Gaskell, and this conclusion is borne out by the available historical evidence.<sup>357</sup> Though she highlights Mary’s flaws, she is ultimately sympathetic to her creation because she appreciates the terrible suffering involved in a life of material destitution. Mary is not really luxurious, with deep-seated mercenary motives, looking to transact a ‘deliberate exchange of innocence for luxury and show’, as Greg put it in a piece on prostitution.<sup>358</sup>

Carson is an escape from suffering:

Her mind wandered over the present distress, and then settled, as she stitched, on the visions of the future, where yet her thoughts dwelt more on the circumstances of ease, and the pomps and vanities awaiting her, than on the lover with whom she was to share them. (MB 116)

Mary eventually realizes this herself:

Jem was a poor mechanic [...] while Mr Carson was rich, and prosperous, and gay, and (she believed) would place her in all circumstances of ease and luxury, where want could never come. What were these hollow vanities to her, now she had discovered the passionate secret of her soul. She felt as if she almost hated Mr Carson, who had decoyed her with his baubles. She now saw how vain,

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<sup>356</sup> *Ruth*, p.15.

<sup>357</sup> See Tosh, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (chapter 6).

<sup>358</sup> W. R. Greg, ‘Prostitution’, *Westminster Review*, July 1850, Vol. 53, pp.448-56 (p.456).

how nothing to her, would be all gaieties and pomps, all joys and pleasures, unless she might share them with Jem. (MB 131-2)

Sally Leadbitter plays on Mary's poverty-stricken situation to encourage Carson. She

has keenly observed the signs of the times; she found out that Mary had begun to affix a stern value to money as the 'Purchaser of Life' [...] So she urged young Mr Carson, by representations of the want she was sure surrounded Mary, to bring matters more to a point. (MB 116)

Gaskell also shows that Mary's yearnings for material comfort are partly unselfish: 'the best of her plans, the holiest, that which in some measure redeemed the vanity of the rest, were those relating to her father [...] how she would surround him with every comfort she could devise' (MB 81). And she imagines them 'liv[ing] in a grand house, where her father should have newspapers, and pamphlets, and pipes, and meat dinners, every day, – and all day long if he liked' (MB 80).

Esther is finally driven to street-walking through desperate want, and not for herself, but for her sick child: "I could not bear to see her suffer [...]–oh, her moans, her moans, which money could give the means of relieving!" (MB 162). Despite her presentation of Esther's flaws, Gaskell took a typical Magdalenist approach to the prostitute, that is the sympathetic view that many prostitutes fell through no fault of their own, were reclaimable and would be forgiven by God if they truly repented. The Magdalenist approach challenged the older stereotype of the bold, licentious woman, naturally corrupt, who took pleasure in being a whore. This new stereotype saw women as particularly susceptible to seduction because of their selfless womanly dispositions, their 'strange and sublime unselfishness',<sup>359</sup> as Greg put it, which would lead them to give the man they loved what he wanted even against their natural inclinations. Once fallen, this disposition would lead them to the utmost extremity, prostitution, in order to provide for others, usually children, rather than themselves, as

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<sup>359</sup> Greg, 'Prostitution', p.459.

Gaskell shows with Esther, whose ‘loving and unselfish disposition’ (MB 238) Mary remembers from her childhood. In ‘Prostitution’ Greg referred to *Mary Barton* and cited Esther as ‘a faithful picture of the feelings of thousands of these poor wretches’.<sup>360</sup>

### III

Whilst Gaskell shows that the luxury of rich men can lead to their becoming sexually corrupted and corrupting, in contrast she presents poor men, in *Mary Barton* and in her work generally, as sexually virtuous, seeking and maintaining the only virtuous sexual attachment, marriage. She shows working-class men in *Mary Barton* deliberately shunning the prostitute. When Esther tries to talk to John Barton he notices immediately that she is a woman ‘of no doubtful profession’ (MB 124), and because of this ‘swore an oath, and bade her begone’ (MB 124). When she perseveres, he says to her: “I tell thee I’m not the man for thee”, adding an opprobrious name’ (MB 124). Esther then seeks Jem’s help, and waiting for him near the foundry in which he works is clearly exposed to ‘insult or curse’ (MB 159) from some of the departing workmen. Jem, too, shuns her, and when she lays her hand on his arm, ‘as she expected, after a momentary glance at the person who thus endeavoured to detain him, he made an effort to shake it off, and pass on’ (MB 159). Again she perseveres, and Jem tells her, “Go away, missus; I’ve nought to do with you, either in hearkening or talking” (MB 160), only paying attention when Mary’s name is mentioned.

As discussed above, this depiction of poverty alongside sexual virtue challenges much social commentary of the period, which subscribed to the terms of comfort

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<sup>360</sup> Greg, ‘Prostitution’, p.454. Greg later thought that Gaskell got the balance wrong in *Ruth*, with her heroine’s atonement being too severe for one so apparently pure, if fallen. See unsigned article, *National Review* (January 1859), in *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Easson, pp.319-329 (p.328). For a more complex contemporary view of the prostitute, see Hemyng, *Prostitution in London*.

theory, in which a link became established between a lack of material possessions (and an apparent lack of aspiration for them) and sexual vice. One might here draw a distinction between the abject poor and the more comfortable and ‘respectable’ poor. Kay, in a typically early Victorian stereotyping of the Irish, blamed the latter for pulling down all the poor to the level of the savage: ‘Instructed in the fatal secret of subsisting on what is barely necessary to life, the labouring classes have ceased to entertain a laudable pride in furnishing their houses, and in multiplying the decent comforts which minister to happiness’.<sup>361</sup> Harriet Martineau, the great populariser of political economy for the poor, chastises the Irish family, the O’Rory’s, in *Weal and Woe in Garveloch* for, in Ella’s words, being “content with destitution, when they might have comfort”.<sup>362</sup> Lazy and content to live on potatoes (as Chalmers had suggested), they pull their neighbours down with them. It could be said that Gaskell’s protagonists are typically respectable working class who have not yet been corrupted to this level. Yet her working-class characters go through comparative extremes of wealth and poverty and remain sexually virtuous (with the proviso that a poor, beautiful woman is in danger of falling into prostitution, but she is a victim). The Davenports, for example, are respectable. Davenport is a serious Methodist, and has been a “steady, civil-spoken fellow” (MB 65) who worked at Carson’s factory for three years before the fire destroyed it. Yet the family end up living in the most squalid accommodation in Manchester.

The Bartons also end up living in squalor, though it is not as bad as the Davenports’ situation. Mr Carson is shocked by the ‘grinding squalid misery’ (MB 370) he finds in the Barton home in its lowest state, which contrasts with the ‘honest,

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<sup>361</sup> James Phillips Kay, p.7

<sup>362</sup> Harriet Martineau, ‘Weal and Woe in Garveloch’, in *Illustrations of Political Economy*, 9 vols (London: Charles Fox, 1834), II, (p.24).

decent poverty' (MB 370) of his own childhood. Yet the Bartons have clearly not been lacking in aspiration. In chapter 2 of the novel, 'A Manchester Tea-Party', the Bartons take great pride in entertaining their friends the Wilsons. Gaskell carefully iterates the 'many conveniences' (MB 15) that their home contains, a home which 'seemed almost crammed with furniture' (MB 15). As Daniel Miller postulates, their material possessions clearly enhance their lives, and they have participated in the spread of comforts and luxuries, in their small way, in the new civilization: 'it was evident Mrs Barton was proud of her crockery and glass, for she left her cupboard door open, with a glance round of satisfaction and pleasure' (MB 15). Esther, as a fallen woman, places great emphasis on a respectable home. Situating herself within the comfort theory dynamic she sees herself as the lowest of the sexual low and therefore as undeserving of a home: "'do you think one sunk so low as I am has a home? Decent, good people have homes'" (MB 164). Jem makes the same connection to Mary: "'Your poor aunt Esther has no home: she's one of them miserable creatures that walk the streets'" (MB 390). Esther's final accommodation is one of the 'low lodging-house[s]' (MB 390) that horrified commentators of the day,<sup>363</sup> which was 'a large garret where twenty or thirty people of all ages and both sexes lay and dozed away the day, choosing the evening and night for their trades of beggary, thieving, or prostitution' (MB 390). As she approaches death and can no longer afford even this sort of shelter, Esther imagines herself in no building at all, being in the countryside and able to 'steal aside and die in a copse, or a clough, like the wild animals' (MB 391).

One might, too, associate John Barton's moral demise with the increasing sparsity of his home and personal appearance. Barton loses his sense of himself along with his stuff, as does Mr Sedley in *Vanity Fair* to a lesser extreme. The Bartons and

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<sup>363</sup> For example, Edwin Chadwick, who devotes a separate section to them at the end of his *Report on The Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Gt. Britain* (1842).



all of the poor rely on the pawn shop to get by in hard times. When the home is full it is a 'sure sign of good times among the mills' (MB 15), and when hard times come to the Bartons, 'by degrees the house was stripped of all its little ornaments' (MB 115) in order to pay for 'the far sterner necessity of food' (MB 115). In *North and South* Mr Hale is bewildered by this pawn shop economy amongst the working classes:

"I hardly know as yet how to compare one of these houses with our Helstone cottages. I see furniture here which our labourers would never have thought of buying, and food commonly used which they would consider luxuries; yet for these very families there seems no other resource, now that their weekly wages are stopped, but the pawn-shop".<sup>364</sup>

Mr Hale is less judgmental and condemnatory about the pawn-shop economy than were many real-life middle-class commentators, who thought that it demonstrated the typical fecklessness, improvidence and inability to manage of the working classes. Temperance campaigners were one disapproving group who thought that necessities were pawned to get money for drink.

Yet in spite of disapproving attitudes, use of the pawn shop actually fitted, at the micro level, within the comfort theory paradigm. Senior saw a luxurious age as the best safeguard against absolute want because comforts and luxuries could be curtailed when necessary, whereas loss of necessities signaled immediate starvation.<sup>365</sup> Indeed, as Melanie Tebbutt points out in her history of working-class credit, use of the pawn shop can be seen as 'the Mirror Image of Saving'.<sup>366</sup> Embracing consumer society, the poorer classes invested in material goods when money allowed, which included items perceived as luxury objects such as furniture and ornaments. These were seen as investments, as the items could then be pawned as the need arose. In a description of a

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<sup>364</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (London: Penguin, 2006 (1855)), p.210.

<sup>365</sup> See Senior, p.33.

<sup>366</sup> Melanie Tebbutt, *Making Ends Meet: Pawnbroking and Working-Class Credit* (Leicester: Leicester University Press; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), p.11.

London pawnshop in an 1851 article, 'My Uncle', for *Household Words*, Dickens described a bricklayer's labourer, who:

although without money, [...] is not without means. He has a coat. [...] In like manner, Mrs Lavers, the char-woman, is short of shillings; but she has a fender; so, her neighbor the washerwoman, has no money at all, but is, thanks to My Uncle, a capitalist while she possesses a flat-iron.<sup>367</sup>

When buying sales goods it was usual for the poor to ask how much they would be worth if pawned, and this influenced their choice of goods. Dickens again:

poor people, in buying articles of sale from that part of My Uncle's mansion in which such things are displayed, habitually ask what such a thing would fetch if it were offered in pawn; and frequently confess that they are influenced in their choice by their "handiness" in that regard. How this strange forethought is conspicuous in costermongers and fishwomen; the former often wearing great squab broaches as convenient pledges, and the latter massive silver rings.<sup>368</sup>

They clearly took comfort and trusted in the materiality or 'thingness' of things, which gave them both pleasure and security. As Tebbutt puts it: 'rather than standing idle in a savings account, money invested in material goods provided immediate enjoyment while being easily realizable'(p.17). Traditionally hostile to establishment institutions, and despite the sometimes astronomical interest charges incurred, the poorer classes also felt comfortable with the pawn shop, especially if it had built up local relationships after a number of years in business. Although recourse to the pawn shop could be a cause of great shame to some, to others a bundle of pledging tickets would be displayed with pride, since it showed that their possessor owned material goods (Tebbutt, p.116). Dickens thought that 'It is a fair question whether My Uncle be not, to some striving people, a real convenience and an absolute necessity', and the political economist, J. R. McCulloch, agreed. Although the system was open to abuse, the poor would always need to borrow, and better through a licensed pawnbroker than an unlicensed

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<sup>367</sup> 'My Uncle', *Household Words*, 6 December 1851, Vol. IV, pp.241-246 (pp.242-3).

<sup>368</sup> 'My Uncle', p.245.

moneylender. McCulloch also noted the ‘forethought’ involved in the process that Dickens had observed: ‘it would seem as if the desire to redeem property in pawn would be one of the most powerful motives to industry and economy’.<sup>369</sup>

But however many things the working classes owned, starvation could still come. Joseph Adshead, in his report on the distress in Manchester in 1840 to 1842, gave a detailed account of the pledging system and, like Gaskell, noted that it was necessities, not comforts, which eventually had to be traded: ‘article after article of extreme necessity was parted with, in order to meet a necessity still more rigorous – that of providing a morsel of food to avoid death from actual starvation’.<sup>370</sup> Gaskell, like many middle-class commentators, partly blamed the poor for improvidence, though not nearly enough for some critics of the novel. Greg, in his review of the novel, was one of these, though he admired its literary merit and sympathised with the poor in many respects.<sup>371</sup> For Gaskell the causes of want were far more complex, were indeed bewildering. Referring to the ‘terrible years 1839, 1840, 1841’ (MB 84) she notes:

Even philanthropists who had studied the subject, were forced to own themselves perplexed in their endeavour to ascertain the real causes of the misery; the whole matter was of so complicated a nature, that it became next to impossible to understand it thoroughly. (MB 84-85)

Gaskell would have read the reports of Manchester's Domestic Mission (to the poor), of which her husband was secretary throughout the 1840s, and John Seed sees *Mary Barton* as reflecting the ambivalence towards the poor that came out of these

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<sup>369</sup> J. R. McCulloch, *A Dictionary Practical, Theoretical, and Historical of Commerce and Commercial Navigation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, ed. by Hugh G. Reid (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1875), pp.1041-1044 (p.1042).

<sup>370</sup> Joseph Adshead, *Distress in Manchester: Evidence of the State of the Labouring Classes in 1840-42* (London: Henry Hooper, 1842), p.20.

<sup>371</sup> See Greg's unsigned review of *Mary Barton*, the *Edinburgh Review* (April 1849), in *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Easson, pp. 163-187.

eyewitness reports, with an increasing sense emerging that the poor might not always be to blame for their condition, and could not be reformed into comfort, but that the situation was of far more 'complicated a nature'.<sup>372</sup> Like Mr Hale Gaskell sees aspiration still result in appalling poverty.

Indeed, the pawnshop economy mirrored the wider, national, and even international economy, and specifically the vicissitudes of the cotton trade, from which Manchester became such a commercial powerhouse. An 1870 breakdown of pawnbroking licences showed that the greatest density of licences per county lay in Lancashire (the trade is more difficult to quantify in the early years of the nineteenth century, when there was considerable licence evasion and a substantial but undocumented illicit sector) (see Tebbutt, p.2). Although the pawn industry in many ways profited from other people's economic misfortunes, it could also suffer in bad times since not only could the hard-up not afford to redeem their pledges, but there was no market for the sale of forfeited pledges. In W. Cooke Taylor's *Notes of a Tour in the Manufacturing Districts of Lancashire* (1842), he cited the pawnbrokers' complaints:

During the whole of this melancholy tour I found no class of men in business complain more loudly of the pressure of the times than the pawnbrokers. They had gone on advancing loans on pledges, until they had nearly, and in some cases quite, exhausted their capital; and they then found themselves unable to procure a sale for their unredeemed pledges.<sup>373</sup>

As D. A. Farnie discusses in *The English Cotton Industry and the World Market* (1979), one of the reasons that the English cotton industry was susceptible to severe fluctuations was because of its dependence on America as the source of raw cotton,

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<sup>372</sup> See John Seed, 'Unitarianism, Political Economy and the Antinomies of Liberal Culture in Manchester, 1830-50', *Social History*, 7 (1982), 1-25.

<sup>373</sup> W. Cooke Taylor, *Notes of a Tour in the Manufacturing Districts of Lancashire; in a Series of Letters to His Grace The Archbishop of Dublin*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Duncan and Malcolm, 1842), p. 175.

which it needed to manufacture the yarn and cotton products which were exported worldwide to such profits. Although Britain attempted to nurse up other sources of supply, America remained dominant, and so the English cotton industry remained mostly reliant on the unpredictable harvest of another continent. This situation made the cotton market extremely speculative. The workers were thus compelled to share the burden of regular market fluctuations and cyclical depressions, which at best put downward pressure on wages and at worst created mass unemployment.<sup>374</sup>

#### IV

However, Malthusians thought that the suffering poor wrought their own woe; it was not sensible or moral to marry and breed on a precarious material maintenance. Although Malthus's critics charged him with cruelty, he genuinely believed that the most humane long-term method to improve their condition was for the poor to reduce their numbers (thereby increasing the market price of their labour) and learn self-reliance. In William Thornton's work on over-population, he defended Malthus and said that it was right that the poor were targeted, since it was they, and not the rich, who were responsible for the problem (he subscribed to Richard Jones's view that levels of reproduction diminished as incomes rose).<sup>375</sup> The poor 'had no more right than the rich to indulge in luxuries which they cannot afford, and [...] it is decidedly immoral to bring children into the world to starve'.<sup>376</sup> John Barton himself wonders about the starving children of the poor, who "'ask us with their eyes why we brought 'em into th' world to suffer?'" (MB 187). And in reference to her 'scapegrace' brother, Tom, and

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<sup>374</sup> See D. A. Farnie, *The English Cotton Industry and the World Market* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp.86-87.

<sup>375</sup> See William Thornton, *Over-population and its Remedy; or, an Inquiry into the Extent and Causes of the Distress Prevailing among the Labouring Classes of the British Islands* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1846), p.387.

<sup>376</sup> William Thornton, p.269.

his large family, old Alice comments: “‘I think scapegraces are always married long before steady folk’” (MB 34). In *North and South*, too, it is hinted that the problems of the improvident Bouchers have partly been caused by their large number of children. Bessy Higgins tells Margaret: “‘Yo’ see, Boucher’s been pulled down wi’ his childer’”.<sup>377</sup> Greg’s response to the problems raised in *Mary Barton* was to suggest that the poor should marry later (at aged 28 rather than 20),<sup>378</sup> even though he would go on to establish late marriage amongst the wealthier classes as one of the main causes of prostitution.

But ultimately Gaskell’s poor have as much right to get married and breed as anyone else. Material possessions might be as important to them as for the higher classes, but the most important thing is human relationships. When the stuff is gone, which seems to be an inevitable result of trade flows and other complicating factors rather than merely the fecklessness of the poor, this is all they have left. The poor might have been encouraged to choose stuff over sex, but there was a strong possibility they would end up with neither, neither material comfort nor the comfort of human relationships to share their burdens in difficult times. Barton’s material decline might mirror his moral one but it is not the cause. The trigger for this is in fact the death of his wife: ‘One of the good influences over John Barton’s life had departed that night. One of the ties which bound him down to the gentle humanities of earth was loosened, and henceforward the neighbours all remarked he was a changed man’ (MB 23). Esther, as a sexual outcast, might consider herself undeserving of a home but the idea of it is not just associated with material comfort: ‘how she would work, and toil, and starve, and die, if necessary, for a husband, a home – for children’ (MB 236). The

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<sup>377</sup> *North and South*, p.207.

<sup>378</sup> unsigned review of *Mary Barton*, *Edinburgh Review* (April 1849), in *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 163-187 (p.178).

squalor that shocks Mr Carson is comforting to Esther because of its family associations: 'she must leave the old dwelling-place, whose very walls, and flags, dingy and sordid as they were, had a charm for her. Must leave the abode of poverty, for the more terrible abodes of vice' (MB 241). Tebbutt presents some evidence that working-class voluntary thrift was related to family life and responsibilities. The unattached might show little interest in saving for themselves, but would readily do so in the service of relatives.<sup>379</sup> It seems that in Miller's mutual – and beneficial – constitution of subject and object, it was a human subject that triggered the dialectical relationship.

Gaskell shows poor men as tender and capable fathers, with children and love of family at the core of working class life. At the opening of the novel, the workers and their families are taking a walk in Green Heys Fields in the spring weather:

Here and there came a sober quiet couple, either whispering lovers, or husband and wife, as the case might be; and if the latter, they were seldom unencumbered by an infant, carried for the most part by the father, while occasionally even three or four little toddlers had been carried or dragged thus far, in order that the whole family might enjoy the delicious May afternoon together. (MB 7)

The Bartons and Wilsons are just such sober couples, with Mrs Barton being heavily pregnant and Mr Wilson and Mrs Wilson each carrying one of their twin babies in their arms. For the anti-Malthusian William Cobbett, this kind of family picture represented the purpose of life. Not only was the sexual instinct natural and God-given but, satisfied virtuously through marriage, created a union that was the principal comfort of the poor's existence:

talk as long as Parson MALTHUS likes about "moral *restraint*"; and report as long as the Committees of Parliament please about preventing "*premature* and

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<sup>379</sup> See Tebbutt, p.16. Tebbutt quotes from M.E. Loane's *From their Point of View* (1908); Loane was a district nurse working in an unspecified, but well known, town in the late nineteenth century.

*improvident* marriages" amongst the labouring classes, the passion that they would *restrain*, while it is necessary to the existence of mankind, is the greatest of all the compensations for the inevitable cares, troubles, hardships, and sorrows of life; and, as to the *marriages*, if they could once be rendered universally *provident*, every generous sentiment would quickly be banished from the world.<sup>380</sup>

Gaskell mildly echoed this sentiment in her description of the marriage of the Gaskells' friends, William Shaen and Emily Winkworth:

The young couple will be *very* poor, and helping them to plan has been a great interest; and I like their way of bravely facing poverty in order to be together, instead of waiting till they can set off in style.<sup>381</sup>

Admittedly their poverty would hardly come near the abject suffering described in *Mary Barton*. Nonetheless, she appreciates the value of marriage as mutual support as opposed to succumbing to the luxury of the age, and waiting to 'set off in style'. Her words also echo Wardlaw's, who was a great advocate of early marriage, despite the Malthusian tendencies of the age: 'Even should their outset in conjugal life be somewhat stinted, how much better a little mutual self-denial, than that cold calculating celibacy, which is ever looking forward to some distant stylish starting-point'.<sup>382</sup>

In acquiring their material comforts, the poor had shown themselves to be willing participants in the civilizing project, in the desire to better their condition, but in continuing to mate at the same time they had only been behaving in the same manner as the rich. Both groups could not live up to the ideal of moral restraint. In continuing to choose marriage, the poor were at least satisfying the natural sexual instinct virtuously. Anti-Malthusians felt that to deny the possibility of marriage, and indeed to stigmatise it as a cause of evil, was blasphemous. Thus Cobbett: 'Perhaps any thing so directly *atheistical* was never before openly avowed. This is, at once, to put man upon a level

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<sup>380</sup> William Cobbett, *Advice to Young Men, and (incidentally) to Young Women, in Middle and Higher Ranks of Life* (London: the author, 1829), 'Letter III. To a Lover', pp.6-7.

<sup>381</sup> *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. by Chapple, p.160 (1 September 1851).

<sup>382</sup> Wardlaw, p.91.



with the beasts of the field. It sets all the laws and commands of God at defiance'.<sup>383</sup> Equally Cobbett felt that the sexual urge was so strong that it would always seek an outlet, and that to remove the outlet of marriage would result in horrific moral consequences:

What limits would there be to that promiscuous intercourse, to which the sexes would constantly be impelled by a passion implanted by nature in the breast of every living creature, most amiable in itself, and far too strong to be subdued by any apprehensions to which the human heart is liable?<sup>384</sup>

The result would be the plunging of a 'whole community into the miseries of debauchery and prostitution, depriving children of the care and protection due from parents, and making a people what a herd of beasts now is'.<sup>385</sup> Cobbett repeatedly stresses, then, that humans would become like animals if they could not marry, rather than their marriage and breeding being somehow a symptom of their animality. The worlds that Gaskell depicts haven't quite reached the pitch that Cobbett predicted. However, in *Mary Barton*, when Mary rejects Jem's first marriage proposal he paints a bleak picture of the results: "'Mary, you'll hear, maybe, of me as a drunkard, and maybe as a thief, and maybe as a murderer'" (MB 130). Jem's potential fate mirrors that of Richard's potential fate in Dickens's anti-Malthusian Christmas tale, *The Chimes*. Richard takes to heart the doctrine of the Malthusian philosophers, calls off his marriage to Meg, and takes to "'drinking, idling, bad companions: all the fine resources that were to be so much better for him than the Home he might have had'".<sup>386</sup>

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<sup>383</sup> William Cobbett, 'The Sin of Forbidding Marriage', in *Twelve Sermons* (London: the author, 1828), pp.197-213 (p.199).

<sup>384</sup> 'The Sin of Forbidding Marriage', p.210.

<sup>385</sup> 'The Sin of Forbidding Marriage', pp.200-201.

<sup>386</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Chimes* (1844), in *Charles Dickens: The Christmas Books*, ed. by Sally Ledger and Michael Slater (London: J. M. Dent; Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle, 1999), pp. 87-177 (p.164).

Cobbett's vision of the strength of the sex drive actually resonates with Malthus's thinking in the first edition of his essay, which was seen by some critics to draw an analogy between lust and hunger, that is between the strength of the two drives. Thus William Hazlitt: 'he sets down, first, hunger, second, the sexual appetite, as two co-ordinate, and equally irresistible principles of action',<sup>387</sup> and Robert Southey: 'he reasoned as if lust and hunger were alike passions of physical necessity, and the one equally with the other'.<sup>388</sup> Cobbett seemed to recognise a parallel, if not an equality. Hazlitt and Southey had thought the notion clearly wrong. All wondered why it seemed to be the poor who would suffer under the new ideal of moral restraint. Hazlitt again:

Why are they to have a perfect system of rights and duties prescribed to them? I do not see why they alone should be put to live on these metaphysical board-wages, why they should be forced to submit to a course of *abstraction*; or why it should be meat and drink to them, more than to others, to do the will of God.<sup>389</sup>

Although Malthus had turned to moral restraint (and critics like Hazlitt pointed out the inconsistency), and this idea became associated with him, he continued to remain doubtful about the possibility of male celibacy: 'I believe that few of my readers can be less sanguine in their expectations of any great change in the general conduct of men on this subject than I am'.<sup>390</sup> However, he thought that the evils associated with sexual 'lapses' in the pre-marriage period were preferable to those resulting from the grinding poverty caused by overpopulation:

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<sup>387</sup> William Hazlitt, 'On the Originality of Mr. Malthus's Essay' (1817), in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. by P. P. Howe, 21 vols (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1932), VII, pp.337-343 (p.342).

<sup>388</sup> Robert Southey, 'On the state of the Poor, the principle of Mr. Malthus's Essay on Population, and the Manufacturing System, 1811', in *Essays, Moral and Political*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1832), I, pp.75-155 (pp.81-82).

<sup>389</sup> Hazlitt, 'On the Application of Mr. Malthus's Principle to the Poor Laws' (1807), in *The Complete Works*, VII, pp. 350-357 (p.353).

<sup>390</sup> Malthus, 2nd edn, p.504.

Under the continued temptations to a breach of chastity, occasional failures may take place, and the moral sensibility, in other respects, not be very strikingly impaired; but the continued temptations which beset hopeless poverty, and the strong sense of injustice that generally accompanies it from an ignorance of its true cause, tend so powerfully to sour the disposition, to harden the heart, and deaden the moral sense, that, generally speaking, virtue takes her flight clear away from the tainted spot, and does not often return.<sup>391</sup>

He therefore suppressed the effects on the recipients of these lapses, girls like Mary and Esther, whose standpoint a novelist like Gaskell brings to the fore.

## V

If a thwarted sex drive (with a virtuous aim) had the potential to lead to violence and misery, the thwarting of the hunger drive, as the most basic primal need, could lead to violence on a much greater scale. And for Gaskell this risk was greatly exacerbated when the starving poor saw that the rich continued to indulge in luxuries. For Gaskell, John Barton has only become a political animal, and one driven to violence, because of the failure of society to satisfy this basic need. He is, like all ‘desperate members of Trades’ Unions, ready for anything; made ready by want’ (MB 118). She is confused about Barton’s supposed politics. Earlier in the novel he is described as having become a ‘Chartist, a Communist, all that is commonly called wild and visionary’ (MB 170). Yet at the novel’s end Job Legh denies that Barton was “an Owenite all for equality and community of goods, and that kind of absurdity” (MB 384); as he “was no fool. No need to tell him that were all men equal to-night, some would get the start by rising an hour earlier to-morrow” (MB 384). Gaskell might be ignorant about the intricacies of working class politics, but she is simply keen to assert that severe want will lead to desperate acts (both personal and political) if more is not done to ease it. A kind of madness – a ‘monomania; so haunting, so incessant, were the thoughts that pressed upon him’ (MB 169) – is created in Barton by a combination of the physical effects of

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<sup>391</sup> Malthus, 2nd edn, p.515.

hunger ('the gnawing wolf within' (MB 58)) on his body and mind, and the mental effects of seeing the great contrasts of rich and poor, of great luxury alongside abject want.

