

Suffering and Happiness in England, 1550-1850: Narratives and Representations: a Collection to Honour Paul Slack

Review Number: 2204

Publish date: Thursday, 7 December, 2017

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ISBN: 9780198748267

Date of Publication: 2017

Price: £65.00

Pages: 272pp.

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Publisher url: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/suffering-and-happiness-in-england-1550-1850-narratives-and-representations-9780198748267?cc=gb&lang=en&>

Place of Publication: Oxford

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Paul Slack has made an important contribution to the history of early modern England. From his early research into plague victims, poverty and urban society, to his more recent discussions on ‘improvement’, consumption and material progress, Slack’s ideas and arguments permeate the 11 essays that make up this volume, which offers a diverse and eclectic history of England from 1550 to 1850. The editors, Michael J. Braddick and Joanna Innes, position this collection both as a tribute to Slack’s work and as a tool for engaging with the emerging field of ‘history of emotions’. Although this has never been a feature of Slack’s research, cues have been taken from his 2007 *English Historical Review* article on ‘The Politics of Consumption and England’s Happiness in the Later Seventeenth Century’.⁽¹⁾ The result is a volume that captures the discourses, language and experiences of ‘happiness’ and ‘suffering’ in various contexts, including linguistics, the history of religion, political discourse, material culture and economic and social history. Its great strength is its awareness of the slippery boundaries between the two categories, as well as the complexity of particular events and processes in changing the significance and meaning attached to conceptions of suffering and happiness over time.

As Braddick and Innes underline in their introduction, current scholarly research is increasingly confronting the question of whether it is possible ‘to historicize the history of emotions’ (p. 6). An extended discussion about the burgeoning field of emotions history is provided, showing how these categories (and their various associations) did not just represent emotional states, but also related to particular circumstances and actions. Yet, despite this detailed discussion, emotions are neither central to the discussions nor the primary interest of the various authors. This means that there is a slight disconnect between the ‘emotional’ framework outlined by the editors and the individual contributions.

The chapters are organised thematically into three parts. The ‘Grand narratives’ that form the focus of part one explore the meanings and connotations of happiness and suffering over time, primarily from the perspective of linguistics and religious and political discourse. The first contribution is Phil Withington’s essay about the range of meanings that came to be associated with the word ‘happiness’ over the course of

the 16th and 17th centuries. Using printed writings as his main source base, and aided by data from keyword and title searches from *Early English Books Online*, Withington successfully shows that the concept of 'happiness' did not have fixed meanings for early modern audiences. It was only through the increasing utilisation of the vernacular to translate classical and Reformation texts in the later 16th century that it acquired the connotations with which we are familiar today (before this point, 'felicity' was used to describe a general sense of contentment and worldly fortune).

The unusual relationship between happiness and suffering is the subject of Alexandra Walsham's essay 'The happiness of suffering'. The two are unlikely bedfellows, but Walsham is successfully able to show how early modern Protestants and Catholics viewed suffering as happiness, and believed that 'true happiness' could only be achieved through suffering (p. 45). Walsham probes how the Protestant Reformation altered the culture of suffering in 16th-century England, since it no longer held salvific powers. She is nevertheless able to effectively show how Protestant reformers continued to evoke 'the theology of affliction' as evidence of their future salvation and as a means of overcoming hardship in their daily lives (p. 55). Linking with her earlier research (2), particular stress is placed on divine providence as a tool for overcoming suffering and achieving happiness, with the closing section hinting at the relationship between happiness and economic prosperity.

Theological writings also underpin Craig Muldrew's investigation of happiness and 'the self' in the late 17th century in chapter three. The essay offers a challenging and wide-ranging philosophical exploration on how ancient understandings of happiness, especially the Aristotelian and Stoic concepts of eudaimonia, beatus and felicitas, permeated Christian thought. But its main emphasis is on how ideas about self-cultivation and self-discipline, as emphasised by the Cambridge Platonists, came to have particular significance in the late 17th century. This was partly in reaction to the publication of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, which painted a bleak picture of happiness and man's ability to control his passions, but also because of emerging debates about religious toleration and material happiness. At times, the wider historical context as a driver for change is only implicit and it would be interesting to see how the concept of 'happiness' in this context intersected with post-Restoration discourses of toleration, pluralism and coexistence.

