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**‘The Poor Prostituted Word’: The Taste Debate in Britain  
1750-1800**



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# ‘THE POOR PROSTITUTED WORD’: THE TASTE DEBATE IN BRITAIN 1750-1800<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Taste was a loaded term in the eighteenth-century. This dissertation seeks to explore who possessed it in their armoury and the targets at which they aimed. Evolving from a physical attachment to the human sense, the definition of taste has developed to become a matter of inclination and discrimination. The possession of taste is a matter of acquiring certain habits, rules and preferences.<sup>2</sup> As such, this study is preoccupied with the question of the acquisition and possession of ‘good taste’.<sup>3</sup> In 1736 Henry Stonecastle (the pseudonym of Henry Baker) wrote, ‘of all our favourite Words lately, none has been more in Vogue, nor so long held its Esteem, as that of TASTE.’ Yet almost two decades later George Colman observed, ‘in this amazing superabundancy of Taste few can say what it really is or what the word itself signifies.’<sup>4</sup> These observations are indicative of a nation exercised by taste, albeit an indeterminable and ambiguous term. By looking at the ways in which taste permeated, and in some cases dominated, cultural and philosophical discussion, this study will seek to explore the wider relationship between taste, culture and society in the latter half of eighteenth-century Britain. Ultimately, this is an exploration of both familiar and unfamiliar sources in the relatively new arena of the historiography surrounding taste. Moving the debate on from issues of gender, effeminacy and domestication, this study seeks to engage with the use of the term as it shaped, and was indeed shaped by, social mobility and cultural distinction.

As one academic has claimed, this period was the century of taste.<sup>5</sup> This is testament not only to its position in eighteenth-century cultural debate, but also its multifaceted application. In the

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<sup>1</sup> J. G. Cooper, *Letters Concerning Taste*, (London, 1755) 62.

<sup>2</sup> ‘noun, taste, OED Online,

[http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50247492?query\\_type=word&queryword=taste&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10&sort\\_type=alpha&search\\_id=aaR3-Eb27B3-3185&result\\_place=2](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50247492?query_type=word&queryword=taste&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&search_id=aaR3-Eb27B3-3185&result_place=2) 17 April 2009

<sup>3</sup> R. Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, (London, 1988) 314.

<sup>4</sup> H. Baker, *The Universal Spectator by Henry Stonecastle*, no. 389 (15 May 1736) 872; G. Colman, *The Connoisseur*, (May, 1756) 721.

<sup>5</sup> G. Dickie, *The Century of Taste: A Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century*, (New York, 1996).

newly formed consumer society, taste was a slippery and evasive term for many. Entangled within discourses of luxury, vice, virtue, beauty and aesthetics, the definitions and implications of taste were contested at different levels in eighteenth-century society. Social commentators and philosophers were haunted by its definition and acquisition, while periodicals, newspapers and magazines were fixated on its exhibition:

Taste is at present the darling idol of the polite world...The fine ladies and gentlemen dress with Taste; the architects...build with Taste; the painters paint with Taste; the poets write with Taste; critics read with Taste; and in short, fiddlers, players, singers, dancers, and mechanics themselves are all the sons and daughters of Taste.<sup>6</sup>

Taken from *The Connoisseur* in 1756, these observations highlight the diffusion of taste within a number of spheres by the middle of the eighteenth-century.

But in what climate was taste located? Hailed by some historians as experiencing a ‘consumer revolution’, the rapid expansion of Britain’s commercial sector had major implications for society and cultural debate throughout the eighteenth-century.<sup>7</sup> While the idea of a revolution has been contested by many academics, Britain is still widely acknowledged to have witnessed a sea change in its material life.<sup>8</sup> Mercantile wealth and financial success produced new consumers eager to buy new goods. More precisely, increasingly throughout the eighteenth-century, the new merchant classes embarked upon ‘the spending spree of an epoch.’<sup>9</sup> With this increased expenditure came moral anxieties concerning luxury and its perceived subversion of virtue.<sup>10</sup> Developments in the cultural sphere of the eighteenth-century are also of significance to this study. There is a consensus among academics that the demise of the monarch at the cultural centre left a ‘vacuum’ in Britain, thus shifting the main cultural site from the court to the public

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<sup>6</sup> Coleman, *The Connoisseur*, 721.

<sup>7</sup> N. McKendrick, ‘The Consumer Revolution of Eighteenth-Century England’ in N. McKendrick, J. Brewer and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-century England*, (London, 1982) 9-33.

<sup>8</sup> J. Styles and A. Vickery (eds.) *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North and America, 1700-1830*, (New Haven, CT, 2006) 1; M. Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, (Oxford, 2005) 12.

<sup>9</sup> R.W Jones, *Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain: The Analysis of Beauty*, (Cambridge, 1997) 4; McKendrick, ‘The Consumer Revolution’ in McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb, *Birth of Consumer Society*, 9-33.

<sup>10</sup> For an extended study of the luxury debate see Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure*.

sphere.<sup>11</sup> In this new territory, defined by Jürgen Habermas as a ‘forum’ in which private people came together to form a ‘public’, new institutions such as coffeehouses, salons and clubs functioned as sites of cultural exchange’.<sup>12</sup> But what was this ‘culture’? Classified by Edmund Burke as ‘works of the imagination and the elegant arts’, art, literature, the theatre and music were taken together and given a special collective identity in this period. Moreover, from newspapers and periodicals to art exhibitions and theatres, culture became more available, and to a wider proportion of society than ever before. Arguably becoming a commodity in the eighteenth-century, access to culture was no longer the privilege of the aristocracy.<sup>13</sup>

These rapid cultural changes in the period had a profound effect on the newly developed ‘public sphere’. For the new merchant classes this power of purchase came without that of the political. This had ramifications for the numbers that wished to participate in cultural debate. From the mid-century, the expansion of wealth production and distribution transformed the cultural sphere into an arena of social display. With the new attitudes to culture as a commodity, the increased spending power was attended by a concern for cultural and social distinction. Wealth and status were on show as social sites became places of ‘self-presentation.’<sup>14</sup> It is within this space of consumption, consumerism, cultural debate and social tension that we find taste: A small, yet powerfully contentious, term. Employed by many, yet seemingly possessed by few.

Without a rich historiographical legacy of its own, the study of taste has been situated within the histories of consumption and luxury that increasingly appeared from the 1990s. Since the emergence of Brewer and Porter’s *Consumption and the World of Goods* (1993), charting the rise of consumption from the later seventeenth-century, the exploration of the meaning behind

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<sup>11</sup> J. Brewer, “‘The Most Polite Age and the Most Vicious’”: Attitudes Towards Culture as a Commodity 1600-1800’ in A. Bermingham and J. Brewer (eds.), *The Consumption of Culture 1600-1800: Image, Object, Text*, (London, 1997) 341-345. See also J. Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth-Century*, (Chicago, 2000) xvii-xxx.

<sup>12</sup> J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger, (Cambridge, MA, 1991) 25-35.

<sup>13</sup> Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, xviii-xx. It is this definition of ‘culture’ that will be referred to throughout this dissertation. For a fuller account on culture see J. Black, *Culture in Eighteenth-Century England: A Subject for Taste*, (London, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Brewer, ‘Most Polite Age’ in Bermingham and Brewer, *Consumption of Culture*, 348; For a more extended treatment of the social history of this period see P. Langford *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783*, (Oxford, 1989) 61-121.

possessions and consumption has become a well-worked theme in historiographical debate.<sup>15</sup> Many more histories of consumption have followed in its wake with a recent article focussing on the ‘consumption turn’ in eighteenth-century British historiography.<sup>16</sup> Attracting multidisciplinary approaches, a consensus has emerged among historians concerning the importance of cultural debate within the rapidly changing commercial world of the period. The relationship between people and things has become an important entry point into the wider debates that engaged society.<sup>17</sup> Yet an analysis of taste has been sidelined in the focus on discourses on luxury and consumption and their implications for society. In particular, Sekora and Berg have both devoted monographs charting the moral criticisms of luxury, its position in relation to social change and the consumer goods situated at the centre of these discourses.<sup>18</sup> Within these histories taste has been incorporated into narratives of context without any extended historical treatment of its own.

More recently, the analysis of taste has been given substantive attention, but it remains a relatively new area of focus for the historian. Until Jones’ *Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain: The Analysis of Beauty* (1997), the study of taste has remained in the domain of philosophy. Dickie’s *The Century of Taste: A Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century* (1996) provides an in-depth analysis of philosophical treatises concerning taste, such as Hume and Kant, yet self-consciously refuses to place the matter in any historical context.<sup>19</sup> Thus, there is a failure to consider why theorists were preoccupied with the issue of taste and how far their ideas were disseminated within the public sphere of periodicals and newspapers. When eventually approached by historians, the analysis of taste has largely focussed on gender and material culture. Jones has put forward arguments concentrating on the cultural role of women and the domestication of taste. Styles and Vickery’s more recent collaboration has also addressed the theme of gender and placed it within a highly material-centric debate. In this, narrow areas of focus, from wallpaper to the country house, have been privileged over a sustained

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<sup>15</sup> J. Brewer, and R. Porter (eds.), *Consumption and the World of Goods*, (London 1993).

<sup>16</sup> White, J., ‘A World of Goods? The “Consumption Turn” and Eighteenth-Century British History’, *Cultural and Social History*, 3:1, (January, 2006) 93-104.

<sup>17</sup> D. Miller (ed.), *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter*, (Chicago 1998).