Although Gaskell could never condone violence, she does in fact absolve Barton of responsibility for both his murder of Carson and his involvement in causes (Trade Unionism, Chartism) which she sees as having violent potential, because he has been driven to it by this madness. As Job Legh stresses to Mr Carson at the end of the tale, Barton "'was a loving man before he grew mad with seeing such as he was slighted, as if Christ Himself had not been poor'" (MB 384), and "'he grew bitter and angry, and mad; and in his madness he did a great sin, and wrought a great woe'" (MB 386). In *North and South* Gaskell stresses repeatedly the connection between hunger and madness, or being "'dazed wi' clemming'",<sup>392</sup> as Higgins puts it, and notes the violence that can result. Margaret is sympathetic to Thornton's striking workmen, who are threatening violence, because they are 'poor creatures who are driven mad.'<sup>393</sup> In *Mary Barton* Esther at first assumes that Carson's murder has been done by 'one of the poor maddened turn-outs, who hung about everywhere, with black, fierce looks, as if contemplating some deed of violence' (MB 233), and 'her sympathy was all with them, for she had known what they suffered' (MB 233).

Even on a small scale, Gaskell shows the deleterious effects of hunger. Mary puts one of her father's fractious moods down to it: 'her experience in the degrees of hunger had taught her that his present irritability was increased, if not caused, by want of food' (MB 196). Minor, every-day hunger causes irritability, but irritability also describes the larger feeling of madness, and its potential for violence, when hunger is

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<sup>392</sup> *North and South*, p.176.

<sup>393</sup> *North and South*, p.234.

long endured. In Adshead's report he gives the example of a woman who believed her husband to have been driven mad through hunger, and whose sufferings resemble Davenport's in his final illness. The letter writer (to Adshead) says:

He did not appear to observe our entrance; and when we spoke to him he appeared not to notice us; he had been for more than a week in a benumbed and helpless state, in which he had scarcely uttered a word; but he had given, in his wild unwonted stare and maniacal expression of countenance, fearful systems of mental derangement: his wife attributed his condition entirely to the want of food.<sup>394</sup>

A contribution from a doctor suggested that hopeless poverty would 'probably have the effect of impelling [a man] to crime or depriving him of reason; and the termination of his career [...] may be sought in a prison or a lunatic asylum'.<sup>395</sup> In *Mary Barton* the striking workers assembled to hear the masters' response to their demands are described as 'starved, irritated, despairing'(MB 185). With however many qualifications, Gaskell points out that the strike, and the violence of a few of the turn-outs towards a weaver who has tried to break it, has been caused by hunger, a hunger which could be eased. The masters in their indignation at the workers are failing to take this crucial factor into account:

they forgot that the strike was in this instance the consequence of want and need, suffered unjustly, as the endurers believed; for, however insane, and without ground of reason, such was their belief, and such was the cause of their violence. (MB 181)

Mary's distracted comment to the hungry Italian boy – "'O lad, hunger is nothing – nothing!'" (MB 229) – could not, then, be less true, for in fact, hunger was everything. Although Gaskell had set her tale as beginning approximately ten years before it was written, it reflected the contemporary economic downturn, and she realised its especial timeliness due to the revolutions occurring on the continent, that is she saw a direct

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<sup>394</sup> Adshead, p.36.

<sup>395</sup> Adshead, p.52.

connection between the latter events and the problems she had fictionalised in *Mary Barton*. She pressed her publisher, Edward Chapman, to let her know when the novel would be published, saying: 'I think the present state of public events may be not unfavourable to a tale, founded in some measure on the present relations between Masters and work people'<sup>396</sup> (though she was also keen not to be seen as cashing in, that the book would not be seen to be a 'catch-penny run up'<sup>397</sup>). Looking back a few years later she again saw the potential connection between revolution and the great divide between rich and poor: 'A good deal of [*Mary Barton's*] success I believe was owing to the time of its publication, – the great revolutions in Europe had directed people's attention to the social evils, and the strange contrasts which exist in old nations'.<sup>398</sup>

Gaskell puts forward the viewpoint of weavers like Barton, who could understand the vicissitudes of trade and bear any corresponding suffering if they 'could also see that [their] employers were bearing their share' (MB 24). Instead the worker is "'aggravated" to see that all goes on just as usual with the mill-owners' (MB 24), that 'carriages still roll along the streets, concerts are still crowded by subscribers, the shops for expensive luxuries still find daily customers' (MB 24), while he thinks of

the pale, uncomplaining wife at home, and the wailing children asking in vain for enough of food, – of the sinking health, of the dying life, of those near and dear to him. The contrast is too great. Why should he alone suffer from bad times? (MB 24)

We learn that Barton's 'mother had died from absolute want of the necessaries of life' (MB 24), and that during a period when he was out of work, his young son's illness led to death, because his survival 'depended on good nourishment, on generous living' (MB

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<sup>396</sup> *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p.55 (2 April [1848]).

<sup>397</sup> *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p.58 ([?early October 1848]).

<sup>398</sup> *Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p.115 (28 April 1850).

25), which could not be provided. Standing at a shop window, 'where all edible luxuries are displayed; haunches of venison, Stilton cheeses, moulds of jelly' (MB 25), Barton sees the wife of his former master, whose business has failed and who has turned off hands including Barton, come out of the shop 'loaded with purchases for a party', and returns home 'with a bitter spirit of wrath in his heart, to see his only boy a corpse!' (MB 25).

In the most harrowing chapter of the novel, 'Poverty and Death', Gaskell goes on to contrast the luxury of the Carsons with the appalling squalor that the Davenports are reduced to. Again the picture is about necessity ('want and need') versus luxury in a world which cruelly seemed to privilege the latter. The fire at Carson's factory gives him an opportunity to get it re-fitted to the latest standard (paid for by insurance) during a slack period in trade, and personally to spend some rare leisure time with his family. But, as Gaskell stresses, 'there is another side to the picture. There were homes of those who would fain work, and no man gave unto them – the homes of those to whom leisure was a curse' (MB 58). Wilson and Barton go to one such home, the Davenports', who have 'sunk lower and lower, and pawned thing after thing' (MB 59), and are now living in a squalid cellar in a filthy area of Manchester, 'whose smell was so foetid as almost to knock the two men down' (MB 60). Davenport is dying of typhoid fever, and 'every now and then he started up in his naked madness, looking like the prophet of woe in the fearful plague-picture' (MB 62). His wife is sick also and they only have a few rags left to cover them both. The whole family are starving, and when Barton arrives the children 'clustered round [him], and tore from him the food he had brought with him' (MB 60). Barton self-sacrificingly pawns his only resource, 'his better coat, and his one gay red-and-yellow silk pocket-handkerchief – his jewels, his plate, his valuables, these were' (MB 60-61), to get money to help them, and buys bread, candles, chips and coal. He has a little money left over but knows he has

secured the basics: ‘food, light, and warmth, he had instantly seen were necessary; for luxuries he would wait’ (MB 60-61). Gaskell's graphic descriptions of suffering are reflections of some of the real-life ‘narratives of suffering’ found in the Domestic Mission reports, of which Adshead included examples in his report. For example, one missionary describes the hunger of the children in a family he visits: ‘I gave them a few pence to get a little bread, and when it came in and was divided, it was a sorry sight to see how ravenous the little ones were’.<sup>399</sup>

Wilson responds to Barton’s wrath about the Davenports’ situation by saying that Carson, as the master, will also suffer, and that Carson has told him he will have to retrench and be very careful about expenditure (MB 66). Barton responds: “’Han they ever seen a child o’ their’n die for want o’ food?’” (MB 66). In a pointed contrast to the foregoing scene Wilson then calls on Mr Carson to ask for an infirmary order for Davenport, and the Carson household hardly seems a place of retrenchment and hardship. He finds a house furnished with ‘lavish expenditure’ (MB 67) and enters a well-stocked, warm kitchen, the cooking odours of which make him ‘yearn for food to break his fast’ (MB 67). We then learn from the coachman that Mrs Carson has been out late at an assembly the previous night, has sent down for an ample breakfast, and is complaining of one of her headaches. Like Lady Bertram in *Mansfield Park*, if of a different class, Mrs Carson is presented as the similar type of spoilt, idle woman, a type Gaskell clearly disapproves of. We are told again later in the story that Mrs Carson was ‘indulging in the luxury of a headache’ (MB 201), but that her illness ‘was but the natural consequence of the state of mental and bodily idleness in which she was placed’ (MB 202), and that she would have felt better if she had ‘taken the work of one of her own housemaids for a week’ (MB 202). Wilson is shown to the ‘luxurious library’ (MB 68). Here the two Carsons, father and son, are lounging over the ‘well-spread

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<sup>399</sup>Adshead, p.26.



breakfast-table' (MB 68), while the youngest daughter of the house is exclaiming that she "'can't live without flowers and scents'" (MB 69), and that she must have the latest rose, as 'it was one of her necessities. Life was not worth having without flowers' (MB 69). When Wilson asks for the order, it is shown that Carson has been careless of his employees. He does not know who Davenport is, having left such things as the names of his workers to the 'overlooker' (MB 70), an attitude reminiscent of the slave plantation owners who were accused of failing in their paternal duty by leaving the day-to-day business to cruel overseers. Carson carelessly, if not unkindly, gives Wilson an out-patient rather than the needed in-patient order because he does not have one of the latter spare (MB 70). In any case, it is too late. In another stark switch of scene, when Wilson gets back to the Davenports' dwelling, Mr Davenport is dead.

The idea of great contrasts could not have been more blatantly and more consistently hammered home. George Eliot, who liked Gaskell's work, later complained of this style in *Ruth*: 'Mrs Gaskell seems to me to be constantly misled by a love of sharp contrasts – of "dramatic" effects'.<sup>400</sup> But in labouring the point Gaskell is stressing simply that the rich can clearly do more to ease the suffering of the poor, that they could relinquish some of their excess to meet the absolute want that exists around them; and indeed that it is their duty to do so. Malthusians believed that there was a limited amount of resources to go around, and too many people for them. State aid and even private charity were manifestations of mistaken humanity because these encouraged those who could not afford to support children themselves to continue to breed, thereby creating even more mouths to be fed and worsening the problem. Equally, because food resources were finite, and not enough, if a portion was given to those who could not feed themselves this was taking it away from someone else. A

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<sup>400</sup> George Eliot on *Ruth*, 1 February 1853, in *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage*, pp.231-232.

famous review of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* had complained: 'Who went without turkey and punch in order that Bob Cratchit might get them – for unless there were turkey and punch in surplus, someone must go without – is a disagreeable reflection kept wholly out of sight',<sup>401</sup> to which Dickens angrily responded with *The Chimes*. Gaskell, like Dickens, might have been missing some grander theoretical truth that if the rich gave away portions of their larger share they would only worsen the problem of hunger in the long run by creating more claimants on it. But Gaskell's truth is plain and simple, however complicated its causes. In the local economic context, the Manchester of the novel, there is more than enough to go around. There are people starving, and dying from starvation, and there are people with too much. In Gaskell's vision, to invert Malthus, there are clearly enough vacant covers at nature's mighty feast'.<sup>402</sup>

In presenting the great contrasts as she does, Gaskell is in fact putting forward Barton's view that 'need was right' (MB 116) (Barton refuses financial help from his trades union because he believes it should go to someone more in need, Tom Darbyshire and his seven children, even though Darbyshire is an enemy of his). She is staking the claim for the need of the many against the luxury of the few, in a world that seemed to valorise the latter at the expense of the former. As we know, Malthusians could not privilege need, since they thought that it was largely self-inflicted and that its satisfaction from the public and (to a lesser extent) the private purse would only create more need in the long run. Although Barton has been very modestly aspirational in good times, he only ever claims a right to the satisfaction of basic needs:

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<sup>401</sup> *Westminster Review*, June 1844, quoted in Charles Dickens, *The Christmas Books*, ed. by Ledger, p.488.

<sup>402</sup> Malthus later excised the controversial passage, 'At nature's mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him', found in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (p.531).

we donnot want dainties, we want bellyfuls; we donnot want gimcrack coats and waistcoats, we want warm clothes; and so that we get ‘em, we’d not quarrel wi’ what they’re made on. We donnot want their grand houses, we want a roof to cover us from the rain, and the snow, and the storm; ay, and not alone to cover us, but the helpless ones that cling to us in the keen wind. (MB 187)

He believes that the masters are deliberately holding back the workers’ rightful share of the profits, which will be spent on useless luxury whilst the poor starve:

“we ask for our share of the payment; [...] if th’ masters get our share of payment it will only go to keep servants and horses – to more dress and pomp. Well and good, if yo choose to be fools we’ll not hinder you, so long as you’re just; but our share we must and will have; we’ll not be cheated. *We* want it for daily bread, for life itself; and not for our own lives neither [...], but for the lives of them little ones”. (MB 188)

Job later reiterates Barton’s feeling to Mr Carson: “Nor yet did he care for goods, nor wealth; no man less, so that he could get daily bread for him and his” (MB 384). This argument tends to disrupt the comfort theory paradigm, with Gaskell placing more moral weight on a limited acquisitive desire, a lack of greed: the need for daily bread as opposed to the desire for goods.

For Barton the rich are so greedy that the starvation of their workers seems to be a deliberate tactic in order to maximise their profits: “They’n screwed us down to th’lowest peg, in order to make their great big fortunes, and build their great big houses, and we, why we’re just clemming, many and many of us” (MB 66). Higgins in *North and South* is in agreement: “Our business being, yo' understand, to take the bated wage, and be thankful; and their business to bate us down to clemming point, to swell their profits”.<sup>403</sup> In *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Engels had made the same point: ‘it is utterly indifferent to the English bourgeois whether his working men starve or not, if only he makes money. All the conditions of life are measured by money, and what brings no money is nonsense, unpractical, idealistic bosh’ (p.282). Hence the bourgeois’s love of political economy, ‘whose sum and substance for the

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<sup>403</sup>*North and South*, p.179.

working man is this, that he cannot do anything more rational than resign himself to starvation' (p.206). Southey had described the Malthusian system as an attempt to 'starve the poor into celibacy'<sup>404</sup> and Hazlitt had called it 'the right of the rich to starve the poor by system'.<sup>405</sup>

Although Gaskell did not exactly challenge the structure of capitalism itself (though she was sometimes accused of doing so: 'people call her socialist and communist',<sup>406</sup> she said of herself), and did consistently put forward the masters' viewpoint, she did challenge the premise of a system (the political economy she claimed to know nothing about) which seemed to embody the pursuit of gain at the expense of all else. In *North and South* Margaret's sentiments echo those of Engels, when she is horrified at Thornton's cold advocacy of the system, 'the hard-reasoning, dry, merciless way in which he laid down axioms of trade, and serenely followed them out to their full consequences'.<sup>407</sup> These necessarily involved the ruin of some masters and men, with the latter particularly

passed by in the swift merciless improvement or alteration; who would fain lie down and quietly die out of the world that needed them not, but felt as if they could never rest in their graves for the clinging cries of the beloved and helpless they would leave behind; who envied the power of the wild bird, that can feed her young with her very heart's blood. Margaret's whole soul rose up against him while he reasoned in this way – as if commerce were everything and humanity nothing.<sup>408</sup>

It is not clear what are the precise political and economic views of characters such as Thornton and Mr Carson. In reality the views of Manchester manufacturers were

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<sup>404</sup> Robert Southey, 'On the state of the Poor, the principle of Mr. Malthus's Essay on Population, and the Manufacturing System, 1811', p.91.

<sup>405</sup> William Hazlitt, 'Queries Relating to the Essay on Population', in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. by Howe, VII, pp. 357-361 (p.361).

<sup>406</sup> *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p.108 (April 1850).

<sup>407</sup> *North and South*, p.203.

<sup>408</sup> *North and South*, pp.202-3.

varied and changeable. However, outsiders certainly associated the world's first industrial city with the doctrines of laissez-faire and free trade. The campaign for the repeal of the corn laws found a base and much of its support in Manchester. Disraeli labeled the doctrines associated with Manchester, 'the Manchester school',<sup>409</sup> and this subsequently became a byword for the hard, self-made, money-driven Mancunian man. As we know, maxims of commerce could also be related with a sort of brotherhood-of-man philanthropy, so that Manchester could boast of the cotton industry in this vein:

THE MISSION OF THE COTTON TRADE is, to develop the resources of this nation – to multiply the springs of industry – to stimulate inventive genius – to encourage art and science – to increase profitably the employment of labour – to improve agriculture – to create large towns – to promote education – to elevate the moral and social status of the working population – to secure civil liberty – to confer political privileges – to check immorality – to encourage religion – to destroy monopolies – to give freedom to all – to enkindle a spirit of loyalty – to foster probity and honour – to discountenance war – to extinguish slavery – to promote peace – and to raise Britain to be the protector of the weak, the friend of the strong, a bright example to all nations, and the grand instrument for promoting the evangelization of the world.<sup>410</sup>

But Thornton's dry axioms of trade, and Mr Carson's claim that the markets were something that "'God alone can control'" (MB 384) suggest a narrower, harder vision, the stereotypical Manchester man who put profit above all else. There was also the uncomfortable fact, despite Baynes's rhetoric, that the imported cotton which the manufacturers and merchants turned to such vast profits was grown by American slaves, a fact that 'cruelly mocked the libertarian rhetoric of the free-trade school,' in the words of Farnie.<sup>411</sup>

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<sup>409</sup> First used in a speech to the House of Commons in February 1846: see T. S. Ashton, 'The Origin of "The Manchester School"', *The Manchester School*, I (1930), 22-27 <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9957.1930.tb01133.x/pdf>>.

<sup>410</sup> Mr. Alderman Baynes, *The Cotton Trade: Two Lectures* (Blackburn: John N. Haworth; London: Hall and Virtue; Manchester: Jos. Thomson and Son; Liverpool: G. Philip & Son, 1857), p.56-57.

<sup>411</sup> Farnie, p.103.

Gaskell's poor sometimes take the impersonal, rigid laws of the market to heart. As if internalising their Malthus, who, as Engels glossed him, had 'declared in plain English that the right to live, a right previously asserted in favour of every man in the world, is nonsense' (p.289), they often dream of death, of quietly dying out of the world that does not need them, if rarely actually consciously contemplate or commit suicide (Boucher in *North and South* is one exception). During old Alice's illness, Mary wishes 'to be as near death as Alice, and to have struggled through this world, whose suffering she had early learnt' (MB 219); and later, in Liverpool, imagines drowning: 'Once or twice a spectral thought loomed among the shadows of her brain; a wonder whether beneath that cold dismal surface there would not be rest from the troubles of earth' (MB 299). In speaking of the poor's sufferings, Barton also suggests that many would readily die, again if it wasn't for their children:

"there's many a one here, I know by mysel, as would be glad and thankful to lie down and die out o' this weary world, but for the lives of them little ones, who don't yet know what life is, and are afeard of death". (MB 188)

Engels claimed that suicide had become 'fashionable' among the poor (p.127), one of the few options they had open to them to deal with their suffering. The others were stealing or slow starvation. Engels thought that there were many poor still too honest to contemplate the former. Gaskell shows Barton, originally a man of integrity, pushed to contemplate this extremity only when good food could have saved his child's life, though he is prevented from doing so by lack of opportunity in the limited time his son has left to live (MB 25). As to slow starvation, this is the life many of Gaskell's poor endure. Engels described it using the radical working man's coinage of 'social murder', the slow, indirect killing off of the poor, which was 'quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet' (p.106). Society 'has placed the workers under conditions in which they can neither retain health nor live long; [...] it undermines the vital force of these workers gradually, little by little, and so hurries them to the grave

before their time' (p.107). Weakened by long want of proper nourishment, the poor easily succumbed to and died from illness and other exacerbating factors which would not have killed them otherwise, just as Barton's son and Davenport do, the latter's fever 'brought on by miserable living, filthy neighbourhood, and great depression of mind and body' (MB 61). In one of Dickens's most radical statements in *Household Words*, he warned his readers to do something about the deadly outbreak of cholera in London in 1854, because, 'unless they set themselves in earnest to improve the towns in which they live, and to amend the dwellings of the poor, they are guilty, before GOD, of wholesale murder'.<sup>412</sup>

Gaskell does not talk about social murder but her descriptions of the poor's suffering are precisely those that Engels envisaged by the concept. Around the time of Davenport's death, Gaskell highlights the worsening trade situation, the rising prices, and the disparity between wages and high food prices occasioning 'disease and death', when 'whole families went through a gradual starvation' (MB 84). These awful years of 1839, 1840, and 1841, she goes on to state, saw privation on a terrible scale, with families 'gradually sinking under the pressure of want and despair into a premature grave' (MB 85). Adshead includes in his report examples of sickness and death originating or encouraged by want, with the doctor already referred to suggesting that 'death of numbers is accelerated or indirectly produced by gradual and protracted starvation, and want of the common necessities of life'.<sup>413</sup> Engels saw this as akin to murder because society was conscious of what was happening and did nothing about it: 'it *knows* the consequences of its deeds; [...] its act is, therefore, not mere manslaughter, but murder' (p.107). Gaskell seems not to apportion blame, yet her

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<sup>412</sup> 'To Working Men', *Household Words*, 7 October 1854, in *Charles Dickens: Selected Journalism: 1850-1870*, ed. by David Pascoe (London: Penguin, 1997), pp.467-470 (p.467).

<sup>413</sup> Adshead, p.50.

statement that the rich cannot have known the true state of affairs, or they would have done more, also reads as accusatory:

It is so impossible to describe, or even faintly to picture, the state of distress which prevailed in the town at that time, that I will not attempt it; and yet I think again that surely, in a Christian land, it was not known even so feebly as words could tell it or the more happy and fortunate would have thronged with their sympathy and their aid. (MB 85)

And again she sees this suffering as an understandable cause of, if not quite justification for, violence: ‘can I wonder that many of them, in such times of misery and destitution, spoke and acted with ferocious precipitation?’ (MB 85).

With Gaskell’s religious (Unitarian) belief came the conviction that suffering was an integral part of life, designed to work out a greater good. Indeed this edict might serve as a convenient excuse for political economy – Carson’s law of God – since it was only necessary for the poor to bear their lot patiently. And on the whole the poor do bear their lot patiently, with, in Greg’s expression, ‘an almost stoical endurance’.<sup>414</sup> In Gaskell’s words:

There was Faith such as the rich can never imagine on earth; there was ‘Love strong as death’; and self-denial, among rude, coarse men, akin to that of Sir Philip Sydney’s most glorious deed. The vices of the poor sometimes astound us *here*; but when the secrets of all hearts shall be made known, their virtues will astound us in far greater degree. Of this I am certain. (MB 58)

In *North and South* Higgins is angered by the strikers’ violence, because he thinks the stoical endurance of the poor will elicit more sympathy for their cause: ‘Folk would go with them if they saw them striving and starving wi’ dumb patience’.<sup>415</sup> The poor’s stoicism, their ability to ‘struggle and endure’, contrasts with the pampered rich and their artificial needs, like Carson’s daughter and her flowers.

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<sup>414</sup> See Greg’s unsigned review of *Mary Barton*, in *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 163-187 (p.166).

<sup>415</sup>*North and South*, p.263.



There is also warning in this contrast. As we know, within the classical mechanics of corruption, the once manly but then effeminate Romans were conquered by the rougher, stronger barbarian tribes. When the masters and workmen meet to discuss terms, the masters take their place round the official table, 'looking as like as they could to the Roman senators who awaited the irruption of Brennus and his Gauls' (MB 182). Some of the masters might be affronted or amused by the 'ragged detachment' (MB 182) of workmen coming before them, but the latter's dilapidated garments 'yet clothed men of parts and power' (MB 182). Brennus and the Gauls were the first barbarians to sack Rome in 390BC. Though they were eventually defeated this marked the beginning of a series of barbarian conquests which would eventually destroy the so-called feminised Roman Empire. Gaskell clearly disapproves of the smooth-tongued union delegate from London, who incites the striking workers with his fiery speech, 'in which he blended the deeds of the elder and the younger Brutus' (MB 186). But these two Brutus role models were also seen as ideal republicans who overthrew the tyranny and corruption of their masters. Lucius Junius Brutus, the first consul of Rome, founded the Roman republic in 509BC by ousting the royal Tarquins, then condemned to death his own two sons for conspiring to restore them to power. Marcus Junius Brutus (85-42 BC) was one of the assassins of Julius Caesar, whom he saw as a tyrant. The workers' decision to strike is also described thus: 'with Spartan endurance they determined to let the employers know their power, by refusing to work' (MB 171). The poor's suffering has also led them to think that "'Life at best is no great thing'" (MB 364), and though this has arisen for different reasons, it resonates with the Spartan traits of strength and heroism, which attaches a lesser value to life in contrast with those corrupted by wealth and too attached to their own selfish needs for the good of the state.

As discussed, Gaskell knew that there was only so much that could be born meekly, with dumb patience, before humans were driven to desperate acts. Suffering might have been needful but it was also part of God's plan that those who were able should do all they could to relieve it. As Job (the aptly named, given the biblical Job's association with the purpose of suffering) puts it to Mr Carson:

"it is part of His plan to send suffering to bring out a higher good; but surely it's also a part of His plan that so much of the burden of the suffering as can be should be lightened by those whom it is His pleasure to make happy, and content in their own circumstances". (MB 385)

Barton has been bewildered growing up because people preached Christian principles, but did not live by them: "they all spoke up for [the Bible], and went and did clean contrary" (MB 370). This bad example has led to his own great sin, because if he had seen the strong helping the weak, the rich helping the poor, earlier in life, its course would have changed and he would not have become bitter and mad. Job tells Mr Carson:

"the masters has it on their own conscience, [...] to answer for to God whether you've done, and are doing, all in your power to lighten the evils that seem always to hang on the trades by which you make your fortunes". (MB 386)

with the implication that the answer is no. Over ten years later, Gaskell echoed Job's sentiment in a letter to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth (wife of James Kay-Shuttleworth), apologising for not being able to help her with one of her charities because

this winter all our 'charity must begin at home'; for I am afraid it is likely to be a very sad one in South Lancashire: and I only hope that those who have made such large fortunes during these last two years by manufactures will give of their abundance to the work-people in their distress – however improvident these latter may have been.<sup>416</sup>

Malthusians thought, in general terms, that charity created dependency, though this line was softened or moderated in varying degrees, including by Malthus himself.

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<sup>416</sup>*The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p.660 (18 November 1861).

Gaskell appreciates the pride of the working man, who does not necessarily like charity either. Barton does not want charity, he wants work: “I don’t want money, child! D--n their charity and their money! I want work, and it is my right. I want work” (MB 115). But when there was no work to be had, charity was essential, and life-saving. As the un-political Wilson, in one of the most political, anti-Malthusian statements of the novel, puts it: “Though I can earn nought, I mun eat summut” (MB 65). For Malthus, as we know, said precisely the opposite, that if the poor could not earn their bread they had no entitlement to food: ‘if the society do not want his labour, [he] has no claim of *right* to the smallest portion of food’,<sup>417</sup> and ‘that when the wages of labour will not maintain a family, it is an incontrovertible sign that their king and country do not want more subjects, or at least that they cannot support them’.<sup>418</sup> Even though Gaskell believed that the poor were partly responsible for their own sufferings, they were still to be helped because to err was human. As Job Legh responds to Mr Carson’s speech on the virtues of self-reliance: “You can never work facts as you would fixed quantities, and say, given two facts, and the product is so and so. God has given men feelings and passions which cannot be worked into the problem” (MB 385). These feelings and passions could not be accounted for in the dry maxims of trade or the merciless demands of the market; but they could not be ignored. They might include any human weakness, but were also the sexual passion and its consequences, which was God-given, not an inherent character defect, and which could not be worked into, or worn away by, the mechanical formulas of political economy. In *North and South* Bessy Higgins and her father have been angered at the Boucher family’s improvidence and bad management, but acknowledge their right to life, love and help in times of trouble. Thus Bessy on Boucher:

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<sup>417</sup> Malthus, 2nd edn, p.531.

<sup>418</sup> Malthus, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, p.507.

