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► **To cite this version:**

Marie-Odile Bernez. Comfort, the acceptable face of luxury - an eighteenth-century cultural etymology. Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies, 2014, 14 (2), pp.3-21. halshs-01017374

HAL Id: halshs-01017374

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01017374>

Submitted on 8 Jun 2021

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Comfort, the Acceptable Face of Luxury:

An Eighteenth-Century Cultural Etymology

MARIE ODILE-BERNEZ

ABSTRACT

The use of the term comfort to refer to material well-being developed in the eighteenth century from the expressions creature comforts and comforts of life. It provided an alternative term to luxury in eighteenth-century economic theory. Comfort always retained its traditional meaning of assistance, support and solace, enabling middle-class writers and novelists to present it as necessary to a perfect lifestyle. A comfortable lifestyle was also considered as characteristic of the English constitution and so evidence of Englishness itself. As a study of the introduction of the term confort into France indicates, there seems to have been, in Britain, a consensual view that happiness, both mental and physical, was guaranteed by the right to accumulate material possessions, which in turn was supposed to be evidence of the superiority of European civilization, a sign of its progressive nature, and a justification for the dissemination of its values.



The introduction of modern amenities into European homes has been extensively studied by sociologists and historians, who have stressed the rise in consumption during the Georgian period.¹ Some objects, such as mirrors, stoves, or umbrellas, were made available by technical innovations; others, such as tea, sugar, or mahogany furniture, became accessible thanks to the expansion of global trade. Other amenities, such as carpets, curtains, or marble chimney-pieces, were no longer restricted to the aristocracy, as living standards rose.² As the British nation became richer, the number of affluent households grew as did their capacity to spend more on material objects. This signaled a change in attitude toward luxury: the view that luxury was sinful was gradually abandoned in favor of another paradigm, that it was legitimate

to desire and own luxuries.³ Historians have generally considered the terms *comforts*, *decencies*, and *conveniences* as synonyms for *luxuries*. It is true that all these words referred to the same material objects, but I argue that the word *comfort* provided a more acceptable alternative to *luxury* when referring to this increase in consumption, since the term never lost its original meaning of mental solace and reassurance and was not as negatively loaded as the word *luxury*. This view should enable us to get away from the notion that luxuries in the course of the eighteenth century were rapidly transformed into something positive. In fact, *luxury*, whose etymology goes back to the Latin *luxus*, was associated with vicious indulgence in the Christian tradition and carried a connotation of lust and sin which never totally disappeared. Luxuries were still presented as negative indulgence, and so for many people, comforts were something quite different from luxuries.

I shall first give a sketch of how the term *comfort* was presented in the works of writers on economics. Was it recognized as something intrinsically different from *necessaries* on the one hand, and *luxuries* on the other hand? In other words, was it presented as something more acceptable? Then, I shall examine the way novelists used the term to criticize both the upper and the lower classes. As representatives of the rising middle-class, novelists were likely to advocate a comfortable lifestyle as a virtuous alternative to both misery and opulence. Finally, the political undertones of the term, and its introduction into the French language, will be studied, to uncover how much *comforts* came to represent the view held by the British that progress was all about making comforts widely available.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the idea that the word *comfort* could refer to material ease and not simply to spiritual assistance to the Westminster divine John Arrowsmith in *Armillæ Catechetica, or A Chain of Principles* (1659), in which he writes, "The Scripture useth diminishing terms when it speaks of creature-comforts" (def. 7). We notice here that to distinguish between *moral* solace and *physical* well-being, the author used the expression "creature-comforts." This term recurs in seventeenth-century theological books and collections of sermons to refer to physical indulgences to be condemned, along with the alternative "comforts of life," contrary to *comfort* on its own, which only referred to spiritual and mental contentment. George Gillespie, a Presbyterian preacher, provides this distinction:

there is a good strong foundation of comfort, if a soul convinced of its own sinful estate, and of the vanity of creature comforts, does so far settle

its thoughts upon Christ that as he is the only saviour so an all-sufficient saviour. (279)

Gillespie is positive about “comfort” as spiritual content, and has a negative view of “creature comforts,” material well-being. The opposition between the mental and the physical is clearly drawn. However, Gerrard Winstanley’s Digger pamphlets, written during the same period, abundantly use the term *comfort* and its derivatives to refer to material well-being in a positive manner, as in the following example:

