
The Sensibility of Comfort

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Whether real or imaginary, pain is pain and pleasure is pleasure.

Benjamin Franklin, "The Art of Procuring Pleasant Dreams," 1786.

There are two words in their language on which these people pride themselves, and which they say cannot be translated. *Home* is the one, by which an Englishman means his house . . . The other word is *comfort*; it means all the enjoyments and privileges of *home*; and here I must confess that these proud islanders have reason for their pride. In their social intercourse and their modes of life they have enjoyments which we never dream of.

Robert Southey, *Letters from England: By Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella* (1807).¹

IN NOVEMBER 1795, UPON RETURNING to his Norfolk home from London, the Reverend James Woodforde noted: "We drank tea, supped and slept at our comfortable quiet, happy, thatched dwelling." Over the forty-five years he kept his diary, from 1758 to 1802, Woodforde carefully analyzed his physical comforts and discomforts. He assessed, for example, the quality of his sleep: "Very ill indeed today having had a very indifferent night of rest last night, owing to the night candle filling the room in being so long going out with intolerable smoke and stink." He not only recorded when he was too hot or too cold but also verified his subjective impressions with thermometer readings. He noted whether he used bedwarmers. The minutiae of his reporting on comfort included the use of an umbrella on numerous rainy days.²

Woodforde's attention to comfort poses a historical problem precisely because its standards seem so similar to those of Anglo-Americans since his time: how natural is the desire for physical comfort? His catalogue of basic physical comforts could

Research grants from Dalhousie University and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (410-95-1148) and a fellowship at the Huntington Library supported this research. Marian Binkley, Timothy Breen, Gordon Wood, Daniel Woolf, and referees for this journal provided helpful criticisms.

¹ Benjamin Franklin, "The Art of Procuring Pleasant Dreams" [1786], *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, Albert Henry Smyth, ed., 10 vols. (New York, 1905-07), 10: 132; Robert Southey, *Letters from England: By Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella, Translated from the Spanish*, 2 vols. (London, 1807), 1: 180, 182, emphasis mine.

² *The Diary of a Country Parson: The Reverend James Woodforde*, John Beresford, ed., 5 vols. (London, 1926-31), quoted 4: 245 (November 4, 1795); for examples of his comments on bedwarmers, fireplaces, smoky chimneys, and umbrellas, see also 1: 339 (December 26, 1781), 2: 300 (January 28, 1787), 3: 100 (April 27, 1789), 3: 386 (November 5, 1792), 5: 268 (August 2, 1800), 5: 405 (September 6, 1802). He noted almost daily what type of meat he ate for dinner.

confirm the commonsense retort to the claims of relativism, that people over time are basically similar. What, after all, could be more human than desires to be warm without stifling, to sleep soundly, to have fresh air, to be dry, and to have a cozy home? Yet if comfort were a specific response to material living conditions, we should be able to measure it. Why, then, have architects found it so difficult to specify, much less to design, a uniformly comfortable environment? According to one prominent architectural critic, architecture schools avoid the topic.³ Anthropologists expect people in different cultures and in the past to have varying ideas of what constitutes satisfactory relations of body, material culture, and environment. They have found that technology, social structures, and belief systems dictate widely varying designs in domestic environments.⁴

Physical comfort—self-conscious satisfaction with the relationship between one's body and its immediate physical environment—was an innovative aspect of Anglo-American culture,⁵ one that had to be taught and learned. During the eighteenth century, Anglo-Americans used the word "comfort" with increasing frequency to express their satisfaction and enjoyment with immediate physical circumstances. This usage indicated a disposition to criticize traditional material culture and to improve it. When Thomas Jefferson in 1785 described most Virginians' housing as "impossible to devise things more ugly, uncomfortable, and happily more perishable," he was applying a set of values that his neighbors had apparently ignored or resisted.⁶ Similarly, a few years later, Jefferson's former compatriot, Benjamin Thompson, Count Rumford, recommended the technical virtues of his design for chimney fireplaces by appealing to "those who have feeling enough to be made miserable by anything careless, slovenly, and wasteful, which happens under their eyes, *who know what comfort is*."⁷ Jefferson's and Rumford's new emphasis on comfort anticipated a new material culture.

³ Witold Rybczynski, *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (New York, 1987), vii; see also *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, Christopher Reed, ed. (London, 1996). For architectural efforts to measure comfort, see T. C. Angus, *The Control of Indoor Climate* (Oxford, 1968); Reyner Banham, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* (London, 1969); P. O. Fanger, *Thermal Comfort: Analysis and Applications of Environmental Engineering* (New York, 1970).

⁴ On variations in the imperatives of material culture, see Bernard Rudofsky, *Now I Lay Me Down to Eat: Notes and Footnotes on the Lost Art of Living* (New York, 1980); Amos Rapoport, *House Form and Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1969); Brent C. Brolin, *The Failure of Modern Architecture* (New York, 1976); Paul Oliver, *Dwellings: The House across the World* (Austin, Tex., 1987); Susan B. Hanley, *Everyday Things in Premodern Japan: The Hidden Legacy of Material Culture* (Berkeley, Calif., 1997); Ronald G. Knapp, *The Chinese House: Craft, Symbol, and the Folk Tradition* (London, 1991). On the cultural constitution of needs, see Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge, 1997); Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason* (Chicago, 1976).

⁵ "Anglo-American" refers here to the society of Great Britain and its colonies in the Americas.

⁶ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* [1785], Thomas Perkins Abernethy, ed. (1861; rpt. edn., Gloucester, Mass., 1976), 145–47. Jefferson noted that most Virginians expressed a preference for wooden rather than stone or brick construction as a matter of health. On the applicability of Jefferson's comments, see Edward A. Chappell, "Housing a Nation: The Transformation of Living Standards in Early America," in *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*, Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert, eds. (Charlottesville, Va., 1994), 221–22; Camille Wells, "The Eighteenth-Century Landscape of Virginia's Northern Neck," *Northern Neck of Virginia Magazine* 37 (1987): 4230–45.

⁷ Benjamin Thompson, "Of Chimney Fire-places" [1796], *Collected Works of Count Rumford*, Sanborn C. Brown, ed., 5 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1968–70), 2: 239. Such critical attention to the design

Earlier in the century, each of Woodforde's concerns—ample ventilation of sleeping quarters, the elimination of smoky chimneys, umbrellas for rainy weather, furnishing homes for domestic leisure—drew the attention of Anglo-American political economists, moral philosophers, scientists, humanitarian reformers, even novelists. These commentators sought to evaluate the relations of body, material culture, and environment in the name of physical comfort. They gave the term “comfort” a new physical emphasis as they reconceptualized values, redesigned material environments, and urged the relearning of behaviors. For centuries, “comfort” had primarily meant moral, emotional, spiritual, and political support in difficult circumstances. To be “comfortless” had meant being “without anything to allay misfortune,” and “discomfort” involved feelings of “sorrow,” “melancholy,” and “gloom” rather than physical irritability.⁸ In Ralph Josselin's diary, the most appropriate seventeenth-century document for comparison with Woodforde's diary, the word “comfort” appears every few days but almost invariably in reference to providential blessings—thoughts of love toward his late father, his wife's pregnancy, the delivery of a sermon, good weather.⁹

Language and concepts emphasizing a physical meaning of comfort developed initially in the nascent political economy around 1700, as it analyzed the differences between “luxury” and “necessity.” Luxury had long been the subject of political and social thought, but its defining antonym, necessity—luxury was what people desired beyond necessities—had been taken for granted as having a natural definition. When eighteenth-century political economists began to analyze necessity as well, they effectively deconstructed luxury by showing how luxury in one context could be necessity in another. Standards of living could improve. The term “comfort” increasingly applied to those standards, and assessed their fulfillment.

The argument that follows begins by relating this new emphasis on physical comfort to the eighteenth-century consumer revolution. It questions a prevailing assumption in the historiography of that revolution, that comfort was a natural motive for new consumption patterns. Items that people might have wanted for their comfort were more likely to be desirable for other reasons, especially to achieve gentility or good health. Having established that a high priority for comfort cannot be taken for granted, the argument then traces how theories of political

of the domestic environment provided themes for imaginative literature and visual art after 1760. In English genre painting, for example, domestic furnishings became subjects in their own right after 1760, as had occurred with landscapes earlier in the century; see Mario Praz, *An Illustrated History of Interior Decoration from Pompeii to Art Nouveau*, William Weaver, trans. (1964; rpt. edn., London, 1982), 154–55; John Cornforth, *English Interiors, 1790–1848: The Quest for Comfort* (London, 1978), 13, 15–16; Charles Saumarez Smith, *Eighteenth-Century Decoration: Design and the Domestic Interior in England* (London, 1993), 215–27, 299, 302–05. For discussions of pleasure and happiness as diffuse aspirations in eighteenth-century British culture, see J. H. Plumb, *Georgian Delights* (Boston, 1980); *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century*, Roy Porter and Marie Mulvey Roberts, eds. (New York, 1996).

⁸ “Comfort” in English derived from the medieval French *conforter/confort* (= *soutenir/encouragement*); A. J. Greimas, *Dictionnaire de l'ancien français jusqu'au milieu du XIV^e*, 2d edn. (Paris, 1977), s.v. “conforter.” Before the middle of the eighteenth century, when used as a noun with physical reference, “comfort” usually had medicinal or nutritional connotations; *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d edn. (Oxford, 1989), s.v. “comfort”; Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. (London, 1785), s.v. “comfort,” “comfortless,” “discomfort.”

⁹ Josselin used the terms “convenient” and “refreshment” to assess his physical accommodation at home; *The Diary of Ralph Josselin 1616–1683*, Alan MacFarlane, ed. (London, 1976), 3, 5, 138, 217–18.

economy in the first half of the eighteenth century made comfort a legitimizing motive for popular consumption patterns. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the imperatives of physical comfort had focused scientific and technological expertise on more amenable designs of the domestic environment. By the last decades of the eighteenth century, the ideal of physical comfort had sufficient ideological force for humanitarians to incorporate it in their appeals for social justice toward the poor, the incarcerated, and the enslaved, groups whose lack of comfort indicated the crucial need to remedy their circumstances. At the end of the eighteenth century, physical comfort could be asserted as a right of the unprivileged and a humanitarian responsibility of the propertied.

THE LANGUAGE OF COMFORT gave meaning to a consumer revolution in Anglo-American society, as more people had more money to spend on more goods.¹⁰ The increase of consumer spending went through two phases in the early modern period. The first, beginning in the mid-sixteenth century and running through the first decades of the eighteenth, saw consumers increase their spending on bedding, clothing, and pewter and brass for serving food and drink. In the second phase, which began in the third quarter of the seventeenth century and was widespread by the 1730s, fashion increasingly shaped demand. The propertied populace began to buy goods previously the exclusive province of the wealthy. People referred to their new consumer preferences as “conveniences” and “decencies”—amenities somewhere between necessity and luxury in the scale of wants and needs. Matching chairs and tables of carved walnut and other fine woods provided specialized furniture for socializing. The new drinks of tea, coffee, and chocolate required specific wares of glass and ceramics for preparation and serving. Looking glasses and clocks allowed luxurious display of technology. Tea and small dinners for guests became feasible domestic leisure activities.¹¹

¹⁰ Joan Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of Consumer Society in Early Modern Britain* (Oxford, 1978); *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*, Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, eds. (Bloomington, Ind., 1982); Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behavior and Material Culture in Britain, 1660–1760* (London, 1988); Carole Shammas, *The Preindustrial Consumer in England and America* (London, 1990); *Consumption and the World of Goods*, John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds. (London, 1993); Carson, Hoffman, and Albert, *Of Consuming Interests*. Revisionists have argued that since the consumer “revolution” arguably began in the sixteenth century, it lacked the temporal crisis to be a revolution. On the periodization of consumer “revolutions,” see Carole Shammas, “Explaining Past Changes in Consumption and Consumer Behavior,” *Historical Methods* 22 (Spring 1989): 61–67; Peter N. Stearns, “Stages of Consumerism: Recent Work on the Issues of Periodization,” *Journal of Modern History* 69 (March 1997): 102–17.