”He's but a weak kind o' chap, I know, but he's a man for a' that; and tho' I've been angry, many a time afore now, wi' him an' his wife, as knew no more nor him how to manage, yet, yo' see, all folks isn't wise, yet God lets 'em live - ay, an' gives 'em some one to love, and be loved by”.<sup>419</sup>

Job insists that the strong should help the weak, because “”God has [...] made some weak”” (MB 385), and therefore “”them that is strong in any of God’s gifts is meant to help the weak”” (MB 385). For Gaskell all of humanity is valuable. If a cruel world sheds its redundant and surplus population, Gaskell also remembers those who are not able-bodied, not economically viable, and the value their lives still bring to others:

But remember! We only miss those who do men’s work in their humble sphere; the aged, the feeble, the children, when they die, are hardly noted by the world; and yet to many hearts, their deaths make a blank which long years will never fill up. (MB 110)

Gaskell solves the issues of lust and hunger, those two basic drives which were the subject of so much anxiety and debate in the early Victorian period, with either death or emigration. Esther, 'the poor crushed Butterfly – the once innocent Esther' (MB 392), whose prostituted body has been the site of this lust and hunger (“”nought but skin and bone”” (MB 391)), dies. In this Esther follows the trajectory of many literary fallen women, though some were given the option of emigration. Dickens has Nancy murdered in *Oliver Twist*, but little Emily in *David Copperfield* is allowed to emigrate, if not to marry. And Dickens, with the help of his wealthy friend, Miss Burdett Coutts, had set up an institution for the reform and emigration of fallen women, Urania Cottage. Gaskell asked for his advice regarding a case of a woman called Pasley who she had come across in Manchester’s New Bayley prison. In *Mary Barton*, Mary, Jem and his mother head off to employment, comfort and plenitude in Canada, with Jem's job as instrument-maker to the new Agricultural College in Toronto bringing “”a comfortable appointment, – house, – land, – and a good percentage on the instruments made”” (MB 375). And it is indicated that Job, Will and Margaret will

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<sup>419</sup> *North and South*, p.206.

follow them to this new paradise. Although for a time emigration was seen as a solution to a whole host of domestic ills, including, as we have seen, Greg's redundant women, Malthusians warned that it could only ever be a temporary one, and would not solve the population issue at home. Instead, it worsened it, actually stimulating population because the need for the preventive check appeared to be slackened, and prudence and economy were destroyed.<sup>420</sup> Several readers of the novel found the solution of emigration unsatisfactory. Maria Edgeworth complained that the novel was too hopeless, with no remedy offered 'But Emigration which is only an evasion, an escape not a remedy'.<sup>421</sup> A review of the novel in the *Economist* saw the solution of emigration as no solution at all, but acknowledged the difficulty of the problems it presented, and could only hope that the novel would at least encourage those with more to try to help those with less:

It is not our duty, nor is this the place to inquire into the sources of the social anomaly presented, by a large body of men, industrious, prudent, saving, and virtuous, being reduced by no fault of their own to the most abject want, and but too often driven to crime. The moral philosopher, the political economist must solve this knotty point; we only draw the attention of our readers to the striking peculiarities of *Mary Barton*, hoping that its pages may inspire them with the wish to contribute their mite towards the lasting relief of the class depicted there. We fear the author has but little hope of a speedy realisation of that object, for he has not been able to find any other means for securing the happiness of his hero and heroine, than of sending them to Canada, into voluntary banishment.<sup>422</sup>

Gaskell knew that she was no more able than the philosophers to solve the knotty problem. But like the *Economist* she saw the value in drawing people's attention to it, and thereby encouraging them to do what they could:

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<sup>420</sup> See Thomas Chalmers, p.389.

<sup>421</sup> Maria Edgeworth letter to Honora Beaufort (early 1849), in *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage*, pp.88-89 (p.89).

<sup>422</sup> *The Economist*, 25 November 1848, quoted in *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage*, pp.77-78 (p.78).

I do think that we must all acknowledge that there are duties connected with the manufacturing system not fully understood as yet, and evils existing in relation to it which may be remedied in some degree, although we as yet do not see how; but surely there is no harm in directing the attention to the existence of such evils.<sup>423</sup>

The Gaskells enjoyed a comfortable life themselves, which sometimes made Gaskell feel guilty. When they moved to their new Manchester home in Plymouth Grove, Gaskell wrote to a friend that it felt a bit uncomfortable ‘to spend so much ourselves on *so* purely selfish a thing as a house is, while so many are wanting’.<sup>424</sup> But this did not stop them doing much work to help those suffering in Manchester, as Gaskell hoped through her writing she would encourage others to do: the fundamental problem of abject poverty might not be solved but the suffering that accompanied it could certainly be ameliorated.

In the next chapter, the focus returns in some ways to Austen’s vision of the early nineteenth century, that is a fear that the luxury of the wealthier classes in society would ultimately end up destroying them. Gaskell feared revolution if the rich did not do more to help the poor, but did not appear to think that the whole edifice of society was decaying. Dickens and Trollope, however, explore luxury’s effects on the entire system of society, and struggle between celebration and condemnation of a get-rich-quick nation that was also increasingly threatened by international rivals. Although the fundamental problem is seen as the luxurious appetites of the higher classes, the lower classes are now also included in a broader vision of social and political concern – how could individual and political liberty be maintained in a luxurious, increasingly democratic age?

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<sup>423</sup>*The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p.67 (late 1848).

<sup>424</sup>*The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, p.108 (April 1850).

**Chapter 4: ‘The downward fortunes of those enervated and corrupted masters of the world’: Rome, Luxury and Corruption in Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* and Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now***

In *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) the greedy ballad seller, Silas Wegg, reads to the Boffins Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, or ‘the downward fortunes of those enervated and corrupted masters of the world who were by this time on their last legs’.<sup>425</sup> Dickens’s novel suggests that his own society is mirroring the fate of Rome in its enervated and corrupted state: ‘this to go through the book’,<sup>426</sup> he wrote in his working notes. Dickens believed in human (and Victorian) progress. One contemporary said: ‘To Charles Dickens, no doubt, a belief in human perfectibility was probably so strong that he was unable even to conceive its negation. In that, he was the man of his epoch, and had the spirit-time throbbing within him’.<sup>427</sup> Yet it is clear that in *Our Mutual Friend* progress has stalled and declined: society is crumbling among the dust heaps, if not already collapsed. “His position is a sign of the degeneracy of the age”<sup>428</sup> So says Roger Carbury of the welcome, honour and power society gives to the corrupt financier, Augustus Melmotte, in Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now* (1875). But did Trollope believe that his society was degenerate and in imminent danger of collapse; and does the novel really say so? Old fashioned country squire, Carbury, continues the theme, making clear his belief that ‘the way we live now’ is just the way the Romans were living before their fall, when “Roman freedom and Roman

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<sup>425</sup> Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 2002 (1865)), p.279. Subsequent references are parenthesized in the text as OMF with the page number.

<sup>426</sup> See Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1990), p.945.

<sup>427</sup> Alfred Austen, ‘Charles Dickens’, *Temple Bar* (July 1870), in *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Philip Collins (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971), pp.533-536 (p.534).

<sup>428</sup> Anthony Trollope, *The Way We Live Now*, 2 vols (Oxford: OUP, 1999 (1875)), II, p.44. Subsequent references are parenthesized in the text as TWLWN with the volume and page number.

manners were going to the dogs” (TWLWN II. 46). But Trollope was not Carbury. Although some critics have seen him as ‘old-fashioned Anthony Trollope’,<sup>429</sup> and despite the biting satire of the novel, I contend that Trollope, and even the novel, is ultimately with the Bishop of Elmham: ““Taking society as a whole, the big and the little, the rich and the poor, I think that it grows better from year to year, and not worse”” (TWLWN II. 46). Trollope sounds a warning note but is finally optimistic.

In my explorations of the idea of luxury in previous chapters of this thesis I have touched on the trope of the luxury-led decline and fall of Rome, and its continued cultural hold on the nineteenth century. With Austen (chapter 1), just emerging from the eighteenth century, we saw how the idea associated itself with fears about declining virtue in the face of ill-gotten wealth, fears exacerbated in a time of war. Although the idea of Rome was not central to my discussion of luxury in chapters 2 (Thackeray) and 3 (Gaskell), we saw the readiness with which people reached for the Roman decline and fall to express their apocalyptic views on specific causes of concern, such as alcohol and prostitution or sexual licentiousness. In this chapter, I return to Rome, and focus on it more fully. As we know, the idea that the Roman Empire declined and fell due to luxury ran broadly thus. The ancient Roman Republic was a relatively simple and virtuous polis based on a manly, courageous and honourable citizenry, who put public before individual good. As Rome increased her dominions and grew in power and wealth this virtue began to corrupt. Individuals vied for more and more personal wealth and luxury instead of being content to live relatively simple lives and put any excess wealth at the service of the state. Living increasingly luxurious lives, men became softened and effeminate. Less able and less willing to put their lives in danger they were content to commit their defence to hired mercenaries. The latter, having

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<sup>429</sup> Vance, p.78.



little unselfish interest in the public good, were content to fight for the highest bidder, a potential tyrant. Political life moved from government by a senatorial aristocracy serving the general good to rule by an unprincipled plutocracy serving themselves, and paying off a de-politicised populace with bread and circuses. The result was internal corruption and chaos. Already subject to internal tyrants Rome would soon leave herself exposed to external ones, and the still vigorous and manly barbarians of northern Europe could easily conquer the now exhausted and degenerate Romans.

The problem of the breaking down of the principles of what would later be called classical republicanism – the erosion of which led to the decline and fall of nations – seemed less and less relevant in the modern, commercial age. The classically-derived idea of liberty, still dominant in the eighteenth century, had undergone a complete transformation through the nineteenth century. Freedom, once realised publically through active participation in the political state, was now realised privately as individuals pursued their own idea of the good life as free from state interference as possible. As we saw in chapter 3, the ‘mechanics of corruption’ (Berry, p.70) were so challenged that by around mid-century the poor could be vilified for lacking in the sort of desire that was once considered subversive. And yet, arriving in the period 1865 to 1875 we find two major authors exploring the idea of pernicious luxury as forcefully as did Tobias Smollett a century earlier in *Humphrey Clinker* (1771). Both Dickens and Trollope were committed political liberals, a position fundamentally at odds with the idea of classical republicanism. And yet they both, particularly the latter, managed to combine their very nineteenth-century liberal ideas with an awareness of the classical republican virtues and a concern about their decline. In doing so, they embodied a strain of Victorian doubt about the progress of its civilization, a fear that the great material foundations (the riches and luxury) on which

it was based could come crashing down if heed was not taken about its alleged corruption.

In discussing how Dickens and Trollope explore the idea of luxury and corruption through the trope of the Roman decline and fall, I will be looking at the following associated symptoms appearing in *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Way We Live Now*: energy loss or enervation, the decline of manly courage, increasing money greed and other luxurious appetites, the decline of virtuous public life, and fear of the mob and of potential tyranny or despotism in the state. Although the overall focus of my discussion centres on the idea of Rome, I will also be touching briefly on the idea of America in the nineteenth century, as the site of British anxieties and hopes about civilizations and their propensity to corruption and collapse.

## I

The idea of a loss of energy – enervation – or energy perverted, then, is strong in both novels. Indeed, in Henry James’s review of *Our Mutual Friend*, he delivered the following scathing verdict: ‘*Our Mutual Friend* is, to our perception, the poorest of Mr Dickens’s works. And it is poor with the poverty not of momentary embarrassment, but of permanent exhaustion’.<sup>430</sup> James clearly thought that Dickens’s best days were behind him and that his creative energies were finished. What James’s feeling in fact captured was not any impairment of Dickens’s talent but the mood of the novel, presenting as it does a state of society in ‘permanent exhaustion’. At the beginning of *Our Mutual Friend*, the lax lawyer, Eugene Wrayburn, sets out the position for himself: “‘If there is a word in the dictionary under any letter from A to Z that I abominate, it is energy”’ (OMF 20). Eugene’s words, mannerisms and

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<sup>430</sup> Henry James, review in *The Nation*, 21 December 1865, in *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Collins, pp. 469-473 (p.469).

movements consistently reinforce his creed. He speaks with a ‘languid inclination of his head’ (OMF 86), has a ‘careless manner’ (OMF 216) and a ‘lazily arrogant air’ (OMF 216). He is ‘all idle and shiftless’ (OMF 503), ‘loung[e] slowly’ (OMF 503), ‘loung[e] moodily’ (OMF 503), or sits ‘indolently rocking his body’ (OMF 507). When Mr Boffin expresses his admiration for the work ethic: “‘there’s nothing like work. Look at the bees’” (OMF 87), Eugene responds:

“Ye-es, [...] they work; but don’t you think they overdo it? They work so much more than they need – they make so much more than they can eat – they are so incessantly boring and buzzing, at their one idea till Death comes upon them – that don’t you think they overdo it?”. (OMF 88)

Eugene (in his own words) is “‘the express picture of discontented idleness’” (OMF 506), one who is “‘dreadfully susceptible [...] to boredom’” (OMF 270), and incapable of purposeful action: “‘I don’t design anything. I have no design whatever. I am incapable of designs. If I conceived a design, I should speedily abandon it, exhausted by the operation’” (OMF 278).

It was natural that those at the top of society, as living the most luxurious lives, would be most susceptible to luxury’s enervating effects. Adam Ferguson, influenced by the classical republican tradition, had warned that in a commercial and luxurious society, the higher orders, ‘are, in reality, by the seeming advantages of their station, become the refuse of that society of which they once were the ornament’ (pp.259-260). In the nineteenth century this idea was reinforced by the increasing power of the middle classes. As we saw in chapter 2 of this thesis, an idle aristocrat like Arthur Huntingdon in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* could be seen as an increasingly useless parasite on productive society. Dickens was of a strongly anti-aristocratic bent, emphasising the enervated state of the pre-revolution French aristocracy in *A Tale of Two Cities*: ‘exquisite gentlemen of the finest breeding, which was at that remarkable time – and has been since – to be known by its fruits of indifference to every natural subject of

human interest, were in the most exemplary state of exhaustion'.<sup>431</sup> Yet in *Our Mutual Friend*, exhaustion is not just a symptom of the aristocracy. Eugene, as the exemplary exhausted man, is an upper middle-class gentleman, who needs to earn a living. It is true that Eugene and his similarly tired friend, Mortimer Lightwood, had been gifted with some private income, and they acknowledge its deleterious effects. Thus the latter to the former: "My own small income (I devoutly wish that my grandfather had left it to the Ocean rather than to me!) has been an effective Something in the way of preventing me from turning to at Anything" (OMF 769). The idea of the need 'to struggle and endure' (MP 455), as Austen suggested, is ever persistent. And yet Eugene's malaise is more than the personal result of early comfort: his malaise is the malaise of society, whose 'weariness was chronic' (OMF 83) (to use Mortimer's idea of himself). Or rather, society's malaise is the result of a class who have had too much comfort and who have never had to struggle and endure. For as I shall discuss later on with regard to public political life, Dickens certainly believed that the aristocracy had caused this malaise, and that as a force in Britain they were more or less already bankrupt. This permanent exhaustion is a prelude even unto death for Eugene, one who is "so soon bored [...], so fatally" (OMF 138), as it is for a society already disintegrating into refuse – ashes, dust and bones.

For Trollope in *The Way We Live Now*, however, lack of energy is certainly indicative of the aristocratic, or near-aristocratic, set at the Beargarden Club. In fact, Trollope was accused of class bias, a 'strain of bitterness towards recognized position', by one of the novel's reviewers, who thought that its characters took 'precedence in the scale of degradation according to their rank in the peerage'.<sup>432</sup> Dolly Longstaffe is

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<sup>431</sup> *A Tale of Two Cities* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1993 (1859)), p.103.

<sup>432</sup> Unsigned notice, *Saturday Review*, 17 July 1875, in *Trollope: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Donald Smalley (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; New York: Barnes & Noble 1969),

representative of the type of weary and dissolute young man who frequents the Beargarden Club. Responding to Sir Felix Carbury's question as to whether he will dine at the club, Dolly says:

“I suppose I shall, because it's such a lot of trouble to go anywhere else. I'm engaged somewhere, I know; but I'm not up to getting home and dressing. By George! I don't know how fellows do that kind of thing. I can't”. (TWWLN I. 25)

Felix wonders if Dolly plans to hunt the next day, to which the latter answers: “well, yes; but I don't suppose I shall. I was going to hunt every day last week, but my fellow never would get me up in time” (TWWLN I. 25). Dolly refuses even to put pen to paper to write a short note to his groom about Felix using his horse: “Oh my dear fellow, that is such a bore; I don't think I could do that” (TWWLN I. 26). So typical is this of Dolly – “I never write any letters” (TWWLN I. 226-227) – that his father is astounded to receive one from him regarding his sister Georgiana's stay with the Melmottes in London: ‘it was marvellous to him that his son should have been instigated to write a letter. The Melmottes must be very bad indeed, – worse than he had thought, – or their iniquities would not have brought about such energy as this’ (TWWLN I. 239). After her own experience of the British male aristocracy, Marie Melmotte captures their state of tiredness, telling the American Fisker that she hates “swells” (TWWLN II. 398): they are insincere, uncaring, taciturn, and “never more than half awake” (TWWLN II. 398). Indeed, she wonders, “what's the use of 'em?” (TWWLN II. 398).

Dolly's sort of idleness was anathema for Trollope, who, like Dickens, was a hugely energetic man. But his value of energy was about more than the personal. For Trollope energy was intimately connected to the creation of civilization. In his unpublished mid-nineteenth-century work on the state of the nation, *The New*

*Zealander*, he set out the classic luxury and corruption dynamic as follows: ‘Has not virtue produced energy, and energy knowledge, knowledge civilisation, and civilisation refinement, refinement luxury, and luxury sin?’<sup>433</sup> To conclude the cycle, luxury and sin would then lead to enervation, decline and the decay of civilization. We might also note here the central place of individual virtue to the success of nations, a given in the classical and eighteenth century debates, before the rise of political economy allowed for their separation (Mandeville’s private vices and public benefits). However, Trollope defines the opposite of virtue – as ‘sin’ rather than ‘vice’ – in more typically nineteenth-century (that is, religious) terms. Indeed, Trollope thought that this cycle of rise and fall would be inevitable ‘till the Creator in the full cycle of his time think fit to free mankind from their burden’.<sup>434</sup> Until then:

Alas, the time must come when England shall fall; [...]. As is the history of vainglorious Greece and of Rome, the mistress of the world; [...] so undoubtedly shall be the history and the memories of England. Such, as far as mortal eye can see, is a doom already spoken. It is not for us to hope even to annul it. But the period of its accomplishment does depend on us; on us and our children and our children’s children. (p.8)

Delaying the fall was possible through personal virtue and general vigilance as to signs of impending decay such as the enervation of the upper classes, a clear symptom of a potential decline on the Roman model.

One form of enervation that hovers on the margins of both novels is male sexual enervation. If up to mid-century the principal fear was the over-potency of the working classes, we are now seeing subtle signs of a lack of procreative potency in the upper classes. In the decline and fall paradigm, the upper classes, debauched by luxury, became unable to sire enough strong and healthy offspring to maintain and defend the

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<sup>433</sup> Anthony Trollope, *The New Zealander* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972). Written c. 1854-6, but rejected for publication at that time, it was not published until 1972.

<sup>434</sup> *The New Zealander*, p.8.

nation. In *Our Mutual Friend* Lizzie Hexham is pursued obsessively by Mr Headstone and Eugene, certainly a sign of a strong male libido. And yet both are driven exceptionally by (a warped or otherwise) love. There is a sense that the strong male bond between Eugene and Mortimer is otherwise the more attractive force, for example when they are fantasising about keeping a lighthouse together in order to escape from the demands of society (OMF 136-137). This is not necessarily to claim a homosexual subtext to the intimacy, which in context is a socially acceptable depiction of tender male friendship. We know from the discussion in chapter 3 of this thesis that some people worried that the luxury of the age encouraged sexual debauchery. Yet could there have been something worse? Now there was appearing a slight undertone that sexual energy might simply be spent, for virtuous purposes or otherwise. Dickens is reported to have said that he would have been alarmed if a son of his were particularly chaste, as if he could not be in good health;<sup>435</sup> and that God would look leniently on all human vice that sprang from natural tenderness and passion (hence his sympathy for prostitutes).<sup>436</sup> And the narrator's attitude to the cold, calculating fish, Fledgeby, is telling:

Why money should be so precious to an Ass too dull and mean to exchange it for any other satisfaction is strange; but there is no animal so sure to get laden with it as the Ass who sees nothing written on the face of the earth and sky but the three letters LSD – not Luxury, Sensuality, Dissoluteness, which they often stand for, but the three letters. Your concentrated Fox is seldom comparable to your concentrated Ass in money-breeding. (OMF 255)

Whilst luxury, sensuality and dissoluteness are not condoned, they, being signs at least of flawed humanity, seem preferable to the sterile, mercenary dullness of a Fledgeby.

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<sup>435</sup> See *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Graham Storey, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), V, pp.275-276 (April 1848). The conversation was with R.W. Emerson (who recorded it in his notebook) and others: footnote 10 (p.276) records the details.

<sup>436</sup> Reported in Ackroyd, p.537.

Like Thackeray, Dickens valued warmth, feeling and passion. Perhaps there was, then, a worse fate for a luxurious civilization than sensuality and dissoluteness – a lack of it.

Like the selfish seducers in Gaskell's fiction, in *The Way We Live Now* aristocrat Felix uses lower class Ruby Ruggles to satisfy his sexual urges, and it is hinted that he has other similar liaisons.<sup>437</sup> It is also suggested that as a result of her liaison with him, Ruby might end up as a prostitute.<sup>438</sup> And yet we are also told that Felix does not take much pleasure in his dalliance with Ruby: 'he probably did not enjoy it much; he cared very little about her, and carried on the liaison simply because it was the proper sort of thing for a young man to do' (TWWLN I. 173). Felix is happiest amongst his male companions at the club, companions who appear to be even less interested in women (with the exception of heiress hunting, a purely monetary pursuit) than he is. As Melmotte tells Lady Carbury when she tries to talk up a relationship between her son and Marie: "'young men don't get their happiness in that way now'" (TWWLN I. 189). And Georgiana Longstaffe laughs at her mother's suggestion that Dolly might try for Marie: "'Dolly will never marry anybody, [...] the idea of his taking the trouble of asking a girl to have him!'" (TWWLN I. 118).

In his attempt to woo Marie, the American speculator, Mr Fisker, makes a similar point, connecting the question of virility to different stages of civilization. For Fisker, Britain is an "effete and stone-cold country in which passion is no longer

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<sup>437</sup> See TWWLN II. 160: 'soon after dinner Felix slunk away to some music hall or theatre in quest probably of some other Ruby Ruggles'; or, more hinting than explicit, TWWLN I. 265: 'what he did with himself during the remainder of the evening the reader need not know'.

<sup>438</sup> Mrs Pipkin thinks that the connection will end up with Ruby "'on the streets'", and, like Gaskell's characters, sees it as a fate worse than death: "'I'd sooner a child of mine should die in a workus', or be starved to death'" (TWWLN II. 188). In an interesting take on Felix's story, Elizabeth Bleicher reads Trollope as critiquing gendered sexual norms through a parody of the typical trajectory of a fallen woman, so that 'Felix descends from the status of eligible, aristocratic bachelor to contaminating social pariah' ('Lessons from the Gutter: Sex and Contamination in *The Way We Live Now*', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 39 (2011), 545-562 (p.545) <<http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk.ezproxy.lib.bbk.ac.uk>> [accessed 18 July 2013]).



allowed to sway” (TWVLN II. 454). Fisker prides himself on the contrasting newness and hence virility of his own country: “On those golden shores which the Pacific washes man is still true, – and woman is still tender” (TWVLN II. 454). Gaskell referenced a similar notion in *Sylvia’s Lovers*, the idea that ‘a primitive set of country-folk [...] recognize the wild passion in love, as it exists untamed by the trammels of reason and self-restraint’.<sup>439</sup> In Trollope’s late science-fiction novel, *The Fixed Period* (1882), he used the word ‘effete’ several times to apply to the old age of men,<sup>440</sup> so in this saw an analogy between men and nations, both of which acquire a certain ‘womanish’ feebleness and effeminacy – certainly a lack of masculine virility – in their decline. Nonetheless, Fisker’s virility arguments are predominantly a pose; he is as much interested in Marie’s money as any of her English aristocratic suitors. Judging from Trollope’s attitude to Mrs Hurtle’s romantic history, with its stories of violence and guns, it might be that more refinement in the field of love and passion was no bad thing. A gentlemanly surface, after all, covers the strongest and most enduring love in the novel, that of Roger Carbury for Hetta Carbury. This is the perfect medium between the passionate violence symptomatic of the wild west of Mrs Hurtle’s background and the sterile sexual enervation of a class so far advanced in luxury it was now in decline.

If the energy of certain portions of society was dissipated in a luxurious age, in other sections it was erratic, nervous, the diseased form of energy associated with the gambling mania prevalent in a get-rich-quick society. ‘We believe there never was so

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<sup>439</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Sylvia’s Lovers* (Oxford: OUP, 1982 (1863)), p.386.

<sup>440</sup> Anthony Trollope, *The Fixed Period* (Oxford: OUP, 1993 (1882)), e.g. p.112. The novel deals with the idea of a fixed age of euthanasia (67 years old): ‘the old and effete should go, in order that the strong and manlike might rise in their places’.

much card-playing for high stakes as there is now',<sup>441</sup> said an editorial in *The Times* in August 1875 (a month before the appearance of the final monthly number of *The Way We Live Now*, and one month after the publication of its full two-volume edition). In *Our Mutual Friend*, instead of the steady expenditure of energy and hard work that was associated with virtue, Alfred Lamble and his stockbroker acquaintances display the more perverted sort of energy. They transact 'business together in a gypsy way at untimely hours of the morning and evening, and in rushes and snatches' (OMF 245), and are 'always coming and going across the Channel' or 'lolling and lounging in and out of the City' (OMF 245). They are 'all feverish, boastful, and indefinitely loose' (OMF 246), and 'were always in a hurry, and yet seemed to have nothing tangible to do' (OMF 246). *The Times* observed the same sickness in the victims of such speculators: 'some are taken by the fever one way, some another'.<sup>442</sup> In *The Way We Live Now* the deliberate analogy between the mania for gambling in the City and personal gambling at the Beargarden Club is highlighted by Lord Nidderdale's momentary captivation with Melmotte and the associated endeavour of commerce on an extended scale: 'the idea occurred to him that it might be almost more exciting than whist or unlimited loo' (TWLNLN II. 225). Even the thoroughly enervated Dolly feels a connection between the business world and gambling during his unwonted exertion over his property: 'the trouble to him was very great, but he began to feel that he almost liked it. The excitement was nearly as good as that of loo' (TWLNLN I. 288). Thus much of society dissipates or distorts its energy in feverish speculation, and the natural equilibrium of a healthful social body is upset.

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<sup>441</sup> 'Editorial', *The Times*, 11 August 1875, p.9.

<sup>442</sup> 'Editorial', *The Times*, 11 August 1875, p.9.

From the loss of energy in the higher class male, to the diseased energy of the speculator, we come to the energy of women. Although this is essentially a positive force, it can also become a perversion, either when misused or misapplied or simply because of its feminine nature. As we know, for Trollope energy was an integral component of civilization, and he admired the quality in both sexes. He felt that his mother's book on America had been 'unjust' because 'she had seen what was distasteful in the manners of a young people, but had hardly recognised their energy',<sup>443</sup> and he listed 'energetic' as one of the qualities of his ideal 'of what men and women should be'.<sup>444</sup> In *The Way We Live Now* Lady Carbury is nothing if not energetic. Like Trollope's mother, who wrote prolifically to support her family and prop up a weaker husband, Lady Carbury works night and day at her writing to keep money coming into the house. She resolves that 'nobody should ever accuse her justly of idleness' (TWLNL I. 147), and that 'whatever might happen she would persevere' (TWLNL I. 147). But Lady Carbury is driven by partisan emotion and love to meddle in things she does not understand and to work for the advancement of a useless son who is a parasite on society. For Trollope, the proper order, and gender balance, of society is reversed when luxury has corrupted and enervated certain sections of male society, so that a woman like Lady Carbury is forced to work for the parasite Felix, instead of vice versa. In fact this position contradicts the traditional view of the relation between women and luxury, a position which *The Times*, barely moving on from centuries of such discourse on the luxury issue, was still putting forward:

who can shut his eyes to the lamentable fact that the gentler and kindlier sex have a very great deal to do with that boundless and ruinous extravagance

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<sup>443</sup> Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography* (London: Penguin, 1996 (1883)), p.106. The autobiography was written in 1875-1876, but not published until 1883, after Trollope's death. Frances Trollope's American book was *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1833).