<sup>18</sup> J. Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett*, (Baltimore, 1977); M. Berg and H. Clifford, *Consumers and Luxury*, (Manchester, 1999); Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure*; M. Berg and E. Eger (eds.), *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, (Basingstoke, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Dickie, *Century of Taste*, 4.

analysis of the wider attitudes expounded in public debate and the appropriation of taste.<sup>20</sup> Described in 1997 as a ‘less familiar’ path of analysis than luxury, academics have yet to address thoroughly the historical analysis of taste within the latter-half of eighteenth-century cultural debate. There has been a failure to engage with the wider debates on taste that increased from the mid-century within public forms of literature. Therefore, whether introduced in the context of other histories of eighteenth-century culture or tied to the investigation of gender and material culture, the relationship between taste and society has been neglected or insufficiently addressed by contemporary historians. It is within sociology that these issues have been most succinctly addressed. Pierre Bourdieu in his *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984) maps aesthetic, cultural and consumer preferences, and has been more willing than the historian to explore taste as an instrument by which class distinctions are created and maintained. His concept of how the possession of the correct taste facilitates the accumulation of ‘cultural capital’ and the importance of social classification provides useful insights and theoretical models for the analysis of taste throughout this dissertation.<sup>21</sup>

In light of the historiographical field, this dissertation seeks to use the literature surrounding the taste debate of the second half of the eighteenth-century to explore the central issue of social mobility and class aspiration. The concern is not to evaluate the definitions offered from philosophers and commentators, such as Edmund Burke and Alexander Gerard. This is not an extensive comparison of their definitions and hypotheses as undertaken by Dickie. The focus resides in their conceptions of the acquisition and possession of taste and how far their ideas permeated the public rhetoric on taste. Indeed, why was its perceived possession important and was taste a matter of birth or acquisition? Central to this investigation is the issue of dissemination. The current historiography concerning the topic has insufficiently explored how far the attitudes found in treatises permeated and shaped the debate found in newspapers and periodicals. Indeed, was there the same obsession and cultural urgency concerning the possession of good taste found resonating throughout the treatises on the topic? Whether fuel for the satirist’s pen or a matter of cultural urgency, taste serves as a tool for understanding the cultural milieu in which its debates were situated. The focus will remain on taste in the latter half of the century as

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<sup>20</sup> Styles and Vickery, *Gender, Taste and Material Culture*.

<sup>21</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, (Cambridge, MA, 1984).

the period in which the effects of the rise in consumerism and wealth redistribution were increasingly felt throughout Britain.

As a study of ideas and attitudes this dissertation uses textual sources to analyse the role of taste in public debate in Britain 1750-1800. The discussion of taste is sought within two main source areas: philosophical treatises and social commentary within newspapers and periodicals. Under discussion from the beginning of the century, such as the influential *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* by Anthony Ashley-Cooper (the Third Earl of Shaftesbury) the question of taste was included in many highly respected works and by the mid-century became a topic of national debate.<sup>22</sup> Analysis will be made of the works of notable scholars such as David Hume and Edmund Burke, alongside John Gilbert Cooper and Alexander Gerard. These works are but a few in the literature focussed on the nature of taste in terms visual and material, mental and behavioural, which appeared from the mid-century.<sup>23</sup> Each approaching the topic in a different form, they provide an excellent starting point in exploring how taste was negotiated in the intellectual sphere. The extended analysis of the faculties required for the possession of taste raises important questions concerning acquisition. In seeking to make claims about the possession of taste in their analyses, these authors make critical assumptions concerning the man of taste and his location in the changing cultural environment of the mid century. When examining these treatises the issue of contextualism is pertinent. As Skinner and Pocock have stressed, texts need to be situated in a number of contexts. These philosophical treatises should not simply be seen as contributions to a discourse on a universal notion of taste. A consideration will be made of the context in which these works were produced and how they fit in with the authors' intellectual oeuvres. In doing so, an understanding not only of what contributions each author wished to make to the debate, but in what terms they were expected do so, become clearer.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, an exploration of the content of these writers' works will take place in conjunction with an analysis

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<sup>22</sup> A. Ashley Cooper, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, (London, 1711). For an extended treatment of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson see L. Klein, 'The Third Earl of Shaftesbury and the Progress of Politeness', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 18: 2 (Winter, 1984-1985) 186-214; Jones, *Gender and the Formation of Taste*, 1-78.

<sup>23</sup> D. Hume, *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, (London, 1758); J. G. Cooper, *Letters Concerning Taste*, (London, 1755); E. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, (London, 1759); A. Gerard, *An Essay on Taste with Dissertations on the Same Subject by de Voltaire, D'Albert and de Montesquieu*, (London, 1759)

<sup>24</sup> For more on contextualism see Q. Skinner *Visions of Politics, Vol. 1: Regarding Method* (Cambridge, 2002) 65-7; Pocock, J.G. A, *Politics Language and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (London, 1972).

of contemporary criticism: How far do their assertions resonate with critics and do they recognise the society they portray?

The second major source used in this analysis of taste in Britain is that of eighteenth-century periodicals and newspapers. If the period is to be called ‘the century of taste’ then its presence in the periodical must be addressed. Heavily indebted to the digitalisation of a number of publications, the historian is provided with a wealth of source material. Crucially, the number of articles concerning taste experiences significant growth within the second-half of the 1700s.<sup>25</sup> This is an indication of the explosion of taste in a variety of popular usages from adverts for ‘a young man who can shave and dress hair in the present taste’ to extended articles concerning the ‘remarks on the taste of the town’.<sup>26</sup> These sources are valuable in charting the discussion of taste and how both attitudes towards it and its deployment developed throughout the period. The information they contain is crucial in exploring the dissemination of philosophical and intellectual debate on taste and its formative role in cultural and social tensions within the changing public sphere. How was taste treated in public debate? Which groups were staking a claim for taste and did writers draw on the work of Hume and other intellectuals in their own analyses? To invoke Anderson’s term of ‘imagined communities’ it is important to view periodicals and newspapers in relation to the groups they wished to engage.<sup>27</sup> The extent to which publications can be presumed to reflect their readership is pertinent in this investigation. The notions of both the implied author and audience will be considered in order to be aware of inbuilt prejudices and agendas. Moreover, the partiality of these sources is not detrimental to this analysis. As previously noted, the intention is not to collate information on an objective view of taste but to understand its usage. Crucially, who these publications were for and what attitudes they wished to portray allows us to look more conclusively at who articulated and deployed taste.

In the pursuit of taste in the eighteenth-century, this analysis will explore the use of the term from the sophisticated philosophical treatises wrestling with definition and acquisition through to the advertisements fixated on its manifestation and application. Chapter one will set out the ways in

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<sup>25</sup> British Periodicals Online <<http://britishperiodicals.chadwyck.co.uk/home.do>>3 Jan 2009.

<sup>26</sup> *The Times*, (9 April 1788) 4; *Westminster Magazine*, (April 1773) 235-36.

<sup>27</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London, 1991).

which thinkers sought to define taste and what meaning was attached to the possession of taste. Situating the work of Hume, Burke, Gerard and Cooper within their linguistic contexts, it will address who was presented as the 'man of taste'. As the launch pad for the investigation of the use of taste in public debate, this section will explore these works for their arguments concerning the development of taste and seek conclusions on how far the acquisition of taste was informed by social status and rank. In seeking to locate taste it will be argued that, despite their different approaches, these academics were remarkably united concerning their belief in the attainability of taste. In essence, man is equipped with the same faculties for developing taste; it is not simply a matter of birth. Yet, common to all these works is the tension between man's universal capacity to possess taste and its refinement in a precious few. Why is it, and through what channels, that certain individuals are able to develop those faculties which constitute a fine taste? The sources will be questioned for what distinctive themes can be drawn out of them in order to make comparisons with the presentation of taste found in literary and periodical literature. While Stephen Bayley's work on taste argues that there is no such thing as objective 'good' taste, the eighteenth-century theorists would vehemently disagree.<sup>28</sup>

Drawing on these discourses and their conclusions, the next chapter will examine the rhetoric of taste within periodicals and newspapers from the mid-century onwards. In analysing a range of information from news articles to advertisements it seeks to address how far their readership was exercised by the possession of taste. Of central importance will be whether the previous discourse and rhetoric of taste were appropriated for discussions of cultural and social urgency, or were they merely fodder for entertainment and satire? Predominantly useful for the insights provided into the manifestations of taste within culture and fashions, they move the philosophical discussion into more tangible examples of the role of taste in people's lives. It will be argued that the uncertainties and ambiguities concerning the man of taste provides not a hindrance but assistance in the quest for cultural prominence.

In order to ground these arguments and debates meaningfully in a concrete discussion of the guiding principle of taste, chapter three will address its role in the increasingly popular profession of landscape gardening. Concerning the grounds of both the aristocracy and wealthy middling

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<sup>28</sup> S. Bayley, *Taste: The Secret Meaning of Things*, (London, 1991).

classes, gardening became an increasingly debated subject stylistically and aesthetically.<sup>29</sup> Seeking to analyse the power of such a small word, this case study on the role of taste in gardening charts how far it permeated the language and discussion of the professionals and enthusiasts writing on the topic. The sources reveal a pursuit increasingly subject to the same anxieties of class and social distinction. This section argues that taste became a facilitating term for the much-desired stylistic hegemony of its employer. Crucially, did taste function as a divisive or inclusive term with the discussions on landscape aesthetics in public debate? Ultimately, this chapter will provide a culmination of the evidence and answers sought throughout the entirety of this dissertation: How far was this ‘poor prostituted word’ used to justify or attack the consumption of the society in which its supposed possessors operated? With the fluidity of the rapidly changing commercial order and its implications for the social sphere, did taste destabilise notions of rank and reshape the existing climate of cultural and social hierarchy? Slippery and elusive, taste is seen to constitute, perhaps more so than in any other epoch, a social and cultural advantage with commentators anxious to lay claim to its final definition.

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<sup>29</sup> For more on this see T. Williamson, *Polite Landscapes: Gardens and Society in Eighteenth-Century England*, (Stroud, 1998).

