


2015

Review of Peggy Thompson, (ed). *Beyond Sense and Sensibility: Moral Formation and the Literary Imagination from Johnson to Wordsworth*

Elizabeth A. Dolan
Lehigh University, bdk3@lehigh.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/abo>

 Part of the [Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dolan, Elizabeth A. (2015) "Review of Peggy Thompson, (ed). *Beyond Sense and Sensibility: Moral Formation and the Literary Imagination from Johnson to Wordsworth*," *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

<https://www.doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/2157-7129.5.2.2>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol5/iss2/2>

This Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830* by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

Review of Peggy Thompson, (ed). *Beyond Sense and Sensibility: Moral Formation and the Literary Imagination from Johnson to Wordsworth*

Keywords

Peggy Thompson Sense and Sensibility Imagination

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial Works 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/).

Peggy Thompson, ed. *Beyond Sense and Sensibility: Moral Formation and the Literary Imagination from Johnson to Wordsworth*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2015. Xv + 214 pp. Index. ISBN: 978-1-61148-640-7.

Reviewed by Elizabeth A. Dolan, Ph.D.
Lehigh University, Bethlehem, PA

Originally conceived by Samuel Johnson scholar O M Brack, Jr., this collection of essays on “moral formation and the literary imagination” is edited by Peggy Thompson with a forward in memoriam of Brack written by Timothy Erwin. Brack is also honored with a photograph taken on his 65th birthday. As Thompson explains in the introduction, Brack sought to explore what he saw as the two major eighteenth-century understandings of how the moral subject is formed—through reason and sensibility. Thus, the collection builds upon a rich and wide-ranging body of scholarship on sensibility, including studies of the relationship of sensibility to cultural practices (G. J. Barker-Benfield), to sociability (John Mullan), to race (Markman Ellis), to literary style (Barbara M. Benedict), to gender (Claudia L. Johnson), to education (Richard A. Barney, Alan Richardson), and even to things (Lynn Festa). As the title suggests, the collection moves “beyond” sensibility and reason to examine additional or alternate factors shaping the moral subject, including social action, habit, and “insensibly” building feelings.

Drawing on a variety of genres, including poetry, literary criticism, novels, children’s literature, and history, the volume is organized into three sections. The first offers essays that reexamine the literature of sensibility; the articles in the second section address didactic literature’s relationship to sense and feeling, and the final three contributions examine moral formation in light of twenty-first-century theoretical challenges to the Enlightenment formulation of the subject. In addition to these elements, the volume contains three images—a photograph, an illustration and a chart.

The first section reassesses the limits of sensibility in works by James Boswell, Robert Fergusson, and Frances Burney. Adam Rounce considers the ways in which Boswell’s self-styling as a man of sensibility affected his rarely considered role as a literary critic. Examining Boswell’s comments on works by Charles Churchill, William Hamilton, William Mason, and Edward Young, Rounce finds that Boswell exudes more enthusiasm than discrimination in his literary criticism, and a clearer commitment to the fame of his favorite authors than to the quality of their work. Although Rounce situates Boswell’s criticism among that of other critics, his comparisons of Boswell to Samuel Johnson are the most telling. Rather than disagreeing with the details of Johnson’s assessments of contemporary poets, for example, Boswell attributes his and Johnson’s differences of opinion to their differing temperaments; in short, according to Boswell, Johnson lacks his depth of feeling and capacity to be moved. Thus Boswell’s literary criticism gushes and generalizes, revealing sensibility as a limited lens for literary discrimination. Rounce’s depiction of the limitations of this feeling-based criticism culminates in a discussion of Boswell’s tone-deaf *No Abolition of Slavery, or the Universal Empire of Love*, a striking example of the misjudgment engendered by the assumption of shared feeling intrinsic to sensibility.

With an examination of Fergusson's poems about animals, Rhona Brown situates the Scottish poet's attitude toward sensibility among that of Henry Mackenzie, Laurence Sterne, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, and Robert Burns. Brown refines the commonly held view of Fergusson as a dedicated opponent to the literature of sensibility. She concedes that Fergusson's parody of Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* in his poem "The Sow of Feeling" offers evidence for the poet's criticism of the excesses of sentiment. However, Fergusson's "Ode to the Gowdspink," a poem about a caged goldfinch, sympathetically compares the creature's plight to that of slaves, and thus resonates with depictions of captured animals in Barbauld's "The Mouse's Petition," and in Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*. If Mackenzie's Harley demonstrates his ability to feel with human sufferers, Fergusson's narrator, Barbauld's narrator, and Sterne's Yorick exhibit the capacity to sympathize with animals *and* people. Concluding the essay, Brown argues for Fergusson's influence on Burns. Brown notes that Burns's poems extend expressions of compassion from the human and animal to the plant world, but share with Fergusson's poetry a turn to moralizing.

