

Sensibility Reconsidered

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G J Barker-Benfield, *The culture of sensibility: sex and society in eighteenth-century Britain*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1992, pp. xxxiv, 520, illus., \$49.95 (0-226-03713-4).

To medical historians, even of the new historical contextual school, *sensibility* remains a word conjuring associations with things sensory: the senses, sensation, the body, the brain; and then higher developed nervous systems, nervous diseases, nervous ailments, especially in psychiatry and the psychobiological sciences. But sensibility also has another profile extending back to the Greeks, transcending these local medical usages, even if it is in medical theory that the transformations of sensibility are most evident.

Down through the seventeenth century, in controversial theoretical leaps taken by Descartes, Thomas Willis, his assumed students Sydenham and John Locke, their students Bernard Mandeville (another doctor) and the Earl of Shaftesbury (Locke's tutee), and Willis's intellectual descendants David Hartley, George Cheyne, Robert Whytt, William Cullen, as well as dozens of prominent Scots, the theory of nervous sensibility was necessarily paramount in any notion of an evolving medical Enlightenment or broader and progressive "pan-European Enlightenment".

Now G J Barker-Benfield has written a very long, heavily annotated, ponderous, seemingly exhaustive, and unsurprisingly "feminist" reconsideration of the subject; feminist perhaps on the assumption that feminism is too important an ideology to be left solely to women. *The culture of sensibility* seems to cover the whole map: religious, philosophical

psychological, social, domestic, medical, scientific, treating of matters as diverse as sensibility and the nervous system, the reformation of male manners, the emergence of masculinity and effeminacy, women as economic consumers, the eighteenth century as a culture of reform, women as individuals with minds newly determined by the forces of sentiment and sensibility, and—in the concluding chapter—"the crisis of sensibility in the 1790s" presided over by the book's First Lady, its heroic, sweeping protagonist, Mary Wollstonecraft.

In my reading of *The culture of sensibility*, the "feminist approach" to these topics is less significant than the author's reliance on the research of others: not merely for their conclusions, which he takes second hand, but for the strength of their ideologies. Perhaps this is why two outside readers are acknowledged as strong "feminist" influences on the author's conception of the subject's ideological status.

Thoroughness and Exhaustibility

Barker-Benfield's *forte* is his thoroughness in dealing with every aspect of this immensely complex phenomenon cultural historians of the early modern period have come to call, for lack of a better term, *the sensibility movement*; his weakness, that such exhaustibility will compel students of the subject to ask what is new here. And he certainly has not demonstrated how medical theory and cultural history interact. For sensibility is one of those immensely problematic labels, more often than not empty words unless meticulously defined. It is inherently unstable, usually ambiguous, and, unless the historian works slowly and carefully in demonstrating its precise cultural gestures and social resonances, there is the risk of

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superficial description. It is the way sensibility's ambivalence and ambiguity are construed that counts for much in a general book about the "culture of sensibility".

The encouraging feature is that Barker-Benfield comes to this eighteenth-century culture as an outsider. The jacket says he works primarily in nineteenth-century American history and women's studies, whereas by any definition sensibility's transformative curve occurred before 1800, and at the end of the day both its clearest medical theory (Willis, Cheyne, Haller, Whytt, the Scottish doctors) and social history (the philosophers and social critics) are essentially an Enlightenment phenomenon.

But if the author naturally thinks as "a feminist", one nevertheless asks why anyone writes a book about sensibility that is five times longer than Sterne's *Sentimental journey* and three times the size of Austen's *Sense and sensibility*. The difference between a book as long as this one and, for example, Michael McKeon's equally long *The origins of the English novel* (1987) is that McKeon has a revisionist thesis that genuinely challenges literary history. Barker-Benfield has no such clear thesis—indeed it is hard to tell what the main point *is*—although he has accumulated a great deal of interesting material and learned that word processors are marvellous technologies for accumulation.

Wollstonecraft, the Helpless Victim

The best one can do is praise the book's ideology. In any *feminist* approach to sensibility Wollstonecraft *should* be the queen pin, as she is here: all female sensibility leads to her, medical theories as well as social cults. Here she is represented as heroine and exemplar of sensibility at its best, leading a life carved on the rock bed of hardship, the helpless victim of cruel society's ills, the unfortunate daughter-wife-mother stranded in an anti-feminist Anglo-European culture presided over by uncaring men, writing deathless prose whenever she can. No matter that Jane Austen did not think so, or that other women before 1800 had other views of the

female plight or of the history of sensibility in their own time. Barker-Benfield's agenda carries all, and what matters to him is seeing these developments from the woman's point of view, as in chapter five ('A culture of reform') where he taps into the campaign on behalf of female victims. And to give him his due, he is especially persuasive when commenting on specific texts and for this reason alone should be on every reading list pertaining to Mary Wollstonecraft.

The Gender of Sensibility

But Barker-Benfield's paradigm not only dictates that sensibility must be genderized (sensibility=female, anti-sensibility=male, etc.), but also that all approaches to sensibility must be made subservient to this larger ideology. Everywhere are binaries that lie unchallenged, including the above set that is also genderized. The paradigm excavates rationalism from sensibility, overlooking the blends, and renders sensibility something aiming to demonstrate that women are fundamentally *different* from men. Sensibility is their daily textuality; they live to write their emotions. Yet the consequences of this radically gendered thesis are not explored. A few case studies from selected texts might have made the point more succinctly than in this sweeping holistic treatment.

Never mind, furthermore, that some of the fiercest attacks on sensibility came from women 1750–1830, or that men, however diverse their backgrounds, were often its staunchest champions: Richardson, Sterne, Smollett, Godwin, the Scots. Never mind that the subtleties of medical and non-medical sensibility are not distinguished, and that the penumbra between sensibility (of whatever version) and sentimentalism remains beclouded. Even Wollstonecraft, about whom Barker-Benfield writes so well, is more problematic than he gives out. The female anti-sensibility campaign is muted to make the case look more convincing than it historically was, while figures such as Hannah More are not well dealt with in all their anti-sensibility modalities. Nothing new is revealed about

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Richardson or Sterne or Smollett; Coleridge, often astute on the subject, receives bare treatment; and a bewildering figure such as George Cheyne—the English physician-author who wrote a bestseller called *The English malady* (1733) at whose base lies a theory of medical sensibility—is treated in a derivative and almost potted way. The chief difficulty is methodological, not ideological: how medical theory gets translated into social practice, or is it the other way round?

Sensibility versus Sensibilities

Barker-Benfield is most persuasive when interpreting texts broadly and when aiming to provide them with social significance. But he does not know the eighteenth century well enough to shed new light on its many, intricate *sensibilities*, and this may be why he has relied almost exclusively on secondary sources. A

review is no place to be mean-spirited and I certainly do not suggest there is no accomplishment here—there is a surfeit, especially in the discussions of male barbarity and Mary Wollstonecraft, and the author's feminist approach deserves applause. But it is hard to tell what Barker-Benfield's own contribution to the debate is.

The book's success is its comprehensiveness, and Barker-Benfield is certainly spot on when claiming that sensibility is more important than its twentieth-century scholarship suggests. But lines of emphasis are lost when everything equals everything else or when represented on a canvas as large as this, and when the author has not immersed himself in the primary sources. Despite its size this is not *the* book about sensibility, and no one should think it closes further exploration.