

1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era

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1650–1850

Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries
in the Early Modern Era

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in the Early Modern Era

Volume 19

Kevin L. Cope
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Book Review Editor

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CONTENTS

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	xi
<i>Foreword from the Editor</i>	xiii
BEVERLY JEROLD, <i>Independent Scholar</i> <i>Dilettante and Amateur: Our Evolving Language</i>	3
RICHARD SHARP, <i>Worcester College (Oxford)</i> Aspects of High Churchmanship in Eighteenth-Century England: Charles Wheatly (1686–1742) and the <i>Rational Illustration of the Book of Common Prayer</i>	31
JAMES E. EVANS, <i>University of North Carolina at Greensboro</i> “The Splendour of Our Golden Age”: The Duchess of Mazarin and Epicurean Voluptuousness in Late Stuart England	45
SUSAN LYDON, <i>Independent Scholar</i> Savage Europeans and Gentlemanly Savages: Capitalism and Blurred Identity in <i>Robinson Crusoe</i>	63
KEELY MCCARTHY, <i>Chestnut Hill College</i> The Problem of Cultural Reproduction in <i>Gulliver's Travels</i>	73

- JAMES E. MAY, *Penn State-Dubois*
 Contemporary Reception and Reputation of Edward
 Young's *Love of Fame* 97
- AL COPPOLA, *John Jay College, City University of New York*
 The Secret History of Eliza Haywood's *Works*: The
 Early Novel and the Book Trade 133
- FRIEDA KOENINGER, *Sam Houston State University*
 Female, French, and Alone: The Case of Luisa de
 Dufressi before the Mexican Inquisition during the
 Times of Viceroy Bernardo de Gálvez (Hero of the
 Battle of Baton Rouge and Other Notable Feats) 163
- JAMES J. KIRSCHKE AND SCOTT GRAPIN, *Villanova University*
 From Colonist to Revolutionary: John Adams
 (1735-1826) 187
- FRANCESCA SAGGINI, *Università della Tuscia*
 "The Story Told Well": Thought, Feeling, and Speech
 in Jane Austen's Proposal Scenes 201
- SHARON WORLEY, *University of St. Thomas*
 Philipp Otto Runge and the Semiotic Language of
 Nature and Patriotism 229

Special Feature

THE CATHOLIC ENLIGHTENMENT

Edited and Introduced by
 Theodore E. D. Braun, University of Delaware

SPECIAL FEATURE INTRODUCTION 251

RENEE GUTIÉRREZ, *Hiram College*

Pedro de Peralta and the Catholic Enlightenment:
Heaven to the Heavens and Back 255

FRÉDÉRIC CONROD, *Florida Atlantic University*

Imaginary Itineraries to the Catholic South:
From Voltaire's Iberian Desolation to Sade's
Inverted Rosary 277

ELIZABETH FRANKLIN LEWIS, *University of Mary Washington*

Enlightenment Politics and Catholic Charity
in Spain: Bernardo Ward's *Obra pia* and *Proyecto
económico* 295

ROBERT J. FRAIL, *Centenary College*

French Catholic Writers and Enlightenment
Contributors to the *Encyclopédie* 313

ULRICH L. LEHNER, *Marquette University*

Enlightened Monasticism: Some Examples from the
Holy Roman Empire 327

JEFFREY D. BURSON, *Georgia Southern University*

Reassessing the Role of the Abbé in Enlightenment
Paris 337

BOOK REVIEWS

Virginia Scott, *Women on the Stage in Early Modern France,
1540-1750*

Reviewed by Jeffrey M. Leichman 359

- David Roberts, *Thomas Betterton: The Greatest Actor of the Restoration Stage*
Reviewed by Jennifer L. Airey 362
- Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy*
Reviewed by Rivka Weisberg and Carl Pletsch 365
- Stephen Bygrave, *Uses of Education: Readings in Enlightenment in England*
Reviewed by David A. Reid 369
- Sandra Macpherson, *Harm's Way: Tragic Responsibility and the Novel Form*
Reviewed by Susan Paterson Glover 372
- Christine Rees, *Johnson's Milton*
Reviewed by Anthony W. Lee 375
- David Nokes, *Samuel Johnson: A Life*
Reviewed by Lance Wilcox 378
- Juliet Shields, *Sentimental Literature and Anglo-Scottish Identity, 1745-1820*
Reviewed by Ian Duncan 381
- Daniel O'Quinn, *Entertaining Crisis in the Atlantic Imperium, 1770-1790*
Reviewed by Jones DeRitter 384
- Kristian Jensen, *Revolution and the Antiquarian Book: Reshaping the Past, 1780-1815*
Reviewed by Mark Wildermuth 387

