

This is the author accepted manuscript of:

Sandford, Stella [Reviewer] (2023) Book Review of 'Uncommon sense : Jeremy Bentham, queer aesthetics, and the politics of taste' by Carrie D. Shanafelt. *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 56(3), pp. 499-500. ISSN (print) 0013-2586 published in final form at <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecs.2023.0047> by Johns Hopkins University Press.

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Carrie D. Shanafelt, *Uncommon Sense: Jeremy Bentham, Queer Aesthetics, and the Politics of Taste*, University of Virginia Press, 2022

Carrie Shanafelt's *Uncommon Sense* is part of a recent resurgence in Bentham studies, driven by the ongoing, decades-long work of the Bentham Project at University College London on a complete critical edition of Bentham's work, including previously unpublished works. The volume *Of Sexual Irregularities, and Other Writings on Sexual Morality* (edited by Philip Schofield, Catherine Pease-Watkin and Michael Quinn), published in 2014, is a startling read. It is difficult not to believe that the mid-late twentieth-century reception of Bentham via Foucault would have been very different had Foucault had access to these manuscripts. In contrast to the stern utilitarian picture of Bentham popularised by Dickens's *Gradgrind*, or the disciplinary panoptical picture of Foucault, this volume reveals Bentham as an astonishing sexual radical, not just in terms of his proposals for legal reforms but in the promotion of the joys of sexual exuberance. (Louis Crompton published some of Bentham's work on sexuality in 1978, in the *Journal of Homosexuality*, but it seems to have received little attention at the time.) Shanafelt's book is the result of an encounter with Bentham's work on sexuality and an attempt – perhaps the first – to locate it within his larger intellectual project of reform.

Shanafelt approaches Bentham – squarely – from the standpoint of the present and the demands for equality characteristic of late-twentieth century and twenty-first century progressive social and political movements. Bentham emerges from *Uncommon Sense* as a formidable ally for those groups of people (who Shanafelt often identifies as women, sexual and religious minorities, the poor, colonized and enslaved people) that were and often still are deprived of the right to be the 'custodians of their own bodily pleasures and political power'. As the book's title suggests, Shanafelt locates Bentham critically against the presumption of the eighteenth-century discourse of common sense, or more particularly the imagined universal figure of common sense who, of course, in fact has the common sense and the tastes of the male, heterosexual ruling class. Shanafelt presents Bentham arguing against any appeal to an imaginary common sense in favour of an analysis of actual human behaviour and against the presumption of the universality of one's

own tastes, both aesthetic and sexual. Building on the existing literature on Bentham's analysis of the ferocity and cruelty of the prohibition and punishment of same sex desire, the book charts Bentham's location of the force of that ferocity in 'aesthetic' disgust (the energetic disavowals of the prosecutors also invite a psychoanalytic reading) and his consistent and insistent argument against 'antipathy' as a defensible basis for morality or law. Any reader of Bentham's well-known works will be familiar with his defence of pleasure as the basis for happiness. But his defence of sexual pleasure – of whatever form, with whomsoever one chooses to find it – as a good in itself when it is not achieved at the expense of another's pain reveals a lesser-known and possibly even queer Bentham.

The most interesting and potentially game-changing aspect of Shanafeld's book for Bentham studies centres on the fact that Bentham was continually thinking and writing about sexual liberty alongside all of his work on legal reform, moral philosophy and theology. Shanafelt proposes, on this basis, that sexual liberty was for Bentham 'a test case' for all his arguments in these fields, that he consistently tested 'liberal rights' discourses, for example, against a criterion requiring 'sexual liberty from legal prescription' (and of course always found those discourses wanting). Given that most of these writings on sexuality were not published in Bentham's lifetime, sexual liberty could only function for Bentham as a private test for the utility of government in providing for the happiness of people, but this is a test which has, arguably, proved its worth in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In any case, Shanafelt's book makes a good case for re-centring study of Bentham's moral and political philosophy on sexuality, which can no longer be understood as a merely peripheral concern for him. In this respect the book makes an important contribution to discussion of the reception of Bentham, and later reception studies may well understand this early-twentieth century period of the publication of the writings on sexuality as marking a significant shift in that reception.

To the extent that *Uncommon Sense* aims to set the record straight (or, rather, to queer the record) on Bentham it mounts a spirited defence of him as a pro-sex, anti-colonialist thinker of liberation – and indeed the case is compelling. Sometimes more textual evidence would have been helpful for readers not yet familiar with Bentham's writings on sexuality and readers may sometimes regret that other of Shanafelt's claims about what Bentham thought or stood for sometimes lack clear signposting to the primary literature. Shanafelt's presentational approach also

means that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between what is being presented as exposition of Bentham's claims and Shanafelt's interpretation of them. Some readers will balk at the occasional sweeping historical generalisation and the tendency to import the political sensibility of the present into commentary on Bentham (so, for example, Bentham's queer Jesus – the true sexual theorist of Christianity as opposed to the asceticism of Paul, according to Bentham – is described by Shanafelt as an anti-colonialist and anti-capitalist thinker). From a philosophical point of view it is also frustrating that the central concept of 'aesthetics' remains undetermined. The mainly British debates on 'taste' are seemingly conflated with their transformation in the German development of aesthetic judgement, and the equivocation between the two meanings of 'aesthetics' (evident in the shift from Kant's transcendental aesthetic in the *Critique of Pure Reason* to the analysis of aesthetic judgements of taste in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*) is unremarked. Perhaps it is Shanafelt's contention that Bentham's philosophy contests this distinction, but there is no explicit argument to that effect. Nevertheless, *Uncommon Sense* works as a lively and committed introduction to Bentham's writings on sexuality and their central place in his oeuvre, and the figure 'Bentham' emerges from it in a surprisingly modern and sympathetic form.