<sup>444</sup> *An Autobiography*, p.200.

which introduces all the vices, and disables all the virtues, even to decay and extinction?<sup>445</sup>

*The Times* thought that men were being driven into dishonesty and the disease of speculation in order to satisfy the luxurious appetites of their wives, a position also taken in an earlier story about the stock market which featured in the Trollope-edited (1866-70) *Saint Paul's Magazine*.<sup>446</sup> But in *The Way We Live Now* the situation is reversed, as Lady Carbury, abstemious herself, is driven to various money-making schemes to support the ruinous extravagance of her son. "If he be a man he would sooner break stones than live on you" (TWWLN I. 62), Roger tells her; but Felix is perfectly content to live on his mother.

So as Felix is incapable of achieving anything for himself, Lady Carbury must build his empire for him, and she conjurs up the idea of Rome to remind herself to be patient in this task. When she brings Melmotte and Mr Broune together, in the hope that Broune might talk up Melmotte in his newspaper, they are cool towards each other. However, she 'told herself at the moment that Rome was not built in a day. She would have been better satisfied certainly if she could have laid a few more bricks on this day. Perseverance, however, was the thing wanted' (TWWLN I. 281). In a continuation of the metaphor, because of her devotion to him Lady Carbury also knows that should the empire fall, so will she: 'If he should fall utterly, she must fall with him (TWWLN I. 215). It is up to Lady Carbury to promote the scheme of a marriage to Melmotte's daughter, since her son can barely rouse himself to the necessary effort:

She entertained in her brain a somewhat confused notion that if she could only bestir herself in the right direction and could induce her son to open his eyes to his own advantage, very great things might be achieved, so that wealth might become his handmaid and luxury the habit and the right of his life. (TWWLN I. 278)

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<sup>445</sup> 'Editorial', *The Times*, 11 August 1875, p.9.

<sup>446</sup> See 'The Stock Exchange', *Saint Paul's Magazine*, September 1870, pp.605-618.

Although Lady Carbury wants this luxury for her spendthrift and dissolute son, and not for herself, she can be ruthless in this quest, dismissing as irrelevant any notions as to the immorality or criminality of Melmotte's methods of acquiring wealth:

People said of him that he had framed and carried out long premeditated and deeply laid schemes for the ruin of those who had trusted him, that he had swallowed up the property of all who had come in contact with him, that he was fed with the blood of widows and children; – but what was all this to Lady Carbury? (TWLWN I. 68)

So although Lady Carbury defies the female spendthrift stereotype, her son's corruption turns her into another female stereotype, the woman behind the throne, the woman with a vicarious and immense ambition for a useless son. She is by no means a 'royal and luxurious sinner' (TWLWN I. 2), like the 'Criminal Queens' she writes about. However, there is a little something of the cruelty associated with the powerful and luxurious women of the Roman Empire in her perverse delight in her son's bad behaviour: 'She was almost proud of his vices, and had taken delight in hearing of doings which if not vicious of themselves had been ruinous from their extravagance' (TWLWN I. 16). Lady Carbury is finally redeemed through her marriage to Mr Broune – 'The best right a woman has is the right to a husband',<sup>447</sup> Trollope had written – in which her great energy will be contained and directed: 'was it not a career enough for any woman to be the wife of such a man, to receive his friends, and to shine with his reflected glory?' (TWLWN II. 465).

So a civilized and luxurious Britain had enervated higher-class masculinity, leading to a misapplication and misdirection of female energy. If Lady Carbury's energies have been misapplied in a luxurious age, the American Mrs Hurtle, that other hugely energetic woman in *The Way We Live Now*, is the victim of an opposite circumstance. Although it was possible to view America as one of the most advanced

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<sup>447</sup>Anthony Trollope, *North America* (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1968 (1862)), p.326.

nations in the world, in terms of its developed market society and its democratic politics, in *The Way We Live Now* it is also seen as still new and developing.<sup>448</sup> Whilst the American characters are proud of America's newness and virility, Trollope sees barbarism in the violent and gun-toting West of America, where Mrs Hurtle originates from. Mrs Hurtle certainly has the positive energy that Trollope identified with America, and, like Lady Carbury, she is never idle: 'in every respect she was an energetic woman, using her time for some purpose, either good or bad, not sleeping it away in bed' (TWLWN I. 371). But Mrs Hurtle's energy has a propensity to wildness: 'there was a bit of the wild cat in her breeding' (TWLWN I. 355); and she sees herself in this way: 'she knew herself to be wild, – fitter for the woods than for polished cities' (TWLWN II. 379). Her wildness has manifested itself in a very masculine violence (she admits to shooting a man, in self-defence, in Oregon; and is accused of, though denies, fighting a duel with her husband), and her imagined revenge on Hetta Carbury as the new object of Paul's love is representative:

She did not doubt that she could cause the shipwreck were she so minded. She could certainly have her revenge after that fashion [the writing of a letter showing Paul in the worst light]. But it was a woman's fashion, and, as such, did not recommend itself to Mrs. Hurtle's feelings. A pistol or a horsewhip, a violent seizing by the neck, with sharp taunts and bitter-ringing words, would have made the fitting revenge. (TWLWN II. 381)

But the narrator is sympathetic to Mrs Hurtle, whose wildness is a result of her tough, less civilized, background: 'circumstances had made her what she was. Circumstances had been cruel to her' (TWLWN I. 450).

If a luxurious, effete nation could produce effete men, a less-developed, barbarous one could produce masculine women. Mrs Hurtle's background has been too masculine, not yet refined (or feminine) enough to enhance her womanly nature. In

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<sup>448</sup> For a summary of British ideas of America in the nineteenth century, see Ella Dzelzainis, 'The Victorians and America', in *Charles Dickens in Context*, ed. by Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp.211-218.

fact, she finds that she prefers the softer, more ‘civilized’ environment of England – ‘in her heart of hearts she liked the somewhat stupid tranquillity of the life she saw, comparing it with the rough tempests of her past days’ (TWLWN II. 439) – despite feeling fitter for the woods. She tells Paul that she

”used to think of better people, perhaps of softer people, of things that should be clean and sweet and gentle, – of things that would smell of lavender instead of wild garlic. [...] of fair, feminine women, – of women who would be scared by seeing what I saw, who would die rather than do what I did”. (TWLWN II. 445)

She thinks that “‘a woman here [in England] is protected’” (TWLWN I. 445). Indeed, Trollope saw a chivalrous state of relations between men and women as the ideal. Women were ‘the nursing mothers of mankind, and in that law their fate is written with all its joys and all its privileges. It is for men to make those joys as lasting and those privileges as perfect as may be’.<sup>449</sup> This ideal was perfectly consonant with an advanced and commercial state of civilization, as long as the higher classes of men avoided falling into effeminacy. In a newer, and more barbarous, stage of civilization, women were not better off (as Fisker claims). Mrs Hurtle has been forced to fend for herself because the men around her have not yet become refined and polished enough to treat women chivalrously.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, the energy of women, especially working-class women, is one of the saving graces in a world of corruption and decay. Working-class female characters on the margins of society such as Lizzie Hexam, Jenny Wren and Betty Higden are models of industrious virtue, often propping up useless, ungrateful or weaker men (Jenny’s drunken father, Lizzie’s hardened brother, Betty’s kind-hearted but idiotic Sloppy). Lizzie, Jenny and Betty must work (for pay) through necessity and thus their energies are not misdirected. The principal danger for women in a luxurious

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<sup>449</sup> *North America*, p.326.

age was the hardening of heart associated with money-love, and although this was not an exclusively female trait, it was seen as particularly abhorrent in women, who for Dickens were meant to be gentle, loving and self-sacrificing. Bella Wilfer, cured of her love of money, blossoms into the ideal Dickensian housewife, with 'a perfect genius for home' (OMF 644), and is greatly energetic in her home duties (OMF 655). Sophronia Lamble, marrying for money only to discover her husband has none, is trapped in a loveless marriage and is forced into permanently hardening her heart and directing her energies into scheming against other people in order to survive.

## II

Mrs Hurtle is one of the bravest as well as one of the most energetic characters in *The Way We Live Now*, however dangerous, perverse or misdirected that bravery might be in one of the 'fairer' sex. But it was the bravery, or lack of it in a luxurious age, of the male sex that was the greater cause of anxiety. As we know, courage was an essential component of manliness within the classical republican paradigm. It was thought that courage eroded as men became feminised by luxury: too engrossed in the stuff of life, they set too high a value on it, and grew unwilling and unable to sacrifice that life for the good of the state. With the rise of economic man in the nineteenth century, a greater value was placed on the stuff of life, and courage came to be de-emphasised as a primary male virtue. Trollope had made the historical point in *The New Zealander*: 'In days of yore [...] the main duty of an aristocrat was to lead his people in war. [...] Things are changed now. [...] the chief warrior is by no means the chief man, nor is he considered to have the worthiest employment' (p.15).

In *War, the Army and Victorian Literature* (1998), John Peck explores the shifting attitudes to military life in the nineteenth century. A decline in the aristocratic military code, which had governed both military life itself and wider society, following



the Napoleonic wars was reflected in the new, domestic concerns of novelists. And even though the Crimean war (1853-1856) and the Indian Mutiny (1857) challenged British lack of interest in military matters, related outcries were short-lived. Peck cites Thackeray's interest in military affairs as exceptional, seeing it as a reflection of the author's struggle to let go of that aristocratic military code in favour of commercial and domestic man,<sup>450</sup> much as I find Thackeray clinging on to Georgian excess in *Vanity Fair*. Peck charts the 'remarkable revival of militarism' (p.128) in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, exemplified by the rise of Jingoism and imperialism, and this is clearly reflected in late Victorian literature. Kipling, for example, is seen to 'reinvent [...] an aristocratic military code for a democratic age' (p.144), making it now applicable to the middle and working, as well as upper, classes.

*Our Mutual Friend* and especially *The Way We Live Now* are on the cusp of this changing attitude to military matters. In some ways Dickens and Trollope represent the typical Victorian 'liberal anti-militarism' (p.186) which Peck identifies as following the Wellington era. Like the early proponents of commercial civilization in the eighteenth century, such as David Hume,<sup>451</sup> they also tried to assert that bravery and commerce were not incompatible. Thus Trollope in *The New Zealander*: 'there is certainly no reason why courage should be lessened by civilisation or why the powers of the body should not go hand in hand with those of the mind' (p.86). Unfortunately, the days of warfare were not yet over, but in spite of the outcry over the sometimes disastrous conduct of the Crimean war, 'It is well for us now that there is so much of

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<sup>450</sup> See chapter 3, 'Thackeray and the Culture of War', in John Peck, *War, the Army and Victorian Literature* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).

<sup>451</sup> Hume, 'Of Refinement in the Arts' (1760), in *David Hume: Writings on Economics*, ed. by Rotwein, pp.19-32. Hume thought that in a luxurious age men lost their ferocity (so becoming more humane) but not their martial spirit or inclination to defend their country.

the bull-dog breed among us [...] and we should be thankful that our soldiers are so true and good; that military order among us is still so dominant a feeling' (p.87).

Dickens, too, did not appear to see a mismatch between a modern, commercial civilization and the arts of war. In 1859 he gave a speech to the Commercial Travellers' Schools association, congratulating them on what appeared to be a happy combination of the two. His sentiments were expressed in the context of the formation of the Volunteer Rifle Corps in May 1859, a measure enacted under the old Militia Act, partly in response to alarm at a potential war with France and a potential invasion. Dickens said:

It was because they who sat there were devoted to the arts and ways of peace, and because they exhibited all the signs of outward prosperity, that he congratulated them upon the manly and national spirit which was then stirring amongst them as well as amongst our professed defenders by sea and land. [...] The plain meaning of the Rifle movement was but the revival of the old brave spirit of our forefathers, and a proof that all who had a stake in the country – and who that had life in it had not? – were ready if occasion required to fight and die in its defence.<sup>452</sup>

Dickens, then, was impressed (and even surprised) by this demonstration of manly and national spirit despite the association's commitment to commerce and wealth, as if ordinarily an opposite result would be the case. The fact that this needed stressing – and was stressed by both Dickens and Trollope – shows that although the courage debates had moved on since the eighteenth century, concerns about a perceived connection between commerce and cowardice continued. And in the two novels under examination there are signs of the approaching new (or re-newed) military code, or rather strains of concern that such a code would no longer be possible in a luxurious age, and that this would threaten Britain's liberty in a less secure international climate.

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<sup>452</sup> Speech to Commercial Travellers' Schools, 22 December 1859, in *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*, ed. by K.J. Fielding (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988), pp.288-293 (p.289).

So despite Trollope's earlier optimism about the British 'bull-dog breed', it is the outsider, Mr Melmotte, who displays most strength and courage in *The Way We Live Now*, a strength and courage that contrast markedly with the enervated state of the British aristocracy. As an outsider Melmotte is a metaphor for a potential external conqueror of an enfeebled nation, one which is already showing signs of collapsing from within. We know that Roger Carbury, as the model gentlemanly squire, is 'a man of high honour and a noble courage' (TWLWN II. 15), but his courage is not called to the test in an obvious way. It is made clear that degraded aristocrat Sir Felix is a coward, or, according to Mrs Hurtle, "'hadn't the spirit of a mouse in his bosom'" (TWLWN II. 287). He has previously sold out of a fashionable army regiment, where he had quarrelled with a brother officer, and 'when the moment came in which a man's heart should have produced manly conduct, he had first threatened and had then shown the white feather' (TWLWN I. 19). His one great chance is an elopement with Marie, and the narrator quotes Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* to emphasise the pivotal nature of the moment and the need for Felix to take courage and seize his opportunity: "'there is a tide in the affairs of men/Which taken at the flood leads on to fortune'" (TWLWN I. 386). But even though Marie has taken on the masculine role by arranging everything, and Felix need only passively follow instructions, he gets drunk at his club and botches the attempt.

It is Melmotte who has the courage and daring of a Julius Caesar, a man who could crush underfoot the mouse-like Felix. Melmotte is corrupt and criminal, but he is a form of warrior, a commercial warrior. Melmotte is an active man of business, and thus while he possesses and deals in great wealth, he is not personally softened by it. He has the great energy that Walter Bagehot in *Lombard Street* (1873) identified with the new class of commercial men, which contrasted with the older merchant princes who lapsed into routine. Whilst lower standards of morality were a serious problem,

‘the rough and vulgar structure of English commerce is the secret of its life’.<sup>453</sup> Again and again Melmotte’s courage is stressed. After displaying momentary fright at his dinner for the Emperor of China, when he recognises his increasingly precarious situation, he resolves that ‘nothing should cow him’ (TWLWN II.105), and that ‘there should be no more shrinking such as that. When people talked of him they should say that he was at least a man’ (TWLWN II.113). As he destroys some incriminating papers, he stiffens himself like a general preparing for battle:

There was no one to see him now, – but he was acting under a resolve that at no moment, either when alone, or in a crowd, or when suddenly called upon for words, – not even when the policemen with their first hints of arrest should come upon him, – would he betray himself by the working of a single muscle, or the loss of a drop of blood from his heart. He would go through it, always armed, without a sign of shrinking. It had to be done, and he would do it. (TWLWN II.119)

After going to Covent Garden polling booth, ‘determined to face everybody and everything’ (TWLWN II.120), he goes into the City, where ‘whatever enmities there might be, or whatever perils, he would face them’ (TWLWN II. 22). As his situation deteriorates, he discovers that he has been elected as Member for Westminster, and determines again ‘to put his shoulder to the wheel, and [that he] would yet conquer his enemies’ (TWLWN II.135). He resolves that ‘at any rate, he would not despair. There was a fight to be fought yet, and he would fight it to the end’ (TWLWN II.136). Some days later he takes his place in Parliament: ‘he would be stopped by no phantom fears, – [...] he would lose nothing by want of personal pluck’ (TWLWN II.174); and even attempts to make a speech: ‘he was full of the lesson which he was now ever teaching himself. Nothing should cow him. Whatever was to be done by brazen-faced audacity he would do’ (TWLWN II.178-179). Even as he botches the attempt, ‘the courage of the man was too high to allow him to be altogether quelled at once’ (TWLWN II.180),

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<sup>453</sup> Walter Bagehot, *Lombard Street: A Description of the Money Market*, new edn (London: John Murray, 1915 (1873), p.10.

and although he gives up on his speech he is glad that ‘he had made a great effort, and had at any rate exhibited his courage’ (TWWLN II.181).

Melmotte fights to the last, not ‘afraid to meet any man, let the man come with what thunderbolts in his hand he might’ (TWWLN II. 300-301). He knows that the end is coming but goes bravely to the House: ‘He was about to have a crushing fall, – but the world should say that he had fallen like a man’ (TWWLN II. 304). Putting on a brave and seemingly arrogant face, Melmotte takes his seat, and then adjourns to the disapproving dining room with ‘almost majestic steps’ (TWWLN II. 316). Making the Roman connection explicit, the narrator comments:

with all the world now gone before him, with nothing before him but the extremist misery which the indignation of offended laws could inflict, [he] was able to spend the last moments of his freedom in making a reputation at any rate for audacity. It was thus that Augustus Melmotte wrapped his toga around him before his death! (TWWLN II. 316)

Having drunk too much alcohol, Melmotte’s natural courage is increased and he tries to make a speech, but finds that he has no words. Recovering from a stumble he then ‘toppled headlong over the shoulders of Mr. Beauchamp Beauclerk, who was sitting in front of him’ (TWWLN II. 318). He has now literalised the metaphor of the fall of Rome with a tragi-comic and very public fall in the senate, or House. The narrator wonders if ‘he might have wrapped his toga around him better perhaps had he remained at home’ (TWWLN II. 318). But he manages to return home unaided, and there to commit suicide: ‘Drunk as he had been, – [...] still he was able to deliver himself from the indignities and penalties to which the law might have subjected him by a dose of prussic acid’ (TWWLN II. 319).

As cowardly as it might seem for Melmotte to evade his punishment at the hands of the law, and the just retribution for his victims, the narrator is sympathetic: ‘he had assured himself indeed not very long ago, – that he would brave it all like a

man. But we none of us know what load we can bear, and what would break our backs' (TWLWN II. 357). There is also a certain bravery and dignity in the act of suicide itself, its Roman analogy made clear by the toga references. Melmotte's ending is in marked contrast to the 'mouse' Felix's response to his disastrous failure to elope with Marie, as 'no man lived less likely to cut his own throat or blow out his own brains (TWLWN I. 213). The image of suicide does flit briefly through Felix's mind, but he is too cowardly and apathetic:

he had heard of suicide. If ever it could be well that a man should cut his own throat, surely the time had come for him now. But as this idea presented itself to him he simply gathered the clothes around him and tried to sleep. The death of Cato would hardly have for him persuasive charms. (TWLWN II.12)

The words used by Trollope here are reminiscent of those he had used a few years earlier to describe the death of Caesar in his introduction to his own translation of Caesar's *Commentaries* (though Caesar was murdered, rather than committing suicide like his rival, Cato). Trollope relates how Caesar was struck to death by Brutus and the other conspirators, and finally 'fell at the foot of Pompey's statue, gathering his garments around him'.<sup>454</sup> The closeness of the image to Felix's retreat under the bedclothes ironically points up all the more the polar opposite tendencies of a heroic figure like Caesar and a cowardly one like Felix.

The use of a similar image applied to Melmotte's end, however, is more respectful (despite his slightly comic fall in the House), and the images of him 'wrapping his toga around him' also resonate with descriptions of Caesar's end. In Plutarch's *Lives* (one of the works Wegg reads to the Boffins after Gibbon in *Our Mutual Friend*), for example, Caesar fights his attackers bravely but finally 'covered

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<sup>454</sup> Anthony Trollope, *The Commentaries of Caesar*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1875), p.182.

his head with his toga and sank to the ground'.<sup>455</sup> It is Melmotte who resembles Caesar in his courage, audacity, ambition and warrior-like mentality. Melmotte's (self-given) first name, 'Augustus', points more obviously to an analogy with Caesar's heir and immediate successor, Augustus (Octavian) Caesar. But the two figures were closely linked, both having 'worked to the same end, the destruction of that oligarchy which was called a Republic in Rome'.<sup>456</sup> Augustus was essentially Rome's first emperor, and he was given the name Augustus, meaning 'the exalted', when he was made such by the Senate in 27 BC. So there is also something in Melmotte's choice of name which shows up his pomposity and ambition, as well as there being comic echoes of the eighteenth-century monarchs who were styled on Augustus. In *The Irish Sketch Book* Thackeray mocks the 'pert statue of George III, in a Roman toga, simpering and turning out his toes',<sup>457</sup> which he found in the Dublin Exchange.

As shown, military metaphors are repeatedly used to describe Melmotte, and Mrs Hurtle likens him to "a great general [who] rises above humanity when he sacrifices an army to conquer a nation" (TWLNL I. 245-246). More specifically she compares him to some of the great generals of the era: "Of course such a man will be abused. People have said that Napoleon was a coward, and Washington a traitor" (TWLNL I. 246). As I discussed in chapter 1, the first Napoleon was compared to Julius Caesar, as revolutionary France moved from the model of Republican Rome to that of the Roman Empire. Caesar was not generally a popular historical figure in the early nineteenth century given this association with Napoleonic ambition and corresponding ideas of empire and tyranny. But, as Norman Vance explains, Caesar's

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<sup>455</sup> Plutarch, *Fall of the Roman Republic: Six Lives By Plutarch*, trans. by Rex Warner, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Penguin, 1972), p.306.

<sup>456</sup> *The Commentaries of Caesar*, p.10.

<sup>457</sup> *The Irish Sketch Book*, p.20.

fortunes gradually improved after mid-century, and by the time Trollope wrote *The Way We Live Now* to dislike him was more of a minority view (p.78). The figure of Cicero tended to be opposed to that of Caesar, with the former being ‘presented as the defender of senatorial aristocracy and traditional Roman liberties lost forever under Caesar and the Empire’ (p.78). Trollope was a great admirer of Cicero, writing a laudatory biography of him, *The Life of Cicero* (1880). It is in this context that Vance posits an ‘Old-fashioned Anthony Trollope’ (p.78), who ‘in Cicero, the cultivated defender of a doomed rational liberty, [...] found a kindred spirit who would have joined him in deploring *The Way We Live Now*’ (p.79).

And yet, Trollope’s admiration for Cicero in no way precluded an admiration for Caesar, an admiration he maintained throughout his life. At the ages of thirty-five and sixty he was describing him as probably ‘the greatest man who ever lived’.<sup>458</sup> And in his *Commentaries* (written at age fifty-five) he said: ‘of all men who have lived, and whose deeds are known to us, Julius Caesar did most to move the world’.<sup>459</sup> However, to highlight Trollope’s admiration for Caesar is not to suggest that he was an exponent of ‘Caesarism’, a cultish admiration of Caesar as the heroic strong man, which grew with his nineteenth-century rehabilitation.<sup>460</sup> Indeed, he was concerned about ‘that doctrine as to the necessity of Caesars’,<sup>461</sup> which was being preached by Napoleon III

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<sup>458</sup> See, respectively, *The Letters of Anthony Trollope*, ed. by N. John Hall, 2 vols (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), I, p.23 (Summer 1850); and *An Autobiography*, p.68.

<sup>459</sup> *The Commentaries of Caesar*, p.5-6.

<sup>460</sup> For a discussion of British attitudes to Caesar and their association with intellectual disillusionment with the liberal state, see Frank M. Turner, ‘British Politics and the Demise of the Roman Republic: 1700-1939’, *The Historical Journal*, 29 (1986), 577-599.

<sup>461</sup> ‘The Election of M. Prevost-Paradol’ (unsigned letter), *Pall Mall Gazette*, 12 April 1865, pp.3-4 (p.3). Napoleon III had also written a biography of Caesar (1865-66) implicitly comparing the latter to both Napoleon I and himself. For an interesting comparison between Melmotte and Napoleon III, see Robert Tracy, *Trollope’s Later Novels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp.170-171.



in France; and he also compared his interest in Caesar's career to contemporary anxieties about the power and ambition of Germany under Bismarck.<sup>462</sup> The point was that, if vigilance was not maintained, an enervated Britain would be unable to defend itself against a Caesar-like conqueror or produce its own Caesar, should the need arise.

For Dickens in *Our Mutual Friend* the question of courage and valour seems mute. Society is already half collapsed, exhausted. Writing to his great friend, the actor, Macready, during the time of the Crimean War, Dickens's frustration at public apathy (leaving aside for now the question of aristocratic incompetence) led him to state that 'we are on the down-hill road to being conquered'.<sup>463</sup> And although a few years later he would be praising (at least publically) the national spirit shown in the Rifle movement (as discussed above), in the world of *Our Mutual Friend* it is hard to imagine a public show of valour in such a fractured, disparate society of individuals. Dickens is not optimistic. In this context Silas Wegg serves as a comic parody of a home-grown Caesar, as he embarks on his own futile attempt to build an empire out of the ashes. Wegg is asked by Mr Boffin to read to the Boffins Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, and so the theme clings to him as he pursues his campaign, even though he associates himself with the rise rather than the fall of empires. As he makes his way to the Boffins' bower, Wegg is literally and metaphorically on his way: 'Silas Wegg, being on his road to the Roman Empire, approaches it by way of Clerkenwell' (OMF 72), and on another occasion is to be seen 'stumping leisurely to the Roman Empire' (OMF 175). When Boffin introduces Wegg to Mr Rokesmith, he stresses unintentionally Wegg's career ambitions: "'as to my literary man's duties, they're clear. Professionally he declines and falls, and as a friend he drops into poetry'" (OMF

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<sup>462</sup> See *An Autobiography*, p.68.

<sup>463</sup> *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Storey, VII, pp.714-716 (p.716) (4 October 1855).

92). When Wegg and Venus are discussing their plans to blackmail Boffin, Wegg, like Lady Carbury, remembers that empire-building takes time: ““Rome, brother, [...] a city which (it may not be generally known) originated in twins and a wolf, and ended in Imperial marble: wasn’t built in a day”” (OMF 452). And in this ambition he plans to usurp the now rich Boffin, for whom he has “”borne the Roman yoke”” (OMF 619): ““Is it for him that I have declined and falled night after night?”” (OMF 550). Like Melmotte, Wegg falls through overweening ambition, as Venus becomes disgusted by his greed and reveals his true nature to Mr Boffin. Wegg has ‘pursue[d] the downward fortunes of those enervated and corrupted masters of the world who were by this time on their last legs’ (OMF 279), and in this reads the latter stages of his own career. Rather than building his empire he has fulfilled his job description and professionally ‘declined and falled’.

### III

Both Wegg and Melmotte, then, fall through hubris, or their appetites become too big. The metaphor of appetite is an appropriate one given its association in the novels with issues of avarice, greed, and power. As we know, within the older luxury and corruption paradigm, appetites were liable to become insatiable, and insatiable appetites led to the downfall of civilizations. A distinction was drawn between need and desire, or necessity and luxury. Once the purposive nature of need was overturned, desire ran rampant and appetites became monstrous. As we saw in chapter 3 of this thesis, however, this discourse was transformed under the influence of political economy, under the terms of which desire was valorised as the defining ingredient of human nature, from which sprang the progress of civilization. This did not mean that the concept of luxury became free from taint. Instead, the terms on which the critique was based were changed to a question of allocation of resources. It could now be seen

as immoral for some sections of the community to have vast wealth whilst other, and larger, sections of the community were unable to satisfy even the basic appetite of hunger. Although desire was now valorised, this did not mean that indulgence was sanctioned. On the contrary, the Victorians prided themselves on the apparent control of their appetites, which was a sign of their progress as a civilization from the excessive and even barbarous appetites of their eighteenth-century forbears. In chapter 2 we saw Thackeray reacting against such rigid mores by celebrating excessive appetites in terms of alcohol and food, capturing a *joie de vivre* which he associated with the better aspects of eighteenth-century life. In *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Way We Live Now* appetites have again become dangerous, especially in their relation to money greed and the desire for the luxurious lifestyle money could buy: if not constrained these appetites might contribute to a societal fall on the Roman model.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, then, Wegg is wrought up to ‘such a pitch of insatiable appetite’ (OMF 464) for Boffin’s money that nothing but the latter’s whole fortune will satisfy him: ‘Such was the greed of the fellow, that his mind had shot beyond halves, two-thirds, three-fourths, and gone straight to spoliation of the whole’ (OMF 475-476). And he is not the only one who wants to feed off Boffin, the latter describing the aspirants as “a crew of plunderers, who would suck me dry by driblets” (OMF 449), with Rokesmith being such a one, “greedy and hungering” (OMF 560). In *The Way We Live Now* Melmotte is said to be a devourer, a man with voracious appetites. As we know, Lady Carbury ignores the rumours that he had ‘swallowed up the property of all who had come in contact with him, that he was fed with the blood of widows and children’ (TWLNLN I. 68).<sup>464</sup> Felix sees him as ‘this surfeited sponge of speculation,

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<sup>464</sup> The anti-Semitic connotations of this image should also be noted – the ‘blood libel’ – that is the idea that Jews wanted to murder and consume the blood of non-Jews (particularly children). See Anthony Julius, *Trials of the Diaspora: A History of Anti-Semitism in England* (Oxford: OUP, 2010).

this crammed commercial cormorant' (TWVLN I. 222); and Melmotte's downfall is attributed to him eating to bursting point. According to Herr Croll, Melmotte "'vas blow'd up vid bigness'" (TWVLN II. 449), and "'e bursted himself, [...]. E vas a great man; but the greater he grew he vas always less and less wise. E ate so much that he became too fat to see to eat his vittels'" (TWVLN II. 449). Melmotte has "'burst up'" (TWVLN I. 419), to use both Miles Grendall's and Fledgeby's expression for bankruptcy (in OMF 531).