George C. Grinnell, *The Age of Hypochondria: Interpreting Romantic Health and Illness*
Reviewed by Martin Wallen 390

Frederick Burwick, *Romantic Drama: Acting and Reacting*
Reviewed by Terence Hoagwood 393

Philip Connell and Nigel Leask, eds., *Romanticism and Popular Culture in Britain and Ireland*
Reviewed by Jim Kelly 395

David Owen, *Rethinking Jane Austen's "Lady Susan": The Case for Her "Failed" Epistolary Novella*
Reviewed by Katie Gemmill 398

Jeffrey Kahan, *Bettymania and the Birth of Celebrity Culture*
Reviewed by Laura Engel 401

Sharon Worley, *Women's Literary Salons and Political Propaganda During the Napoleonic Era: The Cradle of Political Nationalism*
Reviewed by Faith E. Beasley 404

Index 407

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Frontispiece, <i>A Rational Illustration of the Book of Common Prayer</i> (1720)	39
Anonymous engraving, <i>Platform of an Ancient Church taken chiefly from Bp. Beveridge in his Pandectae Canonum</i> (1722)	40
Philipp Otto Runge, <i>The Small Morning</i> (1808)	234
Philipp Otto Runge, <i>Fall of the Fatherland</i> (1809)	235
Anton Raphael Mengs, <i>Parnassus</i> (1761)	236
Philipp Otto Runge, <i>Color Sphere</i> (1810)	237
Raphael, <i>The Sistine Madonna</i> (ca. 1512–13)	238
Antoine Jean Gros, <i>The Republic</i> (1794)	239

FOREWORD

From the Editor

*C*onfidence is a word that seems to have slipped from circulation. Our own era, in which crisis, calamity, danger, and destruction are reported around the clock from every corner of the globe, is not one that lends itself to the easygoing presumption of the probability of success. In the midst of economic disorder and with the seemingly continual revamping of universities and their missions, disoriented academic professionals have come to regard overt expressions of confidence as inaccurate or awkward or insensitive or at least impolite.

Not so during the long eighteenth century. Those who had been touched by the spirit of Enlightenment quickly assumed that universal knowledge and cosmologically extensive explanations were just around the corner (or at least just over on the next library shelf or in the next reagent bottle or possibly in the conclusion to the next new play). Few doubted that untouched nations awaited improvement by those same battalions of explorers who went to them seeking to discover the means to improve their homelands. Many expected that the plurality of worlds would soon lead to interplanetary diplomacy and recreational space travel. True, satirists occasionally wondered whether a hack sitting in a garret could really work out a system of a universe or pen a critique of all mankind, yet the abundance of pamphlets, treatises, and proposals suggested that buyers were ready to purchase the compositions of those for whom self-assurance came easy and constituted the first step toward infallibility.

The essays in this volume of *1650–1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era* all seem to hover around this underappreciated habit of mind. Contributors to these two hundred foliations address those in the early modern period who knew with confidence what comprised a good

churchman; who never hesitated to prosecute those whose views they fancied to be false; who conceived and built new nations; who opined in vivid verse about the fundamental condition of humanity without needing to bother with too much evidence; and who fancied that voluptuousness, far from being a distraction to the enlightened life, would surely amplify the curriculum vitae of a hearty leader. Buoyant guest feature editor Theodore Braun presents a special feature describing the manifold ways in which that most grandly and pleasantly imperial of religions, Catholicism, kept on generating art and intellection wherever its ideologues migrated.

The inadvertent assembly of an array of confidence-affirming essays in this surprise-intensive volume demonstrates the continuing vitality and value of long eighteenth-century culture in our time. Confidence, many of these highly original essays suggest, involves not careless but wise elimination of evidence. Confidence rises when explorers of all kinds—whether researchers in the library or adventurers on deck—know when to hit the metaphorical delete key and when to eliminate distractions. So it is that these confidence-rich essays include several fresh studies of canonical authors and reaffirm that authority of what texts as well as critics say. Crossing borders from Mexico to Milan to Malaysia, the authors of the essays and reviews in this issue of *1650–1850* discover a new internationalism in a period that discovered not only dividing difference but unifying intensity, resolve, and readiness—confidence—wherever its denizens traveled.

1650–1850