



Sensibility *and* Ethics:
The British Novel 1771-1817

情感小说与伦理建构
——1771至1817年间的英国小说

Li-Ping Geng 耿力平 著



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文学论丛

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Preface

The heritage of sensibility is nothing new. It has been the subject of discussion and debate since Greek times in Western civilization, and much earlier in a number of non-European cultures. The phenomenon is often discussed in combination with sense, its counterpart. This pairing is useful because every human being is equipped with both qualities. These qualities are essential since they help us in our emotional and intellectual lives. This study examines the roles that sensibility has played in the novels of four key writers in the defined area from 1771 to 1817: Henry Mackenzie, Robert Bage, Jane West, and Jane Austen.

The time frame covers not only the years in which these authors were professionally active but also the period when two earth-shaking political events took place—the American War of Independence and the French Revolution along with its aftermath, the Napoleonic Wars. The four writers are selected because their novels, while expressing sensibility and sentiments, engage significantly the social, political, and philosophical concerns of their time.

The novels of these four writers clearly made an ethical impact on the national consciousness of the British reading public. With the country undergoing drastic changes in the wake of industrialization and facing international as well as internal turmoil, the discussion of sensibility became topical. Whereas Henry Mackenzie hoped that every Briton would cultivate a deep sense of sympathy, conservative novelists like Jane West and their reform-minded equivalents like Robert Bage took different views on the subject. It was not until Jane Austen came on the scene and offered her artistically rendered account of “sense and

sensibility” that a comprehensive and philosophical notion of these qualities appeared.

This investigation hopes to identify the social and political contexts in which the novel of sensibility developed in the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century. It attempts to look into the varied literary expression of sensibility in the works by these novelists and to account for their specific responses to the changing political and social environment.

Because she is most successful in enlightening readers on the value of sense and sensibility, more space is devoted to Jane Austen. Her art, after all, had done the most to shape the ethical minds of her readers. For a better understanding of her literary identity, I have attached in the appendices three essays that appeared in *The Loiterer* (1789-90), a school periodical started by James Austen, assisted by Henry Austen and probably Jane Austen herself (on one occasion), as well as several others. I have also tried to explain the background and the significance of James Austen’s work and to show the literary influence of the two Oxford brothers on their precocious younger sister.

Some of my thoughts on Jane Austen’s art of fiction were discussed in two articles published in North America, namely, “The *Loiterer* and Jane Austen’s Literary Identity” in *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (2001) and “The Austens and Student Journalism of the 1780s and 90s” in *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal* (2009) (I am grateful to the editors for permitting the use of some of the material from the articles), as well as an earlier book, *Progressive States of Mind: Dialectical Elements in the Novels of Jane Austen* (2006). As my understanding of Austen’s dialectical art has not changed, there may be occasional reiteration in my analysis or treatment of her novels.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to G. E. Bentley, Jr. for taking me into the splendid world of English literature while he was teaching at Fudan University in the early 1980s as a Fulbright scholar. Ever since then I have benefited much from his knowledge and friendship. To him this book is dedicated.

I am indebted to W. J. Keith for his warm support, academic and otherwise, over the years, and for his unfailing readiness to help whenever I consulted him on issues arising from this and other projects. Since our meeting in the spring of 1991 at the University of Toronto (I was a student in his graduate seminar), I have learned much from him both in living life and in making scholarship.

I am grateful as well to the National Social Sciences Foundation of China for supporting this project. The reviewers appointed by the NSSFC to assess the outcome of this research offered their approval as well as advice; their earnestness is much appreciated.

The School of English and International Studies at Beijing Foreign Studies University, where I teach, partially funded the publication of this project; I am thankful for the assistance.

Ms. Bing Zhang (Director of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures) and Ms. Rui-Ming Huang (my editor) at Peking University Press have demonstrated admirable professionalism in editorial matters; to them I express my deep gratitude. Professor Ming Shen of Beijing University of Information Science and Technology helped me prepare the Index; I am indebted to her kindness and expertise.

Finally, I thank my wife Li-Ya Gu and my daughter Penny Hui Geng for accompanying me cheerfully along the way so that the journey is not always lonely.