As a foreigner operating commercially in Britain Melmotte's appetites are particularly suspect (over and above any more specific anti-Semitic sentiment related to Melmotte's possible status as a Jewish speculator). *The Times* thought that 'the country in general is now regarded as a prey upon which any number of vultures, scenting it from afar, may safely light and securely gorge themselves'.<sup>465</sup> But in fact Melmotte is only a more colourful and vivid representation of the insatiable appetites displayed by many people 'in these times of ours' (OMF 3) and according to 'the way we live now'. Melmotte might be a feeder but he is fed on in turn, as Roger Carbury points out: "because he has learned the art of making money, we not only put up with him, but settle upon his carcase as so many birds of prey" (TWVLN I. 138). *The Times* found the appetites of these feeders, particularly those of the higher classes, even more abhorrent and dangerous for being home-grown, with 'gentlemen of family and station competing for the honour of helping Canadian, American, French, and German adventurers to fleece English society'. These men, who became sham directors like the aristocrats in *The Way We Live Now*, were 'retained with a handsome fee to do the dirty work of men whom [they] have the best reasons for suspecting to be scoundrels, and so to ruin all whom [they] can induce to trust [them]'. It was this state of things that

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<sup>465</sup> 'Editorial', *The Times*, 11 August 1875, p.9.

would induce the fall along Roman lines: ‘This is the very thing described by the Roman satirist as the last mark of a social state past reform’.<sup>466</sup>

Indeed, the worst feeders in *The Way We Live Now* are those at the top of the pile, the enervated aristocracy. Felix Carbury’s appetites are especially voracious, and representative of many men of his class. His sister, Hetta, takes this for granted:

When she found that her little comforts were discontinued, and her moderate expenses curtailed, because he, having eaten up all that was his own, was now eating up also all that was his mother’s, she never complained. Henrietta had been taught to think that men in that rank of life in which she had been born always did eat up everything. (TWLWN I. 16)

And as Melmotte is said to be fed on the blood of widows and children, so Felix is literally eating his mother: ‘She was as good a pelican as ever allowed the blood to be torn from her own breast to satisfy the greed of her young [...]. This chick would take all as long as there was a drop left’ (TWLWN I. 215). And Mr Broune begs Lady Carbury to see sense: ‘‘He is eating you up, Lady Carbury’’ (TWLWN II. 18). Heiress-hunting is the recognised technique for a continued supply of food, as Lord Nidderdale and his father understand:

It had been an understood thing, since he had commenced life, that he was to marry an heiress. In such families as his, when such results have been achieved, it is generally understood that matters shall be put right by an heiress. It has become an institution, like primogeniture, and is almost as serviceable for maintaining the proper order of things. Rank squanders money; trade makes it; – and then trade purchases rank by re-gilding its splendour. The arrangement, as it affects the aristocracy generally, is well understood, and was quite approved of by the old marquis – so that he had felt himself to be justified in eating up the property, which his son’s future marriage would renew as a matter of course. (TWLWN II. 59)

One form of eating up that the higher classes take for granted is the acquisition of debt, or the ability ‘to live well on Nothing a Year’ (VF 418), as Thackeray puts it in *Vanity Fair*. They assume that repayment can be avoided indefinitely. Put broadly, it

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<sup>466</sup> ‘Editorial’, *The Times*, 11 August 1875, p.9.

is the notion that what the world has is theirs for the taking, even if it is the property of other people (in essence, stealing). As Dickens described the attitude of the devouring aristocracy in *A Tale of Two Cities*: ‘the earth and the fullness thereof are mine, saith Monseigneur’.<sup>467</sup> In *The Way We Live Now* Lord Nidderdale sums up the philosophy: “I like to live whether I’ve got money or not. And I fear I don’t have many scruples about paying” (TWLWN I. 359). Roger Carbury is disgusted by this sort of attitude in Felix: ‘To him it seemed that a gentleman was disgraced who owed money to a tradesman which he could not pay’ (TWLWN I. 59). But the non-payment of debts is no longer deemed ungentlemanly or disgraceful: ‘even into the Beargarden there had filtered, through the outer world, a feeling that people were not now bound to be so punctilious in the paying of money as they were a few years since’ (TWLWN II. 229). Although the Longstaffes are outraged by Melmotte’s failure to pay for the Pickering property, Melmotte knows that his behaviour in this respect is no worse than their own: ‘as to the simple debt, he cared little comparatively about that. Many fine men were walking about London who owed large sums of money which they could not pay’ (TWLWN II. 134).

It would seem from our discussion so far that in *The Way We Live Now* Trollope was more pessimistic about the aristocracy as a class than he had been 20 years earlier when writing *The New Zealander*. In *The Way We Live Now* the aristocracy is, variously, enervated, dissipated and cowardly, with voracious appetites. In *The New Zealander* Trollope had shared in a mid-century optimism that the days of a debauched elite were more or less over, that ‘the aristocracy of pleasure only [wa]s quickly becoming sufficiently unaristocratic’ (p.17). But this did not mean that positive change was not possible. In his autobiography, written shortly after the publication of *The Way We Live Now*, Trollope was still valuing the aristocracy as a class. Much as Thackeray

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<sup>467</sup>*A Tale of Two Cities*, p.101.

saw the need for a privileged elite able to pursue the 'social good' (fine arts and civilization), Trollope felt that 'the society of the well-born and of the wealthy will as a rule be worth seeking'<sup>468</sup> because of the education, information and graces that were imparted to them as a way of life. And even in *The Way We Live Now* positive change is signalled by Lord Nidderdale's impending reformation. Already 'good-natured and manly' (TWLWN II. 339), he vows to take a new path (albeit somewhat ironically with a bet):

"Live and learn, [...] I don't think anybody has liked the Beargarden so much as I have, but I shall never try this kind of thing again. I shall begin reading blue books tomorrow, and shall dine at the Carlton. Next session I shan't miss a day in the House, and I'll bet anybody a fiver that I make a speech before Easter. I shall take to claret at 20s. a dozen, and shall go about London on the top of an omnibus". (TWLWN II. 437)

But more fundamentally, Lord Nidderdale has learnt the lesson of luxury:

"I always felt it was too good to last. I fancy it doesn't do to make things too easy; – one has to pay so uncommon dear for them! And then, you know, when you've got things easy, then they get rowdy; – and, by George, before you know where you are, you find yourself among a lot of blackguards. If one wants to keep one's self straight, one has to work hard at it, one way or the other. I suppose it all comes from the fall of Adam". (TWLWN II. 437)

He has realised that there must be some degree of struggle and endurance in life, and that nothing is free for the taking without some kind of comeback. Just as Austen had seen that too much comfort could lead to dissatisfaction – one can 'grow cross from the wantonness of comfort' (*Emma*)<sup>469</sup> – so Lord Nidderdale sees that luxury and ease do not necessarily equal happiness. On the contrary, the insatiable nature of desire means that it grows into discontent and becomes rowdy – the mad riot we found still associated with luxury in Austen, and which could lead to criminal luxury (a lot of blackguards). Since the biblical fall, mankind, like his creation, civilization, was

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<sup>468</sup> *An Autobiography*, p.111.

<sup>469</sup> *Emma*, p.23.

naturally prone to corruption, but one could struggle against this and work hard to keep oneself aright.

We know Dickens's attitude to the aristocracy as a class, though in *Our Mutual Friend* they are not his principal target, simply because in keeping with the mood of the novel they seem already collapsed. As Andrew Sanders has pointed out, 'in a certain way his last completed novel suggests that the old nobility and its pretensions are defunct'. Dickens 'dispensed with representations of aristocratic privilege, class oppression and institutional bumbling[;] with Melvin Twemlow he has replaced his swaggering Dedlocks, Evremondes and Barnacles with a faded minor member of a noble family'.<sup>470</sup> 'Society' now comprises a mishmash of people of doubtful character and background, and the gentle Twemlow, who lives on the edges (above a stable yard), finds himself confused and bewildered by this new breed. This new society is every bit as craving and greedy as the former, and so will collapse in its turn. In fact the greed of society is now so monumental it has become cannibalistic. So called Society, with a capital S, is really savagery under a civilized veneer. When Mortimer attends his last society dinner at the Veneerings, who will shortly be bankrupt, Lady Tippins hails him as the "Long-banished Robinson Crusoe" (OMF 771), just returned from his island, asking "how did you leave the savages?" (OMF 772). Mortimer responds: "They were becoming civilised when I left Juan Fernandez, [...] At least, they were eating one another, which looked like it" (OMF 772).

Dickens and Trollope also associate the eating frenzy with the financial speculation and shares mania. In *Our Mutual Friend* the stockbrokers are literal feeders: they 'all ate and drank a great deal; and made bets in eating and drinking'

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<sup>470</sup> Andrew Sanders, 'The Aristocracy', in *Charles Dickens in Context*, ed. by Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp.252-259 (p.259).



(OMF 246), and metaphorical ones, as they feed off gullible investors. Everyone wants to be rich, and shares, as promising a quick route to riches, have become the most important thing in society: ‘As is well known to the wise in their generation, traffic in Shares is the one thing to have to do with in this world’ (OMF 107). The gullible investors, or ‘smaller vermin’ (OMF107), are seduced ‘as under the influence of henbane or opium’ (OMF 107) into the share-buying frenzy: ‘Relieve us of our money, scatter it for us, buy us, sell us, ruin us, only, we beseech ye, take rank among the powers of the earth, and fatten on us!’(OMF 107). It is the larger vermin, the stockbrokers, who for Dickens were replacing the aristocracy as the omnivorous class. Trollope’s aristocracy is still alive if not well in *The Way We Live Now* and is still omnivorous, but the rest of society are also hungry for gain through speculation. Fisker and Melmotte will take advantage of ‘the appetite for such stock as theirs’ (TWLNL I. 82), rather than worry about the South Central Pacific and Mexican railway as a concrete reality. As *The Times* put it, ‘English society has allowed its greediness for exorbitant gains to hurry it blindfold into the trap’.<sup>471</sup>

Trollope had been instigated to write *The Way We Live Now* by this sort of financial behaviour, ‘what [he] conceived to be the commercial profligacy of the age’,<sup>472</sup> and he and Dickens had many real-life models on which to base their financial villains.<sup>473</sup> In D. Morier Evans’s account of the financial crimes – ‘High Art’ crime, as he called it – and villains of the era, he blamed the luxury of the age and the desire to acquire it quickly. As we saw in chapter 3 of this thesis, the expensive cost of living, that is the perceived need for a luxurious lifestyle, was thought to lead to a male

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<sup>471</sup> ‘Editorial’, *The Times*, 11 August 1875, p.9.

<sup>472</sup> *An Autobiography*, p.224.

<sup>473</sup> In *The Hell of the English*, Barbara Weiss gives a detailed account of the notorious scandals and criminals of the era, as well as of the changes in financial and corporate law which helped to create a climate that encouraged them.

reluctance to marry and a corresponding increase in prostitution. Evans thought that criminal tendencies were not restricted to a few villainous individuals but were

so many indices of a depreciated, and apparently bad, moral atmosphere that has of late pervaded the whole of the commercial world. The fact stands self-evident that the ruling passion is the grand desire to make money expeditiously, for the purpose of gratifying luxurious propensities, or of indulging in imposing ostentation.<sup>474</sup>

For Evans ‘the artificial necessity for expenditure comes first, and [is] the beginning of financial crime’,<sup>475</sup> so a luxurious – ‘artificial’ – lifestyle has become needful, and in its insatiability is driving people to crime. Thus it has never occurred to Melmotte to be honest: ‘Not to cheat, not to be a scoundrel, not to live more luxuriously than others by cheating more brilliantly, was a condition of things to which his mind had never turned itself’ (TWLNLN II. 295). Evans thought that if these dangerous appetites were not somehow curbed – ‘unless the extravagant and pretentious habits of the age are brought within more restrained limits’ – then his record of current crimes would be ‘only as a single page in a vast and ever increasing history of the decline and fall of mercantile morality throughout the civilized world’.<sup>476</sup> Evans does not suggest how extravagant appetites might be curtailed; moral pressure seemed the only palliative given that calls for sumptuary legislation were no longer valid. But given the insatiable nature of luxurious appetites, the prognosis was not optimistic.

The greed for money, then, is at the heart of most of the overgrown appetites in these two novels. Because of a perceived need to spend extravagantly and live luxuriously, the spendthrift is the typical manifestation of this greed, as presented in *The Way We Live Now* with examples such as Felix and the rest of the Beargarden

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<sup>474</sup> D. Morier Evans, *Facts, Failures, and Frauds: Revelations, Financial, Mercantile, Criminal* (London: Groombridge & Sons, 1859), p.5.

<sup>475</sup> Evans, p.5.

<sup>476</sup> Evans, p.5.

crowd. But the appetite of avarice was equally thought to manifest itself in the figure of the miser, as we find with Boffin (as fake miser) in *Our Mutual Friend*. F. S. Merryweather, author of one of Boffin's favourite books, *Lives and Anecdotes of Misers* (1850), saw the appetites of the miser and the spendthrift as being a 'species of that same covetous feeling'.<sup>477</sup> Thus gambling could be seen as an equivalent to hoarding – making Felix, financial speculators and Boffin subject to the same urges – both being 'indications of an undue excitement of the acquisitive propensity'.<sup>478</sup> In *Capital* (1867) Marx made a similar comparison. Money was essentially useful for what it could buy, but in the miser the appetite for what money could buy had simply been replaced with an appetite for the buying substance itself – money. So 'the hoarder [...] makes a sacrifice of the lusts of the flesh to his gold fetish'.<sup>479</sup> The sexual analogy is clear. As we discovered in chapter 3 of this thesis, the acquisitive instinct could be seen as an equivalent to or substitute for the sexual one. Indeed, Merryweather describes avarice, whether in its spendthrift or miserly form, as an 'ungodly lust' and a 'grovelling lust';<sup>480</sup> and in *Our Mutual Friend* Wegg and Venus fall into a 'kind of pecuniary swoon' (OMF 456) at the tales of Merryweather's misers and their potential analogy to hidden treasure in Boffin's bower.

Both Merryweather and Marx thought that the miserly appetite was as insatiable as its spendthrift or sensuous version. For the former it was the 'insatiable thirst of this

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<sup>477</sup> F. Somner Merryweather, *Lives and Anecdotes of Misers; or the Passion of Avarice Displayed: In the Parsimonious Habits, Unaccountable Lives and Remarkable Deaths of the Most Notorious Misers of All Ages, with a Few Words on Frugality and Saving* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Co, 1850), p.21.

<sup>478</sup> Merryweather, p.134.

<sup>479</sup> *Capital*, I, p.85.

<sup>480</sup> Merryweather, pp. 13, 80.

inordinate passion'.<sup>481</sup> For the latter this insatiability was because money as the universal representative of material wealth (or exchange value) was unlimited in its usefulness; yet at the same time always limited as to amounts: 'This antagonism between the quantitative limits of money and its qualitative boundlessness, continually acts as a spur to the hoarder in his Sisyphus-like labour of accumulating'.<sup>482</sup> Thus the misers featured in Merryweather's book believe they are poor, and thus 'Mr Boffin, with his appetite for Misers whetted instead of satiated' (OMF 441), suggests that "some of us will be dying in a workhouse next" (OMF 447). Merryweather's 'anxieties and feverish excitement which [the] passion for gold produced'<sup>483</sup> in the miser John Elwes also find their counterpart in the feverish energy of Dicken's stockbrokers, as discussed above. All these 'indications of an undue excitement of the acquisitive propensity',<sup>484</sup> then, show a nation in a state of pathology – disturbed, unbalanced, unhealthy. The appetite for wealth and luxury – whether it is the urge to make it, hoard it or consume it – has become all-encompassing, monstrous. There is little room left for nobler, unselfish virtues, such as thinking of others, or of the greater political good, and the pathological state of the nation might lead to its death.

It has become difficult to discuss money in the Victorian novel without sounding trite, or, at least, without accusing the Victorians of triteness. As Tara McGann puts it: 'for what Victorian novel finds in financial speculation anything other than a sign of social corruption, and which takes a stance other than stinging

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<sup>481</sup> Merryweather, p.176.

<sup>482</sup> *Capital*, I, p.85.

<sup>483</sup> Merryweather, p.140.

<sup>484</sup> Merryweather, p.134.

indictment?<sup>485</sup> McGann refers to speculation specifically but we might substitute the love of money generally. So in *Our Mutual Friend* Bella must be cured of her money infatuation: “how terrible the fascination of money is! [...] I have money always in my thoughts and my desires: and the whole life I place before myself is money, money, money, and what money can make of life!” (OMF 435). Bella’s cure is achieved through Boffin’s fake metamorphosis as a hard-hearted miser, which puts a mirror up to Bella’s own greed. And in *The Way We Live Now* Melmotte must be a swindler and must fall. The world flocks to him because of his reputed ‘outrageous prosperity’ (TWLWN I. 19), a wealth that was ‘generally supposed to be fathomless, bottomless, endless’ (TWLWN I. 19), so much so that ‘money was the very breath of Melmotte’s nostrils, and therefore his breath was taken for money’ (TWLWN I. 325). The vast amounts associated with him are not only too good to be true, not quite right; they are also somehow vulgar and even obscene.

Critics such as Christopher Herbert have explored how this ‘stinging indictment’ of money love in Victorian novels is often figured through analogies between money/gold and dirt/faeces (so literal obscenity). Christianity enjoined its followers to abjure riches, to be ‘not greedy of filthy lucre’, for ‘they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition’.<sup>486</sup> In *Our Mutual Friend* the dirt/money equivalence is made explicit through the Harmon dust mounds and the potential gold within. Merryweather’s tales of misers include that of Daniel Dancer – “he was a good ‘un” (OMF 448) – a close model for Boffin’s miser act. The inheritor of Dancer’s home, or

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<sup>485</sup> Tara McGann, ‘Literary Realism in the Wake of Business Cycle Theory: *The Way We Live Now* (1875)’, in *Victorian Literature and Finance*, ed. by Francis O’Gorman (Oxford: OUP, 2007), pp.133-156 (p.134).

<sup>486</sup> Christopher Herbert, ‘Filthy Lucre: Victorian ideas of money’, *Victorian Studies*, 44 (2002), 185-214.

‘heap of ruins’, finds vast sums of money amongst the filth, including in a dung heap in the cowhouse.<sup>487</sup> And in *The Way We Live Now*, Roger Carbury uses dirt analogies to express his feelings about Melmotte – “I look upon him as dirt in the gutter” (TWLNL I.138) and Felix:

The old-fashioned idea that the touching of pitch will defile still prevailed with him. He was a gentleman; – and would have felt himself disgraced to enter the house of such a one as Augustus Melmotte. [...] Henrietta Carbury had, he thought, a higher turn of mind than her mother, and had as yet been kept free from soil. As for Felix, – he had so grovelled in gutters as to be dirt all over. Nothing short of the prolonged sufferings of half a life could cleanse him. (TWLNL I. 69)

It was a metaphor Trollope also used in his autobiography, where he repeated the concerns that fill the pages of *The Way We Live Now*. In order to achieve riches and greatness men were tempted to close their eyes to certain iniquities, as so many around them were doing, so that it was ‘hard for a man to decide vigorously that the pitch, which so many are handling, will defile him if it be touched’.<sup>488</sup>

But as critics such as Nicholas Shrimpton have pointed out, the overt critique of money greed in Victorian novels often masked a covert desire for it, that is the triteness masked the hypocrisy: ‘Greed and mammon-worship are figured on the satirical or denunciatory surface of Victorian texts. The usefulness of money is inscribed, much more deeply, in their plots’.<sup>489</sup> The obvious example is *Our Mutual Friend* and Bella’s renunciation of money only to be rewarded with it. In the novel there is an insistence that ‘the old perverted uses of the misery-making money’ (OMF 358) can be transformed and the dirt cleansed, with old Harmon’s money “having turned bright

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<sup>487</sup> Merryweather, p.127.

<sup>488</sup> *An Autobiography*, p.142.

<sup>489</sup> Nicholas Shrimpton, ‘Even these metallic problems have their melodramatic side’: Money in Victorian Literature’, in *Victorian Literature and Finance*, ed. by Frances O’Gorman (Oxford: OUP, 2007), pp.17-38 (p.36).

again, after a long long rust in the dark, and [...] at last a-beginning to sparkle in the sunlight” (OMF 736). After passing the test of worth by relinquishing the Boffins’ wealth, Bella is coaxed by John into overcoming her aversion to it: “if you were rich, for instance, you would have a great power of doing good to others” (OMF 643). Bella has been revealed as “true golden gold” (OMF 731), as if there is a gold that is filth but a truer, more real gold that is pure. Thus after all money is good. In his personal life Dickens was an extremely canny businessman who knew his market value. On his second reading trip to America he wrote several letters home revelling in the money he was making, including one to John Forster describing the profits from his last reading in New York: ‘The manager is always going about with an immense bundle that looks like a sofa-cushion, but is in reality paper-money, and it had risen to the proportions of a sofa on the morning he left for Philadelphia’. In short, ‘the gain is enormous’.<sup>490</sup>

In *The Way We Live Now*, the outsider, Mrs Hurtle, exposes the hypocrisy of the love of money taboo, which comes through her admiration for Melmotte:

he is bold in breaking those precepts of yours about coveting worldly wealth. All men and women break that commandment, but they do so in a stealthy fashion, half drawing back the grasping hand, praying to be delivered from temptation while they filch only a little, pretending to despise the only thing that is dear to them in the world. Here is a man who boldly says that he recognises no such law; that wealth is power, and that power is good, and that the more a man has of wealth the greater and the stronger and the nobler he can be. (TWLNLN I. 246)

In his other works, Trollope made several explicit statements about the value of money, which would seem to suggest his personal sympathies lay with Mrs Hurtle. Like Thackeray and Dickens he was antagonistic towards Evangelicalism (which in *The New Zealander* he represented by ‘Mr Everscreech’) and to puritanism more generally: ‘Wealth and the pleasures of the world are not vain. Who, but a few maddened

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<sup>490</sup> *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, XII, pp.4-5 (p.5) (5 January 1868).

enthusiasts, have proved by their lives that wealth to them was vain, or have succeeded in withdrawing themselves from the pursuit of worldly pleasure?’ (p.93) It was dishonest to preach otherwise: ‘the love of money is so distinctive a characteristic of humanity that such sermons are mere platitudes, called for by customary but unintelligent piety’.<sup>491</sup> Like John Harmon in *Our Mutual Friend* he stressed the good that money could do: ‘Who does not desire to be hospitable to his friends, generous to the poor, liberal to all, munificent to his children, and to be himself free from the carking fears which poverty creates?’<sup>492</sup>

As we know, Trollope did think that all civilizations would decay, and that the age of luxury was the peak reached before the descent began. But, and perhaps because of the inevitability of the fall, this did not make him anti-luxury or anti-commerce. In *The Struggles of Brown, Jones and Robinson* (1862), he had poked fun at the brotherhood-of-man clichés that were attached to the age of commerce: ‘Thou civilizest, has civilized, and wilt civilize. Civilization is thy mission, and man’s welfare thine appointed charge’;<sup>493</sup> and in *The Way We Live Now* he mocked what he saw as the cant of ‘world-wide commercial love and harmony’ (TWWLN I. 91) used by characters such as Fisker to cover an essentially fraudulent activity. But he really did think that the desire for wealth, as well as the energy to pursue it, was intimately linked to a divinely ordained progress, and ‘without it civilization could not have advanced; nor the scheme of God in the creation been carried out’ (*The New Zealander*, p.93). Trollope maintained throughout his life this belief that the pursuit-of-wealth-driven rise of civilization was God’s will – so much for the Christian injunction

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<sup>491</sup> *An Autobiography*, p.72.

<sup>492</sup> *An Autobiography*, p.72.

<sup>493</sup> Anthony Trollope, *The Struggles of Brown, Jones and Robinson* (London: Penguin, 1993 (1862)), p.11.



against filthy lucre. Thus in his autobiography: ‘all material progress has come from man’s desire to do the best he can for himself and those about him, and civilisation, and Christianity itself, have been made possible by such progress’.<sup>494</sup> He thought that ‘the progress of the Americans ha[d] been caused by their aptitude for money-making’, and that their desire to prosper had come from ‘the nature given to them from God’.<sup>495</sup>

It is perhaps too easy to point out the inconsistencies and hypocrisies involved in Victorian attitudes to money. As Trollope was not Roger Carbury, neither was he Mrs Hurtle. For Trollope the crux of the matter was the necessity for honesty – ‘it is gude to be honest and true’ (*The New Zealander*, p.211) – to be shown in all things, small and large; in the words of one of Trollope’s biographers, dishonesty was ‘the quintessential Trollopiian sin’.<sup>496</sup> As Trollope put it in his autobiography: ‘can a world retrograding from day to day in honesty be considered to be in a state of progress?’<sup>497</sup> Like D. Morier Evans, Trollope saw the rise of dishonesty and the desire for wealth and luxury as intimately linked:

a certain class of dishonesty, dishonesty magnificent in its proportions and climbing into high places, has become at the same time so rampant and so splendid that there seems to be reason for fearing that men and women will be taught to feel that dishonesty, if it can become splendid, will cease to be abominable. If dishonesty can live in a gorgeous palace with pictures on its walls, and gems in all its cupboards, with marble and ivory in all its corners, and can give Apician dinners and get into Parliament and deal in millions, then dishonesty is not disgraceful, and the man dishonest after such a fashion is not a low scoundrel.<sup>498</sup>

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<sup>494</sup> *An Autobiography*, p.71.

<sup>495</sup> *North America*, p.230.

<sup>496</sup> Victoria Glendinning, *Trollope* (London: Hutchinson, 1992), p.221.

<sup>497</sup> *An Autobiography*, p.224.

<sup>498</sup> *An Autobiography*, p.224-225. Marcus Gavius Apicius was a celebrated gourmand in the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius.

But it was the dishonesty and not the wealth itself that would hasten the downfall of the nation, and it was a return to honesty rather than a renunciation of wealth that would retard its approach:

If we are or can make ourselves an honest people, there may be hope that not in our time, nor that of our children or children's children, not in that of many coming ages, will the flag of which we are so proud have to lower itself before that of any nation which may float hither either from the East or from the West. (*The New Zealander*, p.11)

Trollope's emphasis on honesty aligned him with the so-called prophet of the age, Thomas Carlyle. Indeed, *The New Zealander* had been rejected for publication on the grounds that it was a poor imitation of Carlyle's *Latter Day Pamphlets*.<sup>499</sup> But in fact Trollope's ultimately more positive and measured outlook was profoundly at odds with Carlyle's apocalyptic instincts. He described the *Pamphlets* as 'a sack of the sheerest trash',<sup>500</sup> and later berated Carlyle's 'wail of woe'<sup>501</sup> in 'An Essay upon Carlylism' (1867). In his autobiography, despite his serious concerns about the dishonesty of the age, he described his own (and the general) view of 'Carlylism':

If he be right, we are all going, straight away, to darkness and the dogs. But then we do not put very much faith in Mr Carlyle, – nor in Mr Ruskin and his other followers. The loudness and extravagance of their Lamentations, the wailing and gnashing of teeth which comes from them over a world which is supposed to have gone altogether shoddy-wards, are so contrary to the convictions of men who cannot but see how comfort has been increased, how health has been improved, and education extended, that the general effect of their teaching is the opposite of what they have intended. It is regarded simply as Carlylism to say that the English-speaking world is growing worse from day to day. And it is Carlylism to opine that the general grand result of increased intelligence is a tendency to deterioration.<sup>502</sup>

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<sup>499</sup> See letter from Joseph Cauvin to William Longman (2 April 1855), in *The Letters of Anthony Trollope*, ed. by Hall, I, p.42.

<sup>500</sup> *The Letters of Anthony Trollope*, I, p.29 (?1851).

<sup>501</sup> 'An Essay upon Carlylism: Containing the very melancholy story of a shoddy maker and his mutinous maid-servant', *Saint Paul's Magazine*, December 1867, pp. 292-305 (p. 292). Trollope had also famously caricatured Carlyle as 'Dr Pessimist Anticant' in *The Warden* (1855).

<sup>502</sup> *An Autobiography*, p.244.

