Emotional Economies of pleasure among the gentry of eighteenth-century England

In 1738 Sir Roger Newdigate described Paris in a letter to his Mother during his first Grand Tour, at the age of 19. Immersed in sensory wonders of the new he was seized with the beauty and modernity of the City and the architecture. The streets were '…all finely pav'd, like Whitehall' and he noted '…the manner of hanging the lamps in the middle of the street by ropes from house to house' which had 'a very pretty effect.' Versailles Palace, he described, as the '…greatest piece of magnificence since the time of Salomon' and the Great Gallery within it 'the finest room I ever saw.' His first taste of French wine similarly agreed with him 'as it ran in great streams out of the presse.' He saved his displeasure for the Opera, which he thought to be '…the greatest jumble of noise and jargon that I ever yet heard.' However, he decisively and affectionately claimed to his Mother, in the same letter, that '…to hear from you would be my greatest pleasure.' Newdigate offered a range of responses to the pleasures of Paris whilst affirming the pleasures he derived from family epistles.

When we think of pleasure in the eighteenth century we probably think of certain sections of Newdigate's letter, the aesthetic pleasures of the Grand Tour along with the pleasure garden, the clubhouse, the coffee-house and the luxuries of the new consumerism. These were sensory 'higher order' pleasures, which were gradually becoming more acceptable, more virtuous. A series of developments in enlightenment thinking, natural theology, moral philosophy and aesthetics had provided pathways for people 'to achieve gratification of the senses not just purification of the soul.' Smithsonian economics further democratised desire, lending politeness and respectability to pleasure. Desire was also key in driving the new consumerism of the period. Through the urban renaissance, the boundaries of these pleasures were driven beyond the aristocracy and the gentry and into the middling sorts. In this way pleasure was a civilising force and shopping was a key element in the new

consumerism, locating desire in carefully crafted urban settings, themselves designed for pleasure.

But there is another side to pleasure, one more familial, more intimate and more everyday and it's the everdayness of pleasure that forms the focus for this paper. I draw on a collection of 2,933 family letters of eleven landed gentry families and analyse emotion words denoting pleasure and associated emotions within these documents. Based on the evidence in the letters I make three main arguments. The letters reveal a world of everyday familial pleasure enacted and exchanged through emotional economies in which they were clustered with other emotions such as anger, shame and surprise. These more everyday pleasures played an important role in forming and maintaining family relationships. Pleasure, and displeasure also helped enforce good order among the gentry, imposing norms and values. There are a number of other themes I explore in the article but for that sake of brevity I'll focus on the everydayness of pleasure, the clustering of pleasure with other emotions such as surprise and the use of pleasure for imposing authority.

I'll begin by focussing on the everydayness of pleasure. The term 'pleasure' most frequently appeared in the opening sections of letters as part of extended greetings and as a way of thanking correspondents for their epistles. In a letter to her cousin and future husband, Robert Parker, in 1751, Elizabeth Parker admitted that she 'co'd not deny myself the pleasure of asking after your Health.' Sometimes apologies for delayed epistles returning pleasurable news were required. Mary Huddlestone, in 1780, told her Mother that she hoped 'you will be so good as to pardon me for having so long delayed answering your kind and affectionate letter which we received with the greatest pleasure on the 26th September and more particularly so as it contained the news of our having the satisfaction of seeing all our relations and my Dear Papa and Mama next summer.' Simply writing or receiving letters and hearing regularly of the pleasures of friends and relations was meaningful. In 1796 William

Woolcombe asked that his brother 'forget not that I always receive great pleasure from hearing from you…' Earlier, in 1728, Katherine Windham told her grandson, William, that although he was 'now able to partake all the divertions (*sic*) of persons of your age' it 'is pleasure eno' to me to hear you are so well, & your papa.'

Sharing this sense of longing assisted in the maintenance of family relationships at distance and emotional authenticity through the expression of pleasure, as opposed to mere flattery, was very important. In 1793 Priscilla Woolcombe delighted in her anticipation of seeing her youngest son, Henry, after he had taken a trip to Holland. 'I feel great pleasure', she wrote 'at the thought that I am addressing you for the last time while you are in Holland, and that a short time will I hope reunite us all.' Robert Parker's wooing of his cousin, Elizabeth, made frequent reference to his anticipated and very genuine joy at being in her company. This courtship continued into their early marriage. In 1751 he gushed 'I now can fairly say without flattery or dissimulation that I have no rest but when with you & no pleasure when absent from you.'