# I

## THE MAN OF TASTE: ‘SO RARE A CHARACTER’?

Under some or other of these imperfections, the generality of men labour; and hence a true judge in the finer arts is observed, even during the most polished ages, to be so rare a character<sup>30</sup>

Hume’s belief in the rarity of the ‘delicate men of taste’ is evocative of an elusive and precious faculty possessed only by an exceptional few. Yet throughout his work he remains convinced that ‘the general principles of taste are uniform in human nature’.<sup>31</sup> This is indicative of the ambiguous and uncertain way in which the man of taste is presented throughout eighteenth-century intellectual debate. Even today, the term remains elusive and the task of producing its academic history pronounced ‘impossible’.<sup>32</sup> However, the emphasis in this dissertation is not on charting a particular period of a transhistorical concept of taste as it manifests itself between 1750 and 1800. Rather, of central importance is the appropriation of the term in a particular time and place. More specifically, its deployment in the works of Cooper, Hume, Burke and Gerard as they consciously grapple with its possession, cultivation, and manifestation. These works, among many others produced in the eighteenth-century are particularly fruitful to engage with. Not only were they all produced in the 1750s, the beginning of the period in which this dissertation is grounded, but also each author approaches their subject matter in a different manner. Whether epistolary, short treatise, introduction to another work or formal essay, it is interesting to compare the treatments of taste from different methodological viewpoints. Far from becoming an academic history of the different definitions of taste, this is an exploration of its manifestation in a ‘polite and commercial’ society of ‘conspicuous consumption’.<sup>33</sup>

This section seeks to unravel the idea of the ‘man of taste’; indeed it is debatable whether it is even possible to untie the knotted threads that weave throughout the academic discourse on the

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<sup>30</sup> Hume, ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, *Essays and Treatises*, 143.

<sup>31</sup> Hume, ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, *Essays and Treatises* 144.

<sup>32</sup> Bayley, *Taste*, xviii.

<sup>33</sup> The phrase ‘polite and commercial’ is taken from the title of Langford’s *Polite and Commercial People*. Also, Thorstein Veblen’s term, ‘conspicuous consumption’ is useful in invoking the public display of wealth in this period, T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, (Oxford, 2007).

bearer of taste.<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, this section will confront the consistency of the presentation of taste's possessor. This will be achieved through several research questions: What definitions and attitudes towards taste do these authors present? How far do they perceive taste to be common to all? How coherently is the acquisition of taste presented and where was it to be found? It will also remain pertinent to explore the language and form of these works in order to understand their motivations and prejudices as they influence the different presentations of taste. Is it possible that the form of their work circumscribed their content and assessments? Ultimately, the presentation of taste in these works lies behind a veil of vague obscurity. But in this shrouded ambiguity, its discussion reveals significant amounts about the cultural attitudes of its authors and the role of taste in their increasingly commercial society. As such, investigating the man of taste's supposed attributes has major implications for an assessment of taste's position in the social and cultural domain of Britain in the second-half of the eighteenth-century

In order to draw meaningful conclusions on each author's interpretation of taste it is vital to include a more detailed discussion of the social, cultural and intellectual contexts surrounding their work. As it has already been noted, the latter half of the century experienced the growth of the 'public sphere'. Moreover, the access to culture was no longer the sole privilege of the aristocracy and leisure classes. Art had never been on display publicly before 1761 and music had no dedicated performance space before the 1740s. Within the newly founded gardens, theatres, and museums, culture was available to an unprecedented degree.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, with the advent of an increased spending power among the wealthy merchant classes, a wider proportion of society had access to the new consumer goods on offer as the century progressed. Indeed, those with little bought more, inherited possessions were sidelined in the desire for the new and those with many possessions sought even more.<sup>36</sup> This spending spree had major repercussions for the cultural and social developments in Britain, with increased consumption accompanied by the concern for distinction. In the absence of political and religious unanimity, good taste took on the

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<sup>34</sup> The 'man of taste' became a popular expression denoting the possessor of taste throughout intellectual and popular debate. As such it will be used throughout this dissertation to denote the possessor of taste.

<sup>35</sup> P. De Bolla, N. Leask and D. Simpson, (eds.), *Land, Nation and Culture, 1740-1840*, (Hampshire, 2005), 6; Brewer, 'The Polite Age and Most Vicious', Birmingham and Brewer, *The Consumption of Culture*, 348.

<sup>36</sup> McKendrick, 'The Consumer Revolution', McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society*, 25-27.

role of the new social adhesive.<sup>37</sup> For the rich merchant taste operated as a facilitator, by conforming to the dictates of taste, he could stake a claim in society through cultural fluency. The possibility that the burgeoning middle classes could materially and culturally emulate their social superiors threatened to destabilise the existing structures of society and rank. The fear of a heterogeneous public, one that could alter the cultural and social dominance of the upper classes, increased the desire to fix the principles of correct taste. The need to establish its owner became of the utmost priority. Moreover, in the intellectual climate of Britain, influenced by the Enlightenment's reconfiguration of man, which sought objective studies of human faculties, motives and behaviour, the definition and classification of taste became vital tasks.<sup>38</sup>

Consequently, authors became concerned with whether there was a standard of taste, rational and measurable. Therefore, before discussing taste's possession, we must look at their attempts to fix its principles. Indeed is there any conflict between taste's definition and its possession? From the outset, and despite different agendas, Cooper, Hume, Gerard and Burke concede the difficulties in defining taste. In particular Burke eloquently acknowledges its unsettled nature:

It is even commonly supposed that this delicate and aerial faculty, which seems too volatile to endure even the chains of a definition, cannot be properly tried by any test, nor regulated by any standard

As with his contemporary writers, he believes his investigation will fix the principles of taste for the reader, indeed he is convinced that it has some 'certain and invariable laws'. Hume is also confident that it is possible to fix a standard of taste amidst all the 'variety and caprices'.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, the claim that they are going to settle the matter of taste is suggestive of the fact that each believed the task was still outstanding. As Burke (1759) and Gerard (1758) write after Hume (1757) and Cooper (1754), the implication is that each believed their predecessors had failed to fix the principles of taste. In short, common to all is the belief that taste was formed through the union of principles. While these differ slightly, the senses, judgement and the imagination appear as the central components of taste, with Burke and Cooper occupying opposite ends of the spectrum. For the former, taste is passionate, unchecked by reason, as taste

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<sup>37</sup>R. Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain the Creation of the Modern World*, (London, 2000), 195.

<sup>38</sup> For more on the Enlightenment and its assessment of human nature see Porter, *Enlightenment*.

<sup>39</sup> Burke, 'An Introduction on Taste', *Philosophical Enquiry*, 2-4; Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', *Essays and Treatises*, 137.

‘seizes upon the Applause of the Heart, before the intellectual power, Reason, can descend from the Throne of the Mind’. While for Burke, reason dominates his ‘investigation’ of taste.<sup>40</sup>

However, despite these attempts to settle the principles of taste, each endeavour remains mired in uncertainty.<sup>41</sup> Even Gerard’s lengthy and systematic treatment of the subject is criticised for its inability to fix taste: ‘After all, though we acknowledge the erudition and genius of Mr. Gerard, we think his Essay has reflected no great light upon his subject.’<sup>42</sup> That each author varies to a certain degree from the others in their interpretation is clear. However, while their definitions may vary, they believed taste, as a faculty, was worth investigating. The addition of Burke’s investigation on taste to the original version of his *Philosophical Enquiry into Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* highlights this increasing preoccupation with taste.<sup>43</sup> While Gerard points out that unlike our external senses, taste as an internal sense is not ‘subservient to our preservation’, for each writer, whether taste is internal or external, made up of a few principles or many, it is important to man’s existence.<sup>44</sup> Indicative of its perceived significance in society, it is a valuable asset and one which man should aspire to possess. With the most passionate language of all, Cooper is quick to emphasise its delights as an ‘instantaneous Glow of Pleasure, which thrills thro’ our whole frame’. Similarly Gerard states that taste ‘stamps a value upon riches.’<sup>45</sup> Thus, there is a consensus throughout these works that taste, whatever it may involve, is to be cherished and respected.

Despite the uncertainties surrounding a definitive classification of taste, each author makes explicit claims concerning its ownership. In the attempts to fix its principles, these treatises focus on an analysis of the possession of taste. Of central importance is its location; where can the faculties of taste be located and are they to be found in all? Although each work places a different emphasis on what constitutes taste, Cooper, Hume, Burke and Gerard each, to a different extent, relate this aesthetic discernment to its physical counterpart. While Cooper

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<sup>40</sup> Cooper, *Letters Concerning Taste*, 3; Burke, ‘An Introduction on Taste’, *Philosophical Enquiry*.

<sup>41</sup> A fuller account concerning the definition of taste in these works is not within the realms of this dissertation. In focussing on the central themes of possession and acquisition, other key areas, while recognised for their contributions to the discussion on taste, such as morality and virtue, have been omitted.

<sup>42</sup> *Critical Review*, 7, (May, 1759) 447.

<sup>43</sup> The first edition of Burke’s work published in 1757 did not contain his ‘Introduction on Taste’.

<sup>44</sup> Gerard, *Essay on Taste*, 100-101.