¹¹ Cary Carson, “The Consumer Revolution in Colonial British America: Why Demand?” in Carson, Hoffman, and Albert, *Of Consuming Interests*, 497; Neil McKendrick, “The Consumer Revolution of Eighteenth-Century England,” in McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb, *Birth of a Consumer Society*, 9–33; Richard L. Bushman, “American High-Style and Vernacular Cultures,” in *Colonial British America: Essays in the New History of the Early Modern Era*, Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole, eds. (Baltimore, Md., 1984), 345–83; Gerard Brett, *Dinner Is Served: A History of Dining in England, 1400–1900* (Hamden, Conn., 1968), 85–108; Carole Shammas, “The Domestic Environment in Early Modern England and America,” *Journal of Social History* 14 (Fall 1980–81): 1–24; Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh, “Inventories and the Analysis of Wealth and Consumption Patterns in St. Mary’s County, Maryland, 1658–1777,” *Historical Methods* 13 (Spring 1980): 87–96; Carr and Walsh, “Changing Lifestyles and Consumer Behavior in the Colonial Chesapeake,” in Carson, Hoffman, and Albert, *Of Consuming Interests*, 59–166; Gloria L. Main, *Tobacco Colony: Life in Early Maryland, 1650–1720* (Princeton, N.J.,

Nearly all the most important studies of the eighteenth-century Anglo-American consumer revolution have referred to these goods' necessary desirability on the basis of their physical "comfort," but this factor in explaining demand has not been a major consideration.¹² Histories otherwise characterized by their imaginative use of sources and their conceptual and methodological rigor beg the questions of what people meant by "comfort" and why they wanted it. These studies assume the desire for comfort to be virtually a transhistorical feature of human nature that just happened to take recognizably modern form in the eighteenth century.¹³ Comfort has barely been studied, partly because its development seems a natural response to technological opportunity and partly because its appeal to consumers is often elided with their desires for gentility. I would argue instead that an understanding of the historical development of the values and material culture of comfort in eighteenth-century Anglo-American society deserves as much attention as other themes in the interpretation of consumption patterns, such as emulation, refinement, self-fashioning, conspicuous consumption, and romantic illusions. To what extent did people use the word "comfort" to explain their consumption patterns? Did they use other words more frequently to define their satisfactions from possessions? And if so, how does that usage qualify the explanation from comfort? Were the "conveniences" and "decencies" of the consumer revolution more comfortable?

Clothes were the most popular item for fashionable spending. Seventeenth-

1982), 176; Peter Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class: Business, Society and Family Life in London, 1660–1730* (Berkeley, Calif., 1989), 290–301; Shamma, *Preindustrial Consumer*, 181–85.

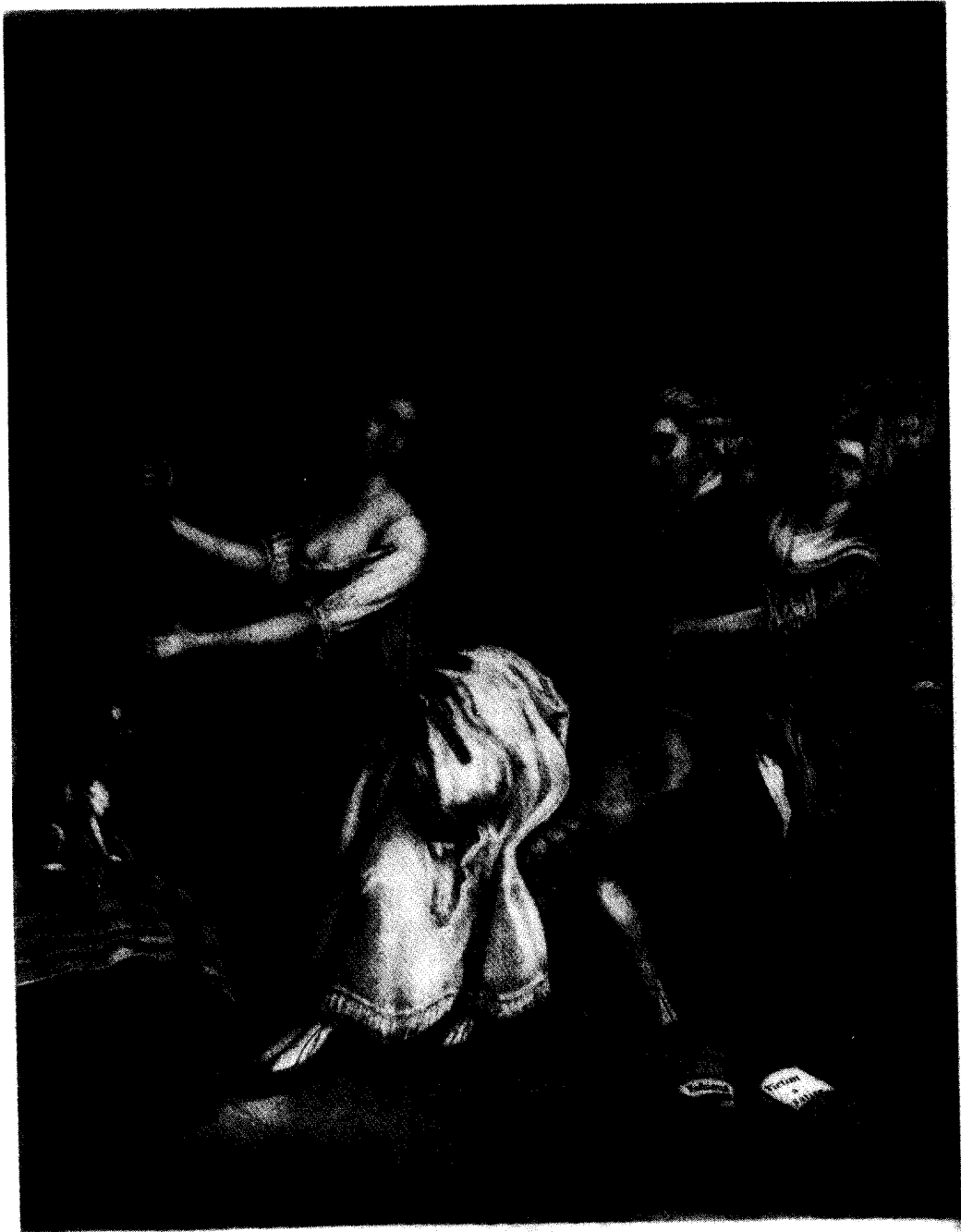
¹² Shamma, *Preindustrial Consumer*, 159; Margaret Spufford, *The Great Reclotting of Rural England: Petty Chapmen and Their Wares in the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1984), 3, 114, 115, 118, 125; Carson, "Consumer Revolution," 562, 564, 619, 634; Carr and Walsh, "Changing Lifestyles," 64, 66, 67, 115. Many historians have made passing comment on the historical, social, and personal contingency of comfort, but only a few have elaborated on the topic. Among these exceptions are Rybczynski, *Home*; Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge, 1994); Joyce Appleby, "Consumption in Early Modern Social Thought," in Brewer and Porter, *Consumption and the World of Goods*, 162–73; Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* (New York, 1948); Katherine C. Grier, *Culture and Comfort: People, Parlors, and Upholstery, 1850–1930* (Rochester, N.Y., 1988); Elizabeth Donaghy Garrett, *At Home: The American Family, 1750–1870* (New York, 1990), chap. 8; Colin Campbell, "Understanding Traditional and Modern Patterns of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century England: A Character-Action Approach," Brewer and Porter, *Consumption and the World of Goods*, 48, see also 52, 53. For an emphasis on the diversity of languages in consumer culture, see Amanda Vickery, "Women and the World of Goods: A Lancashire Consumer and Her Possessions, 1751–81," in Brewer and Porter, 274–301.

¹³ Historians of eighteenth-century material culture usually concur with Peter Thornton's statement that "the French" invented "true comfort" around 1620; Rybczynski, *Home*, 84–99, compare 121n; Carson, "Consumer Revolution," 619–20; Peter Thornton, *Seventeenth-Century Interior Decoration in England, France and Holland* (New Haven, Conn., 1978), 10. But in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the usual French term to assess satisfactory physical circumstance was *confort*. Only in the early nineteenth century did French usage of the term *confort* take on such connotations, having borrowed the term back from English with a new meaning; Annik Pardailhé-Galabrun, *La naissance de l'intime: 3,000 foyers parisiens XVII^{ème}–XVIII^{ème} siècles* (Paris, 1988), 331; *Le Grand Robert de la langue française: Dictionnaire alphabétique de la langue française*, Alain Rey, comp., 9 vols., 2d edn. (Paris, 1985), s.v. "confort"; Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley, Calif., 1996), 223. English visitors to stylish French *hôtels* in the seventeenth century expressed their admiration of interior design with such terms as "most precious moveables," "luxe and excesse Italy" (John Evelyn), "small but extremely neat" (Edward Browne reporting on Christopher Wren), "soe fine and magnificent" (William Hunter); as quoted in Smith, *Eighteenth-Century Decoration*, 19–20. Unlike twentieth-century historians, these observers did not explicitly equate luxury with physical comfort.

century French courtiers introduced Europeans to a style of informality by replacing women's bodices and men's doublets with gowns and coats respectively. They preferred highly patterned clothes of silk and cotton to heavy, stiff materials of velvet, satin, brocaded silks, and embroidered wool. Relatively inexpensive printed and painted cottons, initially from the East Indies, enabled a larger proportion of the population to dress in clothes with the smooth surfaces, rich colors, and exotic ornament long associated with silk. The lightness of cotton—in fabrics such as calico, chintz, and muslin—lent it well to a proliferation of accessories and types of garments, such as petticoats, gowns, cravats, and handkerchiefs. People could dress in cleaner clothes because cotton could be washed more readily than wool or silk. Clean clothes marked a concern with hygiene as well as gentility: "Change of apparel greatly promotes the secretion of the skin, so necessary for health . . . Peasants are likewise extremely careless with respect to change of apparel, keeping their skins clean, etc. These are merely the effects of indolence and a dirty disposition. Habit may indeed render them less disagreeable; but no habit can ever make it salutary to wear dirty cloaths." Commentators attributed the appeal of the new styles and fabrics to their greater ornamentation and "neatness," not their easier wear.¹⁴

Men's and women's dress became more highly gendered in structure and fabric, as the bodiced gown was replaced by a mantua of light fabric and a pair of stays fashioned of stiffly resilient materials such as starched canvas or linen, leather, and whalebone. For the first time in England, women could legally make women's clothes for sale, but only the mantua; male tailors maintained their privileges by making stays. Stays wrapped a woman's torso from her bust to below her waist. To our modern, post-corset, imagination, stays seem inherently uncomfortable, and indeed eighteenth-century medical experts condemned them as potential menaces to health. Yet people did not often record complaints about their sheer discomforts before the second half of the eighteenth century, when they referred primarily to children's wear. The menace of stays for women lay in the tendency to lace them too tightly in order to achieve a slender waist (Figure 1). But every woman had to wear stays, for reasons of health and respectability as well as ideal body shape; loose stays signified impropriety. Stays provided William Hogarth his best example from everyday life to illustrate "the line of beauty," not "bulging too much in their curvature" as to become "gross and clumsy," nor so "straighten" as to be "mean and poor." Stays provided support for people supposed to have inherently weak

¹⁴ William Buchan, *Domestic Medicine; or, The Family Physician* (Edinburgh, 1769), 88, 90–91; on more frequent changes of clothes as a "matter of neatness comparatively modern," see Gilbert White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, Edward Jesse, ed. (1789; rpt. edn., London, 1854), 230. Although Margaret Spufford refers to chapmen bringing "materials to make an ampler wardrobe of more comfortable personal clothing, including underclothing, to the peasantry and to the laborers," she quotes no statements from contemporaries using such a term; Spufford, *Great Reclotting*, 111, 115, 119, 121. On preferences in clothing, see Patricia Trautman, "Dress in Seventeenth-Century Cambridge, Massachusetts: An Inventory-Based Reconstruction," in *Early American Probate Inventories*, Peter Benes, ed. (Boston, 1989), 55, 60, 70–71; François Boucher, *20,000 Years of Fashion: The History of Costume and Personal Adornment* (New York, 1987), 261, 273–74, 294–95, 448; Beverly Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1660–1800* (Oxford, 1991), 6–7. Lemire begins and ends her crucial book on the demand for cotton clothing by referring to its comfort, but she does not present evidence showing that the explicit virtues of cotton included its comfort to wear; 10, 199.



TIGHT LACING. or FASHION before EASE.

From the Original Picture by John Collet, in the possession of the Proprietors.

FIGURE 1: Fashion. A husband tightens his wife's stays before they go out in Maccaroni outfits. Published by Bowles and Carver, after John Collet, *Tight Lacing, or Fashion before Ease* (London, 1770–75). Courtesy of the Print Collection, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

skeletons, namely women and young children. (The garments caused the condition they were supposed to alleviate, since they allowed stomach muscles to atrophy from disuse, which diminished capacity to support the spine.) Children's use of stays truly relaxed in the second half of the eighteenth century, but women's use did not ease until the late 1780s, when an avant-garde fashion temporarily dictated abandoning them in the name of neo-classical simplicity. Informal "undress" became fashionable as "natural elegance, in which the body is left to that freedom so congenial to common sense."¹⁵

Just as stays were not necessarily synonymous with discomfort, so an item's later association with comfort cannot be read back into the eighteenth century. Easy chairs, for example, were not for everyone's comfortable seating; rather, they were designed for people who could not move easily on their own—chronic invalids, women in the late stages of pregnancy or recovering from childbirth, and men with gout (Figure 2). Their recommended virtues were "ease and warm[th]."¹⁶ Their upholstery allowed long periods of sitting and provided insulation as well; some had reclining backs and adjustable leg supports to facilitate sleeping. These adjustable backs and leg supports derived from the sleeping chairs used in aristocratic "closets" since the seventeenth century, but for most of the eighteenth century these apparent anticipations of La-Z-Boy chairs remained unused for general seating. They were not used in parlors; instead, they were found in bedrooms and chambers, usually upstairs. Many of them had close stools (fitted chamber pots). Medical hygiene shaped the design of easy chairs, not physical comfort for everyone. When furniture advertisements did mention physical comfort, they typically had medical or hygienic references as well. Similarly, "go-chairs" for invalids promised "ease and comfort," and "hollow-seated chairs" made "sitting easy beyond expression."

