Historians once assumed that the termination of the slave trade showed that Britons are—or at least can be—a genuinely sensitive people. That is, they didn’t understand eighteenth-century sensibility as a culture, a phenomenon, a cult. Things have changed, however, for outside of popular history little history is being done these days where sensibility is taken at face value. In this exploration of how historians are currently characterizing mid-to-late eighteenth-century abolitionists and their ostensibly sensitive audience, I suggest that historians now prefer to characterize them, not as bad, but as calculating and self-interested. But if the current preferred conception of the sensible “man of feeling” is as either a rational man or a man of artifice, there are murmurs arising from current research into pornography and abolitionist literature which suggest that he is in the process of becoming understood, rather, as perverse, lecherous—as a subject worthy neither of admiration nor of dispassionate assessment, but simply of scorn.

Contemporary historians generally identify mid-to-late eighteenth-century “men [and women] of feeling”—those who would fashion and/or read and/enthusiastically respond to philanthropic causes—as people who saw in (the fashion of) sensibility, means to improve their status in society. Though it is true that in his well-known “The Birth of Sensibility,” Paul Langford identifies sensibility as a cultural phenomenon which helped stabilize British society by working against deism and by improving the over-all wealth of the British nation, he presents sensibility primarily as a tool with which the middle class empowered itself vis-à-vis the upper class. According to Langford, in an era which prized money and property, gentility was the ultimate prize. And to be genteel in an age of sensibility you needn’t be aristocratic; indeed, since the court was seen as artificial, it could count against you. So long as you had wealth, property, and could demonstrate successfully both to yourself and to others that you truly sympathized with the suffering of others, you could be counted amongst the genteel.

Langford’s conception of sensibility as the means by which self-righteousness and social position was rooted fits very well with the conception of the sensitive offered by other prominent contemporary historians of British society such as Anne Mellor, Linda Colley, and Barker-Benfield. These historians often characterize
sensibility as a tool used intentionally for purposes of self-empowerment and satisfaction. Those who saw themselves as sensible were not, then, as they preferred to imagine themselves as, as free of artifice—“natural;” indeed, Langford explicitly states that “naturalism was a cover for ever more contrived artifice” (477). Sentiment, he argues, was fundamentally about the individual and his/her own feelings (481). It was something fundamentally about one’s own needs, not those of others. He argues that such a conception of sentiment was recognized (by whom, Langford does not explain) as “dangerous” (481), but was “rendered useful” (481) by making it ostensibly about others, about attending and giving to others in need (the transformation of “sentiment” to “sensibility”). Sentiment needed to be directed, but could ostensibly have been directed near anywhere and serve its primary purpose of self-empowerment and self-validation on the part of the sensible.

Brycchan Carey’s “Read this and Blush” argues that abolitionists and slavery apologists at the time actually saw sensibility as a movement which needn’t necessarily have been directed towards ending the slave trade. But before exploring Carey’s article and how it too presents us with a conception of the sensible which is typical but (perhaps) in the process of becoming highly contestable, I will note that though Langford’s article attempts a general overview of the culture of sensibility, though it offers no examination of primary material, it still advances a conception of men and women of feeling that can in my judgment convince simply because it offers one contemporary historians are eager to accept. Though the current trend in historiography is strongly against seeing historical subjects as beneficent, it does not lean towards imagining them as evil or amoral. Instead, the expectation is that in any cultural era one will find people who are more or less the same as in any other. Cultures vary drastically, but (ostensibly) not so a people’s essential nature (Barker-Benfield, referring to Norbert Elias psychoanalytic study of cultural development, actually argues that people do change—but not that they improve). Langford’s subjects are far more self-interested than they are selfless, but they are not bad people: he thus offers the preferred (by historians) conception of people as neither heroic nor horrific. Though he writes that “abolition takes its place among the manifold expressions of the new sensibility” (516), and thereby makes abolition seem simply one of many means by which the fashionable engaged in the latest fashion—“sensibility,” he also writes that true “sensitivity to the plight” (505) of others arose from increased awareness of their suffering. Sensibility is to Langford (as it is to most
historians of English culture) integral to the humanitarian movement, but not only or primarily such.