In chapter four, Joanna Innes examines the 'varying registers' in which the concept of 'happiness' was utilised over the late 18th and early 19th centuries (p. 108). Making specific reference to the impact of the turbulent events of the 1790s, this eclectic discussion about happiness's changing public discourse raises the question of the role of the political elite in promoting popular happiness. Innes's attempt to engage with a complex and varied story of change is laudable, but some of the ideas and concepts invoked within the chapter could have been a little more fully-explained for the reader, in particular the repeated claim that by the mid-19th century 'happiness' had lost its 'banality', but was also becoming less 'multivalent' (pp. 10, 87, 108). A few more illustrations of this particular point would have been helpful, including clarification about the meaning of 'banal' in this context, as would a greater exploration of the 'radicals' of the late 18th century who were mobilizing 'happiness' in interesting and different ways (p. 101).

Here we leave the philosophical and linguistic structures of happiness and suffering, and move to the ways in which these concepts were mobilized by groups and individuals to elicit an emotional reaction from their audiences. The more focused approach of part two begins with Michael J. Braddick's dissection of John Lilburne's writings, with particular stress on how Lilburne consciously evoked a tradition of martyrdom to argue for civil change. The ways in which Lilburne used his various imprisonments to appeal not to co-religionists but to 'free-born Englishmen' (pp. 117–18) provides an interesting counterpoint to Walsham's chapter, underscoring how the concept of 'suffering' could be deployed in a variety of contexts and settings. Despite recognising that Lilburne's writings aimed 'to elicit indignation, sympathy, and anger' (p. 116), Braddick could have explored the intended audience in more depth and engaged with some of the methodological tools of enquiry from the history of emotions. For example, through fuller discussion of Lilburne's aim to create an 'emotional community' with his fellow-Englishmen through narrating his experience of suffering and affliction.

Accounts of suffering also underpin Faramerz Dabhoiwala's study of petitions in post-Restoration England. In contrast to existing studies, however, Dabhoiwala's interest is not so much in the content of the petitions but in the process of their creation and delivery. In so doing, he focuses on the surviving archive of the notary, scrivener and minor government official William Griffith, who was employed to write petitions for both literate and illiterate supplicants. Two interesting details about the petitionary process are revealed from this micro-study. First, that much of the work of petition writers like Griffith lay not in the act of writing, but their expertise and knowledge about how 'to get a petition to the king' (p. 132). Second, that the petitions were often brief because they were supported by a whole range of other documents which rarely survive, including an outline of the petitioner's case, letters of support and documents vouching for their character and circumstances.

Chapter seven by Tim Hitchcock draws upon similar themes, focusing on a broadside and ballad that recounted the death of an inmate, Mary Whistle, at the newly-erected workhouse in St Giles parish.⁽³⁾ The aim of the chapter is to draw attention to the micro-politics of the parish. It reveals the social tensions that changing bureaucratic processes and the new system of parish workhouses brought to the communities of St Giles and St George Bloomsbury in the 1720s and 1730s. One of the challenges with this type of discussion is the issue of representation. Much of the focus, for example, is on the changing topography of the parish, building to a conclusion about how ballads and broadsides on the suffering of paupers and workhouse inmates influenced government and parish politics. But the agency of women like Mary Whistle in this process is somewhat unclear. Likewise, it raises questions about the role of the workhouse inmates in the construction of this anti-workhouse propaganda, as well as the identity of the authors of these texts and their intended audiences.

Part three closes the volume with a series of chapters that seek to reclaim the experience of suffering and happiness, coming closest to recovering what we might term 'emotional experience'. It begins with Mark Knights's excellent contribution about the merchant philosopher James Boevey, who mused upon his experiences of hardship and suffering and his views about happiness in over 30 manuscript volumes on various topics. Knights argues that this 'active philosophy' (as Boevey termed it), circulated to a close circle of friends and acquaintances, enabled Boevey to reflect on his turbulent career and to navigate the challenges of 'life's vicissitudes' (p. 177). These manuscripts are a unique find, enabling the historian to 'penetrate the philosophical outlooks of merchants of this period beyond their economic ideas and political, social or religious networks' (pp. 179–80) and showing us how everyday experience could be translated into philosophical thought beyond the world of print and institutions, such as courts, universities and literary societies that have dominated many of the discussions about the production of ideas and knowledge in early modern England.

Picking up on some of the themes and ideas addressed in the 'Grand narratives' of part one, Sarah Lloyd's chapter offers another insight into the relationship between poverty and happiness in the long 18th century. Emphasising the subjectivity of happiness according to situation, speaker and audience, Lloyd explores the ways in which 'poverty' was evoked by different groups, including preachers and charitable associations. The chapter concludes with an examination of the relationship between nostalgia and assertions of happiness, which suggests that poor and labouring people often contrasted past happiness with present misery in letters, petitions and statements. The chapter is ambitious in its scope, but in places would have benefitted from a greater range of evidentiary material, especially to reinforce the claim that 'home' features prominently in accounts of nostalgia given by poor people (p. 204).