General seating in the eighteenth century was not designed primarily for comfort; it was supposed to aid sitting with properly respectful and refined posture and to fit the clothes and wig of the sitter. Seating furniture provided a prop for the ordering of social status.¹⁷ The vocabulary that furniture makers used to recommend their

¹⁵ Geoffrey Squire, *Dress and Society, 1560–1970* (New York, 1974), 94–99, 124–32. On the need to wear stays, see Mrs. Delany to Mary Dewes Port, October 1, 1775, *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs. Delany*, 2d ser., Lady Llanover, ed., 3 vols. (London, 1862), 2: 160; Walpole to Richard Bentley, March 6, 1755, *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, W. S. Lewis, A. Dayle Wallace, and Robert A. Smith, eds. (New Haven, Conn., 1973), 35: 213; William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty* [1753], Joseph Burke, ed. (Oxford, 1955), 65; William Cole, *A Journal of My Journey to Paris in the Year 1765*, Francis Griffin Stokes, ed. (London, 1931), 82. For criticisms of stays, see John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* [1693], John W. and Jean S. Yolton, eds. (Oxford, 1989), 90–91; William Cadogen, *An Essay upon Nursing and the Management of Children, from Their Birth to Three Years of Age* (London, 1748), 4, 11; Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 13–15; Aileen Ribeiro, *The Art of Dress: Fashion in England and France, 1750–1820* (New Haven, 1995), 62–75, quoting William Barker, *A Treatise on the Principles of Hair-Dressing* [ca. 1780], 45; Anne Buck, *Clothes and the Child: A Handbook of Children's Dress in England, 1500–1900* (New York, 1996), 74–75, 114, 185–86, 192, 210–11; Jane Ashelford, *The Art of Dress: Clothes and Society, 1500–1914* (London, 1996), 191; Elizabeth Ham, *Elizabeth Ham by Herself 1783–1820*, Eric Gillett, ed. (London, 1945), 27. On the stylization of informality, see Squire, *Dress and Society*, 103–16; Erasmus Jones, *The Man of Manners*, 3d edn. (1737; rpt. edn., Sandy Hook, Conn., 1993), 12.

¹⁶ Prior to the eighteenth century, "ease" usually implied the absence of physical stress, rather than the positive imperatives that "comfort" would acquire; *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "ease." As comfort increasingly referred to physical satisfactions, ease became an attribute of genteel deportment.

¹⁷ William Lond, *Pennsylvania Packet*, September 10, 1785, and Richard Magrath's advertisement,



FIGURE 2: Hygiene. A man with gout sits in an easy chair, while others sit upright in less upholstered chairs. Thomas Rowlandson, *The Comforts of Bath* (London, 1798), plate 1. Courtesy of the Harry Elkins Widener Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

designs placed little emphasis on comfort. George Hepplewhite used terms such as “elegant,” “rich and splendid appearance,” “pleasing and striking effect to the eye,” “newest fashion,” “grandeur of ornament and gravity of appearance” or “lightness of appearance,” “great utility” (sideboard), “conveniencies,” and “universal utility” (knife case); while Thomas Chippendale promised “magnificence, proportion, and harmony,” “look very grand,” “will have a very good effect,” “will look extremely neat,” “an exceeding genteel and grand appearance,” and “handsome and elegant.”¹⁸ Furniture primarily represented taste.

As these terms suggest, much of the spending during the consumer revolution

South Carolina Gazette, July 9, 1772, as quoted in *The Arts and Crafts in Philadelphia, Maryland, and South Carolina, 1721–1785: Gleanings from Newspapers*, Alfred Coxe Prime, ed. (n.p., Walpole Society, 1929), 174–76. An advertisement for “Machine Chairs” described them as “stuffed and covered for sickly or weak people”; Thomas Elfe, *South Carolina Gazette*, January 7, 1751, as quoted in Prime, 166. On the design and use of easy chairs, see Robert F. Trent, “Mid-Atlantic Easy Chairs, 1770–1820: Old Questions and New Evidence,” *American Furniture* 1993, Luke Beckerdite, ed. (Hanover, N.H., 1993), 201–11. For too easy assertion of the easy chair’s establishing “our standards of comfort,” see John Gloag, *A Social History of Furniture Design from B.C. 1300 to A.D. 1960* (New York, 1966), 120; but see also on the relation of chairs to social status, 1, 63, 74, 93, 120, 127.

¹⁸ *The Gentleman and Cabinet-maker’s Director: Being a Large Collection of the Most Elegant and Useful Designs of Household Furniture, in the Most Fashionable Taste* (London, 1754), 11; *Gentleman and Cabinet-maker’s Director*, 3d edn. (1762), 6, 17, 20; A. Hepplewhite and Co., *The Cabinet-Maker and*

attempted to express gentility, an explicit ideal of behavior since the Renaissance—as marked by its many cognates: *gentilezza*, *civilité*, *civilitas*, “civility,” and “refinement,” among others. Gentility was a specific set of manners that placed a premium on pleasing others in appearance, conversation, and social interaction. Its codes of graceful behavior found expression throughout material culture—in dress, in dining, in music and dance, in architecture and interior decoration. By using bodily restraint to establish social boundaries, persons of all social conditions could (in principle) learn gentility and then apply it to their social situations. By the eighteenth century, gentility had highly didactic representations in print, visual culture, the theater, and everyday examples (Figure 3). There were guidebooks such as *The Rudiments of Genteel Behavior*, with illustrations of the correct postures for women and men to stand, walk, give and receive gifts, and dance, in order to “be, and appear, easy, amiable, genteel and free in their person, mien, air and motions, [rather] than stiff, awkward, deform’d, and consequently, disagreeable.”¹⁹

People acquired goods more often to display such gentility than for purposes of personal comforts. A “modern index” of consumption identifies “ten items that most westerners now consider the basic household equipment needed to ensure a minimum of comfort and cleanliness: a mattress, a bedstead, some bed linen, a table, one or more chairs, pots for boiling food, other utensils for food preparation, some coarse ceramics, table forks, and some means of interior lighting.” In the seventeenth century, ownership of these different types of goods varied with wealth—as though they were luxuries—even though there were inexpensive versions of each item. Even among the wealthy, they were not necessities: many propertied families did without some of them. In the eighteenth century, ownership of these goods became more general, but more people bought more goods associated with elegance and gentility—notably, fashionable clothing, tea ware, table knives and forks, glassware, and mirrors—than they did goods assumed to increase comfort.²⁰ Most of the goods featured in the consumer revolution had crucial functions in sociability, most obviously clothing, but also items used in domestic settings, such as tableware, tea ware, seating furniture, and even bedding. Personal needs for comfort were apparently subordinate—with the exception of

Upholsterer's Guide; or, Repository of Designs for Every Article of Household Furniture, in the Newest and Most Approved Taste (London, 1788), preface, 1–24.

¹⁹ F. Nivelon, *The Rudiments of Genteel Behavior* (n.p., 1737), 25. Gentility has been the subject of richly rewarding studies placing its development at the heart of preindustrial social and cultural development. See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, Edmund Jephcott, trans., 2 vols. (New York, 1982); Jacques Revel, “The Uses of Civility,” in *Passions of the Renaissance*, Roger Chartier, ed., Arthur Goldhammer, trans., Vol. 3 of *A History of Private Life*, Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, eds. (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 167–205; John Hale, *The Civilization of Europe in the Renaissance* (New York, 1994), 355–413, 488–94; Richard A. Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 1300–1600* (Baltimore, Md., 1993); Roger Chartier, “From Texts to Manners: A Concept and Its Books: *Civilité* between Aristocratic Distinction and Popular Appropriation,” in Chartier, *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*, Lydia G. Cochrane, trans. (Princeton, N.J., 1987), 71–109; Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York, 1992); Carson, “Consumer Revolution,” 483–697; Lawrence E. Klein, “Politeness for Plebes: Consumption and Social Identity in Early Eighteenth-Century England,” in *The Consumption of Culture, 1600–1800*, Ann Bermingham and John Brewer, eds. (London, 1995), 362–82.

²⁰ Carr and Walsh, “Changing Lifestyles,” 130–33; Shammas, *Preindustrial Consumer*, 185–86; James Horn, *Adapting to a New World: English Society in the Seventeenth Century Chesapeake* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1994), 307–28.



FIGURE 3: Gentility. Having just inherited the wealth his father made in commerce, the Rake is instructed in the manners and skills of a gentleman by a dancing master, a fencing master, and a landscape gardener, while a poet, tailor, harpsichordist, and jockey attend him. William Hogarth, *A Rake's Progress* (London, 1735), plate 2. Courtesy of the Print Collection, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

foods, to the extent that their consumption for comfort can be separated from genteel rituals. Comfort, like gentility, was something to be learned and expressed, not just afforded. But most of the Anglo-American population initially found it easier to acquire gentility than comfort. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, they made gentility much more explicit than comfort as an imperative in material culture.

IN CONTRAST TO TWENTIETH-CENTURY HISTORIANS, who have tended to take comfort for granted as a motive in consumption patterns, pre-modern religious, moral, political, social, and economic commentators ignored comfort as a regular subject of analysis. Prior to the late seventeenth century, moral philosophers were

interested in luxury but not comfort. Neither classical nor Christian philosophers could say anything good about "luxury," because it referred to behavior that violated a sanctioned order, whether divine or social. Material manifestations of luxury were symptomatic of corruptions of character: men's commitments to public virtue weakened as they succumbed to the effeminate softness synonymous with a luxurious material culture. Christian preoccupations with individual sin reinforced the classical moral associations of luxury, and made it a threat to all individuals regardless of social and political status. But early modern economic and social thought, especially in commercial and sumptuary legislation, had allowed aristocratic privileges of luxury. What might for commoners be a luxury was for nobles a means to uphold rank and social order. By the eighteenth century, as more people consumed goods in emulation of the aristocracy, luxury's antonym, necessity, became associated with poverty and death.²¹ Although eighteenth-century usage still contrasted luxury with necessity, "comfort" increasingly applied to a middle ground between necessity and luxury. This development required people to rethink necessity as well as luxury. Prior to the eighteenth century, luxuries lacked objective specificity; instead, they manifested idiosyncrasy and mindless social aping. Conversely, necessities had objective definition by the requirements of subsistence.

The relativity of necessity and the acceptability of luxury became apparent in apologies for consumption in England's domestic economy. Sustained criticism of the priority of production in England's political economy flourished in the 1690s. This priority had depended on the assumption that England's wealth came from the export of manufactures, particularly cloth. Consumption of foreign goods supposedly lessened national wealth. In this context, consumption of England's domestic production was largely a matter of indifference, because according to mercantilist theory it neither increased nor diminished the total wealth of the nation. These assumptions broke down in the latter decades of the seventeenth century: "Every index of economic growth showed an advance: agricultural output, capital investment, imports from the Indies and the New World, the range and quantity of home manufacturing. Most striking was the abounding evidence of a rise in the level of domestic consumption." Most economic rethinking in this period repudiated simplistic models of the balance of trade as a zero-sum game and argued instead that protectionist measures could be self-defeating if they reduced other countries' capacity to consume England's exports. Nascent political economists also rethought the psychological dynamics and social implications of consumption at the micro level, as the consumption of Indian fabrics became a symbol of economic change—the substitution of newly fashionable goods for traditional ones, the popularization of luxury beyond the aristocracy, and the simultaneous expansion of domestic and foreign markets. Traditional interpretations of luxury could readily account for both the increase and the diversification of consumption patterns, but only in negative terms of sin and social disorder. New arguments interpreted these patterns as social goods, whatever they revealed about people's psychology.²²

²¹ John Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett* (Baltimore, Md., 1977), 1–62; Berry, *Idea of Luxury*, chaps. 2–4; Johnson, *Dictionary*, s.v. "necessity."

