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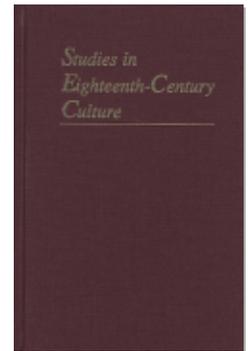
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Forum Introduction: Devotion in the Enlightenment

LAURA M. STEVENS

What does it mean to be devoted? What does devotion feel and look like, where do we find it, and what are its objects? What can devotion tell us about the Enlightenment?

The answers to these questions may appear simple, but the history of the word *devotion* shows that they are not. The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes the earliest appearance of this word in the thirteenth-century *Ancrene Riwle*, a guide for the Anchorites and Anchoresses who took a vow to live their lives in a single room, focusing on prayer. This usage connects the word to the Latin verb from which it derives, *devovere*, meaning to dedicate by a vow. Accompanying the absorption of this word into Middle English was a narrowing of its scope to what is marked as sacred, whereas in Latin the dedication could be to people or causes besides gods. The usage of devotion was stable until the early modern period, when the word began migrating to other contexts, especially the political. In *Richard II*, Henry Bolingbroke seeks to assure the king of his loyalty by declaring, “In the devotion of a subjects love, . . . / Come I appellant to this princely presence.”¹ The history of this word, then, as it moves from Latin to Middle English to Modern English, is one in which meaning narrows to the strictly religious and then expands.

It is tempting to read in this word the standard history of a shift from medieval to modern Europe, with church institutions rivaled and then eclipsed by the state. This is, of course, an element of what is commonly

called the secularization thesis: the idea developed by early sociological theorists that as societies modernize they undergo differentiation between the religious and the secular. Some of these theorists have also argued that over time secular institutions and perspectives surpass religious ones in importance.² Our goal in assembling this forum is neither to topple nor to reinforce this thesis but to explore what can be accomplished by repositioning our gaze on *how* eighteenth-century people expressed their attachments to gods, causes, institutions, or other humans.

Our discussion, which began as a session at the 2017 ASECS meeting, emerged from the conviction that there is a more complex story to tell about approaches to devotion during the Enlightenment. We featured Enlightenment in our conference forum title because we sought obliquely to reconsider an established (perhaps exhausted) binary: religion and Enlightenment. Rather than rehearsing a longstanding debate about the place of belief in an era long celebrated for its dedication to rational inquiry—a debate that in recent decades has resolved largely in favor of acknowledging the continued but altered importance of religion—can we unlock a fresh way of considering what was going on in this century by reconsidering our central terms? What can be learned from exploring devotion across a range of genres, situations, practices, and forms?

As became clear in discussion following our forum, a focus on the word devotion dictates an Anglo-centric approach. A multilingual comparative study, which is beyond the scope of this forum, promises important insights about the overlaps and distinctions conveyed by the various equivalents—if, indeed, there are equivalents—of the English word devotion. Contemporary German, for example, distinguishes between *Andacht*, which means prayer and religious devotion, and *Verehrung*, which includes more general forms of adoration or admiration including fandom. The histories of these words, however, are also complex, with migrations between registers of meaning we today would separate into secular and religious. English may stand out for having a single word describe so many forms of reverence, admiration, or dedication, and this concentration of so many meanings into a single word had clearly taken place by the eighteenth century.

Consider just one text: Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*. Devotion might be described as slipping and sliding around in this epistolary novel, wandering among the categories of friendship, fealty to a social superior, romantic courtship, and religion. In an early letter to her confidante Anna Howe, Clarissa Harlowe disparages the "passionate and obsequious devotion" of Lovelace—the man who, the novel's readers have learned, seeks to trap and then seduce or rape her—by remarking wryly, "This man, you know, has very ready knees." Hoping for a visit, Anna promises Clarissa, "to-morrow I shall be at your devotion from day-light to day-light; nor will I be at home

to any-body.” When Clarissa seeks refuge with Lovelace while escaping from her family, she worries that what on her part was spontaneous flight might have been a well-organized abduction. “I have reason to think,” she explains, “there were other horsemen at his devotion” accompanying her coach. Lovelace, meanwhile, revels in his ability to convince Clarissa that she is in a reputable household, not, as it turns out, a brothel, when he writes to his confidante, “several pieces of devotion have been put in” her closet. He also aestheticizes and sexualizes her attentiveness at church, exclaiming, “Dear creature! how fervent, how amiable, in her devotions!” After Clarissa’s rape and her subsequent escape from Lovelace, a former suitor proposes once more to her by writing, “I pride myself, I say, to stand forth, and offer my fortune, and my life, at your devotion.” Finally, as Clarissa is dying, the reformed rake Belford reports that “all her waking moments [are] taken up in devotion.”³ In this single novel, then, devotion has at least six distinct connotations: ritual gestures of courtship, friendship, serving or supporting a social superior, Christian sermons or prayer guides, marriage, and the act of prayer.

The versatility of this word gestures to a culture in which an array of emotions, utterances, gestures, interpersonal attractions, and commitments are linguistically and, perhaps, affectively intertwined. Just this one novel suggests that it misses the point to describe eighteenth-century Britain as moving away from religion toward secular institutes and privatized expressions of belief, but it would also be misleading merely to assert the continued relevance of religion. Something else is going on, and we seek to explore that something else.

This forum features seven brief position papers, each titled by a single word. Each participant wrote about the way that her research connects with the topic of devotion, drawing on her own expertise to explore this term as it cuts across various arenas. Essays roughly follow the chronological order of their topics. A conclusion by Emma Salgård Cunha offers summary thoughts along with further questions to pursue on this topic.

It is worth considering that although a focus on the word devotion may limit us to English, the bleeding between various categories of commitment, reverence, or attachment, with the foregrounding of simultaneities and overlaps, may still pertain to languages and cultures beyond English. In fact, a focus on comparative devotional feeling and practice has the potential to dovetail with recent critiques of Enlightenment, secularism, and modernity from the vantage point of postcolonial or Indigenous studies.⁴ Inquiry that takes place through the terms Enlightenment, secularity, and even religion inherently does so within a Eurocentric and perhaps also a Christocentric world view. This forum does not venture into these areas, but our hope is that it will open a larger discussion.

NOTES

1. Oxford English Dictionary Online, “devotion, n.” accessed 2 August 2017; William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, I.i.31–34. Online version accessed 2 August 2017. <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/richardii/full.html>. The quotation is cited in the *OED* entry.

2. The literature on secularity and the secularization thesis is extensive; some of the most prominent publications include Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912; London: Allen & Unwin, 1968); Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (1922; Boston: Beacon, 1963); and, Talcott Parsons, *The Evolution of Societies* (1966; New York: Prentice-Hall, 1977). Among the most influential recent commentaries are Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996); and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).

3. Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady, Comprehending the Most Important Concerns of Private Life* (London, 1748), 1: 238; 2: 2; 13: 31; 3: 286; 3: 316; 7: 282; 8: 115. Eighteenth-Century Collections Online.

4. See, e.g., Jared Hickman, “Globalization and the Gods, or the Political Theology of ‘Race’,” *Early American Literature* 45 (2010): 145–82.