<sup>45</sup> Cooper, *Letters Concerning Taste*, 3; Gerard, *Essay on Taste*, 195.

advocates the principle of taste internal, he says the least about this relationship, little discussing how the internal sense of taste relates to its manifestation in man. However, Hume and Gerard elucidate more fully on the location of taste within man and thus make claims about its endowment. In relating taste to the physical senses it is made uniform in man. As far as man is in possession of the internal organs of taste, or as Gerard would have it the seven internal senses of taste, all are equal. However, Hume is quick to acknowledge the flaws in different men's faculties, for him the 'principles of taste be universal, and nearly, if not entirely the same in all men'. Yet, this is followed by the claim that the 'organs of internal sensation are seldom so perfect as to allow the general principles their full play'.<sup>46</sup> Gerard provides a more idealised vision of the commonality of the senses as possessed by man. He perceives the mental principles of taste to be the same in all, indeed, 'men are with *few* exceptions, affected by the qualities, we have investigated.'<sup>47</sup> This democratic vision of the senses would suggest that taste is common to all, thus proposing that all men are capable of possessing taste. But does this really mean that every man is in essence a potential man of taste? It is with Burke that the notion of commonality is given the most attention. From the outset, his investigation expounds that it is 'probable that the standard both of reason and Taste is the same in all human creatures.'<sup>48</sup> His introduction on taste builds up the idea that the central components of taste - the senses, imagination and reason - are the same in all men, the 'learned and unlearned':<sup>49</sup>

It appears to me that what is called Taste, in the most general acceptance, is not a simple idea, but is partly made up of a perception of the primary pleasures of sense, of the secondary pleasures of the imagination, and of the conclusions of the reasoning faculty, concerning the various relations of these and concerning the human passions, manners, and actions...and the ground-work of all these is the same in the human mind...Taste is common to all.<sup>50</sup>

This highly democratic vision of taste has major implications for the social identity of the man of taste. If these works, in particular Gerard's and Burke's, convey a democratic notion of the possession of taste, then logically it can be assumed that they believed it to be obtainable irrespective of social standing. It would appear that man possesses taste inherently by virtue of his physical composition. Moreover, it would facilitate the possibility of a heterogeneous public,

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<sup>46</sup> Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', *Essays and Treatises*, 142, 144.

<sup>47</sup> Gerard, *Essay on Taste*, 77-78.

<sup>48</sup> Burke, 'An Introduction on Taste', *Philosophical Enquiry*, 1.

<sup>49</sup> Burke, 'An Introduction on Taste', *Philosophical Enquiry*, 15.

<sup>50</sup> Burke, 'An Introduction on Taste', *Philosophical Enquiry*, 30-31.

one in which individuals and groups no longer need to lay claim to taste for social distinction. In this manner, does the philosophical notion of taste betray the concept of the esteemed man of taste?

Despite this presentation of taste accessible by all, it soon becomes apparent that the seeds of taste only blossom within a precious few. In setting out their arguments concerning the acquisition of taste Cooper, Burke, Hume and Gerard reveal the complexity of taste's possession. In discussing the attributes needed to develop good taste it is evident that its initial universality falls victim to the highly stratified social order inhabited by its advocates. But how coherently is the acquisition and improvement of taste depicted and what effect does this have on the man of taste? For example, in the longest and most sustained discussion of taste, Gerard is quick to point out this precious faculty is not solely the gift of nature; it cannot achieve its full perfection without assistance from 'proper culture'.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, while he believes that taste can be improved - devoting a whole section on this subject - stating that we are 'scarce possessed of any faculty of mind or body that is not improvable', he remains unclear about how this is applied to taste.<sup>52</sup> The motif of 'proper culture' throughout his work is highly evocative of a taste only accessible by people of a certain social standing, yet it remains unclear what this 'culture judiciously applied' entails.<sup>53</sup> The idea of 'proper culture' is left vague and the profile of the possessor of taste remains frustratingly elusive. Even men of a gifted intellect, such as a 'celebrated mathematician' are incapable of a refined taste.<sup>54</sup> Ultimately then, Gerard adds a qualification for taste, yet as with the uncertainty surrounding its definition, he is unable to articulate fully the components of its improvement. Thus, he renders its ownership a highly ambitious and demanding task.

Cooper similarly suffers from an inability to pin the label of good taste upon a particular character. Speaking critically of those who fail to meet his criteria - the union of intellectual powers, senses and imagination - he states that men may possess a genius for poetry, or have the

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<sup>51</sup> Gerard, *Essay on Taste*, 1.

<sup>52</sup> Gerard, *Essay on Taste*, 100.

<sup>53</sup> Gerard, *Essay on Taste*, 104.

<sup>54</sup> Gerard, *Essay on Taste*, 107. Indeed, even when discussing the good taste of Aristotle, Dionysus, Longinus and Halicarnassus he admits that they each possessed a particular excellence, e.g. refinement or sensibility. Only Quintilian possessed each quality required for a good taste - *Essay on Taste*, 157.

‘most delicate Organs of Sense’ yet remain deficient of ‘that *internal* sensation called *Taste*.’<sup>55</sup> Moreover, Burke’s explanation of the universal nature of the location of taste appears to be subject to ulterior motives. The insistence that the fundamentals of taste are ‘common to all’ justifies Burke’s meditation on taste because it allows him to reason conclusively on the ‘logic of taste’.<sup>56</sup> When he attempts to expound further on what constitutes a good taste in man his argument slips into hazy territory. Principally, in placing great store in the role of judgement within the formation of correct taste, Burke’s concept of taste slips away from its universal setting. As he states, ‘for sensibility and judgement which are the qualities that compose what we commonly call a *Taste*, vary exceedingly in various people’.<sup>57</sup> This failure to provide a more complete picture of the cultivation of taste resonates with Cooper and Gerard’s work.

It is with Hume that we find the most explicit recognition that the man of taste is a rare character. For him it is an embarrassment that it is so difficult to locate these men in society.<sup>58</sup> However, despite acknowledging the rarity of men in possession of a cultivated taste, of all the works considered, it is Hume who directs his piece at its potential owner. He provides a clear list of the attributes required for cultural distinction:

Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty.

This standard of taste is achievable through the course laid out by Hume in the preceding pages.<sup>59</sup> In this way, we find advice on the improvement of taste through the example of art and music, in which a man ‘who has had opportunities of seeing, and, examining and weighing...several performances...(can) assign its proper rank among the productions of genius.’<sup>60</sup> However, despite writing for the potential man of taste, Hume is unable to illuminate his being sufficiently. As such, in these works, the ownership of taste is initially given the potential to reside in many. With its universal principles commonly held within man, the pursuit of taste seems a realistic goal, whether for aristocrat or tradesman. Yet, in seeking to deny common access to a cultivated

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<sup>55</sup> Cooper, *Letters Concerning Taste*, 29-30.

<sup>56</sup> Burke, ‘An Introduction on Taste’, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 30, 3.

<sup>57</sup> Burke, ‘An Introduction on Taste’, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 32.

<sup>58</sup> Hume, ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, *Essays and Treatises*, 143.

<sup>59</sup> Hume, ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, *Essays and Treatises*, 143.

<sup>60</sup> Hume, ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, *Essays and Treatises*, 141.

taste, the treatises and their commentary on the acquisition of good taste restrict its ownership in society through subjecting it to qualification. However, while Hume, Gerard, Burke and Cooper enshrine the precious man of taste in ambiguity, they cannot betray his class.

Despite their vague descriptions, underlying each account of the cultivation of taste swims the current of social status and distinction. In a brief discussion concerning taste, Brewer believes that within the commentaries on taste, its owner is placed in isolation; there is a conspicuous absence of a social milieu.<sup>61</sup> This would seem to fit with the ambiguities surrounding the descriptions concerning the possession and cultivation of taste. However, despite the uncertainty - in some cases silence - concerning the social backdrop of the man in possession of taste it is still possible to draw conclusions concerning its social implications. This is most obviously seen in the insistence on the importance of judgement in the formation of taste. As knowledge is clearly reasoned to be critical in the formation of judgement, assumptions are made concerning the education and therefore the class of the owner of taste. As Gerard states, it is 'only in the few, who improve the rudiments of taste which *nature* has implanted, by *culture* well chosen, and judiciously applied, that taste at length appears in elegant and just proportions'.<sup>62</sup> This acknowledgement of the scarcity of the possession of taste, combined with the importance of knowledge, judgement, and culture, is redolent of social distinction and rank. Indeed as Gerard states, the 'habitual acquaintance with the objects of taste' improves the judgement, and thus taste in man.<sup>63</sup> Gerard's man of taste clearly needs to be in a privileged position within society, not only for his access to culture but the time he is required to spend in its company. Moreover, each work is littered with classical references, serving to emphasise further that education is integral in the formation of taste. Classical poets and scholars emerge as examples of men of taste, perhaps a greater indication of the authors' inability to provide more definitive and modern examples of the man of taste in eighteenth-century society. For example, in Cooper's work, Homer, Horace and Tacitus are littered throughout his letters. Moreover, these classical authors become instrumental tools in the man of taste's process of cultivation. In this way, Cooper's understanding of Addison as a man of taste is made in relation to his ability to translate 'the Poetical Descriptions of Ovid

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<sup>61</sup>Brewer, 'The Polite Age and Most Vicious', Bermingham and Brewer, *The Consumption of Culture*, 352.

<sup>62</sup> Gerard, *Essay on Taste*, 104.

<sup>63</sup>Gerard, *Essay on Taste*, 120; Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', *Essays and Treatises*, 141; Burke, 'An Introduction on Taste', *Philosophical Enquiry*, 33.

very elegantly and faithfully into his own Language'.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, despite the inconsistencies in the depiction of the man of taste, with his social status explicitly avoided, his class is rendered knowable through allusions and inferences in the examples of good taste and its cultivation.