Like Langford, Carey is another historian who offers a sense of the eighteenth-century sensible “man” as someone of considerable artifice. He is as well another historian concerned to show how sensibility was used by one group against another; indeed, his article is primarily about how various prominent abolitionist and slavery apologists used sentimental rhetoric in a heated battle for the hearts of the British public. Readers of abolitionist literature are made to seem as if their level of interest in the slave trade depended upon the ability of abolitionists to craft writings that provided the satisfactions they were looking for. And these were? As the eighteenth-century progressed, readers increasingly expected sentimental descriptions of slaves so that they could make use of them to evidence their ostensibly intrinsic capacity to pity. As with Langford’s, in Carey’s account of them sentimental readers come across as a fickle lot—they had to handled in just the right way. He writes that abolitionists such as James Ramsey needed to know just how to use guilt to make readers feel obliged to support abolitionist efforts, without insulting them. They come across as completely self-interested, and as rather insincere as well: in a part of the article where he informs us how sentimental rhetoric was employed by both abolitionists and by slavery apologists, we are told that both abolitionists and slavery apologists felt the sensible public could be distracted away from the goings-on in the slave trade. (We are told of how James Tobin and the Bristol newspapers used sentimental rhetoric in an effort to draw the sensitive reader to feel for the suffering agriculturalist and chimney sweep.)

Apparent in this article is not just how much the reading public demanded of writers of abolitionist literature, but also how able these writers proved in meeting their demands. About James Ramsay’s *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies*, Carey writes:

Ramsay’s style is neither overtly evangelical, nor overtly sentimental. Rather, he sets out to discuss slavery under various headings and in various styles, which initially gives the Essay a somewhat eclectic appearance. He writes about the history of slavery in the style of an historian, about the economics of slavery in the style of the new political economists, about the theology of slavery in the style of an Anglican clergyman, and about the humanity of
slavery in the style of a sentimental novelist. Long before he chooses to deploy his sentimental rhetoric, Ramsay shows that he intends to be rigorous and scholarly. His descriptions of the daily routine of plantation slaves are meticulous on the one hand, while on the other hand he shows that he is prepared to take on some of the most celebrated thinkers of his age. (110)

Ramsay comes across here as a master of rhetoric, whose range and finesse with rhetorical tropes/tricks is on par with an adept playwright’s. But Carey seems most concerned to characterize them not so much as artisans but as commanders, commanders who used rhetoric not simply to satisfy readers’ desires and actions but to determine them. Thomas Clarkson (whose “Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species [... ] replaced James Ramsay’s Essay as the handbook of the emerging abolition movement” [130]), though he had never been to Africa, still with his writings determined the nature of how Africa and the slave experience came to be understood in Britain through the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century (133). And he was fully aware of his power: we are told he “recognized the power of his vision to mould other people’s perceptions” (133).

When Carey attends to the sentimental efforts of slavery apologists, they too are described as empowered and cunning. Slavery apologists such as James Tobin come across, then, exactly as we would have expected them to have, given how they were introduced in the introduction (to the book of which this article constitutes one chapter) as “as skilful as they are insidious” (17). They—a select group—are insidious, evil; but like their rhetoric-wielding counterparts, they are not driven by sordid passions they remain largely unconscious of: they too are men of reason. Both groups of writers might, however, have come across as something other than as expert tacticians had Carey offered us lengthier selections of their descriptions of slave’ or chimney sweep’ life, and had he not directed us to look at the selections he does in fact supply as evidence of their rhetorical mastery. Though he does tell us that in Ramsay’s Essay we can find “forty pages of minute detail of the slaves’ daily sufferings” (11), and that in Clarkson’s Essay “there are many terrible, painful images of slaves suffering, and [that] we are repeatedly asked to sympathize not with the dismal and melancholy images beloved of sentimentalists but with more horrific images of violence and abuse” (132), very likely at the end of reading his article we do not suspect their interest in suffering arose from their being perverse.
In “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture,” Karen Halttunen actually asks if writers of abolitionist literature (her focus is on British and American culture from the late eighteenth to the mid nineteenth-century) enjoyed writing about/depicting slaves’ suffering. She writes: “Was it possible [. . .] that the reformers’ own sensibilities had been blunted or, worse, that their spectatorship had generated in them a positive taste for cruelty?” (326). But Halttunen is not putting forward her own question here; rather, it is one reformers were themselves asking concerning the potential effects of their long-witnessing of pain and suffering. She argues that in the eighteenth-century the “cult of sensibility” (304) redefined pain so that it became something which was not just unacceptable, something which shouldn’t simply be tolerated as part of man’s lot, but something which could warp the minds and souls of those exposed to too much of it. It became generally understood that spectatorial sympathy could lead, not just to blunting one’s sensibilities but to the development of a taste for pain (308), a taste which manifested itself in the burgeoning popularity of gothic fiction. She writes that humanitarian reformers were concerned to prove that their own witnessing of horrific abuse hadn’t corrupted them. Anti-slavery writers, who often relied on extensive descriptions of torture they themselves had witnessed to help determine the nature of public regard for the slave trade, therefore “filled their writings with close descriptions of their own immediate emotional response to the spectacle of suffering, to demonstrate that their sensibilities remained undamaged” (326). Reformers (anti-slave trade and otherwise) were also concerned that the printed word could cultivate a taste for pain. They used a variety of techniques to help “distance themselves from any imputations of sensationalistic pandering” (328). (For example, she notes that Newton and Clarkson both use asterisks [328].) But, she writes, “[m]ost commonly, reformers’ apologies, demurrals, and denials of sensationalism were simply followed by shockingly vivid representations of human suffering” (330).

