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Marie-Hélène Cotoni, *Les Dégoûts de Voltaire: exploration d'une sensibilité complexe*. Oxford: Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment, 2017. xi + 311 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index of personal names. £70.00. (pb). ISBN 978-0-7294-1190-5.

Review by Jennifer Tsien, University of Virginia.

Voltaire lived in a perpetual state of outrage. What Candide and Martin said of the ever-disapproving aesthete Pocourante could well apply to the author of *Candide* himself: "Mais, dit Candide, n'y a-t-il pas du plaisir à tout critiquer, à sentir des défauts où les autres hommes croient voir des beautés? C'est-à-dire, reprit Martin, qu'il y a du plaisir à n'avoir pas de plaisir?" Marie-Hélène Cotoni deals precisely with the many objects of Voltaire's displeasure in *Les Dégoûts de Voltaire: exploration d'une sensibilité complexe*—an inventory of people, styles, situations, and ideas that Voltaire disliked.

In the introduction, she defines the term *dégoût* within early modern parameters. On the one hand, when a literary scholar discusses an emotion with concepts of modern psychoanalysis, it can yield excellent results, as Winfried Menninghaus does in his study of the "disgust taboo," with ideas of abjection and repression. On the other hand, a scholar can also make a very justifiable and productive choice to use concepts from the subject's era, as Cotoni does. She delineates the historical use of the word *dégoût* and finds, based on the *Encyclopédie* entry "Sensibilité," that it is a bodily sensation. This is a useful fact, because it helps us to distinguish it from other words in the same semantic field, such as *indignation*, which she calls more "cerebral" (p.13). *Dégoût* can also mean a loss of interest in something one enjoyed in the past, a French usage that is not paralleled in English. Both definitions promise some solid lines of inquiry that this study could follow: a focus on Voltaire's body, rather than on his famous intellect, and a consideration of a certain anhedonia he claimed to have experienced, in spite of his long life and his passionate engagement in the world around him.

The organization of the book, I admit, confounded me a little. The material is divided into two sections, "Les dégoûts d'une vie sans dégoût de la vie" and "Les dégoûts d'un auteur polymorphe," each containing chapters that address Voltaire's reactions to various things. Some chapters are difficult to classify strictly under the first section about his life or the second section on his writing. For example, his quarrels with fellow authors Jean-Baptiste Rousseau or Fréron could fall under both headings, as could his writings about political injustices. These episodes concern events in his life, but also what he wrote about them. Even within chapter three, which deals with his romantic relationships, it is unclear why the chronology is reversed, with a discussion of Madame Denis preceding one about his earlier lover, la marquise du

Châtelet. One more observation about organization: in the index, the entry for "Voltaire" refers us to the entry for his birth name "Arouet," which surprisingly lists only four page numbers, even though every page is really about Voltaire. This oddity may just be a proofreading oversight, but it makes it impossible to search for specific titles.

In any case, Cotoni mines Voltaire's writings, from the most famous to the most obscure, to find expressions of *dégoût*. As a Voltaire scholar, I was pleased to see attention being given to long-neglected works, such as the poems "Le Bourbier" and *La Guerre civile de Genève*. What she discovers are various objects of Voltaire's scorn: for example, the editors who published unauthorized or deformed copies his works, his erstwhile patron Frederick of Prussia, religious intolerance, major writers and minor rivals. What is lost in this enumeration is the initial conceptualization of *dégoût* as a visceral, not intellectual, reaction. In many of the quotations, *disgust* could be replaced with *dislike* or *disapprove* without any consequences, since Cotoni does not explore the bodily aspects of Voltaire's emotion.

In many instances, it is the reader who is meant to be disgusted by the words that Voltaire uses, as in references to stench, vermin, bodily fluids, or sewers. Cotoni could have placed more emphasis on the important contradiction between Voltaire's use of such low language and his purported obsession with literary decorum. She nearly touches upon this idea when she states "A son combat pour le Beau et pour le Juste, Voltaire a ajouté, selon ses vues, un combat pour le Vrai, en cherchant à communiquer des dégoûts parfois hargneux" (p. 286). Later in that paragraph, she remarks that "dans la lutte contre l'Infâme," he exploits, "pour accroître la répugnance, les détails obscènes ou scatologiques"(p. 286), but the two ideas are not brought together to show how Voltaire's methods could be seen as undermining his own ideals. She does question his obsession with low diction in the fifth chapter, entitled "Un penseur combatif." There, she lists some aspects of the Old Testament, such as incest, that Voltaire declared disgusting. As an expert on eighteenth-century Biblical exegesis, Cotoni is able to argue that his attack on Jewish texts was an attack on the bases of Christianity. She also cites Voltaire's complaints about aspects of the life of Jesus that he finds offensive to his ideal of a deity and she counters by showing how he deliberately misunderstood the human side of the Christ figure. These examples and the numerous others of Voltaire's disgust could have been brought together to construct an overarching argument that would have offered a new perspective on this author or more generally on the history of ideas.