A Chronology of Henry Mackenzie

- 1745 Born August 6 in Edinburgh, son of a prominent physician.
- 1751 Enters Edinburgh High School.
- 1758 Enters Edinburgh University.
- 1759 Death of mother, Margaret Rose of Kilravock of the Rose Clan.
- 1761 Articled as clerk for five years to George Inglis, King's Attorney in Exchequer.
- 1765 Admitted attorney in Court of Exchequer of Scotland; goes to London to study English law.
- 1768 Returns to Edinburgh, and becomes partner of George Inglis.
- 1769 *Virginia; or The Roman Father*, unpublished tragedy, completed.
- 1771 April, *The Man of Feeling*, novel, published. May, *The Pursuits of Happiness*, a semi-satirical poem, published.
- 1773 February, *The Man of the World*, novel, published. March 8, first performance of *The Prince of Tunis*, tragedy, in Edinburgh; meets Johnson in Edinburgh; purchases Crown practice in Court of Exchequer from his partner, George Inglis.
- 1776 January 6, marries Penuel Grant, daughter of Sir Ludovick Grant and Lady Margaret Ogilvy.
- 1777 April, *Julia de Roubigné*, epistolary novel, published.
- 1779 January 23, *Mirror* begins publication.
- 1780 May 27, *Mirror* ceases publication.
- 1784 February 10, *The Shipwreck*, adaptation of Lillo's *Fatal Curiosity* published; one performance at Covent Garden.
- 1785 February 5, *Lounger* begins publication.

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- 1787 January 6, *Lounger* ceases publication; April 21, "Account of the German Theatre" read before the Royal Society of Edinburgh.
- 1789 December 5, *The Force of Fashion*, comedy; one performance at Covent Garden.
- 1790 April, *Letters of Brutus* begins to be published in the *Edinburgh Herald*.
- 1791 *Letters of Brutus to Certain Celebrated Political Characters*, first series, published in collected form.
- 1792 Publication of *Review of the Principal Proceedings of the Parliament of 1784*.
- 1793 *Letters of Brutus*, second series, published in collected form. "Some Account of the Life and Writings of Dr. Blacklock" prefixed to a new edition of Blacklock's works.
- 1799 Appointed Comptroller of Taxes for Scotland.
- 1800 February 18, death of Dr. Joshua Mackenzie, his father, aged 86.
- 1805 Publication of *Report of the Committee of the Highland Society of Scotland*, appointed to inquire into the nature and authenticity of the poems of Ossian. Drawn up by Henry Mackenzie, Esq., its convener or chairman.
- 1808 Authorized and revised edition of his *Collected Works* published.
- 1814 Sir Walter Scott dedicates *Waverley* to Mackenzie, "Our Scottish Addison."
- 1822 *Account of the Life and Writings of John Home* published.
- 1824 Begins to write his *Anecdotes and Egotisms*, reminiscences first published in 1927.
- 1831 Dies January 14; buried in old Greyfriars Churchyard, Edinburgh.

A Chronology of Robert Bage

- 1728 Born in February in the parish of St. Alkmund's, Derby; father a paper-maker and a dissenter; mother dies soon after his birth.
- 1751 Marries Elizabeth Woolley of Mickleover.
- 1752 First child Charles born.
- 1754 Second child Edward born.
- 1756 Begins business connection with William Hutton of Birmingham, bookseller; begins long acquaintance with Erasmus Darwin.
- 1758 Third child John born.
- 1760 Begins lessons in mathematics with Thomas Hanson; in music and several languages self-taught.
- 1761 Hutton becomes his sole customer, buying all his annual production for about £500, for the rest of Bage's life.
- 1765 Partnership with Darwin and others in an iron-works.
- 1766 Sells mill to the Earl of Donegall for £2,000, and leases it back at £46 per annum.
- 1770 Expands Elford mill.
- c. 1780 Partnership in iron-works fails, with loss to Bage of £1,500; begins to write novels.
- 1782 *Mount Henneth*, novel, published.
- 1784 *Barham Downs*, novel, published.
- 1787 *The Fair Syrian*, novel, published.
- 1788 *James Wallace*, novel, published.
- 1792 *Man as He Is*, novel, published.
- 1793 Death of youngest son John; moves from Elford to Tamworth, but keeps on working at the mill in Elford.
- 1796 *Hermesprong; or, Man as He Is Not*, novel, published

(second edition 1799).

- 1797 Visited by William Godwin in June, who sends a lively
account of the meeting to his wife, Mary Wollstonecraft.
- 1801 Dies September 1 at Tamworth.

A Chronology of Jane West

- 1758 Born August 30 in London, only child of Hane and John Iliffe (upholsterer).
- 1769 Family moves to Desborough, Northamptonshire (now Leicesteshire).
- c. 1780 Marries Thomas West (yeoman farmer) at Little Bowden near Desborough.
- 1783 First child Thomas born.
- 1786 *Miscellaneous Poetry* published.
- 1787 Second child John born.
- 1788 *The Humours of Brighthelmstone: A Poem* published.
- 1791 *Miscellaneous Poems and a Tragedy* published; "For a Ruined Hermitage" and "On the Death of a Friend" published.
- 1793 *The Advantages of Education*, novel, published.
- 1794 Third child Edward born.
- 1796 *A Gossip's Story*, novel, published.
- 1797 *Elegy on Edmund Burke* published.
- 1799 *A Tale of the Times*, novel, published; *Poems and Plays*, Volumes I and II published.
- 1800 "Sonnets by Mrs. West" published.
- 1801 *Letters Addressed to a Young Man*, conduct book, published.
- 1802 *The Infidel Father*, novel, published; *The Sorrows of Selfishness*, play, published.
- 1805 *Poems and Plays*, Volumes III and IV published.
- 1806 *Letters Addressed to a Young Woman*, conduct book, published.
- 1809 *The Mother*, poetry, published.