If they knew or suspected that such vivid representations risked warping their audience, risked actually producing more cruelty, why then did they for the most part still persist in showing them to their audience? Two possible answers come to mind. One, they did so because they decided that though they surely risked harming their readers, many of the afflicted would as a result find themselves even more determined to do something to help end the suffering. Two, they did so because they were sadists—whether or not as a result of prolonged exposure to others’ pain,
something had warped them so that they were now compelled to draw others into their sickly state. Halttunen considers both possibilities, but very clearly prefers the former. She tells us that “[t]he reformers’ purpose was not to exploit the obscenity of pain but to expose it, in order to redefine a wide range of previously accepted social practices as cruel and unacceptable” (330). However, she appreciates that by persisting to show the scenes they could be understood as being moved primarily by the latter impulse. But she works to persuade and even intimidate us away from understanding reformers as mostly sadistic, for she writes, “the historical emergence of the pornography of pain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and its wide-ranging presence in a variety of popular literary genres point the historical inadequacy of attributing the phenomenon solely to sexual psychopathology, whether individual or collective” (331).

Marcus Wood, in “Stedman: Slavery, Empathy, Pornography,” more or less comes to the opposite conclusion: that is, he argues that writers and readers of pornographic depictions of slaves were moved primarily by sadistic and/or masochistic impulses—they were perverse. As a test case to see if the eroticization of slave imagery was necessarily pornographic, he explores John Stedman’s writings on the slave trade. He concludes that though Stedman’s work before the 1790s was often salutary, in the ’90s it is clear that Stedman produced work from which he clearly took pleasure in his eroticized depictions of slave life. Wood believes that Stedman satisfied two urges in particular when he wrote his scenes of slave torture. One, he satisfied his masochistic need to vicariously experience the victim’s pain. Two, he took masturbatory and sadistic pleasure in “witnessing” male and female slaves subjected (essentially) to sexual violation.

Wood would have us believe that the ostensibly sensible, those who wrote and read anti-slavery tracts, exploited the suffering of slaves in a way and to an extent advanced by no other historian so far considered. He really does make the sensible out to be abhorrent and evil—people whose pleasure in witnessing abuse was such that it is hard to believe they could have been anything but disappointed when victory was achieved and the slave trade finally ended. But it isn’t just the eighteenth-century sensibles who stand so accused. That is, there is a strong sense that twentieth-century historians—his contemporaries, his own cohort—are being charged with being perverse as well. Historians approach what he believes is really quite obviously simply pornographic literature, always out of higher purpose—just like sensibles did—and
neither, suspiciously, and ultimately _indictedly_, can see the pornography: Wood would have us know that actually they’re both excusing their satisfaction of illicit desires at their subjects’ expense.

