Extravagances

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Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger, ed., *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2003; 272 pp.; £55.00; ISBN 0333963822.

One point of departure for examinations of luxury in recent decades has been John Sekora's *Luxury: the Concept in Western Thought, from Eden to Smollett* (1977).[1] Working as a historian of ideas, Sekora traced the critique of luxury from the ancient world through the eighteenth century. According to Sekora Tobias Smollett's *Humphrey Clinker* (1771) summarized the eighteenth-century critique of luxury although it was also that critique's last great gasp. Both Sekora's methodology and his interpretation come in for some re-examination in this new collection of essays on the theme of luxury. In particular, Michael McKeon revisits *Humphrey Clinker*.[2] While Sekora took the opinions of the novel's central figure, Matthew Bramble, on luxury as Smollett's own, McKeon sets those opinions in the larger context of the novel. Doing so casts some doubt on Bramble as an absolutely percipient observer of himself and the world in which he lives. McKeon's *Clinker* is a work that sets in play not just 'luxury' but an interacting collection of other eighteenth-century categories (most notably, 'sensibility' and 'enthusiasm'). Moreover, it is, of course, not a treatise but a novel, and an epistolary novel at that, with various characters, viewpoints and opinions. Thus, as purveyed in the novel, 'the truth of things lies in a composite and mixed view of reality'.[3] Bramble may hate luxury, but his own itinerary in the novel meanders on the tide of 'luxurious' phenemona. He is more complicit in what he abhors than he would like us to believe. As McKeon concludes, *Humphrey Clinker* is 'a lesson in learning to discern, beneath the broad façade of traditionality, the innovative modernisations which that façade helps to facilitate and humanise'.[4]

Here McKeon articulates what is most interesting across this entire volume. Luxury was an old discourse, an antique one, in fact, that continued to be used in a changing world. While often appearing a defence of the traditional against innovation, the term 'luxury' and the discourse surrounding it were carried along by economic and social developments: it was a vigorous idiom, then, but an adaptive one, too. The essays in this volume (most of which originated as contributions to the Luxury Project at the University of Warwick from 1997 to 2001) engage with the evolution of the idiom itself and its relation to economic and social developments. Its two focuses are, first, the vagaries of 'luxury' as a discourse during a long eighteenth century and, second, a variety of ways that discourse and practice can be seen to have interacted.

'Luxury was no less than the keyword of the period, a central term in the language of cultural transformation', announce the editors in the introduction (p. 1). That noticeable shift from the definite to the indefinite article suggests two ways to think about the history of 'luxury' in the century. Indeed, the volume attests to

the tension between the claim that luxury is a master trope for discursive developments and the claim that luxury was a term increasingly unsuitable for understandings of the period. It is clear that 'luxury' did not have a linear history, undergoing a simple transvaluation from a negative and destructive force to a positive and useful one. As the editors put it, 'there was no simple progression from disapprobation to endorsement of luxury, but rather an ongoing contest over the concept and the phenomena it might cover'. In their own collaborative contribution to the volume, 'The Rise and Fall of the Luxury Debates', Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger sketch how the term, which began as a moral critique of elite behaviours, was put to use in a widening series of discussions about the economy, the fine and mechanical arts, the nature of social life, and social policy. In these new settings, luxury became a more complex term. Contemporaries developed the distinction between Old Luxury (a prerogative of narrow elites to use up resources in extravagant display) and New Luxury (an expanded capacity of the moneyed to enhance comfort and thereby stimulate the economy). At the same time, the identity of luxury became more diffuse and, in time, so vague that the term itself seemed to some worth jettisoning. While the essay by Berg and Eger surveys intellectual history, contributions by Ros Ballaster and Vivien Jones analyse tropes of luxury (the oriental woman and the prostitute, respectively) and make a compatible point: the two tropes both bear the negative connotations of luxury (appetite, excess, degeneration and so forth), and yet function ambivalently, often offering versions of cunning, mastery and energy that valorize a luxury suitable for commercial society. Thus, even in its most gendered form, the idea of luxury was being explored in positive ways.[5]

However, other essays in the volume make clear that luxury was not the only category at stake; that, while luxury may have been 'a central term in the language of cultural transformation', it was not 'the keyword' in isolation. Just as McKeon insists that 'luxury' in Smollett has to be situated in relation to other categories, other contributors suggest the contingency and partiality of 'luxury' in the wider vocabulary of economic, social and political appraisal. Dena Goodman (discussing French writing desks) is most explicit in challenging the dominance of 'luxury'. Building on work by Daniel Roche and Sarah Maza and much else, she suggests that the very vitality of the discourse of 'luxury' in High Enlightenment France was premised on the rise of alternative schemes. According to Goodman, ' "luxury" was hopelessly burdened with a set of moral and political connotations that could not be shaken off'; it 'had come to mean so much and so little' that 'a new discourse of commerce' emerged separating the analysis of consumption from status and power and relating it to taste, utility and comfort.[6] John Crowley, in his essay on the cottage, echoes Goodman. According to Crowley, the rise of 'comfort' undermined the distinction between 'luxury' and 'necessity' and thus hastened the obsolescence of 'luxury' as a useful category.[7]