²² Joyce Oldham Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England* (Princeton, N.J., 1978), 158–98, quoted 164–65. On the liberal implications of these early defenses of the

Nicholas Barbon, a physician interested in London real estate development, presented the most forthright among these early analyses of people's unlimited potential to consume material goods. He minimized the natural basis of needs: "if strictly Examined, nothing is absolutely necessary to support Life, but Food; for a great part of Mankind go Naked, and lye in Huts and Caves." History showed that the cultural construction of needs had no limits: "The Wants of the Mind are infinite, Man naturally Aspires, and as his Mind is elevated, his Senses grow more refined, and more capable of Delight; his Desires are enlarged and his Wants increase with his Wishes, which is for everything that is rare, can gratifie his Senses, adorn his Body, and promote the Ease, Pleasure and Pomp of Life." Several of these reasons why people consumed, including the strongest—the desires for rarity, adornment, and pomp—were not necessarily identical with physical comfort, but "ease" referred to the alleviation of discomfort. (He listed "Shoomakers, Sadlers, Couch, and Chair-Makers" as occupations serving the "Ease of Life.") Yet historical comparisons revealed no objective standard for convenience: "every Old Fashion was once New . . . And therefore since all Habits are equally handsome, and hard to know which is most Convenient: The Promoting of New Fashions, ought to be Encouraged, because it provides a Livelihood for a great Part of Mankind."²³ In place of a classical model that discussed consumer behavior in moral and political terms—making luxury virtually by definition acceptable only as a privilege of the aristocracy—a psychological model of consumer behavior accounted for everyone the same way, for better or worse. John Locke, another physician writing at the same time as Barbon, identified "civil interests" with "life, liberty, health, and indolency of body; and the possession of outward things, such as money, lands, houses, furniture, and the like." Such possessions were a major good in any "society of men," since governments existed only "for the procuring, preserving, and advancing of their own civil interests."²⁴

Early eighteenth-century English writers primarily used "convenience" to describe physical satisfaction with their immediate material culture. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, convenience (more frequently, "conveniency") had strong connotations of harmony and conformity to a given order, as in "congruity of form,

consumption of fashionable goods, see Appleby, "Ideology and Theory: The Tension between Political and Economic Liberalism in Seventeenth-Century England," *AHR* 81 (June 1976): 499–516, esp. 504. On further liberal revisionism on consumption in the early eighteenth century, see Gordon Vichert, "The Theory of Conspicuous Consumption in the 18th Century," *The Varied Pattern: Studies in the 18th Century*, Peter Hughes and David Williams, eds. (Toronto, 1971), 253–67; McKendrick, "Consumer Revolution," 9–33; see also Sarah Maza, "Luxury, Morality, and Social Change: Why There Was No Middle-Class Consciousness in Prerevolutionary France," *Journal of Modern History* 69 (June 1997): 216–21.

²³ Nicholas Barbon, *A Discourse of Trade* (1690; rpt. edn., Baltimore, Md., 1905), 14, 21, 33; Jules Lubbock, *The Tyranny of Taste: The Politics of Architecture and Design in Britain, 1550–1960* (New Haven, Conn., 1995), 96–99.

²⁴ John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, William Popple, trans. (London, 1689), 6. Jules Lubbock has suggested that physicians "shared a psychological training encouraging them to regard all members of society as having the same bodily and psychological appetites which merit equal satisfaction, in distinction to earlier writers who regarded the nobility as governed by motives different to the rest"; Lubbock, *Tyranny of Taste*, 100. On the connections between medicine and materialism, see E. J. Hundert, "Bernard Mandeville and the Enlightenment's Maxims of Modernity," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56 (October 1995): 590.

quality, or nature.”²⁵ But during the seventeenth century, this meaning became obsolete, as convenience increasingly referred to open-ended suitability “to the performance of some action or to the satisfying of requirements.” For example, a defender of the East India Company’s exportation of bullion used the term to justify the importation of Indian manufactures simply on the basis that people wanted them: “The true and principal Riches, whether of private Persons, or of whole Nations, are Meat, and Bread, and Cloaths, and Houses, the Conveniences as well as Necessaries of Life.” A 1730s guide to manners echoed the old definition of convenience as harmony while, without apparent irony, applying it to the most arbitrarily fashionable and rapidly changing sphere of material culture, namely clothing: “[Propriety], I call a certain Suitableness and Convenience betwixt the Cloaths and the Person, as Courtesy is the framing and adapting our Actions, to the Satisfaction of other People; and if we desire to be exact, we must proportion them to our Shape, our Condition, and our Age.” Olaudah Equiano, an Igbo from the Ika region on the Niger River, used the term when he compared the architecture of his homeland with the buildings he had known while enslaved in Virginia: “In our buildings we study convenience rather than ornament.” As a predecessor for what would eventually be known as “comfort” regarding possessions in a consumer society, “convenience” had two advantages: it measured usefulness according to “any purpose,” and it left the purposes themselves morally neutral and open-ended. Under the rubric of “conveniences,” a guide to living in London discussed hiring carriages, buying wine, borrowing books, finding card players, discussing improving topics, hearing parliamentary and other debates, attending musical concerts, and taking hot, cold, and freshwater baths.²⁶

“Luxury” did not lose its invidious connotations once the liberal political economy developed, but application of the term to specific consumption patterns often carried less condemnation than previously. With respect to material—as opposed to political—culture, in the early eighteenth century references to luxury became increasingly satirical.²⁷ Satire carried much of the argument of Bernard Mandeville, yet another physician among the liberal revisionists on the propriety of

²⁵ During the seventeenth century, convenience had supplanted “commodious,” which since the late Middle Ages had referred specifically to satisfactory architectural accommodation, particularly in its spaciousness for hospitality. In the early modern period, commodious also referred more generally to the satisfactory quality of physical living conditions. Johnson, *Dictionary*; *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “commodious,” “convenience.”

²⁶ Henry Martyn, “Considerations on the East-India Trade” [1691], in *A Select Collection of Early English Tracts on Commerce*, J. R. McCulloch, ed. (1856; rpt. edn., Cambridge, 1954), 558; Jones, *Man of Manners*, 10, 12; Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, 2 vols. (1789; rpt. edn., Coral Gables, Fla., 1989), 1: 15; John Trusler, *The London Adviser and Guide* (London, 1786), 120–24.

²⁷ Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, G. Gregory Smith, ed., 8 vols. in 4 (1711–12; rpt. edn., New York, 1930), no. 260 (December 28, 1711), 1: 35; no. 127 (July 26, 1711), 2: 165; no. 265 (January 3, 1712), 4: 54–55; no. 478 (September 8, 1712), 7: 18; Lubbock, *Tyranny of Taste*, 109–13, 182–89; John Brewer, “‘The Most Polite Age and the Most Vicious’: Attitudes towards Culture as a Commodity, 1660–1800,” in Bermingham and Brewer, *Consumption of Culture*, 342–50; C. E. Nicholson, “World of Artifacts: *The Rape of the Lock* as Social History,” *Literature and History* 5, no. 2 (Autumn 1979): 189; Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, “Tea, Gender, and Domesticity in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, Carla H. Hay and Syndy M. Conger, eds., 23 (1994): 133. On women’s initiative in new consumption patterns, see Garrett, *At Home*, 249–60; David Jaffee, “Peddlers of Progress and the Transformation of the Rural North, 1760–1860,” *Journal of American History* 78 (September 1991): 530.

material consumption—"what we call the Comforts of Life." In *The Grumbling Hive* (1705), Mandeville scandalously disregarded the association of luxury with the vices of avarice, envy, pride, and vanity, and argued instead that they all contributed indispensably to public and private prosperity.

The Root of Evil, Avarice,
That damn'd ill-natur'd baneful Vice,
Was Slave to Prodigality,
That noble Sin; whilst Luxury
Employ'd a Million of the Poor,
And odious Pride a Million more:
Envy it self, and Vanity,
Were Ministers of Industry;
Their darling Folly, Fickleness,
In Diet, Furniture and Dress,
That strange ridic'ulous Vice, was made
The very Wheel that turn'd the Trade . . .
Thus Vice nurs'd Ingenuity,
Which join'd with Time and Industry,
Had carry'd Life's Conveniencies,
It's real Pleasures, Comforts, Ease,
To such a Height, the very Poor
Liv'd better than the Rich before,
And nothing could be added more.

In *The Grumbling Hive* and its notorious prose commentary, *The Fable of the Bees* (1714), Mandeville not only defended luxury for its unintended social benefits, he deconstructed the distinction between necessity and luxury to show that *all* supposed "necessities" were social constructions and therefore "luxuries." It made no difference whether every material need was considered as a luxury or as a necessity, since the distinction between them broke down when applied to specific items in specific societies: "The Comforts of Life are likewise so various and extensive, that no body can tell what People mean by them, except he knows what sort of Life they lead. The same obscurity I observe in the words Decency and Conveniency, and I never understand them unless I am acquainted with the Quality of the Persons that make use of them." "Comfort," "decency," and "conveniency" did not tell us anything about people's generic needs, since their meaning varied according to social circumstances: "People may go to Church together, and be all of one Mind as much as they please, I am apt to believe that when they pray for their daily Bread, the Bishop includes several things in that Petition which the Sexton does not think on" (Figures 4 and 5). "Luxury" simply measured the extent to which "Thought, Experience, and some Labour" had made "Life more comfortable" than an animal-like "primitive Simplicity."²⁸

The development of a political economy in the eighteenth century made it possible for both luxury and necessity to become morally neutral terms. Both of them became associated at least as much with physical well-being as with morality

²⁸ Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees: Or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits* [6th edn., 1732], F. B. Kaye, ed., 2 vols. (1924; rpt. edn., Indianapolis, 1988), 1: 25–26, 107–08, 169, 183. Barbon and Mandeville had Dutch medical training; Locke had trained in England before he encountered Dutch medical culture at first hand.

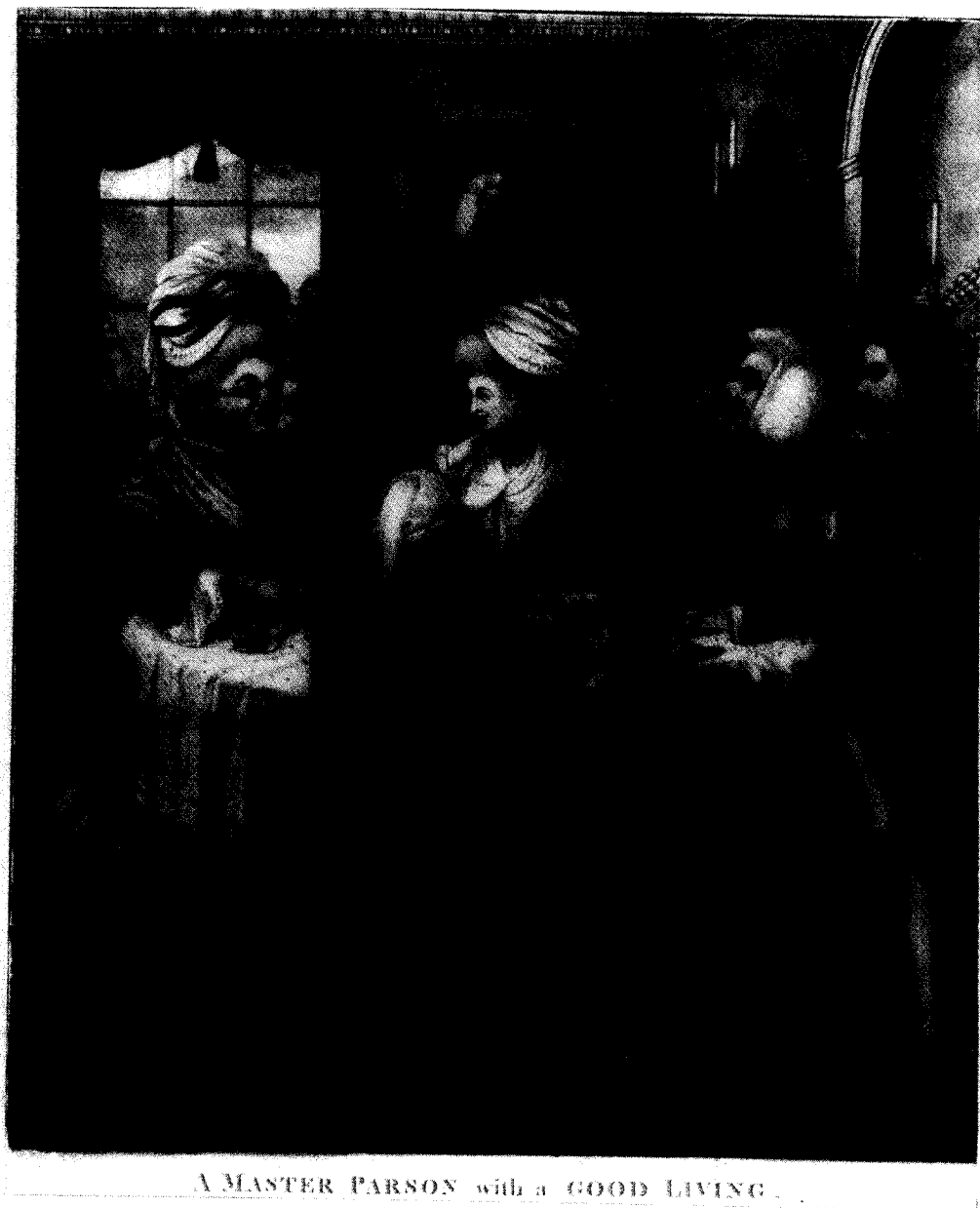


FIGURE 4: Relativity of luxury and necessity. The journeyman parson's "bare existence" is really a series of precise contrasts with the master parson's gentility. Carrington Bowles, after Robert Dighton, *A Master Parson with a Good Living* (London, 1782). Courtesy of the Print Collection, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

and mortality. Mandeville had set the agenda for political economists to analyze how demand shaped economic development. He cleared the way for the issue of standards of living to be a problem in its own right. The extent and degree of convenience and comfort among the populace became measures of northwestern Europe's progress from barbarism to civilization. Yet these measures had no standard scale or absolute morality. If luxury was everything "not immediately



A JOURNEYMAN PARSON with a BARE EXISTENCE.