Sara Pennell's innovative essay explores the experience of distraint and the emotional attachment that plebeian people felt towards their confiscated property, especially in the years following the 1689 Sale of Goods Distrainted for Rent Act. 'Everyday' chattel goods, as Pennell argues, are a topic of neglect within the scholarship and the great success of this chapter is to challenge the burgeoning work on material culture that assumes that all possessions held emotional significance for the owner. Indeed, one of the more fascinating, and underexplored ideas raised in this discussion, centres on the fact that the domestic environ, rather than

goods and possessions, held more emotional meaning for plebeian people. Infringement of the household space, for example, created greater emotional angst than the loss of specific goods. This stress on the 'home' and emotional attachment has far-reaching implications for future research and it would be fascinating to test some of Pennell's conclusions in relation to the voluminous accounts of distress kept by religious nonconformists such as the Quakers.

The final chapter of this volume returns to the theme of suffering and emotional attachment, but this time through the lens of shifting attitudes to maternal breastfeeding in the 17th and 18th centuries. Using printed advice literature, Alexandra Shepard shows how an increasing emphasis on the benefits maternal breastfeeding had the effect of changing care provision in early modern England. Over the course of a century, the wet nurse had metamorphosed from an idealized figure who played a vital role in the community, to a negligent and corrupting influence of low social status and poor educational attainment. This 'sentimentalization of maternal attachment' (p. 230), Shepard argues, occurred in conjunction with emerging ideas about 'sensibility' and 'domesticity' (p. 237). It was also a double-edged sword because it undermined the idea of childcare as skilled work, and thus fundamentally altered the early modern domestic economy.

As the editors acknowledge in their introduction, attempting to give coherence to such a diverse range of essays is a formidable task (p. 19) and although the thematic structure of the volume is largely successful, it is not entirely logical or clear how these disparate discussions hang together. With the exception of Walsham's chapter, the 'Grand narratives' of part one are primarily focused on the conceptual development of happiness, whilst suffering (as acknowledged by the editors) almost exclusively underpins the ideas discussed in the essays in part two, and many of those in part three. This imbalance means that the transition from 'grand narratives' to the mobilization and experience of happiness and suffering is not quite as successful as it could have been. It may have been helpful to have provided a brief afterword or epilogue to round off the collection and make some of the links between the chapters and the history of emotions more explicit.

One idea that might have been probed more fully relates to the suggestion that words connoting 'unhappiness' and suffering in a linguistic or political sense have received less scholarly attention than those relating to happiness (p. 18). But it raises the question of whether this scholarly omission could be partly attributed to an absence in the contemporary source material. Were these words, for example, 'lost emotions' to coin Ute Frevert's turn-of-phrase, that simply became less acceptable to talk about in public discourse?(4)

These quibbles aside, this is nevertheless a fine scholarly collection that represents the rich and vibrant discussions taking place within early modern history. The volume will appeal to a range of specialists in early modern history, including historians of religion, poverty, material culture, linguistics, political discourse and domestic economy. As already noted, although emotions and emotional states feature within the various chapters of this volume, it may come as a disappointment to scholars and students of the 'history of emotions'. A helpful index of 'emotion words' has been provided at the end of the collection to assist readers who want to trace their usage in the primary sources cited, but the link between emotions history and the more established historiographical traditions that form the basis of the individual contributions is largely absent. In some respects, this is one of the successes of the volume for, as the editors argue, the 'history of emotions' should not remain a closed field, but should serve as a methodological tool to advance conversation between historians working with different source bases, methodologies and theoretical tools: to serve 'as a crossroads, or marketplace, in which many historians' paths may fruitfully cross' (p. 19). Nevertheless, with such eclectic and wide-ranging contributions from some of the most eminent scholars of this period, *Suffering and Happiness* offers something for everyone and is undoubtedly a book that readers will find themselves delving into over and over again.

Notes

1. Paul Slack, 'The politics of consumption and England's happiness in the later seventeenth century', *English Historical Review*

- , 122 (2007), 609–31.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Especially Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2001).[Back to \(2\)](#)
 3. *The Workhouse Cruelty; Being a Full and True Account of One Mrs M. W., ... in the Parish of St Gile's in the Fields* (1731); and *The Workhouse Cruelty: Workhouses Turn'd Goals, And Goalers Executioners (1731)*.[Back to \(3\)](#)
 4. Ute Frevert, *Emotions in History: Lost and Found* (Budapest, 2011).[Back to \(4\)](#)
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