

Pleasure and its Illusions:
An Introduction to the Literature and Thought of the French Enlightenment
Early Modernities, French 501, Natania Meeker
Tuesdays, 2-4:50 PM



Jean-Marc Nattier, *Thalie, Muse de la comédie*, 1739

“Nous voyons tous les objets, tout ce qui se passe dans l’univers, comme une belle décoration d’opéra, dont nous n’apercevons ni les cordes, ni les contre-poids. Dans tous les corps, comme dans le nôtre, les premiers ressorts nous sont cachés, & le seront vraisemblablement toujours.”

Julien Offray de La Mettrie,
Système d’Épicure

“J’aime mieux une erreur qui fait mon bonheur qu’une évidence qui me désespère.”

Madeleine de Puisieux,
Les caractères

In this course, we will study the eighteenth-century fascination with the conjunction of pleasure and illusion. If pleasure is in some sense our “truth,” as many authors of the period would suggest, why does it emerge precisely and intensely at moments of deception? We will approach this question as an entry point into some of the most crucial debates of the Enlightenment—around aesthetics, ethics, and politics, certainly, but also around the emergence of publics, both feminine and masculine, who sought out new modes of sensation and new forms of experience—in the novel and at the theater, in the pursuit of knowledge and in the critique of orthodoxies. If the eighteenth century has been deemed the age of pleasure, we will also ask persistently what kinds of illusions and “tricks” these pleasures promulgate. Whose desires do illusions serve, and how are these illusions maintained? Which pleasures generate illusions, and which strip them away? Throughout the course, gender and race will constitute key axes of our analysis: we will examine how pleasure participates in modes of exploitation and how illusion functions as a resource, accessible to a privileged few. But we will also investigate how gendered and raced bodies might work to seize control of illusion’s means of production, as a fundamental right to determine the conditions under which pleasure might come to be. Authors we will read will include: Charrière, Crébillon fils, Diderot, Du Châtelet, La Mettrie, Montesquieu, Riccoboni, and Rousseau. Course is taught in French but students from all disciplines are welcome.