Engraved by G. Gold for CARINGTON BOWLES, at his Map & Print Warehouse, Y 66, near St. Pauls Church Yard LONDON. Published at the Art Society's, No. 25, St. Martin's Lane.

FIGURE 5: Bowles, after Dighton, *A Journeyman Parson with a Bare Existence* (London, 1782). Courtesy of the Print Collection, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

necessary to make Man subsist as he is a living Creature," then all material goods, even those of "naked Savages," were luxuries. Peoples in every society "had made some Improvements upon their former manner of Living; and either in the Preparation of their Eatables, the ordering of their Huts." If everything was luxury, then nothing was: "Our Admiration is extended no farther than to what is new to us, and we all overlook the Excellency of Things we are used to, be they never so curious." For Mandeville, "comfort" meant desirable physical circumstances: "convenient Houses, handsome Furniture, good Fires in Winter, pleasant Gardens in Summer, neat Clothes, and Money enough to bring up their Children . . . These I have named are the necessary comforts of Life, which the most Modest are not ashamed to claim, and which they are very uneasy without."²⁹

Robinson Crusoe, published five years after *The Fable of the Bees*, romanticized this new notion of comfort. Crusoe, confronted with providing for himself from scratch, demonstrated in detail what it meant to be comfortable in early modern England. The chief importance of these details for the development of physical comfort as a cultural priority is their sheer existence in "the first fictional narrative in which an ordinary person's daily activities are the center of continuous literary attention." Much of the apparent interest of that narrative focused on a problem just becoming culturally explicit, the achievement of physical comfort. Daniel Defoe's novel was both symptom and cause of the issues arising from that explicitness, which he explored by juxtaposing the term's emotional and physical senses. When Crusoe had safely landed on shore after his shipwreck, he "solaced [his] mind with the comfortable part of [his] condition." Then he evaluated his physical circumstances: "I was wet, with no clothes to shift me, nor any thing either to eat or drink to comfort me." His immediate recourse was animal-like, to climb a tree for protection, where he slept "comfortably." The next day, "destitute of all comfort and company," he began to reestablish a familiar material culture by looting the wrecked ship and fashioning the island's natural resources.³⁰ His strategy in this project implied the priority among his physical needs.

Crusoe's situation starkly tested Mandeville's cultural definition of a continuum of material needs from necessity to luxury. From the ship, he took food and drink, bedding, clothes, carpentry tools and supplies, and weapons. Aside from his bed, most of Crusoe's initial material comforts came from items that would be ingested—refined foods, alcoholic drinks, and tobacco. Among consumer durables were mostly metal items—razors, scissors, knives and forks, and some money, whose uselessness he appreciated but "upon second thoughts, I took it away." His most valued consumer goods were ones of literary culture—"pens, ink, and paper," and books, particularly religious ones. Among his deprivations, Crusoe most missed candles for artificial illumination. He improved on his housing by building a wall and a thatched roof over the cave opening behind his tent. The cave room was a multi-purpose space, "a warehouse or magazin, a kitchen, a dining room, and a cellar." Eventually, he replaced the tent with a rafted shelter for better protection

²⁹ Mandeville, *Fable of the Bees*, 1: 107, 155.

³⁰ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley, Calif., 1957), 74, 86; Daniel Defoe, *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719; rpt. edn., London, 1965), 66–67.

against rain. Crusoe built himself a hall-and-parlor house. Once he had rooms, he built furniture: "I began to apply myself to such necessary things as I found I most wanted, as particularly a chair and a table; for without these I was not able to enjoy the comforts I had in the world; I could not write, or eat, or do several things with so much pleasure without a table."³¹ His needs would not have been out of place for the third quarter of the seventeenth century, and indeed Defoe set the novel in that period.

Once Crusoe had satisfactorily accommodated himself, he began to explore the interior of the island. One "delicious vale" particularly appealed to him. With conscious irony, he built himself a rural retreat—"a little kind of bower"—on his deserted island. Crusoe claimed that this bower marked his achievement of comfort. Having spent most of the narrative up to that point in dealing expansively with his material needs, he now extolled his physical contentedness with his new home:

I cannot express what a satisfaction it was to me, to come into my old hutch, and lye down in my hammock-bed. This little wandring journey, without settled place of abode, had been so unpleasant to me, that my own house, as I called it to my self, was a perfect settlement to me, compared to that; and it rendered every thing about me so comfortable, that I resolved I would never go a great way from it again, while it should be my lot to stay on the island.

Yet two major increments in his physical comfort were still to come—freshly baked bread and an umbrella. In principle, comfort implicitly involved knowing what amenities one really needed, having them, and desiring no more. But Crusoe repeatedly contradicted a simple equation of comfort with the satisfaction of sheer necessities. When he later discovered a wrecked Spanish ship, his needs expanded again: "I took a fire shovel and tongs, which I wanted extremely; as also two little brass kettles, a copper pot to make chocolate, and a gridiron." As Mandeville had argued, there was no objective basis for distinguishing Crusoe's comforts from luxuries. Isolation on the island had led Crusoe to learn the explicitly Mandevillian lesson that he had come to take his physical comforts for granted as natural, when in fact they were deeply historical.³² A few years later in *The Complete English Tradesman*, Defoe would urge that the history of physical comfort in England be a source of national pride:

The same trade that keeps our people at home, is the cause of the well living of the people here; for as frugality is not the national virtue of *England*, so the people that get much, spend much; and as they work hard, so they live well, eat and drink well, cloath warm, and lodge soft! in a word, the working manufacturing people of *England* eat the fat, drink the sweet, live better, and fare better, than the working poor of any other nation in *Europe*.³³ (See Figure 6.)

As the examples of Mandeville and Defoe indicate, development of a popular culture of fashionable consumption in the eighteenth century coincided with a new language to describe the physical basis of material need. David Hume gave

³¹ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 72–75, 82, 84–85, 89, 91, 93.

³² Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 112–15, 125, 129–34, 139–41, 144–46, 196–97; Andrew Varney, "Mandeville as a Defoe Source," *Notes and Queries*, new ser., no. 1 [vol. 228 in continuous series] (February 1983): 26–29.

³³ Daniel Defoe, *The Complete English Tradesman*, 2 vols., 3d edn. (London, 1732), 1: 318.

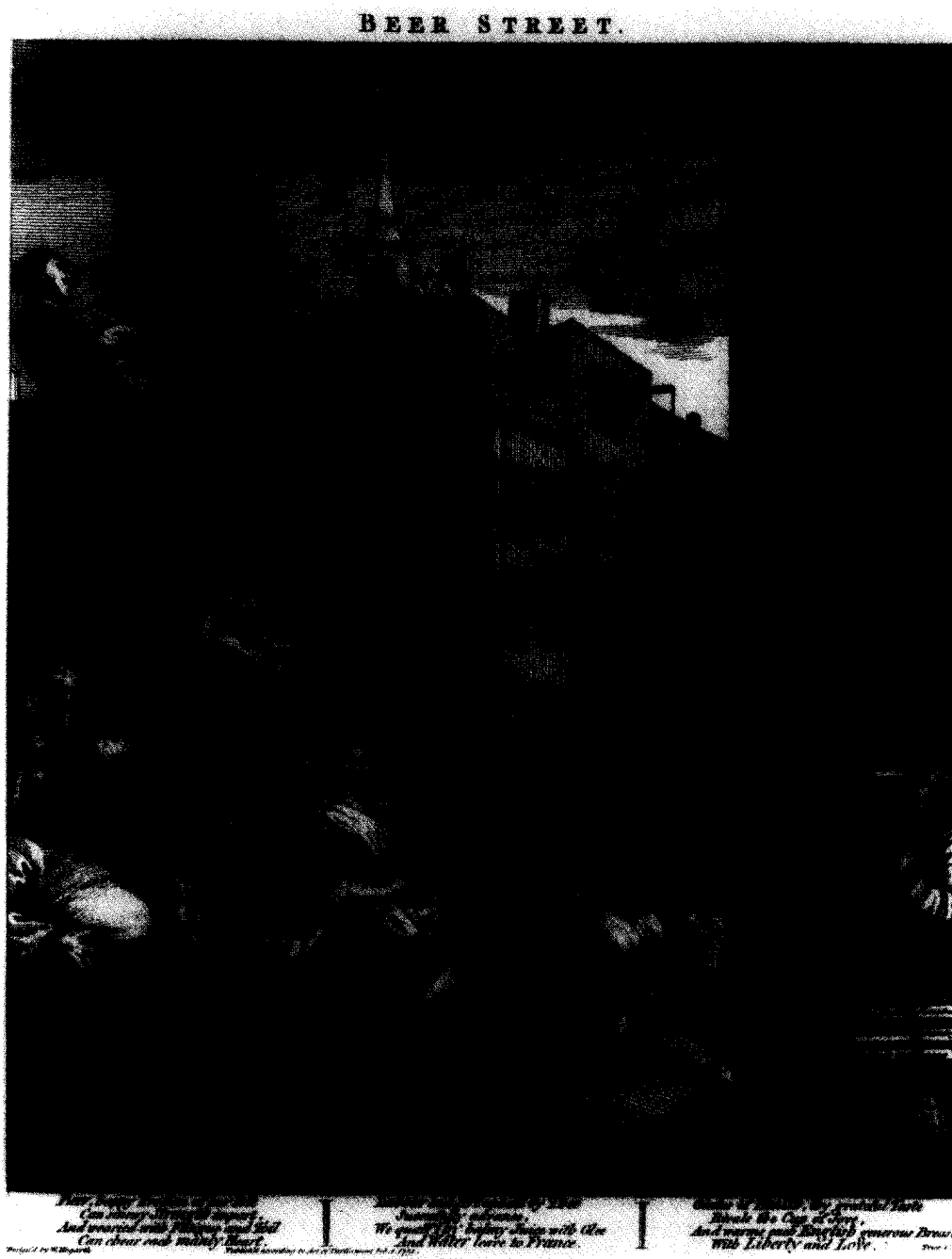


FIGURE 6: Prosperity. On Beer Street, trades and consumption thrived together: meat, drink, fish, clothing, shoes, books, even art. William Hogarth, *Beer Street and Gin Lane* (London, 1751). Courtesy of the Print Collection, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

philosophical respectability to the new revisionist and relativistic view of luxury. (Indeed, when in 1760 he republished his 1752 essay "Of Luxury," he retitled it "Of Refinement in the Arts.") Luxury meant "great refinement in the gratification of the senses; and any degree of it may be innocent or blameable, according to the age, or country, or condition of the person." Hume reminded his readers of "philosophers'" efforts "to render happiness entirely independent of every thing external," but he considered "that degree of perfection is impossible to be attained."³⁴ Other Scottish moral philosophers, notably Francis Hutcheson and Adam Ferguson, gave similarly measured interpretations of the historical and social relativity of luxury. They used the uncertainty implicit in traditional notions of luxury (as conditions in excess of what necessity required) to show that improved standards of living did not necessarily pose a liability to public virtue:

[One] may propose to stop the advancement of arts at any stage of their progress, and still incur the censure of luxury from those who have not advanced so far . . . if the dispute were to turn on the knowledge of what is physically necessary for the preservation of human life, as the standard of what is morally lawful, the faculties of physic, as well as of morality, would probably divide on the subject, and leave every individual, as at present, to find some rule for himself.