In seeking to explore the presentation of the eighteenth-century idea of the man of taste, a consideration of taste's manifestation is pertinent. More precisely, how was the man of taste depicted, if it all, operating in society? What did he consume and in what spheres did he operate within this 'polite society'? Perhaps unsurprisingly, as with other elements of their explorations, Gerard, Hume, Burke and Cooper seem unable to provide a comprehensive account of the manifestation of taste. It is easier for them to articulate what taste is not. For example, Gerard's scathing attack on man's incorrect taste for novelty over real beauty: 'Novelty can bestow charms on a monster, and make things pleasant, which have nothing to recommend them but their rarity'.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, his sustained attack on the incorrectness of taste (which man must endeavour to avoid) particularly criticises 'artificial fame' and fashions, which are 'annihilated' after tempting us into a depravity of taste.<sup>66</sup> Architecture is a common example used by these authors to criticise taste, as Cooper viciously relates the false taste of Mucio's Palace with its 'unmeaning glitter' and 'monstrous enormities' despite everything supposedly built in the 'name of taste'. It is clear that this example attacks the new wealth and spending in the latter half of the century, unchecked by a cultivated taste and subject to fashion, thus accounting for Mucio's decorative '*Chinese Madness*'.<sup>67</sup> Cooper's assault on the false taste in architecture is symptomatic of his epistolary form. In casting his exploration of taste in the intimate setting of letters to fictitious friends, the man of taste becomes a private figure. His passionate accounts of taste tell us very little about the role of the man of taste within society. Moreover, his letters often finish with an example of correct taste, such as the end of Letter IX to Euphemius, in which he discusses Mucio's Palace. The juxtaposition of his passing comments to his 'friend' about sending him a 'beautiful parcel of Spar for your Grotto' following a discussion of a distinct lack of taste is highly suggestive.<sup>68</sup> In this manner, throughout Cooper's letters, the central figure to emerge is the author himself as the

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<sup>64</sup> Cooper, *Letters Concerning Taste*, 30-31. The emphasis on poetry throughout Cooper's work is perhaps unsurprising as he was a poet himself.

<sup>65</sup> Gerard, *Essay on Taste*, 9.

<sup>66</sup> Gerard, *Essay on Taste*, 144-5.

<sup>67</sup> Cooper, *Letters Concerning Taste*, 61-62.

<sup>68</sup> Cooper, *Letters Concerning Taste*, 65.

possessor of good taste. This is highly suggestive. Indeed, taste classifies, and in classifying the man of taste they expose themselves. With their analyses of the acquisition and improvement of taste, above all the indeterminacy shrouding its owner, the only definitive indications of the man of taste are the authors themselves. As they assess and analyse taste, assuming a position of authority and judgement on the matter, they demonstrate their own attainment of that precious faculty.

Ultimately, despite the implicit assumption that these authors are in the elite position of possessing good taste, the man of taste remains, frustratingly, free from the chains of definition. In accordance with taste's slippery nature, the man of taste emerges as a vague and indeterminable character. However, while explicit social status evades him, it is not impossible to form assumptions concerning his class. With the insistence that the principles of taste are common to all, Hume, Burke, Gerard and Cooper seem to make claims that could transform the public sphere of polite society into an arena of democratic cultural debate. Whether taste is wholly internal or external this would imply that man could stake a claim in society as a result of his innate ability to acquire taste. Yet, by adding in an element of discrimination, reducing the possibility of achieving a cultivated and refined taste to near impossibility, these authors endeavour to tie him to particular social strata. Fundamentally, he remains an unknowable character. Thus, there is a lack of consistency and coherence in his representation within these treatises. However, this unsettled nature of the man of taste does not prevent us from looking at the idea meaningfully. In the quest to understand the deployment of taste in the eighteenth-century, the debates concerning its possession provide insights into the way in which taste was used as a vehicle for social distinction. Appearing in these works as an emblem or an ideal, the man of taste becomes a focaliser for the battles fought for cultural fluency.

## II

### ‘THE TASTE OF THE TOWN’: TASTE, NEWSPAPERS, AND PERIODICALS

Not by reason or passion, but fashion we think,  
By fashion we swear and we pray;  
By fashion we game, and by fashion we drink,  
For each vice like a dog has its day,  
Once Shakespeare could please, now operas endear,  
And on sounds large subscriptions we waste;  
Like pillory'd felons, we're nail'd by the ear,  
For forging that phantom call'd Taste.

This verse taken from *Stanzas on Taste*, positioned at the end of an article searching for that preciously elusive faculty, is indicative of taste's treatment within newspaper and periodical literature in the latter half of the eighteenth-century.<sup>69</sup> In seeking to explore further the deployment and reception of taste, these sources provide insights into the public use of such an unsettled and evasive word. With a rapid expansion, the newspaper press increasingly became part of everyday life for men and women in the eighteenth-century. Crucially, the information and views they imparted provided a basis for public debate and the formation of public opinion outside the narrow ruling elite.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, as they became more numerous and socially diverse, a greater number of people drawn from a wider section of society had access to these newspapers and periodicals, particularly through their presence in coffee houses and other public areas. Unquestionably, the influence of print culture should not be underestimated when discussing public debate on taste.<sup>71</sup> As already discussed, the number of articles concerning taste within periodical literature alone experienced significant growth in the second-half of the eighteenth-century.<sup>72</sup> This chapter seeks to move the analysis of taste in intellectual debate into the more open and public arena of the popular press. In this particular search after taste newspapers and periodicals are vital sources of information for the groups who wished to stake a claim for the possession and definition of taste, the pursuits for which taste was employed and the attitudes of

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<sup>69</sup> 'A Search after Taste', in *London Magazine, or Gentleman's Monthly Intelligencer*, 31, (July, 1762), 387.

<sup>70</sup> H. Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society 1695-1855*, (Essex, 2000), 1.

<sup>71</sup> Moreover these newspapers and periodicals were often read aloud publicly under the practice of group reading - Barker, *Newspapers*, 63; See also Porter, *Enlightenment*, 194-202.

<sup>72</sup> There are 38 articles with taste in the title between January 1700 and December 1751. However, in the second half of the century this figure explodes to 382 articles. British Periodicals Online <<http://britishperiodicals.chadwyck.co.uk/home.do>> 3 Jan 2009.

different social groups in eighteenth-century Britain. Above all, this section will address how taste was identified, articulated and mapped within different communities. Moreover, it needs to be answered whether the ambiguities presented in the treatises on taste helped or hindered the appropriation of taste in the public sphere.

In his modern evaluation of taste, Bayley asserts that it is about consumption, and in consuming we ‘reveal ourselves’.<sup>73</sup> This is a highly potent observation, arguably of extreme relevance in the period under investigation. With the articles contained in this discussion come glimpses and evidence concerning the utilisation of taste. Therefore it needs to be asked who reveals themselves in the reports of eighteenth-century consumption. Who is actually deploying taste, what do they consider to be tasteful and how far is its possession important to them? In short, what does the consumption portrayed in newspapers and periodicals reveal about the way taste operated in public debate? A predominant theme in the discussion of taste is the criticism of those considered to be lacking in that desirable attribute (despite their subjects’ claims on the contrary). In their criticisms, the journalists reveal the appropriation of taste by the newly rich middling classes. As such, an article from 1773 concerning the ‘modern taste of tradesmen’s daughters’ within *Gentlemen’s Magazine* shows a group obsessed with fashion and show, to which taste is annexed as an essential qualification. This ‘immoderate love of pleasure’ demonstrates taste’s ever-expanding reach within society. Glimpsed fitfully within the treatises on taste, this article illustrates the full extent of the deployment of taste beyond the ‘polite arts’.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, the proliferation of classified advertisements which call for the ability to harness taste demonstrates how this precious faculty has been dispersed within eighteenth-century Britain. For example, an advertisement from 1788 offers the services of a ‘young man who can shave and dress hair in the present taste’. Interestingly, this young man who ‘wishes to engage as a valet’ directs his assistance to a ‘single gentleman’ and has ‘no objections to travelling abroad; would prefer going to the East Indies’.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, in quoting the East Indies the article is highly suggestive of the social standing of the man concerned with taste. Furthermore, the discussion of

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<sup>73</sup> Bayley, *Taste*, xv.

<sup>74</sup> ‘Modern Taste of Tradesmens Daughters, exploded’, in *Gentlemen’s Magazine*, (January, 1773), 15.

<sup>75</sup> *The Times*, April 9th, 1788, 4; In a similar style another advertisement from 1788 seeks ‘a person who can dress hair in the present taste’, *The Times*, February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1788, 4.

taste in *The Connoisseur*, from the beginning of the period, demonstrates the extent to which the British had become a nation exercised by taste:

The first species of Taste, which gives a loose to the imagination, indulges itself in caprice, and is perpetually striking new strokes, is the chief regulator of the fashion. In dress, it has put hunting-poles into the hands of our gentlemen, and erected coaches and windmills on the heads of our ladies.

By then going on to discuss the newly formed relationship between taste and architecture, this piece highlights for us how taste operated as a justification of consumption as it became a mediating concept redeeming increased expenditure.<sup>76</sup> Yet, this is not the cultivated and highly critical taste found in the work of Gerard and his contemporaries. This is not the heartfelt appreciation of the arts as professed by Cooper. Rather, the taste presented within periodicals and newspapers is subject to passing fashion. It is random and unprincipled. Moreover, it is the concern of the middling classes. Resonating throughout these articles is not only the application of the word taste to a countless number of consumer endeavours, in many cases it is also attended by anxiety. Despite glimpses of the application of the arguments and language of the treatises on taste, the majority of pieces concerning taste reveal a public fixated on the correct taste.<sup>77</sup> A group portrayed as fickle and anxious for distinction.

In looking at the areas in which taste was deployed, and by whom, it is difficult to ignore that many of these articles were written in order to criticise. Fuel for the satirist's pen, the obsession with taste is written about unfavourably and mockingly. Indeed, the remarks of one commentator show this disdain for a public that 'voraciously devours one season...disgorges the next; and perhaps the third, returns like a Dog to its vomit'.<sup>78</sup> However, this method of discussion does not prevent useful insights being made into the relationship between taste and the public. As sources for the use of the term in public debate, the negative response to taste's appropriation remains valuable in this investigation of its role in eighteenth-century society. In a satirical letter from 'Taste to the Trister' the extensive nature of taste's reach within society is rendered universal; the preoccupation of many: 'Sir, it will hardly be necessary to mention my name is TASTE, or that

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<sup>76</sup> Coleman, *The Connoisseur*, 724.

<sup>77</sup> For example, in the *The Connoisseur* article already discussed, the same themes of genius, judgement and the imagination appear in Colman's mocking account of taste. This is also apparent in an article titled 'New Reflections on Taste', in, *Westminster Magazine*, (December, 1774) in which the author makes a similar effort to fix a standard of taste as found in the intellectual debates from the 1750s.