Thus Goodman and Crowley define the limits of 'luxury' as a term of analysis in the eighteenth-century vocabulary. In this way, their essays point up what is missing in Edward Hundert's otherwise lucid account of 'Mandeville, Rousseau and the Political Economy of Fantasy'. Mandeville is a constant reference point among the essays in the volume as the arch-theorist of the burgeoning economy: recognizing the psychological ground of all human exchange, Mandeville demonstrated, in Hundert's words, that 'commerce, rather than being just one sector of the economy, was the environment within which all other sectors of society exist'.[8] Hundert shows

how Rousseau's critique of modernity not only derived from his confrontation with Mandeville, but also shared much of Mandeville's analysis (though Rousseau obviously differed in his moral appraisal of modernity). Hundert's main point, however, is that Rousseau deepened Mandeville's already considerable psychological diagnosis. 'Mandeville had described a social actor who responds to opportunities for consumption through purely instrumental attempts to promote his standing. Rousseau, by contrast, was perhaps the first to grasp that the symbolic power of superfluous possessions extends beyond their intended audience so as to define, if not even to dominate, the very persons who possess them'.[9] Hundert connects Rousseau's profoundest insights to Marxian notions of alienation and commodity fetishism. Hundert's essay is an appeal for their continuing usefulness in the face of Mandeville's seeming triumph: 'We are all Mandevilleans now. . . .'[10]

Are we? It is certainly the case that the tradition of Rousseau and Marx is weaker now than it once was. Their heirs are barely noticed in this collection though John Styles's essay (considered below) notes how little empirical work on consumption underpins the views of E. P. Thompson and other historians 'whose sympathies lie with "those whom the consumer society consumed" '.[11] However, between Mandeville and Rousseau, between vicious though useful luxury and virtuous asceticism, other possibilities – syntheses of commerce and virtue – were explored in the eighteenth century and have come to inform modern explorations of the culture of consumption.

In her essay on Elizabeth Montagu, famous for her bluestocking salon, Elizabeth Eger puts to good use Adam Smith's critique of Mandeville. According to Smith, 'it is the great fallacy of Dr. Mandeville's book to represent every passion as wholly vicious . . .': Mandeville's fundamental 'sophistry' was to legislate as vanity anything 'which has any reference, either to what are, or to what ought to be the sentiments of others'.[12] Smith was engaged in rescuing from the category of 'luxury' such traits as comfort, taste and agreeableness and resituating them in the new category of 'refinement'. Eger is not the only contributor to this volume to point out the salient fact that, when Hume revisited his essay, 'Of luxury', he renamed it 'Of the refinement of the arts' and describes how 'the taste for refinement in the arts creates a community of cultural consumers, of both sexes, who "flock into cities, love to receive and communicate knowledge; to show their wit or their breeding; their taste in conversation or living, in clothes or furniture" '.

One point here is that the history of 'luxury' modulates in the course of the century into the history of 'refinement'. The other is that the discourse of 'refinement' informed consumption not just as an idea with which contemporaries grappled but as a practice that was central in the culture. Eger's own essay rescues Montagu from the label 'bluestocking' and shows how her understandings of commerce and refinement shaped her activities in agriculture and industry, charity and patronage, intellect and art. A similar perspective is evident through the volume. In their introduction, Berg and Eger relate changes in consumption to 'a new civility in middling and upper class society which was conveyed in news ways of eating and socialising', and Jan de Vries notes that what distinguished the modern forms of consumption from Old Luxury was the way they communicated 'cultural meaning, permitting reciprocal relations – a kind of sociability – among participants in consumption'.[13]

This brings us to the second major subject of investigation in this collection, namely, the way in which eighteenth-century discourses interacted with practices,

or, in other words, the nature of consumer cultures. The editors underscore 'the integral relation between material and intellectual culture', and the best of the essays illuminate these connections by studying words, things and the practices that relate them.

In a way, the main point of Jan de Vries's 'Luxury in the Dutch Golden Age in Theory and Practice' is that the influence of the language of 'luxury' can be exaggerated. Seventeenth-century Holland offers an example of a consumer culture *avant la lettre*. De Vries takes a stand against Simon Schama and argues that Dutch riches were not embarrassed by any luxury debate.[14] Opposition to consumption, from either a religious standpoint (Calvinism) or a political one (republicanism), was not strong enough to elicit any strong defence of it. Yes, there were people who spoke the old language of 'luxury' but this did not hinder or even shape 'a new consumer culture being constructed by the innumerable choices of an enlarged population newly endowed with discretionary income'.[15] The cultural imperatives behind the form of this consumer culture (its domesticity, simplicity, 'frugality') were not specifically Calvinist but rather characteristic of an era when *all* Christian denominations sought to consolidate projects of religious revitalization through institutionalization and socialization.