Will you be slaves and beggars still when you may be Freemen? Will you live in straits and die in poverty when you may live comfortably? . . . So that you have the Scriptures to protect you in making the earth a common treasury for the comfortable livelihood of your bodies, while you live upon earth. (qtd. in Berens 154)

Here, the two meanings of comfort—mental and physical well-being—are intimately connected. In fact, at several points in the pamphlets, Winstanley’s use of *comfort* is ambiguous: in many cases, physical security and mental well-being are so closely related that we cannot determine whether he is speaking about the body or the mind. For him, laborers are entitled to the proper share of the wealth they produce, and so to more than basic necessities. This, in turn, will allow them to enjoy mental and physical happiness. This departure from the traditional Christian view was made more obvious in the course of the eighteenth century, though neither Ephraim Chambers’s *Cyclopaedia* nor Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* mentions the meaning of physical well-being in their entry for *comfort*, focusing solely on its spiritual aspect.

Writers on economics were generally aware that “comforts” was not a third category existing alongside “necessaries” and “luxuries.” When Bernard Mandeville uses the term *comforts*, and he does so profusely, it is as a synonym for *luxuries*: he states that these are relative and that they tend to multiply in an opulent society. For him, everybody, including religious leaders, wants “convenient Houses, handsome Furniture, good Fires in Winter, pleasant Gardens in Summer, neat Cloaths, and Money enough to bring up their Children” (176)—these are all defined by him as “comforts of life.” The adjectives used here (*convenient, handsome, good, pleasant, neat*) are not superlatives, such as *excellent, exceptional, or outstanding*, but simply add some refinement to basic needs. The

idea may be that adding superlatives would signal the evil aspect of luxuries; conversely, removing the adjectives, and saying simply that people want “houses, furniture, fire in winter, gardens in summer, clothes” would only refer to the necessities of life. The last point, “Money enough to bring up their Children,” adds the dimension of anticipation and projection into the future, difficult to achieve for the poorer classes who live from hand to mouth, but certainly typical of the middle classes, with increased living standards, as noticed by John Kenneth Galbraith in *The Affluent Society*:

With increasing well-being all people become aware, sooner or later, that they have something to protect . . . With increasing income it also becomes possible to think of old age: the individual expects to survive, and old age without income is differentiated, as it was not before by the prospect of discomfort. (84–85)

Like Galbraith, Mandeville recognizes that most human beings have an urge to surround themselves with possessions, as this makes life more agreeable. He can use indiscriminately the terms *comforts* or *luxuries* to refer to these possessions, but the fact that he seems to prefer *comforts* may be evidence that the term was already in use among the middle and upper classes to avoid employing *luxuries*, and so to distance themselves from the sin of luxurious living.

The problem obviously with *comforts* is that it can be equated either with *luxuries*, or, in the case of Winstanley, with *necessaries*. A comparison with the terminology used by Adam Smith is quite striking: he does not use the term *comforts* as such, but the terms *conveniences* and *decencies* to insist on the legitimacy of the poorer classes possessing certain material goods. For him, the downward dissemination of material objects within society was evidence of a thriving economy. In *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), he endorses Mandeville’s idea that the poor have been enjoying some conveniences that were unknown to them before, but to which they have a legitimate right:

No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the numbers are poor and miserable. It is but equity, besides, that they who food, clothe, and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well-fed, clothed and lodged. (I: 181)

In the chapter entitled “Of the Sources of the General or Public Revenue of the Society,” Smith discusses the question of taxes on consumable commodities. He starts by stating that there are just two types of commodities: necessities and luxuries. This seems to imply that comfort is not an option. But Smith has a special definition of *necessaries*:

Under necessities, therefore, I comprehend not only those things which nature, but those things which the established rules of decency have rendered necessary to the lowest rank of people. All other things I call luxuries. (2: 465)