<sup>78</sup> *Westminster Magazine*, April 1773, 235.

I am at present the universal admiration of the British people'<sup>79</sup> As with the 'Search after Taste' from the same year, in damning the transience and hollowness of taste this article reveals a nation under taste's grip:

I always chuse such as have no meaning, to avoid the possibility of improvement: - I preside at the opera, because I do not understand a single syllable of Italian; and fall asleep at the play-house, to shew the necessity of listening to the entertainment. I keep a stud of horses which I never ride, a mistress I never see, and a house I never live in.- Tho' as ignorant of colours as of the tenets of the gospel, I am always a distinguished connoisseur at every sale of pictures, and as well acquainted with the terms as if I had served an apprenticeship to a painter.<sup>80</sup>

This notion of an arrogant and confident taste is also central to the later article, 'Taste, an Egotist'. In this the author not only acknowledges the indeterminate nature of taste, as found in the treatises, but also reveals the self-conviction that accompanies the claim to taste: 'True taste to me is by this touchstone known, that's always best that's nearest to my own'.<sup>81</sup> Therefore an exploration of the satirical pieces on taste shows us not only the anxious preoccupation that attended the demonstration of taste, but also the confidence that for many accompanied this claim. Furthermore, when considering Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities' it is important to acknowledge that these authors speak to a particular audience.<sup>82</sup> In relation to satire, these articles invoke a sense of audience, one keen to mock the middling classes and their preoccupation with demonstrating their taste. Moreover, in damning these groups, these authors are not themselves aloof and detached from the pursuit of taste. In a similar way to the writers of intellectual pieces on taste, these articles implicitly make assumptions about their own potential for cultural fluency. This provides a more detailed picture of those who wished to stake a claim for the possession of taste, as their criticisms simultaneously highlight their personal attainment of taste. Therefore, in the light of such criticisms it can be deduced that rather than serving a cohesive role in this 'polite society' from the mid-century onwards, taste became a divisive term in the periodical press.

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<sup>79</sup> 'A letter from Taste to the Trister', in *Edinburgh Magazine*, (July, 1762), 349.

<sup>80</sup> 'A letter from Taste', *Edinburgh Magazine*, 349.

<sup>81</sup> 'Taste, an Egotist', in *Town and Country Magazine, or, Universal Repository of Knowledge, Instruction, and Entertainment*, (July 1793), 321.

<sup>82</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (London, 1991).

In making judgements about the possession of taste the periodicals and newspapers in this period also provide evidence concerning the attitudes towards the man of taste. These articles build upon the idea of the ownership of taste, in particular the way in which class became a determining factor in its acquisition. Rather than the ambiguities that litter the intellectual works on taste, these sources make explicit claims concerning class. Bourdieu's critique of taste stresses how it operates to provide people with a 'sense of one's place'.<sup>83</sup> Yet, articles such as one from *The Times* named 'Taste' criticise the attempts of social climbing. In this a 'purse-proud tradesmen' is condemned for conspicuously displaying his wealth. As such, the author's damnation implies that a 'sense of one's place' has been displaced. Interestingly, rather than discussing taste explicitly, this article's title is suggestive of what the author perceives taste to constitute. With 'ideas as narrow and confined as their birth has been obscure' these men, typified by the wealthy tradesmen, do not adhere to their place in 'polite' society and consequently are prohibited from acquiring the label of the man of taste.<sup>84</sup> Similarly an article from *Westminster Magazine* in 1773, highly critical of public taste, dwells on the following dilemma; 'what then is the Taste of the Town; if a few exceptional individuals only have Taste, and the Town in general have no Taste at all?'<sup>85</sup> With an elitist vision of taste, the author again stresses the issue of its attainability, reinforcing the rarity of the man of taste expounded in the treatises of the 1750s. Certain articles, such as one from the *Edinburgh Magazine* in 1780, make concessions towards a more universally obtainable taste: '(some people) have every requisite for being men of taste; they are deficient only in cultivation'.<sup>86</sup> However, the majority concerned with the man of taste focus on his rarity and exclusivity. Again, in mocking the middling classes with their misplaced and conspicuous attempts at cultural distinction, they also serve to highlight their own ability for taste through the implicit assumption that in criticising they exercise that very faculty which comes under attack.

Class has been observed to be defined as much by its being-perceived as by its being.<sup>87</sup> This is highly appropriate to the social struggle that pervades the eighteenth-century periodical literature concerning taste. In these articles we find a public either anxiously obsessed with exposing their cultural fluency or supremely confident in their display of a cultivated taste. Moreover, these

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<sup>83</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 466.

<sup>84</sup> *The Times*, July 27<sup>th</sup> 1786, 1.

<sup>85</sup> *Westminster Magazine*, (April, 1773), 235.

<sup>86</sup> *Edinburgh Magazine*, (June, 1780), 335.

<sup>87</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 483.

sources reveal the extent to which taste was used as a qualification within society. From the opera to women's fashions, taste attached itself to a vast array of preferences, possessions, and pursuits. Presented with an image of taste far removed from the ideal expounded in the 1750s, the uncertainties and vague nature of the intellectual debates on taste have failed in their task to fix a standard of taste for society to adhere to. The sources reveal how this has allowed the public to manipulate taste for their own appropriation and qualifications. Moreover, this deployment took place within the public arena, as taste became a ruthless betrayer of social and cultural attitudes. Indeed as one writer laments; 'we live too much in the eyes and minds of others, and too little in our own hearts, too little in our own consciences, and too little to our own satisfaction. We are too anxious to appear, than to be happy'.<sup>88</sup> In this process, similar to Hume and his contemporaries, the man of taste is presented through the implicit assumption that in attacking the pretenders, the authors demonstrate their own claim to that title. Ultimately, with the threat of emulation and subversion, taste became a battleground for hierarchy and rank.

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<sup>88</sup> 'On the Folly of Sacrificing Comfort to Taste', in *Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure*, (June, 1785), 311.

### III

## ‘A SUBJECT FOR TASTE’: A CASE STUDY ON LANDSCAPE GARDENING

In 1770 Thomas Whately requested that gardening be given a place among the ‘liberal arts’. Viewed as superior to landscape painting, he claimed it be to ‘an exertion of fancy, a subject for taste’.<sup>89</sup> His claim was by no means unprecedented. His work echoes the concern with the classification of culture in public debate, in which gardening was no exception. Like other leisure activities, landscape gardening shifted from an elitist luxury to become a commodity accessible to a wider spectrum of society.<sup>90</sup> As it has been discussed, taste was a central concept in public discussion, both fuelling debate and subject to it. As such, did taste also become a touchstone in the Georgian discussions of modern gardening? This case study seeks to look at the way taste operated in the discussions on gardening in the second half of the eighteenth-century. Ultimately it hopes to discover whether it was a divisive or cohesive term in the public literature and discussion of gardening. It asks, who used taste in their work and for what purpose? How far was taste in gardening a matter of public debate and to what extent were taste and class a significant factor in the discussion of gardening?

From the mid eighteenth-century onwards, the ownership of land remained a dominant symbol of social distinction in a society increasingly dependent on commercial wealth. Indeed landscape design helped to distinguish the superiority of the landed rich within the increasingly fluid social conditions of the period.<sup>91</sup> In this environment, far from acquiescing in a state of conformity and agreement, the professional gardeners and writers on landscape debated the correct style and design for England’s garden designs. In dialogue with each other, particularly Humphry Repton, Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight in the 1790s, we find these authors calling upon taste in their discussions. This study is not concerned with exploring the different styles in themselves,

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<sup>89</sup> T. Whatley, *Observations on Modern Gardening*, (London, 1770), 1.

<sup>90</sup> A. Rogger, *Landscapes of Taste: The Art of Humphry Repton’s Red Books*, (Abington, 2007), 1; For a fuller account of gardening and its social context see Williamson, *Polite Landscapes* and T. Mowl, *Gentlemen and Players: Gardeners of the English Landscape*, (Stroud, 2000).

<sup>91</sup> Williamson, *Polite Landscapes*, 113, 159.

but in looking at the debates on aesthetics, the participants' language and rhetoric provide insights into the way taste was deployed in their arguments. Indeed, natural imagery is often invoked in the intellectual analyses of taste. For example, when Gerard discusses the objects of taste he calls upon nature as a prime example: 'Flowers disclose a thousand delicate vivid hues. Animals appear in comely symmetry...the earth forms a verdant carpet'.<sup>92</sup> Ultimately, in looking specifically at gardening and grounding the work of the previous chapters into a case study, we can assess taste more meaningfully.

Horace Walpole's *The History of the Modern Taste in Gardening*, as the first to attempt a narrative of modern English garden design, is indicative of the privileged place taste held in the formal pieces on the landscape.<sup>93</sup> This work highlights how, in a broad sense, the general trend of advocating a more naturalistic (and English) trend in garden design and a rejection of the formalities of the European garden style became increasingly popular in English garden design.<sup>94</sup> This move towards the 'natural' is a central component in the discourses on taste and gardening. For example in his famous passage in appreciation of William Kent (the English landscape architect), Walpole praises his appreciation of the natural: 'He had followed nature, and imitated her so happily, that he began to think all her works were equally proper for imitation'.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, an earlier piece on gardening from William Shenstone, a poet and landscape designer, in his essay 'Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening', explicitly cites the treatises on taste. Referencing Burke and Gerard among others, his work is clearly influenced by the debates on taste and beauty. As such, in discussing the pleasure stemming from objects, he argues the importance of judgement and the imagination.<sup>96</sup> As discussed in chapter one, these are major themes in the literature of taste. Repton also explicitly cites Burke's work on taste in his defence

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<sup>92</sup> Gerard, *Essay on Taste*, 188.