"Luxury" now referred neutrally to desirable possessions: "that complicated apparatus which mankind devise for the ease and convenience of life. Their buildings, furniture, equipage, cloathing, train of domestics, refinement of the table, and, in general, all that assemblage which is intended rather to please the fancy, than to obviate real wants, and which is rather ornamental than useful."³⁵

WHAT WAS PREVIOUSLY AN OXYMORON, Hume's "innocent luxury," had become a topic for reform-minded analysis by political economists, social commentators, and scientists. Among mid-century philosophes, Benjamin Franklin showed the most explicit interest in the history, anthropology, and science of basic household comforts, and he committed himself to closing the gap between the ideals and the technology of comfort. He promoted spermaceti candles for their steady, clean illumination; he suggested self-experiments to show how increased ventilation improved sleeping; and after his invention of a "Pennsylvanian Fire-place," he became synonymous with smoke-free and draft-free heating. In Pennsylvania, Franklin could consider a range of ethnic alternatives in domestic comfort. He was particularly attentive to the Dutch and German use of stoves that entirely enclosed the fire and used it only for heating. Such stoves reduced drafts because the only air going up the chimney was that introduced to the firebox from outside the room being heated. Franklin contrasted the efficient, clean heat of these stoves with that

³⁴ David Hume, "Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion" [1741], and "Of Refinement in the Arts" [1760], in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, Eugene F. Miller, ed. (Indianapolis, 1987), 5–6, 268, 276. Hume related the political economy of consumption to the satisfactions of stoic morality. The "objects" of such taste were likely to be literary and philosophical expressions—polite arts—rather than physical possessions; "Of the Middle Station of Life" [1742], in *Essays*, 546.

³⁵ Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Edinburgh, 1767), 376–77; Francis Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy* (London, 1755), 1: 287, as quoted in Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* [1776], R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, eds., 2 vols. (1976; rpt. edn., Indianapolis, 1981), 1: 23–24n. On standards of living as a public issue, see James Raven, "Defending Conduct and Property: The London Press and the Luxury Debate," in *Early Modern Conceptions of Property*, John Brewer and Susan Staves, eds. (London, 1995), 308.

provided by the two fireplace types among English colonists, a traditional design with high, wide, and deep hearths and a “newer-fashion’d” style with “low Breasts, and narrow Hearths” for new and remodeled urban housing. In “the large open Fire-places used in the Days of our Fathers, and still generally in the Country, and in Kitchens,” people could warm themselves by sitting within the hearth itself. But such fireplaces had a long list of “inconveniencies” by Franklin’s standards:

they are sometimes too hot to abide in, and at other times incommoded with the Smoke . . . they require a large Funnel, and a large Funnel carries off a great Quantity of Air, which occasions what is called a strong Draft to The Chimney; without which strong Draft the Smoke would come out of some Part or other of so large an Opening, so that the Door can seldom be shut; and the cold Air so nips the backs and Heels of those that sit before the Fire, that they have no Comfort.

The need to provide a draft from an outside door made it impossible to heat an entire room with such fireplaces: “I suppose our Ancestors never thought of warming Rooms to sit in; all they purpos’d was to have a Place to Make a Fire in, by which they might warm themselves when cold.” These traditional fireplaces exposed people to the fire with a directness characteristic of the open central hearth of the European peasantry. With their smaller chimney face, the new fireplaces were less smoky, and they did not need an open door to supply air for combustion. But they still drew room air for combustion, through all the small openings in the walls. Franklin argued that these more intense drafts posed greater health risks than the slower entry of large volumes of air to the older fireplaces: “’tis very uncomfortable as well as dangerous to sit against any such Crevice. Many Colds are caught from this Cause only; it being safer to sit in the open Street; for then the Pores do all close together, and the Air does not strike so sharply against any particular Part.”³⁶ Genteel fireplaces were cleaner but not significantly more warming than the traditional fireplaces; their chief advantage was suitability to elegant living, not physical comfort.

Franklin identified himself with participants in an enlightened subculture who

³⁶ Franklin, “Art of Procuring Pleasant Dreams,” 10: 131–37; Benjamin Franklin, “An Account of the New Invented Pennsylvanian Fire-Places” [1744], *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Leonard W. Labaree, et al., eds., 32 vols. (New Haven, Conn., 1959–), 2: 419–46; Esmond Wright, *Franklin of Philadelphia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), 61–62. Franklin’s interest in the culture of comfort is discussed more fully in John E. Crowley, “Artificial Illumination and the Definition of Domestic Space and Time in Early America,” *Travail et loisir dans les sociétés pré-industrielles*, Barbara Karsky and Elise Marienstras, eds. (Nancy, 1991), 59–69.

Many other eighteenth-century scientists worked on the problem of smoky chimneys, including Nicolas Gauger, John Theophilus Desaguliers, Martin Clare, James Anderson, and Count Rumford. On the scientific background to Franklin’s design, see I. B. Cohen, *Franklin and Newton: An Inquiry into Speculative Newtonian Experimental Science and Franklin’s Work in Electricity as an Example Thereof* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), 243–61. For other discussions of the problem, see Franklin to Jan Ingenhousz, “Causes and Cures of Smoky Chimneys,” August 28, 1785 [orig. pub. in *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 2, pt. 1 (1786)], Smyth, *Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, 9: 413–33; Franklin, “Description of a New Stove for Burning of Pitcoal and Consuming All Its Smoke,” Smyth, *Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, 9: 443–62; James Anderson, “Smoke,” in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1771), 3: 606–13. Anderson expanded this essay into *A Practical Treatise on Chimneys, Containing Full Directions for Preventing or Removing Smoke in Houses* (Edinburgh, 1776). For its entry on “Smoke,” the 3d edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* largely replaced Anderson’s previous essay with material and illustrations drawn from Franklin’s work; *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 18 vols., 3d edn. (Edinburgh, 1797), 7: 547–56.

criticized fashionable domestic priorities in the name of comfort. For them, the fireplace itself, as a source of heat, became the object of scientifically sophisticated innovation. Rather than leave such everyday technical problems aside after he established a transatlantic scientific reputation, Franklin went on to become the foremost authority on smoky chimneys. He took no offense when Hume's cousin, Lord Kames, wrote him for advice on such a mundane matter as smoky chimneys in a new house: "I have long been of an opinion similar to that you express," Franklin replied, "and think happiness consists more in small conveniences or pleasures that occur every day, than in great pieces of good fortune that happen but seldom to a man in the course of his life."³⁷

Classical republicanism and other ascetic strains in British radical and opposition political thought provided an ideological counterpoint to the emergent liberal political economy.³⁸ Use of this ideology (both in Britain and America) in support of American political resistance to imperial reform gave the classical critique of luxury a renewed relevance. Prevailing consumption patterns were interpreted to be causes as well as symptoms of weak public virtue and liability to political corruption. John Adams blamed "the late ministerial Measures" on "the universal Spirit of Debauchery, Dissipation, Luxury, Effeminacy and Gaming": he saw the "Prodigality, in Furniture, Equipage, Apparell and Diet" as "drawing down the Judgments of Heaven" in those same tyrannous acts. But calls for the restoration of civic virtue through "Frugality, Economy, [and] Parcimony" seldom provided a positive definition of desirable consumption patterns. Instead, they expressed primitivist fantasies: "Let us Eat Potatoes and drink Water. Let us Wear Canvass, and undressed Sheepskins, rather than submit to the unrighteous, and ignominious Domination that is prepared for Us." When Abigail Adams urged that their family "return a little more to the primitive Simplicity of Manners [of our Fathers]', and not sink into inglorious ease," John responded by recommending that she remove the coat of arms from the family's carriage, but he kept the carriage itself.³⁹

³⁷ Franklin to Lord Kames, February 28, 1768, Smyth, *Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, 5: 107–10, quoted 107. On the intellectual respectability of anything that "tends to utility," see White, *Natural History of Selborne*, 210; *Johnson's Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland and Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, R. W. Chapman, ed. (Oxford, 1924), 19–20.

³⁸ On the relative menace of luxury, compare Hume, "Of Refinement in the Arts," 278; and John Brown, *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* (Dublin, 1757), 17, 24–27. On the diminished threat of luxury, see Raven, "Defending Conduct and Property," 301–19; John Robertson, "The Scottish Enlightenment at the Limits of the Civic Tradition," and Istvan Hont, "The 'Rich Country-Poor Country' Debate in Scottish Classical Political Economy," in *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, eds. (Cambridge, 1983), 137–78, 271–317; J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, N.J., 1975), chaps. 13–14; Sekora, *Luxury*, 63–109.

³⁹ John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 5, 1774, September 20, 1774; Abigail Adams to John Adams, October 16, 1774, *Adams Family Correspondence*, L. H. Butterfield, et al., eds., 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 1: 125, 161, 173; David E. Shi, *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture* (New York, 1985), 61–65. In 1798, only 3 percent of taxable households owned a carriage; Lee Soltow, *Distribution of Wealth and Income in the United States in 1798* (Pittsburgh, 1989), 72. The best discussion of the relation between American consumption patterns and ideology in the coming of the American Revolution is T. H. Breen, "'Baubles of Britain': The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century," in Carson, Hoffman, and Albert, *Of Consuming Interests*, 444–82. On stereotypes of women's simultaneous liability to luxury and their duty to moderate it with taste, see G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, 1992), 190–214.

Appeals to “primitive simplicity” contributed to nascent republicanism at the same time that British political economists began to use the improvement of standards of living as a measure of the progress of civilization. When “luxury” referred to political corruption, it continued to have condemnatory power, but the term was losing much of its moral force when referring solely to consumption patterns. As one of the advocates of paper money wrote during a fiscal controversy in Massachusetts in the early 1750s, “Every man has a *natural Right* to enjoy the fruit of his own Labour, both as to the *Conveniencies*, and *Comforts*, as well as the *Necessaries of Life*, *natural Liberty* is the same with one Man, as another; and unless in the Enjoyment of these Things they hurt the Community, the Poor ought to be *allow’d* to use them as freely as the Rich.”⁴⁰ After the Seven Years’ War, Britain’s commercial expansion and popular prosperity became even less ambivalently associated with national pride and identity. Josiah Tucker, Adam Smith’s shrewd though less systematic contemporary political economist (and tutor to the prince of Wales on the subject), favorably compared English consumption patterns with those of other countries and forthrightly analyzed the emulative motivations shaping them. English manufactures

are more adapted for the Demands of Peasants and Mechanics, in order to appear in warm circumstances; for Farmers, Freeholders, Tradesmen and Manufacturers in middling Life; and for wholesale Dealers, Merchants, and all persons of Landed Estates, to appear in genteel life; than for the Magnificence of Palaces or the Cabinets of Princes. Thus it is . . . that the *English* of those several denominations have better *Conveniencies* in their Houses, and affect to have more in Quantity of Clean, neat Furniture, and a greater Variety, such as Carpets, Screens, Window Curtains, Chamber Bells, polished Brass Locks, Fenders etc. (Things hardly known Abroad among Persons of such a Rank) than are to be found in any other country in *Europe*, *Holland* excepted.⁴¹

Adam Smith explained motivations in a consumer society with a similarly detailed analysis of standards of living. People’s desire for convenience manifested an optimism that technology could provide happiness. He defined “conveniency” tautologically as “the fitness of any system or machine to produce the end for which it was intended.” Convenience translated into economic demand most readily through efforts to emulate the physical world of the rich: “The palaces, the gardens, the equipage, the retinue of the great are objects of which the obvious conveniency strikes every body.” But many other items—he mentions toothpicks, ear pickers, and nail clippers—had a convenience that lacked satisfaction except by association with an “ease” only supposed of the rich: “If we consider the real satisfaction which all these things are capable of affording, by itself and separated from the beauty of that arrangement which is fitted to promote it, it will always appear in the highest degree contemptible and trifling. But we rarely view it in this abstract and philosophical light.” The real needs of the rich and the poor for “ease of body and peace of mind” were the same regardless of social status. Yet the false “pleasures

⁴⁰ *The Good of the Community Impartially Considered* (Boston, 1754), as quoted in T. H. Breen, “The Meanings of Things: Interpreting the Consumer Economy in the Eighteenth Century,” in Brewer and Porter, *Consumption and the World of Goods*, 258.