The well-being of family was also a valuable currency of pleasure for correspondents. In a letter to her Mother in 1805, Jane Huddlestone found solace in Mary's growing strength after an illness. 'It gives me great pleasure to hear that your health is improved' she wrote, 'and I am quite of Mr Chapel's opinion that strengthening things alone can be of service to you.' These discourses of pleasure signalled and strengthened family affection and belonging, repeating over and again as an 'over-learned cognitive habit', in William Reddy's terms. The everydayness and regularity of 'pleasure' gave force to family belonging. There was pleasure in the desirable qualities of people too, the impression they made and their reputations. Pleasure played an important role in fixing normative boundaries of gender, behaviour and appearance. In 1802 Mary Scully (Nee Huddlestone) provided an assessment of a possible match for her brother, Richard, in a letter to her Mother, noting that 'she looks altogether Pretty and has a very good figure and pleasing

manner…but I do not consider she has money.'[1] The sensory pleasures of beauty and manners were here tempered by the limited achievement pleasures to be gained from Miss Plunkett's financial resources.

Pleasure, like all human feelings, is complex and multi-faceted. In the way it was discussed in the letters it was not simply 'positive', just as anger or anxiety may not be wholly 'negative' but might be experienced in a hedonic way, as Reddy has argued. Rather pleasure operated within clusters of emotions including surprise, anxiety and disgust, in dynamic ways to help produce emotive narratives of family belonging, and to inculcate unbelonging through discord, displeasure and agitation. Surprise was described as a pleasurable and arousing emotion in eighteenth century letters. The two feelings of surprise and pleasure were often associated in correspondence, necessarily relating to specific events and often in the form of narratives intended to amuse and entertain a recipient. In 1797 Mary Huddlestone recounted one such event to her mother, Mary. During the Royal Procession her brother, Ned, had visited her in London, having '…travelled all night on the outside [of the coach], there being no place within.'[2] His suffering and his masculine resilience in Mary's narrative amplified the significance of their meeting, building the drama of the story. The unexpected extension of his visit was a source of additional pleasure. 'He intended to set out again for Colchester at eight o'clock but was too late for the mail, so that he staid till six the next morning', she wrote. 'We knew nothing of his coming tho' I had somewhat expected his arrival the day before yet I was not a little surprised and rejoiced to behold him coming across Pall Mall as I sat at the Window - I immediately (with Mrs Eystons leave) invited him in', she continued. Mary shared this experience of surprise and pleasure with her mother to entertain her but also, in the process, to create an affectionate family narrative around sibling belonging. This juxtaposed, in her letter, with the public procession, which she deemed, with some disgust,

[1] Mary Scully, Rilteache, Ireland, to her Mother, Mary Huddlestone, Sawston, Cambridgeshire, 3 May 1802, CALS, 488/C1/MH76.
[2] Mary Huddlestone, London, to her Mother, Mary Huddlestone, Sawston, Cambridgeshire, 22 November 1797, CALS, 488/C1/MH72.

‘rather melancholy than otherwise’ considering that ‘…certainly such Pomp and such unnecessary expenses are very ill timed...' Mary’s pleasure was of a sensory nature, in *seeing* her brother return to her and *feeling* his embrace. But it was also a deeper pleasure derived from family belonging and reproduced through narrative.

Surprise was an object of intellectual and artistic curiosity in the eighteenth century, as Reddy has noted. It also has a place in current understandings of pleasure within the consumer revolution. Maxine Berg has noted the importance of surprise in the novelty of eighteenth-century goods, giving them an extra and new dimension to what had come before. Experimental psychologists have found that surprise, a basic and fundamental human emotion, is also cognitive. It has complex functions and is used to make sense of the world, as Maguire, Maguire and Keane have argued, through ‘representational integration.’ Levels of surprise are related to the extent to which an event can be integrated into existing representation. Those surprise experiences then go on to form future, adjusted, representative experiences. Mary expressed surprise that her brother returned and remained with her, but this represented close family belonging and the sharing of time. She was building a reality of family life based on pleasure, affection and belonging, recording her experiences of surprise within that family story and sharing this reality with her mother. We might reasonably expect her mother to repeat this story to others and to co-opt them into the narrative.

Pleasure had a darker side. It was a valuable commodity in the eighteenth century. It could be used as a tool to broker power, assert status and denote subservience, to keep good order and to remind people of their membership of an emotional regime that limited their emotional liberty. The role of hierarchies and the policing of pleasure has been explored in the colonial context and in histories of sex by a variety of scholars. However, power and the management of emotions play a deeper role in the history of feelings. William Reddy places power at the centre of his theory of emotions. Emotions are not available to all people evenly,

there are hierarchies of emotional liberty and all of us submit to norms and values of various emotional regimes. Much of the human experience of emotions, according to Reddy, is based either on attempting to 'navigate' through these regimes to find some kind of liberty or in playing a part in managing these regimes and making sure people stick to the rules. Pleasure played an extensive role in the distribution of power in the letters, primarily in terms of valorising shared values within emotional regimes.

