

Alex Wetmore, “Sympathy Machines: Men of Feeling and the Automaton.” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 43.1 (2009): 37-54

While it has long been established that in the eighteenth century models of femininity were often grounded in mechanical analogies, Wetmore’s wide-ranging article of several – but fluidly connected – parts crosses traditional disciplinary divisions between eighteenth-century literature, moral philosophy and popular culture to argue that the “connection between sensitive men and machines” (39) highlights a significant movement from the earlier association of technological developments with self-interest.

Reading Adam Ferguson’s *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), the article convincingly shows that civic humanists often saw the relationship between public and private as following the classical division of liberal and mechanic, and that this social difference mediated various interpretations of the “moral value and social impact of technology” (39). Such divergent attitudes are apparent in early eighteenth-century satires of print culture, including Swift’s *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), which self-consciously draws attention to its status as an object of mechanical and commercial origin in order to support liberal conceptions of production. In later sentimental fictions, however, Wetmore rightly notes that the satirical tone towards their own mechanical and commercial nature is significantly softer than in the Augustan satires.

Wetmore then sets out to “illustrate the subversive potential inherent in eighteenth-century automata, and . . . illuminate important parallels between automata and men of feeling” (44) by examining the anonymous *The Divine Predictions of Daniel and St. John Demonstrated in a Symbolical Theological Dissertation on Cox’s Museum* (1774). As its title suggests, through parallel columns of text this pamphlet connects verses from the books of Daniel and Revelation to the amusing mechanisms encountered during the 1770s at Cox’s Museum in the Spring Gardens. While *Divine Predictions* apparently “points to an important underlying truth about the social and ideological significance of Cox’s exhibition”, Wetmore acknowledges that the pamphlet is “Grounded in under-analyzed, largely superficial similarities” and so presents an argument which is “on the whole, poorly articulated, confusing, and less than convincing” (45). This is an understatement: Wetmore seems to overlook that the pamphlet is an ironic spoof satirizing its ‘dedicatee’ William Warburton’s *Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated* (1737-41). This misreading is perhaps not as catastrophic as it at first sounds (because it is redeemed by significant insights elsewhere in the article), but does hint that one should be a little concerned about the veracity of the “radical upheaval” (45) in culture Wetmore suggests this museum represents.

The article next moves on to its apparent focus: the identification of a shift in the relationship between the liberal and the mechanical within the mid-century novels of “men of feeling” by Sterne, Smollett and Mackenzie. Here, Wetmore’s claim that in discourse prior to the mid-eighteenth century the “realms of sensibility and technology were typically represented as distinct and bound up with separate spheres of public and private” (39) can only go so far, especially if one takes into account the late seventeenth-century Latitudinarian and opponent of Hobbes, Samuel Parker, who argued that “the generality of Men . . . cannot but pity and commiserate the afflicted with a kind of fatal and mechanical Sympathy; their groans force tears and sighs from

the unafflicted” (qtd. in Crane, “Suggestions toward a Genealogy of the ‘Man of Feeling.’” *ELH* 1 (1934): 205-30). R.S. Crane’s essay on the ‘man of feeling’ from which this quotation is drawn is notably absent from Wetmore’s references. It is also regrettable that the article does not acknowledge G. S. Rousseau’s groundbreaking 1975 essay “Nerves, Spirits, and Fibres: Towards Defining the Origins of Sensibility”, especially its discussion of mechanistic mind-body analogies. However, Wetmore’s analysis does establish an important connection between social division and mechanism, adding a different perspective to the number of recent articles which have focused on class in each of these three important novels of sympathy.

In the concluding section, the article makes the case that the sentimental philosophies of the Scottish Enlightenment not only “helped give birth to the man of feeling as a masculine ideal”, but also reinterpreted the categories of public and private, and liberal and mechanic. This re-appraisal challenged the “absolute categorical divisions upon which civic humanism is founded” (50), through the association of the pleasure of observing ingenious mechanisms at work with the satisfaction generated by responses to witnessing virtuous acts. Wetmore acutely suggests that these ideas laid “the ideological groundwork for the emergence of the man of feeling, who is defined by both his mechanistic reactions and his virtuous sensibility” (51): an important point that could have perhaps been made more emphatic earlier in the argument.

Notwithstanding the caveats noted above, the article has much to offer scholars of sensibility, technology, and gender in the eighteenth century, and can be commended for its interdisciplinary endeavours.

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