The idea that everything was going ‘to the dogs’ crops up several times in *The Way We Live Now*. Roger applies it to the reign of Melmotte, Lady Carbury to her own potential downfall at the hands of her son: ‘He would go utterly to the dogs and would take her with him’ (TWLWN I. 293), and even Dolly to the downfall of the Beargarden Club: “‘Everything has gone to the dogs’” (TWLWN II. 433). The expression, though containing grains of truth, has become a worn cliché, like the kneejerk lamentations of Carlyle and Ruskin. Dickens partly mocked the expression in ‘Gone to the Dogs’, an article he wrote for *Household Words* in 1855,<sup>503</sup> though he also had a very serious point to make regarding aristocratic mismanagement of the nation, as we shall see later on.

So for Trollope wealth and luxury were a good, if only acquired honestly. Trollope was with Lady Carbury in her following statement, not in her idea of love but in her idea of luxury: “‘Love is like any other luxury. You have no right to it unless you can afford it. And those who will have it when they can’t afford it, will come to the ground like this Mr Melmotte’” (TWLWN II. 326). And again: “‘The world at large has to eat dry bread, and cannot get cakes and sweetmeats’” (TWLWN II. 384). It might be that the prevalence of cakes and sweetmeats – luxuries – was increasing, and that they were being more widely diffused in a commercial society, but this was a gradual process; cakes and sweetmeats were not a right. As so many before him Trollope believed in a virtuous mean, which however difficult of definition was at least a goal within the reach of imperfect men and women:

Oh, Mr. Everscreech, if thou hadst but the power to teach how love of wealth may run riot, and become covetousness; but how also under due constraint it may be kept from doing so. If thou couldst teach how worldly pleasures may by over indulgence interfere with worldly labour, how they may thus become

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<sup>503</sup> See ‘Gone to the Dogs’, *Household Words*, 10 March 1855, in *Dickens' Journalism, Vol.3: 'Gone Astray' and Other Papers from Household Words: 1851-59*, ed. by Michael Slater (London: J. M. Dent, 1998), pp.283-291.

foul and wicked; but how by due enjoyment they will sweeten the tasks of life, and make even toil delightful; then indeed wouldst thou have earned thy tithes, and preached a doctrine by which men might learn to live. (*The New Zealander*, pp.93-94)

In his autobiography Trollope claimed to have lived by this doctrine, his version of the good life:

to enjoy the excitement of pleasure, but to be free of its vices and ill effects, to have the sweet and to leave the bitter untasted, – that has been my study. The preachers tell us that this is impossible. It seems to me that hitherto I have succeeded fairly well. I will not say that I have never scorched a finger, – but I carry no ugly wounds.<sup>504</sup>

To misquote Austen, Trollope claims to have led a life both sweet and sound, a life enjoying the sweets of luxury but always under ‘due constraint’.

The virtuous mean might also describe the way Dickens tried to live his own life, working hard to support a range of philanthropic activities as well as to enjoy personally the fruits of his labour. Dickens also lay great emphasis on honesty. In *Our Mutual Friend* the Boffins stand out as ‘honest and true’ (OMF 95), the grasping old Mr Harmon realising ‘the powerlessness of all his wealth to buy them’ (OMF 95). Unlike Trollope, Dickens was a great admirer of Carlyle. And in Dickens there does seem to be a more obvious disjunction between his personal rejoicing about financial gain, for example over the largeness of his American earnings, and the explorations in his novels of the idea that the love of money is the root of all evil. In *The Way We Live Now* the money-love taboo is at least exposed (through Mrs Hurtle), and thus the potential hypocrisy surrounding it (including, if necessary, the author’s own). In *Our Mutual Friend* money is bad or it is good but it is never made explicit that to posit these two opposites at the same time is hypocritical. In his work, at least, Dickens never entirely escaped from the idea that money really was filth, however much he tried to wash it clean. In *Our Mutual Friend* especially, money remains tainted, and cannot

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<sup>504</sup> *An Autobiography*, pp.232-233.

stave off the death which is fast engulfing society. Although the good get their just deserts – and their money – there is always the danger that the newly sparkling money will rust again. Or that Bella’s beautifully decorated mansion with its tropical aviary (OMF 727), and ‘jewels the like of which she had never dreamed of’ (OMF 736) will soon crumble like everything else. In a world of ash and bones surely all the riches not already decayed will soon disintegrate to the dust or faeces that they really are. Or as Eugene puts it: “My dear Mr Boffin, everything wears to rags” (OMF 86).

#### IV

Patrick Brantlinger captures this luxury and corruption dynamic in the following terms: ‘imperializing civilizations seem inevitably to transform the raw materials of humanity into piles of useless wealth, and then again into piles of bones and ruins’.<sup>505</sup> Corruption in this case is corruption in its literal, archaic sense of things becoming rotten and breaking apart, or wearing to rags. In *Our Mutual Friend*, the presence of Mr Venus, taxidermist and articulator of bones, and his shop of specimens, is like the literary equivalent of a painting containing a skull, a reminder that all worldly things are vanity and everything will soon decay. It is the Christian message, ‘For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out’ (1 Timothy 6:7), and a reminder of the Anglian burial service: ‘earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust’, sentiments Jenny comforts herself with at the frugal funeral of her father. “I see that the service in the Prayer-book says that we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can take nothing out” (OMF 692-693) (Dickens hated the pomp and lavish expense associated with the Victorian funeral industry). In essence, and as Thackeray had observed, it was all vanity; or, as Lady Carbury half

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<sup>505</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, *Bread & Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p.121. The comment is made in the context of a discussion of Flaubert’s *Salammbô*.

realises in *The Way We Live Now*, ‘it was all “leather or prunello”, [...] all vanity, – and vanity, – and vanity!’ (TWLNLN II. 462). In *Our Mutual Friend* the basic truth that only love and goodness remains is, if uneasily, the overriding message. As Boffin responds to Eugene’s observation about everything wearing to rags: “I won’t go as far as to say everything [...] because there’s some things that I never found among the dust” (OMF 86).

In both novels the idea that piles of useless wealth will soon decay into piles of bones and ruins is emphasised, paradoxically, by the newness of things, a ‘fatal freshness’ (OMF 10). This newness suggests sham, shoddiness, precariousness. So in *Our Mutual Friend* the Veneerings are ‘bran-new people in a bran-new house in a bran-new quarter of London’ (OMF 7). They and their furniture ‘smelt a little too much of the workshop, and w[ere] a trifle sticky’ (OMF 7). Not built to last, the Veneerings, like so many, will collapse into bankruptcy. But they have their stab at glory, and command a short-lived empire in ‘society’, with Veneering getting himself up as a ‘young Antinous’ (OMF 10)<sup>506</sup> for one of their lavish dinners, and the ‘melancholy retainer’ announcing dinner as if to say “Come down and be poisoned, ye unhappy children of men!” (OMF 10) (an echo of the intrigues and murders by poisoning – and thus the necessity for food-tasters – associated with the later Roman empire). In *The Way We Live Now* for Mr Longstaffe it is a question of class and breeding, and he is proud of his Bruton Street town-house because it is the very opposite of ‘bran-new’:

It was not by any means a charming house, having but few of those luxuries and elegancies which have been added of late years to newly-built London residences. [...] But it was the old family town-house, having been inhabited by three or four generations of Longstaffes and did not savour of that radical newness which prevails, and which was peculiarly distasteful to Mr. Longstaffe. (TWLNLN I. 119)

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<sup>506</sup> Antinous was a beautiful favourite of the Roman Emperor, Hadrian.

He sets Bruton Street against other, more suspect, areas of London such as Queen's Gate, which was 'devoted to opulent tradesmen' (TWLWN I. 119), or 'even Belgrave Square, though its aristocratic properties must be admitted, [which] still smelt of the mortar' (TWLWN I. 119).

Melmotte as a usurper smells of the mortar. Barbara Weiss points out the way in which Melmotte 'swallows property whole and then destroys it',<sup>507</sup> such as in his 'purchase', remortgage and renovation of Pickering, his lock-picking in Mr Longestaffe's town house, and the dismantling of his own newly purchased townhouse in Grosvenor Square for the reception of the Chinese Emperor. Hetta visits Grosvenor Square shortly after this event, discovering that:

within the hall the pilasters and trophies, the wreaths and the banners, which three or four days since had been built up with so much trouble, were now being pulled down and hauled away. And amidst the ruins Melmotte himself was standing. (TWLWN II. 164)

This image foreshadows both Melmotte's own fall, and the potential fall of the nation should characters like Melmotte continue to gain power. As Weiss puts it, 'this image of Melmotte among the elegant debris of the old way of life is poignant, for Melmotte is the spoiler who hastens the break-up of the old social order'.<sup>508</sup> Melmotte may hasten the break-up but he is not the cause: his success is merely a symptom of the greed and corruption already present. In any case, Melmotte has also displayed superior courage, vigour and manliness to the native inhabitants of Britain. These qualities not only align him with Roman generals in their heyday but with their conquerors, the barbarians, who took advantage of a weakened Rome in its decline. So the image of him amongst the ruins also points up his superiority because he has

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<sup>507</sup> Weiss, p.166.

<sup>508</sup> Weiss, p.166.

conquered a people weaker than he. The eventual conquest of Rome by barbarian tribes was a theme explored by Charles Kingsley in several lectures, including the series ‘*The Roman and the Teuton*’ (1864) and ‘Ancient Civilisation’ (1874), which warned against the dangerous corruption of his own times. A braver, abler and more virtuous people had simply ‘struck one brave blow at the huge inflated wind-bag’,<sup>509</sup> (Rome), that ‘corrupt, luxurious, effeminate civilisation’,<sup>510</sup> and it had collapsed. Melmotte is not virtuous but is certainly braver and abler than the luxurious and effeminate aristocracy around him. Additionally, this image echoes that from which Trollope took the title and theme of his earlier work, *The New Zealander*. This was an article by Thomas Babington Macaulay in *The Edinburgh Review* (October 1840), which conjured up the vision of a time ‘when some traveller from New Zealand shall, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St. Paul’s’.<sup>511</sup> Melmotte is symbolic of such a future tourist visiting the once great but now dead civilization of Britain.

Trollope may have noticed the sham quality of certain things in a get-rich-quick society, and its corresponding parade of conspicuous consumption. But, as we know, he liked the good things that money could buy, as long as they were honestly come by. Like Thackeray, he took delight in the fine arts, a phenomenon he associated with advanced and even decadent civilizations, as does Mrs Hurtle in *The Way We Live Now*. She tells Paul that “civilisation was becoming effete, or at any rate men were, in the time of the great painters” (TWLNL I. 394); and, admiring Paul’s eye for

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<sup>509</sup> Charles Kingsley, ‘Ancient Civilisation’, in *Historical Lectures and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1893 (1880)), pp.289-309 (p.301). The lecture was first delivered in America in 1874.

<sup>510</sup> *North America*, p.242.

<sup>511</sup> Macaulay, p.3. Macaulay was thinking about the power and endurance of the Roman Catholic Church (which might still be around at such a future period), though the image took on a general meaning as an emblem of the inevitable fall of British civilization.



colour in terms of the clothing that suits her, she nonetheless believes that “taste comes with, or at any rate forebodes, an effete civilization” (TWLWN I. 394). She believes that “all American women [...] have bad taste in gowns, – and so the vain ones and rich ones send to Paris for their finery” (TWLWN I. 394), as do the gorgeously attired young women of the New York Bevan family in Dickens’s *Martin Chuzzlewit*.<sup>512</sup> As Britain is tasteful but effete, so a vigorous America is yet to develop (or decline into) taste, and needs to buy it from a more decadent civilization. Trollope had made a similar point in *North America*, observing (with distaste) that ‘in his tastes the American imitates the Frenchman’.<sup>513</sup>

Trollope had previously explored the issue at greater length in *The New Zealander*: ‘In looking back to the histories of past times it certainly appears that the fine arts have best flourished among people and at periods not conspicuous for political grandeur or aspirations after liberty’. His examples include ‘the noblest buildings of Rome [...] built under the Caesars’ and ‘the architectural splendour of Paris, which was commenced under one despotic Napoleon, [and] is being consummated under another’, concluding: ‘art has certainly thriven best under the wings of tyrants’.<sup>514</sup> Trollope puts this down to the ability and willingness of such sovereigns to reward the labour of the artist, and their subjects being debarred from the political arena sinking into leisure and the dilettante pursuits of promoters of art. Tyrants have then encouraged this propensity, realising that men who could satisfy their whole souls in this way would be less likely to rise in rebellion or have much inclination to fight for liberty. Trollope presents the argument but is not quite willing to accept it. As with many of the

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<sup>512</sup> Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (London: Penguin, 2004 (1844)), p.279.

<sup>513</sup> *North America*, p.242

<sup>514</sup> *The New Zealander*, p.187.

problems of luxury, he wanted to have it both ways. As we know, he thought that the British fall would certainly come, and that great luxury would presage it:

When the New Zealander on his return to his own country shall write, as he certainly will write, his "Impressions made by a ten days' sojourn among the nations of London", he will doubtless attribute the fall of our nation to the wealth and luxury of the people. "They had become infatuated," he will say, "by a passion for all that is rich and rare. The enormity of the price of that which they coveted served only to stimulate their desires. [...] Houses were built of which the deserted walls, and the grass grown courts, still show the extent and the folly of the builders. Houses in which the courts of Kings might have been held were built for the use of private men; or rather for their ambition. All the wines of all the vintages of Europe were insufficient to supply the needs of this luxurious city. And yet while thus revelling in wealth, they were fast sinking into deep poverty". (pp.188-189)

But he deflected its arrival by using the necessity argument (art was somehow a necessity and a luxury at the same time), thereby associating it with virtue, whilst also claiming that as a luxury it need not lead to corruption if vigilance was maintained:

Art no doubt is a luxury, but it does not necessarily follow that all lovers of art must be luxurious. It is more than a luxury. It becomes a necessity to him who has once received it into his understanding and his heart. He who has habituated his ears to sweet sounds will live without delight if forced to live without music. He whose eye has become accustomed to forms of beauty, to artistic groupings, and to grand designs, will look on his life as robbed of half of its joys if he is debarred from the exercise of those tastes which he has acquired. Many among us now have acquired such tastes and have subjected ourselves to this necessity. It will be the same with our children, whom we educate by our own standard. And it should therefore be with us a duty to see that this great enjoyment be not allowed to sink into sloth or mock dilettante energy. (p.189)

Dickens, too, connected art and civilization. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these two authors, as practitioners of art (and thus purveyors of luxury) themselves, were keen to stress its value to a progressive age. Dickens set out his beliefs in several speeches to the Artists' General Benevolent Fund. In one, he said that he was asking

for help from without the fund not as alms-giving, [but] as part payment of a debt which all civilized men owed to Art [and] as a remembrance of what this

land would be without Art, and its inseparability from the best and purest enjoyments.<sup>515</sup>

And in another he typically set the work of the artist, as a service to the community, against public political life. He was ‘strongly disposed to believe there are very few debates in Parliament so important to the public welfare as a really good picture’, and he believed strongly ‘that the neighbourhoods of Trafalgar Square, or Suffolk Street, rightly understood, are quite as important to the welfare of the empire as those of Downing Street or Westminster Hall’.<sup>516</sup> For Dickens, as for Trollope, then, art was a necessity of civilized life. However, it in no way signaled the latter’s decline. On the contrary, it was a sign of national strength. Dickens admired the French in this respect, writing to a French friend: ‘the general appreciation of, and respect for, Art, in its broadest and most universal sense, in Paris, is one of the finest national signs I know’.<sup>517</sup> In fact it was bad art that signaled national decline. In 1855, Dickens wrote the following to John Forster about the Paris Exhibition, comparing French and English pictures to the latter’s detriment:

It is of no use disguising the fact that what we know to be wanting in the men is wanting in their works – character, fire, purpose, and the power of using the vehicle and the model as mere means to an end. There is a horrible respectability about most of the best of them – a little, finite, systematic routine in them, strangely expressive to me of the state of England itself. [...] Don’t think it a part of my despondency about public affairs, and my fear that our national glory is on the decline, when I say that mere form and conventionalities usurp, in English art, as in English government and social relations, the place of living force and truth. I tried to resist the impression yesterday, and went to the English gallery first, and praised and admired with great diligence; but it was of no use. I could not make anything better of it than what I tell you.<sup>518</sup>

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<sup>515</sup> Speech to Artists’ General Benevolent Fund (28 March 1862), in *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Fielding, pp.301-305 (p.304).

<sup>516</sup> Speech to Artists’ General Benevolent Fund (8 May 1858), in *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*, pp.265-269 (p.269).

<sup>517</sup> *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, V, pp.41-43 (p.42) (24 March 1847).

<sup>518</sup> *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, VII, pp.742-744 (p.743) (?11-12 November 1855).

The empty form, the lack of living force, mirrors the death of English government and society. In *Our Mutual Friend* art has become vulgarised by commercialism. The joys of literature, poetry and song are sold as botched commodities by Silas Wegg. The luxurious objects of art have descended into vulgar commodities (the notorious bad taste of the nouveaux riches), such as the Veneerings' infamous table decoration, a gold and silver 'caravan of camels' (OMF 11): the piles of useless things that will soon decay into dust. Only goodness can somehow redeem them from bad taste: the luxurious objects that fill the Boffin mansion at the end of the novel are somehow permissible.

## V

So Dickens would have been profoundly out of sympathy with Thackeray's conception of fine arts and civilization, or 'dandyism' as the latter's mother called it, which required some form of aristocracy to maintain it. On the contrary, it was the aristocracy who were destroying art; they were destroying the public life of the country with their 'Dandy insolence'<sup>519</sup> and 'accursed gentility',<sup>520</sup> and, as a result, the whole of national life was on the decline.<sup>521</sup> As will be clear by now, Dickens did not think highly of public political life; in fact, his feeling for it was more like contempt. As we know, a commitment to active public life was an essential aspect of virtue within the classical republican paradigm. This was liable to corruption when private ambition and the appetite for private wealth and luxury (as Trollope's New Zealander notices in the remnants of private homes fit for kings) grew more important than serving the

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<sup>519</sup> *The letters of Charles Dickens*, VII, pp. 664-665 (p.664) (30 June 1855).

<sup>520</sup> *The letters of Charles Dickens*, VII, pp.586-588 (p.587) (10 April 1855).

<sup>521</sup> Ironically, Dickens himself was sometimes viewed as a dandy, or as foppish, particularly in his earlier years, though this was more in the sense of a perceived kind of vulgar cockneyism, emphasised by a theatrical dress sense and manners.

commonwealth, and thus the state became endangered. This is not to say that Dickens did not believe in public service – quite the contrary. But because of his contempt for aristocrat-run British political institutions and processes he would not have equated serving them, in their present state, with serving the public. For Trollope it was a very different matter. He maintained a lifelong commitment to a more traditional ideal of public life, the epitome of which was to sit in Parliament. He believed that:

the man in Parliament has reached a higher position than the man out, – that to serve one’s country without pay is the grandest work that a man can do, – that of all studies the study of politics is the one in which a man may make himself most useful to his fellow creatures, – and that, of all lives, public political life is capable of the highest efforts.<sup>522</sup>

Indeed, he attempted (but failed) to stand for Parliament, whereas Dickens, who was asked to stand several times, treated the idea with contempt.<sup>523</sup>

In *The Way We Live Now*, Trollope’s respected system is under attack, and the country is following the Roman decline-and-fall trajectory as zeal for the common weal in terms of public service is barely apparent, or is overtaken by a society busy pursuing and spending money. Roger Carbury is the exception, though he serves in the local context as an upright country squire who does his duty by his tenants and neighbours. In terms of national public life the man of the hour is Melmotte, who, as Roger describes him, is “the great French swindler who has come over here, and who is buying his way into society” (TWLWN I. 67). Because wealth has become all important, the polis is moving from a senatorial aristocracy to a plutocracy, or, in Kingsley’s words, ‘the basest of all aristocracies, the aristocracy of the money-bag’.<sup>524</sup>

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<sup>522</sup> *An Autobiography*, p.186.

<sup>523</sup> In 1868 Trollope stood as a Liberal candidate for the borough of Beverley in the East Riding of Yorkshire. For Dickens’s views on the ‘dismal’ House of Commons and his decision never to stand, see *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, XII, pp.182-183 (13 September 1868); XII, p.181 (?early September 1868); X, p.194 (4 October 1868).

<sup>524</sup> Kingsley, ‘Ancient Civilisation’, p.301.

Like Caesar according to Plutarch – ‘He spent money recklessly, and many people thought that he was purchasing a moment’s brief fame at an enormous price, whereas in reality he was buying the greatest place in the world at inconsiderable expense’<sup>525</sup> – Melmotte uses his ‘money-bag’ status to gain power, and Lord Alfred even suggests to him that both political power and aristocratic rank can be bought:

Lord Alfred had whispered into his ear that by certain conduct and by certain uses of his money, he himself might be made a baronet. [...] it was not necessary that he should have been born in England, or even that he should have an English name. No questions would be asked. Let him first get into Parliament, and then spend a little money on the proper side, – by which Lord Alfred meant the Conservative side, – and be munificent in his entertainments, and the baronetcy would be almost a matter of course. Indeed there was no knowing what honours might not be achieved in the present days by money scattered with a liberal hand. (TWLWN I. 233)

And Melmotte does scatter money with a liberal hand, including on the immense reception for the Emperor of China, for which he is granted the honour despite doubts as to his background and character, because ‘no man could deny that he was both able and willing to spend the necessary money’ (TWLWN I. 327). Even when his fraud is being exposed and things are going badly, he remembers what money can do: ‘it would not be so easy to convict a member for Westminster, – especially if money were spent freely’ (TWLWN II. 135).

Melmotte has been courted by both the Conservatives and the Liberals, and Trollope is at pains to stress that this is despite Melmotte’s total want of political feeling or notion of public duty:

This man was undoubtedly a very ignorant man. He knew nothing of any one political question which had vexed England for the last half century, – nothing whatever of the political history which had made England what it was at the beginning of that half century. Of such names as Hampden, Somers, and Pitt he had hardly ever heard. He had probably never read a book in his life. He knew nothing of the working of parliament, nothing of nationality, – had no

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<sup>525</sup> Plutarch, *Fall of the Roman Republic: Six Lives By Plutarch*, trans. by Rex Warner, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Penguin, 1972), p.248.

preference whatever for one form of government over another, never having given his mind a moment's trouble on the subject. He had not even reflected how a despotic monarch or a federal republic might affect himself, and possibly did not comprehend the meaning of those terms. (TWLWN II. 34)

For Roger Melmotte's power is a clear indication that the country is "going to the dogs" (TWLWN I. 46) on the Roman model:

"In Rome they were worshipping just such men as this Melmotte. Do you remember the man who sat upon the seats of the knights and scoured the Via Sacra with his toga, though he had been scourged from pillar to post for his villainies? I always think of that man when I hear Melmotte's name mentioned. Hoc, hoc tribune militum! (Horace: 'this is your member for the knights!')" (TWLWN II. 46-47)

As we know from the dinners they give – "out of the *Arabian Nights*" (OMF 236), according to Lady Tippins – the Veneerings in *Our Mutual Friend* have also entertained luxuriously (if nowhere near on Melmotte's scale), and like the Melmottes, their origins are unclear: "nobody knows who these Veneerings are" (OMF 234). These are also the words of Lady Tippins, who nonetheless is happy to eat their dinners and to promote Veneering as a parliamentary candidate. Like Melmotte after him – 'it was considered to be indispensable to the country that Mr. Melmotte should go into Parliament' (TWLWN I. 326) – Veneering is the man of the hour in terms of public life:

Britannia, sitting meditating one fine day [...], discovers all of a sudden that she wants Veneering in Parliament. It occurs to her that Veneering is 'a representative man' – which cannot in these times be doubted – and that her Majesty's faithful Commons are incomplete without him. (OMF 229)

Veneering also has no political views of his own: "My political opinions", says Veneering, not previously aware of having any' (OMF 230).

Despite the similarities in this presentation of a public life corrupted by wealth and luxury, a sure symptom of decline on the Roman model, in *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens is more despairing than Trollope will be in *The Way We Live Now*. Dickens's picture of political corruption is sheer absurdity and farce, as in chapter 3 of book II,

Veneering and his 'friends' rush about town in order to get him elected for a borough that is already his. In an absurd parody of the civic republican tradition, all this for Veneering is "a matter of public feeling and public principle" (OMF 230), though for Dickens Veneering becoming a member of Parliament is simply a case of him becoming a member of "the best club in London" (OMF 232). Veneering stands for the borough of 'Pocket-Breeches' because for Dickens the system is as absurd as its candidate,<sup>526</sup> whereas in *The Way We Live Now* Melmotte stands for the borough of Westminster, because it is the man and not the system that is absurd (as yet). For Dickens the system is so pointless it is surreal; for Trollope it is of the utmost importance and thus very real.

Dickens's sense of an absurd, defunct and dying system had increased from around the time of the Crimean war. He talked of the

machinery of Government and legislation going round and round, and people fallen from it and standing aloof, as if they had left it to its last remaining function of destroying itself, when it had achieved the destruction of so much that was dear to them.<sup>527</sup>

and frequently compared the system to an aged, dying invalid, like one of Trollope's effete old gentlemen. Here it is 'not occasionally a little hard of hearing, not a little dim of sight, not a little slow of understanding'.<sup>528</sup> He had made extended play with the theme for an article in *Household Words*, where the government was in a state of 'supernatural imbecility',<sup>529</sup> with 'that miserable patient, Mr Cabinet, [...] tottering on

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<sup>526</sup> The novel was written before the Second Reform Act (1867), which extended the franchise to the urban male working class, though Dickens remained sceptical after this event.

<sup>527</sup> Speech to Administrative Reform Association, 27 June 1855, p.201.

<sup>528</sup> Speech to Administrative Reform Association, 27 June 1855, p.201.

<sup>529</sup> 'That Other Public', *Household Words*, 3 February 1855, in *The Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens's Journalism, Vol.3: 'Gone Astray' and Other Papers from Household Words*, ed. by Michael Slater (London: 1998), pp.269-276 (p.274).



his emaciated legs in the last stage of paralysis'.<sup>530</sup> Indeed, the public departments were already dead, and had been 'drearily lying in state, a mere stupid pageant of gorgeous coffins and feebly-burning lights'.<sup>531</sup> Four months before he died Dickens told his close friend and fellow writer, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, 'our system fails',<sup>532</sup> which sums up his depiction of political life in *Our Mutual Friend*. Despite his association with the idea of progress (as Alfred Austen's obituary stated, quoted in the opening paragraph of this chapter), despite his contempt for the idealisation of the past (his mockery of the 'wise old' and 'dear old'<sup>533</sup> times of the eighteenth century in *A Tale of Two Cities*, for example), despite his assertion in *Household Worlds* of its faith 'in the progress of mankind, [and its] thankful[ness] for the privilege of living in this summer-dawn of time'<sup>534</sup> – despite all this – in *Our Mutual Friend* the most important theme he wanted to communicate was the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, a fall brought about by the luxury and imbecility of the governing classes.

In *The Way We Live Now*, however, despite Roger's despair at Melmotte's power, the Bishop's response to him proves to be accurate: "If the man is what you say, he will surely be found out at last, and the day of his punishment will come. [...] The world perhaps is managed more justly than you think" (TWLWN II. 47). Broune tells Lady Carbury that Melmotte indulged in a "reckless personal expenditure" (TWLWN II. 325) "because he thought he would conquer the world by it [...]. He very nearly succeeded too" (TWLWN II. 326). The fact that Melmotte gets so far is a dangerous sign of the times, a sign of the degradation of a public life and its institutions

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<sup>530</sup> 'That Other Public', pp.274-275.

<sup>531</sup> 'That Other Public', p.274.

<sup>532</sup> See Ackroyd, p.1065.

<sup>533</sup> *A Tale of Two Cities*, p.57.

<sup>534</sup> 'A Preliminary Word', *Household Words*, 30 March 1850, pp.1-2 (p.1).

which are in themselves predominantly noble. It is a severe warning, but things are righted, and Melmotte has his fall. In *Our Mutual Friend* the Veneerings do go bankrupt and will disappear from the scene, but there is a sense that the merry-go-round will continue with other minor players. In *The Way We Live Now* Melmotte's demise is more significant. As we know, Lord Nidderdale vows to reform and to do his public duty. The ruling classes are left shaken by their infatuation with Melmotte, although there are also worrying signs of a posthumous 'whitewashing' (OMF 357) of his name in certain parts of London. For Trollope, ultimately, the British form of government had proved to be the best the world had offered:

to me it seems that no form of existing government – no form of government that ever did exist, gives or has given so large a measure of individual freedom to all who live under it as a constitutional monarchy in which the Crown is divested of direct political power.<sup>535</sup>

Constant vigilance was needed to ensure that this great system did not corrupt on the Roman model, and that its freedoms did not turn into license for dishonesty and crime. Trollope might have been 'conservative' in his belief that British institutions were inherently sound, but this fundamental optimism allowed him to have faith in a slow but sure progress (always allowing that all civilizations would ultimately decline) that is absent from a 'radical' Dickens in *Our Mutual Friend*.