<sup>93</sup> Published in 1780 Walpole's composition is dated to the 1750s and 1760s, with some revisions taking place after Whately's *Observations* in 1770 – J. D. Hunt, 'Introduction' in H. Walpole, *The History of the Modern Taste in Gardening*, (New York, 1995), 5-6.

<sup>94</sup> Williamson, *Polite Landscapes*, 3. For more on the stylistic changes in landscape gardening see also Mowl, *Gentlemen and Players*. Walpole also demonstrates this taste for the 'natural' when he praises William Kent for leaping the fence and seeing that 'all nature is a garden': Walpole, *History of the Modern Taste*, 43.

<sup>95</sup> Walpole, *History of the Modern Taste*, 49.

<sup>96</sup> W. Shenstone, 'Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening', in *London Magazine, or Gentlemen's Monthly Intelligencer*, (April, 1764), 192.

from the criticisms of Price and Knight.<sup>97</sup> Thus, professionals and commentators not only appropriated taste as a term in their discussion of the history of garden design, but also used the philosophical debates to punctuate and inform their arguments on landscape aesthetics.

The use of taste in these works not only took on an important role in shaping the language of landscape design, but also became an integral weapon, used as capital in the debates between theorists. Taking place on a public level, the discussion of picturesque landscapes and issues of practice were hotly contested.<sup>98</sup> A major example of this emerges in the debates concerning the Picturesque in the 1790s between Humphry Repton, a successor to Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown and two key figures in the English Picturesque movement, Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight. With the dispute centred on the relationship between landscape gardening and landscape painting, the sources indicate that their arguments were heavily punctuated with the discussion of taste. For example, Price’s *Essay on the Picturesque* from 1794, firmly opposed to the high state of cultivation and embellishment in England, seeks to discover whether the current system of improving (gardening) is ‘founded on any just principles of taste’.<sup>99</sup> In doing so, the practice and style advocated by Brown comes under attack. For Price, his work fails to adhere to the principles of taste:

The moment this mechanical common-place operation (by which Mr. Brown and his followers have gained so much credit) is begun, adieu to all that the painter admires – to all the intricacies – to all the beautiful varieties of form...In a few hours, the rash hand of false taste completely demolishes what time only, and a thousand luck accidents, can mature, so as to become the admiration and study of a Ruysdal or a Gainsborough, and reduces it to such a thing as an Oilman on Thames-street may at any time contract for by the yard at Islington or Mile-End.

These scathing remarks invoke taste, or rather the lack of it, in order to justify Price’s vision of landscape design.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, his criticisms become a key point of Price and Knight’s contention with Repton, hailed as the ‘defender of Brown’.<sup>101</sup> In his public defence of Brown, Repton calls upon the man of taste in defending the practice of ‘clumping’ that Price and Knight

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<sup>97</sup> H. Repton, ‘A Letter to Uvedale Price, Esq.’, in U. Price, *A Letter to H. Repton, Esq. On the Application of the Practice as well as the Principles of Landscape-Painting to Landscape-Gardening: Intended as a Supplement to the Essay on the Picturesque*, (London, 1795), 18.

<sup>98</sup> For more on the Picturesque in landscape gardening see M. Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760-1800*, (Aldershot, 1990).

<sup>99</sup> U. Price, *An Essay on the Picturesque*, (London, 1794), 1-2.

<sup>100</sup> Price, *Essay on the Picturesque*, 28-29.

<sup>101</sup> Price, *A Letter to H. Repton, Esq.*, 27.

attack. In his justifications he cites the neglect or bad taste of Brown's employers for mistakes.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, in a supposed act of reverence, Repton calls upon taste in a veiled insult of his correspondent:

I will not arraign your taste, or call it vitiated, but your palate certainly requires a degree of "irritation" rarely to be expected in a garden scenery; and, I trust, the good sense and good taste of this country will never be led to despise the comfort of a gravel walk...or a view down a steep hill, because they are all subjects incapable of being painted.<sup>103</sup>

Thus, in his opposition to Price and Knight's conceptions of picturesque garden design, Repton deploys the idea of good taste to give weight to his defence against his contemporaries' support of the dominant role of landscape painting. In this manner taste became a central motif in these debates on the Picturesque that took place at the end of the century. In the writings on landscape design, taste is seen operating as a tool of distinction, a term equipping the author with an aesthetic dominance. Thus taste operates not merely as a guiding ideal, but also a divisive weapon in the author's armoury.

This schismatic use of taste in public debates concerning landscape resonates strongly with the satirical pieces on taste found in the periodical literature discussed in chapter two. Having explored how far the intellectual debate concerning taste infiltrated the practice of gardening in this period, there is also evidence to suggest that the man of taste and the question of possession became entangled in this art of 'improvement'. As briefly discussed above, the concept of the 'man of taste' infiltrated Repton's rhetoric on landscape design. Moreover, from looking further into Repton's publications it becomes apparent that his conception of the man of taste is tied to his belief in the role of judgement in cultivating that precious faculty. In perpetuating the idea that the acquisition of taste was not a universal pursuit, inaccessible to many levels of society, he makes certain claims concerning his position as a professional gardener:

(The man of taste) knows that the same principles which direct taste in the polite arts, direct judgement in morality: in short, that a knowledge of what is good, what is bad, and what is indifferent, whether in actions, in manners, in language, in arts, or science, constitutes the basis of good taste, and marks the distinction between the higher ranks of polished society, and the inferior orders of mankind, whose daily labours allow no leisure for other enjoyments than those of mere sensual, individual, and personal gratification.

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<sup>102</sup> H. Repton, 'A Letter to Uvedale Price, Esq.', in Price, *Letter to H. Repton*, 10.

<sup>103</sup> Repton, 'Letter to Uvedale Price', Price, *Letter*, 18-19.

This statement from the preface of his *Observations*, in making explicit claims equating taste with morality and social distinction, demonstrates how landscaping also became embroiled in the race for class and social status.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, in emphasising the roles of judgement in the formation of taste, Repton validates his own distinguished position as a professional landscape gardener who applies his judgement and taste to the land, using his Red Books to provide aesthetic guidance for his clients.<sup>105</sup> The issue of class and gardening and their relationship with taste is also apparent in the periodicals of the period. An excellent example of this is a mid-century article from *The World* in which Adam Fitz-Adam (the *nom de plume* of Edward Moore) casts his satirical eye over the subject of gardening. In particular, his account of Squire Mushroom, a newly enriched man ‘from a dirty little village in Hampshire’ is found to be ‘ambitious of introducing himself to the world as a man of taste and pleasure’.<sup>106</sup> As such, he built himself a villa highly reminiscent of Cooper’s Mucio’s Palace. In ‘building and planting with all the rage of taste’, Squire Mushroom is left with a highly incongruous and decorous house and a garden filled with Chinese bridges and classical monuments. Supremely scathing, Fitz-Adam resolves that the most effective way for ‘Folly’ to ‘display herself to the world’ is to build a villa.<sup>107</sup> This satirical approach to the relationship between taste, class and gardening is also found three decades later in a letter concerning a tradesman’s wife’s ‘ridiculous Affectation of a Taste in Gardening.’ In this the issue of class is discussed immediately, appearing as a prerequisite for taste. Thus in its absence it becomes a qualification for her lack of it: ‘You must know...her father was a carcass-butcher in Whitechapel...(she) never travelled further than Bethnal Green...yet she affects such a taste and passion for the country’. Indeed, if her husband ‘expostulates’ over her rural ideas in their modest urban setting she deems him to have no taste.<sup>108</sup> In conjunction with Squire Mushroom, this article highlights how, as with other areas of

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<sup>104</sup> H. Repton, ‘Preface: Containing Some Observations on Taste’, in *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*, (London, 1803) 124. Repton’s preoccupation with the prominence of his profession is evident in his disagreement concerning its definition: ‘my profession has more frequently been practiced by mere day labourers, and persons of no education, it is the more difficult to give it that rank among the polite arts which I conceive it ought to hold’ – Repton, ‘Letter to Uvedale Price’, Price, *Letter to H. Repton*, 18.