This explains why leather shoes can be categorized as necessary, along with fuel, candles, soap, and salt. Luxuries, on the other hand, include beer and ale, coaches, and imported foreign goods, such as wine, coffee, chocolate, tea, and sugar. But Smith acknowledges that they are bought by many of “middling or more than middling fortune” (2: 482). The study of Smith’s chapter implies first that, by connecting necessities and decencies, he feels the lower classes should enjoy a certain amount of comfort, which removes them from the level of pure subsistence; and, secondly, that luxuries are not the preserve of the upper classes, since the middling sort of people are likely to purchase sugar and tea on a regular basis. This is evidence that the distinction Smith made at the beginning of the chapter, between necessities and luxuries, is not at all watertight. Though he starts with an apparently convincing definition of *necessaries* and *luxuries*, avoiding the trap of defining *necessaries* simply as what allows human beings to subsist, one realizes that doubts still remain about the categorization of several items. These doubts reveal that *luxuries*, or *comforts*, have no absolute definition, as Mandeville had justly claimed earlier, and that the definitions of *necessaries*, *comforts*, and *luxuries* vary according to the levels of economic development. The avoidance of the word *comforts* in Smith’s writings is remarkable: by using *conveniences* and *decencies*, he justifies even further the appropriation of some material goods for the lower classes.

At the very end of the century, Thomas Malthus gives some extra weight to Smith’s view, by equating comforts with happiness—and not simply with decency. In book 2, chapter 8 of the *Essay on Population*, devoted to the checks to population in England, he remarks that some members of the lower classes may postpone marriage to preserve their comforts:

They possess the necessaries, and even the comforts of life, almost in as great plenty as their masters. Their work is easy and their food luxurious, compared with the work and food of the class of labourers . . . thus comfortably situated at present, what are their prospects if they marry? (237)

Though Malthus's perspective is different from Smith's or Mandeville's, his conclusion is similar: with the rising standard of living, more people enjoy material well-being. This is not to be deplored since they thus become part of a middle class, halfway between the poor and the rich, and are more likely to be peaceful and contented, presumably sharing its standards of morality. Comforts are now seen as essential in a thriving economy, not only because they provide the laborers with work, as Mandeville had also suggested, but also because they are likely to foster acceptable behavior in the poor. Happiness has come to depend at least in part on the possession and enjoyment of material comforts. The fact that *comforts* could refer both to mental and physical happiness guaranteed the easy transition between mental ease and material well-being, which would not have been the case with another word. That happiness and a reasonable amount of well-being went together was stressed by novelists, who, as representatives of the middle-class, praised a comfortable lifestyle as the ideal.

There is some difficulty in tracing what was considered as essential for this comfortable ideal, since comforts are situated on a sliding scale of luxuries turning into necessities.⁴ However, novels give us some insight into what objects were considered to be "comforts" or what could be called "necessary luxuries." Novelists concentrated on some essential elements: an independent house, often a farm or cottage, pleasantly situated in the country, and a happy family life, with the wife at the center of an array of domestic material objects, purchased or still very much homemade. These circumstances were presented as what the middle classes had and should hang onto, what the lower classes legitimately aspired to, and what the upper classes should desire if they were to rid themselves of unethical and unnecessary excess, divesting themselves of their carriages, expensive attires, and costly ornaments. As Maxine Berg stresses, objects are always endowed with emotional and moral values, and this was obviously very much in the mind of middle-class novelists.⁵

One of the most articulate extollers of the middle-class perspective was Hannah More. In her short moral tale *Mr. Bragwell and his two daughters* (1796), Mr. Bragwell spends a lot of money on his daughters' education at a fashionable boarding school where they only learn useless accomplishments.

In a passage from the text, Bragwell visits a friend who has brought up his own daughters to “know their place” and respect their parents:

Mr. Bragwell reached Mr. Worthy’s neat and pleasant dwelling. He found everything in it the reverse of his own. It had not so many ornaments, but it had more comforts. And when he saw his friend’s good old fashioned armchair in a warm corner, he gave a sigh to think how his own had been banished to make room for his daughter’s Music. Instead of made flowers in glass cases, and a tea chest and screens too fine to be used, and about which he was cautioned, and scolded as often as he came near them, he saw a neat shelf of good books for the service of the family, and a small medicine chest for the benefit of the poor. (More 82)

The comforts that set the two families apart include an armchair, a shelf of good books (presumably religious), and a chest of medicines for the poor. Comfortable armchairs, disseminated through Thomas Chippendale’s and George Hepplewhite’s pattern books, seem to have been a distinct eighteenth-century achievement.⁶ Apart from his armchair, Mr. Worthy’s home is centered on utility and no-nonsense values, including benevolence. Music stands, artificial flowers, tea chests, and decorative screens, all expensive and fragile, are cited as unnecessary luxuries, the precarious accomplishments of the upper classes. In the paragraph before More’s description of Bragwell’s visit, she twice mentions that Bragwell’s daughters afford no “comfort” to their parents, so the two senses of the word—spiritual, physical—are never disconnected. The comfortable home is the center of a happy life, physically and spiritually. Even Malthus acknowledged the same connection: “the evening meal, the warm house, and the comfortable fireside, would lose half their interest, if we were to exclude the idea of some object of affection, with whom they were to be shared” (155).