Wood makes other historians seem worthy of censure, and some historians are responding to him in kind. Carey, for example, writes that “Wood may not convince all readers that abolitionists were principally motivated by a desire to view sadomasochistic pornography (although, no doubt, some were), but he does remind us very strongly that the discourse of slavery and abolition is thoroughly entwined with other early-modern and modern discourses about the body, the mind, the soul, society, economy, and the fundamental questions asked by every generation about human nature and humanity’s place in the universe” (13). In this reference to Wood’s writing, I, at least, sense Carey both admonishing and schooling Wood. Wood is being reminded that historians know that though there are always individual exceptions; no group of people is entirely either benevolent or sick—they’re always (ostensibly) a mixture of the good and the bad. People are essentially the same, wherever placed in time: their motives are common sense, never _psychiatrist_-worthy. Any other opinion is _self-evidently_ ignorant. He is also being reminded that it is preferred that you mostly not talk motives, anyhow, especially their masturbatory, oral, sadistic, bodily ones. Instead, you are to talk about _cultural discourses about the body_ subjects were located within and participated in. That is, you are to delimit the conversation about human motivation to conversations about conversations.

I happen to like Wood’s willingness to write of historical subjects as having masturbatory and oral needs. I admire how involved Wood is willing to become in the lives of those he studies, of the risk he is willing to take in hopes of figuring out what makes them tick. There is a real sense that when he estimates that Stedman “is like some gargantuan method actor always trying to get inside the experience of the victim, [. . .] always trying to eat up their suffering, so that in the end he can play their part better than they did” (139-40), that he came to this conclusion by trying to get inside Stedman’s experiential world. That is, in his efforts to understand Stedman, he becomes something of the method actor himself. This sort of immersion is risky; identifying with someone like Stedman may be unsettling, and rarely do I see such boldness from historians. It can also lead to ridicule. For example, in the ’70s the psychohistorian Lloyd DeMause wrote that he would curl up in a fetal position to help access the mental/emotional states of historical subjects he believed were
regressing to states associated with birth, but such admissions helped make both him and psychohistory aptly sumuppable as “clownish” once academia had finally cleared itself from the unsettling 1960s/70s influences that had them for a short while letting their guard down, and allowing some outside “crazy thinking” in.

Wood’s essay actually very much reminds me of the sort of research one can still find in journals (if even still, ever so rarely) such as *The Journal of Psychohistory*. As with Wood’s essays, articles for this journal are willing to and do assume that historical subjects were often far more emotive, passionate, and sexual than they were rational and calculating. Unlike Wood’s article, however, what they don’t do is moralize; and it is his strong tendency to moralize, to condemn, that I find puzzling, unfortunate, and am myself inclined to want to censure. Wood understands Stedman and other reformers as sadists and/or masochists. He can identify Stedman as “a person of strong direct emotional responses and apparently without remorse” (138). But he does not seem to want us to involve ourselves in understanding how he came to be this way. No, Stedman is not set up to be understood, only for censure and ridicule. For example, when he discusses Stedman’s fear that he could be the subject of female rape, he directs us to “see the hysterical and intensely misogynistic account in Stedman, 1962, 39-40” (125). One senses here that if we looked at the account he directs us to and did not immediately recognize Stedman as but a vile woman-hater, he would judge us suspect ourselves. Be assured, a therapist would find Wood’s characterization of Stedman as working against an empathic appreciation of why he feared older women; indeed, s/he would conclude it worked against understanding him, and judge it, as I judge it—cruel.

The current historiographical exploration of sensitivity and the English slave trade suggests that true sensitivity and empathy is a very hard thing to cultivate. But though I gauge Wood’s desire to humiliate Stedman, to show him up, extremely unfortunate, I find his efforts far more emancipatory and encouraging than depressing. With his work, with the alarmed reaction his work inspires from other historians, I sense the conception of historical subjects as mostly reasoning (or calculating) as coming under effective attack, and believe it could work to build stronger bridges between history and psychology/therapy. My hope is that it could help move some of those currently entering the historical field to engage more seriously with explorations of historical motives, once so fruitfully entertained in the ’70s. And if some of them do look anew at the research being engaged with at that
time, they might find themselves empowered so they could actually accept Wood’s assessment of reformers, recognize them as often disingenuous, and yet still understand them as genuinely improving—as members of a generation that really were more empathic and sensitive than their predecessors were. That is, they might come to appreciate that the old whig historians, though mostly about triumphalism, actually held constant to an admirable historical truth.

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