While the first two essays reveal Boswell's ineffective application of sensibility to literary criticism, and Fergusson's unexpected deployment of some tenants of sensibility, Heather King's essay traces changes in the depiction of women's performances of sensibility across Frances Burney's novels. King notes the disjunction between the frontispiece of *Evelina* (reprinted in this volume), in which Evelina kneels at her father's feet, apparently shaping his moral responses with her beauty, and the text, which emphasizes Evelina's suffering. King argues, "sentimental constructions of women's morally influential beauty and virtue are built implicitly on women's suffering" (46). King argues that the disjunction between Evelina's beauty and her suffering, which creates discomfort in the reader, marks the beginning of Burney's rejection of sensibility. While Burney's *Cecilia* presents readers with typical sentimental tableaux, Cecilia's extreme suffering in these depictions undercuts any moral lesson for the reader. Burney's *Camilla* removes the common scene of a suffering woman being observed by people of sensibility, inviting the reader to look "directly at Camilla" and see not her, but "what she sees" (47). King argues persuasively that this diversion of the reader's gaze gives Camilla the room to reflect internally about her actions. Across the three novels, King argues, Burney highlights the destructive emphasis on women's "somatic eloquence" or visible virtue, suggesting as a replacement a focus on the heroine's "virtuous, self-regarding vision" (48, 59). This fine essay is drawn from a larger, forthcoming project on the visibility of women's virtue in the late eighteenth century.

The middle section of the volume takes up didacticism in the sermon, biography, novel, and children's book. Christopher D. Johnson argues that the nonconformist minister Philip Doddridge appeals to readers' rational capabilities and capacity for feeling in his popular *Life of Colonel James Gardiner*. Doddridge explores the "intersections and interdependence of reason and faith," while simultaneously making "overt appeals to emotion" that "connect Doddridge's work to sentimental literature" (65, 70). Like other dissenting ministers, Doddridge recommended that his congregation rely on rational evidence to support their faith, and both his evidence-based biographical method and his depictions of Gardiner's own reasonableness support this perspective. However, drawing also on the language of sentiment in the biography, Doddridge risks miring readers in the sentimental emotions of the moment of suffering, and thus undermining the teleological conversion story in which suffering is always redeemed in heaven.

To avoid this pitfall of sensibility, Johnson argues, Doddridge shows Gardiner “suffering, but not complaining,” displaces pathos onto tangentially related narratives in which figures other than Gardiner suffer, and incorporates emotive hymns into the biography at key moments to allow for an emotional reinforcement of the more rational didactic moral lesson (73). Johnson’s essay challenges scholars’ assessment of dissenting religious beliefs as more engaged with rationality than with sentiment, and the idea that sensibility originates in secular moral philosophy and more “emotionally excessive branches of Christianity” (72). Instead, he reveals Dissenting Christianity as an important precursor to literary sensibility.

In her essay “Two Singularly Moral Works,” Leslie A. Chilton argues for the influence of François Fénelon’s *Les aventures de Télémaque* on Tobias Smollett’s *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*. Smollett translated Fénelon’s didactic romance shortly before writing his final novel (and Chilton co-edited this translation with O M Brack). Chilton argues that Smollett’s novel was influenced by Fénelon’s criticism of the desire for luxury as disruptive to social order. Both Fénelon and Smollett supported a rigid class system that would encourage moral behavior and thus contribute to the stability of society. Chilton regards the translation, *The Adventures of Telemachus, The Son of Ulysses*, to be an important resource for understanding the origins of the turn to moral education in England. As someone who works on Romantic-era children’s literature, I found the explication of Fénelon’s pedagogy informative. The essay focuses exclusively on “moral formation,” thus fulfilling the volume’s promise to move “Beyond Sense and Sensibility.”

