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Jennifer Tsien, *The Bad Taste of Others: Judging Literary Value in Eighteenth-Century France*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. 268 pp. Notes, works cited, index, acknowledgments. \$47.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8122-4359-8.

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The redundancy in Jennifer Tsien's provocative title—isn't bad taste always the taste of others?—quite precisely conveys the central idea of this volume and the limits of its argument. Tsien is less concerned with synthesizing a global theory of taste in the eighteenth century than with exploring the ways in which various parties used the label of *bad taste* to discredit other authors, genres, interpretations, periods, nations, or schools.

According to Tsien, accusations of bad taste were used by the period's successive critical parties to defend their opinions, works, and values against two threats posed by the expanding book market in the eighteenth century: a flood of mediocre publications that risked sullyng the French reputation for cultural supremacy, and a democratization of critique that allowed people of dubious qualification to pass judgment on works. Effectively, the label of bad taste was a means of canon formation, maintaining the values of one period or party—in this case the classical ideals of the previous century—by suppressing competing works and genres. Over time, the “edifice of taste” and the canon were built “over the remains of rejected authors, styles, words, and genres” (p. 185), a selection of which Tsien resuscitates for analysis in her work.

The story, outlined in the Introduction, begins in the first half of the eighteenth century, when the ideals of seventeenth-century *salon* culture and its ethic of “worldly politeness” and *honnêteté* were taken up and theorized into a privileged sensibility for artistic judgment by what Tsien calls the “high-society *mondains*” (p. 9) and their intellectual allies: authors such as the marquise de Lambert, Montesquieu, Batteux, and Dubos. Their theories focused on the viewer's or reader's reactions to works of art, correlating appropriate assessments of beauty to a refined sensibility—a sensibility they associated, not surprisingly, with their own social rank and used to identify great art and to distinguish themselves from their inferiors.

In the second half of the century, the sensitive *mondain* was displaced by the group Tsien calls the *philosophes* or *gens de lettres* and which included not only the *philosophes* themselves (among whom Voltaire plays the lead role in Tsien's study), but also those lesser literary figures like Marmontel and La Harpe, who flourished in their backwash. Theorizing that the capacity to judge a work of art hinged not merely on birthright and innate sensitivity but also on training and erudition, these authors used the notion of bad taste to purge inferior works from the French cultural legacy.

Together, the *mondains* and the *philosophes* shaped the canon by exclusion, using the label of bad taste to repress authors, genres, styles, and formal traits that enjoyed substantial popularity in their day. In order to gain “a more complete view of the literary landscape of eighteenth-century France” (p. 185), Tsien devotes the bulk of her study to a survey of these discredited categories: the foreign, the barbaric, the gothic, the enigmatic, the unclear, and the disorderly. In the course of this survey, we learn a lot

about literary tastes of the day, but relatively little about the evolution of (bad) taste as a theoretical category.

The first chapter of the book sets the stage for this drama of suppression by recasting the eighteenth century as overrun by mediocre books and bibliomania. Drawing heavily on Bollioud Mermet's 1761 *De la bibliomanie*, as well as D'Alembert's article on bibliomania in the *Encyclopédie* and Charles Palissot's 1760 comedy, *Les Philosophes*, Tsien argues that a profusion of bad literature in the expanding book market, along with the immoderate love of luxury books, triggered a reaction on the part of the enlightened critical establishment who, eager to maintain their patent of expertise, faulted the judgment of the untrained reader and sought to "enjoin the public to keep its distance from literature" (p. 29). It is not entirely clear, however, how this injunction requires the notion of bad taste, since the relationship of taste to judgment, morals, and sentiment was one of the most heavily argued topics of the day. Tsien herself notes that it is "impossible to undertake a discussion of bad taste without first considering the standard of good taste, a term that was notoriously difficult to define" (p. 39). She finesses the problem by declaring, somewhat tautologically, that the "lack of judgment among foolish readers can be seen as a lack of taste, if taste can be defined as the ability to discern good from bad literature" (p. 29).