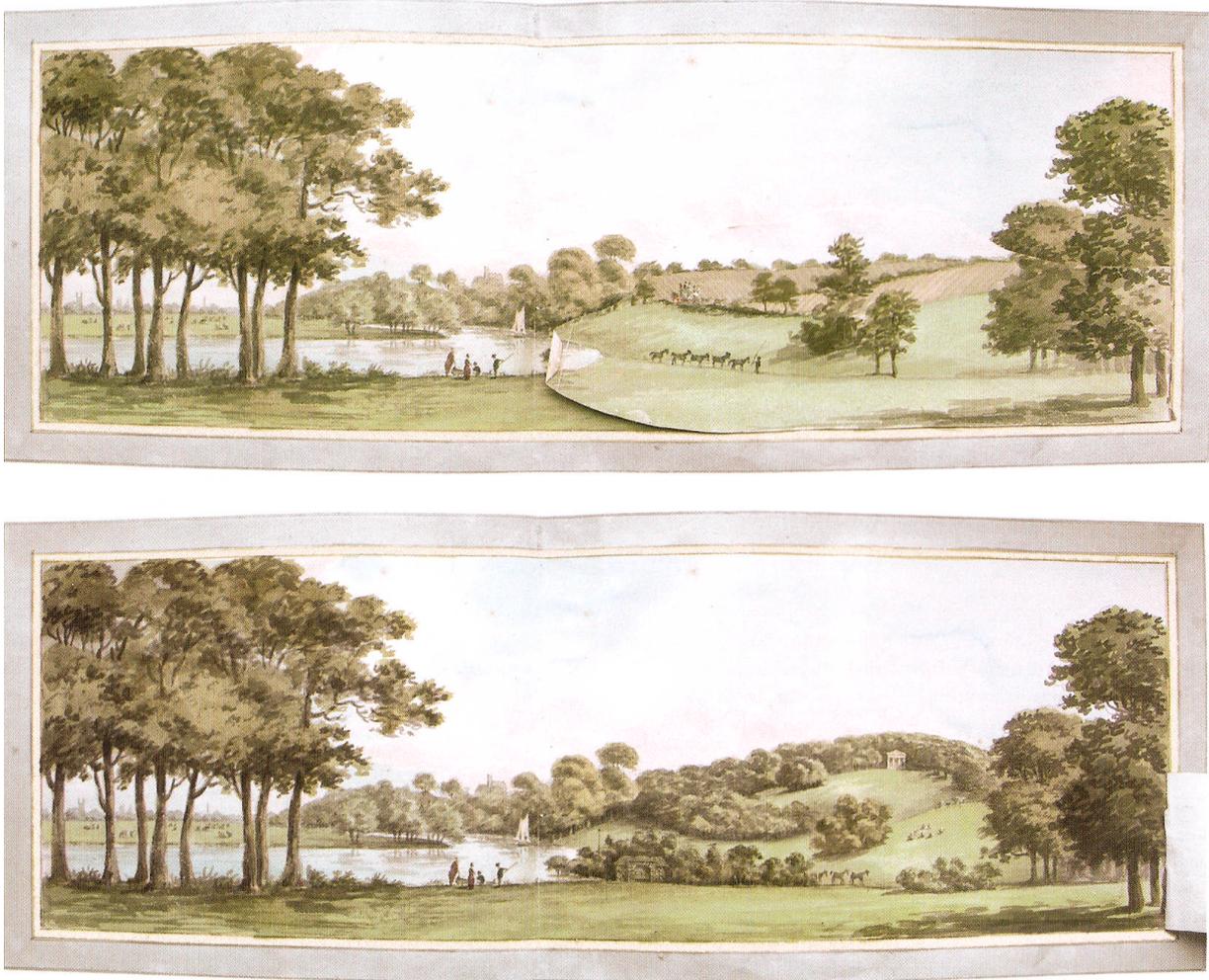
<sup>105</sup> Repton’s ‘Red Books’ consisted of watercolours of ‘before’ and ‘after’ views of his client’s gardens aided by explanatory text. For more on these see Rogger, *Landscapes of Taste*. See also Fig. 1, p. 31.

<sup>106</sup> Adam Fitz-Adam, in *The World*, (April, 1753), 88.

<sup>107</sup> Fitz-Adam, *The World*, 90.

<sup>108</sup> ‘A Humorous Letter from a Tradesman in London, complaining of his Wife’s Ridiculous Affectation of a Taste in Gardening’, in *Weekly Miscellany; or Instructive Entertainer*, (November, 1781), 161-62.

cultural debate, gardening also became ensnared in the debates on class and the possession of taste.



**Fig 1:** Repton, *Purley in Berkshire*, 1793. Sketch II: View from the suggested new house.  
*Top:* Satus quo, with two overlays. *Bottom:* Ideal view, as improved by H Repton  
Watercolour, 450 x 165mm. Private collection, England, in Rogger, *Landscapes of Taste*, 54.

What conclusions can be drawn from this case study of gardening? The rise in professional gardening as a leisure activity in the eighteenth-century drew upon taste as a central contribution to discussions of design and aesthetics. Gardening soon became both a symptom and a symbol of a climate in which the discussion of culture and knowledge took place on an increasingly public stage and with an ever-expanding cast. Drawing on the language and hypotheses put forward by the intellectual debates on taste, Whately and Walpole demonstrate how far gardening became a 'subject for taste'. Moreover, it soon became a tool in the disagreements between authors. In a similar usage to that found in periodical and newspaper debate, the possession of taste was used to make claims of stylistic distinction. In this way, landscape gardens functioned not merely as spaces subject to the principles of taste, but also became sites in which the concepts of beauty and taste were configured. Of course, the very issue of gardening for these treatises and histories concerned itself with the parkland and estates of the landed classes, such as Brown's work on Stowe House in Buckinghamshire. Men of all social ranks did not commission Brown and Repton. Rather, in working and debating on the gardens of landowners and the upper echelons of the propertied middling classes (merchants, financiers and professionals), the rules of taste and judgement became critical in the distinction between different social groups. As such, the commercially wealthy, yet politically and aristocratically poor, became the subject of ridicule in articles such as that found in *The World*. Thus, Squire Mushroom is rebuked for his attempts to qualify his relatively small garden, filled with as many fashions and classical structures as possible, by the invocation of the word 'taste'. Crucially, the man of taste is deployed in these narratives in a similar manner to the intellectual and periodical discourses involving taste. In this way, the debates on gardening invoke the highly elusive and scarcely obtainable status of the man of taste as he is found in the previous chapters. Equipping its possessors with claims of elevation and distinction, taste is rendered a highly divisive concept within landscape gardening.

## CONCLUSIONS

Knowing no other criterion of greatness, but the ostentation of wealth, they discharge their affluence without taste or conduct, through every channel of the most absurd extravagance: ...without further qualification, they can mingle with the princes and nobles of the land. Even the wives and daughters of low tradesmen, who like shovel-nosed sharks, prey upon the blubber of the uncouth whales of fortune, are infected with the same rage of displaying their importance...a very inconsiderable proportion of genteel people are lost in the mob of impudent plebeians, who have neither understanding nor judgement.

As a mouthpiece for the lamentation of the ostentatious wealth and luxury of his age, Tobias Smollett's devastating attack on the 'fashionable company' of Bath in *Humphry Clinker* (1771) depicts a nation on display.<sup>109</sup> Corrupted by the pursuit of wealth and social display, the idealised vision of the man of taste presented in the intellectual discourses on taste from Burke, Gerard, Hume, and Cooper is starkly absent. Today, the reports of celebrity spending in newspapers and magazines inspire a range of responses from awe to disapproval in the face of such conspicuous consumption. As we pore over tables and lists of material wealth with envy and intrigue, our fascination with the lifestyles and possessions of the mega-rich has led us voyeuristically into their homes. Consequently, an episode of 'MTV Cribs', a programme where celebrities show people through their homes, becomes highly reminiscent of Mucio's Palace or Squire Mushroom's villa. Presented with vast 'monuments of vanity', Cooper's concept of 'unmeaning glitter' is by no means alien to us today.<sup>110</sup> Whether we are drawn to admire or criticise the aesthetic and lifestyle choices made by our contemporaries or those who appear to us on the screen and on the page, the question of good taste is still attended by issues of class and social hierarchy.

The Enlightenment reconfiguration of man, as it delved into his inner faculties and behaviour, left the definition and manifestation of taste, and man's ability to possess it, an uncertain and ambiguous concept. In searching for its location and operation in cultural debate it has been questioned whether it served an adhesive role in eighteenth-century Britain. In a nation of increasing mercantile wealth and consumption, many were denied access to the power of the political. Yet, the possibility afforded by the new cultural capital from the mid-century was

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<sup>109</sup> T. Smollett, *Humphry Clinker*, (London, 2008) 44.

<sup>110</sup> Cooper, *Letters Concerning Taste*, 61-62 Cooper, *Letters Concerning Taste*, 61-62.

qualified and facilitated by invoking the possession and application of taste. As the periodical press demonstrates, vast numbers of the middling classes were anxious to stake a claim for cultural fluency through their appropriation and application of taste. But in this period, dubbed the ‘most polite age and most vicious’ taste became a double-edged sword.<sup>111</sup> Not only a facilitator for those who self-consciously sought taste in all manner of pursuits and possessions, taste became a tool in the armoury of those who wished to criticise and attack the new claimants of social and cultural distinction. Thus, at stake was the power over the classificatory schemes and systems, which, as Bourdieu argues, form the basis of the social groups themselves.<sup>112</sup> The mobilisation of taste thus became a battleground of definition, application and possession; the prize at stake - social distinction.

However the treatises’ attempts to fix the principles of taste became highly suggestive of an innate ability for taste in all men. Consequently, in theory, nothing prevented the masses from accessing these rules of acquisition and laying claim to taste. Moreover, their uncertainty and vague descriptions of the man of taste, rather than hindering discussion and appropriation in public debate, ensured that he could be called upon and invoked by greater number. As the periodical and newspaper press demonstrate, he became a guiding principle, facilitating their consumption providing a justification for their consumer and lifestyle choices. Moreover, he simultaneously became a symbol, called upon by the satirist and critic in order to attack the misguided taste of the masses. Thus, the uncertainties of taste and its possession were beneficial for all who wished to appropriate it for their cause, moulding and shaping the concept for their own participation in public debate. This is evident in the case study on landscape gardening. Taste was invoked as the correct design and judgement in garden design became contested. Not only as a means of justification, but also serving to criticise, taste became a central tool in the debates and articles on English landscape design. Moreover, it confirms the conclusion that while taste remained an obtainable goal from the perspective of the middling classes, the intellectual and social elite continued to constrain its possession within the narrow confines of birth.

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<sup>111</sup> Brewer, “‘The Most Polite Age and Most Vicious’”, Bermingham and Brewer, *The Consumption of Culture*, 341-61.

<sup>112</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 479.

Indeed, as it has been shown, the discussion of taste infiltrated a vast number of debates in eighteenth-century Britain. As such, this dissertation has specifically focussed on its possession and acquisition and the implications these have for social status and class distinction in an age where traditional modes of classification were increasingly challenged. The man of taste becomes a focaliser, a tool through which we can enter into this complicated, competitive and changing cultural arena of social display. However, there remain many other avenues in which to pursue this elusive term. Testament to its reach in Britain, further research is required into its application and effects on the terms of other areas of cultural debate. However, this study has addressed the central issue of the possession of taste and the belief in man's ability to acquire it. Occupying a privileged place in the rhetoric on society and cultural fluency, it is clear that ideas and attitudes played an important role in the public sphere. As increasing numbers qualified or condemned consumption, they too became consumed by taste.

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