In Sarah Scott’s novel *The History of Sir George Ellison* (1766), the hero provides the parish poor with cottages comfortably furnished, in order to assure their happiness.⁷ The poor are also given comfortable cottages in Maria Edgeworth’s *Belinda* (1801) and in Thomas Love Peacock’s first novel, *Melincourt* (1817) which even describes an ideal cottage estate. Forester, the philanthropist, explains: “all these cottages are rich according to the definition of Socrates; for they have at all times a little more than they actually need, a subsidium for age, or sickness, or any accidental necessity” (253).

Here, as in Mandeville's remarks, *comfort* means putting some money aside for the future, an indication of the gradual rise in living standards. The life of Peacock's happy cottagers contrasts with that of factory workers, living in unwholesome and insecure environments, the common assumption being that country people are better off than urban dwellers, mostly employed in manufacturing, whose moral life and physical well-being are jeopardized by hard labor and general deprivation.⁸

The image of the comfortable country cottage is also associated with a nostalgic vision of the past. Peacock confirms this with his description of a characteristic cottage interior. The visitors find in it:

all the same traces of comfort and content, and the same images of the better days of England: the clean-tiled floor, the polished beechen table, the tea-cups on the chimney, the dresser with its glittering dishes, the old woman with her spinning-wheel by the fire, and the old man with his little grandson in the garden, giving him his first lessons in the use of the spade, the goodwife busy in her domestic arrangements and the pot boiling on the fire for the return of her husband from his labour in the field. (253)

This passage reveals the paradoxes implied in this nostalgic vision. The cottage is presented as an image of the past, the "better days of England," though it includes items—tea-cups, dresser, and glittering dishes—that would have been considered luxuries a few decades earlier. The woman, in her roles as cook and house-minder, is very much at the center of the home: the husband, returning from work in the fields, finds dinner ready, the house cleaned, and the children quiet and contented. This mixture of middle-class satisfaction and nostalgia for a bygone age focuses on the elements of domestic comfort, which encompasses both the original spiritual sense (the woman provides her assistance as the help-mate described in Genesis) and material life inside the home (commodious furniture, blazing fire, clean floor). Once again, the two senses of *comforts* are conflated.

Peacock's description illustrates the view that the lower classes could be lifted out of poverty and be provided with a minimal level of comfort. At the other end of the social scale, novelists criticized those who wallowed in luxury, advising them, for their own benefit, to be content with comfort and domesticity, to save them from aristocratic vices and habits of excess likely to involve them eventually in disease, ruin, and misery. John Sekora has drawn

attention to the fact that Tobias Smollett criticized luxuries, but felt comforts were perfectly legitimate, and so obviously two different things.⁹ Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771) provides striking examples of what the comfortable way of life is: it consists of living within one's means and refusing to ape one's social superiors. *Expedition* contrasts two families: the Dennisons and the Baynards. Dennison, the second son of an affluent man, is raised to become a lawyer, marries for love, and, after the death of his elder brother, decides to take over the family estate and live as a farmer. He is described as "very moderate in his estimate of the necessaries, and even of the comforts of life," and his real wishes are for "health of body, peace of mind and the private satisfaction of domestic quiet, unalloyed by actual want and uninterrupted by the fears of indigence" (322). He wants to avoid indigence but also luxury, symbolized by a private carriage: keeping an equipage is pure folly for Dennison, whose life centers on domestic affections. His wife, raised in the town and brought to the country, has the same outlook as her husband and finds "the reality less uncomfortable than the picture [he] had drawn" (326). Again, we see how much mental contentment is connected with physical wellness.