- 1810 *The Refusal*, novel, published.
- 1812 *The Loyalists*, historical novel, published.
- 1814 *Alicia de Lacy*, historical romance, published.
- 1816 *Scriptural Essays, Adapted to the Holydays of the Church of England*, published.
- 1821 Third child Edward dies; "Obituary: Mr. Edward West" published.
- 1823 Husband Thomas dies.
- 1827 *Ringrove; Or Old-Fashioned Notions*, novel, published.
- 1841 Second child John dies.
- 1843 First child Thomas dies.
- 1852 Dies at Little Bowden; buried in a cemetery near the Church of St. Nicholas.

A Chronology of Jane Austen

- 1775 Born December 16 at Steventon, Hampshire, second daughter (seventh child) of Rev. George Austen and Cassandra Leigh Austen.
- 1783 Attends Mrs. Cawley's school with elder sister Cassandra and cousin Jane Cooper, first at Oxford and then in Southampton.
- 1785-86 Attends with Cassandra the Abbey House School in Reading.
- 1787 Begins to write *Juvenilia*.
- 1793 Writes last item of *Juvenilia*.
- 1794 M. de Feuillide guillotined in Paris; probably writes *Lady Susan*.
- 1795 Probably writes *Elinor and Marianne*.
- 1795-96 Tom Lefroy visits Ashe Rectory.
- 1796 Begins "First Impressions."
- 1797 Finishes "First Impressions."
- 1798 Probably begins to write "Susan" (*Northanger Abbey*).
- 1799 Visits Bath; probably finishes "Susan" (*Northanger Abbey*).
- 1800 Father retires and moves to Bath.
- 1801 Moves to Bath with parents; James Austen and his family move to Steventon to assume duties at the Rectory.
- 1802 Harris Bigg-Wither proposes to Jane Austen; she accepts him but withdraws her consent the following day; revises "Susan" (*Northanger Abbey*).
- 1803 Jane Austen sells "Susan" (*Northanger Abbey*) to Crosby & Son of London.
- 1804 Probably writes "The Watsons."

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- 1805 Mr. George Austen dies in Bath; buried in the crypt of the rebuilt Church of St. Swithin's at the Cemetery.
- 1809 Attempts to secure publication of "Susan" (*Northanger Abbey*); Mrs. Austen and her two daughters move into Chawton Cottage.
- 1810 *Sense and Sensibility* accepted for publication by Thomas Egerton of London.
- 1811 Planning *Mansfield Park*; *Sense and Sensibility* published; revises "First Impressions" into *Pride and Prejudice*.
- 1812 Sells copyright of *Pride and Prejudice* to Egerton.
- 1813 *Pride and Prejudice* published; finishes *Mansfield Park*.
- 1814 Commences *Emma*; *Mansfield Park* published by Egerton.
- 1815 Starts *Persuasion*; *Emma* finished.
- 1816 Begins to feel unwell in spring; Henry buys back MS of "Susan" (*Northanger Abbey*) for the original sum of £10, which Jane Austen revises for future publication; *Persuasion* completed.
- 1817 Starts *Sanditon*; too ill to continue to write; makes her will; goes to Winchester for final medical treatment; dies July 18 there and buried in the Winchester Cathedral July 24; Henry Austen arranges publication of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, both of which published in one volume by John Murray with "Biographical Notice" by Henry Austen.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do.

—Jeremy Bentham

This study explores the relationship between the novel of sensibility and the ethical mind from 1771 through 1817 in Great Britain. The aim is to trace within this dynamic and momentous period the way sensibility worked its way into the novel, endowed it with a new meaning, but also became a bone of contention during the national debate about ethics during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Further the study attempts to investigate how the social and political elements in novels of sensibility paved the way for a dialectical treatment of the seemingly irreconcilable opposites of sense and sensibility, which constitutes a philosophical imagination of our living experience at the personal as well as the communal and, by extension, national levels.

Henry Mackenzie's first novel *The Man of Feeling* was published in April 1771; Jane Austen's last two novels *Northington Abbey* and *Persuasion* were published posthumously in December 1817.^① Some forty-six years passed between these two significant dates. During this time the world witnessed two

^① On 18 July 1817 Jane Austen, not quite forty-two, died of illness at Winchester, England. In December the two manuscripts left behind by the author were published in one volume by her favourite brother Henry Austen. At the time a book published in November or December was routinely dated the following year.

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