CHAPTER 8

Living Anxiously: The Senses, Society and Morality in Pre-Modern England

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An early modern English reader interested in self-improvement might turn to one of the manuals giving guidance on matters medical as well as spiritual, which were gaining in popularity in the circles of educated male readers in the late 1500s and early 1600s. If he did so, and before long, he could expect to encounter an opinion on how best to employ his senses.1 These ‘channels of understanding’ at the boundary between interior and exterior worlds brought great gifts of sensation, cognition and pleasure; but the gifts were offset by the equally great dangers of temptation, sin and perdition. Opinions and injunctions concerned with the epistemology and ethics of sensory perception—the ‘how-tos’ and ‘whys’ of ordering the use of one’s senses and sensory experience, aesthetics—appear in discussions of the most important topics of the seventeenth century, which are equally relevant today: the need to be healthy, to lead a satisfying, yet moral life, and to align one’s practices with one’s (religious) identity.

Various treatises written in the period, which we can, anachronistically, divide into medical (concerned with the health of the body) and spiritual (concerned with either religious doctrine or mental health, a category more often than not determined in moral terms), seem to reflect anxious interest in orderly government of the senses and interpretation of sensual data, and often promote varying or contradictory views. Although the senses are not always

1 I owe the historical focus of my recent work on the senses in the European Renaissance to Philippa Maddern’s encouragement. The central idea of this article came out of our conversations surrounding Philippa’s work on the nexus of body and soul for my edited collection of essays: Philippa C. Maddern, “Murdering Souls and Killing Bodies: Understanding Spiritual and Physical Sin in Late-Medieval English Devotional Works,” in Conjunctions of Mind, Soul and Body from Plato to the Enlightenment, ed. Danijela Kambaskovic (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014). I am deeply grateful to Pip for enriching all my lives—as a scholar, a friend and a family person—by her warm presence.

mentioned explicitly in pre-modern treatises, their orderly and ‘proper’ use generated much moral anxiety. Interestingly, concepts that imply sensual perception are equally important as those that refer to the senses directly, as long as the focus is on ordering and governing one’s sensual perception with a view to leading a good life. The centrality of the senses in these discourses, the frequency with which the senses are discussed, the fretful tone of the injunctions, the contradictions that often riddle the arguments, both internally and across different authors and works, and the centrality of sensual perception to arguments where senses may not be directly mentioned, all stand as evidence of anxiety that accompanied contemplation of the orderly ways in which to use one’s senses. The burgeoning scholarship about the senses in the pre-modern period tends to focus on a single sense, or to examine senses in the context of a single discipline. Historians of ideas favour a particular philosophical principle of interpretation. The fact that doctrines are often grounded in the role of the senses remains without proper foregrounding. This chapter is concerned


6 On epicureanism, see Catherine Wilson, Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); on empiricism, see Charles T. Wolfe and Ofer Gal, eds., The Body as an Object and Instrument Knowledge: Embodied Empiricism in Early Modern Science (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010).  