Baynard, on the other hand, has married a silly woman whose only aim in life is to spend as much as their richer neighbor. Baynard had the same intention as Dennison, "to keep a comfortable house, without suffering his expense to exceed the limits of his income; and to find pleasure and employment for his wife in the management and avocations of her own family" (287). His unreasonable wife, however, makes the house terribly uncomfortable, though full of luxuries. The character-narrator at this point Matthew Bramble describes the parlor as "designed to be seen only, not inhabited." The chairs seem never to have been sat upon, and the stove has never been "stained by the smoke of any gross material fire" (290). The food they are served is "made up of a parcel of kickshaws, contrived by a French cook, without one substantial article adapted to the satisfaction of an English appetite." Bramble concludes: "in short, everything was cold, comfortless, and disgusting" (295). Like Bragwell in More's story, Baynard is unhappy though surrounded by luxuries, instead of being made happy by comfortable furniture and a humane wife.

These examples are characteristic of the ideal way of life, according to many contemporary writers. Material comforts reflect and contribute to the comforts of the mind. They are more than the acceptable side of luxury: they express a type of morality based on the avoidance of extremes. In that sense, they

recall the classical definition of *merit* as the mean between extremes, rather than the Christian tradition based on the conflict between sin and virtue.¹⁰ This view of comforts extended into the political domain. Several well-known eighteenth-century writers made it clear that comforts were not only the outcome of a prosperous economic situation, or the virtuous mean enjoyed by the middle classes, but also the result of the political compromise worked out under the limited monarchy prevailing in Britain, as commerce and politics were harmoniously linked to the development of virtuous living.

As might be expected, since comfort partly depended on technical innovations, it was primarily associated with Europe, and the rest of the world often was presented as dangerous and comfortless, in both the spiritual and material senses. This notion is expressed in Samuel Johnson's *The History of Rasselas* (1759). In chapter II, the prince listens to Imlac's narrative of his journeys across the world. Imlac is an African who has traveled widely and visited the nations of Europe "which are now in possession of all power and knowledge" (28). He highlights the differences between Europe and other Continents in the following manner:

When I compared these men with the natives of our own kingdom, and those that surround us, they appeared almost another order of beings. In their countries it is difficult to wish for anything that may not be obtained: a thousand arts, of which we never heard, are continually labouring for their convenience and pleasure; and whatever their own climate has denied them is supplied by their commerce. (28)

Johnson mentions that contributions to happiness include technical innovations as well as the facilities provided by trade:

In enumerating the particular comforts of life, we shall find many advantages on the side of the Europeans. They cure wounds and diseases with which we languish and perish. We suffer inclemencies of weather which they can obviate. They have engines for the despatch of many laborious works, which we must perform by manual industry. There is such communication between distant places, that one friend can hardly be said to be absent from another. Their policy removes all publick inconveniencies: they have roads cut through their mountains, and bridges laid upon their rivers. And, if we descend to the privacies of life, their habitations are more commodious, and their possessions are more secure. (30–31)

This paragraph places the comforts of life in the light of technological advances and public organization: thanks to the good management of the country, people can enjoy friendship at a distance and can feel as though their possessions are safe. Imlac does not say that these comforts can obliterate man's ultimate misery, but at least they can alleviate it. According to Johnson, a certain political settlement renders material comforts possible, because it encourages commerce, secures property, and gives free range to innovations. This perspective is reaffirmed by Johnson's later statement in *Taxation no Tyranny* (1775) in which he challenges the view that American settlers had a right to reject taxation from the mother-country:

Yet before [the Americans] quit the comforts of a warm home for the sounding something which they think better, he cannot be thought their enemy who advises them to consider well whether they shall find it. By turning fishermen or hunters, woodmen or shepherds, they may become wild, but it is not easy to conceive them free; for who can be more a slave than he that is driven by force from the comforts of life, is compelled to leave his house to a casual comer, and whatever he does, or wherever he wanders, finds every moment some new testimony of his own subjection? (104)

Liberty and prosperity are interconnected. Johnson's reference to hunters, woodsmen, or shepherds reveals that for him the higher stage of civilization, where commerce prevails, is the one in which people are free and happy, because they enjoy economic prosperity, and so are surrounded by material objects, referred to as "comforts" twice in this short paragraph. Their liberty is guaranteed by the best possible political settlement, Johnson's Britain, which is the reason why it is there that you can find comfortable homes. This corresponds exactly to the position adopted by David Hume in his essays *Of Refinements in the Arts* and *Of the Middle Station of Life*, in which he praises the development of the middle ranks and their accumulation of luxuries, when not excessive, as the best state for happiness, security, and virtuous behavior.¹¹