⁴¹ Josiah Tucker, “Instructions for Travellers” [1758], in *Josiah Tucker: A Selection from His Economic and Political Writings*, Robert Livingston Schuyler, ed. (New York, 1931), 245–46; see also Mandeville, *Fable of the Bees*, 1: 169.

of wealth and greatness" provide the "deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind."⁴²

English adoption of the umbrella provides a parable of Smith's argument that the culture of comfort could endow a symbolically prestigious object with new meaning on the basis of its everyday advantages for everyone. Since antiquity—in Egypt, China, India, Greece, and the Vatican—use of the umbrella as protection from the elements (particularly the sun) had been a matter of strict privilege, often for religious ritual. Apparently borrowed from Chinese examples, umbrellas became fashionable among women at the French court in the seventeenth century, where attendants could be counted on to deal with their unwieldy weight. The umbrella began its career as an item of Parisian "populuxe" consumption when in the early eighteenth century a purse maker adapted his trade's technology to make a lightweight, collapsible umbrella that provided protection from the rain as well as the sun. By the middle of the eighteenth century, they had come into popular use in Paris, by men as well as women: they satisfied desires for courtly associations as well as protection from the weather.⁴³

The English climate had been rainy for a long time, but only in the last decades of the eighteenth century did umbrellas come into general use. They had earlier caught the admiring interest of British travelers such as the military officer James Wolfe and the humanitarian James Hanway, and in the 1760s and 1770s imported ones were advertised as fashion novelties. But French associations frequently made their venturesome users liable to public abuse, especially in the name of hackney coachmen whose livelihoods depended in part on providing protection from the rain. Horace Walpole noted contemptuously of the French: "They walk about the streets in the rain with umbrellas to avoid putting on their hats." As Walpole indicated, English observers initially thought the French carried the "new and most troublesome invention to save the beauty of their head dress," not to stay dry altogether. Yet, in the 1780s, umbrellas became fashionable for English men as well as women, in counterpoint to the decline in carrying swords. Guides such as "Walking London Streets" explained the prudent way to carry the newly popular device, and satirists described the mayhem from opening umbrellas when a shower fell on the Sunday promenade in London's Mall (Figure 7). Now British manufacturers advertised the "much approved pocket and portable umbrellas, which for lightness, elegance and strength, far exceed anything of the kind ever imported or manufactured in this kingdom." Rev. Woodforde must have officiated at many rainy graveside services before he began recording his use of umbrellas in 1787; thereafter, his references became numerous as it became an accustomed accesso-

⁴² Adam Smith, "Of the Effect of Utility upon the Sentiment of Approbation," in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie, eds. (1759; rpt. edn., Indianapolis, 1982), part 4, chap. i, paragraph 1, 179; paragraph 8, 181–82; paragraph 9, 183; paragraph 10, 185; Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, book 1, chap. i, paragraph 11, 23–24; book 3, chap. i, paragraph 2, 377.

⁴³ Robinson Crusoe's use of one on a desert island was an exception proving the gender rule, as were the umbrellas stored in churches for clergymen to use at burials. The first French edition of *Robinson Crusoe* (1720)—unlike early English editions—showed him with an umbrella; David Blewett, *The Illustration of "Robinson Crusoe," 1719–1920* (Gerrards Cross, Bucks., 1995), 26–32. Crusoe described his "great clumsy Goat-Skin Umbrella" as "the most necessary Thing I had about me, next to my Gun"; Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 150.



FIGURE 7: Fashionable comfort. When a shower hits St. James Park, everyone is ready with an umbrella. Samuel Collings, *The Battle of Umbrellas* (London, 1784). Courtesy of the Print Collection, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

ry.⁴⁴ The umbrella—destined to be forever linked to the dapper Englishman—had gone from being a suspiciously foreign and feminine expression of courtly manners to a fashionable device for everyone to cope with the discomforts of the English climate.

⁴⁴ Walpole to John Chute, October 3, 1765, Lady Hertford to Walpole, September 25, 1775, *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, 31: 215, 35: 112, 39: 267; Cole, *Journal of My Journey to Paris*, 346; "The Battle of Umbrellas," *Wit's Magazine* (London) (August 1784): 286–88; M. Dorothy George, *Hogarth to Cruikshank: Social Change in Graphic Satire* (New York, 1967), plates 129, 137, 138, 143; George Paston, *Social Caricature in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1905), 23–24, 30, plates 18–19, 39; Woodforde, *Diary of a Country Parson*, 3: 307 (October 23, 1792), 4: 50 (August 15, 1793) 76 (November 4, 1793) 125 (August 1, 1794) 140 (October 7, 1794), 5: 177 (March 9, 1799); Trusler, *London Adviser*, 115. On umbrellas as an item of French "populuxe" consumption, see Cissie Fairchilds, "The Production and Marketing of Populuxe Goods in Eighteenth-Century Paris," in Brewer and Porter, *Consumption and the World of Goods*, 235–39. On British usage, see William Edward Hartpole Lecky, *A History of England in the Eighteenth Century*, 8 vols. (London, 1887), 6: 146–47; Jeremy Farrell, *Umbrellas and Parasols* (London, 1985), 7–8, 19–37; Aileen Ribeiro, "Men and Umbrellas in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 134 (September 1986): 653–56. Aside from the exceptional use of parasols by Italian horsemen, the typical representation of parasols in seventeenth-century European art showed a servant holding one over an aristocratic woman; Farrell, 21–22.

When Adam Smith rehearsed the increase and the improvement of “the necessities and the conveniences of life” for England’s laboring population, he confronted “the common complaint that luxury extends itself even to the lowest ranks of the people, and that the labouring poor will not now be contented with the same food, cloathing and lodging which satisfied them in former time.” He acknowledged the force of traditional views on luxury by taking up the question whether this improvement in popular standards of living should “be regarded as an advantage or as an inconveniency to the society.” And he forthrightly repudiated traditional wisdom: “what improves the circumstances of the greater part can never be regarded as inconveniency to the whole.” Social justice depended in part on the availability of everyday foods, such as cheaper potatoes, turnips, carrots, cabbages, apples, and onions, on “cheaper and better cloathing,” on the availability of “many agreeable and convenient pieces of household furniture,” and on more affordable “soap, salt, candles, leather, and fermented liquors.”⁴⁵

Smith contrasted necessity and luxury, but he explicitly conceded Mandeville’s relativism: “By necessities I understand, not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without.” He used the word “comfortably” to explain how linen shirts could be a decency in contemporary Europe but unnecessary among other civilized peoples such as the Greeks and Romans. (Here, Mandeville almost certainly influenced Smith directly, since the same example, linen shirts, illustrated the same point.) Such comparisons showed that decency was primarily a matter of social habit, not physical satisfaction. Lack of a linen shirt in eighteenth-century Europe would mark “that disgraceful degree of poverty, which, it is presumed, no body can well fall into without extreme bad conduct.”⁴⁶

Throughout the *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith related “the necessities and conveniences” of life to the material benefits of people’s labor. Nowhere, however, did he distinguish necessities *from* conveniences. Instead, he concluded the celebrated first chapter, on the division of labor, with a paean to the “universal opulence which extends itself to the lowest ranks of the people.” Among the items composing this opulence were a woolen coat, a linen shirt, shoes, a bed, a kitchen grate and its coals, “all the other utensils of his kitchen, all the furniture of his table, the knives and forks, the earthen or pewter plates upon which he serves up and divides his victuals, bread, beer,” and “the glass window which lets in the heat and the light, and keeps out the wind and the rain . . . without which these northern parts of the world would scarce have afforded a very comfortable habitation.” The diversity of production possible with a high degree of division of labor had allowed the “accommodation” of “an industrious and frugal peasant” to exceed that of a ruler in savage societies. (By “savage,” Smith meant societies in which subsistence depended on hunting and fishing.)⁴⁷

According to Smith, the primary imperative to satisfy necessity was to avoid

⁴⁵ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, book 1, chap. viii, paragraphs 35–36, 95–96.

⁴⁶ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, book 5, chap. ii, section k, paragraphs 2–3, 869–70.

⁴⁷ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, book 1, chap. i, paragraph 11, 23; for Smith’s usage of “necessaries and conveniences of life,” see 10, 47, 51, 95, 176, 927.

shame. Thus anyone in England would be “ashamed to appear in publick” without leather shoes, while among “the lowest order” in Scotland only men, not women, felt such necessity. In France’s “lowest rank of people,” neither the men nor the women felt any “discredit” in appearing publicly either in wooden shoes or in bare feet. Smith distinguished between necessities and luxuries, but he defined them both in reference to the same standard, the opinion of others. While respectability was everything in the definition of necessities, the consumption of luxuries could be irrelevant to respectability, so long as it was “temperate.” Luxuries were consumables from which people could abstain without suffering any “reproach”—as in forgoing beer or wine. Smith simultaneously disavowed an automatic disapproval for luxury and made popular consumption patterns respectable by definition.⁴⁸ Desires for comfort now legitimized popular consumption.

ADAM SMITH’S ANALYSIS OF CONSUMPTION PATTERNS showed how sympathy—the ability to understand other people by imaginatively experiencing their emotions and sensations—shaped material culture. In the latter decades of the eighteenth century, humanitarian reformers urged people to use such sympathy to appreciate others’ right to physical comfort. Consideration of others’ physical discomforts fit well into the eighteenth-century’s thriving culture of sensibility, which encouraged people of social and economic privilege to empathize with the physical and psychological distress of others less fortunate than themselves.⁴⁹

The preeminent prison reformer, John Howard, established a genre of social reporting that relied on a humanitarian aesthetic of sensitivity to others’ miseries. His difficulties and perils in observing prisoners’ miserable conditions were themselves sympathetic arguments for the need to design prisons with a view toward the prisoners’ “cleanly and wholesome abodes.” Most of the recent historiography on eighteenth-century English prison reform has followed the Foucauldian line of “discipline and punish” interpretations, and has concentrated on the design of specialized facilities for the control and rehabilitation of criminals. But “distress”—the conventional condition to arouse sympathy—was Howard’s crucial word in *The State of the Prisons in England and Wales* (1777). In response to Howard’s initial findings about prisoners’ critical vulnerability to gaol-fever, Parliament had passed an act in 1774 for preserving the health of prisoners (14 Geo. 3, c. 59). However, Howard found that their living conditions remained miserable:

⁴⁸ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, book 5, chap. ii, section k, paragraph 3, 869–70. On Smith’s moral psychology, see Robert Boyden Lamb, “Adam Smith’s System: Sympathy Not Self-Interest,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 35 (October–December 1974): 679–80; Nathan Phillipson, “Adam Smith as Civic Moralist,” in Hont and Ignatieff, *Wealth and Virtue*, 179–234.

⁴⁹ On the heightened awareness in the eighteenth century of physical misery as an object for sentimental sympathy, see Thomas W. Laqueur, “Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative,” in *The New Cultural History*, Lynn Hunt, ed. (Berkeley, Calif., 1989), 176–204; Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority* (New York, 1982), 25–26, 117–22; Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, 8–9, 215–20, 224–31; Karen Halttunen, “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture,” *AHR* 100 (April 1995): 303–09; Carolyn D. Williams, “‘The Luxury of Doing Good’: Benevolence, Sensibility, and the Royal Humane Society,” in Porter and Roberts, *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century*, 77–107.

any one may judge of the probability there is against the health, and life of prisoners crowded in close rooms, cells, and subterraneous dungeons, for fourteen or fifteen hours out of the four and twenty. In some of those caverns the floor is very damp: in others there is sometimes an inch or two of water: and the straw, or bedding is laid on such floors; seldom on barrack-bedsteads.

Howard's "proposed improvements" in the accommodation of prisoners included individual rooms for sleeping, bedsteads (preferably of iron), windows with shutters and barred doors for ventilation, and facilities for bathing with warm water. Howard even had to insist that jails have some heating: "this is not only what humanity demands in our climate, but that it is essential to the preservation of the health of prisoners, by promoting the circulation of air, and preventing those mortifications of the feet to which they are so liable."⁵⁰

After Howard had reported on the condition of prisoners of war during the War of American Independence, comfort entered into the United States' negotiation of treaties in the 1780s, as it sought to enlist allies in declarations of the rights of prisoners of war. Prisoners should not be sent to "distant and inclement Countries" nor kept in "close and noxious places"; instead, officers should have "comfortable Quarters and the Common Men be disposed in cantonments open and extensive enough for air and exercise, and lodged in barracks as roomly and good" as those provided the captor's troops.⁵¹

Similar terms began to inform commentary on the amenity of slave housing in the new United States. A Polish nobleman interested in prison reform (and himself a political prisoner for two years) invoked the humanitarian aesthetics of misery to report on slavery at George Washington's Mount Vernon plantation: "We entered one of the huts of the Blacks, for one can not call them by the name of houses. They are more miserable than the most miserable of the cottages of our peasants. The husband and wife sleep on a mean pallet, the children on the ground; a very bad fireplace, some utensils for cooking, but in the middle of this poverty some cups and a teapot." Earlier descriptions of slaves' housing used a spectrum of generic terms that took poor quality for granted without further comment: "quarters," "hovels," "huts," "cabins," "cottages," and "Negro houses." After the revolution, travelers used "comfort" to assess slave housing, both positively and negatively—as "comfortably furnished," or as having "no convenience, no furniture, no comfort." Hygiene, warmth, and privacy defined slaves' minimal entitlement to comfort. As comfort emerged in denunciatory descriptions of slaves' living conditions, slave-owners increasingly prided themselves on building accommodation that met

⁵⁰ John Howard, *The State of the Prisons in England and Wales*, 3d edn. (Warrington, 1784), 1–2, 22–23, 32, 38–39, quoted 7, 38. On prison furnishings, see Christopher Gilbert, *English Vernacular Furniture, 1750–1900* (New Haven, Conn., 1991), chap. 13. On prison reform, see Rod Morgan, "Divine Philanthropy: John Howard Reconsidered," *History* 62 (October 1977): 388–411; Michael Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain: The Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution, 1750–1850* (New York, 1978); Robin Evans, *The Architecture of Virtue: English Prison Architecture, 1750–1840* (New York, 1982). Howard himself was a "humanitarian" who "showed no interest in reducing the large number of capital crimes"; Robert Alan Cooper, "Ideas and Their Execution: English Prison Reform," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 10 (Fall 1976): 80. On distress as a convention in sentimental literature, see Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London, 1986), 2–3.