In fact, most of this book follows a trail cleared by Voltaire biographers and other literary scholars of the past century. Cotoni occasionally acknowledges these researchers, but it is surprising to see how many others she neglects to cite. At first, I presumed that the book's title was a play on Winfried Menninghaus's *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*.^[1] I hoped that Marie-Hélène Cotoni would provide a new twist on this topic from the perspective of a Voltaire scholar. In fact, she makes no reference to Menninghaus's profound and entertaining study of the disgust taboo in classical European aesthetics. While she does mention the names of Raymond Naves and Sylvain Menant, who have written about Voltaire's aesthetics, and Olivier Ferret, who has written about his pamphlet wars, she could have engaged more with the content of their work.^[2] In her chapter about literary good taste and bad taste, she briefly reiterates arguments that were made by scholars years earlier, but she cites only primary sources.^[3]

Even though the book covers mostly well-known material, there are moments when Cotoni

hints at several relatively new areas of research that future scholars could branch out into. One area of potential interest is found in the chapter "Un penseur combatif," in which she describes Voltaire's horror of the human body, both the universal one and his own aging and sick one (pp. 167-168). She could have noted how the ugliness he evokes goes against our assumptions about the Enlightenment, especially its human-centric view of the universe and the ideas of human beauty that it inherited from Antiquity. A related line of inquiry is the rapport between humans and animals, both in philosophical terms and in terms of literary decorum: why does Voltaire claim animals are superior to humans in some writings but then uses animal metaphors to demean his enemies? Cotoni could have written more about these issues, after consulting the research that has already been done on them. These ideas would situate Voltaire vis-à-vis current trends in disability studies, animal studies, and ecocriticism.

The same could be said of another field she lightly hints at: queer studies. Voltaire expresses his contradictory views towards male homosexuality in terms that are very much related to the theme of *dégoût*. Cotoni merely mentions his homophobic *ad hominem* attacks on rivals such as the abbé Desfontaines. She could have pointed out that this reaction to sodomy with moral and physical disgust contrasts with other writings in which he describes same-sex attraction as understandable, given the beauty of certain young men, whose bodies he describes in sensuous detail, for example in *La Pucelle* or in the article "Amour nommé socratique" of the *Dictionnaire philosophique*.

Yet one more area of research Cotoni hints at tantalizingly is Voltaire's attitude toward urban planning. She cites his complaints about the dirtiness of Paris, its dysfunctional system of sewage, its unhygienic burial practices, and other problems. His concerns could be put in the context of changing mentalities about cleanliness, subjects that have been pioneered by Norbert Elias and Georges Vigarello.

I mention these topics that Cotoni's book could have explored further for two reasons. First, they could have exposed the wider-reaching implications of Voltaire's disgust. Without resorting to modern psychology, she could have shown how his statements revealed a system of thought that aimed to identify and remove anything dirty, low, morally unjust, and reminiscent of human weakness from his world. This would embed the narrow field of Voltaire studies in the larger fields of the history of mentalities, intellectual history, and early modern European philosophy. Second, it would be useful to show how Voltaire is still relevant to today's readers. For example, his expressions of disgust are examples of the problematic use of *ad hominem* insults in the political arena. His disgust with the human body can be connected to the ethics of food, the narratives of eating disorders, and other current concerns. The theme of disgust has the potential to reveal much about a society and it is to be hoped that this traditional approach to Voltaire will offer some promising lines of inquiry for future researchers to follow.

NOTES

[1] Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, trans. Howard Eiland and Joel Golb (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003).

[2] Raymond Naves, *Le Goût de Voltaire* (Paris: Garnier, 1938); Sylvain Menant, *L'Esthétique de Voltaire* (Paris: SEDES 1995); Olivier Ferret, *La fureur de nuire : échanges pamphlétaires entre*

philosophes et antiphilosophes (1750-1770) (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2007).

[3] Rémy Saisselin, *Taste in Eighteenth-Century France* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1965); Annie Becq, *Genèse de l'esthétique française moderne* (Pisa: Pacini, 1994), Jennifer Tsien, *The Bad Taste of Others: Judging Literary Value in Eighteenth-Century France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Jean-Christophe Abramovici and Carine Barbaferi, eds. *L'Invention du mauvais goût à l'âge classique (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècle)* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013); among others.

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