The obvious gap between civilized Europe and "rude" nations was replicated on a smaller scale within Europe, as travelers to the continent complained of the lack of comfort in the inns they stayed in. Examples can be found in Smollett's *Travels through France and Italy*, which are evidence of his view that luxuries are different from comforts, since he can complain of France's lack of

comforts, while blaming its excessive luxuries. Helen Maria Williams, in her *Letters written in France* (1790), reinforces this impression:

I returned somewhat in mournful mood to the inn, where there was nothing calculated to convey one cheerful idea. The ceiling of our apartment was crossed with old bare beams; the tapestry, with which the room was hung, displayed, like the dress of Otway's old woman "variety of wretchedness"; the canopied beds were of coarse dirty stuff; two pictures, in tawdry gilt frames, slandered the sweet countenances of the Dauphin and Madame; and the floor was paved with brick. In short, one can scarcely imagine a scene more remote from England, in accommodation and comfort, than the country inns of France; yet in this habitation, where an Englishman would have been inclined to hang himself, was my rest disturbed half the night by the merry songs which were sung in an adjoining apartment, as gloomy as my own. (100–01)

The items presented as uncomfortable—"beams," "tapestry," and "brick floor"—are outdated, dirty, or in bad taste, and they exude melancholy. Williams dwells on this aspect: an uncomfortable habitation has an impact on a person's mental happiness—at least for the English, as the French seem impervious to the contamination. The reference to the Dauphin and Madame is significant: their portraits reveal that France at the time still shows respect for an outdated and oppressive political system.

A comment made by Mary Wollstonecraft in *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1795) reinforces this interpretation. In book 5, chapter 4, dedicated to the progress of reform and the *Encyclopédie*, she writes that the French have no word to describe what the English call "comfort":

whilst pleasure was the sole object of living among the higher orders of society, it was the business of the lower to give life to their joys, and convenience to their luxury. This cast-like [sic] division, by destroying all strength of character in the former, and debasing the latter to machines, taught Frenchmen to be more ingenious in their contrivances for pleasure and show, than the men of any other country; whilst with respect to the abridgment of labour in the mechanic arts, or to promote the comfort of common life, they were far behind. They had never, in fact, acquired an

idea of that independent, comfortable situation, in which contentment is sought rather than happiness; because the slaves of pleasure or power can be roused only by lively emotions and extravagant hopes. Indeed they have no word in their vocabulary to express comfort—that state of existence, in which reason renders serene and useful the days, which passion would only cheat with flying dreams of happiness. (6: 231)

Joyce Appleby quoted Wollstonecraft's observation in her investigation of consumption and its links to modernity.¹² I would like to go further than Appleby here: obviously, French citizens are divided between the idle rich, who enjoy a luxurious lifestyle, and those who toil for their pleasure, in the situation of slaves. But for Wollstonecraft, comfort is not just economic: it is also the requisite for serenity and peace of mind, whereas intemperate passions characterize both luxury and poverty. This lack of happiness was already central in Smollett's criticism of the Baynards and their French cook. England, through its middle classes, has introduced a degree of smoothness to lubricate the cogs of society, unlike France where the absence of comfort signals a tyranny, under which people are particularly miserable. The same point is made by the anonymous writer¹³ of *A Residence in France in the Years 1792, 1793, 1794 and 1795*:

Our countrymen who visit France for the first time—their imaginations filled with the epithets which the vanity of one nation has appropriated, and the indulgence of the other sanctioned—are astonished to find this “land of elegance,” this refined people, extremely inferior to the English in all the arts that minister to the comfort and accommodation of life. They are surprized to feel themselves starved by the intrusion of all the winds of heaven, or smothered by volumes of smoke—that no lock will either open or shut—that the drawers are all immoveable—and that neither chairs nor tables can be preserved in equilibrium. In vain do they inquire for a thousand conveniences which to them seem indispensable; they are not to be procured, or even their use is unknown: till at length, after a residence in a score of houses, in all of which they observe the same deficiencies, they begin to grow sceptical, to doubt the pretended superiority of France, and, perhaps for the first time, do justice to their own unassuming country. It must however, be confessed, that if the chimnies smoke, they are usually surrounded by marble—that the unstable chair is often covered with silk—and that if a room be cold, it is plentifully decked with gilding,

pictures, and glasses.—In short, a French house is generally more showy than convenient, and seldom conveys that idea of domestic comfort which constitutes the luxury of an Englishman. (84–85)