The essay that follows, “The Politically Engaged Child,” by Adrienne Wadewitz, demonstrates Charlotte Smith’s commitment to the development of both sense and sensibility in children, an account that resonates with Johnson’s discussion of Doddridge’s religious rhetoric based in reason and feeling. Focusing primarily on Smith’s children’s books *Rural Walks* and *Conversations Introducing Poetry*, Wadewitz argues persuasively, “Smith saw a place for children in the public sphere founded on the discourse of sensibility” (91). Wadewitz suggests that “late eighteenth-century children’s writers like Smith created a new version of sensibility,” which emphasized empathy and social action rather than moral goodness demonstrated through tears (91). Moving beyond Rousseau’s assertion that children learn better from experiences than from books, Smith posits that to mature in a healthy way, “children must not only experience the world but also construct a narrative about that world that incorporates the poetry of sensibility” (100-101). Wadewitz concludes with a compelling argument for the revolutionary status of Smith’s commitment to children’s political agency. ABO readers will appreciate the resonance between Wadewitz’s essay on Smith and King’s essay on Burney, both of which depict the writers as exploring alternatives to the pitfalls of the physical manifestations of sensibility for women and children. Reading this excellent chapter, one regrets the recent loss of this fine scholar.

The essays in the third section of the volume bring eighteenth-century theories of moral formation into conversation with more recent research in social psychology, affect theory, and object-relations theory. In her essay “Habit and Reason in Samuel Johnson’s *Rambler*,” Peggy Thompson asserts that Johnson was as concerned about actions based on habit as those based on feeling, because both are non-rational. Habit can derail the exercise of reason, which depends upon our ability to see future rewards, reflect on past experience, and flex our will. In addition to

Johnson's explicit, if understudied, warnings about the dangers of habit, Thompson finds that Johnson also endorses the potential for intellectual habits to promote virtue. In these moments, Johnson's moral psychology resonates with John Dewey's assertion that we are our habits, or Bill Pollard's and Nancy E. Snow's reconciliation of habit with reason and virtue. In this sense, "the *Rambler* essays seem to shift between an Enlightenment image of humanity as defined and governed by rational choice, on the one hand, and a postmodern acknowledgement of habit's powerful constitutive force, on the other" (123). The essay offers a rich understanding of the tensions within Johnson's thought about moral formation.

James Noggle's fascinating essay, "Unfelt Affect," brings attention to the adverb "insensibly," which, according to Google's Ngram Viewer, enters printed texts around 1690, peaks in 1786, and declines consistently through the nineteenth century. Noggle provides a helpful chart to demonstrate the rise and fall of "insensibility" before moving into a discussion of the usage of the word in Eliza Haywood's *The Female Spectator*, Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* and *Memoirs*. While the verb "insensible" suggests a blockage of feeling, an opposition to sensibility, the adverbial form is closer in meaning to "unnoticed." Although decidedly un-theorized, especially in comparison to "sensibility," the word "insensibly" "makes certain transactions in [the discourse of sensibility] possible" (126). "Insensibly" refers to "time's opacity," to the gradual approach of feeling, even to "an unfeeling built into the way time unfolds" (143). In this regard it resonates with recent definitions of affect by Brian Massumi, Gregory J. Seigworth, and others as "visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing . . . that can . . . drive us toward movement, thought and extension" (133). Beginning with close attention to a single word, this thought-provoking essay significantly expands our sense of how the eighteenth-century self was thought to be shaped by both conscious and unconscious feeling.

With his "Seeing into the Life of Things: Re-viewing Early Wordsworth through Object-Oriented Philosophy," Evan Gottlieb charts evidence of Wordsworth's interest in "the move from empiricism to early psychologism adumbrated by the figures of Locke, Hume, and Hartley" and in Kant's anthropocentric turn (151). Gottlieb argues convincingly that in his treatment of objects in his early poetry, including "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth anticipates object-relations theorists, especially Graham Harman, who argues that no sensory account of an object will exhaust its reality. This perspective significantly differentiates Wordsworth from eighteenth-century empiricists and idealists. Wordsworth, Gottlieb asserts, "represents the way all objects withdraw from human knowledge, but also captures some sense of the way objects withdraw from each other too" (157). In addition to being the most philosophically invested, this essay offers the most groundbreaking reading of a canonical author.

Although Thompson notes that the volume seeks to challenge Sidney's assertion that "literature is not philosophical" (2-3), and instead recognizes "the mutually constitutive relationship between poetics and ethics, between literary forms and moral norms" (3), the final essay is the only one to engage eighteenth-century philosophical thought in depth. Readers seeking a more detailed investigation of the connection between literary and philosophical accounts of sympathy and sensibility might consult Nancy Yousef's *Romantic Intimacy* (2013). However, those looking for varied and exciting ideas about theories of moral formation in the eighteenth century,

including but also moving beyond theories of sensibility and rationality, will find much to enjoy in this volume.