The second chapter, "What is Good Taste?" provides a glimpse of just how difficult it is to define taste in the eighteenth century. Tsien briskly summarizes the ideas of a number of theoreticians, ranging from early men of letters, like Crousaz, le père André, Batteux, and Dubos, whose ideas about taste were bound up in their theories of beauty and the role of sentiment in assessing it, to the later *philosophes*, whose speculations about aesthetic response opened issues of intellectual autonomy, critical experience, and acquired expertise. This is the richest chapter in the book and the most frustrating. It provides a glimpse into some fascinating theoretical texts and the issues they raise, and Tsien nicely interweaves the secondary literature into her survey. But the reader hoping for a synthesis of what made the concept of taste so useful to eighteenth-century thought may well come away frustrated. Since the rest of the book defines bad taste only by inference, tabulating the groups and practices to which the label was applied, it would have been useful to have at the outset an analysis of just what it was that gave the concept of "taste" its conceptual muscle and usefulness as a rhetorical tool.

One wonders, for instance, how the ambivalence that Tsien notes in the meaning of taste—as individual preference or as feature of an object or art work (p. 46)—might map on to one of her central concerns, "the problematic relationship between subjectivity and authority" (p. 2). Batteux's theory, for example, sheds some light on this issue, and on taste's role in reconciling traditional hierarchies of expertise to the notions of personal aesthetic response and the expanding authority of consensus opinion (p. 5). Batteux declares that "le Goût est une connoissance des Regles par le sentiment," that is "beaucoup plus fine & plus sure que celle de l'esprit." [1] But he also identifies taste with collective norms, assimilating personal feeling to public consensus: "Tel est le progrès du Goût: le Public se laisse prendre peu à peu par les exemples. A force de voir, même sans remarquer, on se forme insensiblement sur ce qu'on a vu. Les grands Artistes exposent dans leurs Ouvrages les traits de la belle Nature: ceux qui ont eu quelque éducation, les approuvent d'abord; le peuple même en est frappé. On s'applique le modèle sans y penser. . . Les façons, les discours, les démarches extérieures se sentent d'abord de la réforme: elle passe jusqu'à l'esprit. On veut que les pensées, quand elles sortiront au-dehors, paroissent justes, naturelles, & propres à nous mériter l'estime des autres hommes." [2]

In this scenario, personal feeling both undergirds collective taste and derives from it, much as does truth in the later and more politically muscular concept of Public Opinion. By defining taste as a personal intuition that one refines and expresses under social pressure, Batteux's theory channels the expression of individuality into conformity with consensus opinion. The authority of the critical elite, conversely, depends on the ability to inspire individual acts of aesthetic emulation, which are also gestures of social affiliation. The fact that some individuals ignore the imperative, favor discredited works or genres, and are branded "in bad taste," in no way excludes the positive dimensions of the model or justifies Tsien's

blanket statement that “the *philosophes*’ self-identification as the new judges of taste necessitated the exclusion of others” (p. 11). One might more logically argue that maintaining their authority through the logic of taste necessitated the *recruitment* of others.

Tsien’s third chapter, “The Barbaric, or Of Time and Taste,” inaugurates her survey of things in bad taste and sets the historical stage for her thesis. Providing an overview of the historical prejudices of the eighteenth century, she focuses on how critics repudiated in the name of bad taste and the “barbaric” all things medieval or “gothic,” including the French nation’s own Celtic or Frankish influences. Even the French Renaissance falls by the wayside in the eighteenth century’s determination to trace its lineage directly back to classical sources. However, Tsien argues, this does not mean the eighteenth century saw itself as a golden age: “the superposition of the eighteenth century on the Rome of the Augustan era . . . permits the French writers to envisage their own civilization following the same trajectory as Rome: from primitive beginnings to a high point, then decadence, which leaves the nation vulnerable to attack by barbarians” (p. 97). As Tsien sees it, it was to prevent the incipient decadence of their own century that the writers she examines set about purifying contemporary taste.

The fourth chapter, “On Foreign Taste,” explores how the category of taste intersected contemporary fascination with foreign cultures. To insulate their culture against rival claims to taste, theoreticians like Dubos devised notions of national temperament resulting from differences of climate, positing that France was perfectly situated to excel in poetry and theater. Appeals to taste were also used to defend French letters against the rising popularity of exotic, especially “Oriental” works of art and values. After paraphrasing and critiquing “three types of arguments that overtly or implicitly discredit the taste of countries outside of Europe” (p. 101), Tsien analyzes the parodies of Montesquieu, Grimm, and Voltaire that map out the Orient as “an imaginary realm of bad taste” (p. 127). Her conclusion, however, that the *philosophes*’ “commentary on the ‘Orient’ . . . reveals the constant oscillation between criticizing the aspects they found objectionable (i.e., irrationality, tyranny) and praising aspects of Eastern culture in a way that would put into question Europe’s complacent belief in its own supremacy” (p. 128), seems to have no particular need of the idea of bad taste.