Though their political opinions may differ, all these authors share the notion that comforts are enjoyed by free citizens, authorized by the British constitution, and an integral part of the British way of life, and not simply typical of the middle classes. This is in line with Winstanley's vision, as well as that expressed by the author of the pamphlet *The Good of the Community Impartially Considered* (1754):

Every Man has a *natural Right* to enjoy the fruit of his own Labour, both as to the *Conveniencies*, and *Comforts*, as well as *Necessaries* of Life, *natural Liberty* is the same with one Man as another; and unless in the Enjoyment of these Things they hurt the Community, the Poor ought to be *allow'd* to use them as freely as the Rich. (qtd. in Breen 258)

The right to accumulate possessions is linked to fundamental political liberty, and “comfort” for the body and the mind is the ultimate result of this right, as it already was in Winstanley's pamphlets. By labeling luxuries “comforts,” eighteenth-century writers were able to convert them into the necessities of civilized life.

Wollstonecraft is right in asserting that the word “comfort” was not used in French at the time. The notion of comfort cannot have been unfamiliar to the French, since many items of comfort were invented in France.¹⁴ But British travelers to France in the eighteenth century felt these amenities were the exclusive preserve of the very rich. The French themselves must have considered that the English term conveyed a different meaning from their own words *aise* or *agrément*s, which were early equivalents of *comfort*, since they felt obliged to borrow the word from the English language. This borrowing took place in the early nineteenth century. By that time the traditional sense of the French word *confort*—which originally, like in English, meant consolation, soothing—had become extinct, which means the word in French was then, and still is now, uniquely linked to the idea of physical well-being.

Comfortable appears for the first time in French in journalist Victor de Jouy's 1811 essay, later collected in the first volume of *L'hermite de la chaussée d'Antin* (1815–17): “if one was determined to borrow a few words from English,

a language rich in so many freely lifted from our own, one might try to introduce ‘comfortable,’ ‘inoffensive,’ ‘insignificant,’ and one or two more with no precise equivalent in French” (155; my translation).

The importation of the word into French followed in the wake of English tourists, as shown by the following translation of a guidebook for the French town of Pau, written in the 1820s:

Twenty years ago, not a single house in Pau had a carpet; there were no carriages to hire. There was only one private carriage in the town; there was no sign of what we now call le comfort, and not a single street had a pavement. Today, the houses in part are furnished according to English needs and habits. (Tombs 316)

For some time, French writers couldn’t decide between the English *comfort*, and the French *confort*. In *La peau de chagrin* (1833)—“en montant un vaste escalier à tapis, où je remarquai toutes les recherches du *comfort* anglais” (9: 101)—and *La Maison Nucingen* (1838)—“il y avait introduit le *comfort*, la seule bonne chose qu’il y ait en Angleterre” (5: 643)—Balzac uses the English spelling and italicizes the term. In *Le contrat de mariage* (1842)—“l’arrangement de son hôtel et la restauration du château de Lanstrac, où il introduisit le luxe et le confort anglais” (3: 538)—he writes the word in the French way. In these examples, *comfort* is presented as a recent introduction from England. *Le confort anglais* implies a veiled criticism of fashions and the upper classes’ taste for *anglomanie*. That the term remained exotic for some time is evident. It was a mark of English quaintness, not a mere reflection of the rise in living standards. For English writers as well, as mentioned earlier in this essay (with the description of ideal cottages and Wollstonecraft’s remarks), *comfort* was linked to a green and pleasant land that was specifically English. But for the French, English-style *comfort* was rather a luxury, not the pleasant medium enjoyed by the middle classes. Since, in French, unlike in English, the mental sense of *confort* had long disappeared, the justification for the use of the word never emerged clearly, and the term remained closely linked to *luxury* for a long time. As late as 1842 through 1845, the word *confortable* is presented in Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris* as a recent introduction into the language. The English translation of the passage must have appeared odd to English readers, for whom *confortable* was not a recent introduction. Madame Dubreuil receives a letter she finds puzzling because it contains the word *confortable*, which is new to her:

‘It is absolutely necessary, my dear Madame Dubreuil, that the little pavilion in the orchard be made fit for occupation by to-morrow evening. Have all necessary furniture put into it, such as carpets, curtains, &c. &c. In a word let nothing be wanting to make it as *comfortable* as possible.’