## VI

In the classical tradition, the decline in public life brought about by the pursuit of luxury then became associated with fears about the condition of 'the people', that is the lower classes (or 'the mob', depending on your point of view). So Dickens's and Trollope's political beliefs and attitudes towards 'the people' are important in the context of fears about luxury-driven decline and fall. In Brantlinger's *Bread & Circuses*,

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<sup>535</sup> *North America*, p.109.

he calls comparisons of modern society with Roman imperial decadence ‘negative classicism’. He dates this phenomenon from the nineteenth century, as ‘a response to industrial and democratic “progress” perceived as breakdown’, and relates it specifically to fears about and contempt for mass culture. The ‘bread and circuses’ theme originated from Juvenal’s tenth satire, in which the latter suggests that ‘the Roman Republic has given way to the Empire because the fickle populace has abandoned its political responsibilities for doles of food and the lures of the racetrack and the arena’. The paradigm assumes that ordinary people are really unable to think for themselves and do not know where their best interests lie. A political leader need only feed and entertain them to keep them quiet. Whatever the actual historical truth, in negative classicism ‘democracy is only a prelude to tyranny’ and

‘bread and circuses’ becomes a name for the process by which democracy turns into its opposite, the Republic into the Empire, the aristocratic Senate giving way to the urban mob – or, in modern terms, the process by which a liberal though hierarchical society, with its ‘creative elites’ protected by class institutions, turns into ‘mass society’.<sup>536</sup>

Dickens, not averse to occasional populist posturing, claimed publically to have faith in ‘the people’. In a speech to the Birmingham and Midland Institute in 1869 he said that his political creed was ‘contained in two articles, and has no reference to any party or persons. My faith in the people governing, is, on the whole, infinitesimal; my faith in The People governed, is, on the whole illimitable’.<sup>537</sup> But privately he was more desponding. Despite his proud Liberal Radicalism, he had already given up on the mechanics of democracy in the present state of civilization: ‘As to the suffrage, I have lost hope even in the Ballot. We appear to me to have proved the failure of

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<sup>536</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, *Bread & Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp.17, 31, 22, 81, 81. His period of study is the nineteenth century to his time of writing.

<sup>537</sup> Speech to Birmingham and Midland Institute, 27 September 1869, in *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*, pp.397-408 (p.407).

Representative Institutions, without an educated and advanced people to support them'.<sup>538</sup> Dickens's contempt for the people as mob was made clear in works such as *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), set during the time of the anti-Catholic Gordon riots (1780). In this, Dickens had said of the mob: 'the ocean is not more fickle and uncertain, more terrible when roused, more unreasonable, or more cruel'.<sup>539</sup> Here Dickens saw an irrational mass of people led on by a corrupt few above them for their own ends. Yet in his presentation of revolutionary France in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), the terrible violence wrought by the people had been entirely justified by the 'rapacious licence and oppression'<sup>540</sup> inflicted on them by the luxurious aristocracy. On the one hand, Dickens feared that public political apathy was the harbinger of revolution:

I am particularly uneasy when I find the Public so apathetic to the inefficiency of the Government. It is a new and unhealthy symptom – the kind of unnatural lull that precedes an earthquake – and I mistrust there being something sullen working among the people, which we don't at all understand.<sup>541</sup>

Yet on the other hand – which was somehow worse – there is a sense that it will simply lead to the death of society. For Dickens, the fear is not that a de-politicised populace can be paid off with bread and circuses, but rather that they have been infected with the degenerative disease of the imbecilic upper classes:

it seems to me an absolute impossibility to direct the spirit of the people at this pass, until it shews itself. [...] But you can no more help a people who do not help themselves, than you can help a man who does not help himself. And until the people can be got up from the lethargy which is an awful symptom of the advanced state of their disease, I know of nothing that can be done beyond keeping their wrongs continually before them.<sup>542</sup>

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<sup>538</sup> *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, VII, pp.714-716 (p.715) (4 October 1855).

<sup>539</sup> *Barnaby Rudge* (Oxford: OUP, 1982 (1841)), p.396.

<sup>540</sup> *A Tale of Two Cities*, p.369.

<sup>541</sup> *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, VII, pp.510-513 (p.511) (25 January 1855).

<sup>542</sup> *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, VII, p.588 (10 April 1855).

A few months after this statement he appeared to have given up, as the disease was fatal: ‘I do reluctantly believe that the English people are, habitually, consenting parties to the miserable imbecility into which we have fallen, *and never will help themselves out of it*. Who is to do it, if anybody is, God knows’.<sup>543</sup> So in *Our Mutual Friend* a general exhaustion pervades the nation – apart from the feverish bouts of energy of the speculators – and the only sign of mass political involvement is through ‘the grins of the populace’ (OMF 236) of Pocket-Breeches who assemble for Veneering’s election speech.

Trollope’s concerns about politics and the people in a luxurious age were more influenced by the classical association between luxury, democracy (or the mob) and tyranny. Trollope famously described himself as an ‘advanced conservative Liberal’, who ‘regards [the] continual diminution [of social distances] as a series of steps towards that human millennium of which he dreams’. But this was not a belief in ‘equality, for the word is offensive and presents to the imaginations of men ideas of communism, of ruin, and insane democracy, – but a tendency towards equality’.<sup>544</sup> Although these views might seem inherently contradictory, it is worth stressing that for the nineteenth-century British Liberal, liberty and equality (the latter associated with democracy) were not the same thing; in fact they were often conceived of as opposite things. As the Tory *Quarterly*’s review of Sir Erskine May’s *Democracy in Europe* (1877) stated: ‘the effective distinction between liberty and democracy [...] cannot be too strongly drawn’.<sup>545</sup> In *The English Ideology*, George Watson explains this distinction as the difference between political and social equality. Many Liberals

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<sup>543</sup> *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, VII, pp.714-716 (pp.715-716) (4 October 1855).

<sup>544</sup> *An Autobiography*, p.188.

<sup>545</sup> ‘Democracy in Europe; a History. By Sir Thomas Erskine May, K.C.B., D.C.L.’, *Quarterly Review*, January 1878, pp.112-142 (p.114).

feared that a newly empowered majority (granted the suffrage) could impose social equality, that is in terms of wealth and status. But social inequalities were a function of differentiated individuals thriving in a free society.<sup>546</sup> Watson sets out the three principal fears of democracy in the Victorian mind. The first was that it would lead to a general societal mediocrity and conformity, the sort that we found concerning J. S. Mill in chapter 2 of this thesis with regard to reformers wanting to make everyone alike. The second fear was that it would lead to anarchy, or to anarchical, arbitrary acts such as confiscation of wealth. The third and most important fear, related to the second, was that it would lead to tyranny: there was nothing to prevent an ignorant people choosing dictatorship.<sup>547</sup> So in *The English Constitution* (1867) Walter Bagehot talked of ‘the coarse, dull, contracted multitude’<sup>548</sup> and his fears of a ‘supremacy of ignorance over instruction and of numbers over knowledge’.<sup>549</sup> In the *Quarterly’s* review of May it conceived of democracy as a sort of personified dictator: ‘Democracy claims to be not only supreme, without authority above, but absolute, without independence below; to be its own master, not a trustee’. And it was a master ‘to whom must be rendered the things that are Caesar’s and also the things that are God’s’.<sup>550</sup>

As well as looking to the classical past – Brantlinger’s ‘negative classicism’ – critics of democracy pointed to more recent examples, such as ‘the disastrous outcome of the political history of France, where the search for equality ha[d] twice led to its apt

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<sup>546</sup> See George Watson, *The English Ideology* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2004), p.165.

<sup>547</sup> See George Watson, chapter 9, ‘Democracy and Equality’.

<sup>548</sup> Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Fontana, 1963 (1872)), p.122.

<sup>549</sup> *The English Constitution*, p.277 (Introduction to 2<sup>nd</sup> edn).

<sup>550</sup> ‘Democracy in Europe; a History’, *Quarterly Review*, pp.137-8, 138.

conclusion in imperial dictatorship'.<sup>551</sup> Another much cited example was that of money-getting America, and both Dickens and Trollope looked to North America to see how democracy was faring, and both found it wanting. Dickens visited North America twice, the first time (1842) going out with high hopes about the new Republic, only to come back bitterly disillusioned with what he saw as its dishonest public life, 'the meanest perversion of virtuous Political Machinery that the worst tools ever wrought'.<sup>552</sup> He grew warmer after his second visit (1867-68), proclaiming a great improvement socially but maintaining privately that public life was as bad as ever.<sup>553</sup> Dickens felt especially that America, 'a young lion',<sup>554</sup> had squandered its youth. In the unpublished preface to *American Notes* he referred to America's political failure 'in spite of the advantage she has over all other nations in the elastic freshness and vigour of her youth'.<sup>555</sup> If an aged, feeble and debilitated Britain was on its last legs, a new America, with a blank slate to start from, had quickly turned a virtuous political ideal based on the people (democracy) into the politics of the mob. Trollope, who also visited North America and wrote a book on his experience, was less critical than Dickens; perhaps because he was less idealistic to begin with he was therefore less disappointed. He agreed with Dickens, though, that public life in America was in a parlous state, was a 'state of dirt'.<sup>556</sup> Again dishonesty, which was increasingly invading British public life, was the crux of the issue: 'the science of statesmanship has yet to be learned in the States, – and certainly the highest lesson of that science,

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<sup>551</sup> Watson, p.167.

<sup>552</sup> *American Notes*, pp.133-134.

<sup>553</sup> See his letter to Forster: *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, XII, pp.13-15 (p.13) (14 January 1868).

<sup>554</sup> *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p.263.

<sup>555</sup> *American Notes*, p.277 (Appendix I, Dickens's unpublished introduction to first edition, taken from John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*).

<sup>556</sup> See *An Autobiography*, p.200.

which teaches that honesty is the best policy'.<sup>557</sup> Generally Trollope thought that Americans relied too much on the ballot-box (so much for democracy), because citizenship was thereby reduced to the question of voting only, and political responsibility otherwise absolved.<sup>558</sup>

Trollope's concerns about democracy, then, are explored in *The Way We Live Now* in the context of speculations about the political fates of new civilizations and old. In terms of the latter – Britain – the classical bread and circuses theme manifests itself through a depiction of a society at that pitch of corruption where the masses or mob are coming into being in their support of a potential dictator – Melmotte – and the threat of tyranny looms. The narrator sets out the reasons why the common man would be inclined to follow such a one as Melmotte:

it was supposed that the working classes were in favour of Melmotte, partly from their love of a man who spends a great deal of money, partly from the belief that he was being ill-used, – partly, no doubt, from the occult sympathy which is felt for crime, when the crime committed is injurious to the upper classes. Masses of men will almost feel that a certain amount of injustice ought to be inflicted on their betters, so as to make things even, and will persuade themselves that a criminal should be declared to be innocent, because the crime committed has had a tendency to oppress the rich and pull down the mighty from their seats. (TWWLN II. 128)

This kind of mass politics is the politics of envy and class hatred, as the mob want to 'level' down the upper classes in some sort of revenge. When Melmotte goes bravely to the Covent Garden polling booth, it is working men who approach and support him: 'here he was recognised by various men, mechanics chiefly, who came forward and shook hands with him' (TWWLN II. 120). He 'spends an hour conversing with the people, and at last made a speech to a little knot around him' (TWWLN II. 120-121), the speech which was 'the only good speech he had ever been known to make'

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<sup>557</sup> *North America*, p.106.

<sup>558</sup> See *North America*, p.244.



(TWWLN II. 121), and which was ‘certainly successful, as he was applauded throughout Covent Garden’ (TWWLN II. 121). Even as Melmotte’s position becomes more and more precarious, he takes comfort from the idea of mass favour: ‘he already felt what popular support might do for him’ (TWWLN II. 297).

Melmotte is also favoured by a new farthing newspaper, one of Bagehot’s ‘popular organs’<sup>559</sup> of the masses, the not-subtle-of-title ‘The Mob’, which

was already putting Melmotte forward as a political hero, preaching with reference to his commercial transactions the grand doctrine that magnitude in affairs is a valid defence for certain irregularities. A Napoleon, though he may exterminate tribes in carrying out his projects, cannot be judged by the same law as a young lieutenant who may be punished for cruelty to a few negroes. ‘The Mob’ thought that a good deal should be overlooked in a Melmotte, and that the philanthropy of his great designs should be allowed to cover a multitude of sins. (TWWLN II. 171)

The mob and its namesake, then, share the same irrationality and emotional pull towards a potential dictator as do women. Like Lady Carbury and Mrs Hurtle they are drawn to the strong man, the strong leader, the military (or new military, commercial) hero, and will overlook moral shortcomings in their worship. Their love of someone who spends a lot of money, whilst hardly exclusive to their class, is consonant with the bread and circuses motif; and Melmotte is known to well recompense the working man for his labour: ‘there was not a man in London who caused the payment of a larger sum in weekly wages than Mr. Melmotte’ (TWWLN II. 128). We know that Trollope admired Caesar but feared Caesarism, and in *The Way We Live Now* he fears the sanction that those above the level of the mob, indeed sections of the political elite, give to these mob-like sentiments. Thus the narrator in *The Way We Live Now*: ‘I do not know that the theory was ever so plainly put forward as it was done by the ingenious and courageous writer in ‘The Mob’; but in practice it has commanded the assent of many intelligent minds’ (TWWLN II. 171). Even as Melmotte becomes

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<sup>559</sup> *The English Constitution*, p.251.

increasingly tarnished and one half of the Conservative party have a ‘feeling of shame’ (TWLWN II. 171) that he is their representative, ‘there was already springing up an idea among another class that Melmotte might become as it were a Conservative tribune of the people’ (TWLWN II. 171). Brantlinger shows how this manipulation of, or capitulation to, the lower classes by their ‘betters’ was an inherent part of the classical critique of luxury and corruption (for example, in Juvenal), and this continued in the more modern critique of ‘negative classicism’. For example, Bagehot shared Trollope’s concerns:

what I fear is that both our political parties will bid for the support of the working man; that both of them will promise to do as he likes if he will only tell them what it is; that, as he now holds the casting vote in our affairs, both parties will beg and pray him to give that vote to them. I can conceive of nothing more corrupting or worse for a set of poor ignorant people than that two combinations of well-taught and rich men should constantly offer to defer to their decision, and compete for the office of executing it.<sup>560</sup>

In Kingsley’s anxious discussions of ancient and modern civilizations he feared the ‘sentimental admiration of “Imperialism” growing up now-a-days, under the pretentious titles of “hero-worship”, and “strong government”’,<sup>561</sup> and warned about ““He that cometh in the name of all” – the popular military despot – the “saviour of his country” [...] – the inaugurator of that Imperialism, that Caesarism into which Rome sank [...] simply because men must eat and drink for to-morrow they die’.<sup>562</sup> *The Times* feared the age’s ‘unwonted admiration for those who seem to make lines of their own and push ahead in almost any matter. “Be something”, it says, to old and young; to rich and poor. To be nothing, good or bad, is alone contemptible’.<sup>563</sup> Engendered

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<sup>560</sup> *The English Constitution*, p.277 (Introduction to 2<sup>nd</sup> edn).

<sup>561</sup> Charles Kingsley, *The Roman and the Teuton, A Series of Lectures delivered before the University of Cambridge*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: Macmillan, 1901 (1889)), p.249.

<sup>562</sup> Kingsley, ‘Ancient Civilisation’, in *Historical Lectures and Essays*, pp.289-309 (p.304).

<sup>563</sup> ‘Editorial’, *The Times*, 11 August 1875, p.9.

originally by the luxury of the age, it was now the age's personality type, and *The Times* saw a connection between this attitude and the types of crime being committed:

we cannot help thinking that the Police and Assize Reports exhibit an increasing amount of the crimes arising from self-exaltation, self-confidence, self-indulgence, and uncontrollable 'will', as it is called, but which is not 'will', but the very contrary of it – mere passion.<sup>564</sup>

As we know, Trollope, looking to France, had feared 'Napoleon's diatribe in favour of Caesars as the only panacea for human ills',<sup>565</sup> and thought, like Dickens, that there was 'a state of things worse than the worst of political troubles, more fraught with evil to humanity, more conducive to absolute national ruin. And that state is the absence of all political interest, the annihilation of politics among the people'.<sup>566</sup> But for Trollope this was not yet the case for Britain, though a strong eye should be kept on this susceptibility to potential dictators, particularly among the common man.

Melmotte's association with a potential tyranny is also reinforced by the natural inclinations of his personality. Although the courageous Marie stands up to him, his wife is terrified of the man who is 'her tyrant' (TWLNL II. 338), and who is to her 'an awful being, powerful as Satan' (TWLNL II. 258). And in the height of Melmotte's hubris he enjoys domineering over the country's elite: 'six months since he had been a humble man to a Lord, – but now he scolded Earls and snubbed Dukes' (TWLNL II. 35). His brief appearances in the House of Commons are embarrassing failures, but his very presence there is a warning of the danger that might ensue should such a politically ignorant and personally tyrannical man be given political power. Britain has given Melmotte freedom, where his previous countries of abode had found him out: 'he had at length found that British freedom would alone allow him to enjoy, without

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<sup>564</sup> 'Editorial', *The Times*, 11 August 1875, p.9.

<sup>565</sup> 'The Election of M. Prevost-Paradol', p.3.

<sup>566</sup> 'The Election of M. Prevost-Paradol', p.3.

persecution, the fruits of his industry' (TWVLN I. 31); but in doing so could at last endanger her own.

However, Trollope was not as dismissive of the masses and of the working man as it might seem. After all, he believed in commercial civilizations and also that commercial civilizations tended towards equality (however conveniently distant that equality might be). The key was to move slowly. Even in *The Way We Live Now* there are hints that Trollope was optimistic about the potential of the masses. At a dinner at Roger's home, Carbury Manor, in Suffolk, the conversation turns to the county of Suffolk, or 'Silly Suffolk', as it is known. Conservative Roger praises it:

"I like Suffolk. The people are hearty, and radicalism is not quite so rampant as it is elsewhere. The poor people touch their hats, and the rich people think of the poor. There is something left among us of old English habits". (TWVLN I. 153)

The Bishop responds: "Something left of old English ignorance, [...] all the same I dare say we're improving, like the rest of the world" (TWVLN I. 153). In *North America*, Trollope had expressed the Bishop's sentiments:

The honest, happy rustic makes a very pretty picture; and I hope that honest rustics are happy. But the man who earns two shillings a day in the country, would always prefer to earn five in the town. The man who finds himself bound to touch his hat to the squire, would be glad to dispense with that ceremony, if circumstances would permit. A crowd of greasy-coated town artisans with grimy hands and pale faces, is not in itself delectable; but each of that crowd had probably more of the goods of life than any rural labourer. He thinks more, reads more, feels more, sees more, hears more, learns more, and lives more. It is through great cities that the civilisation of the world has progressed, and the charms of life been advanced. Man in his rudest state begins in the country, and in his most finished state may retire there. But the battle of the world has to be fought in the cities; and the country that shows the greatest city population is ever the one that is going most ahead in the world's history.<sup>567</sup>

So Trollope could see that the sort of London artisans who are supporting Melmotte in *The Way We Live Now* were ultimately better off than the picturesque but probably

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<sup>567</sup> *North America*, p.58.

more ignorant and even stupid rustics in the country. Also, this is better not just for the individuals who make up that class but for an advancing civilization as a whole. There is something of these differing internal stages of civilization in Gaskell's *North and South*, which opposes a vigorous, industrial north with a sleepy, pastoral south. As Regenia Gagnier points out: 'in contrast to Milton, which is always associated with action and movement, the southern countryside is typically presented as civil, already congealed, leisurely, ordered – [...] the qualities that elsewhere were associated with "oriental" stasis and luxury'.<sup>568</sup>

These internal stages of civilization are microcosms of the wider world, as, according to the Americans in the novel, Britain as a whole has descended into the 'stupid tranquillity' (TWWLN II. 439) and "'soft civilisation'" (TWWLN I. 445) of the countryside, while America is forging ahead in a manly and vigorous way. Trollope acknowledged in *North America* that sentimentally he could sympathise with a Roger Carbury, but more rationally and disinterestedly he was with a Bishop Elmham. As David M. Craig puts it: 'Trollope appreciated the *emotional* pull of conservatism, but ultimately it was subordinate to his *rational* liberalism' (author's emphasis).<sup>569</sup> The more people who were educated, politically aware and materially comfortable, the better civilization would be:

I know there is among us a strong feeling that the lower classes are better without politics, as there is also that they are better without crinoline and artificial flowers; but if politics and crinoline and artificial flowers are good at all, they are good for all who can honestly come by them and honestly use them. The political coachman is perhaps less valuable to his master as a coachman than he would be without his politics, but he with his politics is more valuable to himself. For myself, I do not like the Americans of the lower order. I am not comfortable among them. They tread on my corns and offend me. They make my daily life unpleasant. But I do respect them. I acknowledge their

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<sup>568</sup> *The Insatiability of Human Wants*, p.39.

<sup>569</sup> David M. Craig, 'Advanced Conservative Liberalism: Party and Principle in Trollope's Parliamentary Novels', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 38 (2010), 355- 370 (p.360).

intelligence and personal dignity. I know that they are men and women worthy to be so called; I see that they are living as human beings in possession of reasoning faculties; and I perceive that they owe this to the progress that education has made among them.<sup>570</sup>

Trollope continues:

After all, what is wanted in this world? Is it not that men should eat and drink, and read and write, and say their prayers? [...] When we talk of the advances of civilisation, do we mean anything but this, that men who now eat and drink badly shall eat and drink well, and that those who cannot read and write now shall learn to do so, – the prayers following, as prayers will follow upon such learning? Civilisation does not consist in the eschewing of garlic or the keeping clean of man's finger-nails. It may lead to such delicacies, and probably will do so. But the man who thinks that civilisation cannot exist without them imagines that the church cannot stand without the spire. In the States of America men do eat and drink, and do read and write.<sup>571</sup>

Here politics are the right of the lower classes, as are any luxuries honestly within their means. And the two necessarily go together, since it is the classic liberal contention that advancing commercial states bring with them increasing political freedoms. Much of the people have not yet advanced (or declined) into delicacies and refinement, but the core components of civilization are in place. With all this, America has the potential to advance into a virtuous public life, which a democratic system can sometimes, but need not, impair.

Barbara Weiss thinks that Trollope ends *The Way We Live Now* in a deeply conservative fashion:

*The Way We Live Now* ends like so many eighteenth-century novels – back in the country, with a renewal of social harmony symbolized by a series of weddings – Ruby to John Crumb, and Hetta to Paul Montague. As the adventurers have all been packed off to America, so the prudent characters have all settled in the country to live out a well-regulated life of order and traditional values [...]. Thus Trollope closes with a vision of a prudent, conservative way of life still possible in a quiet corner of the country. It is his ideal vision, but it is also a wistful one; in his heart Trollope knows that bankruptcy, rather than prudence, is the way we live now.<sup>572</sup>

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<sup>570</sup> *North America*, p.339.

<sup>571</sup> *North America*, p.339-340.

<sup>572</sup> Weiss, p.171.

But as we have seen, and despite his personal sentiments, Trollope knew that the way forward for civilization was neither conservative, quiet nor pastoral. Hetta Carbury says of Roger, “there is an unchanging way with him that is awful to think of” (TWLWN II. 150). Hetta talks of Roger’s love for her but also means his personality more broadly. Roger thinks in terms of the classical luxury and corruption paradigm, whereby luxury, as a dynamic thing, signifies change, and this change is corruption. But for Trollope, as for Hetta, to be unchanging was ‘awful’: changing was the way the world was, and should be.

This statement seems to contradict the fact that one of Trollope’s favourite aphorisms was ‘whatever is, is good’, from Pope’s *Essay on Man*,<sup>573</sup> a sentiment we might oppose to Dickens’s in *A Tale of Two Cities*, where ‘the precept, that “Whatever is is right” [is] an aphorism that would be as final as it is lazy, did it not include the troublesome consequence, that nothing that ever was, was wrong’.<sup>574</sup> But the notion is consonant with Trollope’s belief in a slow but sure (if not always visible) progress, which underpinned the workings of providence or God. Although Dickens yearned for radical political change, the final nail in the coffin for the luxurious and decrepit political classes, he had lost faith in ‘the people’ to bring this about. In *The New Zealander*, Trollope had asked:

Is our present wealth and present glory, our increasing luxury, our love of art, our polished intellect of which we are so proud, are these things but signs of our decay? Is the Zealander already coming to feed his pride with our fall? (p.10)

Despite the warning signs shown in *The Way We Live Now* – the enervated upper classes, the money greed and monstrous appetites for luxury, the beginnings of a degradation of public life – the answer to the question was no, as long as vigilance was

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<sup>573</sup> See Glendinning, *Trollope*, p.221.

<sup>574</sup> *A Tale of Two Cities*, p.58.

maintained. For Dickens it seemed already too late: Britain's 'national glory [was] on the decline',<sup>575</sup> and, like Rome, 'those enervated and corrupted masters of the world' (OMF 279), before her, she was already 'on her last legs' (OMF 279).

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<sup>575</sup> *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, VII, pp.742-744 (p.743) ( ?11-12 November 1855).



## Conclusion

In 1790, the Whig statesman, Edmund Burke, talked despondently of the many servile occupations to which the poor had to submit in service of their wealthy masters, masters who were enslaved ‘to the yoke of luxury, and the despotism of fancy’.<sup>576</sup> But in the interests of liberty and the rights of property, these two tyrants were to be tolerated, because, in Smithian terms, ‘in their own imperious way [they] will distribute the surplus product of the soil’.<sup>577</sup> The metaphor of the ‘yoke of luxury’ captured the general feeling of anxiety attached to the idea of luxury in the eighteenth century. We know that luxury itself was extremely difficult to define, but this did not stop people fearing that an indulgence of the senses above a certain level became addictive, uncontrollable, insatiable, and that this could lead to individual and national destruction.

In this thesis I have been exploring attitudes to luxury in the nineteenth century, and especially questioning how much this negative idea of luxury – the association of luxury and corruption – continued. Whilst sensing before I began my research that eighteenth-century understandings of luxury and its harmful consequences could not have just withered away as the nineteenth century turned, I was still surprised at its persistence, and not just in subtle ways. I was most intrigued by Trollope’s *New Zealander* (c. 1854-6), which in the mid-nineteenth century sets out the terms of the older idea of luxury almost in the form of a manifesto. And yet Trollope’s tone is cheerful. It reads like the tenets of a religion whose outward forms are acknowledged but not necessarily lived by or felt in the heart – a very Trollopiian, un-Evangelical approach, in fact. Even when his tone grows darker in *The Way We Live Now*, the

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<sup>576</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1<sup>st</sup> edn (London: J. Dodsley, 1790), p.237.

<sup>577</sup> Burke, p.237.

answer to the problem of luxury is not its renunciation but a care not to cross due bounds, and a reassertion of honesty to prevent luxury leading to criminality.

But Burke's notion of the 'yoke of luxury' remains pertinent in relation to the nineteenth century. Whilst the political economists ostensibly moved the debates on, indeed transformed them to accommodate the idea of the freedom of luxury, novelists continued to capture cultural fears about luxury's relationship to individual and political slavery. At the same time the imaginative form of the novel allowed a writer like Thackeray a safe space in which to challenge these cultural conventions, and to celebrate luxury. It would have been unthinkable for a respectable Victorian writer to produce a serious treatise celebrating drunkenness and luxurious excess, but a literary work like *Vanity Fair* allows enough ambiguity for Thackeray's exuberance in relation to these things to be given full reign without his appearing entirely to condone them.

Just as nineteenth-century novelists continued to grapple with what I have interpreted as a total idea of luxury, early twenty-first-century novelists are re-imagining the luxury debates for our own time. Although the critique of luxury in our advanced capitalist society is again ostensibly about the unfair distribution of resources, it is not difficult to discern that there is much more going on. The question of liberty remains crucial to the debates, not in the sense of fears about national political slavery (though fears of national decline are still apparent) but in the sense of luxury as personal slavery.

## I

Author John Lanchester has been described as having 'a keen eye for the state of the nation' (*The Observer*, 29 January 2012), most especially in his recent novel, *Capital* (2012), about the lives of a variety of individuals – rich and poor – connected to an expensive South London street, in the early stages of the recent financial crash.