⁵¹ "Project of a Treaty Submitted by the American Commissioners" [1786], *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Julian P. Boyd, ed., 27 vols. (Princeton, N.J., 1954–), 9: 419–20; Appleby, "Consumption," 169; Howard, *State of the Prisons*, 184–94.

minimal standards for decent living, as measured by how poor European Americans lived. This concern on the part of some slaveowners was part of the broader humanitarian definition of comfort in the second half of the eighteenth century. But their use of that standard met a more pressing need to apologize for their treatment of human chattels in the face of nascent antislavery developments throughout European Atlantic culture.⁵²

Housing for these groups had been miserable for a long time before, but its inadequacy had not previously been regularly reported or studied. A new standard applied—comfort. A culture of sensibility naturalized the phenomenon of discomfort and made it susceptible to rational improvement. Humanitarian concern with the physical miseries of poverty took particular responsibility for the design of comfortable cottages for the rural poor. While it might be taken for granted that humanitarian reformers would want to enable the poor to have comfortable housing, this assumption begs the question that comfort was an architectural priority. The estate surveyor Nathaniel Kent and the architect John Wood established an architectural genre of philanthropic designs of model cottages. The designs developed in conjunction with intensified public concerns about the social and economic conditions of cottagers in the latter decades of the eighteenth century. Reformers argued that well-designed cottages made aesthetic, social, and economic priorities potentially harmonious: “As a number of labourers constitutes one of the requisites of grandeur, comfortable habitations for its poor dependents ought to be provided.” Arthur Young, the preeminent authority on agricultural reform in late eighteenth-century Britain, included the adequacy of peasant housing in his inventory of questions when assessing a region. When touring Catalonia, for example, he noted repeatedly how the houses lacked chimneys and glazed windows. In the valley of Aran, he found “abodes of poverty and wretchedness; not one window of glass to be seen in the whole town; scarcely any chimnies, both ground floor and the chambers vomiting the smoke out of the windows.” Young was perplexed to explain “a poverty which hurt our feelings,” among a people whom he found highly industrious in their use of agricultural resources. He tentatively

⁵² Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, *Under Their Vine and Fig Tree: Travels through America in 1797–1799, 1805 with Some Further Account of Life in New Jersey*, Metchie J. E. Budka, trans. and ed., *Collections of the New Jersey Historical Society*, 14 (Elizabeth, N.J., 1965), 33–35, 100 (Niemcewicz was at home in Anglo-American culture and stayed in the United States for ten years, engaging in literary and political activities); Isaac Weld, *Travels through the States of North America, and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada, during the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797* (London, 1799), 85; J. F. D. Smyth, *A Tour in the United States of America*, 2 vols. (London, 1784), 1: 76. On the architectural reality of slave housing, see Bernard L. Herman, “Slave Quarters in Virginia: The Persona behind Historic Artifacts,” *The Scope of Historical Archaeology: Essays in Honor of John L. Cotter*, David G. Orr and Daniel G. Crozier, eds. (Philadelphia, 1984), 274; William M. Kelso, *Kingsmill Plantations, 1619–1800: Archaeology of Country Life in Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1984), 28–29; Leland Ferguson, *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650–1800* (Washington, D.C., 1992), 79; John Michael Vlach, “Afro-American Domestic Artifacts in Eighteenth-Century Virginia,” *Material Culture* 19 (Spring 1987): 10. On apologies for slavery in response to humanitarianism, see Joyce E. Chaplin, “Slavery and the Principle of Humanity: A Modern Idea in the Early Lower South,” *Journal of Social History* 24 (Winter 1990): 299–313; John Drayton, *A View of South Carolina, as Respects Her Natural and Civil Concerns* (Charleston, S.C., 1802), 144–49. On the terminology applicable to slave accommodation, see Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998), 104–21.

attributed the disparity to an absentee landholding class neglecting its social responsibilities.⁵³

By identifying basic needs in housing, philanthropic reformers asserted a common humanity on the basis of physical comfort. In presenting model cottages as tests of minimal comfort, housing reformers urged landlords to consider comfort as their tenants' right: "it is as necessary to provide plain and comfortable habitations for the poor as it is to provide comfortable and convenient buildings for cattle." Kent, Wood, and other housing reformers challenged their readers to imagine entering "the shattered hovels which half the poor of this kingdom are obliged to put up with . . . Those who condescend to visit these miserable tenements, can testify, that neither health or decency can be preserved in them. The weather frequently penetrates all parts of them: which must occasion illness of various kinds, particularly agues; which more frequently visit the children of cottagers than any others, and early shake their constitutions." Even when imaginary, such an experience with uncomfortable housing enabled the "man of feeling" to find a common humanity with its real occupants: "no architect can form a convenient plan, unless he ideally places himself in the situation of the person for whom he designs . . . and for that end to visit him; to enquire after the conveniencies he wanted, and into the inconveniencies he laboured under." Housing reformers encouraged their genteel readers to acknowledge their common humanity with cottagers: "so like the feelings of men in a higher sphere, are those of a poor cottager, that if his habitation be warm, cheerful, and comfortable, he will return to it with gladness, and abide in it with pleasure."⁵⁴

BY THE TURN OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY Anglo-American social thought had naturalized the desire for physical comfort. The mature work of Thomas Malthus represented and synthesized the invention of comfort in material culture and social thought: the indeterminability of distinctions between necessity and luxury, the

⁵³ Nathaniel Kent, *Hints to Gentlemen of Landed Property* (London, 1775); John Wood, *Series of Plans for Cottages or Habitations of the Labourer . . . Tending to the Comfort of the Poor and Advantage of the Builder* (1781; rpt. edn., London, 1806); Arthur Young, "Tour in Catalonia," *Annals of Agriculture and Other Useful Arts* (Bury St. Edmunds, 1787), 8: 202, 263, see also 207, 210; Humphry Repton, *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (London, 1803), quoted 137–38; *Communications to the Board of Agriculture on Subjects Relative to the Husbandry and Internal Improvement of the Country*, 7 vols. (London, 1797), 1: part 2, *Cottages*. On concerns with rural misery, see John B. Radner, "The Art of Sympathy in Eighteenth-Century British Moral Thought," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, Roseann Runte, ed., 9 (1979): 190; Chappell, "Housing a Nation," 221–22; Eileen Harris, *British Architectural Books and Writers, 1556–1785* (Cambridge, 1990), 490; Pierre de la Ruffinière du Prey, *John Soane: The Making of an Architect* (Chicago, 1982), 223–24; John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730–1840* (Cambridge, 1980), 35–88; Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740–1860* (Berkeley, Calif., 1986), 14–54; Christiana Payne, *Toil and Plenty: Images of the Agricultural Landscape in England, 1780–1890* (New Haven, Conn., 1993), 23–66. The priority of comfort in the design of model philanthropic cottages is discussed more fully in John E. Crowley, "'In Happier Mansions, Warm, and Bright': The Invention of the Cottage as the Comfortable House," *Winterthur Portfolio* 32 (Summer–Autumn 1997): 169–88.

⁵⁴ Nathaniel Kent to Coke of Norfolk, 1789, as quoted in John Martin Robinson, *Georgian Model Farms: A Study of the Decorative and Model Farm Buildings of the Age of Improvement, 1700–1846* (Oxford, 1983), 109; Kent, *Hints to Gentlemen*, 229, 237; Wood, *Series of Plans*, 3–5; John Loudon, *A Treatise on Forming, Improving, and Managing Country Residences*, 2 vols. (London, 1806), 1: 124–25.

acceptance of popular consumption patterns, the benevolent impulse to establish minimal entitlements to comfort, and the demonstrability of respectable family life by comfortable domestic environments. Between the first edition of the *Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1798 and the second in 1803, largely as a result of his travels comparing English living conditions with those elsewhere in Europe, Malthus came to the realization that a desire for comfort and convenience was crucial to the "moral restraint" that allowed sufficient control over the principle of population to maintain happiness in a society: "throughout a very large class of people [in England], a decided taste for the conveniences and comforts of life, a strong desire of bettering their condition, that master-spring of public prosperity, and, in consequence, a most laudable spirit of industry and foresight, are observed to prevail."

Malthus's image of the comforts of English life came straight out of genre representations of happy cottagers: "a good meal, a warm house, and a comfortable fireside in the evening" (Figure 8). The desire for such comforts, wrote Malthus, "put in motion the greatest part of that activity, from which spring the multiplied improvements and advantages of civilised life; and . . . the pursuit of these objects, and the gratification of these desires, form the principal happiness of the larger half of mankind, civilised or uncivilised, and are indispensably necessary to the more refined enjoyments of the other half." What was minimally comfortable for the propertied was needed by the poor as well, and it was reasonable and desirable that the poor should want those "luxuries" of the propertied that were really comfortable:

It is the spread of luxury therefore among the mass of the people, and not an excess of it in a few, that seems to be most advantageous, both with regard to national wealth and national happiness[,] . . . if it be observed that a taste for the comforts and conveniences of life will prevent people from marrying, under the certainty of being deprived of these advantages.⁵⁵

Comfort had become a set of expectations, physical designs, and personal imperatives.

The eighteenth-century consumer revolution in Anglo-American society developed a culture of comfort that synthesized the notion's new physical meanings with traditional ones of moral support. That culture depended on a fashion-conscious public being made sensible of the *discomfort* of previously acceptable facilities. This sensibility recognized that comfort was culturally progressive rather than physically natural. Facilities for physical comfort signified membership in a culture giving high priority to respectable domesticity. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, comfort provided crucial values, consumption patterns, and behaviors for the formation of a middle class. Within the house, it provided a measure of women's success at domesticity, while its external symbols represented the respectability of

⁵⁵ Thomas Malthus, "An Essay on the Principle of Population: The Sixth Edition (1826) with Variant Readings from the Second Edition (1803)," *The Works of Thomas Robert Malthus*, E. A. Wrigley and David Souden, eds., 9 vols. (London, 1986), 3: 466–68, 520; on Malthus and standards of living, see D. E. C. Eversley, *Social Theories of Fertility and the Malthusian Debate* (Oxford, 1959), 211. On David Allan's aquatints to illustrate Allan Ramsay's pastoral poem, *The Gentle Shepherd* (Figure 8), see Duncan Macmillan, *Painting in Scotland: The Golden Age* (Oxford, 1986), 66–69.



David Allan "Glaud, Jenny and Peggy"

While Peggy laces up her bosom fair,
 A true Good-bye hangs up her hair.
 Glaud & his morning frock takes a look.
 The rising sun shines merrily thro' the rook.
 A pipe has mouth, the ladies please his ten,
 And now and then his pipe man intervenes.

Engraved by J. G. Smith

FIGURE 8: Happy cottagers. Though close to nature, the household amply meets its physical needs for shelter, food, heat, and light, while also having such manufactured items as shoes, stockings, ribbons, coats and gowns, tobacco, turned furniture, mirrors, ceramics, and books. David Allan, "Glaud, Jenny and Peggy," from Allan Ramsay, *The Gentle Shepherd, a Pastoral Comedy* (Glasgow, 1788). Courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

men's economic activities.⁵⁶ Satisfaction with a comfortable home became one of the most convincing ways to give meaning to consumption patterns—hence the untranslatable English ideals of “home” and “comfort” quoted from Southey in the epigraph at the beginning of this article. Southey went on to link these ideals with the consumer revolution:

Saints and philosophers teach us that they who have the fewest wants are the wisest and the happiest; but neither philosophers nor saints are in fashion in England. It is recorded of some old Eastern tyrant, that he offered a reward for the discovery of a new pleasure;—in like manner this nation offers a perpetual reward to those who will discover new wants for them, in the readiness wherewith they purchase any thing, if the seller will but assure them that it is exceedingly convenient.⁵⁷

Concern with comfort provided a rationale for moderate but innovative patterns of consumption that transcended both the aristocratic imperatives of luxury and the necessities of poverty.

⁵⁶ These themes are elaborated in John E. Crowley, “Houses, Gender, and the Picturesque Landscape: The Designs of Catherine Beecher and Andrew Jackson Downing,” *Gender and Material Culture: Historical Perspectives*, Moira Donald and Linda Hurcombe, eds. (London, forthcoming). On the relations between material culture and the formation of a middle class, see Lenore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (Chicago, 1987), 357–88; Stuart M. Blumin, “The Hypothesis of Middle-Class Formation in Nineteenth-Century America: A Critique and Some Proposals,” *AHR* 90 (April 1985): 299–338.

⁵⁷ Southey, *Letters from England*, 1: 182; Southey's examples of such conveniences included patent corkscrews, pocket fenders and toasting forks, lightweight fire-irons, mechanical candle snuffers, pen cutters, nail clippers, cucumber slicers, and buttoners for knee britches.

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