“Do you mark—*comfortable*, Madame Georges! and the word is underlined, too!” said Madame Dubreuil, looking at her friend with an air at once embarrassed and meditative. Then she continued to read:

‘Have fires burning day and night, to dispel any possible damp; for it is a long time since the rooms were inhabited. . . .

PS. The person in question will arrive the day after to-morrow, about dusk. Above all things, I beg of you, do not forget to make the pavilion as *comfortable* as you possibly can.’

“*Comfortable* again, you see, and underlined as before!” said Madame Dubreuil, as she returned the letter of the duchess to her pocket.

“Well nothing can be more simple than that,” replied Madame Georges.

“How, nothing more simple? Did you not hear, then? Madame the Duchess wishes the pavilion to be rendered as *comfortable* as possible. It is on that account that I have begged you to come to day. Clara and I have well nigh bothered our senses endeavouring to make out what that word *comfortable* means, but we could not manage it. Yet Clara has been at boarding school at Villiers le Bel, and brought away I know not how many prizes for history and geography; however she could make no more of the outlandish word than I could! I suppose it is only some fine term which the gentry use among themselves. Still, you must see how embarrassing it is to me; Madame the Duchess especially wishes the pavilion to be made *comfortable*; she underlines the word, she repeats it twice, and we do not even know what it means!”

“Heaven be praised!” said Madame Georges, “I can explain this great mystery. *Comfortable*, in the present instance, means a convenient, well-arranged, well-closed, and well-warmed apartment; in a word, an apartment in which nothing is wanting of the necessary, and even of the superfluous.” (131–32)

Madame Georges’s explanation and Eugène Sue’s lengthy discussion of the word here reveal how much the French sense differed from the English: *comfort* was a word used by duchesses in a country where carpets and furniture were still a luxury for simple folks like Madame Dubreuil.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the English had appropriated the notion of *comfort* and turned it into an ideal and a model for all classes. Material objects reflected middle-class morality and appeared to be the result of the best political settlement. Not simply what Mandeville had cynically seen as just another name for luxury, comfort had become a standard of virtuous living, upholding the norms of frugality, morality, and political righteousness, which eventually spread to the Continent. The moral and spiritual sense of *comfort* was never forgotten by English speakers, and this allowed them to enjoy a certain number of luxuries, without calling them luxuries. Indeed, for the promoters of the middle-way of life, the accumulation of comforts in modern Europe was not a sign of decline. Contrary to what had occurred in the Roman Empire, whose decadence was attributed to an excess of luxury, the spread of comforts was considered as a positive movement toward more happiness for more people. There seems to have been a consensual view that happiness, both mental and physical, was guaranteed by the right to accumulate material possessions, which in turn was supposed to be evidence of the superiority of European civilization, a sign of its progressive nature and a justification for the dissemination of its values. Voices were still heard attacking the consumption of luxuries, but rarely were there attacks on comfort as such—until Disraeli’s cynical remark in *Tancred* (1847) questioned the supposed close connection between comfort and civilization: “[t]he European talks of progress because by an ingenious application of some scientific acquirement he has established a society which has mistaken comfort for civilization” (233).

NOTES

1. See Hibbert 331–336; Brewer and Porter; McKendrick; Crowley.
2. See Langford 70–71.
3. See Berry 126–176; McKendrick 25–26; Berg 32, 195.
4. See Berry 18.
5. See Berg 85–86.
6. See Rybczynski, on armchairs 82–85 and on pattern books 208–09.
7. See Scott 66.
8. See Malthus 132–32.
9. See Sekora 75.
10. See Berry 94.
11. See Hume 167–77.
12. See Appleby 169.
13. Helen Maria Williams is sometimes credited with writing this book, but this has never been authoritatively verified.
14. See Crowley 125; 192–93; 163; Rybczynski 95–97.

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