Pleasure might be withheld from others to signal authority and reinforce social hierarchies. In a letter to a tenant, Mr Boys, in 1747, who had disputed his lease and was behind on rental payments, Sir Roger Newdigate noted his anger and displeasure at Boys' letter, which required 'all my patience to refrain from answering.' He insisted 'upon the lease, which it is not in your power to be quit of as soon as you please.' In one move Newdigate both neutralised Boys' freedom of pleasure and, perhaps, took Aristotelian delight himself in unleashing his anger as virtue. If freedom is partly about the ability to experience pleasure and to self-fashion through the regulation of pleasure, as Foucault argued, then correspondents such as Newdigate managed the freedoms and identities of those lower down the social hierarchy through a discourse of pleasure.

There were, of course, hierarchies of power within the gentry. Inheritance and provision for younger children was a frequent source of dispute in landed families. In the Radcliffe family of the early eighteenth century the elderly Sir Ralph Radcliffe (1633-1720) held the purse strings over his son Edward and his grandsons and determined their lot in life under the system of strict settlement and primogeniture. He set his grandsons up as merchants in the Levant trade, in Aleppo, Syria, and managed the three younger brothers' investments through their eldest brother, Ralph, also a merchant there. Ralph noted with displeasure the power his grandfather wielded. In a letter, of 1715, he explained to Sir Ralph that 'the ruin of my three younger brothers (as your pleasure is they should be merchants) is inevitable.'

Ralph noted his patron's power in this relationship but also hinted at schadenfreude in Sir Ralph's motivations as well as poor decision making and the immoral treatment of his grandchildren.

Conclusion

Pleasure was a birth right of the gentry. Their wealth and status allowed them to indulge in the sensual and the sublime. The Grand Tour, lavish country house parties, fine art and sculpture, the seductions of London life, field sports and other 'high society' activities were all emblematic of the position of landowners at the apex of society as consumers of pleasure, although this privilege was becoming more readily available to the lower orders as this period progressed. And yet family and home repeatedly make their claim in letters of the eighteenth century as the most nourishing of gentry pleasures.

We should of course treat these pleasures with some caution. We should be aware of context. The cult of sensibility in the late eighteenth century required a meaningful emotional and sensory connection with the world, with landscapes, with culture and with people. This, as well as discussions around the rights and wrongs of pleasure, explain the rising incidence of pleasure in published literature across the eighteenth century, even if, as Phil Withington has shown, it was of fading importance compared to the use of 'happiness.' However, the term 'pleasure', including the variations pleased, pleasured, pleasurable and pleasant, was remarkably stable across the century, occurring in just over forty-five per cent of all the letters included in this study, with forty-three per cent of the usage occurring before 1750 and fifty-seven percent in the late eighteenth century. So there was something more enduring and constant about pleasure in family discussions.

More generally letters are very complex documents with diverse functions for the correspondents that wrote them and the people that received them, not least the way the writers were constructing a self-identity through authorship and carefully projecting that identity within the letters. Reading them as straightforward information or as honest presentations of people would be an error and, indeed it would be foolish to assume that the people sending or receiving these letters experienced pleasure with each stroke of the pen when pleasure or associated words were written. Indeed, pleasure was often part of a wider epistolary strategy in which emotions were traded for advantage, influence or to implement power and authority.

This reveals a much wider truth about emotions, in history. That they led (and live) a double life. In one life they are deeply personal experiences inside of each of us that we can only partially explain or reveal to others. On the other hand they lead a social life out in the world, discussed and discoursed as the fundamental things that bind people and groups together. As a historian of emotions it doesn't take long to realise that people talk about little else! These double lives were connected though. The regularity of pleasure and displeasure in family correspondence is explained partly by the very regularity that pleasure and displeasure have in the human condition. Their high incidence in letters may also be explained by the way that, in the human experience, they stand for clusters of lots of other positive emotions, just as displeasure or pain act as proxy for negative emotions and experiences. Also, it is clear from a wider reading of eighteenth-century letters that pleasure had an important role in making or breaking affective familial bonds. The placement of this word in the greetings of letters and, more significantly in areas of the letters where family relationships and events were discussed, supports this very strongly.

We should also remember that in this period letters were the only means of communication at distance, and they travelled across great distances, both in space and time,

the latter being as important as the former. As Roger Newdigate noted in the letter we began this paper with, to his mother, 'I long very much to hear from you, which is the greatest pleasure I can receive at this distance.' his grand tour lasted over four months, the relationship of Robert and Elizabeth Parker was conducted *only* by letter for much of 1751 because their families opposed the match, William Woolcombe very rarely met with his younger brother during the whole of the later 1790s and the Huddlestone family were rarely together either, their letters containing very few reminiscences of meetings such as the one that Mary recalled to her mother. Family relationships functioned through correspondence and were built by this communication. It is no surprise then that pleasure and displeasure played such a large part in the composition of those letters and in the emotional economy of gentry family life.