Fellow novelist, Colm Tóibín, thinks that the book ‘seems like a story that belongs to the fifties or the Victorian novel’,<sup>578</sup> and describes Lanchester’s ability to capture the zeitgeist of ‘these times of ours’ or of ‘the way we live now’, to condense this drama of the now as a record of imaginative history for the future:

*Capital* comes in a great tradition of novels which are filled with the news of now, in which the intricacies of the present moment are noticed with clarity and relish and then brilliantly dramatized. It is clear that its characters, its wisdom, and scope and range of its sympathy, will fascinate readers into the far future.<sup>579</sup>

What current and future readers will recognise in this novel, just as we recognise in the novelists of the nineteenth century, is a central preoccupation with issues of wealth and poverty, luxury and need, as well as the inescapable feeling that wealth can corrupt the self and also cause unhappiness. The novel’s title even nods to Marx, as well as referring to Britain’s capital city and the overriding importance of money. Like many nineteenth-century novelists, Lanchester is also a journalist, moving freely between the two discourses and able to capture in fictional form the human dimension and imaginative truth of real-life events. What is fascinating about *Capital* is that a factual account of the crisis grows out of his research for the novel: *I.O.U.: Why Everyone Owes Everyone and No One Can Pay* (2010). That is, rather than Lanchester’s journalism providing a context for an imaginative story, his creative impetus – the urge to tell a story – provides the context for a factual analysis of reality: the artist is both recorder and shaper of culture. In researching *Capital* Lanchester ‘stumbled across the most interesting story I’ve ever found’, an ‘absolutely amazing story, full of human interest and drama, one whose byways of mathematics, economics, and psychology are both central to the story of the last decades and mysteriously unknown to the general

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<sup>578</sup> Elizabeth Rose Murray, ‘John Lanchester in Conversation with Colm Tóibín, *Writers’ Week*, 31 May 2012, <<http://writersweek.ie/writers-week-event/john-lanchester-in-conversation-with-coltm-tobin>> [accessed 3 September 2013].

<sup>579</sup> Quoted in front cover inside sleeve of John Lanchester, *Capital* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013).

public'.<sup>580</sup> If Trollope set out the inescapable 'facts' of history – the inevitable decline and fall of civilizations – in *The New Zealander*, and then imagined the build-up to a fall in *The Way We Live Now*, Lanchester imagines the early stages of the fall in his planning of *Capital* and then historicises it in *I.O.U.*

Just as the old idea of luxury was seen as a form of pathology, so current cultural commentators describe our addiction to money and consumerism – 'You just can't kick it, that junk, even if you want to. You can't get the money monkey off your back', according to John Self in Martin Amis's *Money* (1984)<sup>581</sup> – in the language of disease, with book titles including Robert H. Frank's, *Luxury Fever: Money and Happiness in an Era of Excess* (1999), Alain de Botton's *Status Anxiety* (2004) and Oliver James's *Affluenza* (2007). The illness is thought to be caused by a relentless drive to keep up with the Joneses. In Frank's words: 'that many goods become more attractive to us when others also have them means that consumption spending has much in common with a contagious illness'.<sup>582</sup> Adam Ferguson said:

if silks and pearl are made common, men will begin to covet some new decorations, which the wealthy alone can procure. If they are indulged in their humour, their demands are repeated: For it is the continual increase of riches, not any measure attained, that keeps the craving imagination at ease.<sup>583</sup>

This insatiable craving, first identified in the old luxury debates, now has a technical name, the 'hedonic treadmill' or 'hedonic adaptation', defined by Lanchester as the 'always-receding vision of contentment'.<sup>584</sup>

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<sup>580</sup> John Lanchester, *I.O.U.: Why Everyone Owes Everyone and No One Can Pay* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2010), pp.4, 5.

<sup>581</sup> Martin Amis, *Money: A Suicide Note* (London: Penguin, 1985 (1984)), p.384.

<sup>582</sup> Robert H. Frank, *Luxury Fever: Money and Happiness in an Era of Excess* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p.270.

<sup>583</sup> Adam Ferguson, p.143.

<sup>584</sup> John Lanchester, *I.O.U.*, p.218. Michael Eysenck developed the theory (based on previously

In *Capital* Lanchester sums up this modern anxiety via the anonymous postcard campaign targeted at Pepys Road, ‘We Want What You Have’. And one of the road’s residents, the banker, Roger Yount, enjoys the idea of being envied: ‘the thought of other people wishing they had your level of material affluence was an idea you could sit in front of, like a hearth fire’.<sup>585</sup> But, caught up in the fever himself, Roger is not really happy. In *Affluenza*, James discusses the idea that although Western societies are materially richer than ever before, the relative and competitive nature of conspicuous consumption means that those caught in the trap can still feel poor. He cites research on Britain showing that ‘two-thirds of Britons believe that they cannot afford to buy everything they really need’,<sup>586</sup> just as nineteenth-century commentators complained about the luxury of the age and the expense of the age. Again, the crux is seen as a conflation of need and desire. In *Capital* the perceived need for Roger and his wife, Arabella, to keep up and advance on their luxurious lifestyle (the Pepys Road home worth several millions of pounds, the house in the country, the hoped for third home abroad, the private schools for the two children, the luxurious holidays) leads Roger to feel that a hoped for million pounds bonus has become an absolute essential: ‘The figure of £1,000,000 had started as a vague, semi-comic aspiration and had become an actual necessity, something he needed to pay the bills and set his finances on the square’ (p.19). When Roger is fired from his job in the City and expenses need to be curtailed, shopaholic Arabella, despite failing to grasp the concept, finds satisfaction in

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established psychological terms) in *Happiness: Facts and Myths* (Hove: Lawrence Earlbaum, 1990).

<sup>585</sup> John Lanchester, *Capital* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013), p.279.

<sup>586</sup> Oliver James, *Affluenza* (London: Vermilion, 2007), p.52. Taken from C. Hamilton, ‘Overconsumption in Britain: A culture of middle-class complaint?’, Discussion Paper no.57, The Australia Institute, Canberra <[www.tai.org.au/Publications\\_Files/Publications.htm](http://www.tai.org.au/Publications_Files/Publications.htm)>.

being able to prove to her parents that she and Roger are not really ‘rich’ but ‘your typical London struggling well-off’ (p.514).

James describes the need/luxury confusion as follows: ‘virus values screw us up by conflating what we want with what we truly need, Having with Being’.<sup>587</sup> The pathology is not just metaphorical. James’s analysis of a 2004 World Health Organisation study on rates of emotional distress in fifteen nations finds that ‘the richer the developed nation, the more distressed its people’.<sup>588</sup> This distress includes rising rates of anxiety, depression, and chronic unhappiness. Just as Austen and Adam Ferguson observed that the notion of happiness could be misunderstood, and that wealth and luxury could even create its opposite, James finds the idea of happiness as ‘chimeric and temporary, akin to pleasure’, and that individual unhappiness and illness is a natural outcome of a society that seeks pleasure and happiness in the material: ‘I contend that most emotional distress is best understood as a rational response to sick societies’.<sup>589</sup> In *Capital*, the Zimbabwean asylum-seeker, Quentina, working illegally as a parking attendant whose area covers Pepys road, is amazed at the fury she attracts:

she had never known a subject on which people became irrational as quickly and completely as that of parking in this absurdly rich, absurdly comfortable country. When you gave people a ticket they were angry, always and inevitably. And the anger could spread, and become catching, as it had with this plainly mad woman, crazed with resentments. (p.212)

Quentina, thinking in terms of the rational allocation of resources question, is bewildered, and ‘there were times when she wanted to say: Get down on your knees! Be grateful! A billion people living on a dollar a day’ (p.212). But Quentina, coming from a developing country, has not grown up with ‘affluenza’, the irrational disease of

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<sup>587</sup> James, p.xvi.

<sup>588</sup> James, p.17 and Appendix 1.

<sup>589</sup> James, pp.xvvi, xx.

growing cross from the wantonness of comfort, to paraphrase Austen. When Roger and Arabella are forced to sell their Pepys Road property, Roger is amazed by the madness the sale creates:

What Roger hated most about all this house fandango was that it was insane. No one could make a rational judgement about a decision of that size so quickly, after a twenty-minute viewing. But this air of madness seemed to be general. The whole process had a frenzy to it – everybody seemed in a rush, everybody was somehow heated up. It verged on the sexual. (pp.511-512)

As did the commentators of the eighteenth-century particularly, Roger identifies ‘luxury fever’ with sexual behaviour – the lust and wantonness – the overwhelming desire to get and ‘spend’.

Just as Dickens explored the idea of money-madness in the nineteenth century manifesting itself in the figure of the miser as well as the spendthrift, so Lanchester includes the miserly figure of Albert Howe, deceased husband of the humble Petunia, the oldest resident of Pepys Road. Petunia remembers Albert’s distrust of banks, insurance companies and credit-card companies, and ‘the government and everybody else, and the way that you couldn’t be too careful’ (p.64). Albert

was not, in general, mad; but when the subject was money, he could not be relied on to be sane. For him, money was out of perspective, both all-important (because it at times seemed to be all he thought about) but also completely out of step with reality. (p.65)

Indeed, when their daughter has the home redecorated for sale after her mother’s death, a battered suitcase containing £500,000 in cash is discovered hidden in a false wall (p.367). Just like Daniel Dancer, Albert has secreted his money in the building. And in further echoes of Dickens’s exploration of the relationship between money and dirt, Albert’s cash turns out to be more or less worthless, so that ‘everything wears to rags’ (OMF 86).

One of Lanchester's principal themes is our preoccupation with 'stuff', our obsessive need to have, to possess, which, as we know, has been reflected in the turn towards material culture in criticism of nineteenth-century literature. In the novel form, Lanchester can inhabit different human mind-sets in their reaction to stuff, and he shows the alienation felt by the have-nots (and even the haves). Patrick Kamo (from Senegal), father of the teenaged football prodigy, Freddy, is bewildered by the shops on the King's Road:

he walked along the famous road, looking in the windows of the expensive shops selling things which he could not imagine anyone wanting or needing or using: lamps which did not look as if they would emit any light, shoes no woman could stand in, coats which would not keep anyone warm, chairs which had no obvious way to sit on them. People wanted these things, they must do, or the shops wouldn't be selling them – and yet Patrick was so far from wanting any of them for himself that he felt that it wasn't the things for sale which were useless, but he himself. (p.233)

Usman Kamal, youngest son of a British-Pakistani family, who own a grocery and general store on Pepys Road, feels alienated by the family business: 'He could never quite get used to how much sheer stuff there was in the shop: piled and stacked and arrayed. There was something offensive and impure about this sheer amount of stuffness' (p.122). The most important 'stuff' in this world are the houses, the principal luxury signifier, and the way to label the inhabitants of 'a country of winners and losers' (p.7). The residents of Pepys Road are winners, but the houses have overtaken them, have taken on a life of their own, have become their masters, as it were: 'The houses were now like people, and rich people at that, imperious, with needs of their own that they were not shy about having serviced' (p.6). Usman's brother, Shahid, realises instinctively the nature of money and stuff as a yoke, and so turns down a potentially lucrative permanent job offer:

Somewhere deep in Shahid's sense of himself was the idea of being a seeker, a drifter, a man not tied down; he could feel the cash, four-figure sums in a good



week, starting to tether him. Shahid could tell that it wouldn't be long before he wanted the life to go with the money. (p.38)

And Roger finally comes to the conclusion that:

You could not spend your entire span of life in thrall to the code of stuff. There was no code of stuff. Stuff was just stuff. You couldn't live by it or for it. Roger's new motto: stuff is not enough. (p.575)

But we need to be careful not to fall into Usman's trap of judging 'stuff' too simplistically, something that critics of nineteenth-century literature have sometimes done. Because of our own anxieties about material culture and conspicuous consumption, we have tended to look back on the nineteenth-century material world through a negative lens. Lyn Pykett has said: 'It seems that we are all cultural materialists nowadays',<sup>590</sup> but more than this, we are morally judgmental cultural materialists. As Daniel Miller points out, this attitude can contribute to our anxiety:

whatever our environmental fears or concerns over materialism, we will not be helped by either a theory of stuff, or an attitude to stuff, that simply tries to oppose ourselves to it; as though the more we think of things as alien, the more we keep ourselves sacrosanct and pure. The idea that stuff somehow drains away our humanity, as we dissolve into a sticky mess of plastic and other commodities, is really an attempt to retain a rather simplistic and false view of pure and prior unsullied humanity.<sup>591</sup>

In *Capital* Usman is temporarily drawn into Islamic fundamentalism (with the potential for terrorist activity), agreeing with his local Iman that Western society's addiction to stuff, sex and drunkenness is a 'symptom[...] of decadence' (p.259). James's idea of our alleged conflation of 'Having and Being' brings us back to Sekora's exploration of luxury and his identification of the difference between eighteenth-century internals, or 'states of interior wholesomeness', and nineteenth-century externals. I have contended in this thesis that nineteenth-century luxury remained a question of both the internal

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<sup>590</sup> Lyn Pykett, 'The Material Turn in Victorian Studies', *Literature Compass*, 1 (2003), 1-5 (p.3).

<sup>591</sup> Miller, p.5.

and the external. Indeed, our tendency to label stuff as shallow suggests that this is still the case. One example of this form of anxiety is our attitude to clothing and fashion, which Adam Smith saw as the ‘most trifling [luxury] of all’,<sup>592</sup> and Wollstonecraft regarded as a ‘badge of slavery’.<sup>593</sup> Miller again:

The problem with a theory of semiotics and of treating clothing as superficial is that we presume a certain relationship between the interior and the exterior. We possess what could be called a *depth ontology*. The assumption is that *being* – what we truly are – is located deep inside ourselves and is in direct opposition to surface. A clothes shopper is shallow because a philosopher or a saint is deep. The true core to the self is relatively constant and unchanging and also unresponsive to mere circumstance. We have to look deep inside ourselves to find ourselves. But these are all metaphors. Deep inside ourselves is blood and bile, not philosophical certainty. We won't find a soul by cutting deep into someone, though I suppose we might accidentally release it.<sup>594</sup>

Thus, Miller's ideas contradict James's. Far from conflating having with being, we insist on separating the two, and it is this that produces anxiety.

Lanchester describes his own feeling about *Capital* as realising that ‘the most important forms of capital are emotional, linked to relationships; human capital’.<sup>595</sup> Like Dickens and Gaskell, Lanchester as novelist can prioritise human capital, a world that exists outside of the neat formulations of political economy, or the ‘determined illusions, systematically ignoring reality’<sup>596</sup> of today's mathematical, free-market formulas. But an emphasis on human capital does not preclude the pleasure that humans find in stuff, something that is also captured in *Capital*. Unlike his father,

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<sup>592</sup> Smith, p.377

<sup>593</sup> *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p.123.

<sup>594</sup> Miller, pp.16-17.

<sup>595</sup> Elizabeth Rose Murray, ‘John Lanchester in Conversation with Colm Tóibín’, *Writers' Week*, 31 May 2012.

<sup>596</sup> See Lanchester's talk to the Royal Society of Arts: ‘Whoops! – Implications of the Economic Crisis’ (9 February 2010), <[http://www.thersa.org/events/video/archive/john-lanchester-whoops!](http://www.thersa.org/events/video/archive/john-lanchester-whoops!>)> [accessed 14 September 2013].

Freddy Kamo is delighted with London, especially the spectacle aspect of a capitalist society:

London was so rich, and also so green, and somehow so detailed: full of stuff that had been made, and bought, and placed, and groomed, and shaped, and washed clean, and put on display as if the whole city was for sale. It seemed too as if many of the people were on display, behaving as if they were expecting to be looked at, as if they were on show: so many of them seemed to be wearing costumes, their I'm-a-mother-pushing-a-pram costumes, babies and children in outfits that were like costumes; workers digging holes in their costume-bright orange vests; joggers in jogging costume; even the drinkers in the streets and parks, even the beggars, seemed to be wearing costumes, uniforms. Freddy thought it was delightful, every bit of it. (p.277)

Arabella might turn out to be fundamentally unable to grasp basic financial realities, but her delight in the idea of luxury is something that most people could relate to:

The idea of luxury, even the word "luxury", was important to Arabella. Luxury meant something that was by definition overpriced, but was so nice, so lovely, in itself that you did not mind, in fact was so lovely that the expensiveness became part of the point. (p.44)

Other characters, like the Hungarian nanny, Matya, can see the up side as well as the down:

Matya had an ambivalent relationship with the currents of money on which much of London seemed to float [...]. People got it and spent it and thought about it and talked about it all the time. It was brash and horrible and vulgar, but also exciting and energetic and shameless and new. (p.337)

Usman turns away from fundamentalism and Shahid realises that to achieve fulfilment he needs to commit to a full-time career, to some kind of shackle. As the novelists of the nineteenth century struggled to pinpoint a virtuous mean between wealth and poverty, so Lanchester depicts different individuals coming to terms with their own need to find a virtuous mean between the yoke and a Spartan existence that could only be lived extra-societally. In coming to London, Matya hopes to find a financially secure future, with a wealthy partner – 'if there was a single box she definitely wanted ticked it was that a serious boyfriend would have serious money' (p.530) – including love and children. In falling for the Polish builder, Zbigniew, she lets go of the idea of

riches but not her value of money and an appreciation of what it can do. She realises that this apparent liability in Zbigniew is also a strength: 'He wasn't rich. That meant he knew the value of money: you could trust him with money, trust him to get the point of it' (p.530).

## II

The question of social class has been an important aspect of my discussion of literary representations of nineteenth-century luxury. On the whole the wealthier classes do not come off well, the novel's ambiguous space allowing room for, for example, a vision of a degraded aristocracy which sometimes belies the moderate political opinion (such as that of Trollope) of its author. Again, the emphasis is mostly on the corruption of virtue, or of internals, or of the self. Even Gaskell, who shifted the focus to the issue of unfair resource allocation, could not quite get away from the idea that luxury corrupts in itself, as exemplified in *Mary Barton* by Carson's selfishness and sexual corruption. Gaskell's principal fear was that luxury hardened the heart, an idea long associated with the older idea of luxury, as we found in relation to debates about the slave trade in chapter 1. Gaskell, who tried to be sympathetic with both rich and poor, saw that a life led in luxury meant that, understandably, the rich simply forgot the poor, and could not then comprehend this other form of existence. So in *North and South* Margaret feels that in the wealthy home of her London friends, 'she was getting surfeited of the eventless ease in which no struggle or endeavour was required', and 'she was afraid lest she should even become sleepily deadened into forgetfulness of anything beyond the life which was lapping her round with luxury'.<sup>597</sup> In *Ruth*, Mr Donne is already hardened:

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<sup>597</sup> *North and South*, p.487.

Mr Donne had been born and cradled in all that wealth could purchase, and so had his ancestors before him for so many generations, that refinement and luxury seemed the natural condition of man, and they that dwelt without were in the position of monsters.<sup>598</sup>

The assumption that the rich can become cold, inhumane and contemptuous of the poor manifested itself in the recent ‘Plebgate’ scandal, when in September 2012 Conservative MP, Andrew Mitchell, was forced to resign after being accused of calling the police guards at Downing Street ‘plebs’. Nobody seemed to mind the alleged fact that Mitchell swore at the officers. It was the ‘pleb’ aspect of the allegations which became so highly charged. The question of the truthfulness of the latter (Mitchell vehemently denies it) seems less relevant than its believability: if Mitchell did not use the term pleb on this occasion, we feel that it is the sort of word he would use. Concerns about the great disparities between rich and poor in modern Britain, with a wealthy elite holding political power, turn into beliefs or prejudices about an out-of-touch and callous elite of Tory ‘toffs’ (the ‘Nasty Party’<sup>599</sup>) – the Roman patrician class, as it were – being contemptuous of the plebs below them, only fit for bread and circuses.

In *Capital* Lanchester does not condemn the rich in the easy rhetoric of the media coverage of plebgate, rather he shows how relatively decent individuals can corrupt from their infection with the affluenza virus, and their increasing distance, as ‘winners’, from the ‘losers’. As we saw with Melmotte in *The Way We Live Now*, Lanchester’s depiction of another banker, Eric, shows that the acquisition of the traits of arrogance and hubris is simply a natural reaction to an ability to make and the possession of a great deal of money:

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<sup>598</sup> *North and South*, p.265.

<sup>599</sup> The term ‘Nasty Party’ was first used in October 2002 by Theresa May, then Chairman of the Conservative Party (in opposition).

Eric was the most tremendous job, no question. He had that absolute certainty of being right about everything which often came with having made a lot of money in the City. Because every trade involved a winner and a loser, making a great deal of money through trading involved being proved repeatedly right, time after time. That had an effect on people who for the most had not been shy or unconfident in the first place. They tended to think, genuinely and sincerely, that they were the next-best thing to God. (p.96)

But class snobbery remains. Like Melmotte purchasing the status symbols of the English gentleman (the country house, the place in Parliament), Eric takes up shooting and yachting: ‘it was interesting the way people with new money copied the people with old money [...] it was as if there was a rule book’ (p.96).

On the other side of the debates ostensibly about a fair allocation of the nation’s resources, the attack turns to the ‘plebs’, or Burke’s ‘swinish multitude’.<sup>600</sup> The question of democracy is not at issue but some of the nineteenth-century attitudes related to fears about democracy and the masses persist. In *Capital*, Roger’s bitter, humourless deputy, Mark, echoing J. S. Mill, thinks that the City is the only place where his originality can thrive:

A culture of fat people, lazy people, people who watch reality television, people who aren’t interested in anything except celebrity, people who eat in the street, people who betray their ordinariness every time they open their mouths. The City of London is one of the few places in which this tyranny of the mediocre, the mean, the average, the banal, the ordinary, the complacent is challenged. (p.192)

The key issue now is the welfare state. In public debates the reasonableness of arguments questioning the fairness of the size of welfare payments is stressed, but they often slip into moral contempt for the working class as beings in themselves. Whilst the word luxury itself is rarely used, the argument is one of luxury: the poor are spoiled by an over-generous welfare state, and have become not only lazy, dependent, feckless, and workshy but bestial and savage. This trend of vilifying the poor as other has been identified by Owen Jones in *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* (2012).

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<sup>600</sup> Burke, p.117.

Just as the Victorian poor were accused of fecklessness, an inability to manage and of prioritising luxury over need, Jones finds that, ‘one of many snide accusations against the poor is that they ruin themselves by spending their money on frivolous and luxury items’.<sup>601</sup> If gin was the bugbear of the Victorians, today’s working classes are similarly seen to waste their money on drink, with the additional luxuries of cigarettes, junk food and Sky television. And just as Gaskell showed the stoicism of the poor as they struggled to survive, Jones cites evidence of today’s poor as being necessarily good managers, eking out their benefit payments or low wages to get by (pp.205-6).

Jones’s thesis of working-class demonization is not difficult to discern. We can see the return of Malthus in proposals by the Conservative-Liberal Coalition government to discontinue benefit payments for a third child,<sup>602</sup> and the idea of single mothers breeding to get council housing and benefits has been a long-standing accusation from the political right. The recent ‘bedroom tax’ or ‘spare-room subsidy’<sup>603</sup> suggests that the poorer classes have been spoilt with regard to their accommodation needs. Overall, the language of ‘strivers versus shirkers’, or ‘savers versus scroungers’ does more than make a point about unfairness and moves into categorising the working classes as other. So if we found the question of luxury moving towards a question of rights in relation to Gaskell, we can now see an opposite trend – a backlash against material rights and an attempt to reduce or even abolish them.

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<sup>601</sup> Owen Jones, *The Demonization of the Working Class* (London: Verso, 2012), p.205.

<sup>602</sup> The proposal was announced in the politically supportive *Daily Mail* (15 July 2013) by current Tory party Chairman, Grant Schapps, though it has been on the table for some time.

<sup>603</sup> The policy means that tenants have their housing benefit reduced by 14 per cent if they have one spare bedroom, and 25 per cent if they have two or more spare bedrooms. Because of a shortage of social housing stock, moving to smaller properties to avoid benefit reduction is not always an option.

If Gaskell's literature attempted to re-claim poor people from the 'Otherness' that the language of political economy could confine them to, Martin Amis's literature can be seen to intervene in an opposite way, depicting poor people as the 'Other' that some current politicians seem to view them as, if unable to precisely articulate their thoughts. The use of language related to 'chavs' is controversial, if not popularly, at least politically. Conservative political discourse might have been getting closer to depicting a 'chav', but it would still be unthinkable to actually use the word. A novelist, however, has more licence. One reviewer of Amis's recent novel, *Lionel Asbo: State of England* (2012), credits him for at least engaging with 'those areas in the life of a nation which journalists and politicians tip-toe around'.<sup>604</sup> In this novel and in its predecessor, the classic satire on 80s greed, *Money* (1984), the heroes, or anti-heroes, Lionel Asbo and John Self are addicted, variously, to food, alcohol, sex, pornography and violence (violence against women is instinctive and obligatory). Amis's satires are complex and at times sympathetic but are fundamentally problematic in class terms: Self and Asbo are working-class monsters, and because in *Asbo* Amis aims to depict the 'state of England', it is as if again the basic problems of society are caused by working-class appetites. It would be unfair to suggest that these novels (*Asbo* particularly) are nothing but a picture of anti-social yobs and rampantly fertile pre-teen mums – a vision of obesity, incest, anti-intellectualism, pornography and systematic and casual violence and crime. But Amis's association of these qualities with a humorous depiction of Self's and Asbo's lack of cultural capital, their inability to understand 'high-brow' culture, gives the reader permission to laugh at the vulgar, bestial other, the 'chav'. Asbo, for example, lives on a diet of pop-tarts, Kentucky Fried Chicken and lager. Post lottery win he is unable to translate his tastes and appetites into a more elite bracket, requesting steak and pints of champagne in an

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<sup>604</sup> Amanda Craig, 'Lionel Asbo, By Martin Amis', *The Independent*, 10 June 2012.



expensive fish restaurant, whilst dressed in a luxury tailored suit that nonetheless makes him look like a bingo-caller.<sup>605</sup> These novels make me laugh, but also leave me feeling profoundly uncomfortable, a feeling shared by some of the novel's reviewers. Amanda Craig (*The Independent*) shows how Amis aims to write *Hard Times*, but fails to achieve the pathos that Dickens strived for.<sup>606</sup> David Evans (also of *The Independent*) finds the novel a blunt instrument attacking the wrong people:

Never mind that Amis might have found a more appropriate comedic target, in these grim times, than uppity proles. It's the complacency here that grates – the way Amis's brilliant language services a plot boasting all the satirical sophistication of a Little Britain sketch [...]. It's depressing to see our greatest stylist put the fine instrument of his prose to such crude, bludgeoning, reactionary use.<sup>607</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Owen Jones views the novel as "a cardboard cut-out of broken Britain".<sup>608</sup> However, I value my feeling of discomfort; I appreciate the artist's freedom and ability to get under our skin, to articulate thoughts and feelings that we may not have even acknowledged to ourselves, to capture the mood of a time that politicians, economists, journalists and other spokespeople of the day can never fully render.

Given our own continued preoccupation with the idea of luxury and corruption, which is clearly a question of insides and outsides, now might be a good time to look back at the idea of luxury in the nineteenth century in these fuller terms. The idea of luxury captured, and still captures, nothing less than an ethic of the self and an ethic of

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<sup>605</sup> Martin Amis, *Lionel Asbo: State of England* (London: Vintage, 2013 (2012)), chapter 10.

<sup>606</sup> Amanda Craig, *The Independent*, 10 June 2012.

<sup>607</sup> David Evans, 'Paperback review: Lionel Asbo, By Martin Amis', *The Independent*, 30 June 2013.

<sup>608</sup> Quoted in Annmarie Lopez, 'Owen Jones accuses Martin Amis of chav hate in Lionel Asbo', *The Week*, 21 June 2012.

society. Grappling with our own issues about luxury's relation to questions of liberties and rights, we can ask deeper questions about what it meant for the nineteenth century. At the same time it is worth noticing the joy as well as the pain. Inevitably, Thackeray best makes the point for his own century. In 'Memorials of Gormandizing', Thackeray's narrator, M. A. Titmarsh, comments on the rumour that Shakespeare 'died of a surfeit, brought on by carousing with a literary friend':

And wherefore not? Better to die of good wine and good company than of slow disease and doctors' doses. Some geniuses live on sour misanthropy, and some on meek milk-and-water. Let us not deal too hardly with those that are of a jovial sort, and indulge in the decent practice of the cup and the platter.<sup>609</sup>

Thackeray would not have approved of Amis's monstrous John Self, but even Self can offer a similar take on life to that of Titmarsh, the idea that luxury and excess fulfil the human need for release and joy: 'I sit around trying to teach myself self-discipline. I can't be doing with it, though (it just isn't enough fun, self-discipline), and I always end up going out for a good time instead'.<sup>610</sup>

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<sup>609</sup> 'Memorials of Gormandizing', in *Catherine, A Shabby Genteel Story, The Second Funeral of Napoleon and Miscellanies, 1840-1*, pp.509-536 (p.535).

<sup>610</sup> Martin Amis, *Money: A Suicide Note*, p.73.

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