“The Obscure, or Enigmas and the Enigmatic,” Tsien’s fifth chapter, starts with a concise genealogy of two French ideals frequently associated with taste: clarity and order. Focusing on writing practices (excessive metaphors, obscure syntax) and genres (*énigmes*) that violated the ideal of clarity and thus embodied bad taste, Tsien traces the French preoccupation with clarity back to Quintilian and Aristotle, before segueing into a “more interesting object of inquiry” which “involves the ways in which the rule was broken in different periods and different countries” (p. 135). This “brief history of obscurity” (p. 155) hopscoches back and forth over many centuries, authors and genres, from bad eighteenth-century poetry or the prose of Montaigne to Augustine’s writing and Egyptian hieroglyphics. It reveals enigmatic writing to be a perennial topic of debate, alternately embraced or disparaged, in genres from the Christian Scripture to alchemical writings. Tsien’s ultimate thesis is that “the call for clarity among the *philosophes* seemed to combine principles of style with a political agenda, specifically the demand to make ideas, whether moral, scientific, or of any other domain, as comprehensible as possible to a large public” (p. 161).

Tsien’s sixth and last substantive chapter pivots on the remaining half of the clarity/order binary, to show how critics “enforced the principle of order through discussions of good and bad taste in writing style and how they excluded particular genres because of their random patterns” (p. 163). After briefly summarizing ideas of order found in Crousaz, André, Montesquieu, and Diderot, Tsien focuses on Buffon’s *Discours sur le style*, which interests her for the way it stigmatizes orality, femininity, and false wit in the course of its delegitimization of conversation (p. 165). This program, she asserts, is part of the “transfer of aesthetic authority . . . from the aristocratic amateurs of the seventeenth century to the *gens de lettres* of the eighteenth century” (p. 170). Genres that imitated the spontaneity of conversation and were accordingly repudiated by the *gens de lettres* include *abrégés*, compilations or *-ana*, almanacs, and

magazines. Tsien briefly surveys these before detailing at some length the *Mercur*'s various fortunes at the hands of different editors and critics. She concludes her overview of disorder by contrasting the *Mercur* to l'*Encyclopédie*. Tsien sums up her survey and argument: "The trouble with conversation, *ana*, and magazines lies ostensibly in their tasteless lack of logical order, a critique that opens the way for the imposition of a professional, authoritative, often characterized as male, system on literature" (p. 181).

It is hard to deny the opposition between order and disorder that Tsien charts. Still, it is not self-evident that the taste/tasteless binary is the framework of choice to describe the difference between l'*Encyclopédie* and the *Mercur*, or that the label of bad taste, as Tsien describes it, has either the theoretical consistency or the conceptual muscle to function as a critical fulcrum in the repudiation of genres with which she associates it. (Note, for example, that omitting the label "tasteless" in Tsien's summary sentence, cited above, has little effect on the sentence.) The ubiquity of "taste" in discussions of the day may have more to do with an expanding discursive economy than with the special onus the term carried in the negative.

The virtues of this volume, which concludes with a short coda that leaps forward in time to Hugo's repudiation of "good taste," lie especially in its broad chronological sweep, its interpellation of modern scholarship, and its resuscitation of works and genres long since exiled from the canon. Tsien carries through on her promise to reveal an eighteenth century considerably more variegated than the canonic version to which we are accustomed, and she does so in a detailed yet readable style that should appeal to most students of the period. Even those who do not find her emphasis on the category of bad taste compelling in its particulars should appreciate the breadth of her gesture and the variety in her subject matter. The volume provides an interesting point of entry into a complex aesthetic category and the historical period and parties that deployed and theorized it.

NOTES

[1] Charles Batteux, *Les Beaux-Arts réduits à un même principe* (Paris: Chez Durand, 1746), p. 97. Dubos says much the same thing.

[2] Batteux, *Les Beaux-Arts réduits à un même principe*, pp. 119-20. Montesquieu describes a similar trajectory in his theory of *goût acquis*: Charles-Louis de Secondat Montesquieu, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Roger Caillois (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p. 62.

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