The Christian meanings of material culture are not evident in treatments of the next century. Dena Goodman examines the rococo writing desk in France. It is easy – too easy, according to Goodman – to see the desk within the terms of the critique of luxury, as an opulent object, suitable for a moribund aristocratic or courtly culture. She traces how it emerged in the middle of the eighteenth century from a furniture trade that was expanding, innovating, specializing and coming to grips with a diversifying market. From one perspective, the writing desk was a luxury item for conspicuous display. However, Goodman's explication of the trade and market in which it emerged suggests that we should see it as a consumer good. The writing desk was an object sanctioned by its usefulness in a society in which epistolary and economic exchange were intertwined; it was also sanctioned by its tastefulness for purchasers to whom discrimination was a point of identity. Goodman's point is that the moralization of this sort of consumption is better understood outside rather than within the terms of the language of 'luxury'.

The purchaser of the most humble writing desk was still a very comfortable person in mid eighteenth-century France. What about ordinary people? John Styles takes up the question of plebeian access to 'luxury' in England by looking at clothing, the fashion item that ordinary people were most likely to purchase. The consuming practices of plebeians were far more contingent than those of the better-off: their ability to consume was a function of economic cycles (since dearth obliterated discretionary income) and life-cycles within households (since dependent children and old age did likewise). However, as Styles demonstrates, when conditions allowed, plebeians had an appetite to buy 'luxuries' and indulged in the practice. Fashionable clothing could convey sexual maturity and availability and / or material advancement and respectability. Styles's essay foregrounds neglected evidence about plebeian consumption and illuminates some of its meanings. While he opposes those who would insist that ordinary people resisted the incursions of the market by resorting to a customary culture, it is the opposition, custom versus market, that he undermines. He argues that participation in consumer culture did not supplant participation in traditional culture since the opportunities for fashionable display that clothing offered were largely those of the inherited festive calendar: thus,

'custom and consumption were often allies, not enemies'.[16] We might adjust Michael McKeon's correction of John Sekora's account of *Humphrey Clinker* (cited at the outset) and, in Styles's essay, discern, within the façade of modernity, the sturdy traditions which that façade helped facilitate and humanize.

If John Sekora's *Luxury* is one reference point for this volume, the other more proximate and more prominent is the set of volumes edited by John Brewer and others on culture and consumption, which began appearing a decade ago.[17] (Indeed, de Vries, Goodman and Styles made contributions to that project as well.) Berg and Eger suggest that, while indebted to these volumes, they see their work as entering new territory. It is hard to assent to this claim since the focus on 'luxury' does not represent a conceptual improvement on the investigation of consumer cultures: several of the contributors agree with me on this point. In other ways, this much slimmer volume is much like those earlier three volumes. It is heterogeneous in a number of ways. While engaging the energies of people in different disciplines (mostly historians and scholars of English literature), the synergy of interdisciplinarity is only occasionally achieved. The relevance of the essays to the theme of 'luxury' varies. The essays are all short (since there are sixteen contributions in less than 250 pages); thus, the volume has the virtue of diversity though some discussions are telegraphic or seem truncated from longer discussions. On the other hand, some of the essays are brilliantly suggestive, accomplishing that integrated analysis of discourse and practice hoped for by the editors.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Published by the Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.
2 Michael McKeon, 'Aestheticising the Critique of Luxury: Smollett's *Humphrey Clinker*'.
3 McKeon, 'Aestheticising', p. 59.
4 McKeon, 'Aestheticising', p. 66.
5 Ros Ballaster, 'Performing Roxane: the Oriental Woman as the Sign of Luxury in Eighteenth-Century Fictions'; Vivien Jones, 'Luxury, Satire and Prostitute Narratives'.
6 Dena Goodman, 'Furnishing Discourses: Readings of a Writing Desk in Eighteenth-Century France', pp. 74–5.
7 John Crowley, 'From Luxury to Comfort and Back Again: Landscape Architecture and the Cottage in Britain and America', pp. 135–6.
8 Edward Hundert, 'Mandeville, Rousseau and the Political Economy of Fantasy', p. 31.
9 Hundert, 'Mandeville', p. 37.
10 Hundert, 'Mandeville', p. 37.
11 John Styles, 'Custom or Consumption: Plebeian Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England', p. 103.
12 Elizabeth Eger, 'Luxury, Industry and Charity: Bluestocking Culture Displayed', p. 196 (quoting *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*).
13 Jan de Vries, 'Luxury in the Dutch Golden Age in Theory and Practice', p. 43.
14 Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, William Collins & Sons, London, 1987.
15 De Vries, 'Luxury in the Dutch Golden Age', p. 51.
16 Styles, 'Custom or Consumption', p. 104.
17 John Brewer and Roy Porter, *Consumption and the World of Goods*, 1993, John Brewer and Susan Staves, *Early Modern Conceptions of Property*, 1995 and John Brewer and Ann Bermingham, *The Consumption of Culture 1600–1800*, 1995, published by Routledge, London.